



Romans 15:1-13

[Play selfie video](#) (minus Pizza Hut ad.)

I was going to title this message, "It's Not About Me" but this one seemed even more appropriate. Can you have sacrificial love in a selfie generation? We'll answer that question as we go.

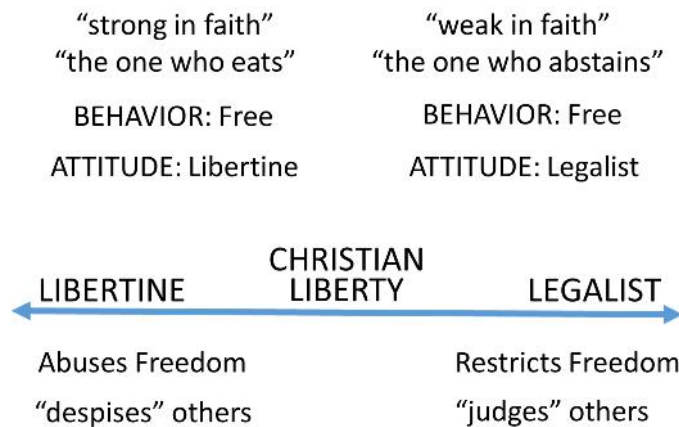
I love questions people send to me in regard to the sermon. Remember the email about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler? We returned to that question several times in Romans 13 as we worked out our relationship with the governing authorities. This week I received an email with this question from Romans 14.

"How is the Christian free within the confines of the weak in faith? I understand the idea of not offending the weaker brother. Where do the limits lie in the weaker influencing the behavior of the stronger? Holiness is the endpoint for all, so how is holiness to be pursued for the stronger and the weaker, so that each group does not cause unnecessary frustration for the other?"

I can understand the question. It's not unlike the one I asked about fairness last week. Why is it fair that the weaker brother can put restraints on the stronger brother? Why should my Christian liberty be coerced by the standards of the weaker brother? It's a fair question. But especially based on Romans 15, I am convinced that it is the wrong question. I don't mean to dis the guy who asked the question. I know his heart is genuine and that it was asked with the right motives. He would expect me to push back and even call him out, if necessary. So I don't want to discourage you from asking good questions like these for fear that I will call you out in a sermon. So laying that part aside, I believe it is the wrong question to ask in this case.

It's a little bit like the question that is asked my Christian teens and young adults who are single. "OK, you say that Christians are not supposed to have premarital sex, but how far is too far? What are the acceptable boundaries?" This is a very common question with young, unmarried

Christians. And if they don't actually say it out loud, they most certainly think about the question. But I hope you can see that it is also the wrong question. As believers, we should never be wondering how close we can get to sin without crossing some imaginary line. Instead, the question should be: "How far from sin can we get and still be salt and light in the world?"



I confess that I may be at fault for framing the argument as I did. The two extremes are legalism or libertinism. One side abuses freedom and the other restricts freedom. So like much of the Christian life, there is a Biblical balance that needs to be reached. I placed Christian liberty in the middle as the balanced point. I don't think this is wrong, but it is incomplete. So you see, the question I received is a question about balance-How can we arrive at true

Christian liberty, as the writer asked, "so that each group does not cause unnecessary frustration for the other?" But the balanced position is not Liberty. It something else. But I'm not going to just tell you what it is. For that, we need to read the passage in Romans 15.

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." 4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

1. The strong have an obligation to the weak.

I love principles that literally jump off of the page of Scripture. *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.* So if anyone is to sacrifice something in this so-called balance, it is who? The strong. The strong have an obligation to the weak. But before you yell "unfair," let's dig a little deeper.

First of all, this just makes sense from a logical standpoint. Like the illustration I used last week about having a church out on an island and you need to be a good swimmer to get to it. In this case, the strong would help the weak.



If you didn't know the Nick (pr. Voyachich) Vujicic story, you might think this was just another stock photo of a nice looking family. This family could be advertising anything from minivans to health insurance. But if you are familiar with this family, you know

that Nick was born without any arms or legs. Nick is the weaker one in this family, at least physically speaking. It would be cruel and inhumane to expect him to do things that a fully abled man can do. You will never see Nick's wife (pr. Kon-ai-ay) Kanae demanding that he do the dishes, take out the garbage or fix the family van. Kanae has an obligation to her husband. She has obligations that most wives would never even have to consider. As the physically strong of the two, she has an obligation to him. But she no doubt counted the cost long before she married him.



