

Romans
Faith, Family, and Fullness
Part 14
Romans 14-16

Sanctification:

- Set apart wholly for God and His purposes.
- Filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

1. Love heals ethnic divisions.

- Without judging. (*Romans 14:1-12*)
- Without hindering. (*Romans 14:13-23*)
- With Christ. (*Romans 15:1-13*)

2. Concluding remarks: plans, people, and Phoebe.

- *Romans 15:14-16:27*

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Romans: Faith, Family, Fullness Romans 14-16¹

Today we've come to the end of our summer long series, going through the New Testament letter to the Romans, and it's been quite a journey. Maybe you're relieved that we're finally about to finish (well don't get too relieved just yet, because we're covering the last three chapters today, so we might be here awhile! I'm kidding, but) we are going to finish up by looking at Romans chapters 14, 15, and 16.

I pray you've been learning and growing like I have. Before we finish up, let me give us a quick review of the whys, wheres, and whats of this letter. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Christians who lived in Rome. Paul had not actually been there yet, but he planned to be soon. Remember, too, that Paul had hoped to go beyond Rome to Spain, so his visit there would become a launching pad to go on to do missionary work across more of Europe. We don't know for sure that he ever actually got to do that, but that was his plan.

But there were problems in the church in Rome. Here's why: the church was made up of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, and at one point the emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jewish people from Rome. This included all the Jewish Christians. Then, about five years later, all the Jews were allowed to return, and when these Jewish Christians returned to the church in Rome, they found that the Gentile Christians weren't practicing the religious rituals that were so important to the Jewish Christians – things like circumcision and dietary restrictions, and all kinds of rituals. So there was conflict going on between these two different ethnic cultures, and they were struggling to find their unity in a multi-cultural church.

Paul's letter, then, is an attempt to help them sort things out before he arrives. But it's more than that – it's been called Paul's Gospel, his Magnum Opus, and is a theological masterpiece. Paul is reminding the Roman Christians – and *us* – of all that God has done for us in Christ and how we can be changed by the Holy Spirit to live truly Christian lives in this world. That's where our unity comes from! In this letter, Paul grieves for his own Jewish people who have rejected Christ, and if he could, would give up his own salvation so they could be saved. But he also reminds the Gentile Christians that, if it weren't for the Jews, they wouldn't even be Christians; they are a wild olive branch that has been grafted onto the tree. All of this is because of God's love and grace, because neither Jews nor Gentiles

¹ Resources:

NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 2: Chapters 9-16* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 78–79

William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, 3rd ed. fully rev. & updated., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002)

William M. Greathouse and George Lyons, *Romans 9–16: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2008), 163–164.

John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, Fourth American Edition. (New York: J. Soule and T. Mason, 1818)

Clarence L. Bence, *Romans: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1996)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

deserve to be in God's family. It's only because of the work of God's Son on the cross and resurrection.

We've been calling this series, "Faith, Family, and Fullness," because that's what this book is about: that we are justified or made right with God through faith in his gift of salvation through Jesus, and so we are a new, multi-ethnic family of faith, who live different lives than the world around us; we live lives that are filled with the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Through these weeks, we've given you lots of background and contextual information, we've gained insight and inspiration, and we've been challenged to live our Christian lives to the fullest that God intended – being filled with the Holy Spirit, being what the Bible calls "sanctified." Remember that we've talked a lot about what **Sanctification** is and we've been using this definition: sanctification means to be – **Set apart wholly for God and His purposes, and to be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit.**

Romans is all about how we have received, and how we live out, this sanctified life. So from chapter 8 on through the end, we have been seeing what this life looks like. Romans makes the point that being sanctified is the ambition and priority of *every* true believer in Jesus.

Pastor Casey did a great job last week, didn't he? He reminded us that, as sanctified believers, our allegiance is to God, and because of that, we are to be good citizens. So now, Paul returns his attention to the issues that are creating the ethnic divisions in being a multi-cultural church, and then gives us some closing remarks.

