

**Title: Bearing with the Weak**  
**Biblical Text: Romans 15:1**  
**Teaching Series: Justified by Love**  
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## Romans 15:1

*We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.*

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We're back in Romans.

If you remember, we left off our study before the summer as Paul was going to great lengths to help us understand our unity as God's people and our witness within society. Particularly, he drew our attention to the fact that within our church family we're all at different stages and understandings of the faith, and have varying perspectives about the Scriptures and life with God. In first-century Rome, some Christians sensed spiritual conviction about eating meat, while others felt liberty to enjoy all foods (14:2). Some saw every day as the same, others esteemed some days as holier than others (14:5). What Paul's been doing, then, is comparing those who have experienced a kind of freedom from the law through Christ (he calls them the *strong*) and those who still feel a sense of obligation to old rules and regulations (he calls them the *weak*).

They're both Christians.

They're all family.

Now Paul understands that as this new church was taking shape these differences could cause real division within the community. The same thing is true of our church family—just this month five years old. And so, Paul instructs them to welcome each other (14:1) and not despise or judge each other (14:3), but build up each other (14:19). That's what we've been learning too. Church, we must be so careful about being critical toward one another because of our differences.

Because, as Paul writes in Romans 14:17, ***Read Romans 14:17 ... "the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*** God wants us to understand and live in light of the reality that it's always better to show love than it is to be right and win.

Now, doesn't this all sound a bit familiar? Especially for us who live in a progressive secular city like Chicago? Doesn't Paul's instruction sounds a lot like tolerance? You know, that modern concept of coexisting because we have more in common than in distinction. Even though Paul has faithfully grounded his encouragement and instruction in the gospel, in Christ's character and death and resurrection and lordship, at the end of the day it seems like the great apostle is going to great lengths to communicate something that comes quite naturally to most modern people. Even our verse today invites those who are strong or powerful, who are in the majority, to consider the failings or weaknesses or needs of the marginalized in order to cultivate equality and rich community. That's

basically tolerance. So, *is there a difference?* That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about the beauty and limits of secular tolerance. In other words, how does the life Jesus demands both naturally affirming (we agree with it) yet beyond the reach (we can't live it) of tolerance, and how does it ultimately points us to a greater joy?

Now, *why would we talk about this?* Well, first because I think Paul's talking about in his own cultural moment. But also because modern tolerance is the prevailing spiritual sentiment of our society. It's widely believed that the virtue of a faith or religion or worldview is purely personal. But this view corrodes the concept of universal truth. So, it's an important conversation for us to understand what we can and should affirm and what we can and should reject, so we can live as loving neighbors for God's glory.

Here's how we'll organize our time together ...

- Tolerance is *beautiful*.
- Tolerance is *limited*.
- Tolerance is a *signpost*.

[Prayer]

## **Movement 1: Tolerance is Beautiful (v.1, Galatians 6:2, Genesis 2:27, John 15:3)**

Okay, so Paul transitions from a long explanation about how to treat each other within community by giving us a bit of a summary statement. He writes, look at v.1, *Read Romans 15:1a ... "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak ..."* Now, that phrase *bear with* is the Greek word *bastazo*. It means to carry or support or endure. So Paul intends that those who are in positions of freedom from the law and power within the community should willfully carry burdens or weaknesses which are not their own. They should suspend looking down on those who do not see the world as they do. The strong are supposed to willingly take on the plight or situation of their weaker brothers and sisters. In a word, the strong should *tolerate* the weak. And this is *beautiful*.

I think it's instinctively beautiful to Christians and non-Christians alike for a few reasons ...

Now, *tolerate* sounds negative. Like a loveless putting up with. But that's neither the idea Paul is communicating nor, to be fair, is it the idea of most Chicagoans. This idea of tolerance is built on the social concept of toleration. Toleration is ... "*a refusal to impose punitive sanctions for dissent from prevailing norms or policies or a deliberate choice not to interfere with behaviour of which one disapproves*" (Encyclopedia). This is beautiful. Toleration is about creating space within society for distinction and disagreement. You see, it's not that we should be

ignorant of our disagreements. It's that we shouldn't judge or punish each other for our disagreement. It reminds me of what Dr. Tim Keller said about tolerance; *“Tolerance isn’t about not having beliefs. It’s about how your beliefs lead you to treat people who disagree with you.”* As a social ideology then, tolerance is beautiful. It's a way of seeing the fullness of someone's value and nature regardless of the color of their skin, their ethnic heritage, religion, gender, sexuality ... or their beliefs, thoughts, education, ethics, or what days they think are holy or whether or not they eat meat.

