Lesson 8

THE HOLY SPIRIT HELPS US BUILD A COMMUNITY FULL OF GOD’S HOPE

Romans 15:1–19

Key Verse: 15:13

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Hope. That’s not a popular word in our society. Even when we think of it, it’s usually only on the personal level. But in today’s passage Paul encourages the Christian community in Rome to have God’s great hope. This hope includes hope for themselves, hope for one another, and hope for the world. This hope, Paul says, comes through the power of the Holy Spirit who is at work among us. Through this study may God help us grow as a community overflowing with his hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 15 is at the end of the third section of Romans, the section where Paul addresses how to live in Christian community. Beginning in chapter 12, Paul’s been giving the believers in Rome practical directives on how to live together. To Paul, not only is our personal faith important, but also it’s very important how we’re living together in community.

The believers in Rome had some problems. They disagreed about which foods they should eat (14:2–3). They disagreed about which days to regard as holy (14:5). In their hearts they were judging each other and treating each other with contempt (14:10). These differences were basically because some had grown up as strict Jews, but most had grown up Gentiles, unfamiliar with Jewish traditions. In chapter 12 Paul taught them that through faith in Jesus they all belonged to one body and that they all needed each other (12:4–5). But changing their deeply ingrained ways of thinking and treating each other wasn't easy.

To help them focus on what was really important, Paul gave them a picture of the kind of fellowship they should have. Let’s go back and read 14:17. Paul says our fellowship should be a reflection of the kingdom of God on earth. It shouldn’t be a fellowship only of eating and drinking. It should be full of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables people very different from one another to have a change of heart and to become one. The Holy Spirit helps each of us, though we’re all different, to experience the same righteousness, peace and joy. He helps us relate to each other in new ways.

In chapter 15 Paul explains how the Holy Spirit helps us relate to each other. Read 15:1–2. If we live naturally, we all would just focus on pleasing ourselves. This often involves disregarding those who are weak. But when we live by the Spirit, we have a new focus. It’s to build up those in our Christian community who are weak. To build them up, we can’t just teach them; we have to bear with their failings in day-to-day living. This is where our faith is tested.

It’s so hard to do that Paul turns our attention to the example of Jesus. Read 15:3. What’s shocking here is the word “insults.” We may be able to bear with people who make chronic mistakes, but it’s really hard to bear with those who insult us while we’re bearing with them! But even Christ put up with such insults. In doing so he fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 69:9: “…for zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me.” The Holy Spirit leads us to think about Christ who bore with all kinds of insults from his people. When we think about how he bore with such insults, we’re comforted and strengthened to keep on following his example.

Paul also encouraged the Christians in Rome to keep reading the Scriptures. Read 15:4. The Scriptures teach us endurance. The Scriptures provide us with encouragement, especially in our struggles to bear with each other and build each other up. The Holy Spirit fills us with endurance and encouragement when we read and study the Scriptures.

The word “hope” at the end of verse 4 is important. Spirit-filled Bible study gives us hope for one another. Hope in the midst of our struggles is very important. It’s hope not just in heaven, but real hope for one other. Without hope for one another, we’re just coexisting. We only want to maintain peace, we avoid conflict and the relationship is superficial. But when we have true hope for each other, we *want* to be together, and we embrace even the difficulties because there’s a meaningful goal. This is true for Christian roommates, for friends, for couples, and for parents and children. Here we should ask ourselves, “Do I have real hope for the people in my life? How can I have that hope, and how can I relate to these people based on that hope?”

Let’s read 15:5–6. What is the attitude of mind Christ Jesus had? It was not a mind to please himself first. It was not a mind of judging others. It was not a mind of treating others with contempt. No, Jesus had a humble mind. Jesus had a mind full of love. Jesus had hope even for the weakest sinners. Jesus was willing to suffer anything if only he could build up others. This is the mind the Holy Spirit is trying to create in us when we believe in Jesus. Paul describes the attitude of mind Christ had in Philippians 2:3–7a: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value one another above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ‘Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, but made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant…’” Christ’s mindset in becoming nothing and taking the very nature of a servant wasn’t pointless, like a kamikaze pilot diving to an explosive death. No, Christ made himself nothing, took the very nature of a servant, and was obedient even to death on a cross so that he could bring the gospel to sinners and change us into children of God, blameless and pure, who shine like stars in the dark night sky, holding firmly to the word of life (Php2:15–16a).

But this mindset of Christ is just the opposite of the mindset of most people. Our sinful mindset is to use others as stepping-stones for our own advancement. It’s to be engrossed in our own interests and to be totally indifferent to the struggles and needs of others. Sadly, we see this sinful mindset even in church ministries. May the Holy Spirit convict us of our sins and help us repent so that we can have the mindset of Christ toward one another. Let’s read 15:6 again. The goal of having the mindset of Christ is so that we can glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is what the Holy Spirit wants to lead us collectively to do. Also, this implies that when we don’t all have the mindset of Christ, we have many different minds, many different voices, based on our sinful nature, and we don’t really glorify God.

