

Liberty and Love

Romans 14:1-12

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Romans is an amazing and wonderful book of the Bible. If it stopped at the end of chapter 8 or 11 or even 13, we would still call it the greatest book in the Bible. But then we would miss out on chapter 14, which we begin today. As theologically soaring as chapters 1-11 are, chapter 14 is imminently practical to anyone who has spent five minutes in a local church. Why? Five minutes of observation in any local church will quickly reveal that not everybody in the church is the same. We don't look the same. We don't talk the same. We don't think the same. Now we do think the same on gospel essentials. These essentials are non-negotiable beliefs necessary for salvation and have remained the same ever since the time of the Apostles.

But once we move off the gospel essentials, there are always many, many areas of disagreement. Some of these are totally superficial, others are more important. Beware of thinking someone's important is superficial! I have mistakenly teased members about a favorite team losing only to find for them, it's not a laughing matter. Other things are rooted in our consciences, lifestyle choices we make for religious or other reasons. These are important to us for varying reasons; our spiritual background, traditions we grew up with, sins we struggled with pre-conversion, settled convictions we have landed on. Put 10 Christians in a room and you likely have 10 different opinions, somehow perhaps more.

How should we handle it? Do we go to relational war about our every disagreement or difference? Paul wrote Romans to a divided church in Rome with historic divisions along ethnic and religious lines. Some deeply held, lifelong-type convictions. Some rooted in their ethnic heritage. Yet now they are all members of the same church! They have all embraced Jesus as Savior. What about these ongoing differences? Do we act like they aren't there?

Did you see the explosion in Beirut, Lebanon this summer? Shocking power. Apparently, the ingredients for an explosion had been in that port warehouse for years. All it took was a spark. Local churches are like that. The ingredients for explosions lay all over the church. Paul wants to diffuse and dismantle the bombs. How? *For the sake of Jesus, the gospel, unity, and God's glory, self-denying love.* Here are verses 1-12.

"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 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. 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. 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. 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. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. 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; for it is

written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:1-12 ESV).

We are spending a couple weeks on this text, so don't choke on all this at once. Paul is now writing about "disputable matters" (verse 1, as the NIV translates it). "Opinions" in the ESV. Perhaps it's helpful to understand what it's not. It's not anything he explained in chapters 1-11. Nothing essential to the gospel. Nothing someone must believe in order to be justified before God. These are not disputable matters. Paul would never give an inch on gospel essentials.

What is in view are secondary matters, non-gospel salvation matters on which people who are truly saved can disagree. While this applies to doctrinal issues, what is in view here are lifestyle choices. Standards of conduct. You say, like what? He gives three hot button issues in the Roman church. Religious dietary practices, the observance of a Sabbath, and the drinking of wine.

"One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables" (Romans 14:2).

His examples help us understand the tribes within the church. First is food. The actual word in the Greek is *kosher*. To this day you can go to any supermarket and buy kosher meat. No pig. Why? Pigs were forbidden to be eaten by Jews in the Old Testament. Kosher is Old Testament approved.

When I lived in Indianapolis, I would often eat breakfast at a restaurant called Shapiros. Inevitably, I would forget and order bacon. *I'm sorry, we don't serve bacon*. What? Why not? It was a Jewish-owned restaurant, and they didn't serve that particular meat. Dietary laws are a big part of Old Testament Levitical practice.

"One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike" (Romans 14:5).

Ever hear of the Sabbath? The fourth commandment of God's top Ten Commandments is, *"Keep the Sabbath holy"* (Exodus 20:8). Practicing the Sabbath was and still is sacred among practicing Jews. To show how fanatical it had become, the Pharisees were incensed at Jesus for healing people on the Sabbath. They said, *are there not six other days to do healing?* (Luke 13:14) It's one of the funnier verses in the Bible.

Even in Christian traditions today, practicing the Sunday Sabbath is controversial. Many Christians are what are known as Sabbatarians. They view Sunday as the New Covenant Sabbath and apply Sabbatarian principles to Sundays. I myself was raised in a somewhat Sabbatarian home. We didn't eat out on Sunday. We didn't mow the yard. It was a day set aside primarily for going to church and napping. Now some of you are warming to the idea...

The reformers had a word for these things, *adiaphora*, "matters indifferent; areas in which Christians have freedom to have differing practices and lifestyles as long as pleasing God is the goal." It is often called Christian liberty. And there were two tribes in the Roman church. Paul calls them the weak in faith and the strong in faith.

