

Paul is now coming to the end of the book of Romans, and he's talking in this passage about what he wants to do in the future. He's talking about his future plans, how he wants to go to Spain to work there, but he's going to stop in Rome on the way through. And that's all interesting enough, but what does it have to do with us? Because, yeah, it tells us something about what Paul wanted to do, but it doesn't actually seem to apply to how we live as Christians today. And especially because we learn in the book of Acts that Paul never actually did what he planned. Because he went to Jerusalem, and while he was there he was thrown into prison. And he ended up going to Rome in chains, not at all like he planned to do. So what do we do with this passage, then? How do we apply something like this to our lives today?

But we do have to remember, Christians, that everything in the Bible has been written for our benefit, including this passage. And so while this passage talks mostly about what Paul is going to do, we see little glimpses of what it means to live as a Christian through it, especially what it means to support one another in the Lord. And yeah, it's not written as a clear command, as if Paul said you should do this or this or this. But through his example, what he says and what he does, we can see what it means to support each other in the Lord. And in that way we can apply this passage also to our lives today.

So take the first example, verse 24. Paul says: "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain and to be helped on my journey there by you once I have enjoyed your company for a while." So again, he's talking about going through, passing through Rome on his way west toward Spain, where he wanted to do some work. And he's talking about wanting to stop there and be refreshed for a while. And so, in other words, he also is looking for their support. Paul is asking for their financial support as he goes to do his mission in Spain. Because travel in those days, just like ours, was very expensive, and it was probably even more expensive back then simply because it took so long. The distance between Jerusalem, where Paul was going to be starting, and Spain in those days was about 2400 miles. And that's a journey that would take him in those days no less than 50 days to complete. So that's 50 days of food, that's 50 days of lodging, that's 50 days of travel. That's all very expensive. It all starts to rack up pretty quickly. Sometimes he's walking, sometimes he's sailing, but he's always trying to get there. And that's not even talking about what it's going to cost when he finally gets there and starts working! He needs their support to carry out the Gospel, to bring the Gospel also to the far western parts of the Roman Empire. And so he's asking for their support, and it is right for him to do so.

Now, I know that we often get suspicious when people ask us for money, and understandably so. There's people out there who pretend to be Christians who are only interested in making money off of us. That's true in our time, and it was true in Paul's time too. In fact, he warns us in the very next chapter against these kinds of people. He says in chapter 16, verse 18: "Such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naïve." So it's good to be on guard against such people. We don't want to support people who are only in it for themselves. But Christians, being careful very often turns into being too careful, so that we become unwilling to help people or support people or give money or even to talk about it. Because we want to be too careful about these things. And even if there are some people who are just serving themselves, as Paul says, that doesn't mean that they all are. It is a good and a godly thing to use what we have in the service of the Gospel. That's why we support missions through this church. That's why we support the work of others in the

district, in the synod, whatever it may be. It's even why we support pastors, so that they can carry out their work too. It is good to use what God has given us in the service of the Gospel. And if those gifts that we give are helpful in bringing a person to believe in Christ, then it's money well spent. And so Paul, by his example here in this reading, shows us what it means to support the work of the Church, and that is certainly something that we can imitate in our lives today.

Or to use another example, Paul also talks about supporting poor Christians with physical things as well. He says in verse 25: "At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints." So Paul, when he wrote this letter, was carrying with him money that he had gotten from congregations in Greece and Macedonia. And he was taking that money to Jerusalem in order to help the poor who were there. And he says that that is a good thing to do, to help these poor Christians, even if they were people they had never met and lived far away. Why were they doing this, though? Paul says, verse 27: "For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings." So in other words, they're caring for each other. It's not just a one direction kind of thing. The rich are caring for the poor with material things, because that's what God had given to them, but the poor are caring for the rich in spiritual things, because that's what God had given to them. And so in this way it becomes supporting each other, not just the rich helping the poor. And so charity or alms or whatever you want to call it is a good thing, because it is a benefit for everyone who is involved.

