

Warmly Embrace Your Brother

Romans 14:1-13

Are you an accepting person? Would others in the church describe you as an accepting person? When you looked at the title to today's sermon, "warmly embrace your brother", what thoughts went through your mind?

Because we are called to defend the truth, it is easy to live with a pugilistic posture (fists up in a boxer stance). We continually have our guard up. We are looking for heresy under every rock. And if we find anything that even smells like it could be error, whether in doctrine or practice, we are ready to take our jabs. And so, we are somewhat surprised when we come to the text for today and the clear command is to "Welcome one another." The picture of a warm embrace captures the attitude rather well.

What image better describes you? The boxer with his guard up or the man in warm embrace of another. There is a time for both. It takes wisdom to know when one or the other is appropriate. Paul knew when to fight. But here he is exhorting the warm embrace.

Today we are going to look at Romans 14:1-13. But this passage is only the first section of a larger discussion that will not end until Romans 15:13. I will take two more sermons to get through this section. The whole of this larger section deals with the theme of welcoming one another!

The focus for today is to demonstrate why we should not pass judgment on our brothers and sisters in the Church. The next section is an exhortation to pursue peace in the church and the building up of other believers. The third section is a call to live in harmony with one another. All under the broad exhortation: Warmly embrace your brother.

Read Romans 14:1-13.

As for the one who is weak in faith,

welcome him,

but not to quarrel over opinions.

2

One person believes he may eat anything,
while the weak person eats only vegetables.

3

Let 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.

God welcomes to himself, warmly embracing all who come to him through faith in His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. That one fact should change how we relate to God. And it should also change how we relate to one another.

There are three commands in these first three verses. The first is to welcome. The second is to “not despise”. And the third is to “not pass judgment”.

The Greek word for welcome is “proslambano”. And as the English translations show, in this context it means to welcome, or to accept, or to receive hospitably. Paul is speaking to members of the Church and he is exhorting one group within the Church to “embrace warmly” members of another group within the Church.

Think for a moment about the members of Faith Church. Are there members that you are not too sure about? Maybe you had a conversation after church and something that they said seemed odd. And you thought to yourself, I am not too sure about that person. Maybe they said something that made you think, “That guy is so strict. He makes me feel so uncomfortable. I am not sure I really want to get to know him.” Hear Paul’s exhortation, “Warmly embrace and do not despise that person.”

To despise in this context is “to think less of”, to “make light of”, or “to disregard”. In our lingo, it is to say things like, “That guy is weird.” Or you might talk about this person like, “Don’t mind him. He just doesn’t get grace.” Or maybe the conversation went the other way. Maybe some person said something that made you think, “Does that guy care about holiness? How does the church tolerate such people in the fold?”

Hear Paul’s exhortation, “Warmly embrace and do not pass judgment.” Because the other person does not seem to care about something that clearly matters to you, there is a reflex attitude that can develop. You immediately jump to conclusions about the other person. They are a wishy, washy Christian. They are going the way of the world. And you then inwardly begin to pat yourself on the back for your own passion for holiness. And you begin to wish that someone in authority would confront them to get them back on track.

We could take what Paul is saying here into unhealthy extremes. For instance, in the book of Galatians, Paul confronts and condemns doctrines that oppose justification by faith alone. He does not want the Galatians to “get along” or “welcome” such false teachers. And in I Corinthians, Paul encourages spiritual discipline including excommunication for a man who is committing open and unrepentant adultery.

But not every issue is doctrinal heresy. And not every moral issue is black and white. There are grey issues about which sincere Christians come down on different sides. And usually, one side falls on the side of being stricter. While the other side is looser. And when this happens, the attitudes that Paul describes develop. And if you do not have a grid by which you can filter those attitudes, you will not be able to love those for whom Christ has shed his blood.

Paul labels the two parties as:

- Weak in faith
- Strong in faith

In doing this Paul tips his hat as to which position is the better position. No one should want to be in the “weak in faith” party. If as we go through this passage you think to yourself, “That’s me”, then you ought to make an attempt to move over into the “strong in faith” position. And I would argue that that no one is always in one camp or the other. On one issue, you may be “weak in faith” and on another issue, you may be “strong in faith.” We need to define the person who is weak in faith.

The “weak in faith” person has a genuine faith in Jesus Christ. He or she is not opposing the Gospel message or trusting in their own works but in Jesus Christ to justify them before God. But, while this person understands the gospel correctly, and embraces that gospel, when it comes to working out the implications of that Gospel, he falls short.

