

Weak in Faith

We are nearing the end of our study of the book of Romans. This week's readings were chapters 14 and 15, and next week we will finish the book off with Romans 16. The book of Romans I think is one of the most comprehensive books of the Bible in the sense that it covers such a wide variety of topics in a very systematic way. We have covered many topics in our time together, beginning from Romans 1 where we talk about the wrath of God and the universal sinfulness of mankind. We moved on into Romans 3 and 4 to discuss justification by faith in Christ alone. We then looked into Romans 5-8 and talked about the process of sanctification that occurs in our life. How we are regenerated, made new in Christ, yet the sinful nature still remains in our flesh trying to bring us under its captivity. But thanks be to God, that as we saw in Romans 8, there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And not only this, but we can live a life of obedience through the working of the Holy Spirit. And all of us this culminates in our final glorification. That once we lose this body of corruption, we will put on what is incorruptible, and be conformed into the very image of Christ. We certainly have much to look forward to as Christians.

But until that day, there remains this life that we have here in the world. And the way we live this life matters to God. I think back to Jesus words in John 17, as He is praying for His disciples and all those who would come to believe, He says this:

[Jhn 17:15-19 NKJV] 15 "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. 16 "They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. 18 "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth.

That we can see from Jesus very own prayer, that His desire for us is not that we should be taken out of the world, but sent into it. But not sent in as the same people we were before knowing Christ, but sent in as people who are being sanctified by His word. And we have been talking about these practical applications of the Christian life the past couple weeks. Paul gives us some insight into how our lives should be transformed in a very practical way as believers starting in Romans 12 and moving on into the rest of His letter to the church here in Rome.

So this week, we are taking a look at Romans 14 together, and this is about as close as we come in this book to Paul addressing an actual issue within the church here at Rome, because as we see it says in verses 1-2:

[Rom 14:1-2 NKJV] 1 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.

Paul begins here by giving a command for the church to receive one who is weak in the faith. The idea here is one of fellowship. Who should we allow to come into fellowship with us? Should we allow those who are weak in the faith to come be a part of the family we have here as a church? Or can someone's weak convictions actually disqualify them from having that fellowship with other believers?

And Paul seems to make his stance fairly clear here, that we are to receive even the brother or sister who is weak in their faith. The word receive here in the greek is **proslambanō**, which in other places in the new testament is translated as to take aside or to receive. One of the uses that I think gives us a picture of the type of fellowship we should strive to have even with those weak in the faith is Paul's use of the same word in the book of Philemon. And if you don't remember the story in the book of Philemon, it is a very short letter, but basically Paul is writing to one of the leader's of a church named Philemon. And he is writing concerning one of Philemon's runaway slaves who evidently crossed paths with Paul and became a believer. So Paul is writing now back to Philemon to let him know that He is send onesimus, the runaway, back to Philemon. And this is the instruction Paul gives:

[Phm 1:8-14 NKJV] 8 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, 9 [yet] for love's sake I rather appeal [to you]--being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ-- 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten [while] in my chains, 11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me. 12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. 14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

Notice there in verse 12, that same word and same translation of "receive" that we find in our text today. And I love this use of it because we get the picture of the type of receiving we are to do of those who are weak in the faith. We are not just to tolerate these people or treat them as second class Christian citizens, we are to receive them fully, to love them fully, to treat them as brothers and sisters in Christ, to receive them as we would any other member of the body. We are to permit them into fellowship as Philemon was supposed to permit onesimus back now not as just his slave, but as his brother in Christ.

And so I think Paul's command and his intent here is one of unity in the faith. And this is something that I think is so cool about the body of Christ is that it unites people from all different walks of life and backgrounds and it brings them together by their love of Jesus Christ. I have often joked with my brother Charlie, that if it were not for our shared loved of Jesus, we would not be as close as we are today. Him and I share very little in common, although more now than we used to, but what has always bonded us so close and the reason I love spending as much time with Him as I can is that we both love Jesus. And this is the sort of common ground we share as believers in this room here today, and even this common ground can be had amongst

believers who do polar opposite things. For notice, going back to our text today, how Paul describes those who are weak in the faith:

[Rom 14:1-2 NKJV] 1 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.

So Paul wants us to receive our brother or sister who is weak in the faith and then goes on to try to give us an idea of what he means by those who are weak because he brings up this example of those who eat meat vs those who do not eat meat. So here's how Paul frames the discussion we are about to have. He says those who are eating the meat, are those who would be considered stronger in the faith, while those who are abstaining from the meat, would be considered the weaker in the faith. What do we learn here then? That if we want to be strong in the faith, we shouldn't be vegetarians! (joke)

No, but rather there was a deeper issue of conscience going on here. There were believers in the church here at Rome who had a problem eating meat or drinking wine, as it's mentioned there in verse 21 as well, because they believed it to be unclean or common in some way. And there's a few insights the Bible gives us to what actually may be going on here in these disputes that may be worth looking at then we can get into some of the deeper discussions about what we're actually supposed to do with "doubtful things" like this.

