

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Romans 15:1-7 & 16:17-20

Sermon Title: "People Pleasing or Neighbor Pleasing" (A Journey through Romans)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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**{SLIDE 1}** Paul had his critics. Jesus had his critics. All of the disciples had their critics. They all faced opposition along the way. They would try to teach a new godly idea about love and grace, and there was always somebody saying that those new godly ideas were rubbish. They would introduce a new way of living for God, a way that brought more meaning and purpose to people's lives. There was always somebody close by arguing against this new way of living and steering people away from God. The disciples and even Paul had their critics. Even the Savior of the world, through whom the world was made, had people denying his claim as Savior and Lord.<sup>1</sup>

So how did they deal with it? What was their responses? Did they give up being disciples, and did Jesus give up being our Savior? Did they fight back with harsher words, and if those didn't work with fist swinging and guns blaring? The disciples along with Paul and even Jesus himself responded with more

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John 1:1-4.

service. They didn't count themselves as being defeated. They didn't count their work as being a waste of time. They pushed through the criticism, through the negativity, and they shared life-giving words to those who needed to hear them.

**{SLIDE 2}** In Romans 15:3, Paul shares with us these words, "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." Whatever damaging things people may say about you and your faith, remember that Jesus takes on the burden. Jesus takes the damage. If someone did a little research in Romans 15:3, one would find the words come from Psalm 69:9, in which the psalmist prays for deliverance from persecution. The psalmist, King David, says that he has such zeal for God's house that anyone who insults the Lord or his house also insults King David. He is willing to share in the burden of being laughed at, because he has such a strong connection with God.

Although the words that Paul quotes are not direct words from Jesus, he isn't too far off base. Jesus once famously said in his Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the

prophets who were before you.”<sup>2</sup> In John 15, just before Jesus goes to his crucifixion, he tells the disciples, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you... [You] do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world – therefore, the world hates you.”<sup>3</sup> So, once again, whatever damaging things people may say about us and our faith, remember that Jesus takes on the burden. Jesus takes the damage. He is willing to share in the burden of being laughed at, because we have such a strong connection with Christ.

**{SLIDE 3}** We then can push through the criticism and negativity and remain alive in Christ, and move forward in the life he gives us through his death and resurrection. Jesus never failed to be Savior despite the insults, so he will never fail to be our Savior despite the insults waged against us. Paul never weakened in his zeal to be a disciple. He knew his Savior could take any insult – Paul used to be one of those who insulted Jesus before his transformation – so Paul drew strength in knowing that whatever happened to him Jesus would share in it, bad or good.

“We who are strong [in Christ] ought to put up with the failings of the weak,” Paul cheers on the Roman Christians. “For whatever was written in former days

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:11-12.

<sup>3</sup> Verse 18 and 19.

was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness [by endurance, consistency, and patience] and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”<sup>4</sup> Those Christians in Rome and we Christians in Morrow, GA, may remain strong in Christ as Christ gives us strength. We may do and think and speak as God wants us to, whether people are in line with it or not. Christ speaks through Scripture to guide us. Christ walks the paths with us. He does not fail us, nor does he fail to be Savior and Lord. We can push through the criticism and negativity.

{SLIDE 4} And then, as I was reading through one of my commentaries, four words jumped out that simplify all the stuff we were just talking about. Two of the words are “people pleasing” and the other two words are “neighbor pleasing.”<sup>5</sup>

We said before that when we run into opposition, insults and criticisms about our faith, we could either give up and stop work on our faith, or we could fight back with harsher words. Another thing we could do is try to please others. We could try to make people like us, so that they never say anything bad about us. We try to act the way they think we should act. If they

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 15:1, 4.

<sup>5</sup> John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, cf. 369.

criticize us again, we could apologize and say that we can change. It is like being a chameleon that changes its colors to match the background. It is like being a marionette, in which somebody else pulls the strings and we cannot say anything about it.

Paul says in the first verse of Chapter 15 that our business is not to please ourselves. We are not supposed to make ourselves happy and comfortable, especially when insults come our way. Christ never pleased himself, Paul tells us.<sup>6</sup> Paul never tried to please himself. Pleasing oneself is self-centered. It is self-seeking, trying to build up a world around us in which nothing can harm us, nothing can bother us ever again. We cannot build up such a world. We are not immune to insults and criticisms and the general bad things that happened every day.

**{SLIDE 5}** Pleasing ourselves is one of the results we wish to have when we people please. If we can please the people around us, we can make our lives so much easier. If we can stop the insults about faith, then we can live a more comfortable faith without any stress or strain. It is natural for all of us as fallen human beings. Because we are so broken and weak, we try to find places of healing and strength. We try to create equilibrium for ourselves, a space of tranquility

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Romans 15:4.

and happiness. One of the ways we do this is to be on good terms with the people around us. We try to make them like us by any means necessary. They might be bad for us, but we don't want to create any friction. We don't want to stir them up, so that they criticize us again. If the people around us are pleased, we are pleased.

