

## How Must the Strong Treat the Weak?

Romans 14:13-15:7

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Last week we talked about strong & weak Christians. The “strong” were Christians who had discovered a new freedom because of Christ. They could now participate in something that was once excluded for God’s people – eating meat that had been first offered to idols. They had a clear conscience before God about the rightness of this activity. The apostle Paul agreed with them. Weak Christians did not have enough faith to let go of something that was no longer necessary. They continued to practice the dietary laws and special/sacred days. They thought these were still essential practices for Christians.

But Christ fulfilled the law. They didn’t need to continue in these areas. Yet fellow Christians disagreed about this in the Roman Church. It continues today. Christians can disagree about a lot of things.

Last week we considered that diagram that you have in the bottom right of your bulletin – absolutes, convictions, opinions and questions. Anything in the absolute category separates Christians from everyone else. So the belief that God is one yet three persons is an absolute. No other faith agrees with that. There is salvation in no other name but Jesus is an absolute. Jesus was both fully God and fully man. Jesus was raised physically from the dead. These are essentials. The other 3 categories contain non essentials in decreasing order of importance. So in the convictions area you might find beliefs about the meaning of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. In the opinions area we would put drinking alcohol; going to parties; movie choices; music choices; dating and marriage choices. We learned a simple saying that can help us: “In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in everything charity or love”. Today, we continue our look at the question “How can Christians who agree on essentials but disagree on non-essentials continue to fellowship with one another?” Part 1 of the answer came last week from Romans 14:1-12. Instead of judging one another, we must welcome each other. Today we look at part 2. Paul goes into much greater detail on how the strong and the weak must relate to continue as one body. His greater charge is to the strong.

**To love as Christ loved, the strong must show great care and consideration for the weak.**

Everyone knows that Jesus talked a lot about love. But the type of love He calls for requires a determined effort to figure out how we can love those different than us. How specifically would we live this out in some of the areas of disagreement over non-essentials? We will discover answers to these questions and others as we go through the

next chunk of Romans. No matter where you're at in faith today, you can influence others towards or away from Christ. So I want you to see 3 ways we can show love to those weaker than us in faith.

### **Romans 14:13-15:6 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup>Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. <sup>14</sup>I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. <sup>15</sup>For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup>So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup>For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup>Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup>So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

<sup>20</sup>Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. <sup>21</sup>It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. <sup>22</sup>The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. <sup>23</sup>But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

<sup>15:1</sup> We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. <sup>3</sup> For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." <sup>4</sup> For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup> May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **How must the strong act in consideration of the weak?**

**1- Don't put a stumbling block in their path. Instead build them up. 14:13-19** Decide never to put a stumbling block in the pathway of another Christian. Don't do something that will trip up a weaker Christian when he sees or hears about it. Instead pursue what makes for peace and building up.

In verse 13, Paul begins by speaking to both the strong and the weak. "Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another any longer." Remember last week in verses 1-12, we saw that the strong, likely Gentile Christians, and the weak, likely Jewish Christians were having problems with each other. The Gentiles understood Paul's teaching that to observe food laws of special days was no longer necessary. Christ had fulfilled these. So these "strong," as Paul labels them, were tempted to argue with the weak and despise or look down on them. The Jewish Christians were tempted to pass judgment on the strong. To pass judgment meant "to pronounce a verdict" on the faith of another person. The weak likely questioned the faith of the strong who no longer kept these food laws, specifically eating meat that had likely been offered to idols. So last week we saw God command them to put their energy into welcoming one another.

Now he says "Let us not pass judgment on one another any longer." Stop doing that. Stop judging another Christian who disagrees with you on a non-essential area. But after the first half of verse 13, Paul directs the rest of this

passage to the strong. So he writes “Rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” Did you catch that? “Decide in your heart that you will NEVER do something that will hinder another person’s faith.” Never set an example that might lead another to sin. Never be the reason another Christian stumbles in their faith by copying your action and doing something against their own conscience. He doesn’t say “consider this.” He doesn’t say “I think this is something you should pay attention to. No – decide never to do this. Take very seriously the responsibility you have to NOT cause another Christian to stumble.