So one of the issues with the meat may have been the same issue that is going on in the church at corinth. Paul writes to the church at corinth because they also had a meat eating problem. And this is part of the conversation that Paul has with that church:

[1Co 8:4-6 NKJV] 4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol [is] nothing in the world, and that [there is] no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us [there is] one God, the Father, of whom [are] all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom [are] all things, and through whom we [live].

So in writing to the church at Corinth, Paul tells us that there are some believers who have a really hard time eating this meat from the market that has been a part of a ritual that was meant for idol worship. And there are also those who know that there is no other God than the one true God and therefore even if that meat was offered to an idol, then at the end of the day it's just a piece of meat and the idol is just a stick or a stone, so really they are free to eat the meat. So we have two camps of people, one who will eat the meat and have no problems in their mind that they are in sin before God, and one camp of people who do not eat the meat because they feel like doing so would violate the conscience before God and therefore they abstain from that meat.

And this may be what is going on here at the church in Rome. There may be a similar situation where there are meats offered to idols and some are eating freely and others are abstaining out of fear they might be in sin.

Another possibility is that this is a Jew/Gentile divide over what is clean to eat. We see later on in this chapter that Paul will say in verse 14:

[Rom 14:14 NKJV] 14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that [there is] nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him [it is] unclean.

That word Paul uses three times there in verse 14 referring to something being unclean doesn't mean it's not washed well but rather that it was Levitically unclean or prohibited under the Mosaic Law. This is the same word Peter uses in Acts 10 saying:

[Act 10:11-15 NKJV] 11 and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 13 And a voice came to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean." 15 And a voice [spoke] to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common."

So what we may have in Rome is Jewish believers who will not partake in the same foods as the gentiles will because to them, they remain ritually unclean because of the law. But either way, I think what is interesting is who Paul calls the strong and who Paul calls the weak. Because we see here, it is the ones who are the partakers who Paul calls the strong and the ones who are the abstainers that Paul calls the weak in faith.

And I think this is interesting because this is not always how we consider it to be. I think we sometimes relate abstaining from certain things as being stronger and partaking in things to be weaker. Take drinking for example. I think there can be a tendency in some Christian circles to look down upon those who drink in any capacity. And I think even in my own mind, I would say those who don't drink at all are stronger or wiser or more disciplined in their faith than those who do enjoy in moderation. But that seems to be the opposite of what Paul is saying. He is saying that the brother or sister in Christ who is able to do these things to the glory of God, is really the stronger in faith. Those who are able to in clean conscience enjoy what God has given for good are really the ones who Paul would say are stronger in faith.

But notice, what he does not say, is that those who are abstaining from the meat or the drink are faithless. And this is where we run into a lot of problems as churches. Sometimes we elevate the issues over what Paul would call doubtful things to an extreme where we are willing to call our brother or sister in Christ anathema for their personal conviction on a minor issue. And I think this is what Paul is trying to help the church here at Rome avoid. He wants them to be united, not torn apart. He wants us to bear with one another in love, not look for opportunities to

split apart. And it is sad how minor things, doubtful things, like this have caused many disputes between genuine members of the family of God.

Now, a couple notes on this, and I think it's an important one to point out, is that these disputes were over doubtful things. Things that may not be clear from the word of God or maybe even freedoms that are clear from the Word of God but that we struggle to actually partake in.

And I wanna make mention of this because obviously not every issue we have is an issue over a doubtful thing. This would be a totally different conversation if we were talking about committing adultery. We wouldn't say "There are some who commit adultery to the glory of God and some who abstain from committing adultery for the glory of God" or lying or covetousness. There are things that are clearly described in the Bible as being sinful to partake in. Those issues would not fall under this category that Paul brings up here in Romans 14. And I mention this because there are Christians today who take this kind of attitude. They are antinomian, which means against any kind of law, and so they use grace as a license to sin and perform evil under the guise of living a carefree life because Jesus has paid for all of their sins. These people do not care about the things of God, only that they can use God to justify their wicked behavior.

But that is not the conversation we are having here. The two sides of people we see here care deeply about the things of God. The whole issue here is that both sides care so deeply about loving God that because they fall on opposite sides there is a risk there that they might split off because they cannot agree on how to best glorify God. Look at what Paul says in verse 3 and 4:

[Rom 14:3-4 NKJV] 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.

