

The Unity of Strong and Weak Believers

Last week we spent a lot of time looking at background material for this topic and it should have become clear to us that God is concerned about how Christians treat one another. We learned last time that because of the diversity of backgrounds of people in the church and their preference for different things, the potential for disagreement is pretty high. The church is a mixture of Christians at all levels of spiritual growth as well as those who think they're Christians and really don't understand what salvation is really all about. There are a wide range of cultural backgrounds in the church. There are people who think it's OK to be critical and then there are those who are very docile and gentle. So what Paul is bringing to our attention in Romans 14 is the need to develop a loving compatibility among all believers in the church. And Paul divides believers in a church into two categories, the weak and the strong.

A weak Christian was defined as one who because of some preference can't understand and fully enjoy his/her freedom in Christ. A strong believer is one who understands his/her freedom, enjoys it, and is not restricted by ceremony or rituals. The potential problem comes when the weak believer looks at the strong believer and accuses them of being abusive of their freedom, or the strong believer looks at the weak believer and accuses them of being too legalistic and not understanding the freedom that Christ has provided. Therein lies the potential conflict. For example, if you're a mature Christian and a new Christian tells you they were taught that God doesn't want us to go to baseball games on Sunday, don't tell them that's foolish. Just let them work through that issue as the Holy Spirit matures them over time. It is not a sin issue and you don't want to motivate them to do something that will make them feel guilty and violate their conscience. And don't tell them the next time you see them about the great time you had at the baseball game on Sunday.

Paul starts out in Romans 14:1 by telling us that if we want to get along we have to learn to *accept one another*. Let's read 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.*

Remember that Paul is talking about people here who are believers in Christ. **THEY KNOW THAT SALVATION COMES BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST** but they are just unable to let go of some past practices, rituals, ceremonies, and beliefs. The strong or mature believer is not to accept such a person and then start an argument with them. For then they haven't really accepted the person. To accept is not to argue. Mature Christians should embrace such believers for the sake of unity and love within the fellowship. The weaker believers too should accept the stronger believers for the sake of unity and love within the fellowship. Romans 14:2:

2 For instance, one person believes it is all right to eat anything. But another believer who has a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables.

The one who believes he/she can eat anything is the strong believer. Are they right? Are they permitted as Christians to eat anything they want? Yes. See **1 Timothy 4:4, NAS:**

For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude.

There are no dietary restrictions in the New Covenant which Christ brought. The only provision is that the food be eaten in an attitude of gratitude to the Lord God who created it. But even though a believer may be right, he or she is not to criticize believers who don't understand that yet. And why should we all do this? Because God has accepted all believers. Romans 14:3:

3 Those who think it is all right to eat anything must not look down on those who won't. And those who won't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them.

Paul speaks of dietary (food) laws here because it was so prominent an issue at the time he wrote the letter to the Romans. But these verses apply to many other practices as well. They could apply to styles of worship, styles of praying, or feelings about church décor, as well as to a number of lifestyle issues.

A mature believer is not to show contempt for someone who doesn't fully understand yet who they are in Christ. And to the weak Paul says don't look with resentment upon the strong.

Who are we to not accept those whom God has accepted? Remember if you condemn a brother Christian, you're condemning someone who God has received because of their faith in Christ.

Each group has a tendency to feel that the other is going to fall away from the faith because of what they are doing. But God sustains each believer, Romans 14:4:

4 Who are you to condemn God's servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let Him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord's power will help them do as they should.

