

Forbearance

Romans 15:01

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

This may be just any ordinary morning to you, but for me it's a very exciting morning because we're starting another chapter in the book of Romans. That has only happened in my little life about fourteen times over the past eighteen years. So, that's what we're doing, loved ones. If you take a Bible and turn to Romans 15, you'll find the first verse there of that chapter. "Romans" is a letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Rome about 57 A.D. And why we think it's important is Jesus said that his apostles were inspired by the Holy Spirit. So, the things that they wrote are used by him to speak to our hearts. That's why we think it's a big deal. We think that Romans is not just an ordinary letter written by a man in the first century, but it is actually the word of our creator to us human beings -- and that the Holy Spirit who wrote this word is able to actually speak it to your own spirit in a unique way this morning. That's why it's kind of dynamic. So, I pray that God will say something to you that he isn't saying to any of the rest of us and yet he'll be able to say it because this is his word.

So loved ones, we are looking at Romans 15:1 and it runs you can see like this, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." And in Greek, the verse looks really something like this -- and perhaps those of you who are at the very front can see it a little. The Greek word is "opheilomen" and it means "now under obligation." And "hemeis" means "we." "Hoi dunatoi" means "the able" actually. "Dunatoi" derivation is "dunamis" and this becomes dynamite in English. So "dunatoi" is "the able." So the verse goes "under obligation are we the able." [This is a literal translation] The people who are able in society, the competent people, the people who are strong in their faith and are able we are under obligation. "Ta asthenemata" is the weakness or the weak things. "Ton adunaton" means "of the unable." Now under obligation, are we the able, the weakness of the unable -- that's "bastazein" meaning "to bear." So we who are able in society and confident and strong in our faith are under obligation to bear the weaknesses of those who aren't able and aren't competent and aren't strong in faith. Then "kai mai eautois areskein" or "not to please ourselves." So that's what the verse means, loved ones, in a literal translation from the Greek. You remember Paul wrote it in Greek originally. We who are able and confident and strong in faith are under obligation to bear the weaknesses of "the unable" or the incompetent, or those who are weak in faith, and not to please ourselves.

And actually if you look at our translation in the RSV, you can see a little of the inadequacies of it. Because it runs, "we who are strong in faith ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." You can see that. We're to bear with them and that appeals to us. Yeah, we're to bear with them. But actually, the Greek word "bastazein" does not mean to bear with. The Greek word for bear is a word that's used in another verse in the New Testament. Matthew 8:17 -- and it will come home to you immediately you read it why the RSV translation is inadequate here. Matthew 8:17, "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.'" And that's the same word as God uses saying that we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses or the failings of the weak.

I mean you just don't imagine Jesus saying, "Well, I'll bear with them Lord, I'll bear with these miserable sins and infirmities and diseases that these people have committed against You; I'll bear with them, I'll put up with them if you want me to." We know he didn't do that. We know he wasn't irritable like that or resentful about it. We know that he bore them. He took our sicknesses and he

took your failings and mine and he bore them gladly in his own body. He allowed the wrath of God to destroy them in him -- he rejoiced to do that for us -- that was the bearing that he did. That is what God's word means here, loved ones. We who are strong ought to NOT bear with the failings of the weak, in the sense that we kind of put up with them as best we can. No, we're to bear them lovingly and gladly and rejoicing to bear them. And that's what the King James Version translates it. "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak," -- not bear with them, but "ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves." And then the New American Standard Version does the same, "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength," -- not to bear with them and put up with them reluctantly, but we ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.

So, you've decided to teach your son or your friend or your colleague or your girlfriend or your boyfriend how to drive a stick shift. And you've decided to teach them not in some miserable old hired car, not in some old beat up wreck but in your prized five-speed that you love and cherish, and have next to your heart. And so you get into the car and they take off, and without any visible aid from the clutch, they kind of throw the gears all in together and let them sort themselves out. And the grinding goes right through your whole body. It's easy to bear with them; it is -- it's easy to bear with them. The way you bear with them is you grip your seat with white knuckles, you clench your teeth and the strain goes right through your whole body, and you say, "Could you try to use the clutch a little?" That's bearing with them. Actually whenever you bear with the weaknesses of somebody, you make them bear their weaknesses. That's really what you do, because that's what that little one does right beside you. They feel all the tension, they feel all the strain and it adds to them the confusion of embarrassment over what they already feel, and actually they end up bearing not only their embarrassment and their failure and their weakness but bearing your irritability and your resentment as well.

