

#41 One Gospel, One People: “Weak & Strong” (2018.02.04)

A true indicator of our Christian maturity is how well we deal with differences of opinion. In fact, we can go even further than that and say, when it comes to our faith, a true indicator of our maturity is recognizing when we are dealing with a difference of opinion, rather than a “Thus sayeth the Lord.”

A common attitude that many Christians, including myself, have been guilty of is to say: “My opinion IS a ‘Thus sayeth the Lord’ and your ‘Thus sayeth the Lord’ is your opinion!”

After graduating from seminary, Sheila and I flew to PEI to meet the congregations that were interested in calling us to serve with them. I thought the weekend went well, and we flew back, and all was good. In a few weeks, they would vote and determine if the call was official or not. It turns out they said “yes” and we got ready to move to Prince Edward Island for our first ministry.

After getting there, I found out that there was a rather influential member of one of the congregations who was a very well liked, active servant, and from what I gathered, also a very generous giver. I was told by one of the elders that this gentleman, in no uncertain terms did not want me to come and serve with the church because I had a beard. To his way of thinking, a beard made you shifty and a fraud. In fact, he didn’t believe that Jesus had a beard. His Jesus was clean-shaven, thank you very much! I am not exaggerating, in case you are wondering.

One of my first tasks, after moving there, was to go to this person’s home, with an elder, and visit with him and see if we could smooth things over. Ultimately there was nothing I could do to change his mind. He adamantly declared that he would no longer attend the church if I didn’t shave off my beard. So, I guess there was something I could have done. I could have shaved off my beard.

But, in the zeal of my youth, and the flaring up of my righteous indignation, I was not about to shave my beard off, because clearly, Jesus was on my side! My reply to his ultimatum

was: “My wife loves my beard and if I have to chose between pleasing you or my wife, she wins.”

That was not my finest moment, I must admit. I wasn’t really helping, but what wasn’t helping even more was that I clearly considered his position to be ridiculous, superficial and fleshly, and I am pretty sure my attitude was communicated.

The fact of the matter is that I never really tried to understand what might possibly be behind his opinion. I never tried to find some common ground with him. I should have, after all, we were both brothers in Christ. If I am being honest, I am not even sure that I considered him a brother in Christ at that point.

Summing up, his problem was that he raised a matter of opinion to the status of a doctrine that had to be obeyed, or he wouldn’t continue to be part of that church. My problem was that I immediately dismissed both his request and his attitude as immature and offensive. I felt judged. I felt like I was being marginalized over a trivial matter.

And, that’s the way it goes with matters of opinion—one sees the issue as trivial and the other sees it as essential. But the point really is this: If something causes division. If it causes a lack of respect, or a lack of love and acceptance, then the issue is not trivial, because of the significance of its impact.

Please turn with me to Romans 14. We are going to be looking at verses 1-6 today. You’ll find the passage on page 960 in the congregational Bibles.

The section of Romans that we just finished, which ran from the beginning of Romans 12 to the end of Romans 13, had to do with the practical aspects of living a life that is no longer conformed to this age, but instead, is being transformed by the renewing of our minds. Really what was being described by Paul, is a life of love that transforms our relationships with each other, and between us and the world, even to the extent that we are called to love our enemies.

Now, that Paul has finished speaking about the general principles of love, he is going to get specific. He is going to speak directly to a situation in the congregations in Rome that needed to be addressed. Basically, Paul is saying, “OK, now that I have talked about love in general terms, let me show you how you need to allow love to fix what is broken in the life of your congregations. This is what it looks like to apply love in your situation.”

Beginning with verse 1 we read: *Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.*

Let’s stop there for a moment. Clearly there was some tension in the congregations in Rome. Judgement was being passed. People were being criticized and perhaps marginalized. The image of passing judgement has an air of superiority to it. It is an “I am more mature than you” attitude. It speaks of pride and arrogance. One group was not very accepting of another group. They didn’t accept them as equals. They didn’t love them or respect them as they should.

But, before we go any further we need to figure out two things: (1) what is meant by “weak faith;” and (2) what is meant by “disputable matters.”

The context of Romans 14 is that verses 1-12 focus more on the issue of those who have what Paul characterizes as “weak faith.” Then in verses 13-21, the focus will shift to those who are “strong,” although, he really doesn’t refer to this other group by the word “strong” until the beginning of chapter 15.

In our passage today, “weak faith” is characterized by those whose faith only allows them to eat vegetables (v. 2).

Now, before we go any further. Paul is not talking about Vegans or Vegetarians here. Vegans and Vegetarians choose not to eat meat and/or animal products of any kind because of ethical issues regarding how animals are raised and slaughtered in the current farm factory system, or because of the value they place on the life and happiness of animals.

What Paul is speaking about is something entirely different. The question is, what exactly is he taking about, and who is this group that makes up those who have a weaker faith?

Some people are confused by the fact that Jewish dietary restrictions don't require abstaining from meat. And, in verse 21, abstaining from wine is mentioned, and again, that isn't a restriction that is made in the Old Testament dietary laws. Because of this, some people think that "the weaker" are not those Christians with a Jewish background and they point out that Paul doesn't actually identify "the weaker" as having a Jewish background. That is true.

But, we know the history of the church in Rome. We know about the tensions between the Jews and the Gentiles and Paul is not going to go out of his way to make ethnic distinctions. Why would he want to emphasize something he is trying to eliminate? That would be counterproductive and unnecessary. So, the fact that he doesn't connect being "weak" with the Christians who had a Jewish background, doesn't mean that wasn't the case.

