

## Lesson 36: Living In Acceptance of One Another

### Romans 15:1-13

- <sup>1</sup> Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves.  
<sup>2</sup> Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.
- <sup>3</sup> For even Christ did not please Himself;  
but as it is written, "THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME."  
<sup>4</sup> 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**.
- <sup>5</sup> Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement  
grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup> so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- <sup>7</sup> Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.  
<sup>8</sup> For I say that Christ has become a servant  
(1) to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers,  
(2) <sup>9</sup> and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy;  
as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME."  
<sup>10</sup> Again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE."  
<sup>11</sup> And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM."  
<sup>12</sup> Again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES,  
IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES **HOPE**."
- <sup>13</sup> Now may the God of **hope** fill you with all joy and peace in believing,  
so that you will abound in **hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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### Introduction

One of the great challenges in the early years of gospel expansion came from the richness of Old Testament Judaism. God intended under the Old Covenant for his people to be set apart from the nations of the world by their morality and their religious customs. God's covenant led to a strongly defined religious culture. With the advent of Jesus Christ, God initiated a new way; a gospel stripped down to a powerful, minimalistic set of customs that would enter into any culture as good news for that people. The essential beliefs of the gospel and the life-giving experience of new birth in Jesus Christ are a seed that can be planted in any ground, among any people, with the power to grow into a community of believers that can transform that society. The seed of the gospel of Jesus Christ has taken root among the urban elite of New York City and the tribal headhunters of Nagaland (Check out the youtube video from National Geographic: [Why These Headhunters Converted to Christianity](#).), among Muslim Iranians and atheist Chinese, in Tanzania and Honduras, in Mississippi and California, in Scandinavia and the Balkans, from Israel to Egypt to Hawaii to India.

And though Christians cannot help but to spread their own culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that sometimes a new Christian community feels foreign to that culture, still in every one of these places just mentioned there also exist Christian communities that have taken on the distinct flavor of the culture in which the gospel seed was planted.

With the New Covenant coming from such a strong culture derived from Old Testament biblical commands, Paul as a missionary to the Gentiles faced the challenge of disassociating Old Covenant elements that were not meant to be carried on with the new wineskin of the New Covenant. The gospel needed to be freed from Jewish culture in a way that still must happen when Korean missionaries bring the gospel to Europe or South American missionaries go to Africa. In cross-cultural mission there is always this danger that the source culture will significantly distort the gospel when it is introduced into a new receiving culture. How will those who receive the message distinguish between what is essential to the gospel and what is an expression of the missionary's own Christian culture? This is the challenging danger that faced the first generation of Jewish Christians tasked with taking the gospel from Israel out into the world. They must attempt to take off the Jewish packaging without belittling the Word of God.

When God called Paul as a missionary to the Gentiles, he not only gave Paul an evangelistic ministry, he also gave Paul a theological ministry. More than any other single person, the apostle Paul was tasked with defining the new wineskin of the new covenant in this context of transition from Jewish religion to a universal message of good news for all of humanity. What God did not want was for Paul, the former Pharisee to lock himself away in Tarsus for three years writing out a universal systematic theology. God wanted theology in action, or we could say theology in context. We need to see how this is done. How do you maintain gospel integrity while disassociating the gospel from the very strong Jewish religious culture?

With the Letter to the Romans we see Paul stepping into this challenge, drawing on his commitment to God's Word and his experience as the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul is communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ to a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles. And in doing so, he has balanced the theological tension of continuity and discontinuity between the Old and the New. We also see him balancing the practical tension of how two different cultures within one community are struggling to understand the implications of the gospel.

When we come to the practical section of the letter to the Romans in 12:1-15:13, each section comes out of Paul's practical understanding of how the gospel of Jesus Christ takes root and grows into a new community. Chapters 12 through 13 apply to all churches everywhere. These are universal issues. And though we can easily apply chapter 14 to the broader issue of accepting each other when we disagree about issues of conscience, we also see that Paul is addressing a specific issue that was particularly important to his time. These disagreements are specifically about the transition from Old Covenant Jewish ceremony to New Covenant gospel practice. We can even assume from the particular tone of the issue that he is specifically speaking into the context of the church in Rome. And that explains why he uses much harsher language writing to the Galatians on the same issue; same issue but different specific local context.

