

Romans: The Good News of God

Dealing with Disputable Matters

Romans 14:1-15:13

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Scripture

Today we continue our study in Romans. My plan is to finish our study in Paul's letter to the Romans by the end of this month. And so we are going to look at a large portion of the text this morning, Romans 14:1-15:13. I will not be going into each detail of this text; I will just give you a general overview of the text. You may want to pick up the manuscript which has much more detailed information of the text than I plan to cover today.

So, with that in mind, let's read Romans 14:1-15:13:

¹As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ²One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹for it is written,

**“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God.”**

¹²So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

¹³Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

²⁰Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²²The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

¹We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ²Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” ⁴For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ. ⁷Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

⁸For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

**“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,
and sing to your name.”**

¹⁰And again it is said,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

¹¹And again,

**“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples extol him.”**

¹²And again Isaiah says,

**“The root of Jesse will come,
even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;
in him will the Gentiles hope.”**

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Romans 14:1-15:13)

Introduction

Romans 12 and 13 laid emphasis on the primacy of love, whether loving our enemies (12:9, 14, 17ff) or loving our neighbors (13:8ff). Now Paul supplies a lengthy example of what it means in practice to “walk according to love” (14:15, literally). It concerns the relationship between two groups: the weak and the strong.

Note that Paul is not talking about weakness of character; it is

weakness of *faith*: “As for the one who is weak *in faith*” (14:1a). We are to picture a Christian who is sensitive and scrupulous.

But who were the “weak”? The four main proposals are as follows:

First, *ex-idolaters*. New converts from paganism who feared that eating meat offered to idols would compromise and contaminate them. Is this similar to the situation in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13? Perhaps. But there is no mention in Romans about meat. We should conclude that while the principles involved in both places are similar, the situations in Rome and Corinth were different.

Second, *ascetics*. Ascetic movements existed in both paganism (*e.g.* the Pythagoreans) and in Judaism (*e.g.* the Essenes). Such asceticism might explain why the weak abstained from wine as well as meat (14:21). But beyond this the evidence is weak.

Third, *legalists*. The weak in faith, some suggest, regarded their observances and abstentions as good works necessary for salvation. But in Galatians Paul pronounced a solemn anathema upon anyone who in such ways distorted the gospel of grace. Would he have been so gentle with the weak in Rome when the very gospel was at stake? Hardly!

And fourth, *Jewish Christians*. This is the most satisfactory proposal. The Jewish Christians’ weakness consisted in their continuing conscientious commitment to Jewish regulations regarding diet and days. As for diet, they kept the Old Testament food laws, eating only clean items (14:14, 20). In addition, either they assured themselves that their meat was kosher or, because of the difficulty in guaranteeing this, they may have abstained from meat altogether. As for special days, they observed both the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals. All this fits a Jewish Christian context.

Paul’s conciliatory attitude to the weak (not allowing the strong to despise, browbeat, condemn or damage them) is also in keeping with the Jerusalem Council’s decree (cf. Acts 15), which had been designed precisely to restrain the strong and safeguard the consciences of the weak.

We cannot exactly equate *Jewish Christian* with “weak” and

Gentile Christian with “strong.” Doubtless Gentile Christians had their scruples as well.

Paul is addressing the vital issue of *essential* and *non-essential* in this passage. Paul insists that, from a gospel perspective, questions of diet and days are precisely *non-essentials*.

There is a similar need for discernment today. We must not elevate non-essentials, especially issues of custom and ceremony, to the level of the essential and make them tests of orthodoxy and conditions for fellowship.

Nor must we marginalize fundamental theological or moral questions as if they were only cultural and of no great importance. Paul distinguishes between these things, and so should we.

But what is a *non-essential* issue? Paul does not insist that everybody agree with him, as he did in the early chapters of his letter regarding the way of salvation. No, the Roman issues were *dialogismos* (14:1), “opinions” (*ESV*), “disputable matters” (*NIV*), “doubtful points” (*NEB*), “opinion” (*RSV*), “doubtful things” (*NKJV*) on which it was not necessary for all Christians to agree.

The 16th century Reformers called such things *adiaphora*, “matters of indifference,” whether (as here) they were customs and ceremonies, or secondary beliefs that are not part of the gospel.

In either case they are matters on which Scripture does not clearly pronounce. In these and other issues, the problem is how to handle conscientious differences in matters on which Scripture is either silent or seemingly equivocal, in such a way as to prevent them from disrupting the Christian fellowship.