And so, whenever you bear with the weakness of somebody, you actually don't help them at all. You actually make them bear not only their weakness, but your weakness as well. When you bear them, you relax and you remain at peace, whatever they are doing to your dear prized car -- and when they grate the gears, you say, "It's okay, the gears are robust and they'll take some of that and we all do that at the beginning -- just take it slowly, depress the clutch and it'll go okay." And you bear their weakness in your own being and you absorb the pain of it inside yourself and you give out to them a love and a strength that enables them to win.

Loved ones, that's what it's about. It's bearing weaknesses. And if you say, well why -- why should I do that? Oh, that same verse in Matthew -- Matthew 8:17 if you look at it -- for the same reason. Matthew 8:17, "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah. He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." Because that's what God has done with you and me. Not only have we teachers done it, not only have we parents, not only have we coaches, not only have we countless friends who have put up and borne our weaknesses and taken our weaknesses and made up for them, but our God has done that himself. Our God has borne our weaknesses. He has throughout the years borne things that you have failed in, and things that I have failed in. He has borne them without any complaints. You think of how stupid and how ridiculous you and I have been over the years -- you think of how miserable and wretched and disobedient we have been over the years, and he has borne all those things without any question. Loved ones, the reason we bear the weaknesses and the failings of those who are not as strong as we are, is because that's the nature of reality -- that's the nature of our God.

Our God is one who bears people's weaknesses and doesn't rebuke them for them or approve them but

absorbs them into his own being. Our God does that. That's what you get in a verse in the Old Testament, it's Isaiah 42:3. This is the nature of our God. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." That's it. We are so lucky. A bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. For a thousand times, you and I have been bruised reeds and we haven't been worth much, and he has refused to break us. And a thousand times, he could have broken us in a moment, but he has not done it. Our God has been most tender hearted to us.

There is a children's hymn, it says, "The heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind" -- and that's what he's been for us. And that's why we are to be the same. You get it again in Isaiah 40:11, in the Revised Standard Version. Isaiah 40:11, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." That's why we should do it. Because finally when all this life is over, the God that we'll meet is not going to be a terrifying Hitler or a terrible Khrushchev or some massive tyrant, he is going to be a person who looks like a shepherd -- who feeds his flock like a shepherd, who gathers the lambs in his arms, carries them in his bosom and gently leads those that are with young.

That's why we should be like that. Both at work, if we're bosses, and at school if we're teachers and in our families with husbands and wives and fathers and mothers; and in tennis if we're coaches, and in hockey if we're teaching somebody else how to do it. That's why we should bear the failings of the weak because our Creator is like that. And you say, yeah but what about the gears -- what about the gears, that's what I'm worried about. I don't mind bearing the failings of the weak, but it's the gears, the gears are all coming apart, as they try to change without visible use of the clutch.

And sometimes it's not just gears that are grating, sometimes these weak people are out there destroying my reputation, spreading all kinds of rumors that aren't true; sometimes they're destroying my business. Sometimes at home, they're just tearing the thing apart; that's what I'm concerned about. If you just bear the failings of these weak people, probably they'll tear the whole thing apart.

Loved ones, there is absolute foundation for not worrying about that for one moment. And you'll find it in a great verse that just brings home to us how God and Jesus are unalterably happy. I don't know how many of you realize that the reason the sun rises so happily and wonderfully every day is because God and his son Jesus are unalterably happy; they are always happy -- and the sun is just part of their smile. Philippians 4:4 is the basis of why we can bear with the failings of the weak and not be concerned about the evil consequences of what they're doing. It runs, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice." So God is saying, "Don't only keep your depression, your sadness, and your anxiety down, but actually rejoice. You may have failings and they express them to you - rejoice, be glad." Why? "Let all men know your forbearance." [Philippians 4:5] Let them see your forbearance.