Now for the mature Christian, or for someone who is moving along the road from weak to mature, this can be a very hard test. They have to strongly resist telling their brother or sister what to do and how to live. They must trust God to work in the life of that brother or sister. They have to back off and realize the issue is between God and that other individual. God's power will work in the other person's life. Imagine this: In a Christian family the parents have strong ideas of right and wrong, which they have worked hard to

convey to their children. These parents have grave concern for the kind of “testimony” they have in the community; that is, they care what other people, especially non-believers, think of them. So now their teenager comes home and announces that he wants to get his nose pierced. I am not aware of anything in the Bible that directly states, “*Thou shalt not pierce thy nose*” and neither are the parents of this teen. But immediately their reaction is “NO! Not my kid! It’s a sin!” But is it? It may be unpleasant. It may be unaesthetic. It may be something all the other teens are doing, but is it really sin? According to this passage in Romans, what are the parents to do? They are to accept their teen and allow God to deal with him. They are to pray daily, and trust that “*The Lord’s power will help him do as he should.*” Perhaps God knows He can best use this teen to witness to others if his nose is pierced. Perhaps God has a spiritual lesson of some sort that He wants to teach this teenager through this process. So, according to Romans 14, the parents are best advised to accept their teenager, not argue with him (although they may share their own reasoning with their son) and trust God to be working in their son’s life. A hard task for most parents.

Who are we to condemn one who belongs to God? The Lord will take care of His own. We are not permitted to condemn a fellow Christian. God will see to it that each believer will make it and never lose their salvation. They will never fall away. God will never let go of even one single believer. Romans 8:35,37-39:

35 Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean He no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death?

37 No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

38 And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can’t, and life can’t. The angels can’t, and the demons can’t. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can’t keep God’s love away.

39 Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God is also sovereign over both the strong and the weak. Romans 14:5-9:

5 In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. Each person should have a personal conviction about this matter.

6 Those who have a special day for worshiping the Lord are trying to honor him. Those who eat all kinds of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who won’t eat everything also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God.

*7 **FOR WE ARE NOT OUR OWN MASTERS** when we live or when we die.*

*8 While we live, we live to please the Lord. And when we die, we go to be with the Lord. So in life and in death, **WE BELONG TO THE LORD.***

9 Christ died and rose again for this very purpose, so that He might be Lord of those who are alive and of those who have died.

Even though their practices might vary, the goals and motives of both strong and weak Christians are the same. Why does the weak brother or sister do or not do all the things he or she does? Because **he or she believes in their heart that they are pleasing God.** Why does the strong brother or sister enjoy all the freedoms in full that they are given by Christ? Because **he or she believes in their heart that they are pleasing and honoring God.** So the motive is the same in both cases. Being weak doesn't mean that the person is walking without God in their lives. It simply means they haven't come to understand yet the power and freedom available to them through Christ. **They want to serve Christ with all their heart and soul.** They just don't quite understand yet what the strong or more mature Christian understands. And Paul does not want a believer to go against their conscience. Why? Because for a believer who wants to do God's will with all their heart, soul, and mind, **THEIR CONSCIENCE IS AN IMPORTANT WAY THE HOLY SPIRIT GUIDES THEM.**

If your heart is telling you to do something and you believe it will please God, and there is nothing in Scripture that forbids it, then do it. Don't let someone else come along and condemn you for what you're thinking. You may actively seek the counsel of other brothers and sisters, and that's a good idea. But in the end after prayer and counsel, **you must trust yourself to do what you feel the Lord is telling you to do through your conscience.** But also don't get in another believer's way in a manner that would cause them to stumble.

We must be patient to allow the Holy Spirit to work through the Word of God and the community of believers, to bring the person to maturity in Christ. Conscience is a very important tool.

In Acts 23:1, Paul says:

“Brothers, I have always lived before God in all good conscience!”

Paul not only obeyed the Word but also did what he felt the Spirit of God was prompting him to do in his conscience. Paul is telling us in chapter 14 of Romans that since these matters are simply ones of preference and not sin, let's not cause dissension or a split in the church over them.

Another point I'd like to make is that God will judge every believer. That means God and God alone. You won't have anything to say about it. Romans 14:10:

10 So why do you condemn another Christian? Why do you look down on another Christian? Remember, each of us will stand personally before the judgment seat of God.