As Christians we say *yes and amen* to treating others (even, if not especially, our opponents) with respect and dignity. Everyone is precious. Everyone has a story. Everyone is more valuable than the accuracy or mutuality of their ideas. Everyone is made of the matchless materials and quality of God's image. That's the first reason tolerance is beautiful. Tolerance is beautiful because it sees the unimpeachable value of people. Sounds a lot like love.

And so we see, Paul wants his readers to live within the bounds of love. Back in chapter 13 he said as much, ***Read Romans 13:8 ... "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."*** This isn't simply a vow to suspend judgment but a commitment to take ownership of the needs of others. This idea is consistent in our cultural value system and equally steady through Paul's writings. Near the end of his correspondence with Christians in a town called Galatia he encourages them similarly, saying, ***Read Galatians 6:2 ... "Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."*** At the heart

of tolerance is a self-understanding. In Galatians and in Romans, Paul is articulating a vision for life which is wrapped up with those who we do life with ... those we worship with ... those we live in community and connection with. You see, though we all bear the image of God we bear this image together. Our inherent value is a community gift. When God speaks this truth over the first couple, he speaks it over both of them ... at the same time. ***Read Genesis 2:27 ... "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."*** In the image of God ... he created *them*. The strong are obligated to the weak, because the strong and the weak are a family.

That's the second reason tolerance is beautiful. Tolerance is beautiful because it constructs identity through community. *No one is meant to journey alone. We're in this together.* On the whole, even non-religious people value the richness of relationship. And the Scripture's articulation of our personhood and our behavior toward one another embodies this reality. Jane Jacobs realized the beauty of community one day when she looked down from her apartment and saw a man struggling with a younger woman. As Jacobs started to make her way down the stairs to help, she realized that the butcher was already approaching the struggle. Then she saw the locksmith, a man behind the fruit stand, and people from the laundry mat all descending on the incident in care for the young woman. They obligated themselves for someone else. They understood themselves as part of a community. Jacobs later wrote, ***"That man didn't know it, but he was surrounded"*** (*De-managing America*, 75). Tolerance is beautiful because it constructs identity through community.

Paul continues with the cost. Community is always costly. There is always a sacrifice to this kind of sharing of burdens and this type of loving tolerance. In fact, the cost is often the thing which keeps us from living the way Paul is prescribing. Notice the second portion of the passage, *Read Romans 15:1b ... "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."* You see, in order to carry the burdens of another I have to put something down. Now, Paul is not saying enjoying pleasure or comfort or excess is evil. Rather, as scholar Leon Morris explains, "*we are never to do what pleases us regardless of its effects on others*" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 497). When we're in community with each other there's necessarily a laying down of personal preferences for the sake of the community. This is beautiful. We see this type of sacrificial love woven throughout the fabric of our movies, shows, and books.

In the story of Harry Potter, author J.K. Rowling captures the beauty of self-denial or self-sacrifice. Dumbledore explains to Harry, "*Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign...to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever.*" Paul is inviting us into a self-giving and burden-sharing affection for each other. Jesus puts it this way, *Read John 15:13 ... "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."* That's the third reason tolerance is beautiful. Tolerance is beautiful because it values of self-denial.

If you're not a follower of Jesus, I think it's important to acknowledge how the Christian Scriptures actually affirm and even give foundation to one of your deepest held virtues. If you are a follower of Jesus, I think it's important we understand how a popular idea like tolerance isn't something we must wholesale reject—but interrogate and appreciate. We agree on the beauty of tolerance because it values people, constructs identity through community, and isn't selfish or myopic.