But this does not mean that the “weaker” brother’s convictions are absolutely correct. Verse 14 – “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus Christ that nothing is unclean in itself.” Paul states in the strongest terms possible his rejection that food can bring spiritual defilement. It is not what goes into a man or woman that defiles him. It is what’s inside of us. The Pharisees taught that you could be defiled if you touched utensils used by a Gentile. So you had to purify those utensils to ensure you didn’t catch Gentile germs. But Jesus taught that we are defiled by the evil in our hearts, not from what we touch or eat.

So every food was now spiritually clean. Yet it took a long time for this new teaching to make its way through Christianity. Peter had to see a vision and see the Holy Spirit descend on the Gentiles before he was convinced the Gospel was for everyone. The Pharisees got so focused on external rituals that they forgot the heart. But Jesus’ taught that the source of our defilement is personal and ethical not impersonal and ritualistic. This puts him at odds with the Pharisees and the common understanding of religion today. What do many people today think religion is all about? Millions of Hindus flock to the Ganges River to get the cleansing from something external. Some Christians believe that as long as you take in the externals of the bread and the cup, you are cleansed. But we are defiled and destroyed spiritually from within. His sacrifice would liberate us from the penalty and grasp of this inner evil.

So Paul emphasizes this point in the first half of verse 14. Food offered to idols was not in itself defiling. But some Jewish Christians may still feel defiled by eating it. A conscience controlled by a powerful religious culture may tell me that I am defiled by eating a forbidden food, even though Jesus declared all foods clean. It may take time to be free to eat what was previously forbidden. So Paul writes in the second half of verse 14, “but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”

So in verse 15, he gets back to the responsibility of the strong towards the weak. “For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love”. So the strong must not only decide not to put a stumbling block before the weak that might damage their faith. The strong must keep love first and foremost as his or her motivation. If we grieve our brother or sister by what we eat or take part in, we no longer walk in love. Notice how Paul emphasized the gravity of this. “By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.” Now I don’t think Paul overstates something here for effect. He alerts us to the very real possibility that our behavior can destroy another person’s faith. To be grieved means “to be made to suffer in a way that causes spiritual confusion and discouragement.”

How could a Gentile Christian eating meat that may have been offered to idols destroy a Jewish Christian’s faith? Well say this devout Jewish Christian sees his brother eating meat that was likely offered to an idol. So the Jewish Christian decides he’s going to eat meat too despite having grave concerns about it. So he goes ahead and eats the meat. But later a guilty conscience strikes to the core of his being. “I have broken faith with God,” he concluded. He condemns himself to eternal loss and no longer pursues faith in God. Or maybe by influencing the Jewish Christian to abandon his convictions, the Gentiles start him down the road of abandoning his faith in Christ. He gets comfortable giving up his convictions to the point that he begins giving up absolutes. He turns away from Christ.

Paul raises the stakes. “You Stronger Christians – you think you can exercise your freedom in Christ carelessly around younger or weaker Christians? Your behavior might start them down a road away from Christ!” Do not destroy the one from whom Christ died.

Parents, Grandparents, older brothers and sisters; youth sponsors; church leaders; – your actions are being watched all the time by others: children; younger siblings; young people; young in the faith; peers in the faith. . Don’t think that the language you use or the movies you watch or the music listened to or the attitude you have towards others goes unobserved. All of us influence others. But will it be for better or worse?

Paul then continues his appeal to the strong. He puts the freedom to drink or eat something in its proper place in the overall kingdom of God. Verse 17 – For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Our preferences about what we eat or drink; our view on non-essentials is at bottom level of importance compared to righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. In the big picture, limiting your freedom in some area is a very minor matter. God’s kingdom is much more about enjoying the gift

of right standing before God. And we get to enjoy peace with God and joy in our hearts brought by the Holy Spirit. So if we act like the most important thing is to exercise our right to eat or drink whatever we want, we've missed the big picture of being a Christian. Sometimes we need to revisit all that we've been given through Christ to put a small limitation on our rights in perspective.

I was listening to an interview of a pastor who asked about "how we respond when things don't go our way". How do you respond when you don't get your way or you don't get what you want? We can get very upset. But then he asks *"why should things go your way? What right do we have to expect everything should go the way we want it to? You're a sinner. You deserve hell. The fact that you are breathing is a spectacular gift. You may have two eyes or one eye that can see. You could be blind. If you have two ears, you can hear. Some of our friends in this room don't experience that gift. You may have two hands that are healthy. But they could be arthritic or all crippled up. We can be so ungrateful and proud that things aren't better for us."*

So we've got to limit ourselves a little for the sake of a weaker brother. That's not worth getting upset about when we enjoy right standing before God and peace with God and joy in the Holy Spirit. In fact, the person who decides not to put a stumbling block in their weaker brother's way is acceptable to God and approved by men verse 18. The word approved is a blacksmith's term for ironwork that is tried and tested by fire.