Let me suggest a list of items that may constitute “disputable matters” in our day:

- Giving and receiving of wedding rings (which was hotly contested by the Puritans in the 17th century)
- Wearing jewelry
- Use of make-up
- Consumption of alcohol
- Smoking

- Mode of baptism (immersion or sprinkling)
- Some aspects of Old Testament fulfillment of prophecy
- View of eschatology (especially the millennium)
- Attending movies
- Watching television
- Aspects of Sabbath observance (such as work, play, and worship)
- Eating food in the church building
- Letting children participate in Halloween
- School choices (public, private, or home)
- Mixed swimming
- Playing cards
- “Gambling” for recreation
- Buying insurance
- Dancing
- Wearing pants (for women)
- Using a Bible other than the *King James Version*
- Playing guitars in church
- Men wearing their hair over their ears
- Etc.

One further characteristic of this passage deserves our attention, namely Paul’s remarkable blend of theology and ethics. He is treating some very mundane matters, yet he grounds them in the truths of the cross, the resurrection, and the last judgment.

Lesson

Well, with that as an introduction, let’s look at Paul’s method in Romans 14:1-15:13 of dealing with disputable matters.

I. The Fundamental Principle (14:1)

Paul lays down the fundamental principle of welcome (espe-

cially the welcome of the weak), which undergirds the whole discussion, in verse 1: **“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”**

This fundamental principle is in two parts.

A. *It Is Positive*

It is positive: **“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him. . .”** (14:1a).

There is no attempt to disguise or conceal what these brothers and sisters are. They are **weak in faith** (here meaning “conviction”), immature, untaught, and (as Paul’s unfolding argument makes clear) actually mistaken.

Yet, on that account they are not to be ignored, reproached, nor (at least at this stage) corrected, but rather to be received into the fellowship.

The Greek word for **welcome** is *proslambano*. It means to welcome another into one’s fellowship and into one’s heart. It implies warmth and kindness of genuine love.

We need to bear this in mind when we consider that we are to welcome the weak (14:1) for “God has welcomed him” (14:3), and to welcome one another “as Christ has welcomed” us (15:7).

B. *It Is Qualified*

Having reflected on the principle of welcome, we need to note that it is qualified: **“. . . but not to quarrel over opinions”** (14:1b).

The Greek word for **quarrel** (*diakriseis*) can mean “discussions, debates, quarrels or judgments.”

And the Greek word for **opinions** (*dialogismon*) can mean “opinions, scruples, or the anxious internal debates of conscience.”

Paul is saying, then, that we must receive the weak person with a warm and genuine welcome, “without debate over his misgivings or scruples,” or “not for the purpose of getting into quarrels

about opinions.”

In other words, we are not to turn the church into a debating chamber, whose chief characteristic is argument, still less into a law court in which weak persons are put in the dock, interrogated and arraigned.

The welcome we give them must include respect for their opinions.

II. Three Negative Deductions (14:2-15:13)

Having laid down the fundamental principle of welcome (especially welcome of the weak), which undergirds the whole discussion, Paul now develops three negative deductions or consequences that follow from the fundamental principle.

A. *Do Not Despise or Condemn the Weak Person (14:2-13a)*

The first negative deduction is this: Do not despise or condemn the weak person. This is fleshed out in Romans 14:2-13a.

1. **Welcome him because God has welcomed him (14:2-3)**

First, welcome him because God has welcomed him.

Paul chooses the dietary question as his first illustration of how the weak and the strong, the fearful and the free, should behave towards one another.

One person believes he may eat anything, his freedom in Christ having liberated him from unnecessary scruples about food, **while the weak person eats only vegetables** (14:2).

This is probably not because he is a vegetarian on principle or for health reasons, but because the only foolproof way of ensuring that he never eats non-kosher meat is not to eat any meat at all.

How are these Christians to regard one another? **Let not the one who eats** (that is, the strong) **despise the one who abstains** (who is weak on account of his scruples), **and let not the one who**

abstains (the weak) **pass judgment on the one who eats** (that is, the strong, on account of his liberty).

It is not clear why the strong are forbidden to “**despise**” on the weak, and the weak to “**pass judgment**” on the strong.

Perhaps it is that, whereas the strong might be tempted to pity the weakness of the weak, the weak might regard the strong, who have abandoned Israel’s time-honored traditions, as having committed apostasy and therefore as deserving condemnation.

Whether this is correct or not, the reason both the despising and the passing judgment of a fellow Christian is wrong is that **God has welcomed him** (14:3). How dare we reject a person whom God has welcomed?

Indeed, the best way to determine what our attitude to other people should be is to determine what God’s attitude to them is.

This principle is better even than the golden rule. It is safe to treat others as we would like them to treat us, but it is safer still to treat them as God does.

The former is a ready-made guide based on our fallen self-centeredness, while the latter is a standard based on God’s perfection.

2. **Welcome him because Christ died and rose to be the Lord (14:4-9)**

Second, welcome him because Christ died and rose to be the Lord.