So, Paul's instruction regarding this last application issue is giving us insight both into Christian practice but also into our understanding of the gospel. Paul is very serious about freeing the gospel from Old Covenant ceremony. And he does not show us any attempt to rebuild that ceremony with New Covenant parallels. Paul is pointing us past these disagreements over these issues of ceremony to a spiritual reality that he considers to be more important for gospel community. The theology of the gospel is being worked out in the practical application of the gospel.

In our last two lessons we considered three practical principles of acceptance that come out of Paul's exhortation here: the principle of the master, the principle of faith and the principle of the stumbling block. In this lesson, Paul directs us back to the gospel as the foundation of our unity and acceptance of one another. He is reminding us again that the content of our belief matters. Let's read the text and then we will walk through it step by step, Romans 15:1-13.

**[Read Romans 15:1-13]**

Paul makes five points. His first point is that the strong have an obligation to the weak.

**1. The strong have an obligation to the weak (15:1-2).**

This is in verse 1-2. "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification." This is Paul's first use of the word strong to characterize one of the groups in Rome. We just assumed it as the opposite of weak in chapter 14. But this is the first place he actually says it. Here he explicitly refers to those with a clear understanding of gospel freedom from Jewish ceremony as the strong. For us, we could expand the principle out of the Jew/Gentile context by considering the strong as those who are able to distinguish the essential truths of the gospel from the non-essential truths of the gospel. The strong understand that salvation is 100% by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; they understand that living out biblical morality flows from the truth of the gospel; and they understand freedom from cultural norms that are not essential to gospel truth or gospel morality. We should imagine that Paul is thinking about some of the leaders he mentions in chapter 16, like Pricilla and

Aquila, Mary, Urbanus, Persis and others who labored with him in the gospel. These believers are among the strong in this context.

In my own ministry with college students, I have noticed an interesting phenomena among some who trust in Christ. Sometimes there is this interesting mix of behavior that includes a new commitment morality, maybe waiting for marriage to have sex, not cheating on tests, or telling others about Jesus, which goes along with a freedom to drink, and smoke cigars and engage in other activities not normally considered appropriate in the Christian culture. In a gospel environment of grace, the young believer commits to morality while also exerting freedom. And along with this can come an intensity, unfortunately, not accompanied with love. The young believer is excited about truth and his or her own personal experience with God and may communicate the truth of the message without considering how the other person might hear what is being communicated.

One student friend I disciplined came out of a legalistic Roman Catholic background. He saw God as a cosmic policeman. His main goal was to keep his head down and not be noticed. He learned at confession to tell just enough of the truth to make it sound like a confession without admitting anything too serious. When he first understood the gospel, he came alive to God, but began to feel dead to the empty teaching in his particular local church. He stopped going to the church he had grown up in but did not start attending another church. One Sunday his mother confronted him when he said he was not going to go to church any more. She asked, "Well, what do you believe then?" And he responded, "I don't know. I just know that I am not Roman Catholic."

That did not go over so well. When he told me, I thought, "Wow, you really could have handled that better." Then I thought back to my own conversations with my parents after I had come alive in my faith in Jesus. I was very critical of the local Moravian church where I grew up. When I talked about never hearing the gospel at church, it never occurred to me to consider how that would sound to my parents who raised me there. I did not think about the kind ladies who watched over me in Sunday School. I was on fire with the gospel, but I was immature. I was personally rejoicing in the gospel, expressing my freedom, but with other people I was often really intense and indignant. I witnessed to the truth but without love.

And I am not sure there is any real way to fix that. It's a natural progression of coming alive to the truth of the gospel. We start as babies. We hear this truth and it is wonderful, but our character isn't fully formed. And God uses that young intensity. But he does not want us to get stuck there. He wants us to hold on to the truth of the gospel while also growing in love. So, if you want to claim that you are among the strong, then show it by combining gospel understanding with gospel character and behavior. As Paul says, if you are strong, then you "ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength." I have seen myself fail at this more than once in parenting, well, often in parenting. My children act immature which angers me, so how do I respond? Well, sometimes I respond like a child, a big, angry child who happens to be in charge. They at least have an excuse for acting like a child. What's my excuse? The mature are obligated to act mature.

And if the strong in the gospel are to continue to live in line with the gospel, they must put away the natural tendency towards pride and judgment over those who disagree with them, who do not yet have the same understanding. The freedom of the gospel is not intended for selfish use. The freedom of the gospel is intended to give us space to grow in love. Those who are strong, if indeed they are strong, will go past their own exultation in freedom to learn empathy and understanding and desire for the blessing of other people. They will learn to understand that their message is not an end in itself but an invitation for other people to share in the glory of God. And what good is an invitation if it is offered in an obnoxious, distasteful way. The goal is not to win a debate. The goal is to win over hearts for Jesus and to build the weak up, so that they might become strong in faith. As Paul says in verse 2, "Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification."

