OUR PRIESTLY DUTY

Romans 15:1-33
Key Verse: 15:16

“...to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

By God’s grace, we have studied the book of Romans for this past year, with the goal of building up the foundation of the gospel in our hearts to prepare us as Bible teachers and shepherds for WIU college students. But as we studied Romans, we discovered that before building the foundation of the gospel, we first had to tear down the false messiah of our self-righteousness. As we discovered in chapter 14, our self-righteousness extends even to what we eat and drink, encouraging us to judge and condemn others regarding what are in fact disputable matters. We make others cry endlessly by violating their consciences when we self-righteously use our freedom in Christ. We learned that we must make every effort not to destroy our brothers and sisters in Christ, but to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. For only when we use our freedom in Christ to obey the law of love and to build others up can we keep our consciences clear and our freedom to do what is right secure. In today's passage, Paul reiterates this very basic point in order to help us carry out our priestly duty as servants of the gospel. Let’s learn from Paul’s shepherd life how to build others up by planting God’s hope for them in their hearts.

I. Pleasing others

First, Bearing with others’ failings. Look at verse 1. “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.” As we learned in Chapter 14, strong faith is not self-righteous faith. Strong faith is faith in the righteousness that is from God through Christ Jesus and his sacrifice for us on the cross. Strong faith is the confidence in God and in his salvation that we will stand by faith in him alone. One who has strong faith can be fully convinced in
his own mind that no food is unclean in itself, but whatever does not come from faith is sin. Therefore, one who has strong faith does not use his freedom in Christ to please himself, but to bear with the failings of the weak, as a shepherd for them.

Bearing with others’ failings does not mean to tolerate others self-righteously. Instead, it is our Christian duty, following the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. When the demon-possessed man came to Jesus, he had so many bad habits, including failing to wash, comb his hair or wear suitable clothing. But Jesus did not shrink from helping the demon-possessed man out of disgust. He bore with the man and his rude and foul behavior because he had the hope of God for him to be changed, if only he believed in God’s original creation purpose. So Jesus spoke tenderly to him, “What is your name?” Later, this man became the evangelical director of the region of the Gadarenes (Mark 5:20).

There are many examples of bearing with others’ failings in the history of UBF in the US. One Ph.D. candidate in ocean engineering began to take care of two hillbillies, both of whom had potbellies. Their failings were that they had no vision or ambitious spirit as young men. The Ph.D. student brought them to his house every weekend and fed them both in body and spirit for over three and a half years. They consumed a huge amount of food. But neither of them grew spiritually. Only their stomachs grew. Still he never gave up on them. He loved them, bearing with all of their failings joyfully in the hope of raising them as the most outstanding servants of God in this generation. At that time, his effort to fulfill the priestly duty seemed to be in vain. But God blessed his ministry when he bore all of their failings wholeheartedly to the end. Now one of them has grown up to be the director of the Chicago chapter, and another has become a professor shepherd, something of which he had never dreamt. There was a young man who had been suffering from strange sorrowful feelings, caused by his mother’s mental illness. His failing was that he took everything for granted. He was not thankful even when his sick mother served him occasionally with many tears and affection. A Christian woman began to take care of him, as a mother hen cares for her chick, for three and a half years. But he did not grow spiritually as people had expected.
Rather, he looked spoiled in addition to his inner corruption. But she was always happy to baby-sit him. She kept on caring for him even when her husband joined her in her mission field and demanded her attention desperately. At last the young man began to realize the love of God through Bible study with her. Now he is bearing with the failings of many weak people as the director of DePaul UBF, Newsletter editor and the principal organizer of International conferences.

Second, Building others up. The goal of bearing with others’ failings is to build others up in Christ. Look at verse 2. “Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.” Our Christian duty is not to provide welfare benefits. No one among the Christian community should demand that others please him or build him up. Rather, each of us must use our strengths and abilities to build others up. There is no exception to this rule. For example, Paul asks for the prayers of his Roman coworkers as he journeys on to Jerusalem (30-31). Paul was ready to build up the coworkers in Rome for their good, but he also helped them to build him up as a messenger of the gospel and servant of God’s world salvation purpose. In the same way, we must be ready to build others up until their salvation is secure and they can participate willingly in the world salvation work of God.

Building others up requires self-sacrifice. Look at verse 3. “For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written, ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’” Self-righteous people want nothing to do with those who do not meet their standard of conduct. One woman criticized her son’s ministry to college students, saying, “I would never go to church with drunks or drug addicts.” The Pharisees of Jesus’ time refused even to associate with tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners, for fear of making themselves unclean. Christ Jesus had no sin. He had no reason to associate with sinners, or to let himself be associated with them. But Jesus Christ took the insults and shame that were due others upon himself, in order to save them from their sins, and build them up in faith and obedience to God. His disciples were just country-bumpkins. As a result, the Pharisees caught them numerous times eating their meals with unclean hands or eating the ripening grain in the grain fields on the Sabbath. But Jesus
did not say, “they are just uncouth disciples.” Jesus defended his disciples before the religious bigotry of the Pharisees, saying, “They are like David's mighty men. They are guests of the bridegroom. They are servants of the king.” Jesus suffered a lot to build others up. Because of his clear stand regarding using the Sabbath day for the sake of helping sinners and healing the sick, Jesus was accused time and again of being a law-breaker, sinner, and even a servant of the devil. When they arrested Jesus, they arranged for Jesus to be crucified between two robbers, thinking that by associating him with criminals, they could discredit him before the people. But Jesus was not ashamed to be associated with sinners who believed in him as the Christ. One of the criminals next to him on Golgotha begged Jesus, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Then Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:42-43).