## **Movement 2: Tolerance is Limited (vv.1,4, 1**

### **Corinthians 6:19-20, 1 John 3:1, Matthew 16:25)**

Tolerance is *beautiful*. But upon deeper consideration, the brand of tolerance which isn't shaped by the gospel is terminally limited. Let's go back through each of these marks of beauty and consider how the secular reality of each is limited ... and how the gospel brings each idea to it's fullest expression.

Okay, so we first considered that tolerance is beautiful because it sees the unimpeachable value of people. However, modern tolerance is limited because (often) human value is presumed and sometimes outright denied. While it's instinctive to value all life, particularly life which is threatened or in jeopardy (as Paul says, *weak*), we don't really have a basis for this value. You see, while everyone values human life, few non-religious Chicagoans can articulate why human life is so precious. Atheist and scientist Steven Hawkins believed in



demonstrating tolerance and respect toward his fellow human beings. However, his anthropology or his understanding of human value was limited to biological existence. During a television interview in 1995, Hawkins famously said, *“the human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate size planet, orbiting round a very average star in the outer suburb of one among a billion galaxies.”* There's integrity in his perspective. But it also exposes the limited perspective of many of our friends and neighbors. While tolerance sees the value of human beings, few have a cogent understanding or logic for human value.

When we look at the Bible, and this passage in Romans in particular, we see a clear reason for obligating ourselves to bear someone's failings. The value of human life is defined in two ways in Christianity. First, as we've previously mentioned, we are made in the image of God. God is supremely valuable and glorious. The value of anything and everything in creation is determined by its relationship with the Creator. And human beings are made to reflect, look like, and represent God. No other being in all of creation is given such an intimate relationship with God, not even the angels. Secondly, Paul goes on to say that, ***Read Romans 15:4 ... "Christ did not please himself"*** ... meaning he willfully bore the failings of humanity. This also determines our value. Human beings are not only made in God's image but we are also the ones for whom Christ died. Our nature and our worth demonstrate our unique value within creation. The limits of secular tolerance don't exist within the Christian worldview. Therefore, as followers of Jesus we should obligate ourselves to the weak among us because of their unimpeachable value ... because that's how Jesus has treated us.

The second reason tolerance is beautiful is because it seeks to construct identity through community. However, tolerance is limited because we seem just as committed to define ourselves through isolation. We are a bit obsessed with *discovering* our true self or true identity. And that's perhaps the best way to put it. Instead of defining ourselves or constructing an identity, we talk about discovering who we are. Think about, well, any Disney animated film.

- *Encanto*, while contextually it's about a family and community, the force of the storyline is about an individual, Mirable discovering that her magic was herself.
- *Luca*, contextually it's also about a family too, but the arch of the narrative is about Luca discovery and accepting his identity as a "sea-monster" and as a boy.
- *Moana*, same ... the line repeated over and over is line about individual identity ... *I am Moana of Motunui. You will board my boat, sail across the sea, and restore the heart of Te Fiti.*
- *Zootopia*, same ... Judy Hopps' reason for going to the city ... *Dream big. And don't let anyone tell you that you can't be what you want to be.*

What's more, in each of these films the community and family create the narrative tension. They don't believe in or trust or see the dreams or identity of the main character.

Baylor professor Alan Noble identifies this as the value of "I am my own and belong to myself." Noble sees the tension this value creates with our ethic of tolerance in progressive western society. He explains that "***If I am my own and belong to myself, the first and most significant implication is that I am wholly responsible for my life***" (*You Are Not Your Own*, 19). Now ... let's not miss this ... the value of tolerance says, *I'm obligated to the weak* ... the value of self says, *I am obligated to no one*. This is the limit of the modern view of tolerance with respect to identity through community. The Christian view of self, does not begin and end with self. Paul tells the Corinthian church, ***Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 ... Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*** Our very bodies belong to the Lord. Not only so, but Paul is using the plural aspect of 'you' ... just like our creation, our individual identity is intimately constructed with other people, God's people ... in fact, we're called *the Body of Christ*. That means, I carry the failing of my brothers or sisters not only because their are unimpeachably valuable but also because in a very real way those are my failings too ... those are my weaknesses ... those are my shortcomings ... those are my needs. We are obligated to one another because we are a family, a body, a people, a spiritual house (see 1 Peter 2).