Paul's next point gives the precedent for what it looks like to be strong. He tells us to look to Jesus.

## 2. Jesus modeled this attitude (15:3-4).

Paul quotes from Psalm 69:9 when he writes in verse 3, "For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME.'" Jesus is the supreme example of one who was willing to take abuse for the benefit of those who abused him. He was unmoved by false accusation or by the questioning of his motives. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus scorned the attempts of Roman and Jew to shame him through the cross. Jesus knew who he was, he knew who he was listening to. He was unmoved by those who opposed him out of their own lack of understanding. Do you know who you are? Do you know who you are listening to? Are you unmoved by those who oppose you out of their own lack of understanding?

Paul makes an interesting observation about the Bible in verse 4. He comments, "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." Paul understands what was written about Jesus in Psalm 69:9 as useful not only in teaching us what Jesus was like but also to help us understand what we ought to be like.

Jesus modeled how conviction of truth leads to perseverance and encouragement in living out that truth. We persevere when we are convinced in what we believe. And we receive encouragement or comfort when we are convinced of what we believe. Without conviction that we act on real truth our commitment to that truth gives out and our consolation from that truth fails. We need to know that we are not just making these things up. We need a stronger foundation for our convictions if we are going to be able to live out those convictions in difficult circumstances.

Paul says we gain that conviction through Scripture. Jesus knows who he is because he is God. He is the source of the Word. We know who Jesus is not by discovering that truth in ourselves but by recognizing that truth in the Bible. The Bible teaches us what Jesus was like, so that we can model our behavior after him. In this case, the model of Jesus in the Scripture is showing us that if we are strong in the faith, we will be willing to take recrimination without retaliation from those who are less strong in the faith. Even if we are treated unfairly, we do not retaliate against our brothers and sisters in Christ because our goal is their edification, not winning the argument, not justifying ourselves. Our goal is not to prove ourselves right but to work for the growth of the whole community.

Lots of people commend the love of Jesus and say, "We should all love like Jesus." But without knowing what that love really looks like it is hard to persevere through the kinds of challenges that Jesus persevered through. Scripture provides for us truth upon which we can build conviction. I see what Jesus was like in the Word of God. Against all justice, Jesus did not exert the rights that were truly his. He did not require the honor that was due to him. Jesus chose to take abuse for the sake of those who abused him. It's counter intuitive. It's not the way you would think to act. But it is the way of Jesus acted.

Paul just quotes half of Psalm 69:9 here. The other half of the verse is quoted in John 2:17, "The zeal of your house will consume me." Thinking about the two verses brings up a very interesting tension. Paul uses half the verse to show how Jesus took abuse meekly. John uses the other half of the verse to show how Jesus became angry with those misusing the temple court. Jesus took abuse at times without exerting his power. That does not mean Jesus could not be intense or angry or righteous in his judgement. It does mean that Jesus was not ruled by pride or anger. He could not be pushed into action contrary to his purpose. The strong learn from Jesus when to exert authority and when to be meek. And they learn about Jesus from Scripture which provides the conviction necessary for perseverance and comfort in the midst of difficult service.

Here we also have to notice that Paul never suggested to the Romans that they expel the weaker group from the community. Christian unity does not come by claiming differences do not matter and it does not come about by getting rid of those who differ. Christian unity comes through a willingness to engage in the difficult tensions of holding onto the truth of the gospel while also allowing for space for disagreement or even weakness or mistakes during the process of growth.

Paul emphasizes the importance of gospel truth to unity in verses 5-6. This is the third point. Unity is grounded in our faith in Jesus. So, let's read verses 5-6 again.

**3. Unity is grounded in our faith in Jesus (15:5-6).**

"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."

Paul uses two phrases that communicate the same idea. In my version the two phrases are "be of the same mind" and "with one accord." We are to be of the same mind according to Jesus Christ. I believe this has to do with our belief about Jesus Christ, our belief about his nature, our belief about his gospel. Having that same mind, we are able to glorify God with one common voice. We are saying the same things about God. One of those same things is that we recognize God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our unity or oneness starts with common beliefs about Jesus which lead to a common voice in our praise of God.

Modern attempts at Christian unity often focus on common action. I think common action is good. But following Paul here, I think true Christian unity starts with common belief. There must be an essential set of truths about God and about the gospel of Jesus Christ from which we start.

