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THE PARABLE OF THE M&M’S

Romans 15:1-6

We have all heard of some of the outrageous demands made by celebrities. Jennifer Lopez, for example, demands that everything in her rooms be white and that she bring her staff of 75 people, including an eyebrow assistant and a coat carrier. For me, one of the most memorable was a demand made by the old rock band Van Halen. They required that promoters provide a bowl of M&M’s back stage. That’s not a big deal, but they required that every single brown M&M be removed. It was stipulated in their contract that if they came to the concert venue and found even one brown M&M in the bowl, they had the right to cancel the concert, but still receive full payment. That seems absurd. However, David Lee Roth, the lead singer, explained why they had that in the contract. The standard in their day was that a rock band would have 3 semi trucks filled with production equipment for their show. Van Halen had 9 trucks. There was so much equipment and so many technical details for their show to work that their contract was several inches thick. Buried in the middle of that contract was the stipulation about the M&M’s. The band knew if they found brown M&M’s in the bowl, the promoter had not paid attention to the details in the contract, so there would likely be trouble. At one venue they found brown M&M’s and that tipped them off that there might be problems. They investigated and discovered that the promoter had not paid attention to weight requirements. Had they put all their equipment on the stage, it would have collapsed under the weight.

What does that have to do with our faith? The brown M&M’s were a tipoff, a warning sign. There is also a tip off about genuine faith in Jesus Christ. We are looking at the book of Romans and considering a section that has to do with Christians living in harmony. In verse 6 Paul tells us the goal of all that he has been saying in chapters 14 and 15.

THE GOAL: “That with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul wanted believers to be one, to be unified. Unity glorifies God. It is characteristic of him. If there is no unity among those who claim to worship him, something is wrong. Unity is kind of the brown M&M’s of our faith. Where there is no unity, someone is not walking in the Spirit of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 3:1 Paul wrote, “Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly.” How did he know the Corinthians were worldly? Was it wild partying, or rampant greed or sexuality? Verse 3 tells us what the brown M&M’s were. “You are still worldly, for since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?” They were fighting, comparing, competing over all kinds of things, and that was the telltale sign that they were not living by the Spirit of Christ.

This ought to get our attention. Many years ago I read a book called *Maximum Marriage* that was written by a well known pastor. In it he said that God’s plan for marriage was true unity. Marriage is a fundamental building block of society, and there we should see God’s plan for humans to be unified worked out in the most intimate way. The last sentence of the book said, “If Christianity doesn’t work in the home, maybe it really doesn’t work at all.” The author’s name was Tim Timmons. He was a dynamic communicator, a terrific speaker. But he blew up one church, causing a bitter split by persuing his own personal goals and desires. Then he went on some years later to have an affair with a woman he was not married to and blew up his own marriage. Given that last sentence in his book, his life seems to have some chilling implications, because Christianity didn’t seem to “work” in his home. Does that mean, as he says, “maybe it doesn’t work at all”?

If Christianity “works,” it will produce some semblance of true unity between people. But this is a challenge, as we have seen. Today we will look at Romans 15:1-6 where Paul will tell us some components to living in unity.

BEAR WITH WEAKNESSES

Verse 1 says, “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” No one wants to think of themselves as in the weak group. We have seen that one of the problems we humans have is that we judge others and even have contempt for them. When we judge others or criticize them we can only do that if we think that we are stronger or wiser or better than they. Paul says, “Fine, let’s assume you are stronger or wiser. Here’s what you need to do. You need to bear with the failings of those weak people. Be patient and kind with them.”

The Greek word translated “ought to” in that verse is from the same root as the word Paul used in Romans 13:8 when he said, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.” It is the word “debt.” So you could translate Romans 15:1 “we who are strong owe a debt to the weak to bear their failings.” This is not merely an option we might choose when we are frustrated by those weak people. Laurie and I have a mortgage on our house still. We do not occasionally choose to make a payment to the loan company. We *owe* it to them to make a payment every month. Paul says if we find someone to be weak in our estimation and are frustrated by their failings, we owe it to them to bear with them.

The Greek word translated “bear” is a word I kind of like. To me it sounds like a word you might use when you stub your toe. The word is *bastazo*. I can see myself inadvertently kicking the leg on a chair, then hopping up and down holding my injured foot saying, “bastazo!” But that’s not what it meant. In Luke 11:27 a woman in the crowd that was listening to Jesus called out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” The New American Standard translation of that is close to the original. It says, “Blessed is the womb that bore you.” This is about more than just putting up with the weaknesses of others, tolerating their continuing failure. It is about carrying them. That’s about being for them the way a mother is for the child she carries.