Glorifying God together isn't just about singing together in harmony. Read 15:7. Here the word “accept” in Greek literally means “to receive into one’s heart as a dear friend.” Paul says “just as Christ accepted you.” Paul meant that Christ accepted us, even though he was so much better than us, and even though we were so sinful, full of problems, with nothing to offer. Verse 7 challenges us to remember the grace of Jesus who accepted us just as we were, in his deep humility, friendship and love. If we have a problem with accepting people, it’s probably because we’ve forgotten, or never really appreciated, how we were accepted by Jesus. The Holy Spirit helps us know and remember this grace in our lives, and he leads us to practice this accepting grace toward all those God has led to our Christian community. Paul says that when we receive one another into our hearts as Christ received us, this is how we bring praise to God.

Read 15:8. Here Paul emphasizes how Christ became a servant of the Jews, though it was so hard to do. From the beginning, the Jews rejected Jesus. They despised him, verbally abused him and tried to discredit everything he was doing. Historically, they had a bad habit of treating all God’s servants that way (e.g. Mt23:37). Still, Christ became their servant on behalf of God’s truth. It was to confirm the promises God had made to them. Paul seems to be writing here especially to Gentile Christians in Rome. They must've found it nearly impossible to serve the Jews, who insulted them as lesser beings and were constantly treating them with contempt. Look at 15:9–12. Here Paul quotes several Scriptures that say that the Gentiles are to be included among God’s people, rejoicing, praising God and putting their hope in him. It's God’s will.

Today we see Christians who worship according to their ethnicities. There are all-white churches, all-black churches, all-Hispanic churches and all-Asian churches. It’s more comfortable to have a homogenous congregation that can understand each other’s feelings and relate to each other humanly. But that’s not God’s plan. God wants to see Christian communities inclusive of all kinds of people, from all ethnicities, old and young, together not because of our natural affinities but because of Jesus. For this to happen we need to break our fixed idea to make others like ourselves, to have everything the way we’re used to or the way we like. We need to build a Christian community where not any one culture or generation is dominant, but where Jesus and the truth of God’s word are the standard. This is what the Holy Spirit is trying to make happen among us, if only we cooperate with him.

Let’s read the key verse again, 15:13. Here we notice that Paul calls God “the God of hope.” Hope isn’t rooted in people or in favorable situations; hope starts with God himself. Our God is the God of hope. He hoped even when it was impossible to hope anymore. He put his hope in a hopeless old man, Abraham. He put his hope in the hopeless Israelite slaves. He hoped even when they became totally corrupt and utterly failed him. He still hopes, and he's still the Hope of the hopeless. Because God is the God of hope, we can trust in him. When we come to him and put our trust in him, he fills us with all joy and peace. This is also the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul says at the end of verse 13, “…so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” God wants us, both as individuals and as a community, to be overflowing with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Clearly this isn’t a hope we have to make or summon with our willpower; it’s something the Holy Spirit does within us by his mighty power. But what does it mean to “overflow with hope”? Some people think it means to be full of the hope of the kingdom of God. While that’s true, in this context in Romans it seems to mean to be full of God’s hope for people, both those within the Christian community now and those far away from God and his people. What a contrast! The Christian community shouldn’t be a place where different ethnicities are disconnected, squabbling over petty matters and isolated from the outside world; it should be a place where all these different people are overflowing with God’s hope for each other and for the world.

Paul really wanted to impart this great hope of God to the believing community in Rome. To do so, he shared his own personal calling and ministry. Read 15:15–16. The Gentile world that God called Paul to serve was the dominant culture at that time. Paul himself was a minority Jew, and in the past he’d been as exclusive and narrow-minded as anybody. But after meeting the Risen Jesus and receiving his personal forgiving grace, God opened Paul’s mind and heart to embrace his calling for the Gentiles. Paul could see God’s great hope for the whole Gentile world, a hope God had had from the beginning, when he first called Abraham to be a blessing to all nations on earth. Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to share in God’s great hope for Gentile evangelism. At that time, the Gentiles were notoriously corrupt. They were known for abhorrent immorality and amorality. They were living filthy lives. But God didn’t have any less hope for them. God’s hope was that in Christ, the Holy Spirit could sanctify them and teach them how to worship God in the Spirit and in truth. Paul himself had seen the gospel work powerfully in many Gentiles in other places he’d been. He saw that if the Christian community in Rome caught God’s vision for Gentile evangelism, God would use them greatly. The Holy Spirit still gives us God's hope and vision, because the Holy Spirit can completely change people.

In light of this, through the Holy Spirit we need to find our own calling and mission from God, how God is leading us and how he wants to use us in our time and place. Instead of being ingrown, the Holy Spirit wants us to see God's great hope to use us for the “Gentiles” of our time, that through the gospel of Jesus their lives can be completely transformed. Instead of being isolationist and judgmental, through the Holy Spirit we need to reach out to the people, “overflowing” with God’s hope for them in Jesus.

Paul says that his Gentile ministry was fruitful not because of his own greatness, but by the power of the Spirit of God (15:19). And in 15:30 he urges the believers in Rome to pray for him as he serves the gospel ministry. He says to “join me in my struggle”—and his struggle was mainly to spread the gospel to people who didn’t know it. He urges them to pray “by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit.” “The love of the Spirit” may mean the love the Spirit kindles in us, or the love the Spirit has for his people, or even the love believers have for the Spirit. In any case, the Holy Spirit builds a community full of hope among us when we truly pray for one another, not just because we have to, or just barely, but joining in their struggles “by the love of the Spirit.”

Today we learned that the Holy Spirit wants to build a community full of hope among us. May the God of hope help us to keep on trusting in him through Jesus, so that we all may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.