

**Weekly Bible Study Series, Vol. 14, No. 16: 19 May 2013**

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## **BE RESPONSIBLE NOT A RESPONSIBILITY!**

**Today's Text: Romans 15: 1- 13**

### **Extracts:**

**We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. *Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."* ... Therefore, receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God...Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit [Rom. 15: 1-3, 7, 13]**

*In September 2011, Amanda Clayton, a 23-year-old mother of two, won US\$1million jackpot in the Michigan Lottery's game show, "Make Me Rich!"<sup>1</sup> She opted to take the lump sum, that is, to collect all the money at once instead of spreading it over time for better tax advantages. As a result, she got about half of that sum, net of taxes. She immediately bought a new car and a new home. In spite of the change in her fortune, Michigan State authorities soon discovered that Amanda was still collecting \$200 a month on food stamps and receiving medical aid, programmes meant for the poor and the needy. Her defence was that the government was to blame for not cutting her off welfare! On Saturday, 29 September 2012, Amanda was found dead in her home from an apparent drug overdose.*

*Before her lottery winnings, Amanda was the responsibility of Michigan tax payers. In spite of her new status, she remained their responsibility instead of becoming responsible for her needs and those of less fortunate others. Are we different from her? For example, many children refuse to be weaned from their parents even when they get married. Some leaders live large at the expense of poor citizens who have no access to basic necessities of life. Some pastors are flying private jets when their members are in dire need of their daily bread. Are you a responsibility where you are supposed to be responsible? In this week's Bible verses, Paul enjoins believers to live for others, especially the weak and the needy, instead of for themselves. Where do you stand on the matter? Let us find out from this week's study.*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on the following sources: "\$1M lottery winner still happily uses food stamps," Thurs. 8 March 2012; <http://now.msn.com/money/0307-lottery-foodstamps.aspx> and "Amanda Clayton (21) died from an apparent drug overdose," Tues., Oct. 02, 2012; [http://mydeathspace.com/article/2012/10/02/Amanda\\_Clayton\\_\(21\)\\_died\\_from\\_an\\_apparent\\_drug\\_overdose](http://mydeathspace.com/article/2012/10/02/Amanda_Clayton_(21)_died_from_an_apparent_drug_overdose)

## 1. Background: Time to grow up!

The children of Israel spent forty years in the wilderness on their way from bondage in Egypt. During that long period, God fed them with manna from heaven. Their garments did not wear out on them, nor did their feet swell [**Deut. 8: 3-4**]. But, as soon as they crossed into the Promised Land, “the children of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate the food of the land of Canaan” [**Josh. 5: 10-12**]. What does that suggest? It was time for them to grow up and provide for themselves! God would still take care of their needs but they had to make their own contribution. In other words, they were required to grow from being God’s sole responsibility to becoming responsible for part of their welfare.

*To be responsible is to be aware that other people depend on us as we depend on others (and God, of course) and to act accordingly.* To be a responsibility is to think and act as if the rest of the world owes us our comforts and privileges but we do not need to reciprocate even if we could. We do realize that every one of us is in transit- from childhood to adulthood, from learner to teacher, from child to parent, from sinner to the righteous, to give a few examples. Nevertheless, milk may be good for the infant but not for the adult. Sooner than later, the prodigal child has to return to his/her senses and return home! Therefore, *it is time for each of us to grow up and accept responsibility for something or somebody. That is the theme of Paul’s exhortation to believers in Rome that we shall examine in this week’s study.*

Here are some of the critical responsibilities to which Paul has drawn our attention that believers owe to others:

### a) *The strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak*

Paul wrote, “We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves” [**Rom. 15: 1**]. To be strong is to have an abundance of supply of a specific strength or resource that gives you an advantage over others. We all have our areas of strengths and weaknesses. Such strengths can be natural gifts or talents [**Ex.31: 1-6**], spiritual gifts (from the Holy Spirit) [**1 Cor. 12: 4-11**] or acquired, such as through training, inheritance or sheer luck. We may be weak because of laziness or our refusal to take advantage of opportunities, such as shunning a publicly-funded free education scheme for religious or other reasons. The critical question here is this: how should you relate with somebody who is not as endowed as you are- physically, emotionally or spiritually?

