

The Strong and The Weak

Have you ever struggled over what is right or wrong for you to do as a Christian? I'm not talking about the things that are explicitly spelled out in Scripture: don't steal, don't kill, don't covet, don't gossip, don't worship false gods, be truthful, love your enemy, show love to everyone. Rather, I'm referring to lifestyle issues. What activities can I participate in? What movies can I see? What books can I read? What foods should I consume? Should I buy that lottery ticket or not? Do I have to go to church every Sunday or every time there is a service? Can I mow my lawn on Sunday? Can I shop on Sunday? And the list could go on and on. Plug in whatever it is you struggle with and I think you'll get the picture.

Then there is also the matter of church congregations. How should they worship? Should they have stained glass windows in a cathedral or should they meet in a warehouse? What kind of music is "right" for the service? In our current culture, is God more pleased with traditional services, contemporary services, or some mixture of both?

Those are the kinds of questions we will be looking at as we study Romans chapter 14. In the beginning of Romans 14, we are immediately brought face to face with the concept of *Christians who are weak in faith* (verse 1). We are dealing with the idea of, "Have care and concern for your weaker brother or sister in the faith." So then we are confronted with several questions:

- Exactly who is the "weaker" brother or sister?
- How are we to care for them?
- How does this tie in with the other things we have been taught coming up to this chapter?

The end of Romans 13 was dealing with love. We were told to "owe no one anything, except to love them," because we can never repay the debt of love that we owe.

In chapters 12 and 13 Paul gave us guidelines on how to identify and use our spiritual gifts in the church, how to relate to non-Christians and to those who would persecute us, how to relate to the government, and how to view the paying of taxes. So now Paul comes to where the rubber meets the road in regards to the daily lives and lifestyles of Christians.

We must keep in mind as we move through this chapter that it is written to Christians; it is written to those of us in the church. The things discussed in this chapter have nothing to do with our salvation. They have everything to do with how we live in relation to each other in the church. Paul speaks specifically of what he calls "strong" and "weak" Christians. And you might be surprised at how these are actually defined.

Your first thought might be that a person who has been saved for 25 years, and can quote

a lot of Scripture, someone who attends every church service, is the “strong” Christian, and that the new believer, who doesn’t yet know their way around the Bible is the “weak” one. Well, if so, you are in for a surprise.

The person who has been saved for many years and who does know the Bible well should be the strong Christian; that individual should be a mature believer. Yet, unfortunately, that is not always the case. In New Testament times as well as today, there are those in the church who have been around a long time, but who have not necessarily matured.

Sometimes believers get lazy. Instead of growing and maturing in their faith, they start leaning on a few tried and true Bible verses and a list of man-made do’s and don’ts, along with showing up at every church service, in order to define their Christianity. Their growth gets stunted. This person, then, is actually the “weaker” brother or sister, no matter how long they have professed faith in Christ. Too often the weaker brother is that individual who has been a Christian for 25-30 years, but who is also a died-in-the-wool legalist.

The major point of all this is the need for unity and oneness between believers in a church.

There is a great diversity of people in most churches. There are young people, old people, and those in between. There are people who have been saved for fifty years and there are those who have been saved for a short period of time, as well as all those in between. There are people who come from unchurched backgrounds, Roman Catholic backgrounds, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist and many other backgrounds. There are people who come from strict fundamentalist background churches and others who come from more liberal churches. Now the potential with all of that is to create a lot of problems, because everybody has their own set of beliefs and ways of doing church. It can be just as difficult to deal with these issues as it is to deal with sin.

There will be those who ask why the church doesn’t light candles. They are uncomfortable worshipping without lighting candles. Some people are offended by the way other people dress. Some people are offended because other people are lifting up their hands. Some people like certain music and other people hate it. Some people think drinking is OK and others see it as the vilest of sins. There are those who wouldn’t miss seeing the latest movie and others who fear God would strike them dead if they entered a theater to watch such a thing. You have a tremendous spectrum of people who provide a great deal of ammunition for disagreement in the church.

