

Decorated With Stars

Grey Matters – Part IX

Romans 15:4-13

Introduction

In April of 1940, German tanks rumbled across the borders of yet another peaceful European country. Hitler's voracious appetite had created a feeding frenzy as the German forces attempted to both conquer all of Europe and kill all the Jews.

Hitler already possessed control of Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Now his troops rolled into Denmark, a relatively small nation which could never stand up against the war machine of Germany.

As part of their systematic method of intimidation and oppression, the Germans announced that every Dane of Jewish descent would be required to wear a yellow Star of David. Any Jew who failed to comply would be executed on the spot. The Star of David, a symbol of the Jewish faith, would be used to mark them so they could be robbed of their possessions, their dignity, and even their lives.

The Danish government and its people were in no position to do battle, but their leader, King Christian X, made a bold request to prevent the Nazis from persecuting the Jewish people among them; a request that would risk his own life, and everyone who went along with him. The Danish king called for every one of his subjects to begin wearing the Star of David. Every one of them were asked to pin a Star on their shirts and blouses and jackets. Can you imagine such a request?

The Danish people knew of the concentration camps. They knew that the Germans were intoxicated by national arrogance and demonically inspired hatred for the Jew. They had heard of the lyrics Hitler's troops changed as they went from city

to city – searching for Jews to rob and rape and carry away. The lyrics, translated into English, were roughly:

Sharpen the long knives on the pavement stone.

Sink the knives into Jewish flesh and bone.

Let the blood flow freely.

What would the Danish subjects do?

What would you do, if you lived in Denmark during 1940?

There is a legend that in spite of the tremendous fear that would have gripped their hearts to take such a stand, on the morning they were to venture from their homes and be accounted for, what the German troops saw was almost too hard to believe. There were Stars of David everywhere. Brown headed Gentiles and red headed alike, all wore Stars on their clothing. They all claimed to be of Jewish origin. The Jews among them wept when they saw this incredible, life-risking act of love and support.

I have read accounts that this act by the Danes is only a legend, and I have read accounts that it actually happened. We do have this amazing statistic. As a result of the resistance of the Danish citizens to the German army, and their insistence that Jews were equal to Gentiles, while six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust, only fifty-one of them were from the country of Denmark.ⁱ

This was all because the Danish citizens stood that day, decorated with stars.

In Romans 14 and 15, Paul is making an appeal – like King Christian X – for the church to be bound

into one people; for everyone to stand, decorated with the emblems of unity and love and truth.

The enemy is on the move – marching from church to church; from home to home – seeking someone to devour. His appetite is insatiable. His hatred for the people of God has no limit.

One of the greatest defenses against the enemy of the church is the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace; the declaration of our mouths and the demonstration with our lives, that the ground, at the foot of the cross, is level. We are together in this.

As hard as it is for us to imagine, the first century would have been a difficult time for the Jew to stand next to the Gentile; for the Gentile to worship with the Jew. It is no wonder, in the center of these thirty-six verses that we have been studying, there is the cry of the apostle, which represents the cry of the Holy Spirit,

. . . accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (Romans 15:7)

To make matters even worse, there was the clash of culture – between the Jewish way of life and the Gentile way of life.

How are we to treat those within the church who are different, and who have different opinions, than we do?

Paul answers that we are to live by the principles of:

- Protection;
- Reputation;
- Consideration;
- Conviction;
- Imitation.

The last of the principles I find in this text, as we wrap up our study of Grey Matters, is the Principle of Reception.

Webster defined “receive (or reception)” as, “to take into one’s possession . . . to accept”.ⁱⁱ

As we take one final look at this text and its theme, Paul will encourage Christians in any century, to receive – to take into one’s possession.

The Principle of Reception

In this Principle of Reception, we could say that Paul is encouraging us, as believers, to embrace three things. Let me give them to you.

1. First, if we want to know how to get along, even when we disagree, we have to embrace the Scriptures. When we embrace the Scriptures, we discover that our lives are not hopeless!

Notice Romans 15:4.

For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

For Paul’s audience, this would primarily have referred to the Old Testament. It was all they had.

Paul has already made clear that the ceremonial requirements, festivals, and Sabbaths of the Old Covenant are no longer requirements for the believer in the New Covenant (Romans 14:5-6). However, all of God’s revelation, Paul wrote,

is profitable . . . that the [believer] may be . . . equipped for every good work. (II Timothy 3:16-17)

Literally, Scripture is to provide the supplies we, as believers, are going to need for life.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers that the Israelite experience in their exodus from Egypt was written down so that we would have their example and not follow it. He wrote,

Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they craved. (I Corinthians 10:6)

Further, Paul wrote,

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, (I Corinthians 10:11)

Do you want to know how to live? Then:

- Study the exodus of the Israelites.
- Read the challenges of Daniel.
- Feel the loss of Job.
- Watch Hosea respond to the unfaithfulness of his wife.
- Stand by as Gideon steps out in faith.
- Join in as the Israelites sing their song of faith as they walk around Jericho.
- Feel the agony in the heart of Nehemiah for his beloved homeland.
- Listen as Joseph refuses his employer’s wife.