The argument moves on. If it is inappropriate to reject somebody whom God has welcomed, it is at least as inappropriate to interfere in the relationship between a master and his *oiketes*, his household slave. **Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?** (14:4a).

In ordinary life such behavior would be regarded as outrageous and would be deeply resented.

Just so, we have no business to come between a fellow Christian and Christ, or to usurp Christ’s position in his life. **It is before**

his own master that he stands or falls. For he is not responsible to us, nor are we responsible for him. **And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand** (14:4b), giving him his approval, whether he has ours or not.

Paul now develops his second illustration of the relationship between the strong and the weak. It concerns the observance or nonobservance of special days, presumably Jewish festivals, whether feasts or fasts, and whether weekly, monthly or annual.

He begins by describing the alternatives without comment. **One person** (the weak) **esteems one day as better than another, while another** (the strong) **esteems all days alike.** The strong does not distinguish between days any more than he does between foods.

To whichever group his readers might belong, Paul's first concern for them is this: **Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind** (14:5).

Paul is not encouraging mindless behavior. Nor is he friendly to unexamined traditions.

But assuming that each (weak and strong) has reflected on the issue and has reached a firm decision, he will then reckon his practice to be part of his Christian discipleship. **The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord** (14:6a).

And the same is true of the one who regards every day alike, although Paul does not mention him in verse 6.

Instead, he reverts to the question of eating and in doing so adds an important double principle, which is related to thanksgiving. **The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God** (14:6b).

Whether one is an eater or an abstainer, the same two principles apply.

If we are able to receive something from God with thanksgiving, as his gift to us, then we can offer it back, as our service to him.

The two movements, from him to us and from us to him, be-

long together and are vital aspects of our Christian discipleship.

Both are valuable and practical tests. “Can I thank God for this? Can I do this unto the Lord?”

This introduction of the Lord into our lives applies to every situation. **For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself (14:7).** On the contrary, **for if** (that is, “while”) **we live, we live to the Lord, and if** (that is, when) **we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (14:8).**

Life and death seem to be taken as constituting together the sum total of our human being. While we continue to live on earth and when through death we begin the life of heaven, everything we have and are belongs to the Lord Jesus and must therefore be lived to his honor and glory.

Why is this? Here is Paul’s answer: **For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living (14:9).**

It is wonderful that the apostle lifts the very mundane question of our mutual relationships in the Christian community to the high theological level of the death, resurrection and consequent universal lordship of Jesus. Because he is our Lord, we must live for him.

Because he is also the Lord of our fellow Christians, we must respect their relationship to him and mind our own business. For he died and rose to be their Lord too.

3. Welcome him because he is your brother (14:10a)

Third, welcome him because he is your brother.

After writing about the strong and the weak, the observers and the abstainers, the living and the dead, all in rather general and impersonal terms, Paul suddenly poses two straight questions in which he sets over against each other “you” and “your brother.” **Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do**

you despise your brother? (14:10a).

Judging and despising fellow Christians (the same two verbs are used as in verse 3) are both now shown up to be totally anomalous attitudes.

Why? Not only because God has welcomed them, because Christ has died and risen to be our common Lord, but also because they and we are related to one another in the strongest possible way, by family ties.

Whether we are thinking of the weak, with all their tedious doubts and fears, or of the strong, with all their brash assurances and freedoms, they are our brothers and sisters. When we remember this, our attitude to them becomes at once less critical and impatient, more generous and tender.

4. Welcome him because we will all stand before God's judgment seat (14:10b-13a)

And fourth, welcome him because we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

There is an obvious link between our not judging our brother (14:10a) and our having to **stand before the judgment seat of God** (14:10b). We should not judge, because we are going to be judged.

There seems to be an allusion to the word of Jesus: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" (cf. Matthew 7:1). What kind of "judging" was Jesus referring to, however? He was not forbidding criticism, or telling us to suspend our critical faculties. If we did that, we would not be able to obey one of his next instructions, namely to "watch out for false prophets" (cf. 7:15).

No, what is prohibited to the followers of Jesus is not criticism but censoriousness, "judging" in the sense of "passing judgment on" or despising. And the reason given is that we ourselves will one day appear before the Judge.

In other words, we have no warrant to climb on to the bench, place our fellow human beings in the dock, and start pronouncing

judgment and passing sentence, because God alone is judge and we are not, as we will be forcibly reminded when the roles are reversed.

In order to confirm this, Paul quotes from Isaiah 45:23: “**As I live, says the Lord** (an introductory formula which occurs before several other prophetic oracles, though not in this text), “**Every knee shall bow to me; and every tongue shall confess to God**” (14:11). The emphasis is on the universality of God’s jurisdiction, in that **every knee** and **every tongue** will pay homage to him.