For most of this summer, we've taken time in the service to read the passages for each Sunday, but we're not going to do that today – we'll look at what's in those chapters but won't also read them. I'd really, really encourage you to read those three chapters today, while the sermon is still fresh on your mind. Maybe read them with your notes, so you can see how what I'm sharing with you is reflected in those chapters. It wouldn't take long for you to do that.

So let's start by seeing that all of chapter fourteen and half of chapter fifteen are showing us how...

1. Love heals ethnic divisions.

Remember that we've said that the motive and result of a person's sanctified life is love – love for God and love for others. That's the kind of love that can heal any ethnic division. The ethnic divisions in the church in Rome were showing up in their differences of language, of worship, and of lifestyle practices, including what foods they ate.

What we find in this section is particularly helpful for us here at West Valley Church. We live in a valley that has multiple cultures and ethnicities, and the two dominant ones being...what? Anglo and Hispanic. In West Valley, those two ethnicities and cultures are roughly somewhere around 50% each of the population. We've said all along: if we are doing our job as a church and introducing people in our community to Jesus, then we are going to start looking like our community.

Here's our vision: that we will be one church with two languages. Eventually, we will have two services on Sunday morning: one in primarily English and one primarily in Spanish,

with plenty of time between services to fellowship together. We will have meals and events and children and youth ministries together. And we will also have worship services together on a regular basis. That is where we are headed. One church, two languages.

But whenever you mix two ethnicities, you have differences. And whenever you have differences, you have the potential for conflict.

That's what Paul was addressing in Rome. So he starts off by reminding them that, since love heals these ethnic divisions, it means that they will exist together...

– Without judging.

That's in verses 1-12 of chapter 14. Since both Jews and Gentiles are in the family of God because of God's grace, and neither has earned it or deserves it, then they have no business judging each other's ethnic or cultural practices.

I recently read an article that said the police in Oregon were looking for a man who they say stole a car with a child in the back seat, only to return the four-year-old and reprimand the mom about her parenting. Local authorities said the theft took place outside a grocery store when the mom left the car running with the child in the back seat.

The mother left the car unlocked and went inside to buy a gallon of milk and some meat. The thief happened to walk by and hopped in the car. He soon realized the four-year-old was in the back seat and pulled back into the parking lot, returning the child to the mother—but not without scolding her.

Police spokesman, Matt Henderson said, "He actually lectured the mother for leaving the child in the car and threatened to call the police on her. Obviously, we're thankful he brought the little one back." The thief ordered the mom to take the child...before he drove off in her car.²

What that mom did wasn't smart, but that thief was in no position to judge her! Neither of the ethnic groups in the Roman Church were in a position to judge the other; both were sinners that had been forgiven by God through Christ.

Remember Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matthew 7:1-5, niv)

For either group to judge the other based on their cultural practices was to sin by judging them over something that was not sin. (repeat)

² Source: Bre'Anna Grant, "Police say Oregon man who stole a car with a child in the back seat came back and 'lectured' the mom about parenting," Insider (1-17-21)

Church, let me just say that this is something we must guard ourselves against here at West Valley Church. As we become the multi-ethnic Church that God is calling us to be, we'll need to help each other so we don't struggle with this.

One of the ways we are trying to help with this is by becoming more and more bilingual, and you experienced it this morning with our worship in both languages – isn't that amazing?!

The Bible tells us that when we are all gathered around God's throne in heaven, we will be worshiping him in every tongue, all at the same time. Here's the description from Revelation 7:9-10 –

"I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9-10, niv)

That's what God intends for his church! That's why Paul wrote this letter to Romans – it was so important that they get it right.

Right now, experts say that there are 7,000 different languages spoken on earth.³ That means that if Jesus came back today, there would be at least 7000 different languages singing God's praise in unison (that doesn't even account for the believers from ages past who speak a language that doesn't exist anymore!). That means this morning in our worship service, West Valley Church, worshiping in two languages, we represent .000003% of heaven's worship! That's not much, but that's our part.

Let me repeat what I said a minute ago:

We've said all along, if we are doing our job as a church and introducing people in our community to Jesus, then we are going to start looking like our community. But whenever you mix two ethnicities, you have differences. And whenever you have differences, you have the potential for conflict.