We have one fairly, famous Brent in the family, he is my grandfather's uncle, the Episcopal Bishop Charles Brent. My oldest brother is named after Charles Brent. We have a picture of him with General Patton when he served as Chaplain General of the American forces in World War I. Two ecumenical conferences begun in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century later came together to form the World Council of Churches which first met in 1948. The Conference on Life and Work focused on common social action as the basis for Christian unity. Bishop Brent was no stranger to social action. He gained international recognition for helping to end the legal opium trade between the United States and Europe and Asian nations. Bishop Brent did not, however, endorse the argument by the Conference on Life and Work that unity comes through social action. He championed the work of the Conference on Faith and Order, arguing "that cooperation among churches was possible only on the basis of agreement on essentials of faith (Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 444)." The Conference on Faith and Order lost out to the Conference on Life and Work. As a result, the World Council of Churches has no clear message for the world. They have given up on Romans 1-11, while trying to hold on to Romans 12-15. But even there they pretty much whittle it all down to "accept everybody for every reason no matter what they believe."

Bishop Brent's insight that unity must be grounded in an agreement on essential beliefs follows Paul's teaching to the Romans. In his exhortation to acceptance, Paul does not urge both sides to validate one another's ideas. He urges both sides to respect one another. But he recognizes one side as having a stronger understanding of gospel truth. His desire is that both sides would accept one another even as both sides move towards an agreed understanding of the gospel, towards one mind about Christ.

The ultimate goal of coming together in one mind is "so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul is urging unity of belief and unity of worship. Christians do not and cannot share this unity with Muslims, Jews, Atheists or even liberal Christians who deny the true reality of Jesus' humanity and divinity. We simply do not worship the same God. As Jesus himself said, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him (John 5:23)." The God we worship as Christians is three-in-one, Father, Son and Spirit. A god who is not seen as three-in-one is not God. Jesus Christ is the full representation of the nature of God (John 1:1; Colossians 1:3; Hebrews 1:3). To reject Jesus, who is the very image of God, is to reject God the Father. As Jesus said when Philip asked to see the Father, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the father (John 14:9)." To accept God while rejecting Jesus is to reject God.

Christian unity is grounded on our agreement regarding Jesus Christ and his gospel. Paul's fourth point is closely connected to that. Our unity comes from our common testimony about Jesus. When we establish a common testimony about Jesus, then we can accept one another. When we agree about Jesus and his gospel, we find that acceptance is grounded in the work of Jesus. This is Paul's fourth point. This is in 15:7-12.

#### 4. Acceptance is grounded in the work of Jesus (15:7-12).

Our faith in Jesus makes a claim about acceptance. Not acceptance between people, but an acceptance between man and God. Jesus Christ makes acceptance 100% possible through his gift of grace. Having been accepted by God we can accept one another. What is our basis of rejection if God has accepted? Paul is particularly targeting Jew and Gentile here. He is saying that Jesus Christ became a servant on behalf of both Jew and Gentile. So, how does the Gentile justify his rejection of the Jewish brother in Christ, and how does the Jew justify his rejection of the Gentile? If Christ died to accept both then how do you justify using non-essential disagreements as basis for rejecting one another.

Let's read how Paul puts the argument in verses 7-12.

<sup>7</sup> Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> For I say that Christ has become a servant (1) to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers, (2) and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME." Again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." Again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE."

Paul's gospel message about Jesus Christ is the foundation for the practice he expects from the Roman believers. Jews might argue exclusion of Gentiles based on Old Covenant precedent. They were taught to exclude those who were ceremonially unclean. The gospel has removed those ceremonial barriers between Jew and Gentile. Gentiles might argue exclusion of Jews based on an incorrect understanding of the implications of the Gospel. But while the gospel may not require keeping the food laws, the gospel also does not condemn those who do keep the food laws, as long as they do not see it as the basis for salvation. The gospel creates space for disagreement these issues of conscience. And the gospel creates space for different cultural applications of the gospel or different cultural ways of answering the question, "How do we live in a way that is pleasing to God."