So why do people waste their time judging one another? It's never going to carry any weight before God. God alone will judge all believers. Romans 14:11,12:

11 For the Scriptures say, " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow to me and every tongue will confess allegiance to God.' "
12 Yes, each of us will have to give a personal account to God.

So let's drop the criticism. Let the Lord be the judge. It's better if we just love one another.

Now let's continue in Romans 14:13-23, where Paul discusses Christian liberty, **not** in the way it affects the individual but in the sense that it affects that person's brother and sister. This is very important because ultimately it affects the church community. Paul's concern from verses 13-23 is for other Christians.

Paul will focus on how we can build up other Christians and not offend them.

Now before getting started we need to remind you again that we are not talking about sinful behavior here. We're talking about the externals, the rituals, the things people think they can do or not do to earn their way into God's favor and Heaven. Let's read Romans 14: 13-23:

13 So don't condemn each other anymore. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not put an obstacle in another Christian's path.

14 I know and am perfectly sure on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong.

15 And if another Christian is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died.

16 Then you will not be condemned for doing something you know is all right.

17 For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, BUT OF LIVING A LIFE OF GOODNESS AND PEACE AND JOY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT.

18 If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God. And other people will approve of you, too.

19 So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

20 Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, there is nothing wrong with these things in themselves. But it is wrong to eat anything if it makes another person stumble.

21 Don't eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another Christian to stumble.

22 You may have the faith to believe that there is nothing wrong with what

you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO DO NOT CONDEMN THEMSELVES BY DOING SOMETHING THEY KNOW IS ALL RIGHT.

*23 But if people have doubts about whether they should eat something, they shouldn't eat it. They would be condemned for not acting in faith before God. **IF YOU DO ANYTHING YOU BELIEVE IS NOT RIGHT, YOU ARE SINNING.***

How do we avoid offending each other? The key to this is found in verse 15: “*you are not acting in love.*” You want to make sure that your conduct is not unloving. You don't want to be insensitive to the feelings of other believers. The objective of a mature Christian, a strong believer, is to conduct oneself in love toward a weaker brother or sister. In verse 13, Paul says:

13 So don't condemn each other anymore. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not put an obstacle in another Christian's path.

You are not to judge other Christians, but rather you are to be sure you don't cause them to stumble along the path of their Christian growth. Let me give you an example. Scripture commands Christians not to get drunk (Ephesians 5:18; Proverbs 20:1;23:29-35; Romans 13:13) but it does not forbid drinking in moderation. If you're a Christian and you invite someone over to your house, or perhaps it's a party, and the alcoholic beverages are flowing, what if one of your Christian guests, who is new to the faith and the church, is an alcoholic who has been off the booze for several years? If that person sees you and other believers hoisting a few, he or she might be tempted to get into the action and take a drink that could send them off on an alcoholic binge that they might never recover from.

In that case the exercise of your freedom to do something that you are free to do could cause someone else to stumble. They could fall into sin and have their relationship with God seriously diminished. That's why alcohol shouldn't be served to guests in the Christian home. I don't have anything against anyone drinking. I don't hate alcohol as a substance. But I certainly would not want to cause one of my brothers or sisters to stumble. So if you like to drink and Betty and I ever invite you over to our home, you had better come prepared to be abstinent for several hours. But I assure you I won't be critical of the fact that you have a few drinks now and then under appropriate conditions and not to excess. But I will tell you this. I've known many a person that became an alcoholic because they ran with a crowd at an early age that drank. Once they got started the handwriting was on the wall and they were on a slippery slope to alcoholism. And I would be surprised if there was anyone in this room who hasn't had a family member, friend, or acquaintance affected by this devastating disease.

If you come over to our house and the final episode of your favorite sexy or violent TV show is on and you want to watch it, we will not permit that type of entertainment in our

home. We don't want any of our brothers or sisters to stumble because we allowed certain freedoms to be exercised. I trust you get the picture.

