

# The Weak, the Strong, and the Way of Christ

## Romans 15:1-3

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Today is our final message on what Paul calls in Romans 14 disputable matters. Never underestimate church folks' ability to turn any matter into a disputable matter. I was struck by this on a tour of Israel some years ago. A must-see stop on any tour is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (see below):



It is the traditional site of the tomb of Jesus and it's well documented as such. This ancient church dates back to the fourth century. It is massive and six major historic denominations of the church lay claim to this site: Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Roman Catholic, Coptic, Ethiopian, and Syriac Orthodox. In the early centuries, these denominations had to work out arrangements on how they would share responsibility of the church. The solution was that each denomination had areas assigned to them and some areas of the church were shared areas. As you may guess, this has not always gone well, and the monks are always on alert for the slightest overstep by the rival denominations.

This leads me to the famous ladder on the outside of the church:



I like to point this out when we are doing a tour because it summarizes well the pettiness God's people can have. The story of the famous ladder is that sometime in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century someone put this ladder here. No one knows who or which denomination he may have been from. For three centuries no one had dared touch it lest status quo be changed. We aren't sure when it was placed there, but that ladder is in a drawing of the church dated 1728.

All local churches have similar ladders in them. Disputable matters. Not core gospel truths, but differences of opinion on not-so-important things. How should we handle them? Handle them improperly and those ladder issues become permanent reminders of petty things made into big things. The irony of the Jerusalem ladder is that it sits at the very site of Jesus' death and resurrection. In terms of what is really important, there is nothing more important than the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

### **Romans 14 and Christian Liberty**

Paul wrote a letter to the church at Rome whose ladder issues were Old Testament dietary laws, Sabbath keeping, and wine drinking. Each of these are mentioned in Romans 14. To review, he describes two factions in the church: The weak in faith or weaker conscience Christians and the strong in faith or stronger conscience Christians. The weaker are those whose consciences are still controlled by their pre-Christian Jewish lifestyle standards. The strong are those who are not conscientious about such things. They have freedom where the weak in conscience do not.

The real problem is not so much whether you do or don't participate, but divisiveness in the church about them. The weak judged the strong for participating. The strong despised the weak for making such minor things major things. Paul writes to clean up the mess. How? Here's my very brief summary:

#### **Keep the main things the main things!**

*"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17 ESV).*

The real danger in upgrading minor things to main things is it displaces the crucial gospel truths. The minor things become the major things which demotes the major things into minor things. Don't die on the hills of minor things!

Jesus didn't die for ladder placement or dietary laws or personal preferences. He died for sins. He died to conquer Satan. He died for God's glory and our eternal good. When God's people are nourishing their souls on the grand, sweeping, glorious truths of the gospel, it keeps the minor things minor things and the glorious truths the major thing.

#### **Why judge others when Jesus will judge me?**

*"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" (Romans 14:10).*

The church at Rome was filled with judgment. Paul says, if it's judgment you're focused on, you better worry about what Jesus is going to say about you. Jesus has the final word, and all the rancor people create in churches over the small stuff will be judged by Jesus for what it is.

## **Don't violate your conscience/Do seek to mature it**

Our consciences are God-given moral compasses in us. The conscience is a blessing. However, it's not infallible. It's not the voice of God. Conscience is influenced by many factors in our lives including our upbringing, traditions, the opinion of key people, etc. We should all want to mature our consciences and conform them to God's Word. Don't violate it. Don't worship it. Do seek to conform it to God's Word.

## **Love and unity are more important than secondary matters**

This is the theme he continues in Romans 15:1-3...

*"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me'"* (Romans 15:1-3).

Did Paul identify himself with the strong? *"We who are strong."* If there was anybody who knew the essential gospel and applied it to his conscience, it was Paul. Remember, he had been a very strict Pharisee and followed Jewish practices fastidiously. But then he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. Did his lifestyle choices and conscience change as a result? Big time. Before, he hated the Gentiles and would never fellowship them. He became the Apostle to the Gentiles and loved them. Before, he always practiced the Sabbath and never ate non-kosher. After, he writes that all days are sacred and while we don't know his menu choices, it's safe to say he didn't always order off the kosher menu.

Paul was definitely a strong in faith dude. Perhaps the strongest ever. But this strength of conscience has obligations within the community of faith. *"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves"* (Romans 15:1). The Greek word for obligation is the same word back in 13:8 for financial debt. As we must pay our debts financially, the strong have duties spiritually in the church. What are they?