Now there is a definite leaning towards Gentiles in these verses. I think that may be for two reasons. First, the Roman church is primarily Gentile now. But second, and I think more importantly, Paul wants to emphasize that God had always intended for the gospel to go to the Gentiles. Isaiah proclaimed it ahead of time. God loves all peoples. And through the prophets Israel should have been prepared for something really new to happen when the Messiah came. The newness of the gospel resulted in a removal of the Jewish religious custom with no necessary Christian replacement. For the sake of correct understanding of the gospel, Paul has emphasized throughout that the Law has ended, something new has come. Paul's application of the gospel to the Greek and Roman Gentile world helps us all to recognize what is truly essential to the gospel message as distinct from what is its cultural packaging, whether that packaging was the original Jewish packaging or whether we are talking about later Western Christian packaging.

As hard as it was for Jewish Christians to let go of food laws, it became just as hard for later Western Christians to let go of Latin services or closer to our day it becomes hard for some Christians to let go of organ music. That is not to say that service in Latin is bad, or organ music is bad, not necessarily. We are not supposed to aim for some kind of culture neutral primitive church experience. For those whose heart language was Latin, that was the right choice. And for those who spiritually connect with organ music, that is a fine choice. But it is packaging. It is not essential to the gospel. What is essential to the gospel is our faith in Jesus Christ and the recognition that he opens his arm to every people group.

Paul's final point comes to us as a benediction and will serve as our conclusion for this lesson. He prays that we would experience the fruits of belief. Those fruits are joy, peace and hope.

#### 5. The fruits of belief are joy, peace and hope (15:13)

This is verse 13, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." There is a basic spiritual pattern here in Paul's letter. We yearn to experience joy, peace and hope. Just imagine for a second if these three words

described your normal internal state. This is you as you normally go through your day: joy, peace, hope. Would you require anything else. Joy is true satisfaction that brings a genuine smile to your face which does not fade quickly. Peace is a soul settled on a deep, firm, fearless foundation. And hope is a portal opening up a clear line of sight to a beautiful and just and loving future. Joy, peace, hope, these are the fruits of belief.

And yet, the fruits of the belief do not come separated from the acts of belief. We experience the fruits of belief by offering ourselves up as a living sacrifice to God and by pursuing a renewed mind. The fruits of belief come through the hard work of perseverance through life with God.

But those acts do not automatically produce the fruit. It is possible to engage in the acts of belief without the heart of belief. Without true faith in Jesus and a heart made alive in him, religious action is more likely to produce bitterness than joy, more likely to produce stress than peace, and more likely to produce disillusionment than hope. Saving faith is not only a decision of the will but is also true sight. We need to see God. It is a work of the Holy Spirit in the soul of man. And we start with a heart that has come alive to God. The Christian life is a response of wonder and gratitude from the heart. And in response we offer ourselves up to the acts of faith, in obedience to God as a living sacrifice, and we pursue the renewing of our minds through study of the word. We walk with God. We depend on God. From the heart of belief and these acts of belief come the fruits of belief.

There is one more element required: time. Walking with God is not easy. We do not experience joy and peace all the time. Paul would not have spent so much space talking about accepting one another for the sake of God if it were not a real challenge in Christian community. If we are going to walk with God in gospel community, we can expect to get hurt, to be misunderstood, to have disagreements. To successfully offer the loving gift of acceptance in a meaningful way will require perseverance and encouragement from God. We cannot keep going apart from the truth of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The feelings are not always there. But as we persevere and as we trust in God for his encouragement, his Spirit will produce these fruits in our lives in due season. Walking with Jesus we will experience joy and peace and hope. And as Paul said in 5:5, “hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

## Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 15:1-13?
2. In this context, what do you imagine it looks like for the strong to bear with the weak? What would the strong have to bear in the case of the Roman church? (For a parallel use of the Greek word translated here as “please” look at 1 Corinthians 10:33 where the word is used in a similar context.)
3. Think back to one of the issues of conscience you considered over the last two lessons, what might it look like to “please” yourself in regard to that issue? What might it look like to “please” someone else?
4. What are the strengths of expressing unity through common social action? Do you agree or disagree that Christian unity in a local community of believers must start with common agreement regarding the nature of Jesus and the essentials of the gospel? What are some reasons for your position?
5. What factors prevent Christians from different races or different nationalities from worshipping together in local communities of believers? Could this passage be applied to bring together believers from different races or nationalities into a common Christian community? What truths here would apply?
6. Notice the repetition of the word “hope” in 15:4, 12 and 13. Notice also the repetition of the word in 5:1-5 and 8:24-25. Those two passages are at the beginning and end of the larger section about how the gospel empowers believers through grace. Those two bookend sections teach us that we have security in our relationship with God because of the love he has expressed through Jesus Christ. How does Paul’s use of the word “hope” speak to you personally here at the end of our application section?