Most of us humans are a mixed bag of contradictions. We want to think of ourselves as strong, we want to be able to see the failings of others, but we also, in our most honest moments, know we are weaker than we’d like to admit. We know we fail, and we want others to bear with us when we do. We don’t want them to just tolerate us, but to understand us and to actually be for us. And that’s what Paul is telling us we are to do for those we think are weak.

Recently one evening Laurie and I were with our grandsons. Wesley was carrying around this small stuffed bear that he calls Baby Bear. He decided he wanted to toss Baby Bear to me, and then have me toss Baby Bear back to him. The first part of that he was pretty good at. He would toss the bear to me and I would catch it. The problem is, he has not developed the coordination and skill of catching. I would toss the bear to him but he would whiff on it every time. He couldn’t catch it. I became impatient of this weakness and said, “What’s the matter with you? This is the easiest thing in the world. Just catch the dumb bear.” No, I absolutely did not say that. I said, “Let me help you, Wesley. Hold out your hands, put them together and turn the palms up.” I patiently showed him what I meant, positioning his hands so they were ready to catch. Then I lightly tossed the bear so it would gently land right in his hands and all he had to do was pull it into his body. He quickly began to get the idea of how to catch. Soon he was catching it every time. I was bearing with his weakness. I was gently, kindly, patiently helping him because I love him. That’s how this passage tells us to be with others.

Through 43 years of ministry as a pastor my weaknesses and failings have been on full display. Plenty of people over the years have clearly and repeatedly pointed out some of those weaknesses to me. On 3 different occasions I’ve had people who I considered friends specifically take time to discuss my weaknesses and explain why I should not be a pastor. One of them was at the lowest point of my life. It was really fun. There have been some who found my failings too frustrating to deal with and have decided they needed to trade me in for a better model. I assure you that I have longed for people to bear with me in my weaknesses. I am more grateful than I can express for the many friends who have done just that. In fact, I am humbled by the faithful love of all of you. That is what Paul wants us to have for each other, especially when we are weak.

In his book, *The Grace Awakening*, pastor Chuck Swindoll tells a story of a time when he became painfully aware of how he needed to bear with those who are weak. He was speaking for a week at a summer Bible conference. The first night he met a married couple who were attending. They seemed very excited to meet him, but as the week went on, he began to notice something that started to bug him. Every time he began to speak, within minutes the husband would fall asleep and would sleep throughout his talk. Chuck said he soon decided that this was a case where the wife really wanted to be there, but the man obviously had no spiritual interest at all and was there to just appease his wife. After his last talk of the week the woman asked if she could talk to Chuck for a few minutes. He expected that she was going to express how unhappy she was being married to a man who had no spiritual interest at all. He was wrong. She said that coming to the conference was her husband’s idea. He had terminal cancer with only weeks to live. This was his last wish. The medication he was taking for pain made him sleepy, and that greatly embarrassed him. She said, “He loves the Lord, and you are his favorite Bible teacher. He wanted to hear you one last time and meet you, no matter what.” She thanked him for his ministry that week and left, leaving him stunned and as deeply rebuked as he had ever been in his life. He had failed to bear with a brother in Christ who was weak.

HAVE THE ATTITUDE OF JESUS

Paul told us that we should seek the good of others, try to build them up. Then he gave us the example. In verse 3 he said we should be like Jesus. He reminds us of what Jesus went through for us, then said in verse 4, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us.” Why do we have those Gospels that tell the story of Jesus life? It is to teach us how to live. In verse 5 he prayed that God would, “give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had.”

Later when Paul wrote a letter to the Philippian church he would tell them in 2:3, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.” This is much like what Romans 15 tells us. But why should we value others above ourselves? Are they more important than us? Do they have more value than we do? That’s a tough pill to swallow. Paul was not telling us that other people have more value than we do or are more important. He was telling us to choose to care for them as though they were more important. They are not to come first in our estimation, but in our choosing and caring.

That’s fine, but still, why should we do that? It’s because that’s what it means to love someone. To love is to seek a person’s good. So whose good are you most going to seek? If you seek your own good most, who are you loving? You are loving yourself. We only truly love another person when we choose to seek that person’s good more than we seek our own. In other words, the level of our love can pretty much be measured by how much we are willing to sacrifice for another.

We should seek the good of others first because that’s exactly what Jesus did. Philippians 2:5-6 says, “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage.” In m\any translations verse 6 says Jesus didn’t consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. That should be translated that it is not a thing of grasping. In other words, equality with God, being in very nature God, was not something of getting something for himself. That’s why the NIV says it was not to be used for his advantage.