In the same way, strong believers have an obligation to weaker believers. Paul went on to make sure that we understood the depth of this obligation. *2Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.* Here is how I would diagram this sentence. The obvious emphasis is on the other person-to please **his** neighbor for **his** good to build **him** up. This is very sacrificial, isn't it? It's completely and totally other-centered.

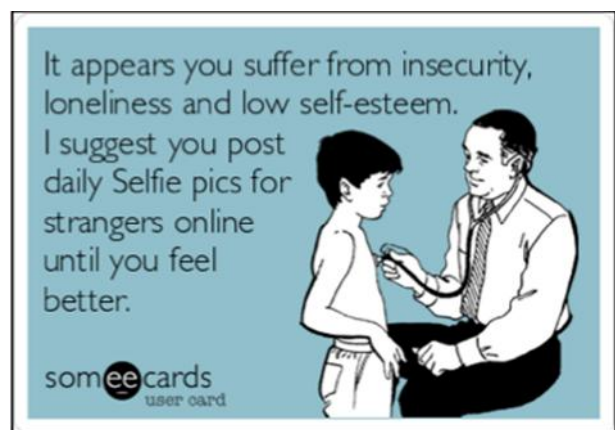
Let each of us..

*please his neighbor
for his good
to build him up.*

This is why the message is titled Sacrificial Love in a Selfie Generation. Just because we take selfies, does that mean we are more selfish than past generations? It is interesting that this generation would probably never go up to a stranger and ask,

“Excuse me. Would you mind taking our picture?” They have no need to do so since selfies and especially selfie sticks are everywhere. So taking a selfie when no one else is around to take your picture is understandable. But by selfies, I mean ones like this one to the right.

Just because you do take an occasional selfie does not mean you are hopelessly selfish. And if you have never taken a selfie does not mean that you are not selfish. I am not sure if we are



necessarily more selfish than past generations but I do think that our culture strongly encourages selfishness more than it used to. Selfies are not the problem but more the symptom of the problem.

Quick-what is the primary antidote to self-centeredness? It's other-centeredness, right? That's an oversimplification, but it's true. If you are belly-button gazing, selfie-loving, happiness at all costs kind of a person, then looking to the needs of others is exactly what you need to do. This text says that we are not to please ourselves but rather please others. But like all of Scripture, if you rip it from its context, you could turn it into something horrible. For example, if you are married to an alcoholic, you have a very good chance of becoming an enabler. An enabler allows other people to mistreat them, to take advantage of them and sometimes to abuse them. This is obviously a very unhealthy place to be.

So taken out of context, vv. 1-2 could turn us into doormats and enablers. If I am always and forever looking out for the interests of others and not myself, how will I know if someone is taking advantage of me? How will I become aware if I am helping someone or enabling them to continue in their bad behavior? Those are good questions. Moreover, this passage tells us that we are to please our neighbor, but doesn't Scripture also instruct us not to be "men pleasers"? It is true. There are many passages that warn us from becoming a man-pleaser instead of a God-pleaser.

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 (Galatians 1:10).

But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts (1 Thes. 2:4).

So obviously we do not want to be a man-pleaser in any sense of the word. Everything within us wants to have the approval of others and that is very often a fruitless pursuit. So then what does it mean to *please his neighbor for his good, to build him up* without being a man-pleaser? And perhaps more importantly, why should we be so focused on others? That's what comes next.

2. Christ obligated himself to us.

3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." 4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

As he so often does, Paul leaned heavily on the Old Testament in this passage. In verses 1-3, Paul quoted from five different OT passages which makes up almost half of this passage. Here he quoted from Psalm 69:9.

For zeal for your house has consumed me,
and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.

We easily recognize the first half of this Psalm- *zeal for your house has consumed me*. In John chapter two, after Jesus cast the money changers out of the Temple, 'His disciples remembered

that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” This is the “sometimes it’s OK to be angry for the right reasons” verse. We think to ourselves, “Jesus had righteous anger and so can we.” Maybe. But nevertheless, this is familiar to us. But not so much the second half—*the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.*

To be reproached is to be abused and mistreated. Notice that Paul is applying this to Jesus. Reproaches in the form of endless sin, fell upon God the Father. God was abused by mankind, but ultimately, the reproaches that fell upon the Father landed on the Son through the cross.