If we judge each other based on our cultural practices, then we are sinning by judging over something that is not sin.

Then Paul says in 14:13 –

"Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister." (Romans 14:13, niv)

That verse serves as a segue into the next point, and that is that if we are a sanctified church, our love will heal ethnic divisions...

– Without hindering. (Romans 14:13-23)

³ <https://statisticsanddata.org/data/the-most-spoken-languages-2023/#:~:text=According%20to%20various%20analyses%2C%20there,billion%3A%20English%20and%20Mandarin%20Chinese.>

Paul makes the point that, since their unity is in Christ, and since their ethnic differences do not involve sin, then they shouldn't do anything that would hinder the other group from being able to carry on with their cultural practices.

For the Jews, carrying out their rituals were important to them – these things had been part of their culture for centuries. They had certain food preferences, they had certain worship rituals, but the Gentiles very loudly said that those things were not important. And Paul *agreed* – those things are *not* what's most important. So you'd think Paul would say, "Since those things are not important, we'll make them stop doing it." But instead Paul said, "You're right, those things are not important, but it's important to *them*! So don't judge them and don't tell them they can't do those things! Don't hinder them in their worship. If that's what they need right now, don't get in their way!"

Paul referred to the Jewish Christians as being weaker in their faith, because they didn't realize the freedom they had in Christ. They still thought they needed to practice those things. They weren't wrong; they were just weak.

These believers were cautious with these food laws, and just ate vegetables to avoid the difficulty of eating unclean food. They still kept certain days and feasts. But can you blame them from a human standpoint?

If you were a Jew, you kept those things your whole life, and you avoided certain foods altogether. How challenging would it be to eat some of those forbidden foods, or to not celebrate some of those holidays?

Imagine that you are a guy with a peanut allergy. You've known your whole life that you've got to avoid anything with peanuts in it. It's become your life practice. Then one day, your wife bought some almond butter, which has the same consistency, smell, look, and taste of peanut butter. She wanted you to know the joys of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with stuff that wouldn't kill you. Even though you could eat it, mentally, you couldn't. It would be weird to eat something you had been forbidden to eat, even though it was fine. You'd take a bite and wait for your lips to tingle and your throat to swell with each bite. And even though it doesn't happen, you still won't feel comfortable eating it. It was the same for these people. That freedom was a lot to get used to. Wouldn't it be horrible if your wife nagged you about how stupid you were for not eating almond butter, or imagine if she tried to force feed you almond butter. That's kind of like what the Gentile Christians were doing to the Jewish Christians.

So Paul is saying that the Jewish Christians weren't doing anything wrong; they just weren't ready to move on from those things. So in the meantime, don't hinder them by making them be like you! Love doesn't do that!

One of the ways you've seen that at work here at West Valley Church is with Spanish language. When we sing in English, there are Spanish subtexts. When we sing in Spanish, there are English subtexts. You saw on the announcements that we have Spanish subtexts. Right now, this sermon is being translated into Spanish for folks through the use of in-ear live translation. You see more and more of our print material in both English and Spanish.

Why do we do that? Because we don't want to hinder either language from being able to be a part of our church.

Now, I'll be honest with you. I've heard a few people over the years say to me, "Well 'they' (referring to our Hispanic brothers and sisters) they should learn to speak English. We shouldn't accommodate them." And the rationale for that is this, "This is America. They should learn to speak English." And you know what? That thought would be right – if our goal was to make Americans. But that's not our goal. Our goal is to see people become Christians! So we will accommodate people for Jesus. I'm not saying we shouldn't encourage citizenship – by all means we want to be good citizens, like Casey told us last week from Romans 13. But it's America's goal to make Americans; it is the church's goal to make Christians.