Has it ever occurred to you that the Living Word – the Lord Jesus – quoted the written word three times as He faced the devil, himself? To all three temptations, Christ responded to Satan with verses of scripture – all three of them from the book of Deuteronomy.

A radio listener wrote to me recently, complaining that I was preaching from the Old Testament. He said, “I thought you were a Christian and a Baptist – what are you doing preaching out of the Old Testament?”

I thought, “If he only knew!”

The message of Paul to the Romans, and to us, is clear – both the Old and New Testaments are the words of God, and together, they offer hope to the student of the word.

David sang in the Psalms of Old Testament scripture with these lyrics:

- ***My soul cleaves to the dust; revive me according to Your word. (119:25)***
- ***My soul weeps because of grief; strengthen me according to Your word. (119:28)***

In other words, embrace the Scriptures – for in them you discover hope.

Do you want hope? Take Scripture to heart.

David wrote further in his 119th hymn,

I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings and shall not be ashamed. I shall delight in Your commandments, which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, which I love . . . remember the word to Your servant, in which You have made me hope. (119:46-49)

Do you want to know how to live and how to walk? The word of God is the manual for life. Is it any wonder that the enemy so attacks it?

Rich Tatum told the story of the faith of one little girl in the word of God, in spite of her pastor who was feeling a little mischievous one Sunday. He saw her standing outside the preschool Sunday school classroom, between the time for Sunday school and the worship service, waiting for her parents to come and pick her up for “big church”. The pastor noticed that she was clutching a big storybook under her arm. He knelt beside her and asked, “What’s that you have in your hand?”

She answered, “This is my storybook about Jonah and the whale.”

“Tell me something – do you really believe that story about Jonah and the whale?”

“I sure do.”

He went on, “You mean to tell me you believe a man can be swallowed by a big whale, stay inside him all that time, and come out alive?”

She declared, “Yes sir! This story is in the Bible and we talked about it in Sunday school today.”

The pastor said, “Can you prove to me this story is true?”

She thought for a moment and bit her lip, and then said, “Well, when I get to heaven, I’ll ask Jonah myself.”

He asked, “What if he’s not in heaven?”

She replied, “Then you ask him!”ⁱⁱⁱ

Embrace the Bible. It is God’s instruction manual for life.

I typically share with my GreenHouse class – our church membership class – about the summer of my freshman year of college. My parents were building a modest ranch house on a couple of acres and moving from the home where I had lived my entire life. Every day we would go to the building site and note the progress. It seemed painfully slow, much like the building project we are now beginning to see take place on our church property.

Every day this week, I have driven past the field out front, to see if that hole is any bigger. I am convinced they are moving the dirt with a spoon! It is not nearly fast enough.

I remember when the framing of my parent’s home was finished and work on the inside was beginning to take shape.

One day, as my father and I walked into the house, we noticed they had begun laying the brick for the fireplace in the family room. They had laid the brick to about waist height. We both stopped and stared at it, and then said, “Does it seem crooked to you?”

We called the contractor. He came and took one look at it, and said, “It’s crooked.”

He then, ordered his crew to tear it down to the hearth.

The next afternoon, we returned to check on the progress. We walked in through the kitchen door and looked across the room, into the family room and at the fireplace. It had been rebuilt to about four feet in height. We stood and stared, and once again, said, “Doesn’t it seem crooked?”

We called the contractor again. He drove over to take a look, and immediately said, “I can’t believe it! They are building it crooked again!”

He called the crew and told them to tear it down again – all the way down to the flooring – and to start over.

A couple of days later, we returned, marched in, and immediately sized up the fireplace, which by this time, was all the way to the ceiling. It was perfectly straight.

My father asked the contractor what made the difference, the third time.

The contractor said these intriguing words that I have never forgotten. He informed us that this particular crew was young, so on the third attempt, he had stayed behind to personally work with them.

This contractor illustrates the role of Scripture.

We are inexperienced in life. So much of what happens to us, happens for the first time.

There are no summa cum lauds in the faith. In fact, there is no such thing as a graduation for believers from the school of pain and difficulty and growth, this side of heaven, and it is impossible to audit any of the classes while you are on your way there.