To be a shepherd for one other person is to struggle together with that person against the sins of unbelief, selfishness, anger and lust. It is not possible to do so without being stained or infected by those same sins. So how can we survive spiritually and live as shepherds in this dark world ruled by sin? The only way for us is through faithful and deep Bible study. Look at verse 4. “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” From this verse we learn, first of all, that we must practice spiritual endurance. Spiritual endurance in the face of temptation and sin is also called repentance. No one who lives in a physical body can keep himself clean from sin by his own effort. As soon as we interact with other sinners, we are stained again and again by our sinful thoughts, desires and actions, both voluntarily and involuntarily. As a result, we come under constant condemnation due to our guilty consciences. How can we persist in doing the work of God when our own consciences condemn us? We must endure in the face of the devil's accusations through repentance and faith in the promises of God. We cannot bear our own weaknesses and failings. But Christ bore them in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness (1 Pe 2:24). We can endure when we remember Christ who accepted us as we are for the sake of the Father's plan of world salvation. Secondly,
we must find encouragement and hope through the example of others in Scripture. Rebekah who took Isaac’s curse upon herself for the sake of Jacob; Nehemiah, who pulled out the hair of those Jews who had married foreign women; Esther, who resolved, “If I perish, I perish,” all were men and women in God’s history who took the weaknesses and failings of others upon themselves. Because of them, God’s history could continue, and his world salvation purpose could be carried out. We must learn from them hope in God that overcame their shame and weakness and enabled them to do God's work at great cost to themselves.

Third, The God of hope. Look at verses 5 and 6. “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” When we depend on God for our victory in denying ourselves in order to build others up, God rewards us with the spirit of unity among ourselves. A spirit of unity among proud and rebellious human beings is unheard of. But for those who remember God’s grace of forgiveness, and the grace of Jesus’ sacrifice on their behalf, it is possible. Look at verse 7. “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” Jews could not accept Gentiles because of their unclean habits and years of suffering under Gentile rule. Gentiles could not accept Jews because of their attitude of cultural superiority and unbearable self-righteousness. But God had a hope that Jews and Gentiles alike could worship God with one heart and one mouth. Look at verses 8 and 9. “For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name.” The Jews were indeed self-righteous and proud. But Christ Jesus came to help them repent and take up their holy mission as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The Gentiles were indeed unbelievers and slaves of their sinful desire. But Jesus came to make God’s salvation known to the Gentiles through his disciples’ witness, so that they might repent and practice the obedience that comes from faith. When we study the Bible sincerely, we can understand that it is God’s undying hope that all men everywhere
might repent and believe in his Son, so that they might have life in his name. Look at verse 12. “And again, Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him.’” When we know God's hope for ourselves and for our sheep, then our hearts can overflow with the hope of God (13).

II. Paul's ministry to the Gentiles

First, Paul's priestly duty. Paul wrote a masterful account of the gospel and of God's world salvation purpose in his letter. But he apologizes here to the Roman Christians for having to tell them things they surely already knew. Nonetheless, he is convinced that he had to do so, because of God's grace and high calling. Look at verses 15 and 16. “I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” Here Paul describes in a nutshell what has motivated him in his shepherd life, from the time he first fell from his horse before the holiness and majesty of the Risen Christ. Paul confesses that he has been given a priestly duty to make the gospel known to unbelievers, so that they might become acceptable to God through their changed lives in obedience to the law of love. Paul's priestly duty is precisely the way of peace and mutual edification that he has been teaching us since Romans chapter 12. In short, Paul is urging us to follow God's calling for us to live as kings and priests for the sake of his world salvation plan, just as Paul had been doing. We have a priestly duty to love others as Christ has loved us. We have a priestly duty to reconcile men to God through proclaiming the gospel, and all men with one another in Christ. When God's people repent and become a kingdom of such priests and a holy nation, then Jesus will return to gather his own and restore us to his heavenly kingdom.

Second, “I glory in Christ Jesus.” Paul was universally attacked by Jews and Romans for his radical message of reconciliation in Christ Jesus. But Paul was not sorry. Instead, he exulted in doing the work of God as a servant of Christ Jesus. Look at verses 17-19. “Therefore, I
glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ.” After helping the Samaritan woman repent of her idolatrous relationships with men, Jesus told his confused disciples, “I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (Jn. 4:32,34). Jesus really wanted his disciples to share in the glory of doing God’s work. Paul also experienced God’s great grace and joy in doing God’s work. God’s work seems to involve too much struggle and too much self-denial. But God’s work is the most rewarding labor for any man or woman in this world. May God bless you as you struggle to accept one another in Christ Jesus, to bear the failings of others in order to build them up, until you may glory in Christ Jesus who gives you the victory in his service.

III. Paul’s plan to visit Rome (21-33)

Paul had been terribly busy to proclaim the gospel throughout Asia and Greece. Now, he intended to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth in Spain. The Romans already had the foundation in Christ. But Paul looked forward to enjoying their company and mutually encouraging one another by sharing spiritual gifts as he passed through on his way to Spain. First, however, he needed to go to Jerusalem to present to the Jewish Christians there an offering from the Macedonian and Achaean churches. It was a dangerous mission. But it was necessary in order to reconcile the Jews and Gentiles and make them one in Christ. Paul was willing to bear the cost, if only he could participate and share in God’s hope to bring all men to God.

May the God of peace and hope fill you with overflowing hope as you serve him and his world salvation purpose in this generation.