Introducing the Weak “in Faith” and the Strong “in Faith”

The weak in faith

Eats only vegetables (14:2)
Observes religious days (14:5)
No wine drinking (14:21)

The strong in faith

Eats everything (including meat) (14:3)
Views all days as equally sacred (14:5)
Drinks wine (14:21)

Based on these descriptions, we can confidently identify who made up these groups. The weak in faith were Jewish Christians. They grew up practicing Judaism and were steeped in their traditions and lifestyle practices. They only ate kosher. They always practiced the Sabbath.

The strong in faith were Gentile Christians. Their baggage was pagan idolatry but that didn't include the unique Jewish traditions. Gentile Christians loved bacon, ham and cheese, and the acting of Kevin Bacon...sorry. They also didn't have any legacy with any kind of sacred day different from the others. Paul says for them, all days are sacred. No distinction. So, the tectonic fault lines here are substantial. They are religious, ethnic, historic. Sound like a warehouse in Beirut to you?

It's important to not view weak faith as pejorative. Faith here isn't saving faith or trusting-in-the-promises-of-God faith. They are not weak in character or strong in convictions. They are weak in conscience. Paul says the strong are technically correct, but you can be right on the issues and still wrong in God's eyes. God's concern is less with whether bacon is on the menu than with insuring that love is always on the menu.

To be clear, the weak are the ones whose consciences don't give them freedom to exercise liberty. The strong are ones who have no such inhibitions. I remember in college or seminary discovering this. The light went on for me because in my previous faith background, the more rules you had and followed, the godlier you were. In my more fundamentalist background, it seemed people tried to see who could make the longer list. The longer the list the better. In seminary, I discovered more freedom. But please see here that the brother with the long list is the weaker brother. I hope to spend time next week on how to reform our consciences and hopefully, shorten the extra-biblical rules list.

Paul's main concern here is not rebuking the weak for their unnecessary scruples or praising the strong for their freedom. He has sharp rebukes for both groups. He starts with the strong.

The strong are to be welcoming, not condescending to the weak

The natural tendency for the person who has freedom would be to look down on the person who struggles in these areas. Rather, he is to accept him. *Welcome* or *Accept* in verse 1 means to “welcome into one's fellowship and into one's heart.”

The example given is with eating meat or only vegetables. For example, the “strong faith” man has “weak faith” man over for dinner. Strong faith man fires up the grill, pulls out the pork chops and goes to put them on the grill. The weak faith man takes one look at it and says, *I can't eat this!* What should the strong faith man do? He could easily pull out his Bible and begin to beat him over the head screaming, *Yes you can, Yes you can! You are free in Christ! God told Peter in the vision of the sheet coming down to rise and eat!* He could do that. He also could look at him, shake his head, and say, *O my poor, pitiful, weaker faith brother. How I pity you. You are so far beneath me....* Both are wrong.

No. He is to accept him. To receive him into his heart. This might mean thinking about the menu before he comes over. *He's coming out of Judaism, maybe I should go with steak instead.* Or how about a vegetarian dinner? *But I hate plant-based meat and throw up when I eat broccoli!* But stronger brother, is it about you or him? What is love's call? *But he's wrong and I'm right and I've got Bible verses to prove it.* Are any of your verses about sacrificial love? Stronger brother, welcome and accept the weaker brother. Don't be condescending. Don't be patronizing or think your meat choices or any other freedom make you godlier.

The weak are not to judge the strong

"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" (Romans 14:3).

There were definitely bad attitudes in both directions. The strong condescended and the weak in turn piously judged the strong for their lack of spirituality. In the weak brother's value set, the strong are wrong and questionably Christian for eating and drinking such things.

You can see this happening. In fact, you have possibly been on the receiving end of something like this: *And you call yourself a Christian? As I suspected, you go to that church!* The eyebrows raise and you can feel the contempt. According to their rules-based righteousness, we aren't righteous.

I recall years ago I was scheduled to speak at a Christian high school chapel. This school was very conservative and fundamentalist. I was talking with a few teachers before it started, when suddenly one of the teens came running up and said, "Teacher, the girl who plays piano for chapel is sick, what are we going to do for music at chapel?"