So then, Paul continues, in the light of this Scripture, **each of us** individually, not all of us in a mass, **will give an account of himself**, not of other people, but **to God** (14:12). **Therefore**, because God is the Judge and we are among the judged, **let us not pass judgment on one another any longer** (14:13a), for then we shall avoid the extreme folly of trying to usurp God’s prerogative and anticipate judgment day.

Four theological truths, then, undergird Paul’s admonition to welcome the weak, and neither despise nor condemn them. They concern God, Christ, them and ourselves.

First, God has accepted them (14:3).

Second, Christ died and rose to be the Lord, both theirs and ours (14:9).

Third, they are our sisters and brothers, so that we are members of the same family (14:10a).

And fourth, all of us will stand before God’s judgment seat (14:10b).

Any one of these truths should be enough to sanctify our relationships; the four together leave us without excuse. And there are still two more to come!

B. Do Not Offend or Destroy the Weak Person (14:13b-23)

The second negative deduction is this: Do not offend or destroy the weak person. This is fleshed out in Romans 14:13b-23.

In this section, as in the previous one, it is our relationship to

the weak which is mainly in mind.

In spite of three “one another” verses (14:13a, 14:19 and 15:7), which speak of reciprocal duties between the weak and the strong, the chief emphasis throughout is on the Christian responsibility of the strong towards the weak.

The argument moves on, however, from how the strong should *regard* the weak to how they should *treat* them, that is, from *attitudes* (not despising or condemning them) to *actions* (not causing them to stumble or destroying them).

But of passing judgment on one another, Paul writes, **rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother** (14:13b).

There is a play on words in the Greek sentence, which contains a double use of the Greek verb *krinein*, “to judge.” “Let us therefore cease judging one another, but rather make this simple judgment. . . .” (*NEB*).

The judgment or decision which we are to make is to avoid putting either a hindrance (*proskomma*) or a snare (*skandalon*) in our brother’s path and so causing him to trip and fall. But why?

Paul goes on to lay two theological foundations for his exhortation, in addition to the four developed in Romans 14:1-13a.

1. Welcome him because he is your brother for whom Christ died (14:14-16)

First, welcome him because he is your brother for whom Christ died.

Before deploying this argument for not harming the weaker brother, however, Paul explains in very personal terms the dilemma which faces the strong. It is created by two truths in conflict with each other.

First, Paul says, **“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself”** (14:14a).

Paul’s reference to the Lord Jesus probably does not mean that he is actually quoting him, although he is sure to have been

familiar with Jesus' controversy with the Pharisees over the clean and the unclean, and with the risen Lord's word to Peter not to call unclean what God has made clean.

The reference seems to be more general ("All that I know of the Lord Jesus convinces me that. . .," seems to be what he is saying), and is also a claim to be in close personal union with Christ as his disciple and especially as his apostle. However he came to his conviction, it was that **nothing is unclean in itself**.

But, and this is the second part of the dilemma, **it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean** (14:14b), and he should not partake of it.

Verse 14 refers, of course, to ceremonial or cultural (not moral) issues, for Paul is quite explicit that some of our thoughts, words and deeds are intrinsically evil.

The paradox, then, which faces the strong, is that some foods are both clean and unclean simultaneously.

On the one hand, the strong are convinced that all foods are clean.

On the other, the weak are convinced that they are not. How should the strong behave when two consciences are in collision?

Paul's response is unambiguous. Although the strong are correct, and he shares their conviction because the Lord Jesus has endorsed it, they must not ride roughshod over the scruples of the weak by imposing their view on them.

On the contrary, they must defer to the weaker brother's conscience (even though it is mistaken) and not violate it or cause him to violate it.

Here is the reason: **If your brother is grieved by what you eat**, not only because he sees you doing something of which he disapproves, but because he is induced to follow your example against his conscience, **you are no longer walking in love** (14:15a).

For love never disregards weak consciences. Love limits its own liberty out of respect for them. For to wound a weaker brother's conscience is not only to distress him but to "**destroy**" him,

and that is totally incompatible with love. **By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died** (14:15b).

Already twice Paul has referred to the weaker Christian as a “brother” (14:10); now he repeats the epithet four more times (14:13, twice in 14:15, 14:21), and adds the poignant description **for whom Christ died**.

Did Christ love him enough to die for him, and shall we not love him enough to refrain from wounding his conscience?

Did Christ sacrifice himself for his well being, and shall we assert ourselves to his harm?

Did Christ die to save him, and shall we not care if we destroy him?

But what kind of “destruction” does Paul have in mind? It seems that Paul’s warning is that the strong who mislead the weak to go against their consciences will seriously damage their Christian discipleship.

He urges the strong against causing such injury to the weak. **So do not let what you regard as good** (i.e. the liberty you have found in Christ) **to be spoken of as evil** (14:16), because you flaunt it to the detriment of the weak.

