

Subject: *The Unity of Strong and Weak Believers*

Scripture: *Romans 14:1-12*

The church must always deal with two important issues. The first issue is how the church deals with sin. Sin must be confronted seriously and properly, corporately and personally. That's why, when we have Communion, we are to examine ourselves. The second issue is how the church deals with differences between Christians over matters that are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. These are not moral or doctrinal issues, but matters of personal preference and tradition. In other words, how members live in harmony when they disagree on secondary matters. These issues of how the church deals with sin and differences of opinion are important because the purity of the church and the unity of the church are both at stake.

1. ISSUES THAT MAY CAUSE DIVISION

We first need to understand the situation that Paul was addressing and then we can rightly apply the truth to our own lives and church. The phrase "doubtful disputations" (vs. 1) can be translated "disputable matters" or "disputes over doubtful things."

Romans 14:1 (NASB) *Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.*

These Christians at Rome came from different backgrounds. Some were saved Jews who came out of a rigid, traditional, legalistic background. Others were saved Gentiles who came out of a pagan, immoral background that often included worship of idols. Paul addresses these issues in this whole section from Romans 14:1 through 15:13. These believers had a difference of opinion on two main things: special diets and special days.

Some believers thought it was fine to eat any kind of meat. Other believers thought it was a sin to eat certain kinds of meat. Some believers thought it was unnecessary to honor special days for worship, while other believers thought it was a sin not to observe those days as holy. Now if each of these groups had kept their convictions to themselves, there would have been no conflict. But they began to criticize and judge one another. Each group was sure they were "more spiritual" than the others. It has been said the greatest test of Christian love is not how we react to unbelievers who persecute us, but how we react to other believers who disagree with us.

Down through the years believers have differed over secondary or minor things. In the 17th century some of the Puritans condemned the practice of giving and receiving a wedding ring. In the mid-1800s in England, two of the best known and respected preachers were Joseph Parker and Charles Spurgeon. They had a disagreement and it even became public in the newspapers. Spurgeon accused Parker of being unspiritual because he attended the theater. But Parker condemned Spurgeon for smoking cigars. Who was right? Who was wrong?

In our generation there are many issues that fall into the category of secondary or minor things: wearing make-up (Is it a sin? It may be a sin if some women don't); length of hair (some say it is wrong for a man to have long hair and some say it is a sin for a woman to have short hair); length of a woman's dress; wearing jewelry; different kinds of music; certain kinds of entertainment, movies, and television. Some people even make Bible translations a test of fellowship. Now who's right and who's wrong?

Some things are not doctrinal and some things are not moral. Some things are personal and each person must decide for himself.

2. PRINCIPLES THAT MAINTAIN UNITY

We find in this text one main command and four supporting reasons for that command.

The command: Receive other believers who may differ with you (vs. 1)

To "receive" means to welcome warmly someone into your fellowship and into your heart. This is the same word Jesus used when He spoke about heaven in **John 14:3** *And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also.*

Christians come in all kinds of varieties. Some are old and some are young. Some have been saved a long time and others are new believers. Some come from a religious background and others from a heathen background.

Paul refers to two kinds of believers: the weak believer and the strong believer. The weak believer is the Christian who is bound by tradition and his old way of life and does not fully enjoy the freedom he has in Christ. The strong believer is the Christian who has a better understanding of his position in Christ and is not bound by his former way of thinking and living. In practical terms here is what it meant in those days. Some believers were saved out of a Jewish background. Those who were weak in faith wanted to hold on to the old traditions and dietary laws, even though they were not depending on those things for salvation. But the stronger believers understood that those former things were not important and had nothing to do with their Christian walk.

Some believers were saved out of a Gentile background that often involved worship of pagan gods. As part of worship meat was offered in sacrifice to these gods, but leftover meat was usually sold in the meat market. Weak believers thought it was wrong to eat that kind of meat because of its connection to false worship. Strong believers didn't have a problem with it because they understood that the false gods were not really gods at all and they could buy the meat at a good price. These were the kinds of things that potentially caused misunderstanding and discord in the church. God never intended for there to be a Jewish church and a Gentile church, but one church. Sadly, this is often the reason for the existence of different churches and denominations. John MacArthur said: "The Lord did not plan for his church to be divided into a hundred varieties, based on distinctives of personal preference and traditions that have no basis in Scripture."

The reasons for receiving other believers:

A. The Lord receives every believer (vs. 1-3)

We are to receive other believers as Christ receives them. Christ doesn't receive a person on the condition that he eats certain foods or that he doesn't eat certain foods. He doesn't receive a person on the condition that he keeps certain holy days. And neither should we. If God doesn't make an issue of minor things, why should we?

The words of Augustine are helpful: "In essentials, let there be UNITY; in non-essentials, let there be LIBERTY; and in all things, let there be CHARITY." Someone confessed something we all need to realize. He said, "I have learned that God blesses people I disagree with."

The strong must not despise the weak brother, and the weak must not condemn the strong brother. Christians must replace criticism with concern and compassion.

B. The Lord sustains every believer (vs. 4)

Each of us will "stand" or "fall" before God. That means our service for God will either be approved or disapproved by Him. The words "servant" and "master" suggest that all of us are to serve the Lord. A believer's evaluation of other believers does not affect their standing with the Lord. No believer has a right to judge another believer's service. Christ's evaluation is all that matters (1 Cor. 4:3-5).

C. The Lord is sovereign over every believer (vs. 5-9)

Our success in the Christian life doesn't depend on what others think or say. The title "Lord" is found several times in these verses. Our first concern is to the Lord. The motive for what we do or don't do is not what other people think, but what the Lord wants us to do. The person who observes special days does it unto the Lord. The person who doesn't observe the day, he makes that decision unto the Lord as well.

There is no greater call for holy living and submission to the lordship of Christ than we find in verses 7-8. Everything a believer does is to and for the Lord.

When Jesus was talking to Peter in John 21 and He said, "Follow me." Then Peter asked Jesus about John, "Lord, what shall this man do?" Jesus then said, "What is that to thee? Follow me." In other words, what John does is none of your business.

D. The Lord alone will judge every believer (vs. 10-12)

We are not going to judge each other in the future, so why do it now? The judgment seat of Christ is the place and time when Jesus will judge the service of every believer. This judgment will have nothing to do with sin. Our sins were judged at Calvary. This judgment will deal with our service for Christ.

Now it is important to understand what Paul was saying about receiving believers with different opinions on secondary matters and what he said in other places about those who preach and believe a different kind of gospel. Here the tone is one of love and concern. But when it came to someone presenting a different gospel, Paul was very stern and blunt:

Galatians 1:8 *But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.*

The gospel is settled and clear. There is no room for discussion or difference of opinion on the matter of salvation. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. There is only one gospel for Jews and Gentiles, for men and women, for young and old.