## **The Strong's Spiritual Duties in the Church**

### **Bear with the weak and their struggles**

*Bear with* here doesn't mean "put up with it." *Bear* means "to carry it." Help them carry the burdens of their weaker conscience. Share the weight of a weak conscience with them. A weak conscience has many burdens. This has been a struggle in my life in some areas where I look back and I think I've been overly conscientious about certain things. I've based too much of my sense of well-being on my spiritual performance. The result is a lot of guilt. A lot of internal condemnation. If you come from my kind of background where the lifestyle standards had a lot of rules with them, you know how internally condemning that can be.

I remember talking with a friend who went to a well-known, very conservative Christian college. They had strict rules about everything. He told me the worst part of that college experience was that he got comfortable with violating his conscience. An observation I would make is that excessively strict Christian contexts create people who either are incredibly self-righteous about their outward conformity or inwardly distraught by their hypocrisy. They often cope by numbing themselves to the guilty conscience. Since this can't be sustained, people are shocked when said person sins excessively and publicly. *How did*

*they come to this?* Their conscience was numbed, and when you numb your conscience, you can sin spectacularly.

All that to say, there are a lot of burdens that go along with the weaker faith Christian. The last thing they need is the strong in faith laying on more levels of guilt. They are already drowning in guilt.

So rather than adding to their burdens, we should help carry them. That's the sense here. We all know how carrying groceries can be tedious. The bag breaks and the pickles are all over the floor. Carry it wrong and your bread is smashed, and the eggs are cracked. How helpful when someone says, *can I help you carry that?* How can the strong help carry the failings of the weak?

### **Put their needs ahead of my own**

*"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up"* (Romans 15:1).

This is all about the orientation of my priorities in community with other Christians. Our natural selves want everything to bend toward us—our preferences, our priorities, our way of looking at things. The church is about me!

Carrying other people's burdens means putting their needs ahead of own. In context, that means the strong willingly defer to the weak in the non-essential issues when circumstances call for it. This doesn't mean the whole church is hostage to the weak. That's not healthy either. But it does give them consideration. As he has urged prior, don't flaunt your freedom, and don't pressure the weak to do what their conscience doesn't allow.

You say, *how am I supposed to know?* Paul gives two litmus tests:

- Is this for his or her good?
- Does it build him or her up?

Too often our first instinct is, what's good for me? What props me up? What builds me up? This is human nature. What do we call putting other's interests ahead of our own? Love. It echoes 1 Corinthians 13's description:

*"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends"* (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

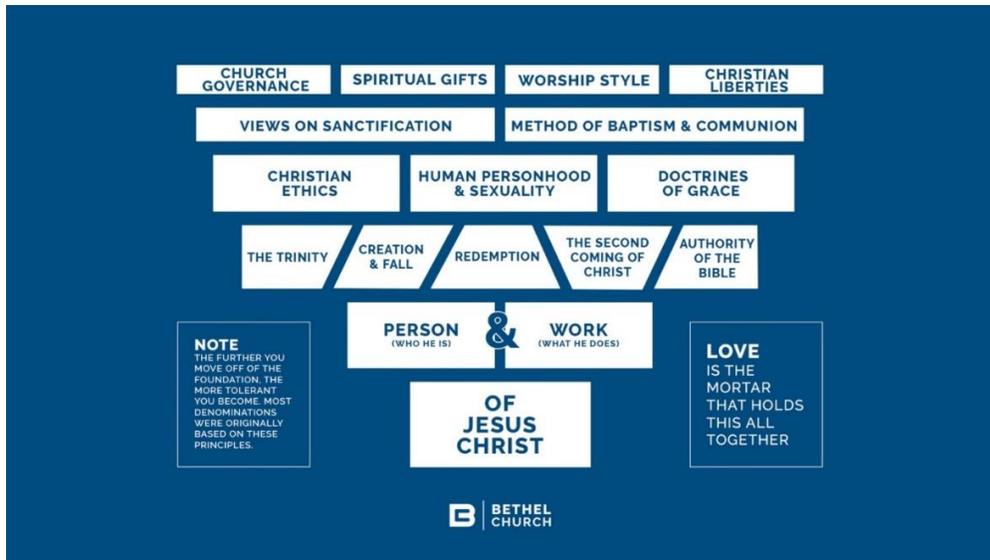
What do you hear? Orientation. Priority. The strong in faith must also be strong in love. Love's starting point is not self-serving, but others-serving. What pleases them? What helps them? What builds them up?