2. Welcome him because the kingdom of God is more important than food (14:17-21)

And second, welcome him because the kingdom of God is more important than food.

If the first theological truth which undergirds Paul’s appeal to the strong for restraint is the cross of Christ, the second is the kingdom of God, that is, the gracious rule of God through Christ and by the Spirit in the lives of his people, bringing a free salvation and demanding a radical obedience.

Although the kingdom of God is not as central a doctrine in the teaching of Paul as it was in the teaching of Jesus, it nevertheless occupies a prominent place.

The apostle’s argument now is that, whenever the strong in-

sist on using their liberty to eat whatever they like, even at the expense of the welfare of the weak, they are guilty of a grave lack of proportion.

They are overestimating the importance of diet (which is trivial) and underestimating the importance of the kingdom (which is central). **For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit** (14:17).

Righteousness and peace and joy inspired by the **Holy Spirit** are sometimes understood as the subjective conditions of being righteous, peaceful and joyful.

But in the wider context of Romans it is more natural to take them as objective states, namely justification through Christ, peace with God and rejoicing in hope of God's glory (5:1ff), of which the Holy Spirit himself is the pledge and foretaste (8:23).

And the reason for the greater significance of the kingdom is that **whoever thus serves Christ**, who seeks first God's kingdom and acknowledges "that food and drink are secondary matters," **is acceptable to God and approved by men** (14:18).

Verses 19-21 repeat, enforce and apply the same teaching about proportion or balance. They contain three exhortations.

First, **so then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding** (14:19). This is the positive goal which all should seek, and which the strong were neglecting in their insensitive treatment of the weak.

Second, **do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God** (14:20a). "**The work of God**" could mean the individual weaker brother, but in the context it seems to refer to the Christian community.

"**Destroy**" translates a different verb from the one which Paul has used in verse 15. Here in verse 20 *katalyo* means to "tear down" or "throw down," particularly in relation to buildings.

It appears to be deliberately contrasted with the previous verse. Our responsibility is to seek to build up the fellowship (14:19), not to tear it down (14:20).

And in particular we must not tear it down **for the sake of food**. Surely, for the sake of a plate of meat we are not going to wreck God's work!

Already three times Paul has used a little irony to expose the incongruity of valuing food above peace, the health of our stomach above the health of the community; this is the fourth.

Are you strong really prepared, he asks, to distress a brother **by what you eat** (14:15a), to damage him spiritually **by what you eat** (14:15b), to prize your **eating and drinking** above God's kingdom (14:17), and now to demolish God's work **for the sake of food** (14:20)?

There must have been some red faces among the strong as they listened to Paul's letter being read out in the assembly. His gentle sarcasm showed up their skewed perspective. They would have to re-value their values, give up insisting on their liberties at the expense of the welfare of others, and put the cross and the kingdom first.

Paul's third exhortation expresses a contrast between two kinds of behavior, which he declares to be respectively "wrong" and "right," *kakos* (14:20b) and *kalos* (14:21). **Everything is indeed clean**, he affirms, a truth repeated from verse 14 except that the adjective is now *katharos* ("pure") not *koinos* ("common"), **but it is wrong (*kakos*) for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats** (14:20b).

This being so, **it is good (*kalos*) not to eat meat or drink wine** (which is here mentioned for the first time) **or to do anything that causes your brother to stumble** (14:21).

The statement that "**everything is indeed clean**" sounds like the slogan of the strong. And Paul agrees with it. Here is the theological truth which gave them their liberty to eat anything they liked.

But there were other factors to consider, which would require them to limit the exercise of their liberty.

In particular, there was the weaker brother or sister with the oversensitive, over-scrupulous conscience, who was convinced that

not all food was clean. So it would be wrong for the strong to use their liberty to harm the weak.

Alternatively, it would be **good** for the strong (Paul drives the argument to its logical conclusion) to eat no meat and drink no wine, that is, to become vegetarians and total abstainers, and to go to any other extreme of renunciation, if that were necessary to serve the welfare of the weak.

Paul concludes (14:22-23) by drawing a distinction between *belief* and *action*, that is, between *private conviction* and *public behavior*.

So, he writes, as regards the *private* sphere, **the faith that you have**, whether you are strong and believe you can eat anything, or weak and believe you cannot, **keep between yourself and God** (14:22a), keep it a secret. There is no need either to parade your views or to impose them on other people.

As for public behavior, there are two options, represented by two “men” whom we quickly recognize as a strong and a weak Christian respectively.

The strong Christian is blessed because his conscience approves of his eating everything, so that he can follow his conscience without any guilt feelings. **Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves** (14:22b).