It’s hard to let go of what is deeply ingrained in you. There are preferences in all kinds of things, and it was the same way in the early churches that Paul planted during the first century. It isn’t necessarily a sin issue in and of itself to do or not do these things we’ll be talking about. But it can be a serious issue in the church and we have to understand what the Bible teaches us about these things so we can get along with each other. Keep in mind that the goal here is maintaining unity within the church, just as Paul describes in

Ephesians 4:1-6:

1 Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God.
*2 **Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.***
3 Always keep yourselves united in the Holy Spirit, and bind yourselves together with peace.
4 We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future.
5 There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
6 and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all.

We need to attempt to keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. Paul writes in Colossians 3:14:

14 And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony.

We're talking about unity, a loving compatibility of diverse people. This isn't an easy trick when you have so many different kinds of people in one large body. Now in Acts 20:35, Paul is talking to the elders of the Ephesian church and says:

35 In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak.

Paul identifies the fact that there are going to be weak people in the church. Now if there are weak people in the church, there are undoubtedly strong people as well. Paul says the elders must be conscientious about supporting those in the church who are weak. Then in Galatians 6:1 (NAS):

1 Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness;

Paul indicates that there are going to be some weak members and when a weakness is detected, a stronger member should step up and assist the one who is weak. In 1 John 2:12-14, we're told there are spiritual infants, spiritual young men and women, and spiritual fathers and mothers, all at different levels of spiritual growth. In order to develop a loving compatibility among all of these people we need to understand what Paul writes beginning here in Romans chapter 14. I believe you'll find it exciting.

Let me try to create the scene for you as it exists in Romans chapter 14. The temptation in the church is this: On the one hand you have the liberated brothers and sisters who really understand what it means to be free in Christ. Liberated here does not mean a believer is free to do any thing they want. It means that they're not hung up on old traditions, rituals,

or routines. They understand fully that they are free from sin, death, Hell, and Satan because of what Jesus Christ has done for them. They understand that the freedom they have in Christ no longer involves religious formats and rituals and holy days and ceremonies and candles and all of that kind of thing. They're free to make choices dependent on the Spirit of God moving in their heart. Paul calls these people, *the strong*. We can call them mature. They are strong in their faith, yet they understand their freedom.

On the other hand you have those Paul refers to as *the weak*. We may refer to them as *immature Christians*. These are the people who are still so close to the past that they can't let go of it. They can't quite move away from past beliefs so they can't believe that they have the freedoms they really have. They can't handle the freedoms because of preferences that have been brought to bear on their lives in the past. Their walk in the faith, their sanctification, has to come one step at a time.

A new Christian might say something like: "*You can't do that; isn't that a sin?*" And a more mature Christian's reaction might be to be critical of that person as one who doesn't understand their freedom and isn't mature enough yet to understand what freedoms are available in Christ. Conversely the tendency on the part of *the weak* is to condemn *the strong* for what they see to be an abuse of freedom.

Let's say at the outset that we do have freedom in Christ. We are free from sin in terms of its ultimate penalty. We are free from death in terms of its ultimate power. We are free from Hell in terms of its ultimate punishment. We are free from Satan in terms of his ultimate persuasion. We are free in those areas. We are free to worship God. We are free to love God. We are free to be forgiven. We are free to go to Heaven. But there's another dimension in which we enjoy freedom as well. We are free as New Covenant Christians from all the Old Testament laws that were strictly external and ceremonial. We're not free from the Ten Commandments. We're not free from any moral laws given in the Old Testament because God is the same God in both the Old and New Testaments. However, we are free from external ceremonial rules and rituals that were attached only to a period of time for the people of Israel. We have entered into a freedom that is no longer attached to ceremony and ritual and routine, although we might find certain forms of ceremony occasionally appropriate to worship. Many people enjoy this freedom. But in some churches there are those that come out of varying backgrounds where ritual and tradition were essential parts of the faith in which they were raised.