So then verse 19 "let us pursue what makes for peace and mutual building up." This is what the body of Christ is all about. It's not about my rights to exercise my freedom. It's "how can I contribute to the peace and building up of others in this body?" If that means I have to limit some of my freedoms, so be it. I don't want to cause another to stumble. I want to build them up.

How must the strong act in consideration of the weak? 1 – Don't put a stumbling block in their way. Instead build them up. **2 - Don't let personal liberty over a non-essential destroy God's work. (14:20-23)** Verse 20 really stopped me. "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God." Do I have the power to destroy the work God's work? We're so small and weak compared to him. Is he talking about other Christians or something greater? I agree with commentators who argue that the work of God described here is the church. God works to knit together a people who are one because of Him. But individual Christians can destroy this work by their judgmental attitude towards each other or their insistence on exercising their freedom to do things. That can tear apart a church.

Some writers think that the primary purpose of this letter to the Romans was to draw together the scattered Jewish and Gentile groups of the church in Rome. Throughout the letter he's addressed Jews and Gentiles. Romans 9-11 is all about Jews and Gentiles and how both have a place in Christ's kingdom. Now, he appeals to the strong to consider something much higher than their right to eat meat sold in the market. If they don't they may destroy some of God's work among them in Rome. Do we want someday to face God and admit "Yah, I was part of destroying your work in that body of believers. I thought that was a good thing?" No. Our actions have consequences far beyond us.

Paul presses home his point with an increasing urgency. Middle of verse 20 – *Everything is indeed clean but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.* Paul even goes so far as to offer counsel to the strong on whether they should talk about their convictions about certain freedoms in Christ. "The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God." I take that to mean that if you have discovered freedom in Christ in some area – if you have received faith to be able to do something and know it's not sinning then share that joy with Christ. Talk about it with God. But if you know that this area is a struggle for someone else don't bring up your freedom. Don't brag about it. Don't even speak about it. Consider them. Consider the church. Don't let personal liberty over a non-essential issue destroy God's work.

How must the strong show love in consideration of the weak? **3 - Imitate Christ by bearing with the weak and don't please yourself. (15:1-3)** *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak.* An obligation is a duty, responsibility, requirement, compulsion or commitment. The strong have a responsibility towards the weak. Bear with the shortcomings in their faith. Did you catch that entirely counter-cultural statement at the end of verse 1. "And not to please ourselves." Do you ever see that on a West Edmonton Mall poster or sign in a store. "Come on in to our store – but don't please yourself." Are you kidding? That's the mantra of our culture – "please yourself. It's all about you."

No. Because of Christ and what He's done in our lives, it's about others. "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." Don't tear down. Don't be a stumbling block. Build up. Don't please yourself! "But I want to please myself." Yes, don't we all. But where would we be if that's what Jesus decided?

Verse 3 - "For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproach you fell on me." Jesus did not please himself by staying in heaven while we desperately needed saving. He came to earth. But he

didn't just come to give us a hand up and keep on his merry way. He took the reproach, blame and accusations that we deserved. He took that all the way through His life and ministry. He took those punches and spit and thorns and whipping that was for us on the way to cross. He bore God's wrath that we deserved on the cross. He died instead of us on the cross. He didn't please himself so that we might have life. As His disciples we are called to follow that example.

It's not easy. It will be swimming against the stream. You might be the only one in a situation looking out for that weak person. But God will grant us encouragement and endurance. One way he does that is through His living word. Did you see that in Romans 15:4 – *For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

Paul describes a community where both the strong and weak will be safe. It reflects Jesus' heart of concern for others. It gives hope to those searching for a loving community. It means we don't have to separate because of differences in non-essential areas. One commentator put it like this. "The liberty of the Christian assembly should be able to embrace different views and practices without a feeling that they must be resolved or that a common mind must be achieved on every point of disagreement."

Could Sturgeon Valley be such a community? Could we grow to be a people where it is known that the strong look out for the weak to the glory of Christ? It's only possible if we ask for God's strength and power to become like this. So let us do that now with verses 5 and 6. "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."