Finally, we said that tolerance is also beautiful because it fosters self-denial or self-sacrifice. Or we might say, it decenters the self. Real community is always costly. In particular, Paul says in Romans 15 that this brand of togetherness will cost us something that *pleases* us. In shouldering the burdens of our sisters and brothers we're simultaneously invited to release something we want or enjoy. This is where we find another limit of modern tolerance. The popular view of tolerance is limited by what we're willing to sacrifice. That's because self-denial flies in the face of another ideal we're often unwilling to release: self-actualization. *You know what I mean?* We are inundated with messages of becoming our best self, our true self, and reach our peak potential. While of course, it's not evil to aspire to steward our lives as best we can, this pursuit is always hitting the brick wall of community. You see, I can't be my best self if I have to keep slowing down to help other people, other *weak* people with their needs. *With me?* Modern people want to help the weak, but they also want to become great.

This is where the Christian hope and Christian message bears significant distinction, yet again, from the secular view of tolerance. You see, our understanding of self-actualization is both instant and doesn't come from striving but dying. *What's instant?* Well, the moment you and I follow Jesus we become sons and daughter of the Heavenly Father. The Apostle John puts this beautifully, ***Read 1 John 3:1 ... See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.*** We are sons. We are daughters. In our striving and self-actualization ... the Christian understands that the greatest achievement we could ever attain in this life pales in comparison to being a child

of God. Church, the greatest title, accolade, or identity you could ever have is a son or daughter of the Heavenly Father. And that's yours, the instant of salvation. It's given. Not achieved. And it comes not from striving, but dying. Jesus says, ***Read Matthew 16:25 ... For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*** Through death comes life. Through denial comes actualization. It's not when we hold on to our pleasures that we find the good life. Rather, the good life is found when your life is given away. That's the gospel. Jesus becomes the Resurrected Lord of the universe by dying. When we resist the urge to always please ourselves, especially when our spiritual siblings are in need, we find the life which is truly life (see 1 Timothy 6:19).

Tolerance is *beautiful*.

But tolerance is *limited*.

And so ultimately, tolerance points us to something greater. It's a *signpost*.

### **Movement 3: Tolerance is a Signpost (Romans 15:5-7)**

A signpost is not the point. Rather, it points to something else. It points to what is real ... greater ... or actual. Therefore when it comes to tolerance we don't need to get angry nor despondent. We should get curious. *Where is all this going? What longing does tolerance reveal in the human heart?* Well, I think secular tolerance keeps us conflict free, or at least that's the aim. It invites us all to take on the posture that all views are equally right and equally wrong. To live in peace in a pluralistic society we're asked to lay down our postures of exclusivity and absolutism. The only view which isn't tolerated in a tolerant society is a view

which claims to be the only way. In other words, to be tolerated we must be tolerant. This, of course, is deeply ironic. You see, tolerance is feeling around for something. It's seeking to build a flourishing society with a beautiful ethic. However, this ethic is void of truth. And beauty without truth is a mirage. Tolerance, in the modern sense, is incredibly intolerant.

But when we bear with the failings of the weak Paul says we live in harmony.

Biblically, harmony or peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of justice. I think this is what tolerance is pointing to. Real and true justice. We don't really want tolerance. It's a means to an end. We want peace. We want justice.

Later in this passage he says, *Read Romans 15:5-7 ... **May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*** When we live with gospel tolerance as a community, we point to the glory of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I believe this is what our friends and neighbor are longing for. Tolerance points to something greater. But many stop at the sign and think they've arrived at the destination. Therefore you and I, as follower of Jesus, affirm the beauty of tolerance while acknowledging it's limits so that more and more people will encounter the real thing ... a real love ... a real hope ... a real peace ... a real justice ... and a real world where the weak and strong, and every tribe, tongue, and nation dwell in joyful oneness with their Creator.

*What if the love of the church was meant to give the watching world a picture of the society they are all longing for? A beautiful care for each other, complemented by the truth of our value? A beautiful community identity which is not at war with the self? A beautiful de-centering of self, which is at rest as son and daughter? Paul is saying that when we love each other well, when the strong bear with the failings of the weak we point to the beauty of God ... we point to the truth of the gospel. Tolerance is a signpost, pointing to an ultimate harmony in the age to come.*