Think of how things work in the world. I was talking with our son in law, Michael, about some of the things that are going on in the airline industry right now. A lot of poor decisions are being made, which is contributing to the chaos we’ve been seeing. Michael said a lot of the problem is people at the very top of the airlines are making decisions to benefit themselves, rather than choosing what is best for the airline, the employees and especially the customers over the long haul. That is how things work. People with position and power think first of themselves. All over the world there are people in power in countries who are becoming wealthy by taking money from their own people. Vladimir Putin, for example, has a net worth of $200 billion. We are kidding ourselves if we think it’s not happening here.

Jesus was the antithesis of that. His position is the Ruler of all, the Lord of glory. But he did not use that position to do what was for his advantage. As verse 8 says he humbled himself by “becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” Jesus was not about himself. He was about doing his Father’s will. And that meant giving up himself to bring about good for others. He subjected himself to mind boggling humiliation, rejection, scorn and inconceivable suffering, to look out for our interests. It was never about himself.

When I was in grad school I worked part time on the staff of a huge church in their ministry to college age students. The first year I worked there I was given the task of organizing all of the summer social events for this large group. We had a ton of social events. I had to plan something for every Sunday night. We had volleyball once a week in the middle of the week and we had a major special event at least once a month. This was stressful for me, because I am not an administrative person. I’m not an organizer. This was way outside my comfort zone. I had a number of people who volunteered to help. There were two young women who offered to arrange for any food required at the events, which was a big help. At one point that summer I had some vacation time. I was going to take a few days to go visit my parents in Bakersfield, but one of the Sunday night events fell during that time. Fortunately, it was one of the lesser involved events. We were going to have an ice cream social at the home of some wealthy members of the church. I made sure that all the details were covered by people. The two women assured me they had all the makings for banana splits for everyone. All was good, it seemed. I went on my vacation. The day I got back in my office, almost the minute I got back, I was confronted by one of the women who were taking care of the food, and she was furious. She lit into me good. I had no idea what she was upset about. It turned out that the family who hosted the event had decided they would help out. They apparently had put out a spread of food that was fit for kings. It totally eclipsed the efforts of the two women and the banana splits. She was mad at me because of this. I told her I did not ask them to do any of that and I had no clue that they were going to do it. They had acted all on their own, and I had no control over it. It didn’t matter. In her eyes, I was Darth Vader, the dark lord. I said, “Look, I’m sorry that they did that. I had no idea they were going to do it. But the main thing is, the students loved the event, so even though I know it might have been frustrating for you, the kids were ministered to and the event was a success, right?” I found out that was not right. She stormed out after that. Why was that not right? I got that it was frustrating to go to the effort they did when it wasn’t necessary. But what mattered was having a successful event, I thought. As I reflected I realized that wasn’t what mattered to this woman. What mattered to her was that she receive credit for the work she did, and that didn’t happen. She was actually serving herself in her serving of others. There was not a trace of that in Jesus’ life and ministry. He gave up himself to serve others.

This is the model for us to follow. How far are we to go with this? Well, Jesus went to the cross. So I would have to say that’s how far we are to go as well. Wait, I have to protect myself, take care of myself, don’t I? How much was Jesus protecting himself and taking care of himself? The answer to that is pretty obvious, isn’t it?

In his book, *Jesus, Hero Of Thy Soul*, Jim McGuigan tells the story of a friend of his who was a tough man. He was a former sergeant in the army, a hard man among hard men. His friend said that the hardest, toughest man in his unit was a corporal. At one point this guy became a believer in Jesus, and his life changed dramatically. No more brawling, no more womanizing, no more drunken binges, no more dirty stories, and his language even cleaned up. At first the other men in the unit found it amusing that he had “found religion.” They were sure it wouldn’t last. After some time when he didn’t return to his old ways they were in awe of what he had become. But that changed when his life and character began to make them feel guilty about themselves. They began to do everything they could to provoke him. Ridicule, insults, even threats were fired at him continually. One day they had a long march in foul weather. They got back to the barracks cold, wet, covered in mud and bone tired. McGuigan’s friend, the sergeant, sat on his bunk and pulled off his muddy boots. He looked up and saw the corporal praying. Somehow, that was too much. He was enraged by this. He picked up a muddy boot and fired it across the room, hitting the corporal in the shoulder. The man just ignored it. This made the sergeant even madder, so he picked up his other book and threw it, hitting the guy in the head. It obviously hurt him. He grunted, rubbed his head, but then just went back to praying. At that point the sergeant just gave up. He was too tired to bother with the guy so he laid down and went to sleep. When he woke up, the corporal wasn’t there. But the sergeant’s boots were sitting on the floor next to his bed, cleaned and polished. The sergeant couldn’t take it anymore. That’s when he gave his life to Christ.