I heard this and simply said, "Well, if you guys have a guitar, I would be glad to lead some worship!" These two teachers looked at me with veins popping and I could feel the scorn. *"Oh...you play guitar do you?"* Judgmentalism. Condemnation. Critical eyes. These are the struggles for the weaker brother.

*"Believe as I believe—no more, no less,
That I am right, and no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel, think only as I think;
Eat what I eat, and drink but what I drink;
Look as I look, do always as I do;
And then, and only then,
I'll fellowship with you."¹*

Those of you with weak consciences, don't judge your brother because he participates in something that you don't have freedom in your own conscience to do.

Why We Should Accept One Another

God has accepted us

"For God has welcomed him" (Romans 14:3).

¹ Anonymous as quoted by Thomas W. Hanford, *Illustrated Home Book of Poetry and Song: Comprising Choice Selections from the Poets of All Lands and Ages*, (St. Paul, MN: Globe Publishing Company, 1883), 278.

What a great point! If you're the stronger brother on some particular issue, and here's a weaker brother and you're feeling this sense of indignation at his/her immaturity or their lack of growth or understanding, you could think, *you're not as good as me. You're not as enlightened as me.* Or you could think about that person's relationship with God and recognize this is an individual who is under the blood of Jesus Christ. *This is somebody that Jesus died for, that Jesus welcomed. God himself not only welcomed but will welcome forever in the new heaven and the new earth. This is somebody that God gladly fellowships with. Who am I to view this issue as something that I cannot fellowship with this person if God is fellowshiping with them?* As a side note, this doesn't undermine the role of truth. God doesn't fellowship with everyone.

If God has accepted the weaker or stronger brother, why won't you? Do I need to be more spiritual or holy or separatist than God is? No. If God accepts someone, then who am I to think I'm so right and he's so wrong that I can't accept him into my heart? *But he doesn't practice the Sabbath! She eats sausage! He drinks wine!* Paul says in verse 17 that the kingdom of God isn't about these things. What's it about? What should we actually care about? Righteousness. Peace. Joy in the Holy Spirit. If we worried half as much about those things as our preference list, we'd all be more Christlike.

Both groups intend to serve the Lord

"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. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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" (Romans 14:6-8).

Get this, Paul says, people with opposing viewpoints on non-essentials can both be perfectly right with God.² When we recognize the intent of our brother or sister is to faithfully serve the Lord, we can be merciful toward their particular ways of doing it. They are trying to be faithful to God as they see it.

We are family in Christ

"For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?" (Romans 14:9-10)

Paul says this tribalism within the church is denying a core doctrine—we are all members of the family of God. Your hurtful words or condescending attitude is damaging a brother or sister in the Lord. You have heard the old saying, *"Blood is thicker than water."* My friends, we are blood brothers. We have been bought with the blood of Jesus Christ, which means that we are family, and we should show a family love and warmth and acceptance for one another.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 263.

We will all be judged by God

"For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10-12).

Time doesn't allow a deep dive on the judgment seat of Christ. Suffice it to say, we all will give an account of our lives to Jesus. This judgment seat is not a judgment of heaven or hell. This is a qualitative judgment by Jesus on the nature of our service to him. What does it include? Everything. But the fact that Paul brings it up here enforces that how we treat each other is very much a part of Jesus' judgment of our lives. If we elevate vegetables over love and destroy people with our judgmental words, Jesus has the final say on it. Christian liberty is wonderful. Freedom in Christ is fantastic. But LOVE is more important than liberty. Unity is more important than vegetables.

As a pastor, I've seen way too much of Romans 14 among God's people. Are you prepared to accept people who take strong stands in non-essential areas? Areas that you may even think are silly but are important to them? Will you smirk in your heart? Will you get with your friends later and laugh about it? Will you look your spiritual nose down at them? Or will you realize that they too are accepted by God and will you see that Jesus himself is their Lord and will you love that brother no matter how bothersome he is?

If your view of the Christian life is filled with regulations that may not truly be grounded in God's Word, will you be like the Pharisees who condemned anyone who violates your rule system? Would you have joined the Pharisees in condemning Jesus as he ate and drank with the tax collectors?

Accepting wholeheartedly the person with whom you disagree in a non-essential matter is a spiritual matter. This is a sure sign of spiritual maturity. The difference may not be spiritual, but our attitude toward each other is.

The balance is beautifully captured in this statement: *"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."*

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