I know in marriage, for example, the worst moments I have had as a husband are somehow related to me seeking my own way. Conversely, the best moments I have ever had always involve selflessness of some kind. When I am selfless, it draws Jennifer and I together like nothing else.

That's true in church families too. We are stuck in this season of pandemic and politics. What a week it's been! Our country's orientation is far from the ideal John F. Kennedy put

out there, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country."<sup>1</sup> Not what's best for me, but what's best for my fellow citizens. There's not a lot of that going on right now.

But shouldn't that be the culture of a gospel-believing church? Are there strong opinions circulating through the congregation these days? Your social media posts would say so. Are these opinions about essential truths of the gospel? No. I have seen some wonderful calls to prayer. But most, if not all that I see, are largely political, pandemical, mask/non-mask non-gospely things. How can we discern the mature from the immature on these things?



The lower on this pyramid, the more passion we should have. The higher, the more flexible we should be. Love is the mortar that holds all this together. The mature are those who reflect this kind of graduated theology. The immature generally won't.



<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1961.

When you turn the pyramid upside down, people will make the smallest things really important things. Think ladders, like we saw earlier.

This is a daily reality as a dad of young daughters. I'll hear a blood-curdling scream. Here comes my 5-year-old and she has completely lost it.

*"What's wrong, sweetheart? Are you dying?"*

*"Yes, Daddy. I'm bleeding!"*

*"Where?" She shows me.* Most of the time when she shows me, I can't see anything. Often she will insist, and if I look at it up close, under just the right light, with a microscope, I might see a speck-sized spot of red. The hysterics don't match the injury at all.

What do I do? I'm supposed to be the adult, right? Do I condemn her? *You're such a drama queen!* Do I go passive aggressive? *As long you are this way, I won't speak to you anymore.* Do I mock her? *You're such a baby!* No. We get Mr. Penguin and snuggle on the couch until her boo-boo is better. Why? Because I understand she's a work in progress. I realize I was five once too. And because I love her, I carry her burdens and put her interests ahead of my own.

This is a sign of a mature Christian in the church. We keep the main things the main things, and loving our brother or sister in their weakness with love is a main thing too.

Just in case we remain confused, Paul gives a living, breathing example. *"For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me'"* (Romans 15:3). This quote is from Psalm 69. Paul sees it as prophecy for the kind of ministry Jesus the Messiah would have. What the ESV translates *reproaches* means "insults." Jesus certainly received insults as he hung on the cross. He was mocked by the religious leaders and even the two thieves reproached him for a while. But look carefully. *"The reproaches of those who reproached you."* This is Trinity. We have reproached God, specifically God the Father. Our sins are against him. We have insulted God by our pride and selfishness. Yet, our insults of God fell on Jesus. This is substitutionary atonement. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us.

When Jesus bore our sins, was he making his personal pleasure his first priority? Obviously not. If he had, he never would have left heaven in the first place. Jesus' incarnation was a divine expression of Jesus putting our needs ahead of his own. You get the point, don't you? If there was ever a strong in faith person, it was Jesus. If there ever was abject weakness, it was us. In spite of this, Jesus' orientation was to prioritize God's glory and our needs ahead of his own.

Paul is saying, *hey, strong conscience types, if you are actually mature, you will do with these non-essential things what Jesus did with the reproaches. You will orient your attitude and actions toward what is best for others.*

*"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 2:3-5).

How about a church family that approaches Christian liberty issues with a basic orientation toward putting others' needs ahead of our own? How do we work through the leaning ladder stuff? They don't go away but they do go down, way down the priority list. When they are where they are supposed to be, the glorious gospel of Jesus is where it must be. Number one. On full display. For all the world to see. Here are people who amazingly get along

despite differences that divide everybody else. Hey Bethel Church, seriously, what's your secret? You're racially different? *Yes*. You get along well? *Oh yes*. Your politics are different? *Yes*. You get along? *Oh yes*. You all have different opinions on pandemic policies? *Oh yes*. Yet you still get along well? *Of course*.

*How? In our country where these things create such rancor and division that families and neighbors and communities and cities and states are bitterly divided, how church? How are you possibly united?*

For Christ did not please himself. Our reproaches against God fell on him. When you really look at the cross of Jesus, there is a reservoir of love which creates a stretchy, flexible capacity to love those different from us. And we do so for Jesus' sake and his glory.

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