But whoever has doubts, that is, the weak Christian who is plagued with misgivings because his conscience gives him vacillating signals, **is condemned if he eats** (probably by his conscience, not by God), **because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith** (i.e., which does not arise from conviction) **is sin** (14:23).

This final saying exalts the significance of our conscience. Although, as we have seen, it is not infallible, it is nevertheless sacrosanct, so that to go against it (to act **not from faith**) is to sin.

At the same time, alongside this explicit instruction not to violate our conscience, there is an implicit requirement to educate it.

C. *Do Not Please Yourselfes (15:1-13)*

Paul comes next to his third negative deduction from the positive principle to welcome the weaker brother. This is fleshed out in Romans 15:1-13.

Having urged the strong neither to despise and judge him (14:2-13a), nor to distress and damage him (14:13b-23), he now exhorts them not to please themselves (15:1-13).

We who are strong, he begins (15:1). Thus for the first time he both identifies them by this name and at the same time identifies himself as one of them.

What then ought the **strong** to do? What is their Christian responsibility towards the **weak**?

First, **we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings** (literally “weaknesses”) **of the weak** (15:1a). **Strong** people are of course tempted to wield their strength to discard or crush the **weak**. Paul urges them instead to bear with them.

The Greek verb *bastazo*, like the English verb “**bear**,” can mean either to “endure” in the sense of “tolerate,” or to “carry” and “support.” The context suggests that the latter is correct here.

One person’s strength can compensate for another person’s weakness.

Second, **we who are strong have an obligation. . . not to please ourselves** (15:1b). To be self-centered and self-seeking is natural to our fallen human nature. But we ought not to use our strength to serve our own advantage.

As Paul has been arguing, Christians with a strong conscience must not trample on the consciences of the weak.

And third, **each of us** should **please his neighbor for his good, to build him up** (15:2). Neighbor-pleasing, which Scripture commands, must not be confused with “men-pleasing,” which Scripture condemns.

In this pejorative sense, to “please men,” usually in antithesis to pleasing God, means to flatter people in order to curry favor with them, to win their approval by some unprincipled compro-

mise. It is always incompatible with integrity and sincerity.

Perhaps it is to avoid such a possible misunderstanding that Paul qualifies his appeal to please our neighbor with the clause **for his good, to build him up** (cf. 14:19). Instead of causing to stumble (14:13, 20, 21), tearing down (14:20) or damaging (14:15) our neighbor, we are **to build him up**.

Edification is a constructive alternative to demolition. And this upbuilding of the weak will doubtless include helping to educate and so strengthen their conscience.

Once again Paul adds a theological foundation to his appeal. This time it concerns Jesus Christ himself, who is now mentioned in almost every verse, and in particular his example. Why should we please our neighbor and not ourselves?

1. **Because Christ did not please himself (15:3-4)**

First, we should please our neighbor and not ourselves because Christ did not please himself (15:3-4).

Instead of pleasing himself, he gave himself in the service of his Father and of human beings. Although he, “being in very nature God,” had the greatest right of all persons to please himself, yet “he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” for his own advantage, but first “emptied himself” (*RSV*) of his glory and then “humbled himself” to serve (Philippians 2:6-7).

Instead of referring specifically either to the incarnation or to some incident of his incarnate life, however, Paul quotes from Psalm 69, which vividly describes the unjust, unreasonable sufferings of a righteous man, and which is quoted of Christ four or five times in the New Testament, being regarded as a messianic prediction.

Paul quotes Psalm 69:9. **As it is written: “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me”** (15:3). That is to say, as an example of his refusing to please himself, Christ so completely identified himself with the name, will, cause and glory of

the Father that insults intended for God fell upon him.

Christ's fulfillment of Psalm 69:9 leads Paul into a brief digression about the nature and purpose of Old Testament Scripture. **For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope** (15:4).

From this thoughtful statement it is legitimate to derive five truths about Scripture, which we would do well to remember.

First, its *contemporary intention*. The books of Scripture were of course primarily intended for those to and for whom they were **written in former days**. Yet the apostle is persuaded that they were also **written for our instruction**.

Second, its *inclusive value*. Having quoted only half a verse from one psalm, Paul declares that **whatever** written in the past is for us, although obviously not everything is of equal value. Jesus himself spoke of "the more important matters of the law."

Third, its *Christological focus*. Paul's application of Psalm 69 to Christ is a fine example of how the risen Lord could explain to his disciples "what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

Fourth, its *practical purpose*. Not only is it able to make us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," but it can bring us **encouragement** with a view to **endurance**, so that **we might have hope**, looking beyond time to eternity, beyond present sufferings to future glory.

Fifth, its *divine message*. The striking fact that **endurance** and **encouragement**, which in verse 4 are attributed to Scripture, in verse 5 are attributed to **God**, can only mean that it is God himself who encourages us through the living voice of Scripture. For God continues to speak through what he has spoken.