Well, if that can be an existing problem in certain churches today, you can imagine what kind of a problem it must have been in the first century. There were Jews who were being saved right out of Judaism and finding it impossible to let go of deeply ingrained tradition. Tradition for example along the line of dietary laws. Tradition along the line of holy days, feast days, festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths, which they had been required to maintain. Their consciences put unnecessary bondage on their freedom.

There were also believers who came out of pagan backgrounds where there had been either no belief in any God or perhaps a belief in many gods, and they were saved in

Christ. But their background limited their growth in the faith because of past pagan religious experience. They were not able, therefore, to enjoy all the things they had a right to enjoy. So you have Jews wanting to hold on to what they had known, and these other people from diversified religious backgrounds trying to hold on to or avoid things they had known in the past. There was a potential conflict between liberated people from various backgrounds. A legalistic believer, one who is used to rituals and traditions, sees freedom as sinful, and a liberated believer sees legalism as sinful.

Do you think one or two conflicts might develop? In Romans 14 and 15, Paul gives four principles for handling such situations:

- 1) Receive one another with understanding (Romans 14:1-12).
- 2) Build up one another without offending one another (Romans 14:13-23).
- 3) Please one another just as Christ pleased God. (Romans 15:1-7).
- 4) Rejoice with one another in God's plan (Romans 15:8-13).

Let's take a closer look at number one:

1) Receive One Another With Understanding

Romans 14:1

I Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong.

The pressure in the early church among the Jews was to hang onto Judaism. In fact, Josephus, the great Jewish historian says that there were Jews living in Rome in the first century who lived on nothing but fruit for fear of eating something unclean. They did this because they could not give up laws that had since been cancelled with the coming of Christ. Jesus said in Mark 7:14,15:

*14 "All of you listen," he said, "and try to understand.
15 You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do!"*

We can understand that the pressure was on the Jews to maintain their heritage. But what about the pressure that was on the Gentiles (all those other than Jews) who came to faith in Jesus? 1 Corinthians 8:1:

I Now let's talk about food that has been sacrificed to idols.

Now this is the problem in Corinth. Let's say you're a typical pagan. How would you worship?. Here's how you would do it. You go to a temple of a pagan deity, and there were many such temples and deities in Corinth. So you go to the temple that's throwing a banquet that day and you bring in a sacrifice, roast beef for example. You bring your sacrifice and put it on the altar of the pagan God. Everybody does this. It's kind of like a

pot-luck dinner. Part of it might be consumed during the temple ceremony. Part of it might be eaten, and whatever was not eaten that night would be taken out of the back of the temple and sold the next day in the market so that the priests of the temple could profit from such sales. So when people went through the marketplace doing their shopping they could theoretically purchase meat that the night before had been offered to idols.

Now if you happened to be a person who had lived all your life in this kind of idolatrous worship and thought nothing of it, and then you heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and were totally transformed and redeemed, you would have a distaste for many of the things you once did. Consequently if you were invited to the home of some Christian brother who was offering you a wonderful meal, you might be concerned that the food had been offered first to idols and that might bother you quite a bit. So you might not be able to eat that meal and as a result offend your host. The problem in the Corinthian church was what do you do about meat offered to idols?

So Paul sees the necessity to lay out some guidelines for them. **First of all**, again in 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, Paul says:

You think that everyone should agree with your perfect knowledge. While knowledge may make us feel important, it is love that really builds up the church.

2 Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much.

3 But the person who loves God is the one God knows and cares for.

Paul is telling them not to force their knowledge on a person, but rather to place their love on a person. If your knowledge is going to offend them, be quiet. Be sensitive. Knowledge is fine but love should rule.