The person who is weak in faith is not applying in every area of his life the freedoms that are his through his union with Jesus Christ. (Repeat) When put like this, who would want to be the person who is weak in faith? Should we not all desire to live in the fullness of the freedoms that are ours in Jesus Christ? Ultimately, yes.

But Paul recognizes that getting to this fullness is a process. It is a process that will not be completed until we see Jesus Christ at his return. And, even more importantly for us, Paul recognizes that genuine Christians are often at different places in their growth in the faith. By deduction then, the “strong in faith” is the person who recognizes and embraces the implications of the Gospel in the various areas of their life. It is not technically correct to say that there are no right or wrong answers to the disagreements among Christians. Nor is it best to say that the disagreements do not matter. If that were the case, then Paul would not have labeled one party as “weak in faith.” It is the fact that Paul holds to such strong convictions on various issues that makes his exhortations so helpful.

Paul wants members within the congregation to have healthy and vigorous discussions on all sorts of issues. He is fine with members not seeing eye to eye on every issue. If every Christian had to see eye to eye on every issue before engaging in true fellowship the Church could not exist.

When Jesus returns, he will settle every dispute. But until he returns, there will be differences of opinion among sincere Christians. And your job as a Christian is not always to set people straight, even if you think you have the more gospel-enlightened opinion on any particular issue.

Paul says to “welcome” the person who is weak in the faith, but not simply for the purpose of enlightening them, but not to quarrel over opinions. The phrase literally reads, “not to judgments of reasonings.”

NAS - *but not for the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions.

You may have run into this sort of person. They are nice enough at first, but before long you realize that you really only exist to be corrected. They don't really care to listen to you and your ideas. They only want to point out where you are wrong, or worse, where your life is somehow inconsistent with the Gospel. Instead, Paul wants Christians to welcome other Christians. He wants them to warmly embrace one another even when they may not agree perfectly on every issue. Let's look at the issues in the Church at Rome.

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

The question to ask is “why?” Why does one person eat everything? And why does another person eat only vegetables? The strong in faith position very likely flows from Jesus' teaching in Mark 7.

Mark 7:18-22 ¹⁸ And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come

evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

No food, in itself, is evil. Sin originates in the heart and works its way out, not vice versa. Therefore, the strong position is the correct one. It flows out of the truth that Jesus is able to cleanse the heart such that any food can be received with thanksgiving. Even the Jewish food laws of the OT are viewed as having only a limited purpose for a specific situation. But if this is the truth. And it is. Then why does Paul not rule out the “weak position” entirely? What good reason is there for these “weak in faith” people to not accept the strong position? Why do they eat only vegetables? The truth is that we are not sure. We have some theories, but none fit Paul’s language perfectly. We just do not know. And that is probably best. Why?

Because not knowing helps us to not limit the application of Paul’s exhortation to the issue of foods only. And Paul wants the strong to accept the weak, not simply to correct them. He is following his own advice. We are to warmly embrace our brother in Christ even while they are weak in faith.

Paul is not telling either side to no longer believe in their position. Nor is he telling them that having a position is wrong. He is telling them to receive without judgment the person who thinks differently. Paul is arguing for what the writers of the Westminster Confession called: Liberty of Conscience.

WCF 20.2 God alone is Lord of the conscience,(1) and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.(2) So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience (ie. When you are not convinced it is right), is to betray true liberty of conscience:(3) and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.(4)

The strong in faith person wants to live out the implications of the gospel. He does this because he loves Jesus and wants to honor him. The weak in faith person also wants to honor Jesus out of a sincere love for him. But for one reason or another, some activities feel to his conscience like sin, or at least they might lead to sin.

We are not sure historically why some in the church at Rome would only eat vegetables. And I doubt very much that their reasoning was anything like modern day vegetarians or Vegans. But thinking through a few possibilities may help us gain a clearer picture of the thoughts that we also have.

Maybe the person who refused to eat any meat wanted to avoid any association with paganism. They knew that much of the meat had been offered to idols. And they wanted nothing to do with idolatry. Maybe their desire to not participate in idolatry went a step further. Maybe they knew the people who raised the animals or who sold them in the marketplace, and they did not want to “give their money” to them. They would grow their own vegetables. Is it not true that some Christians will not go to certain stores because of the stands that those stores take moral issues?

Maybe they were taking the view that the body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and they felt like meat was not nearly as healthy for the body as vegetables. They sincerely believed that people were stronger because of eating only vegetables and therefore were better able to honor God.

