

Sermons through

Romans

Judge and Despise

Romans 14:1-4

With Study Questions

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Romans 14:1-4

Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. 2 For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. 3 Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. 4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand (Romans 14:1-4).

Introduction

A few years ago I was attending a family camp. It was one of the few times I went without my wife. Add to that I brought some extra kids. Prior to the camp some of married couples asked if we could do some counseling. All this to say, the camp became quite a busy week so I missed a couple of the lessons (I think there were 11 in all).

Toward the end of the last talk the instructor, a seminary professor, opened the floor to questions and answers. There was a lengthy and awkward silence. I asked one of the campers if the lecturer had addressed a certain topic in any of his talks. I was told he hadn't and that it would be a good question. I was really just trying to get the ball rolling so others might feel comfortable asking questions, knowing how ill-at-ease people can be when it comes to public discourse.

I raised my hand and asked my question.

The speaker asked me if I had attended the talk where said topic was raised. Trying to keep it light, I said "apparently not." He responded by saying he would prefer to answer questions by people who had actually attended all the talks. The temperature in the room went up. In all candor, I was more embarrassed for him than I was for myself, especially since the topic of the week was 1 Corinthians 13-the Love Chapter.

I mention this little story because it's been said that Christians are the only ones who shoot their wounded. That may be a bit over the top, but there is little doubt that we can be much better at the way we interact with one another. Leaving aside for the moment the 'weaker/stronger in the

faith' issue, the simple admonition at the beginning of verse one to **"receive"** *proslambano* someone means to accept the presence of person with friendliness.

I don't know what's going on at In-N-Out Burger, but sometimes I'd like every member of our denomination to take whatever classes their employees are required to take. They seem to be the most Spirit-filled fast-food chain in the world. They greet you warmly. They look you in the eye. They listen attentively and cheerfully. There is an atmosphere created designed to make you feel welcomed.

Not to get ahead of ourselves, but in the last chapter of Romans, Paul will use the word **"greet"** *aspasasthe* over twenty times in twenty-seven verses. The word means to employ a certain set of phrases as part of a process of greeting or interaction.

I realize that we're not all as outgoing and ebullient as others. But we all need to shoulder at least some responsibility in receiving one another. In our own way (whether it's a head-nod or a brief series of questions or a tap on the shoulder) we need to thoughtfully acknowledge another person's presence in the gathering. Now to the deeper issue in the text.

Unity

What we have in this passage are Christians who are **"despise(ing)"** *exoutheneito* and **"judge(ing)"** *krineto* each other. So this passage has that Peter consolation feel to it. What I mean by that is how often I am comforted by what a dunderhead Peter seems to be at times.

Although there is a certain level of comfort when we realize that our sins fall into the **"common to man"** category, it still doesn't justify the unseemly disposition of courting friction among the brethren. Let us take to heart that **"one who sows discord among brethren"** makes the hot list of the seven things the Lord hates (Proverbs 6:19).

We might say, I'm not sowing discord, I'm merely passive. But when we see commands in Scripture there is generally both a positive and negative application. That is to say that we do not keep the commandment **"thou shalt not murder"** if we passively allow someone to die. "Thou shalt not murder" carries with it a "Thou shalt seek to preserve life" implication.

Simply put:

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity! 2 It is like the precious oil upon the head, Running down on the beard, The beard of Aaron, Running down on the edge of his garments. 3 It is like the dew of Hermon, Descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the LORD commanded the blessing – Life forevermore (Psalm 133:1-3).

Doubtful Things

What we have in this passage are Christians who are designated as “**weak**” *asthenounta* and “**strong**” *dynatoi* (from 15:1). And the issue has to do with “**disputes**” *dialogismon* over “**doubtful things**” *diakriseis*. Let’s take a moment to define these terms. The *weak* one is the one who feels they can’t, in good conscience, do certain things that are not clearly prohibited by the word of God. The *strong* one is the one whose conscience allows them to do these things.

The *doubtful things* have to do with dietary decisions, (and later) observations of certain days (Romans 14:6) or the drinking of wine (Romans 14:21). These issues likely had to do with Christian Jews who grew up observing the dietary laws and just couldn’t seem to make the adjustment that it’s okay to eat bacon. It also included those who had participated in the pagan culture of offering sacrifices to idols whose conscience just couldn’t allow them to eat food that had been part of that cultic practice (1 Corinthians 8:4-8).