And I'll be truthful again; we've had a few folks leave our church because they don't like that we are becoming one church with two languages. They think "those" people (Hispanics) should just go to their own church, and if "those" people (Hispanics) won't go to a church for their own kind, then those folks who left (Anglos) decided they'd go to a church of their own kind (all Anglos). But it was Martin Luther King Jr. who very rightly observed, and I quote, "11 o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour, in Christian America." Let me ask you: which image best reflects the Church from Scripture: the multi-ethnic church of Rome and Revelation, or the segregated church in America? I'm not trying to be harsh; I'm just trying to be honest. And according to Romans, sanctified believers love others, and so they won't judge, and they won't hinder folks of other ethnicities from worshipping together. Instead, they will be one...

– With Christ. (15:1-13)

The first half of chapter fifteen gets the two groups to focus on what's most important, by being like Jesus toward one another. Paul reminds them of the way Jesus treated others, and, if they are filled with the Holy Spirit, they too will have the character and nature of Christ toward each other. So they'll respect each other, they'll protect each other, they'll look out for each other and love and serve each other. He reminds them that there isn't a "right" and a "wrong" between the two groups. There *is* a "weak" and a "strong." That sounds condescending, like Paul is saying, "We're strong in our faith, but they are weak, so we have to treat them with kid gloves because they are so puny in their faith." But it's not meant that way. Paul is saying that, whatever privilege you might have by being more mature, it's your job to use that privilege to love and serve others. Jesus gave up so much of his privilege to love and serve us. We do the same for each other. We are only all on this journey together. So we help each other out, even from different ethnicities, whether some of us are weak or some of us are strong.

Paul points out that this has *always* been God's intention, even from way back in the Old Testament. He even quotes four passages to prove his point.

The passages are Psalm 18:50, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117:1 and Isaiah 11:10. (They all talk about God's desire for all people from every tribe and nation and language to be in God's family). Paul shows that all those old passages were ancient forecasts of God's plan for the inclusion of the Gentiles into the faith. One scholar points out, "(Paul's) convinced that, just as Jesus Christ came into this world to save all people, so the Church must

welcome all men and women, no matter what their differences may be. Christ was an inclusive Savior, and therefore his Church must be an inclusive Church.”⁴

Mark DeYmaz is the pastor of the Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas, and he’s passionate about building a multi-ethnic and economically diverse church. In his book *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*, DeYmaz stresses the church—especially the American church—ought to reflect the many colors and cultures of our landscape. He admits that this isn’t the easy route. But that’s not the point. He says that the church ought to be “a place in which people are comfortable being uncomfortable.” Christians must realize “that they are a part of something much bigger than themselves.” DeYmaz goes on to share a story that shows the beauty—and complexity—of multi-ethnic worship (I’m quoting him here):

“Let’s compare the multi-ethnic church to a multi-generational family. Assume for a moment that Grandma, who is alive and well, lives in the same house with you, your spouse, and several children of varying age. Now in your home, one tradition involves the family meal. Indeed, you expect the entire family to come to the table when dinner is served. However, one night you arrive home, only to be challenged in this regard.

On this occasion, Grandma has arrived early to help feed the baby while you help your spouse set the table. Soon your twelve-year-old twins enter the room arguing over television rights; nevertheless, they are seated, and it is time to pray. At that moment, however, you realize someone is missing. Your teenage son is not at the table. Heading upstairs to see what’s the matter, you find him playing a video game in his room; he is wearing headphones so as not to be disturbed.

“Why,” you inquire, “are you not at the table? Didn’t you hear Mom say it’s time to eat?”

“Oh yeah,” he replies, with just a touch of attitude. “I heard her. But I’m not coming to dinner tonight. Mom’s serving meatloaf, and I don’t like it.”

Now let me ask you a question: *If you were a parent, how would you respond?*

No matter how many times I have asked that question, the answer always comes back the same. It’s likely that you, too, would tell your son to [go to the table whether he likes it or not]. And in so doing, of course, you would teach him a most profound lesson: *It’s not about the food; it’s about the family.*

“Look, Son,” you might say, “I don’t care what we’re eating tonight. You’re coming to dinner because you’re a part of this family. You see, it’s not so much the *meal* but the *memories* we make that’s important. And when you’re not there, we miss out on all you contribute, and you miss out, too. Sure it’s meatloaf tonight, but tomorrow we’re having pizza!”