Now what is forbearance? Well, forbearance is a Greek word "epieikes." It actually means "let your appropriate reaction be seen by all men." That's what it says. Not just let your forbearance be seen by all men but let your appropriate reaction be seen by all men. When you are in a situation where everybody expects you to be absolutely exasperated by the failings of this weak person, then you let your appropriate reaction be seen by all men. Why appropriate? Because of Romans 8:28, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." That's why Philippians says, "Rejoice. Let your forbearance be known to all men." And the next

clause goes, "The Lord is at hand. The Lord is working all things together for good to them that love him." That's why. The Lord is able to look after your gears; the Lord is able to look after your reputation, the Lord is able to look after your family and your home. Your life is not at the mercy of the failings of the weak that God allows to happen; your life is in the hands of God. God overrules all things that happen in your life as long as you trust him, and don't put your trust in the failings of the weak. That's why you can afford to bear the failings of the weak.

Loved ones, we don't need to be all concerned about this little one or that little one who is going to spoil our life by what they are doing. That's what prevents us being loving to them. Because we're thinking, wait a minute, they'll tear the place apart. They're going to spoil my life. No, the Father works all things together for good in your life. He brings all things under the counsel of his will. There is no trial come upon you above what you're able to bear, and with the trial will be provided also a way of deliverance. Your God is always working on your behalf. He is better than any mainframe computer; something feeds in, he operates it and weaves it into the pattern.

It's the old story of the rug maker. He gets a thread that's wrong into the pattern. He doesn't take the thread out. He with cleverness and skill weaves it into the pattern, so that you'd never notice that a wrong thread was there. That's what God does with the events that come into your life through the weaknesses of other people. You don't need to be all uptight that they're going to spoil your life, and think that if you bear the weaknesses instead of expressing your resentment and your irritability to them about their weaknesses, then those weaknesses are going to pull your life apart. It's not.

The Lord God has control of your life and no weak or incompetent person, weak in faith or weak in ability is going to be able to destroy your life. So, no. God will take care of the gears in the car. God will look after those, if you'll concentrate on being like him. I don't know if you understood fully the parable of the unrighteous steward. You are good if you did, because I don't understand it. It's one of those deep mysteries. But it is interesting that God commended that happy old steward that started to write down the debts of all the people who owed his master money, he commended him because the steward was expressing the mercy of God's heart. And every time that you express the mercy of God's heart in a situation where you are the strong one and the weak one has failed, God himself will look after the consequences of that in your life, and he will provide for it.

There's another reason of course, for bearing the weaknesses of those people and bearing their failings. It ties up a bit with the kind of experience you probably had when you first got a little knowledge of tennis, a little more than your younger brother had or a little more than the students in your school had. Or you got to know something a little better; you got to know mathematics a little better or you knew how to drive a car a little better or you knew a little more about theology or a little more about the Christian faith. And do you remember what you were like in those days? You were supposedly helping somebody else to learn and they only had to make one mistake, and you nailed them. And you didn't nail them for their good -- you know that. You nailed them because you're a bit insecure in your knowledge yourself. You weren't too sure of all the tennis strokes, you weren't too sure of exactly how to play the ball in that situation and you wanted to establish your own security in your own eyes and if possible in their eyes. And so, you nailed them immediately.

You remember how different it was when you began to get a little more confidence. You became a good tennis coach, and you became a little more confident of your position in the Christian faith. Then

that person failed in some way and you could concentrate. You had one desire and that was to strengthen them. You had. You wanted a better tennis player in your team; you wanted a better Christian brother or sister beside you. You weren't concerned with establishing your own prowess or defending your own security. You were free at last to tell them and guide them in exactly the way they needed to be strong. Now that's why we're to bear the failings of the weak. Because our purpose is to strengthen them, so that they'll be able to stand strong beside us and be the kind of people that God wants them to be.

