

Romans 15: 1 – Black or White 5 – 21 July 2013

Now in Gospel Light Christian Church, we have also been journeying through the book of Romans and for the past weeks, we in particular have stopped at Romans 14 and 15 on a series called 'Black or White'. Really we're talking about the grey areas of the Christian life, things that are not specifically spelled out or forbidden or commanded in the Scriptures. And we've always started with a video, this is the 5th sermon, this will be the last time you'll watch this video. So, by way of introduction, last time - Black or White 'Chai Tao Kway'.

(Video Shown)

You know, this little video clip goes to show that it's very easy for us to quarrel. It's very easy for men to argue, isn't it? Often times, we argue about non-essential matters. We argued about 'Chai Tao Kway' (Hokkien dialect words meaning carrot cake) and 'Tau Hway Jui' (Hokkien dialect words meaning Soya Milk) and er...'Chin Chow' (Hokkien dialect word meaning Grass Jelly drink). We argue over really, the non-essential things of life. May I say, this happens also in the church. Church is nothing more than a gathering of God's people, and some of you who have never been to church, you do not know what church is all about, let me tell you a little family secret. In a family of God, in the church of Jesus Christ, we are not perfect people. In fact, we are people just in a sense, like you, except that we are saved by God's grace. We are being changed by God's grace, but we still struggle with selfishness and sin, and therefore in the church, we also argue, we also quarrel and often times, we quarrel over very non-essential things. What do we quarrel about? Well, we quarrel about things like the kinds of instruments we should put up on stage; we quarrel about the style of music; we quarrel about the versions of Bible; we quarrel about whether we should have chairs or pews; we quarrel about whether the carpet should be red or blue; we quarrel on very non-essential matters as well. And the danger, if you are part of the church, if you are a believer of Jesus Christ, let me say this: the danger of us quarrelling over the non-essentials is that we may value our opinions, our self-opinions so much that we hurt relationships and fracture the church of Jesus Christ. 0:03:00.1

You'll be familiar with the story of the 'Lord of the Rings' or 'The Fellowship of the Ring.' It really is about a group of people - very diverse people, they form a fellowship. It's made up of...er... of hobbits and humans and elves and the dwarf and together this fellowship of the ring has a clear mission. To bring this evil ring across middle earth to Mount Doom to be destroyed. But along the journey, they

meet evil externally and they also faced evil internally, because the ring has an evil power to lure men into sin and corruption. And so when the fellowship experiences the last, or the corruption that this ring brings, the fellowship was in danger of being broken up and the mission was in danger of being compromised. You know, the evil one does the same thing. If the evil one can get Christians to be upset, angry, and er... out of sync with fellow believers, our mission for Jesus can be compromised. We fail to live out the unity that God wants His church to live out. We fail to walk in love towards one another and we fail to live up, therefore, to the good name, the testimony of the Lord Jesus and it ought not to be so.

Thomas Brooks is a Puritan preacher. He says, "Away with all discriminating names, discord and division become no Christian. For wolves to worry the lambs is no wonder, but for one lamb to worry another, this is unnatural and monstrous." In the realm of non-essentials, in the realm of the grey areas of the Bible, we must not allow our self inflated opinions, we must not insist on our opinions on others so much so that we hurt others and fracture the fellowship and unity God desires. And really, this is the whole point in Romans chapters 14 and 15. As we come to the conclusion of this series, Paul reminds us, "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus." (Romans 15:5-6, ESV) He's saying there's something that unites us, something that lifts us up, above our own opinions or desire to be right. That's Jesus Christ. And God's people may be very diverse, we may be very different, we may hold very opposing views on the non-essentials of the faith but we must always remember, we must have that harmony, unity in Jesus. We may all sing different notes but we must sing the same song. And so this is the whole essence of Romans 14 and 15 on non-essentials.

0:06:01.1

Question is, can we get there? How? How can you and I live in such harmony? Maybe today, as I begin the message, you can think of someone that...that has offended you already or maybe someone you have offended? You've argued over Bible versions; you've argue about music and it leaves a bad taste in your mouth and it is not a very pleasant experience but you've never been able to reconcile. You've never been able to put your hand around that man again and say, "Hey, we are brothers." How can we live in such harmony? Can I just start by saying we need to recognise this is not an easy thing to accomplish because if you think this is easy, then we don't need a sermon. But the whole point of this message is, I believe it is not an easy thing at all to work out this harmony. It's not an easy thing at all to maintain this harmony.