The **second guideline** Paul gives is that in reality there aren't any other gods in the world, so don't worry about who offered what to whom because in effect it's meaningless. So whatever is offered to a false god is offered to a nothing. 1 Corinthians 8:4-6:

4 So now, what about it? Should we eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God and no other.

5 According to some people, there are many so-called gods and many lords, both in heaven and on earth.

6 But we know that there is only one God, the Father, who created everything, and we exist for him. And there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom God made everything and through whom we have been given life.

They shouldn't be hung up on this issue because there aren't any other gods anyway.

Verse 7:

7 However, not all Christians realize this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated.

A weak person, a baby Christian, may not understand that they are free to eat whatever they want. If they eat something then that they think is causing them to sin, he/she may be filled with guilt and violate their conscience. Because their conscience will be screaming, "Don't eat that! Don't eat that!" Now if you force a person to eat it against their conscience, you will violate their conscience, and his/her conscience will accuse him/her. Then Paul gives a **third guideline** and that is that food is not an issue with God anyhow. Verse 8:

8 It's true that we can't win God's approval by what we eat. We don't miss out on anything if we don't eat it, and we don't gain anything if we do.

Could that be any simpler? God could care less what you eat in terms of any ceremonial effect of any religious impact. But we should all have enough sense to know that God doesn't want you to stuff food in you that will ultimately shorten your life or your ability to function as a human being. But God doesn't concern Himself with whether you eat this or that. It doesn't matter where it came from or who it was offered to or what it was intended for. That isn't an issue with God. Please keep in mind that we have been using food here as an example. These guidelines also apply to any other external rituals and traditions people tend to cling to. Now a **fourth guideline**, verse 9:

9 But you must be careful with this freedom of yours. Do not cause a brother or sister with a weaker conscience to stumble.

So if it offends someone, don't do it. There were some mature believers who had lost their connection with paganism who would go down to the marketplace and if the meat was a little cheaper at the temple butcher shop, they would take the best buy. It didn't bother them at all and they wouldn't give a second thought to whom they invited to dinner when they bought the meat. If a new convert was among the guests and asked where they bought the meat and the reply was at the temple butcher shop which had meat on sale that had been offered to Zeus, the new convert might not be able to handle that because of their belief that it was offered to a false god. What if the host were to say: "Man, you're out of your mind. Don't you understand your freedoms? Eat up." 1 Corinthians 8: 10,11:

10 You see, this is what can happen: Weak Christians who think it is wrong to eat this food will see you eating in the temple of an idol. You know there's nothing wrong with it, but they will be encouraged to violate

their conscience by eating food that has been dedicated to the idol.
11 So because of your superior knowledge, a weak Christian, for whom Christ died, will be destroyed.

So don't sin against a brother and wound their weak conscience because when you do that you sin against whom? Verse 12:

12 And you are sinning against Christ when you sin against other Christians by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong.

So Paul says if eating meat is going to offend your brother or sister, don't eat it. So we see from the Galatians passage that there were some Jews who were very hung up on maintaining Jewish traditions, dietary laws and Sabbath laws. There were some Gentiles who were very hung up on not maintaining their past traditions. So there was potential in the church for all kinds of conflict. These were the issues facing the early church and they're very comparable to the issues facing the church today as we shall see. There was an immature **weak faith**, which is the person who doesn't understand their freedom in Christ. They think they're bound to external traditions when they're not. The **strong believer** is the one who knows they are not bound to those things. Now of course we're not talking about moral issues or sin issues. Obviously Christian freedom is not the freedom to do wrong. It is freedom from externals, rituals and ceremonies.

Now let's go back and take a look at that first verse and get ourselves in position to take on the rest of the chapter. Romans 14:1:

1 Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong.