Of course, neither one of these issues are major players for today’s Christian (or for most Christians throughout history). Nonetheless there is a *doubtful things principle* we can extract from this passage that may apply to a great number of things. What would be included in doubtful things is not always easy to determine.

For example, this passage (at least verse 5) is often brought up in the Sabbath-keeping argument. Some will say that Paul is allowing for some to esteem the Sabbath and others to esteem every day alike. Others will argue that Paul was talking about the “Sabbaths” and did not have the Lord’s Day in mind. In other words, the Fourth Commandment was not a “doubtful thing”. All this to say that it is not always easy to find the right

category. But even if you are convinced you have categorized correctly, there is still an attitude we are called not to court.

Despise and Judge

There is a great temptation among those who are strong and/or mature in the faith to despise those who are weaker in the faith. I'm sure we all bristle at the thought of falling into this category. Especially if we consider how this same word is used elsewhere as a brief prologue into a parable by Jesus.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt (despise) (Luke 18:9).

Holding others in contempt because of their immaturity and sinfulness is a very unhealthy and dangerous step to take. We may think we've escaped falling into this trap until we truly, honestly consider how irritated we are by certain professing Christians who seem to be missing (at least in some categories) the entire Christian target. This, by the way, can apply to our attitudes regarding non-Christians as well. There is no indication in Jesus' parable that the "**others**" the Pharisees held in contempt were Christians at all.

We may be thinking, but isn't it an act of love to seek to correct and instruct the weaker brother or sister? And if you want to wander there in your mind right now, so be it. But the wise, loving and winsome correction of the weaker brother is not the topic of the current passage. So please come back.

Of course the one who is weak in faith is not given a pass. No one likes to be despised, so the natural and sinful reaction is to "judge". This judgmental attitude may be a result of two things:

First, our natural inclination to judge someone for despising us. I call this the *great invisible infraction*. Because the moment we judge someone for despising us, we've walked right into the living room of their sin and put on their coat.

If you want to test my theory here, all you have to do is offer a post on some form of social media where you (even as nicely as you possibly can) critique a certain societal behavior as wrong or sinful. Then sit back and watch the angry, vitriolic flood of 'who are you to judge' comments. This is done with a mystifying blindness of their own judgmentalism.

Second, and more likely in the context, is the judgmental attitude the weaker one has because the stronger is engaging in the particular behavior the weaker has determined to be sin. Now this list can be quite lengthy. The stumbling block issue will be taken up in more detail later in the chapter (Romans 14:13), but what type of things are we talking about here, since meat, vegetables, wine, etc. are no longer major issues (especially since the issue is not whether it is moral to eat meat or drink wine, as much as the religious and ritualistic aspects of these elements). And how can we engage in what I call a *general principle of sensitivity*?

A General Principle of Sensitivity

I am going to offer just a couple of, what I would consider safe, examples of the types of things that might fall into the meat/vegetable/wine category.

Many years ago I was asked to lead a Bible study of high schoolers at another church. As we sat in the circle, it became apparent to me (based upon some dialogue I heard) that some of these students may not be Christians at all. As we began our little study, I was grabbing my notes and momentarily put my Bible on the floor. One young lady was very offended and told me that I should not put the Bible on the floor. What I also noticed was that once we opened the Bible and started discussing it, she was not (at least as far as I could tell) remotely interested in what it had to say.

Again, I am not saying this inconsistent behavior should not be addressed at some point, but I found it quite irritating. She judged me for doing something that was not, biblically speaking, a wrong thing to do but then ignored, to the point of being distracting, the lesson. The right thing for me to do was not give into the temptation to look down on her. Along with that, if she was at the study, I would avoid putting the Bible on the floor.

Another example came when I was evangelizing with a Christian athletic association I had become part of. We were in the practice of playing a couple of volleyball games against some colleges, then sharing the gospel with the other team and the crowd. After doing so, one of the members of my team, who had been raised and educated somewhere east of the Mississippi, landed on me with both feet. I was shocked!

Apparently, my offense was casually leaning my hand on the volleyball stand while I shared the gospel. Again, I don't think that was a violation of any known passage in Scripture, but it was highly offensive to him and, therefore, I must assume it might be unnecessarily offensive to others. To this day I consider these types of things when I'm invited to teach or preach in various environments.