2. **Because Christ is the way to united worship (15:5-6)**

Second, we should please our neighbor and not ourselves because Christ is the way to united worship.

Verses 5-6 are in the form of a benediction. Paul's prayer is that **the God of endurance and encouragement** (through Scripture, as we have seen) may **grant you to live in such harmony with one another**, or literally, "may give you to think the same thing among yourselves" (15:5a).

This can hardly be a plea that the Roman Christians may come to agree with each other about everything, since Paul has been at pains to urge the weak and the strong to accept each other in spite of their conscientious disagreement on secondary matters.

It must therefore be a prayer for their unity of mind in essentials. For he adds, "**in accord with Christ Jesus**" (15:5b).

This seems to indicate that Christian unity is unity in Christ, that the person of Jesus Christ himself is the focus of our unity, and that therefore the more we agree with him and about him, the more we will agree with one another.

But what is the purpose of this unity of mind? It is in order that (*hina*) we may engage in the common worship of God: **that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ** (15:6).

3. **Because Christ accepted you (15:7)**

Third, we should please our neighbor and not ourselves because Christ accepted you.

With verse 7 Paul returns to the beginning, to his original and positive appeal for acceptance.

Indeed, the long, closely reasoned, theological-practical argument about the strong and the weak (14:2-15:6) is sandwiched between the two cries, **welcome him** (14:1) and **welcome one another** (15:7a).

Both are addressed to the whole congregation, although the first urges the church to welcome the weaker brother, while the second urges all church members to welcome each other.

Both also have a theological base. The weak brother is to be welcomed for **God has welcomed him** (14:3), and the members

are to welcome each other **as Christ has welcomed you** (15:7a).

Moreover, Christ's welcome of us was also **for the glory of God** (15:7b).

The entire credit for the welcome we have received goes to him who took the initiative through Christ to reconcile us to himself and to each other.

4. **Because Christ has become a servant (15:8-13)**

And fourth, we should please our neighbor and not ourselves because Christ has become a servant.

With verse 8 Paul slips almost imperceptibly from the unity of the weak and the strong through Christ to the unity of Jews and Gentiles through the same Christ.

Further, in both cases the unity is with a view to worship, so that they may glorify God together (15:6, 9ff.).

The grammar of verses 8-9 is uncertain, however. Here is the *ESV* text of verses 8-9a: **For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.**

What is clear is that there are two complementary clauses, the first about **the circumcised** (that is, the Jews) and **God's truthfulness**, the second about **the Gentiles** and his **mercy**. But what is the relation between them?

Many commentators suspend both clauses on the solemn opening words, **I tell you**. But because the context highlights the work of Christ, it seems better to suspend them on a longer introduction, namely, **I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcises. . . .**

Then his role as the servant of the Jews, that is, as the Jewish Messiah, is seen to have two parallel purposes, first **to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs**, and second to incorporate the **Gentiles** as well.

His ministry to the Jews was **to show God's truthfulness**, to

demonstrate his faithfulness to his covenant promises, whereas his ministry to the **Gentiles** was on account of **his mercy**, his uncovenanted mercy.

For, although the Old Testament contains many prophecies of the inclusion of the Gentiles, and indeed the promise to Abraham was that the nations would be blessed through his posterity, yet God had made no covenant with the Gentiles comparable to his covenant with Israel. Consequently, it was in mercy to the Gentiles, as it was in faithfulness to Israel, that Christ became a servant for the benefit of both.

This truth of the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in the messianic community Paul now enforces with four Old Testament quotations.

In each case he uses the Septuagint (LXX) text, and he chooses one from the Law, one from the Prophets and two from the Writings, which are the three divisions of the Old Testament.

All four quotations refer both to the Gentiles and to the worship of God, although each contains a slightly different emphasis.

In the first, David, though king of Israel, announces his intention to praise God among the Gentiles, although it is not clear whether the nations are to be spectators only or active participants. **“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; and sing to your name”** (15:9b = Psalm 18:49; 2 Samuel 22:50).

In the second quotation the nations are definitely participants. Moses is represented as summoning them to rejoice in company with God’s people. **Again, it is written, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”** (15:10 = Deuteronomy 32:43).

In the third quotation the psalmist also addresses all the nations directly and bids them praise Jehovah, repeating the word “all.” **And again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him”** (15:11 = Psalm 117:1).

Then in the fourth and final verse the prophet Isaiah predicts the rise of the Messiah, descended from David, Jesse’s son, who would rule the nations and win their confidence. **And again, Isaiah says, “The Root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to**

rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope” (15:12 = Isaiah 11:10).

Thus the Messiah would be simultaneously the root of Jesse and the hope of the nations.