Jesus gave us a very good example in the case of the woman caught in adultery. Under the Law of Moses, she and her accomplice deserved to die by stoning [**Lev. 20: 10**]. Who among those who wanted to kill her cared to find out about her “scruples” that is, her sense of right and wrong? Where was the man that she had committed the adultery with? Where was

her husband? How do we know that she did not do it to survive or to keep her starving family alive? Of course, her reasons may not justify her sin but they may elicit our understanding and sympathy. It took Jesus to bring that out in her pursuers. Jesus challenged whoever was without sin to cast the first stone. They were all sinners themselves! Empathy took over. They dropped their stones and walked away one by one. Much more, Jesus while alone with the woman asked her where were here accusers who had condemned her. There was none. Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” [Jn 8: 1-11]. Can you imagine what difference those comforting words made to her starved spirit?

Out there, there are people who are hurting. Many people are too proud to let you know what they are passing through. Even a smile from you can comfort some sullen hearts today. But do you care? Do you have time?

b) *Learn to please your neighbour for his good*

Paul also said, “Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification” [Rom. 15: 2]. The operating phrase here is “for his good, leading to edification.” That suggests that ***pleasing your neighbour goes beyond saying or doing things that will make him/her like you. Your interest should be in their long-term best interest.*** Therefore, you will encourage or discourage, praise or chastise, give or withhold, depending on what is appropriate at any particular point in time. You do not want to be politically correct but truthful. You do not want to be popular but to be right. All you need to do is to find out how to please your neighbour for his/her good without looking judgmental or damaging.

Take the example of Job’s friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar, that came to console him after the disaster that had befallen him and his family. They had come to “mourn with him and to comfort him.” When they saw him, they could not recognize him. So, “they lifted their voices and wept... they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was great” [Job 2: 11-13]. That was great and encouraging. But the moment they opened their mouths, they turned accusatory and judgmental. It got to a stage that Job hit back at them, saying, “What you know, I also know; I am not inferior to you... You are all worthless physicians. Oh, that you would be silent, and it would be your wisdom!” [Job 13: 1-5].

Again, empathy is a good skill to apply here to good effect. You put yourself in the place of the other party in order to appreciate why they behave the way they do. Once you are able to tune into their channel of understanding, you can feel how they feel and they will likely accept your advice, guidance or admonition. The prodigal son’s brother saw his younger sibling’s misconduct from his own selfish perspective and was

angry that his father was about to squander more resources on the undeserving. His father, on the other hand, saw a misguided young man trying to find his way back home. He saw a dead son come back to life; a lost son found again. So, he showed him love and forgiveness- the kind of assurances that he badly needed at that time [**Lk 15:20-32**].

c) *Be like-minded toward one another as the God of patience and comfort grants you*

Paul prayed for his audience, saying, “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” [**Rom. 15: 5-6**]. Indeed, it takes faith in God by Christ Jesus for us to be patient and comfortable with people who are out to hurt you or your feelings every step of the way. Whether in the family, office or place of worship, it almost seems that Satan has lined up some people to irritate or frustrate you every step of the way. You need patience which can only come from faith in a higher authority who has promised you an outcome that will vindicate you in due season. Consequently, you can afford to be like-minded with those that you disagree with.