The word of God has been given to help you construct meaning and hope out of life. It is intended by God to instruct you. The Greek word Paul uses in Romans 15:4, translated “instruction,” is “didaskalia,” which means that the scriptures are the teaching instrument that reveal both act and content for holy living.^{iv}

This is what you believe. But do not stop there – this is the way you are to behave.

Remember that the proof of Christianity is not what you believe, but how you behave. The world could not care less about what you believe. Your Bible is only one of many supposed sacred writings. The convincing testimony of Christianity is not this Book, it is this Book applied in your life.

It is not a creed – it is your character!^v

So embrace the scriptures.

2. Secondly, not only are we to embrace the Scriptures, we are to embrace the saints. When we embrace the saints, we discover that our hearts are never homeless.

Notice Romans 15:5-7.

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the

same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.

When we embrace the Scriptures, we discover that our lives will never be hopeless.

When we embrace the saints, we discover that our hearts will never be homeless.

Paul is not calling for us to simply accept new believers into our church fellowship, although that would certainly be included in this admonition. He is calling on all Christians to accept one another in the fullest and deepest sense; to treat each other with love and understanding, just as Christ also accepted us.^{vi}

In this immediate context, the Jew and the Gentile were to move past their prejudice – even though it was rooted in centuries of discrimination and bigotry and partiality.

However, this is our nature – in any century.

We not only pander to be part of a group, but we really like to be part of an exclusive group. We like it best when we are it!

The Jews believed they were it! The Gentiles argued that they were not it – in this new era of grace.

Have you ever flown first-class? How do you feel when they announce, “Now boarding – all first-class passengers.”? You are part of an exclusive group of people.

My wife and I flew with a mission team from this church to France several years ago. We visited a mission station and a church that we supported. On the flight over, we sat in coach class. It was very cramped quarters and I ate more peanuts than an elephant would ever want.

On the flight home, we discovered at the ticket counter that the airlines had somehow separated my wife and I. They told us to wait while they found two seats together and then, to our surprise, they said, “We’re going to seat you both in first-class.”

This was not a short flight to a nearby city – this was from France to Raleigh!

Even before lift-off, we were sipping Sprite. We were presented with warm towels to wipe our hands before the meal. We had a menu, and it included chocolate mousse for dessert! Our meal was served on china and crystal. I could not help but think of the people in the back eating cold sandwiches. We had

magazine and newspaper selections and leather seats that reclined.

I felt so bad for the rest of our missions team! I even went back to see if some of them wanted to switch places.

My wife and I felt elite. We had special treatment that everyone else around us had to pay a small fortune to receive.

James says, “You’re holding a church service and a man walks into the assembly wearing a gold ring and fine clothing.”

Human nature says, “Treat that man differently.”

We think this man deserves to sit in the first-class section – which in church means the back row. You have to come early to get the best seats in the house.

Then, a poor man walks in, and you say to him, “Have a seat on the floor.”

James then asks,

have you not made distinctions among yourselves . . .? (James 2:2-4)

This is our nature.

It is no wonder we need a new one. We need a nature in which we discover that the ground is level at the cross of Christ; that our brotherhood is in the saving gospel of grace.

We have a unity based, not on Adam’s blood, but Christ’s; not of flesh, but of faith; not by our first birth, but by our second.^{vii}

If you went back through just the first eight verses of Romans 15, you could easily develop a profile of a healthy church. It is a place of:

- refuge and strength for needy people (verse 1);
- instruction, where our lives are built up (verse 2);
- focus on the glory and sacrifice of Christ on our behalf (verse 3);
- encouragement, where the scriptures are taught (verse 4);
- unity, where the ground is level among us (verse 5);
- worship, where we glorify God in unison (verse 6);
- acceptance, where the pattern of Christ becomes our model (verse 7);
- humility, where the servant spirit of our Lord becomes our goal (verse 8).

If this sounds like work – it is!

This is the reason that if you are looking for the ideal church, you need to keep visiting around. Anyone can embrace the ideal church; the challenge in these verses is to embrace the real church.

Romans 15:7 could be paraphrased to read,
Embrace one another as Christ has embraced you.

This is as if to remind us, “Do you think Christ embraced you because you deserved it?”

That is not grace! That is compensation.

Grace is undeserved kindness. Grace is wearing a star and risking your life for nothing in return. Grace is,

. . . while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8).

What could we offer Christ in return? Even our righteous deeds are like filthy rags compared to His glory and His purity and His righteousness.

This, however, is the point of grace. Paul wrote that this is how God demonstrated His love toward us – while we were in the act of continually sinning – Christ died for us.

Part of our problem with not willingly embracing other saints is that we have a higher opinion of ourselves than we ought to have.