Paul says, endeavour – try your very best to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It's not an easy thing to do. Um... there's this man called Phillips Brooks. I was once in Boston city, and then in Boston, I saw this beautiful church building in the middle of the city itself and I saw a statue beside the building and realised that Phillips Brooks was the pastor there. And... there's a story about Phillips Brooks. He wanted to get a horse and so he went to one of the owners and say, "Get me the best horse because my friend is going to ride upon it." So the owner came along and says, "This is our best horse. This is a fantastic horse. It is obedience. It is gentle, it is kind. It listens to instructions, it never bites back. It never kicks back, it never baulks. This horse lives only to please the master. Phillips Brooks then lean over to the owner and whispers to him, "Can you get him to join my church?" (Laughter in the congregation)

You know, in the church, not everyone is gentle and meek and kind and submissive and loving and lives to please the master. We are a people who are very selfish. We bite, we kick, we baulk. We are not always the nicest of all people. Therefore, we got to recognize that unity and harmony in the church cannot be taken for granted. It does not come by easily. Let me tell you also about Mark Twain. He's an American author and humorist and er... he said something to this effect, I modified a little, and Mark Twain said, "I wanted to conduct an experiment by seeing if a dog and a cat to live together, can live together. So I put them both in a cage. A dog and a cat and amazingly, they managed to survive and so I added in a... a bird, a pig and a goat and with a little adjustments... adjustment, they also survived. Next I put in a Baptist, a Presbyterian and a Methodist and soon there was nothing left." (Laughter in the congregation) It's not easy to live together. Just as one person would say, to live up above with the saints that we love, that will be glory and grace. To live down below with the saints that we know, ah...that's another story. It's a hard thing to do.

0:09:21.6

So how in the world can fallen people like you and I, sinners progressively being transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ, be able to live in such harmony and unity? How can we be able to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ? I believe the answer is found in one word. Amazingly, it's found in one... if you understand the meaning of this word, and the application of this word, you're on the way, by the spirit's help to live out a life of love and unity. And this word is found right in the beginning of Romans 14, verse 1, it says here: "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." The key to not being divisive when we come to differing opinions is that we must learn to welcome. Um... 'Mabuhay' in Filipino language, 欢迎 (huan ying), 'Foon Ying' (Cantonese dialect), Selamat

whatever you want to call it. Welcome. This is the word that is translated 'welcome' in ESV - English Standard Version. In the King James version, it is translated: receive him. But what is really the meaning of this word? If you look at the Greek, the Bible in the New Testament is written in Greek and it is the word 'proslambano'. This is Greek, nobody knows how to read it. . This is how it's pronounced, alright? That's the idea and 'proslambano' is a very graphic and pictorial word. This is what it means: it means to reach out to someone and to pull them in. You get that? Very simple, alright? 'Proslambano' means to reach across to someone else and to pull them in. Now, this is a very strong word. Actually, the word 'lambano' itself would convey that idea, but it is given a prefix, a preposition that says, 'pros-lambano'. In other words, this is an intensive word. It is a strong word. You actively, strongly, reached across to bring someone in. To pull them in, so this is the idea of reaching out to pulling someone in. And he's saying, you who are strong, you who are strong, reach out and pull that person who is weak in. As for the one who is weak in faith, you who are strong, go 'proslambano' him to yourself. 0:11:55.6

Now, who is the strong here? The strong refers to those who are deeply oriented to grace. When it comes to grey areas: food offered to idols, special days, they are not disturbed if people obey or people don't obey it. They can accept the grey area, they are... they are not easily offended in their conscience. They're strong, they're deeply oriented to grace. But the weak are the opposite. The weak are those who are not so deeply oriented to grace and so their conscience is easily defiled when they see someone eat food offered to idols or they don't observe special days. They're easily stumbled. And the Bible is saying, you who are strong, don't stay where you are, actively reached out across and bring them into yourself. The word really conveys the idea of taking as one's companion, to take or to receive with the idea of kindness, to receive or that is to grant one access to one's heart. It's a loving, proactive gesture to welcome and receive someone. Therefore it's translated as welcome or receive in our English Bible.

Now, this is amazing. If you were to 'proslambano' someone, what it means is: Number one, you don't despise the other person. You don't reject the other person. It also means that you... you don't force yourself on another person. You don't false or insist upon your own opinion and say you must follow me. No, this is about reaching out to them to bring them in. It's not about forcing your opinions on others. This also doesn't mean you merely tolerate them. You know how it is when you argue with someone, you quarrel with someone and you say, "Okay, let's agree to disagree and I'll never talk to you again." I ignore you. So you have a stalemate in church. You have impasse, and you know there're many Christians who have gone

through such journeys. You argue with this person, you argue with that person and you realise they are all on this side so you sit on that side today. But soon after long enough, because you are also going to argue with someone else, you are going to shift to the front and then you're going to shift to the back and if I see you shifting around, I know what's happening in your life. (Laughter in the congregation) Because you... you... you just want to keep a distance. Now, you are not going to run out of church, but you're just going to keep a distance. Now, that's not the biblical standard at all.