So we must realize that we must live in a way that does not cause someone else to stumble. When I was a kid I can remember that most Christian kids didn't go to dances. I wasn't a Christian at the time so I wasn't affected by what I considered to be strict fundamentalist rules. We used to tease them and say that they didn't want to go to dances because if they went to dances they would then go out and neck. So Christians don't dance because they just want to go right out and neck.

But in all seriousness there are still some Christians who might think it's a sin to dance. Are you then going to laugh at them and tell them how foolish that is and that you go to dances every Saturday night? I hope not. You can still go to your dances on Saturday night but don't flaunt it in front of someone who considers it wrong.

Paul also tells us not to grieve our brother or sister. He discusses this in Romans 14:14,15:

14 I know and am perfectly sure on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. BUT IF SOMEONE BELIEVES IT IS WRONG, THEN FOR THAT PERSON IT IS WRONG.

15 And if another Christian is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died.

Paul is saying that he was convinced by the Lord Jesus Himself that the strong, the mature Christians, are right. Sin doesn't reside in things like food. It doesn't reside in a glass, or on a reel of film, or electronics, or games. It doesn't reside in any thing. Mark 7:15 (ISV):

15 Nothing that goes into a person from the outside can make him unclean. It is what comes out of a person that makes a person unclean.

So the strong Christian is right about their freedom in Christ. But they must remember that for the weak Christian who thinks something is wrong to do, it is wrong. If a weak Christian believes it's a sin to do a certain thing and if they go ahead and do it anyhow, even though inherently it isn't a sin, they will have a guilty conscience and so for them that thing is sin. Now, let me ask you a question. Do you think it's a sin not to tithe 10% of your income to the church? I'll guarantee you that if in your conscience you consider it to be a sin and you don't tithe, then you're going to suffer with a guilty conscience. So in verse 15, Paul is saying, why in the world would you want to cause your brother or sister to grieve or be upset because in their own conscience they believe they've done something wrong?

David Brown says:

Whatever leads someone to violate their conscience tends to lead to the destruction of their soul. And those who help to bring about the one are guilty of contributing to accomplishing the other.¹

You don't want to train anyone to ignore their conscience because then you're training them to ignore a major means by which the Holy Spirit of God leads them. When a stronger Christian comes along and because of their freedom somehow tempts a weaker Christian to go against their own conscience, that weaker Christian will have pain in their heart as a result of feeling guilty. They will feel guilty and instead of helping that weaker Christian grow in their spiritual life, you will have actually contributed to pushing them backward. Because then they will be even more afraid of liberty. They will feel that if they do what you say is OK for them to do, they will feel even more guilty. Liberty will then be a greater threat to them than before because they have experienced guilt by exercising that freedom, which for them was not freedom.

Now how could a weak or immature brother or sister be grieved? By just seeing a strong Christian do what they thought was wrong. And it's not only that they saw you do it, they're grieved because you've led them to do it as well. By following your example, they go ahead and do what they feel is wrong anyway and have to live with the guilt and remorse of their conscience. They have to give up the peace and joy they should be feeling in their Christian walk. What is the point of that?

You know what all of this is telling us? It's telling us that we have to get close enough to one another to know what's going on with each other. We have to understand the hearts of the people around us so that we can be sure that we walk in love toward those people.

Paul also says in verse 15: *"Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died."*

Paul has told us so far NOT TO MAKE A FELLOW CHRISTIAN STUMBLE, NOT TO GRIEVE THEM, and then he tells us NOT TO RUIN THEM. Do you see the downward spiral we can cause in someone else's life? First, we believe we are free to do something that is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture: go to rock concerts, pierce our tongue, or wear a certain style of clothing, for instance. Our brother or sister feels that is wrong but agrees to go along with us. But in doing so they have violated their conscience and feel grieved. They may feel overwhelmed by their sense of sin and that may lead them to either pull away from God, or to turn to a path of sin. Our liberty misused can destroy others.