Yeah, I know that we often get suspicious of this too. We don't like what we call "handouts." We don't like people who get them. We think that they're being lazy and that they should just get a job. I work for everything that I have, so why can't you do the same thing too? And Christians, it's true, there are people who abuse charity. There are people who abuse the system, who take advantage of what is supposed to be a help for them. That's certainly true. But does that mean that we should just not give alms altogether? Does that mean that we should just give up charity completely? Not at all. It is right and it is good to help our fellow Christians in need. Because if my brother Christian is hungry, I should feed him. If he's naked, I should clothe him. If he needs money for something, I should not withhold it. Because this is who we are called to be, one body in Christ taking care of one another. I must not let some people who abuse this cause me to become hardhearted against my neighbor who needs my help. Think of it this way. Jesus himself multiplied food and healed diseases because he had compassion on the people. Jesus knew that some of them were doing it for all the wrong reasons. He knew that they were only in it for what they could get out of him. But that didn't stop him from doing it. He continued to have compassion on the people, because he cared for them. And if nothing else, may our Lord's compassion drive us to show that same compassion to those who are in need! And so Paul shows us, then, in this way also what it means to support one another, and that's also something that we can imitate in our lives today.

But money is not the only thing that Paul talks about in this passage. He says in verse 30: "I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf." So he wants the Romans to also pray for him, to ask God to bless him, so that his preaching would be successful and so that his alms that he was taking to Jerusalem would be beneficial. Asking God to make it all fruitful and for it all to happen according to his will. Because prayer is not something that we only do when there's

nothing else to do. We don't just pray because there's nothing left to do but pray. Prayer is part of what it means to be a Christian. It's part of what we do in everything, asking God to help us, asking God to bless us, asking God to care for those around us. Lifting up one another in prayer to the Lord, who can help us in all things.

Yes, we should pray for our own needs, for the things that we need, for our daily bread, whatever it may be. Paul does that here in Romans chapter 15. But we should also pray for the needs of others just as much as our own, if not more. To pray to God to bless them, pray to God to take care of them, pray to God to provide for all of their needs, bringing all of their troubles to the Lord in prayer, so that God would do something about them. I know we want to be nice most of the time when we say "I'll pray for you," but we shouldn't just say "I'll pray for you" and then not do it. We should say "I'll pray for you," and then pray! To bring those things to the Lord, to support one another in that way. Jesus himself prays, Christians. Jesus himself prayed in the garden of Gethsemane for you and for me. And Jesus is praying right now in heaven at the right hand of the Father, praying that our faith would not fail, praying that we would receive all of our daily bread, praying that we would continue and be strengthened, asking the Father for all of these things on our behalf. Jesus is not doing this because he has nothing else he can do. It's not like he's helpless. He's God! Rather, Jesus does this, because that's what prayer is, bringing all of these things before the throne of God as the first thing and not the last. Supporting each other in this way in the Lord. So Paul shows us, then, through his example what it means to support one another in prayer, and that is also something that we can do in these days as well.

There's one more example that Paul has here. He says in verse 32: "So that by God's will, I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company." He wants to be refreshed among them. And he's not talking about a physical refreshment, as if he's just tired from traveling all the way to Rome and needs to take a break for a while. He's talking about a spiritual refreshment, about faith building up faith. In fact, this is similar to what he says in the very first part of the book of Romans, chapter 1 verses 11 and 12: "For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." That mutual encouragement, faith building up faith. Because think of it this way. Paul is an apostle. Paul has heard the voice of the Holy Spirit. Paul has written a very large part of the New Testament. Paul has even seen visions of heaven itself. He is a very great man in the history of the Church. And yet Paul says that he can be built up by the faith of the ordinary Christians at Rome. Because that's why we are here, Christians, to build each other up, to strengthen one another. Because when we hear about what God has done for another person, that builds up our faith too. When we hear how God has answered the prayer of someone else, that builds up our faith too. When we hear somebody talk about trusting in the Lord, especially in the face of a terrible situation, that builds up our faith too. We learn to trust God more and more because we hear what he is doing for fellow Christians. Because we need one another, Christians. We build each other up. That's why we gather together for worship. That's why we gather together for fellowship. That's why we gather together for prayer. Because in this way we build one another up as one the body in Jesus Christ our Lord. And that's also something that Paul shows us in our reading for today.

So we should not just ignore this passage, then, Christians, as if it has nothing to say to us. Rather, we can see through Paul's example what it means to support one another in the Lord. To

support each other through what we have, to support each other through prayer, to support each other through our mutual faith. And in that way, Christians, we can build one another up in the Lord. So let us imitate what Paul is doing, just as he imitates what Jesus is doing, and in that way we can support one another as fellow believers in the Lord.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have bound us together into one body in Jesus Christ, your Son. Help us to build one another up, so that we may be strengthened together in him unto life everlasting. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.