

## **“What Would Jesus Do?”**

**Romans 15:1-7**

**November 19, 2023**

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Thirty years ago, a youth director in Michigan named Janie Tinklenberg wanted to help her teenagers remember to follow the example of Jesus. She had the idea of creating a bracelet they could wear with the letters WWJD on it, for “What Would Jesus Do?” Before long, the bracelets spread throughout the nation and teens everywhere were sporting their WWJD bracelets.

While the call to follow the example of Jesus is certainly a biblical call, a problem soon surfaced with the WWJD movement. How can I know what Jesus would do apart from the truth about Jesus found in the Bible? If there is a lack of biblical knowledge of the true Jesus, we end up following the example of a Jesus of our own imagination. This false Jesus often turns out to look just like us.

What would Jesus do if he were a member of a church battling disunity? That is the question answered in today’s passage. The church in Rome was in the process of being ripped apart by an attitude of judgmentalism. We saw that in last week’s passage, where Paul wrote, **“Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer”** (14:13). The phrase “any longer” indicates that such judgmentalism was in fact present, and Paul wanted it to stop.

The division in this church occurred at their weekly common meal. This was a meal that was a blend of a potluck dinner and a communion worship service. There were some in the church who believed the Old Testament dietary laws were still obligatory on Christians, and Paul refers to these as the weak-faith Christians (14:1-2). There were others who were ready to receive what Jesus had taught in declaring all foods clean, and Paul refers to these as the “strong” (15:1). The weak were judging the strong and the strong were condescending to the weak, even attempting to shame them into eating meat in violation of their consciences. In the first part of chapter 15, Paul invites the strong to look to the example of Christ as they navigate the rough waters of church disunity. Here’s what Jesus would do if he were in a church battling disunity.

### **I. Use His Strength to Serve – v. 1-3**

How do the strong outside the church use their power? The rich and powerful naturally use their money to hold onto power. The well-connected use their connections to maintain the status quo that keeps them rich and

powerful. How are the strong within the church to use their power? **“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.”** The word “obligation” is a common word Paul uses for indebtedness. The strong have a duty to the weak that is just as obligatory as paying your monthly mortgage.

What is the obligation the strong have? It is to “bear with the failings of the weak.” To “bear with” doesn’t mean just to tolerate the weak, but to carry their load. It means that their weakness will in some way add a burden to the strong. Their failings bring some type of burden and suffering to the lives of the strong, and the strong are told to be willing to carry that. In the case of the common meal, it may mean that they will need to alter the dish they bring. It may mean that they should be silent when the weak judge them. In any case, the focus of the strong should be toward pleasing his neighbor instead of himself.

Doesn’t Paul elsewhere condemn people-pleasing? He goes so far as to say in Galatians, **“For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ”** (1:10). Apparently, there’s a good people-pleasing as well as a bad version. The difference is found in the last part of verse 2. **“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”** The good people-pleasing is for the good of another, while the bad version is more selfish, concerned only with feeling better about oneself by the approval of another. What Paul is urging here is the building up of others. It is possible to seek to help others in a condescending way that tears them down rather than building them up. This destructive help communicates something like, “You poor thing, let me help you understand what you so obviously don’t see.”

Jesus is offered as our example in this. **“For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’”** This short statement sums up nicely everything about Jesus. In his incarnation, he did not please himself. In his life, his first priority was to please others for their good and to build them up. And he willingly died for our good. This quote from Psalm 69 was originally about King David but is even more true of Israel’s ultimate King, Jesus. Christ so identified himself with God that the insults intended for God came to him.

Paul’s use of this verse from Psalm 69 teaches us that when we seek to please others for their good, to build them up, we should expect some suffering. And the suffering will be undeserved, just as was the case with the sufferings of David in this psalm, a verse ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. What is the suffering that we can expect in the pursuit of unity? It is the suffering of being thought of as wrong by those who differ from you, without escalating the conflict through continuing to state why you think you’re right and the other person is wrong. Instead, you value the peace of the relationship more than the

satisfaction of having others agree with you that you're right. To be silent when you know you're right is a kind of reproach, an insult that we should be willing to suffer.

The general principle here is that the purpose of strength and power is to serve the weak, not yourself. When I'm on a group bike ride, some riders are stronger than others. The strong riders will take more than their share of time at the front of the group, which requires more work, while allowing the weaker riders to benefit from drafting behind them. What strength has God given to you? Whether it's physical strength, intellectual ability, artistic or musical talent, a good sense of humor, or any number of other strengths, the best and most Christlike use of that strength is to serve others.

## II. Trust the Power of the Scriptures – v. 4-6

Some commentators view these verses about the Scriptures as a digression. Though there is some truth in that, I see at least two connections to Paul's theme of unity in the church. First, in his statement about the value of Scripture, Paul is finding common ground with the weak-faith Christians. The reason they observe the Old Testament dietary laws and observe certain days as holy is because of their faithful adherence to the Old Testament Scriptures as the word of God. So Paul seeks to dialogue with them by finding points he can affirm in the views of those who disagree with him. Paul was a proponent of the benefit of building bridges instead of walls. Starting with areas of agreement instead of differences is to build a bridge.