1 Corinthians 8:11-13, NIV

11 *So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.*

12 *When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak*

¹ Brown, David.

conscience, you sin against Christ.

13 Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

Now we need to remember that once a person has truly received Jesus Christ as Savior and is granted salvation by God's grace through faith, they are guaranteed that salvation and a place in Heaven for eternity.

So you couldn't ruin a person to the degree that they would lose that salvation. We're talking about some type of spiritual loss here. Perhaps your actions could cause them to leave the church, or lose their joy, or their effectiveness in ministry. We're referring to the loss of some kind of blessedness a person enjoys because of their faith. So how could you dare to cause someone to stumble, because of loveless behavior on your part, who had been saved by Jesus in an act of supreme love? What a contrast. If Christ, the perfect Son of God, loved that weak person enough to die for them, can we not love that sinner enough to keep them from stumbling?

I'd like to close with a little practical reflection and it's definitely related to what Paul has been talking about. Some of you may come from strict fundamentalist background churches. Some of you may come from Catholic backgrounds. Whatever your background might be, if you've been programmed to see God as a vengeful and punishing God only, you may have been badly damaged in your Christian walk and perhaps are still damaged. In fact it is entirely possible that such people are living with serious emotional disorders because of guilt feelings they have for not being able to obey all of what they were told were God's rules. Many pastors, priests, teachers, and parents have created feelings of guilt in children in order to keep them in line and fear the consequences if they weren't obedient. I have no doubt that such people may even become suicidal.

I believe this is just another aspect of what Paul has described in the verses we've looked at. Whether you take a new believer and insist it's OK for them to do things they don't feel they should do, or whether you teach a new Christian that they should feel guilt over something for which there should be no guilt, you are causing that brother or sister to stumble. I sometimes wonder if people who do such things ever read their Bibles. Because if they knew the serious consequences of false teaching they would never dare do such things. Jesus gives the following warning for anyone who alters the truth of the Holy Scriptures by changing their meaning or by adding to or subtracting from the original text. Revelation 22:18,19:

18 And I solemnly declare to everyone who hears the prophetic words of this book: If anyone adds anything to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book.

19 And if anyone removes any of the words of this prophetic book, God will remove that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book.

James 3:1:

I Dear brothers and sisters, not many of you should become teachers in the church, for we who teach will be judged by God with greater strictness.

So to summarize: Here are the principles believers should use when deciding about an activity:

1. Does Scripture forbid or command it?
2. Is the Holy Spirit guiding me?
3. Will it cause a brother or sister to stumble (fall into sin or delay their onward growth into faith)?
4. If we cause another Christian to stumble or to disobey their conscience, we have contributed to their ruin.

Anyone who leads another Christian astray, or anyone else for that matter, away from the original and perfect teaching of the Word of God in the Bible **will answer to God** one day for their behavior. Don't allow that to happen to you. So whether it's leading another believer to where they will do something they think is a sin and it causes them guilt and shame, or whether you create that guilt and shame by telling them things about God and Jesus that are not true, we are to have no part in such behavior. We are to simply, as Paul said in verses 1 and 13:

"I Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. 13 Don't condemn each other anymore. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not put an obstacle in another Christian's path.

And remember what Paul said earlier in Romans 13:8-10:

*8 Pay all your debts, except the debt of love for others. You can never finish paying that! **If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill all the requirements of God's law.***

*9 For the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting—and any other commandment—are all summed up in this one commandment: **"Love your neighbor as yourself."***

10 Love does no wrong to anyone, so love satisfies all of God's requirements.

I hope you don't let the complete impact of these verses slip by you because they sum up the entire Bible. Keep it simple. Keep your eyes on the throne, and you will be blessed both in this life and in Heaven. Next week we'll finish Romans 14 and perhaps even begin in Romans 15.