So what is Paul's counsel to those Christians who are having issues over these doubtful things? He says whether you eat or not, do not despise or judge the other side, because God has received Him! This is further confirmation that the brother who is struggling in his conviction over meat or whatever else he may be struggling with, is not one who is faithless, but that He has been received by God shows that his faith is genuine, although maybe not fully knowledgeable. His faith is real, and he may be living out with full conviction what he believes, it may not just come from a place of knowledge. But nonetheless, God is able to make even that brother or sister stand on the day of judgment.

And this has serious implications for the way we worship together. Because the principle here seems to be if God does not turn that person away, then we should not either. And we may not like that sometimes, because it forces us to fellowship with people who are quite unlike us, but in God's family this is the way he has designed it for His glory. So notice then, there is no test to get in the doors of this church. There is no statement of beliefs you have to sign to become a member here. If God has received you, then who are we to turn you away from the fellowship.

This limits the scope of what is necessary for us to share fellowship together down to the essentials of the faith. If you trust fully in Jesus Christ alone for the basis of your relationship to God, then we can have fellowship. Even if you don't eat meat, or even if you have tattoos or don't have tattoos, or if you listen or don't listen to certain Christian bands, there are so many of these minor issues that can arise, but at the end of the day I think the guiding principle here is does that person love Jesus? There is a difference between weak and rebellious. A brother or sister who is weak in the faith is walking in accordance to how they understand the scriptures and are trying in their best way to honor and glorify God. A person who is rebellious is acting in a way they know is contrary to how God would have them walk. So I can have fellowship with the weak brother, I can have fellowship with the strong brother when I am the one who is weak, because at the end of the day, it is God who will judge, and justify, and make us all stand.

So we see, we should not be quick to judge or condemn a brother or sister in Christ who does not see an issue the same way we do. Of course, if it's a matter of sin, of which the Bible clearly speaks about, we should follow the guidance of scripture in helping restore that brother or sister into fellowship, we should do as Jesus says in Matthew 18:

[Mat 18:15-17 NKJV] 15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell [it] to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

But we need to make sure what we see in our brother is really sin and not just our personal preference. We need to be careful not to call sin what God does not. For you may end up damaging the believer's conscience if you are not careful and this is a dangerous thing to play with.

So Paul then recognizes that both he who eats and he who does not eat both are able to stand before God because God is able to make them stand. Even if one side is weak in faith, God still receives them, so we should too. But this leaves the question, how do we exist together when our actions and viewpoints are so polar opposite? Should we all find some middle ground where we eat meat sometimes, but then other times we don't? Maybe one week on, one week off so everyone's happy? Is there value in finding a middle ground between believer's who hold polar opposite viewpoints? The answer from Paul may surprise you! Look what he says in the very next verse:

[Rom 14:5-6 NKJV] 5 One person esteems [one] day above another; another esteems every day [alike]. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who observes the day, observes [it] to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe [it]. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.

Now we may be tempted to believe that after the first four verses of this chapter, that it would be wise to become these sort of wishy washy Christian creatures who aren't really set in stone on any of our convictions and are really just happy to go with the flow. But notice what Paul does here when he brings up this example of observing one day over another. He says that some people esteem one day over another and some view all days to be the same, but for either side, the instruction that Paul gives next is that each person should be fully convinced in their own mind!

And you may be thinking, but wait! Won't that make for more strife and argument? Shouldn't we be trying to come to one common consensus here? And Paul says no. We don't all need to hold the same opinions and the same convictions. But what we need is to be fully convinced in our mind in the way that is most honoring to the Lord. If that for you is to observe Sunday as a strict day of rest, where you don't go anywhere but church and home and you spend the whole day relaxing with your Bible, then you be convinced in your mind and you do that! But maybe you are convinced that God is Lord over every day and that there is no day better than another so you don't do anything special on Sunday and instead you live to glory of God just as you do any other day! And if that's you, then be fully convinced in your mind and live that way.

And we see another principle given to us here by Paul. God is honored when we live authentic and faithful lives towards Him even if that means we are doing polar opposite things. I say authentic because it seems here the Paul wants us to be fully convinced of what we are doing. That means we need to give thought into what we are doing. We need to weigh what we are doing against what the Holy word of God says. We need to ask if what we are doing is honoring to God, and once we become fully convinced, we need to not waver from it. If I am convinced that drinking is bad, and that even a sip of alcohol would mean I am in sin, yet I choose one night to drink a glass of red wine, what does that say about my attitude before God? It means I have been convinced in my mind that what I was doing is sin and yet I chose to do it anyway. That is not God honoring. That is God belittling even if the action itself isn't inherently sinful.