So you don't despise, you don't reject. Neither do you impose or force, nor do you merely tolerate. The biblical ideal, the Gospel teaching is that you are to take the initiative, pro actively reached across to bring that person in. Therefore, Paul says, um... you are to... verse 50... er... chapter 15 verse 1, "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak..." (Romans 15:1) It might appear to you Paul is teaching mere tolerance. Just bear with them. Just 'tahan' (Malay words meaning bear with) them. You know, just coexist with them. But that's not the meaning at all. You got to understand the word 'bear'. The word 'bear' in the Greek is 'bastazo' which is to carry or to support or to hold up. So it is not we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the weak, but it is we who are strong have an obligation to bear up the weak. You see, it is an active, loving service towards the other person. The whole idea here is a proactive reaching out. Therefore he also tells us, "So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding." (Romans 14:19) There is no allowance for stalemates or impasse, there is no allowance for despising or rejection. There is no allowance for us to impose ourselves but the Scripture gives us only this one way, you reach across, considered their weakness and blessed them by bringing them into your affections and kindness and fellowship. 0:16:21.5

This is the only way. You see, often times when you argue, have you argued before with your wife, your husband, your friends? You know what happens when we argue? It's very interesting. Whoever is arguing, you always point out the faults of the other person. Agree with me? You always like that, you always like that! And then when the person hears that, he says, "Why do you always say me, you also like that what!" (Laughter in the congregation) And the whole argument is really pointing out to each other their faults. The underlying desire in arguments is so that YOU will change. You get that? When you argue, why? Because you want the other person to change and when the other person doesn't change, you get frustrated. But the Gospel way is not about me wanting you to change, although that is deep in my heart. But the Gospel way is very different. It is not insisting you change, it is also not saying let's not change, but it is saying, let me change. Let me, be the one who will

proactively perform 'proslambano', to reach out to bring you in. You get that? It's not you change, it's not no change but I changed, for your good. Why do we do that? Again, Paul tells us, "Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up." (Romans 15:2) Don't stumble him. Don't be abrasive and insist on your opinion so much so that his conscience is defiled. Don't do that! Please him for his good, to build him up. In other words, this is a high level of living that the Gospel calls for. That you're not going to insist that you're right. You're not going to insist that your way is the only way, but you're going to forsake even some of your liberties. To you, this is fine! Drinking alcohol is fine! Or doing this is fine, but because he will be stumbled, I give up that liberty, though I am perfectly comfortable with such a conviction. I will give that up so that I can be gently, nurturing, building him up for his good. O:18:54.7

Does that self-forgetfulness that is called for in 'proslambano' . Does it mean that as a church we always go to the com... lowest common denominator? Does it mean that we always do only what everybody is comfortable with? Not necessarily so, because that will be akin to a parent allowing indulgences in a kid and leaving him that way, never helping him to grow. But this does remind us, that if we are to help someone grow in their convictions, their understanding of grey, or grey areas of the Bible, you got to do it in a gentle, loving, nurturing... nurturing way. You can't just say, "Get out and do what is right!" No, you can't. You got to be gentle with them. It takes time to grow and you just can't expect people to snap out of it. But 'proslambano' therefore, is a reaching out, it's a welcoming thing. It's a loving thing, it's a proactive thing.

So the Gospel teaches us to live in an upside down way or actually better put, a right-side-up way. Because the world's philosophy is, the strong should take advantage of the weak. The strong should exploit the weaknesses of the weak, to gain out of those weaknesses, but the Gospel is saying, if you are strong, you don't take advantage of them, you serve them. The world says, "Crush the man!" The Gospel says, "Carry the man." Lift him up, receive him, welcome him. This is the amazing teaching of the Word of God. It's radical, it revolutionises the way we think, the way we live. Because we are so used to despising people who are different from us, rejecting them because they hold different opinions. We are so used to saying you got to change and until you change, I'm not going to have any relationship with you. You are prone to say, "Let's have a stalemate, we will never get anywhere." The Gospel says, "I change." To reach out to you, for your good.