Of course, the next night you will not need to have the same talk with Grandma. In her maturity, she learned long ago to appreciate the blessing of life and love. And while her stomach will not allow her to eat the pizza, she will enjoy watching her grandchildren tear into it! Yes, in that moment, she will be thankful just to have a seat at the table, still to be

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, 3rd ed. fully rev. & updated., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 233.

alive and a part of the family.”⁵

This is the point Paul is making: it’s not about what language one group uses or the other, it’s not about the food one group eats or the other. It’s about being the family of God, and every one of us ought to be thankful to have a seat at the table, to be alive in Christ and part of God’s forever family.

So Paul wraps it all up in the second half of chapter fifteen through the end of chapter 16 with...

2. Concluding remarks: plans, people, and Phoebe. (Romans 15:14-16:27)

It’s from this passage that we see Paul’s plans to come visit Rome and then to go on from Rome to Spain, and then he gives a long list of people that he wants them to say hello to for him – people that he knows who are visiting there, others that he has heard about that he looks forward to meeting. But there’s something really important in this closing list of people that Paul commends, and that’s the women. Here’s a last, parting point that Paul makes to show that the Church is something different than the world around it. Not only are we united in our different ethnicities, we are united as men and women, too. If the church were supposed to be led by men alone, this list would only include men. But there are multiple people in this list of leaders who are women. Paul shows us this by starting off the list with Phoebe – a deacon. Deacon is a term for a leader who serves the church. In fact, she is the probably the one who hand-delivered this letter from Paul, and was the one who read it aloud to the church in Rome. Phoebe was a leader and a teacher. By the way, interestingly enough, the first use of the specific word “church” in Romans is used here to describe Phoebe – “a deacon in the church at Cenchreae (*kencray-I*),” which means that the church met *in her own home*. Paul goes out of his way to tell the Roman Christians that they should welcome Phoebe as they would any other leader in the church – even Paul himself. Phoebe is just one in a list of many women that Paul commends here; notice too that he lists the husband and wife leadership team of Priscilla (wife) and Aquilla (husband) – in that order. In a male dominated culture, you’d expect the husband’s name to be listed first. Paul intentionally lists Priscilla first, to show that women as well as men can be leaders in the church. I will tell you, it doesn’t make sense to me why there are some denominations today that refuse to allow women to be pastors or teachers or leaders, when Paul went out of his way to show otherwise. I am thankful that in the Church of the Nazarene, we ordain women as pastors and leaders, and one of our six General Superintendents, who help lead our global denomination, is a woman. We’ve had women pastors on our staff here over the years, and right now we have three women in our church who have local ministers’ licenses and are on their way toward becoming women pastors: Karren Crawford, Melissa Peart, and Sarissa Gonzales.

Paul wrote about this to the church in Galatia about this too:

“For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither

⁵ Mark DeYmaz, *Building a Healthy Multi-ethnic Church* (Jossey-Bass, 2007), p. 111

Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:27-28, niv)

West Valley Church is a unified, sanctified, multi-generational, multi-cultural church led by men and women – just like God’s Word itself tells us to be.

So Paul leaves us with some closing comments that are worth mentioning. In verses 17-18 of chapter sixteen he reminds us again:

“I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.” (Romans 16:17-18, niv)

And then he gives us this promise for the sanctified, Spirit filled church of believers in Jesus from verse 20:

“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.” (Romans 16:20, niv) (*repeat!*)

So keep it up church. Be sanctified: set yourselves apart wholly to God and his purposes, and be filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Let love be your motivation and character. Be the multi-ethnic church in West Valley. And in doing so, God will crush Satan under your feet. The enemy is destroyed in a sanctified, multi-ethnic church!

Now Pastor Roger is coming to send us out with the final three verses of the entire book of Romans, as it applies to us. Would you stand with me as he does.

Benediction

Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with *(the)* gospel, the message *(we)* proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that *(people of all ethnicities and cultures)* might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. (Romans 16:25-27, niv)