Strangely enough, Paul tells us not to do this. We are not to please ourselves by people pleasing. That is not the point of having faith in Christ. Christ himself never people-pleased. He stuck to his mission, and lives were saved.

**{SLIDE 6}** Another way we people please is to agree with what they are saying, even though it is completely wrong. Apparently there were certain people in that Roman church a long time ago, trying to get people to think less about faith in Christ and more about other things. In Romans 16, Paul urges the new Christians not to be swayed by false teachings. "Such people do not serve the Lord," he told them, "but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded."<sup>7</sup> We like to be flattered, don't we? We like to be told we are good-looking, young, smart, athletic, whatever it might be.

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 16:18.



We like when somebody smooth-talks us into something. The person's words are so smooth and welcoming. There is a coziness in what the person says, oddly enough. The ideas that person has might actually become the ideas we could believe.

If we "people-please" such people, we leave our faith in Christ at the side of the road for some cheap imitation. If we choose to please such characters that smooth talk us and flatter us, we turn our backs on God and choose a path on which God will not support us. A so-called benefit of pleasing people by following them is the insults will stop. The criticisms about faith in Christ will vanish. They go away, because we are doing exactly what somebody else wants us to do. We fall for their schemes hook, line, and sinker, which makes them happy, which makes them pleased with themselves. Of course, we know the major downside to such people pleasing. We just spoke about it. Faith in Christ is gone. God is nowhere to be found, because we walked away. We will still suffer, not from insults but from lack of love, grace, and fellowship.

**{SLIDE 7}** What Paul urges the new Christians in Rome and us to do is neighbor-please. "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of

building up the neighborhood,” Paul says.<sup>8</sup> There is a big difference between neighbor pleasing and people pleasing. People pleasing chooses to bend to the whims of others. Neighbor pleasing bends to the will of God to help others. People pleasing is self-seeking, yearning to bring peace and quiet to the person under stress. Neighbor pleasing is other-seeking, yearning to bring peace and joy to another person, hoping to remedy their suffering. People pleasing only works for one person, the one doing the people pleasing. Neighbor pleasing works for the entire community, and even for the stranger who wish to welcome to our neighborhood.

**{SLIDE 8}** In the next verse, Paul says that Christ did not please himself. He could easily have said that Christ always pleased his neighbor, because he was always focused on the needs of others. When a man come to Jesus about his son who is demon-possessed, Jesus hears the request and heals the boy.<sup>9</sup> When a blind beggar calls out to Jesus from the side of the road, calling him the Son of David and begging for his mercy, Jesus stops his travel forward and brings sight to the man.<sup>10</sup> When a woman who has been bleeding

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 15:2.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mark 9:14-29.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Mark 10:46-52.



hemorrhages for 12 years just touches the fringe of Jesus' clothing, he turns to her and declares that her faith has made her well.<sup>11</sup> When a popular centurion sends his servants to Jesus to heal the centurion's most-treasured servant – and the centurion himself will not approach Jesus because he understands that Jews and Gentiles cannot mix – Jesus speaks a word and the servant from a long distance away is cured.<sup>12</sup> Even when Jesus' mother is at a wedding, and the wine has run out, and she tells Jesus to do something, and he really doesn't want to get involved; nevertheless, Jesus will turn water into wine and allow the newly-married couple's celebration to continue.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus never pleased himself, when people needed his help or when people insulted him for his words and actions. Jesus was always neighbor pleasing, always mindful of the other person's plight, always sure of the power he held to change the course of events, always bring life into dead situations.

**{SLIDE 9}** “Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighborhood,” Paul says. Neighbor pleasing builds up God's church. Neighbor pleasing adds people to a community of

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Luke 8:40-48.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Luke 7:1-10.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. John 2:1-11.

compassion and purpose. In neighbor pleasing we recognize that all of us are lost, all of us have the potential of following the wrong paths, listening to the wrong words. In neighbor pleasing we share the good words of God. We follow the example of Jesus Christ and reveal him as the Example for all of us to follow. In neighbor pleasing we are attune to the Holy Spirit, who shows us another person we can reach, another person who needs help and hope.

And God is pleased to see us together in community with Christ as our Head. God is thrilled to watch us gather together in support and in service, in worship and learning and growing. God created us to please our neighbor. God gives us the ability to please our neighbor, providing enough energy, enough time, enough resources. God rejoices when his neighborhood is building up, growing stronger, without one person left on the outside.

## *The Assurance of Pardon:*

Hear the good news! Christ Jesus lives and reigns in heaven above, holding the keys to death. Christ reigns in power with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, and he tells us to not be afraid. All sin is forgiven: large and small, secret and revealed. We are saved from death, and life is our reward. Believe this good news. You and I are forgiven through Christ our Lord. Amen.