So, with homosexuals, or with whoever in your mind or my mind seem to be weaker in faith -- in fact we would say seem totally opposed to God's will -- so with them. Our task is to strengthen them in God's life. Our task is not to nail them to the wall. Our task is not to try to establish maybe our own self-righteousness in some area that we're not so sure where we stand. Our task is to strengthen them. Where do they stand? Oh, under cosmic condemnation. And I say that, loved ones, even if you are a homosexual yourself. They stand, the wee souls, under cosmic condemnation. Look at Romans 1. It is one of those shattering verses that are being fulfilled right now in our own society in an incredible way. It's Romans 1:26, "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error."

Well, it is so stark -- it's so plain and so obvious. You don't need a Bible expositor to explain it, and you certainly don't need a hammer to hammer it into the souls' hearts. All of them that are under fear of AIDS at this moment must know fine well, however you profess or however you protest. Sure it's plain -- it's plain, "receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error." We think that there has been no disease or plague that we have experienced in this world that has so much threat and so much danger to it as AIDS. I am sure there will be worse diseases before the world ends but it seems it's the worst we've ever had. It's the disease that even destroys your protection, your built in natural protection against disease. So, it seems like the final disease. And these little souls, they are the ones that are receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

So, I am sure there are willful ones who still say they are right. I am sure there are rebellious ones who still protest they are doing nothing wrong. On the whole, the whole community must be in terror and in fear -- and the word of God makes it plain why they should be. But in that situation, we're to be what the first century Christians were. Every time a plague hit the city in the ancient world, everybody scurried out, relatives left relatives, they were afraid of the plague. They got away as fast as they could. The pagans would leave their relatives dying in the streets and one group would be found in the streets, lifting up their relatives. That's how the Christians made a reputation for Jesus. They were the people that stayed behind in a plague-ridden city and took care of those who are touched by the plague. They bore the failings of the weak. So, are we? I saw the little boy on television, the black guy? I saw his two parents who had AIDS. He isn't dangerous actually; but even if he is dangerous, God has called us to bear the failings of the weak.

So, I do hope that we will be known in the homosexual community not for the fact that we have told them where to get off. But because this dear Word does it better than we can ever do. I hope we will be known because of our love and our willingness to bear even the consequences of their own sin. We will be willing to look after their children. And then, you begin to have a Christian witness; and the world begins to see Jesus.

What can encourage us husbands and wives and us Moms and Dads? We are not dealing probably with homosexuality in our house. We are just dealing with the wife wanting to know how to get the car out of the garage. We are just dealing with our little son who has for the fifth time made the same mistake in his math. We are just dealing with the husband who again has done something clumsy. And God says, "I have borne with your clumsiness for years and I am willing to bear it for eternity. I want you who are strong to bear the failings of the weak and not to please yourselves." I pray for myself and for each one of you that this coming week will see you and me more patient people and more kindly and tender hearted. Let's pray.

Dear Father, we pray for the obvious great need in our society, particularly in our own dear city. We pray for the guys and girls that have been caught up in homosexuality and lesbianism. Lord, we stand well away from condemnation. We stand Lord Jesus with you who refused to condemn the woman that was caught in the very act of adultery -- and we stand with you, Lord, and we love them. We see how often they have been driven by a lack of love into rebellion and we love them, Lord. We intend to love them through these coming days and weeks. And then Lord, we commit ourselves to bearing even their failings and the very results and consequences of their sins just as you bore ours. So, we ask you to use us where we can be used to help them and shelter them and pray for them and heal them by your power and take care of their children and in every way be to them what you have been to us.

And then, our Father, we pray for ourselves and our own family situations -- on the surface so much less sensational, but just as cruel and just as destructive. Father, we would confess and repent of any impatience or irritability where we have found ourselves to be stronger and more confident than our loved ones, or than our friends or our students or our colleagues at work. We would confess and repent of any bearing with them in a superior fashion. And Lord, we would turn from that, and we would instead help them by bearing their failings, by bearing the consequences of it, and filling up the sufferings of our Lord Jesus and enabling you through us to counteract the ill-effects of what they do. And then to lovingly and kindly show them how to do the thing better. So Lord, we thank you that the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind. We intend to be the same by your grace. Amen.