I intentionally used a strong word in this principles. Christ obligated himself to us. Is that the right word? Was Jesus obligated to die in our place? Did anyone force him to do this infinitely merciful act? Absolutely not. Jesus was no more obligated to save us than he was to create us in the first place. No one forced Jesus to the cross. He went willingly and sacrificially. He obeyed the will of His Father in walking this merciless path. To say that he was obligated to save us would imply that we somehow deserved to be saved. I am obligated to pay the mortgage on my house. The nice people at the bank gave me thousands of dollars so that I could partially own my own home. But surprise, surprise, they want their money back! Even if it’s in monthly installments. I am *obligated* to pay them because they *deserve* to be paid

In no way shape or form could we say that Christ was obligated in this way to save us. That would be rank heresy and you should run me out of the church. However, there is one sense in which we could say Christ obligated himself to us. Once he decided to save us—and this was decided before the foundation of the world. It’s an awesome, overwhelming fact to think that there never was a time when God was not planning to redeem us. He was perfectly free to make that decision but once the decision was made, we could say that he obligated himself to carry it through.

Listen to this phrase from 2 Cor. 5. *For the love of Christ controls us* (2 Cor. 5:14). In context, this is referring to Christ’s death and resurrection. Are we obligated to Christ for his sacrifice on our behalf? Indeed we are, again, in the best sense of that word. His love compels us to serve and follow him. Gratitude for the cross is the engine that drives our lives, so yes, in this sense, we are wonderfully obligated. This phrase says the love of Christ “controls” us. Is love controlling? Control seems to be the opposite of love, right? But the word control here is a little different. It means ‘to hold together.’

I almost hate to bring the Packers into a sermon before the season starts, but if you are a Packer fan (or Bears or Patriots or Vikings or what have you), does anyone have to force you to watch their games? Of course not, yet your love for the team and enjoyment of the game is a type of compulsion. The love for your team compels you to watch. For some, it might even be an unhealthy addiction, but that’s for another message. ;-)

Can you see how love can be controlling and compelling and yet still be love? So there is also a sense in which Christ obligates himself by his love for us. God demonstrated his love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). God's love was on display in the cross. Christ obligated himself by his love and for his own glory. Therefore, since Christ's



Now do you see what should be in the middle of this diagram? Liberty is not the balance between legalism and libertinism. Love is the balance. If liberty were the true middle, then it should be sought at all costs. If I am truly free to do anything that Scripture does not condemn, then I should be

expressing my full liberty at every turn. I should not allow a weaker brother or sister to restrain me, to hold me back, to chip away at my full freedom.

But liberty is not the ultimate goal. Love is the ultimate goal. Let's go back to the original question in the email. "How is the Christian free within the confines of the weak in faith?" The answer is that he really is not free because he or she is constrained by love. Love trumps liberty. Just as God was free to not create us or not to save us but was compelled by love, so we are free to express our Christian liberty while being obligated by love. *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak.*

And if you are tempted to claim that this is not fair, then you've got to deal with the cross in your complaint. When you seek your liberty what you are actually asking for is less love, not more. Do you see, there is no 'balance' between our liberty and the needs of the weaker brother. Love trumps our liberty every time. And this is true not just for areas such as liberty. The strong brother is always obligated to help the weaker brother.

Now this is not to say that love ever turns a blind eye to sin. I love how Paul puts it in Galatians. *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1-2).* Bear one another's burdens. In other words, we are obligated to bear the burden of restoring a brother caught in sin. So you don't merely help the weaker brother by allowing them to remain weak. If your four year old daughter is extremely selfish, do you want her to remain that way? That is not love. Love wants the weaker brother to grow stronger. But in so doing, the stronger brother gently leads him or her in that path.

I was greatly encouraged by how many people showed up to help the Hutchisons move yesterday. And a few people went all the way to Eau Claire to help them unload the truck. That's amazing. And two guys did the same thing for the Petricks. They went all the way to Milwaukee

to unload their truck. This is helping a brother in great need. But this is about much more than practical help such as this. There are marriages in need of encouragement. Some of you are stuck in sin. Others are not embroiled in sin but are just stuck and spiritually dry. You are in need of someone who can come alongside you and walk you to the next level.

Let me close with Paul's prayer in verses 5-6.

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rich Maurer
August 9, 2015