RELY ON GOD

Paul knew it would not always be easy to live as Jesus did. It definitely was not easy for Jesus. Our natural bent is to take care of ourselves. It is not natural to care more for others than we do for ourselves. It is hard to keep doing something day after day with no end in sight when it is not natural and requires making a choice to do the difficult thing over and over. It could not have been easy for that army corporal to put up with ridicule and opposition day after day.

Laurie and I had a conversation with one of our neighbors recently. I have mentioned before that there is a man who lives in our neighborhood who is very difficult to get along with. This woman lives right next to him. As I listened to her talk about what this man has done, it occurred to me that having the attitude of Christ Jesus toward him continually for years could be exhausting. There will be times when we get tired and just want to give up. We aren’t going to be perfect, but we all know that getting tired and compromising, giving in to our natural selfish drives, can eclipse a lot of good.

In 2004 at the Olympics in Greece, the Australian women’s eight rowing team was in the final race. Halfway through the 2000 meter race they were in position to win a medal. In the next 500 meters they lost a little ground, but still had a shot at a medal. But in the final 400 meters one of the women in the boat, Sally Robbins, dropped her oar, quit rowing, and just fell back into the lap of the woman behind her. She was exhausted, and just quit! They finished a distant last in the race. As you can imagine, her teammates were furious at her. In fact, pretty much all of Australia was upset at her. She was given the label “Lay Down Sally.” She had rowed well in preliminary races, and for more than 3 quarters of the final she was doing fine. But she didn’t endure. She gave up. That failure to endure wiped out all of the good she had done previously.

John Chrysostom, one of the early church fathers who was known as a tremendous preacher. The name Chrysostom was given to him because of this. It means “golden mouthed.” He said, “Endurance is the queen of all virtues.” Whatever virtue we have, whatever good we might do, if we do not endure, it unravels. Theologian William Barclay said, “Endurance is not just the ability to bear a hard thing, but to turn it into glory.”

In verse 5 Paul prayed, “May God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had.” We will need both encouragement and endurance in order to live like Jesus. God gives both of those. He is the God who gives endurance and encouragement. That is part of his character. He is able to lift our spirits and enable us to stand.

Isaiah 40:30-31 is often quoted, but also often not applied. “Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall. But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” Even youths grow tired and weary. Sometimes I think Isaiah might have revised that if he had met our grandson, Wesley. That little guy has more energy than that battery bunny on the TV commercial who keeps going and going. It is astounding at times. But Laurie has noted that actually after dinner and before bed time he gets almost frantically energetic. It’s like he can’t stop moving for a second. But Laurie has noted this is actually a sign that he is tired. When it’s time for bed he usually says “Bye, bye” to us and heads to his bedroom. He goes right to sleep.

Youths do grow tired. How about those who are not youths, those who are, say, in the “golden years”? Here’s what I find. I wake up tired. Recently one day Laurie and I went for a walk and it seemed like going up hill I was trudging because everything seemed hard. Those days when Laurie and I take care of some of our grandchildren we end the day utterly spent. We don’t have enough energy to get up off the couch to go upstairs and go to bed. Isaiah’s point is no one, young or old, has unlimited energy. But he claims those who hope in the Lord will run and not grow weary. They won’t have to quit because the slog is too exhausting for them. They will not be drained, instead they will renew their strength even as they are in motion.

Some other translations reflect the fact that the Hebrew word for “hope” here more often means “wait.” So it is those who wait for the Lord who will renew their strength and endure. The problem I have with this is waiting itself is something I have to endure. I have told you my doctor did a biopsy on a spot he feared could be melanoma. He said it would take a week to get the pathology report back on that, so I was going to have to wait a week knowing if the news was going to be bad. Waiting in that situation is hard. You must endure it. That makes Isaiah 40:31 seem kind of circular. You have to wait for the Lord to get endurance, but you need endurance in order to wait. Sounds like a catch 22 situation to me.

Little did I know that waiting a week would end up seeming easy. The lab couldn’t confirm the nature of the tissue, so they sent it out for another test that takes 36 days! I was going to have to wait for 6 weeks. How would I endure that? I figured out the key component. There is a doctor, a pathologist, in the lab. He’s the one trying to determine the nature of this thing. The key question is, does he know what he’s doing? I needed to trust that he knows what he’s doing. If he thought making me wait that long would be putting my life in some risk, he wouldn’t do it. So I could wait patiently trusting him. That’s what enables us to wait in life. God knows what he’s doing. We wait on him, because we know we can trust him. And waiting on him is what gives us endurance.