So the Gospel says, "The strong uses his strength to serve the weak." And you know what? That's not a new thing. I have not preach to you anything that is new, this is

the teaching of the Bible right from the beginning, isn't it? That God would say to the nation of Israel, you are... when you are strong and when there are people in your midst, take care of the poor, take care of the widows, take care of the orphans, take care of the strangers, the aliens in the country, instead of abusing your power, use it to serve them. You who have land and harvest, don't harvest everything, deliberately leave the crops at the corners of the field so that you can serve the poor. The poor can come and gather a harvest to feed their tummies. Take care of the widow. Have special provisions for the aliens. The strangers, the foreigners in your nation. That's always been the heart of God and the law of God when you read Deuteronomy in Exodus and Numbers, you wah... so 'chim' (Hokkien dialect word meaning deep), so many laws, but do you see behind the laws is the heart of a loving God? Who gives such laws to protect the weak, the poor? That's always been the will of God. That the strong would serve the weak. 0:22:41.0

I'm not trying to be political here. Please, I'm not saying who is right or wrong but just this week or last week there was a debate in Parliament about cleaning of a Hawker Center. And there was this statement which I feel it to be true, whether it is true in the situation, I do not know. But it is... it is true as a general principle. Dr Vivian Balakrishnan says, "Politics is a contest of power. But you know, the key principle is when you have power, don't take advantage of people under your charge..." That's right. But it's right theologically or philosophically but very rarely practiced in reality. But this is the way of God. That the rich and the strong and the powerful will not exploit the weak to crush them, but we will look for opportunities to serve them and to build them up and therefore this principle is not unexpected in Romans 14 and 15. That we would reach out in 'proslambano'.

Now if you think about it, it is also very understandable in the healthcare setting. Let me give you another example. Remember in the SARS period, there were plenty of people who were fearful about SARS but what did the healthcare workers do? Well, the healthcare workers stayed on at their posts. As far as I know, very few people quit healthcare and says, "Oh SARS ah, I'm not... I'm going to be out of it!" No, they stayed behind in their posts because as healthcare workers, we who are healthy have a responsibility and obligation really, to serve those who are stricken. The strong has a responsibility towards the weak. So if a SARS patient were to come to the hospital, the healthcare workers could not say to themselves, "Haha... you got sick. Haha..." and despise them. No, you don't do that. Neither does a healthcare worker say, "You don't get in until you get well." They have no ability to get well and neither does a healthcare worker say, "Alright, you can come, you stay in the corner, we have a stalemate. We're not going to reach out to you, you just stay where you are." No, the

healthcare worker does a 'proslambano'. At the risk of his own life, he reaches across to those who are infected, to receive him, that he may be well. It's not a difficult concept to grasp, you see.

And the last example maybe I will share with you is parents and children. Parents have power. Parents have resources. It is sad when parents abused children but you see, God's intention is for parents who have the power to serve the weak, the children. You do things for your kids. You don't say, "Until you figure out one plus one equals to 2, don't come and talk to me." No, you go to your kid and say, "Son, one plus one equals to 2. Do you understand why?" You don't say to your son, "Until you get to be able to cycle, don't walk with me or don't cycle with me." No, you reach down to your little one and help him to cycle. You see, that's love. If I may say, it's even common sense, if you think about it.

But you know, all these illustrations I gave you are not fitting illustrations because they don't give you the real essence of the depth of 'proslambano' in the Scriptures. The only good illustration which Paul employs in Romans is that of the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross of Jesus Christ is the supreme demonstration of this receptive grace, of this 'proslambano'. You see, Jesus saw us in our weakness and he's infinitely strong. He's infinitely rich, he's infinitely glorious. But Jesus in the heavens, didn't say to us, "You are sinners and I despise you." He didn't say to us, "You get yourself in shape and come right up to me!" Because you wouldn't be able to do it. Jesus didn't say, "Let's have a stalemate and see what happens when you die." He didn't say, "You change." He didn't say, "No change." But He says, "I will change. I will come. And though I am strong, I would enter into your weakness. I'll make myself vulnerable, I would give my life, so that through my life, through my death, you may have life." You know what? He did this for his enemies. He did this for sinners like you and me. He's not like a parent for a child. I mean that's... that's great, but it's a very different thing when it is the creator, who gives His life for those who mock Him and scoff at Him.

That's the whole essence why Paul says in Romans 15, for you...we wonder why, why in the middle of this discussion on grey areas would Paul bring up Psalms 69, that says, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." Paul is saying this is my closing shot. This is my clincher. Why do you have to reach out to that brother who just disagreed with you? Why do you have to reach across even though you know you're right? To humble yourself and to build him up. Why? Because Jesus did it and who did He do it for? He did it for people who reproached him. You know, it is very clear who is right or wrong. Jesus was the sinless one and we are the sinful ones and

the amazing thing is that He allowed those who are wrong to reproach Him. In our arguments, in our strife, in our quarrels, let me say this, it really is not about who is right or wrong, or maybe that is exactly the point. That even though you know you are right, you give yourself to reach out to him or her. That is what it means to live like Jesus.