Allow me to offer a couple of other weaker/stronger Christian issues, then you can prayerfully consider how this works itself out in your own lives.

There have been a couple of times when I thought it would be a good idea to get rid of my television set. There is a lot of garbage on television and it can be a tremendous waste of time. I would say when it comes to television, I am a weaker brother. If one is on, it is almost impossible for me to avoid watching it. Now the temptation, especially as a pastor, is to tell everyone to get rid of their television.

In fact, I recall walking into a Pentecostal church back in the early 70's where a whole bunch of televisions had been put up front in the church. It was a sort of altar where they sacrificed their television in an act of faithful obedience. Whereas getting rid of your television (or today, smartphone, iPad, iPod or whatever) may not be a bad idea, it would be an unhealthy move to declare this an absolute necessity and begin to judge others who chose not to. As has been said: **"who dare to pronounce anything respecting the actions of men without the warrant of God's word."**¹

One last example because I don't feel like I've stepped on enough toes just yet. This has to do with worship. There have been times when I have visited Christian churches whose songs in worship, I felt to be shallow and emotionally driven. The temptation for me was to simply not

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). Romans (electronic ed., Ro 14:4). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

engage. But there came a time when, by conviction of the Holy Spirit, I realized I was courting an amazingly arrogant attitude. Now the songs weren't heretical. They were just theologically a bit shallow and somewhat repetitious. I'm an opera singer. I don't sing jingles and ditties!

It made me wonder if I would consider an act of spiritual maturity if I would refuse to *Jesus Loves Me* with the children. Would it be an act of love, wisdom and maturity (strength) on my part to despise the children for their shallow lyrics? It dawned on me there that I wasn't quite as mature as I thought.

Another's Servant

The Apostle finishes this portion of his thought with a brief question which he answers himself:

...for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand (Romans 14:3b, 4).

It seems to be that both sides would be both challenged and comforted by these words. When it gets right down to it, in the final analysis, we are not answerable to each other, but to God. There is great liberty in knowing who our true Master is and what His call is in our lives. It is not without reason the James calls it the *Law of Liberty* (James 1:25). Among the many things which the law liberates us, one is undo power and authority of those by which we are surrounded who would gladly have us yield to their notions of right and wrong.

As many of you know I was part of a somewhat ecumenical, local church council during the past couple of years. We were seven Christian men who were not part of the same denomination. All were Christians (I have little doubt) but there were theologically distinctives on which we dramatically disagreed. On occasion these distinctives would surface in our dialogue, followed by brief, friendly debate.

It was a lot of hard work and I didn't always get my way. But the table (and I think all would agree) was a source of loving, enjoyable communion. I think was achieved (at least in part) because we realized that once the words were spoken everyone at the table was answerable to

his Master, who is Christ. There is great contentment in knowing that at the end of the day (even though we are called to lovingly and faithfully participate) it is in the hands of Christ, who alone is wise.

So let us be cautious, whether within our own church, denomination or wider Christian community. It has been powerfully conveyed:

“When you see,” he says, “a man illuminated with the knowledge of God, you have evidence enough that he is received by the Lord; if you either despise or condemn him, you reject him whom God has embraced.”²

Are we in danger of rejecting someone whom God has embraced?
Are our standards higher than His?

And almost as if to anticipate an objection, Paul finishes with these wonderful words, **“Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.”** Whether we are the weaker brother/sister or the stronger, whether or not we think we have it somewhat figured out or find ourselves weak, weary, helpless, lost and confused, if, with childlike faith, we have thrown our souls into hands of Christ, we will be made to stand. For God and only God is able to make us stand.

² Calvin, J. (1998). Romans (electronic ed., Ro 14:3). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study

1. What does it mean to “receive” someone when it comes to church? How can we be better at that (pages 2, 3)?
2. How important is it to seek harmony and unity in the church? How does the commands in Scripture have both a positive and negative application (pages 3, 4)?
3. Paul wrote of weaker and stronger Christians. How was that determined? What were the “doubtful things” the Apostle Paul was talking about (page 4)?
4. What were the dispositions these stronger and weaker Christians were tempted to have toward one another? Why (pages 5, 6)?
5. Discuss the general principle of sensitivity and discuss how it might fall into categories that are doubtful in today’s church (pages 6, 7).
6. Paul resolves this dilemma by offering a brief question. What is the question and how is it answered (pages 8, 9)?