IMPLICATIONS

HUMILITY COMES FROM SECURITY, NOT LOW SELF ESTEEM

When we read that we should have the attitude Jesus had and value others above ourselves, it is not uncommon that people see that as having a low self esteem problem. But in fact the ability to humble ourselves to serve others comes from the exact opposite. Jesus’ humility did not come from the fact that he thought he was nothing and that he had little worth. Jesus knew exactly what he was. He knew he was the Son of God, that he would rule all of creation. He knew the Father loved him. So how he looked to people was not important to him. His security in who he was, freed him to give himself up for others.

When our kids were young the street in front of our house was the center of activity in our neighborhood. It was where the football games, baseball games and especially roller hockey games were played almost daily. There were tons of kids in our neighborhood and that’s where they played. We observed, though, that often there was as much arguing as playing that went on. They argued about everything, because heaven forbid the other team might get an advantage and thus beat them. Losing those all important games was a fate worse than death. They couldn’t bear to not win, for then they would be losers. Fast forward a few years. Toby and one of his buddies, Cyrus, were now in their junior and senior years in high school. They both had moved on to larger arenas. Both of them were successful in two sports in high school. One day they were out in front of our house shooting baskets at the basketball hoop we had back then. Amanda, the little 12 year old girl who lived next door, asked if she could join them. They said, “Of course,” and the 3 of them decided to play Horse. It was interesting to see the difference in those guys. They competed, but every time Amanda made a shot they cheered for her. In the end, Amanda won the game, beating these two very athletic older boys, in part because they rigged the game so she would win. And when she won, they celebrated like she’d just won March Madness. What had changed? They’d grown up. They’d become secure in who they were. Losing that game threatened nothing, so they were happy to humble themselves. The key for us to be able to humble ourselves to serve others is being secure in God’s love. When we are at peace with him and with ourselves, it will be no problem to serve.

MOTIVATION FOR SERVING COMES FROM LOVING THE FATHER

Jesus didn’t look at humans and say, “Oh, they’re so precious and cute. I can’t help myself. I’d do anything for them.” That works for Laurie and me taking care of our grandchildren, who are precious and cute. But people were mostly ugly to Jesus. So how did he love them so much?

It’s important to note Philippians 2:8 says Jesus became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Obedient to whom? He was obedient to his Father, whom he loved beyond measure. Jesus was eager to give up himself to serve people, because that’s what the Father wanted, and Jesus would do anything and everything for the Father.

Our granddaughters love to watch a television show called *Bluey*. It’s an animated show. The central characters are a family of dogs from Australia. It’s a cute show, but for me it is not must see television. Though I don’t find it compelling, I’ve watched quite a bit of *Bluey*. I have watched it because I love my granddaughters and they want me to watch it with them. I don’t do it for myself, but I gladly do it for them. That is how we love and serve other people. We don’t do it for ourselves or even for them, we do it because we love God.

The more we worship and love God, the more we will be able to do what he wants us to do, giving up self to serve others. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus, love and worship him. That’s what will enable us to live as Paul has instructed here.

SERVING IS THE WAY TO GET JOY AND LIFE

This is perhaps as counterintuitive as anything in the Bible. We are certain that the way to find joy and get life is to get what we think we want for ourselves. It is to protect ourselves, promote ourselves, serve ourselves. But in Matthew 16:25 Jesus said, “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” We find life by giving up self to serve Jesus, by serving others.

Hebrews 12:2 says of Jesus, “For the joy set before him he endured the cross.” The joy came through endurance and sacrifice. The same is true for us. If you want joy, if you want real life, give up serving yourself, humble yourself like Jesus did, and serve as he did.

One night Laurie and I were going to bed. We both like to read a bit before we go to sleep. I was already in bed reading my book. Laurie said, “Oh I guess I left my book downstairs.” That wasn’t my problem. It wasn’t my book. I didn’t leave it downstairs. And Laurie is fully capable of going to retrieve it. But I told her I would get it. She said I didn’t need to do that. I insisted. It was a tiny thing, but it was a way I could serve her and love her. It wasn’t about the book. It was about her knowing I love her. When I saw it as a small way I could give her a gift of love, it actually brought me joy. There is a truth that we need to grasp. Joy comes from giving and serving more than from receiving and being served.