Writing to the Roman church, Paul urged the faithful to note those who caused divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which they had learned, to avoid them “for those who are such do not serve the Lord Jesus Christ but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.” Nevertheless, because of the obedience of the faithful that had become known to all, Paul was glad on their behalf and urged them “to be wise in what is good and simple concerning evil” [**Rom. 16: 17-18**]. Only the peace of God that surpasses all understanding can guard our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus [**Phil. 4: 7**].

d) *Receive one another as Christ also received us*

Finally, Paul enjoins believers to “receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God” [**Rom. 15: 7**]. Again, the emphasis is on “one another,” suggesting a two-way (reciprocal) relationship. Some relationships are far from being mutually helpful. Some people only receive and never give. When some people visit you, you are the host. When you visit them, they still expect you to play the host. This is quite common in Africa under the guise of extended family obligations where a few (endowed) members carry the burden of parents, siblings and extended family members. Yet, when you are in need, they simply assume that you can take care of yourself!

The word of God says, “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me” [Ps. 27: 10]. When you receive others the way Christ has received you (with all your filth of sins), your Father in heaven will take care of you, even when people refuse to appreciate you.

***In sum, Paul is reminding us that everybody should be responsible for something good for self and others for Christ’s sake. You cannot remain the responsibility of others forever.*** Otherwise, you may soon find that you are simply out there waiting for others who may never show up to put you in an El Dorado.<sup>2</sup> ***You still need to roll away the stone before Jesus can make your dead Lazarus rise and come alive again [Jn 11:39-44].*** So, where are you currently on the responsibility ladder?

## 2. Where are you on the responsibility ladder?

Our readiness to assume the spiritual responsibilities laid out above can be influenced by so many factors, the most prominent of which are as follows:

### a) *You may be among the haves*

Some people believe that they can do much if and only if they have the means- material or otherwise. After all, money answers everything [Eccl. 10: 19], as one often hears in our churches. The assumption seems to be that the more people have, the more they are willing to take on the responsibility of taking care of others. It may be true to some extent but we also know that some filthy rich people are also quite stingy. The Psalmist says, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.” But he adds an alternate use of those wings- wander far off and remain in the wilderness [Ps. 55: 6-7]. ***The haves do have options and they are not all edifying.***

The rich man, in the Parable of the Rich Fool, was not about to give his abundant wealth to the needy. Instead, he was going to expand his barn to take in more abundant harvests instead of giving them away [Lk 12: 16-21]. A rich young man walked away sad when Jesus challenged him to sell all that he had and give to the poor [Matt. 19: 16-22]. How much of your time and talents are you willing and able to share with those in need of them? Do you realize that your material blessings have been given you by God for His own purposes [Deut. 8:17-19]? Do you not know that any god that you can carry- money, greed, selfishness, etc- is an idol? Think about it.

### b) *Or among the have-nots*

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<sup>2</sup> A legendary place in South America where the streets were said to be paved with gold, and wealth and riches were to be had in abundance. Now used to describe an imaginary place of great wealth or where great wealth can be acquired-*Encarta Dictionary: English (North America)*

At the other end of the scale are those who call or see themselves as the have-nots. These are *the poor, the needy and the deprived*. The poor may always be with us [**Deut. 15:11; Jn 12: 8**], but does that mean that they have no responsibilities? Is that why in many large congregations, especially in poor neighbourhoods, offerings are thin and fringy?

It should not be so. We are all familiar with the widow's mite story. She gave the least and yet, Jesus said that her offering was the best- she gave ALL that she had while the rich gave part of what they had [**Lk 21: 1-4**]. *God measures your offerings by what you keep for yourself, not by what you give.*

From the foregoing, we can conclude that *your faith* (and not the material gadgets around you) best *measures your level of responsibility to others*. If you care and fear God, you will accept responsibility for yourself and others. *Therefore, anchor your faith in God by Christ Jesus*. That is Paul's message in this week's study.

### **3. Conclusion: Jesus took responsibility for your sins!**

Jesus did not need to die on the cross because He did not commit any sin. Yet, he took responsibility for ALL sinners. He was never poor but He made Himself poor so that we can become rich [**2 Cor. 8:9**]. But what have you offered in return? More obedience to His will or more deference to your stiff-neckedness? If you do not grow up now, it will be too late after death.

Be responsible. Do not be a responsibility.