There are all sorts of good reasons that make some sense to not partake of a certain food. The problem occurs when we begin to look down upon those who eat those very foods. The issue of foods is only one of many that can divide us as Christians. Do you celebrate holidays? Do you not celebrate holidays? What clothes do you wear to Church? I once heard a preacher say that if you did not wear a tie that you were not giving God your best. What sort of music do you listen to?

Do you get up early in the morning to spend time with God or do you wait until later in the day? Do you watch movies? What sort of books are allowable? Do you home school? Do you public school? Do you private school? You insert the issue. It is endless.

Whenever you meet up with another believer within the church who disagrees with you on an issue of conscience, Paul’s exhortation applies to you. Whenever you cannot point to a specific scripture that condemns a behavior as sin, and yet you feel like it is sin, Paul is speaking to you. Or whenever you are convinced that your behavior is not breaking any specific command, but you know that others do think it to be sin, and you are therefore tempted to simply belittle them as not understanding grace, Paul is speaking to you.

You are not to pass judgment on or despise other members of the body of Christ. Instead, you are to warmly embrace your brother. What is Paul’s reasoning? It is not that having strong convictions is wrong. Nor is it that the disagreement does not matter. Truth always matters. But the issue of the disagreement is not the only truth to consider.

⁴ Who 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.

1. You are not to pass judgment on other believers because you are not their master.

Paul asks the question, “Who are you?” Are you the Master of the other Christian?

No. Then you are not in a position to judge them.

Paul teaches that every Christian has one true Master, that is Jesus Christ. We will all as Christians have to stand before Jesus Christ, our true Master, and give an account of every thought, word and deed. He will judge each one of us. Jesus will decide whether our deeds were right or wrong or some mixture of right and wrong. Those who are truly in Jesus Christ now, will be able to stand on that Day. We will not be able to stand because our deeds have been perfect, or because we have correctly figured out every disputable matter of theology or practice. We will be able to stand because Jesus, our Redeemer, is able to make us stand through his own shed blood.

Heidelberg Catechism – Q. 52

How does Christ’s return “to judge the living and the dead comfort you”?

In all distress and persecution with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgment of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me. Christ will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but will take me and all his chosen ones to himself into the joy and glory of heaven.

What will not happen on the judgment day is for you to be judged by other Christians. There is good reason to believe that as Christians we will somehow be involved in the judgment of non-Christians. But believers will not judge other believers. You will not be judge on the Judgment Day, so why are you standing in judgment now? Let that sink in. What is it in your own heart that moves you to judge someone else They do not belong to you.

Parents, you have argued in this way with your children. They want to do something that you do not think is best for them. And they say, “But Joey’s parents let him do it.” And what do you tell them? “Joey is their responsibility. You are ours.” The

Christian sitting next to you does not belong to you. They have another Master – Jesus Christ.

Now Paul adds to the issue of food the observance of days. Paul’s point is to show that it is possible for two Christians holding opposite positions both to be obedient to Jesus Christ.

5 One person esteems one day as better than another,
while another esteems all days alike.

Each one should be fully convinced
in his own mind.

6 The 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.

Some think that the disagreement had to do with the weekly Sabbath. One group believed that the Sabbath was holy, while another group believed every day to be holy. This is a disagreement among Christians today. In the Presbyterian Church, we continue to believe in keeping one day in seven as holy to the Lord. Other denominations see the Sabbath as ending with Jesus.

A second possibility related to the Sabbath is the changing of the day of worship from the 7th to the 1st Day of the Week. It is clear that the norm of the NT is to worship on the 1st Day of the Week. The obvious question then was what to do with the 7th Day. Did it continue as a holy day of rest? Or should it now be viewed as any other day?

A third possibility was related to feast days. This could relate to the Jewish festivals, or it could relate to the Roman “holidays”. Some may have believed that it was wrong altogether to in any way celebrate any day for any reason as more holy than another. Others may have felt the freedom to participate in these celebrations, so long as they did not engage in pagan worship. This discussion is purposely brief. Paul’s point is not to argue who is right. He does not even explain his own position on the matter. He

simply makes clear that one person holds all days are equally holy and another holds that some days are more holy than others.

He does believe in healthy debate of the various positions. If we are to be fully convinced in our own mind this implies that you have thoughtfully considered the various positions. This implies debate and discussion. You cannot be “fully assured” of your position, if you have not reasoned it through, by considering alternative views.