So we need to come to a place in our lives that everything we are doing is for the glory of the Lord. That should be the heart behind whatever action we take. If we eat the meat, let it be for His glory. If we abstain from the meat, let us abstain for His glory. If we celebrate certain days, let it be for His glory, if we live everyday the same, let it be for His glory. This echos Paul's conclusion in 1 corinthians 10 where he says:

[1Co 10:31 NKJV] 31 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Whatever you partake in or don't partake in, let it be done or not done before the Lord. Let it be done or not done from a sincere heart of faith. Because anything that is not done in faith is sin. Look at verse 14 with me:

[Rom 14:14 NKJV] 14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that [there is] nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him [it is] unclean.

Notice Paul speaks to his own conscience here. He says he knows and is convinced that there is nothing unclean of itself. But he also knows that he has brothers in Christ who do consider certain foods unclean. So what is his instruction to them? To get over it and eat? No but look what he says: to him who considers anything to be unclean, it is unclean to him!

And so Paul does not want any believer to violate his own conviction. To do this, Paul says it would be sinful, because the attitude of the heart is not right before the Lord. Remember the words of God to the prophet Samuel speaking of David:

[1Sa 16:7 NKJV] 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For [the LORD does] not [see] as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

But this still leaves the question, how should we bear with one another when we have such opposite convictions? Well Paul goes on to address this in verse 15 here, saying:

[Rom 14:15-18 NKJV] 15 Yet if your brother is grieved because of [your] food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 For he who serves Christ in these things [is] acceptable to God and approved by men.

So Paul puts the responsibility on the one who is stronger in the faith. He says if your eating causes your brother to stumble or to be grieved, then you are no longer walking in love. If you are so in love with the liberties you have, that you are willing to destroy the brother for whom Christ died, then you have turned your liberties into an object of worship rather than a gift from the Lord.

To walk in a spirit of love towards one another means to sacrifice even our own liberties if it means that our brother is not grieved and his conscience is not affected. This is one thing that I think the world has got very wrong. I think that most people think love is a feeling. And certainly love, in one sense, can be accompanied by feelings and a positive disposition towards someone. But really, if we look at the words of Paul here and we take the whole counsel of God into consideration, it seems to me that the opposite of love isn't necessarily feelings of hate, but rather actions of selfishness. And so if I can sacrifice some of my liberties so that my brother in Christ feels more comfortable, then I will do it.

Our concern and love for our fellow disciple should be the thing that marks us as followers of Christ. This seems to be what Jesus teaches in John 13 when he says:

[Jhn 13:34-35 NKJV] 34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Think about how radical these words are to a Jewish audience and group of disciples. They were literally defined by their law. They were defined by the things they do and the things they do not do. But Jesus comes to them and says it's not by any of the things of the law that people will know you belong to me, it's by the love that you have for one another. It's by the way you are willing to sacrifice for one another.

Because as Paul says back in verse 17, that the kingdom of God is not in food or drink, but it is in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are the inward realities of the kingdom of God that mark the lives of true believers. And nothing is more honoring to God than for us to be fully within our rights to claim something as our own, yet to lay it aside for our fellow Christian. This mind was the same mind that was in Christ Jesus Himself, who:

[Phi 2:5-8 NKJV], 6 who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, 7 but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, [and] coming in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to [the point of] death, even the death of the cross.

And even Paul's own conclusion, as he is speaking to the church in corinth, is to say:

[1Co 8:13 NKJV] 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

This is the foundation of all we do with one another as we meet in fellowship with fellow believers. We are to love one another as Christ loved us. And if we love one another that way, we will sacrifice our own liberties for the sake of the good of our brother. And when we love one another like this, it produces a beautiful unity within the church. One in which God is well pleased with. This is Paul's conclusion and prayer to this section of scripture in Chapter 15, where he says:

[Rom 15:5-6 NKJV] 5 Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, 6 that you may with one mind [and] one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is ultimately what we should aspire to do as a church. We should come to a place where we can stand together and glorify God with one mind and one mouth. Our eyes should be so fixated on Christ together, that we have no time for foolish squabbles about things that don't matter. This to me is ultimately what Christian unity is. It is not a total agreement on every point of doctrine, but it should be a total fixation of the beauty and majesty of Christ together. That is what I often tell people when they ask if we should have fellowship with this certain denomination or that certain denomination. My response is usually, Do they love Jesus? Do they trust in Him alone for their salvation? Do they love the Lord? There are certainly some bare essentials we must have in common. This church itself was birthed from a straying away from those bare essentials, but when it comes to the secondary issues, we must pursue one another with love, being fully convinced in our own minds, and seeking to live in both peace and authenticity before the Lord