Is there someone in your head right now that you just can't get out of? His face is before you. Her face is before you. You have argued about things and you feel really awkward coming to church because you don't want to meet him, you don't want to meet her and you feel that you are right. Why should I go to her? The answer: Jesus, He did this for me. This is His grace and we who have tasted that grace should give of that grace to others. And so my friends, it's not about who is right or wrong today. It's who is your master? If it is Jesus, then let us learn to cross that gap in a 'proslambano' and to bring them in.

You know what it means to be a living sacrifice? It means to follow the way of Jesus. That's the way He died for me and that's the way I'm going to live my life. Living the Gospel, means living like Jesus, living for Jesus. And when we do that, the world would see something supernatural in His people, because the world doesn't understand 'proslambano' this way. The world sees power abusing the weak. The world sees stalemates but the world has got to see the cross of Jesus Christ, motivating the church to reach out like the Son of God. 0:31:06.7

I ended last week with an allusion to 'Screwtape Letters' and today it's the same, I close with this illustration. The 'Screwtape Letters' again. It's a series of letters, fictional letters written by CS Lewis, portraying himself as a Senior Devil called Screwtape and Screwtape is writing letters to a junior devil called Wormwood, to encourage him, and to teach them how to be a better devil. And this is what one of the excerpts of 'Screwtape Letters': "The church is a fertile field if you ... (it's a fruitful field... it's really easy to work there, he's saying to Wormwood.) The church is a fertile field if you just keep them bickering over details, structure, organisation, money, property, personal hurts and misunderstandings. One thing you must prevent: don't let them ever look up and see the banners flying, for if they ever see the banners flying then you have lost them forever."

This morning, my goal is for us to see the banners of Jesus Christ flying. That you will see Jesus and be willing to rise above those differences and love one another, as Jesus has loves us. Gospel Light Christian Church is shining only if we understand the grace of Jesus Christ in the Gospel and when we lift up the grace of Jesus Christ

in the Gospel. May we be a people who sees Jesus and live like Jesus, and live for Jesus. Let's bow for a word of prayer. O:33:01.3

I just want to give all of us this time. It's so easy for us to rush through the service. So easy for us to hear these words and let them slip away. James tells us that we must not be forgetful hearers, but we must be doers of the Word, and I just want to give you a time, right now to process all that you've heard. So much, so much, but to process it before God, in the quietness of the heart as the music plays, that you may be able to have a settled conviction before God and to choose to do what is right. Is there someone you're offended with? Or you have offended? You know, please don't play the game of saying he's at fault, she's at fault, they are at fault. We were all at fault when Jesus reached out to us. We were immeasurably steeped in sin, but it didn't matter because Jesus reached out to us in grace. If you have tasted grace, you have received the forgiving love of Jesus Christ, be ye tender hearted, forgiving one another, reaching out, restoring the unity, the fellowship that God so desires in His people.

Maybe today you're here and for the first time you've heard anything from the Bible preached. You say what is Christianity about? Is it about some songs we sing? Is it about some rituals we go through? It's about the cross of Jesus Christ, folks. It's about the Son of God sent to reach across to us, to die for us, in order to rescue us from our sins. We were enemies, we are slaves to sin. There is no hope except in Jesus Christ and God knew it and God sent His Son. And the message of the Bible is this: if you're willing to repent of your sin and believe and trust in Jesus alone, you will have salvation, you will have life and that is the beginning of a lifelong discipleship and following of Jesus. For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten Son whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. This is the Good News, the Gospel is the Good News. He loved you and gave His Son for you. Would you believe in Him and find that true eternal life? It's a choice, it's a step of faith. Would you see Jesus? May we today, rise, allow our eyes to rise up and see the banners flying high.

Father, we thank you this morning we can reflect upon the grace and the cross of Jesus. May you bless each one with a clearer taste and glimpse of what it all means. I pray for our friends who are here, who do not know Jesus. Would you be merciful and grant them understanding that they may believe in your Son? And I pray for all your children, so easy for us in the skirmishes of life to be absorbed with ourselves, in our wounds and our battle scars, but Lord, lift up our eyes and see that cross, the banner of Jesus flying high. May we live out the Gospel, may there be a true,

beautiful unity and love amongst your people. May Jesus be praised through our lives. We pray this now in Jesus name. Amen. God bless.