A second connection I see here is that Paul trusted God to work through his word to bring about the necessary changes in people. Whenever two Christians disagree about something, they each think that the other needs to change. We all know what happens if we volunteer for the job of being the chief agent of change in another's life. It has the opposite effect of what we intend, leading to further disunity. To trust God for needed change in another means that we trust God to work through his word to bring about any needed changes. We resign the role of change agent and take up the role of loving our brothers and sisters. This doesn't mean that we are never to correct or rebuke, because there are times when that is required. But it does mean that we trust God for the needed changes in another's life.

Paul makes some pretty astounding claims for the Scriptures here. He speaks of its contemporary relevance even though the words may have been composed centuries earlier. **“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction.”** Further, he claims that this is true of all the Scriptures. *Whatever* was written is for us now. And then there's the most astounding claim of all about the power of God's word. John Stott says it like this. “The striking fact that ‘endurance and encouragement’, which in verse 4

are attributed to Scripture, in verse 5 are attributed to God, can only mean that it is God himself who encourages us through the living voice of Scripture.” What he means is that God speaks the gifts of endurance and encouragement to our hearts through his word. We should think of the words of Scripture as having the same power as God’s word at creation, when God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

The benefits of God’s word come to us by faith. One of Jesus’ most important parables was the parable of the soils. The word of God is sown in a variety of different soils but bears abundant and abiding fruit in only one soil. Good soil for God’s word is the heart of those who, **“hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience”** (Luke 8:15). We hear the word, believe it, and wait patiently for the changes God brings about through it.

What changes might we expect God to bring through his word? Though Christlikeness is the summation of it, we see in this passage what such qualities look like in a situation of disunity. We learn to live in **“harmony with one another”** (v. 5). And the result of that harmony is worship that brings glory to God. In Paul’s words, it is **“that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”** The greatest tragedy of disunity in a church isn’t the fact that it destroys relationships, though that is indeed a tragic thing. But the greatest tragedy is that it impedes our worship, and that reduces God’s glory.

Like many churches, Altadena has some division in its past, and this division had a deadly effect on its worship. This division happened over one-hundred years ago and arose over a difference of opinion about a union movement between the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (to which our church belonged at the time) and the United Presbyterian Church, or northern Presbyterians. A union between those two denominations was approved by the leaders in 1906, but many members in Cumberland Presbyterian churches, which were mostly in the south, didn’t want to be in a denomination with those Yankees. Our congregation was divided down the middle, to the point that the pro-unionists and anti-unionists could no longer worship together. So both groups continued to meet in the same building, with one group meeting in the morning and the other in the evening for their respective worship services. The Session minutes from that time had an entry that said, “We want to ask the Anti’s to stop turning the pews around for their worship service.” Apparently, not only could they not worship together, but they couldn’t even worship apart while facing the same direction. They lacked the one voice glorifying the Lord Jesus.

### **III. Welcome the Strong and the Weak – v. 7**

The final verse of our passage returns to the summary statement that began this section. **“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”** What would Jesus do in a church lacking unity? He would welcome all his brothers and sisters in Christ, even the ones who didn’t agree with him. I hope you recognize the words of this verse, because they are part of our church’s liturgy every week.

The welcome of Jesus is both our standard and our motivation for welcoming others. How does Jesus welcome us? He doesn’t say, “When you get your stuff together, then I’ll accept and welcome you.” He welcomes us warts and all. We could summarize the welcome of Jesus by saying that Jesus both sees us and provides safety for us. We are both seen and safe. Though nothing is hidden from the eyes of Jesus, including much of the sin we don’t even see in our own hearts, he provides his arms of safety for us. Those arms are spread wide on the cross in order that they might wrap us in their protective forgiveness. To welcome others, we must do the same. We must take the time and make the effort to see them and know them. And we must then take up the burden of doing all we can to protect them. We do these things because that’s what Jesus has done for us.

The welcome of Jesus is also our motivation for welcoming others. In order for this to happen, we need to feel this at a heart level. What helps me in this is to acknowledge the loud voice of exclusion. Have you heard that voice? It tells us, “You don’t belong here with all these others. If they only knew who you really were, they would all have nothing to do with you.” We answer that discouraging voice with the words of our text. When the Lord of heaven welcomes me, what more is needed? He is the One on the throne of heaven, the One at the center around which all the mighty angels of heaven fall down and worship. He is the Son of God who has all power and authority in heaven and on the earth. And he is the one who says to any who cast themselves on his mercy, “You are welcome here, and you are wanted here.” And then we realize that if Jesus welcomes that person, who are we to do otherwise? Is there a certain kind of person you have a hard time welcoming? Maybe it’s someone with different political views or someone from a different culture or race. Remember that Jesus welcomes him fully and then do the same.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The example of Christ shows us that the culture of the church should be the opposite of the growing tribalism of our culture. Instead of narrowing the circle of those we will accept, Jesus teaches us to widen the circle to all who will join us in humble faith.