Mark McMinn makes the following analogy in his book, *Why Sin Matters*, as he writes that each of us is like a light bulb. One shines with 50 watts of holiness, while another has only 25 watts. The most stellar Christians are 200 watts. But these foolish comparisons become meaningless in the presence of the sun.

Paul is making one last appeal. If God, the glorious Son, has shown His grace to needy, polluted, self-seeking, self-interested, self-centered, depraved, egotistic, arrogant, perverted, wandering, wretched sinners like us, – did I make the list long enough? – how can we not show grace to one another who are now united by . . . “precious blood, a second birth and one belief?”^{viii}

Embrace the Scriptures. Embrace the saints.

3. Thirdly, we are to embrace the Sovereign. When we embrace the Sovereign, we discover that we are not helpless!

If the church is to be a unified body – if we all are to decorate our clothing with stars, as it were, to indicate we are all indeed one new race (I Peter 2:9) – if there really is no first-class and coach in the church

– if we really can embrace the Savior by faith as our Sovereign – is the scripture clear on this?

It is no surprise that Paul will support these claims by quoting from each of the three major divisions of the Old Testament – the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms.

- The first quote is in Romans 15:9.

... Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles ...

This is from II Samuel 22:50, when David sings of his deliverance from King Saul. He sings so that his rejoicing will be heard among the Gentiles, as well as among the Jews.

- The second quote is in Romans 15:10.

... Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.

This quote is from Deuteronomy 32:43, when Moses calls on the Gentiles to praise God with the Jews.

- The third quote is in Romans 15:11.

... Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him.

This is from Psalm 117:1, when the Jews and Gentiles are embracing their Lord in praise together.

- The final quote is in Romans 15:12.

... There shall come the root of Jesse, and He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles hope.

This is from Isaiah 11:10. In other words, the Messiah will come from Jesse – the family line of King David.

So:

- in the first quote, Jews are praising God among the Gentiles;
- in the second quote, Gentiles are praising God along with the Jews;
- in the third quote, Jews and Gentiles together are praising their sovereign Lord;
- in the final quote, the Sovereign Christ is reigning over all Jews and Gentiles who have embraced Him by faith.^{ix}

What tremendous hope this engendered! Can you imagine this news in the first century church?

In other words, “Hey, there is room for the Gentile in the royal family of the Messiah – in the coming kingdom! And for those of Jewish origin, there is room for you in the bride of Christ – which is the church!”

Is it true? Today, in this church, 2000 years later, both Jews and Gentiles are worshiping God together, side by side.

Conclusion

It is no wonder Paul ends this section with the benediction of Romans 15:13,

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is a blessing within this wonderful benediction! Paul ends this section by just bursting into this exuberant prayer:

- You are not hopeless! For,
... the God of hope [has filled] you with all joy and peace ...
- You are not homeless! For you have entered the everlasting family of God,
... in believing ...
- You are not helpless! For, not by your power, but,
... you ... abound in hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are to:

- embrace the Scriptures – and our lives will not be hopeless;
- embrace the saints – and our hearts will never be homeless;
- embrace the Sovereign Savior – and in the strength of His Spirit we will never be helpless.

Now, there we have it. It has been quite a journey for us through grey matters, and it ends essentially, where it began – with more choices. In fact, the most important kind of choices – that make getting along with one another, even in matters where we disagree, possible.

Will we choose to embrace the Scriptures?

Will we choose to embrace the saints?

Will we choose to embrace the Sovereign Savior?

This is the way to build our lives together – to build them together on the solid foundation of the grace of God.

Let us not forget while we shine our puny little lights with as much enthusiasm as we can that we

belong to our glorious Lord – the brilliant, resplendent Son, of God – who embraced us by His grace. He has made His choice – and He will never let us go.

Sing:

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' name.*

Refrain

*On Christ the solid Rock, I stand,
All other ground is sinking sand;
All other ground is sinking sand.*

*His oath, His covenant, His blood,
Support me in the whelming flood.
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my Hope and Stay.*

Refrain

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ⁱ John Maxwell, The Power of Partnership in the Church, <http://www.preachingtoday.com>, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Webster's New World Dictionary (Southwestern Company, 1964), p. 619.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rich Tatum, <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.

^{iv} Readers Greek New Testament (Zondervan, 2003), p. 356.

^v William Woodfin, Leadership Magazine vol. 8, no. 1.

^{vi} John MacArthur, Romans: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1994), p. 318.

^{vii} Ralph Lauren, Romans: Where Life Begins (Kregel, 1948), p. 476.

^{viii} John Phillips, Exploring Romans (Moody Press, 1969), p. 250.

^{ix} Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Right (Victor, 1997), p. 166.