Paul concludes the long doctrinal-ethical section of his letter with another benediction (see verse 5 for the first). **May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing** (15:13a).

The reference to **joy** and **peace** recalls the apostle’s definition of the kingdom of God (14:7).

Now he adds faith (**in believing**) as the means by which **joy** and **peace** grow within us, and he prays that his Roman readers will be filled with both. He also anticipates that this filling will result in an overflowing: **so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope** (15:13b).

The burden of Paul’s earlier benediction (15:5) was unity with a view to worship; the burden of this one is **“hope.”**

He has already expressed his assurance that the Scriptures bring us hope (15:4). Now he expresses his prayer-wish that **the God of hope** may cause them to **abound in hope**.

Hope of course always looks to the future. And since Paul has just quoted Isaiah’s prophecy that the Messiah will be the object of the Gentiles’ hope (15:12), we are given a clue as to what hope is in his mind.

Paul is looking forward to the time the “fullness” of both Israel and the Gentiles will have come in (11:12, 25), then to the culmination of history with the *parousia* (second coming of Christ), and then beyond it to the glory of the new universe which Jews and Gentiles will together inherit.

Thus joy, peace, faith and hope are essential Christian qualities. If faith is the means to joy and peace, hope is their consequence, and all four are due to the power of the Spirit within us.

Conclusion

Looking back over this whole section (14:1-15:13), which is

largely devoted to how the strong should regard and treat the weak, it is particularly impressive to see how the apostle buttresses his ethical exhortations with solid theological arguments. Although we have noted six, three of them seem to be central. They concern the cross, the resurrection and the last judgment.

First, *Christ died to be our Savior*. Since God has accepted the weaker brother (14:1, 3), and since Christ has accepted us (15:7), we must complete the triangle and accept one another. How could we possibly destroy those whom Christ died to save?

The second fundamental argument is that *Christ rose to be our Lord*. This is explicitly stated (14:9). In consequence, all his people are his servants, and are accountable to him, the weak and the strong alike (14:6ff).

And thirdly, *Christ is coming to be our judge*. We will all stand before his judgment seat one day, and each of us will then give an account of himself or herself to God (14:10ff). To presume to stand in judgment on others is to usurp the prerogative of God.

These are the three acclamations which are made in many churches during the Lord's Supper: "Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!" They not only inform our worship; they also influence our behavior.

As we have tried to follow the intricacies of Paul's reasoning regarding relationships between the strong and the weak, it must sometimes have seemed very remote from our own situation.

Yet there are two particular principles which Paul develops, which, especially in combination, are applicable to all churches in all places at all times.

The first is *the principle of faith*. Everything must be done "from faith," he writes (14:23). Again, "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (14:5). We need therefore to educate our consciences by the Word of God, so that we become strong in faith, growing in settled convictions and so in Christian liberty.

Second, there is *the principle of love*. Everything must be done according to love (14:15). We need therefore to remember who our fellow Christians are, especially that they are our sisters

and brothers for whom Christ died, so that we honor and not despise them; serve and not harm them; and especially respect their consciences.

One area in which this distinction between faith and love should operate is in the difference between essentials and non-essentials in Christian doctrine and practice.

Although it is not always easy to distinguish between them, a safe guide is that truths on which Scripture speaks with a clear voice are essentials, whereas whenever equally biblical Christians, equally anxious to understand and obey Scripture, reach different conclusions, these must be regarded as non-essentials.

Some people glory in the so-called “comprehensiveness” of certain denominations. But there are two kinds of comprehensiveness, principled and unprincipled.

Dr Alex Vidler has described the latter as the resolve “to hold together in juxtaposition as many varieties of Christian faith and practice as are willing to agree to differ, so that the church is regarded as a sort of league of religions [a sort of “United Religions,” he might have said today]. I have nothing to say for such an unprincipled syncretism.”

The true principle of comprehensiveness, on the other hand, he writes, “is that a church ought to hold the fundamentals of the faith, and at the same time allow for differences of opinion and of interpretation in secondary matters, especially rites and ceremonies”

In fundamentals, then, faith is primary, and we may not appeal to love as an excuse to deny essential faith.

In non-fundamentals, however, love is primary, and we may not appeal to zeal for the faith as an excuse for failures in love.

Faith instructs our own conscience; love respects the conscience of others.

Faith gives liberty; love limits its exercise.

No-one has put it better than Rupert Meldenius, a name which some believe was a *nom de plume* used by Richard Baxter:

Romans: The Good News of God

*In essentials unity;
In non-essentials liberty;
In all things charity.*

May God help us to put this into practice. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Almighty God, we thank you for your Word. The Apostle Paul has taught us that we have tremendous responsibilities in light of your mercies to us. Help us to welcome one another as you have welcomed us into fellowship with you.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.