And it also implies that there is room for continuing advancement in your view. Remember Paul does want everyone to be strong in the faith. That being said, it is often the case that we do not come to the same conclusions on issues. And when that happens, Paul believes that it is more important that each person follow their own conscience than that they have a common practice. Unity is not the same thing as uniformity.

We are not saying that the motivation of the heart is everything. But we are saying that the motivation of the heart is one thing. And it is an important thing. When you do any activity, you should have a clean conscience in doing it. In other words, you should be convinced that you are attempting to honor God in your actions. And you should be able to do your action with thanksgiving in your heart to God. This is what Paul taught in Romans 12:1-2 that we are offer ourselves as living sacrifices.

2. Therefore, the second reason why you should not judge your brother is he may be acting with a pure motivation of devotion to Jesus.

Can you honestly say that you know the motivation of their heart? Remember, we are not saying that you cannot disagree with a brother. Nor are we saying that there is never a place to attempt to convince them of your position. But, as long as they are not convinced of your position, you should not try to force their behavior to be in line with your own.

Our church’s position on not making your view of baptism a condition for membership is a good example. We practice covenantal baptism. That means that believers, and their children, have a right to the covenant sign of baptism. We believe this view is biblical. The elders of this church all hold this position. But we do not believe that your view of baptism is a condition for membership. So, there are members of our congregation who do not believe they ought to baptize their children. While we believe that they ought to remain teachable in this area and be willing to hear our teaching on

this issue, we do not believe that we ought to force our members to submit their children for baptism until they have been convinced that it is biblical.

Other churches and denominations make your view of baptism a condition for membership. We respect them for so doing, even though we do not see in Scripture where your position on baptism is a rule for membership. I disagree with my Baptist brothers as to the validity of my baptism as a child in the Lutheran Church. I would like them all to agree with me. But I also believe that they are seeking to honor God with their position.

Every Christian is called to offer themselves to Christ as a living sacrifice. In as much as they think a behavior to be wrong (even if that behavior is not technically wrong) they should not go against their conscience. And other believers should not judge them as if they are less of a Christian.

The 3rd reason is very much like the 1st only even more convicting.

3. You are not qualified to judge your brother. Only Jesus has endured the cross and so earned the right to judge his people.

7 For none of us lives to himself,
and
none of us dies to himself.

8 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.

9 For to this end Christ
died
and
lived again,
that he might be Lord
both
of the dead
and
of the living.

What have you done to have the right to judge another Christian? What credentials do you have? Jesus has credentials. He has endured the cross. He was laid in the tomb. He experienced the torments of hell itself. And so, he now lives as the king over all of his people. Have you died for your brother? Have you endured death for him? Then why do you think you have the right to stand in judgment over your brother?

“Who died and made you boss?” is a colloquial expression. But it certainly applies here. If you want the right to judge, maybe you should take it up with Jesus. Can you really say that you have replaced him as judge of his people? How arrogant of us to tell Jesus, “Move over, let me handle this.” Again, this is not the same thing as being able to call out clearly sinful behavior. When God’s Word speaks clearly to a situation, we are not taking the place of Jesus on the throne. We are simply stating what God’s Word has already clearly stated.

But when Christians judge Christians, those whom God welcomes in Christ, they assume a role they have no right to assume. Jesus does not take lightly when we assume his role as judge. Particularly when we are judging one for whom he has shed his blood.

And so, Paul asks again:

10 Why 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;
11 for it is written,
"As I live, says the Lord,
every knee shall bow to me,
and
every tongue shall confess to God."
12 So then each of us will give
an account of himself to God.

We should take very seriously that we will stand before Jesus Christ. Paul is not encouraging loose living. As Christians we ought to be continually striving to know God’s good and pleasing and perfect will. And then we must strive to have our lives be transformed according to that will.

Knowing that we will stand before Jesus Christ to give an account of our lives is not to make us fearful so much as it is to make us careful and humble.

Developing good convictions that will enable us to walk faithfully with God matters. We certainly want to better inform our own conscience and the conscience of our brothers and sisters, but until the conscience is changed, we are bound to follow the conscience.

And, we are commanded to warmly embrace our brothers in Christ until Jesus Returns and sets us all straight.

Why?

1. You are not the master of other believers.
2. You do not know the motivations of other believers.
3. You do not hold the credentials to be judge – Only Jesus does!

We end where we began. Are you an accepting person? Do you see your warmly embracing other believers with whom you differ as one expression of your godliness? God does...