The strong are to accept and embrace the weak and bring them into fellowship. I believe a good contemporary example of how some of these people must have felt would be to consider how life is lived in the Amish communities. Most of you know that they live on farms that are self-sustaining for all the needs of life. They have no motorized vehicles, no electricity, no radios, no television, no mp3 players, and they have very simple and basic furniture. Many of the Amish are not Christian. They have a religious way of life, but many do not hold Jesus Christ to be their Lord and Savior. Imagine if you would that one of these families heard the message of the gospel and became new believers. Can you then imagine their reaction if all of a sudden a bunch of Christians came roaring up the driveway in cars and motorcycles and started playing Christian rock music. These poor folks would go into shock and wonder if they had made a mistake in accepting Jesus if this is the way things were in the Christian community. That's just the kind of thing I can see happening in Paul's culture, only with the Jews and pagans instead of the Amish.

There are people like that we just have to love and we certainly don't want to do anything to offend them. That's what Paul is saying in Romans 14:1. If there's going to be loving unity in the church among these diverse people, who are the ones who are going to have

to reach out and give? It has to be the strong who are willing to sacrifice some of their freedoms. I want to be able to do that. I want to be sensitive to people who think you ought to live a certain way and dress a certain way and think in a certain way, even though I don't agree with it. I want to be sensitive to that, until they can better understand the freedoms they enjoy in Jesus Christ.

Paul is very gentle here and it is very different from the way he rebukes people in Galatians and Colossians. This is kind of interesting. Let's read Galatians 1:8,9:

*8 Let God's curse fall on anyone, including myself, who preaches any other message than the one we told you about. Even if an angel comes from heaven and preaches any other message, let him be forever cursed.
9 I will say it again: If anyone preaches any other gospel than the one you welcomed, let God's curse fall upon that person.*

Paul here says he'll pronounce a curse on any one who preaches any other Gospel. Colossians 4:8,9:

*8 Before you Gentiles knew God, you were slaves to so-called gods that do not even exist.
9 And now that you have found God (or should I say, now that God has found you), why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual powers of this world?*

Paul first came through and preached the Gospel in Galatia, and then Judaizers came through and said, "That Gospel can't save you. You can't be saved by grace alone. You have to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law." So Paul says in verses 10,11:

*10 You are trying to find favor with God by what you do or don't do on certain days or months or seasons or years.
11 I fear for you. I am afraid that all my hard work for you was worth nothing.*

Then in Galatians 5:1,2 Paul says:

*1 So Christ has really set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.
2 Listen! I, Paul, tell you this: If you are counting on circumcision to make you right with God, then Christ cannot help you.*

Why is Paul so strong and bold and straightforward here? Here's the difference. In Galatia they were teaching that the Law and the Mosaic ceremony with all its rituals was necessary for salvation in addition to faith in Jesus. Paul condemns that as a false teaching. In the Roman Christian church they were not advocating those things as a part

of salvation, they had come to believe in salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. They were just holding on to those things as past traditions and habits. That was the difference. That's why he could speak gently to the Roman church because they weren't affirming these things as elements of salvation, but the Galatians were. So were the Colossians. Colossians 2:16:

16 So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new-moon ceremonies or Sabbaths.

Paul is telling them to resist that kind of teaching because it no longer applies. Verse 17:

For these rules were only shadows of the real thing, Christ himself.

People in Colossi were saying that in order to be a true Christian you had to have the food and the drink and the feast and the new moon and the Sabbath which were in line with the Old Testament Mosaic tradition. They were saying that those things were still essential to a person's salvation. Paul rejects such false teachings. The difference in the Roman situation is that these things were just ingrained traditions that people were having difficulty letting go of. These things weren't being pushed as necessary to salvation. They were just being held onto as a natural part of spiritual growth.

So Paul instructs the more mature Christians to be easy on them, to open their arms to them, and bring them along. Getting back to Romans 14:1, Paul says in effect, "*When you receive them, don't do it for the purpose of passing judgment on their opinions.*" In other words don't do it just to get in an argument with them. Just love them. You see to push them too fast may offend their conscience and cause them to stumble. Go slow and be gentle. There are several reasons why we are to receive people in this way and we'll look at those next Sunday.