Consider the example of Daniel for a moment. Daniel was living in a Gentile culture and he and the boys became vegetarians because, "*Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.*" (**Daniel 1:8**) So this gives us a possible insight as to why Christians with a Jewish background could fit into the context in Rome.

What this suggests is that the issue wasn't the eating of meat or the drinking of wine. It was not being able to know if the meat or wine was prepared properly, according to kosher standards. This is further supported by verses 14 and 20, which clearly indicate that some believed that certain foods were "unclean." This is a clear reference to Old Testament ceremonial laws about "clean" and "unclean" foods.

With the Jewish expulsion from Rome in AD 49, there could have been a disruption in the availability of a reliable source of "clean" meat. And, even if that were not the case, who

knows if the Jews would have wanted to sell meat to Christians who had a Jewish background? So, both the restriction of not eating meat or drinking wine fit within the context of not wanting to defile oneself because the cleanliness of the meat or drink could not be established.

Not only that, but we are told in verse 5, that the weaker faith also considered one day more special than others. This also fits within the context of Christians with a Jewish background. In Colossians 2:16 Paul speaks of Christians who still held to Jewish/Old Testament feast days. That could very well be what Paul is talking about here.

So, the “weak” are those Christians with either a Jewish background, or Greeks who became God-fearers, meaning they had converted to Judaism before they became Christians. And the “strong” were mostly Gentile, although, Paul numbers himself in this group and he himself has a Jewish background.

OK, but still, what does Paul mean by “weak” faith? Well, Paul isn’t saying that these Christians weren’t saved, or that they didn’t trust in Christ. This group isn’t the same as the Judaizers that Paul addresses in Galatians, who felt that obedience to the Law was necessary for salvation.

If this were the case, Paul would have addressed their error, particularly when he has spent so much time in Romans talking about the fact that we are saved by a righteousness that comes by faith, apart from the keeping of the Law.

And, more than that, Paul’s whole point in this passage is to point out that the “weak” Christians are fellow Christians who need to be respected and accepted.

So, Paul is not saying that “weak” Christians aren’t saved, or that they don’t trust Christ. Where they are “weak” is in the way they can’t quite get past a legalistic spirit that still restricts them. To put it another way, they have not fully worked out the implications of the gospel in their lives. They have yet to become comfortable with the idea that if you are saved

by grace alone, there is no need to feel you can or must somehow keep God's favour through rules and regulations.

The weak do not know when they are considering what Paul calls "disputable" issues and when they are considering "indisputable" issues.

The Greek word translated as "disputable" has the idea of being a "matter of conscience." It is a practice about which God has not specifically spoken in His word. He has not clearly forbidden it or clearly commanded it.

So, Paul is not talking about the clear teaching of Romans 12 & 13, that we have been instructed to follow, that teaching is "indisputable." It characterizes the way we live as Christians.

So, the point Paul is making here is that differences of opinion on "matters of conscience" has actually lead the congregations in Rome to violate the clear teaching of letting no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt of loving one another (13:8). The friction between differing opinions on the "disputable" has caused them to violate the "indisputable!"

The NIV omits the first word in verse 1, which is "but." This shows that Paul is pointing back to the teaching about love in chapter 13, including the last verse which says, *"Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Romans 13:14).*

As we will see, both the weak and the strong, in the way they were dealing with one another over "matters of conscience" were actually gratifying the desires of the sinful nature. They were violating the clear teaching of Scripture in the way they dealt with one another on issues that Scripture didn't speak to directly. They were prideful and critical and unloving.

Now Paul deals with a similar issue in 1 Corinthians 8, where the “matter of conscious” was eating meat sacrificed to idols. This gives us an interesting insight. If we compare the dispute in 1 Corinthians with the one described in Romans 14, we gain a better understanding of the issue.

The conflict, in 1 Corinthians 8, was between ex-idol worshipers and other believers over whether Christians could buy and eat meat left over after pagan temple services. Interestingly, in that situation, the “strong” would have been Christians who thought that there was nothing wrong with eating meat sacrificed to idols because they knew that idols weren’t real. In other words, the “strong” in the case of 1 Corinthians were most like mainly Jewish Christians, who had no background in idol worship. The “weak” would have been former idolaters who were mainly Gentiles. They were people who had been entrapped in the pagan cults and who now felt polluted when they had anything to do with them.

So, when you set 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 beside each other, you can see how the “weak” and the “strong” flip-flop, based on the issue and the experience and background of the people involved. In Corinth the weak were Greeks, in Rome the weak had Jewish backgrounds.

This helps us get at the broader understanding: The “weak” are any Christians who tend to consider non-essential cultural and ceremonial customs as critical for Christian maturity and effectiveness.

Let me give you an example of this. Years ago, when I was still in Seminary, Sheila and I would sometimes host evenings of worship and fellowship with some of the other students, and one night, we decided to have a communion time together. Back then, we often burnt incense to make the place smell nice. Some of the students that were originally from Hong Kong, approached us about it, because from their background, the burning of incense was associated with idolatry and the worship of ancestors. It was the smell of the temples they

grew up around, and they had a hard time dealing with that. For us, there was absolutely no context or experience that connected incense to idolatry.

The Chinese students, were very respectful and gracious about the issue, but they wanted us to know that it bothered them, as a matter of conscience.

One time, at a ladies' retreat in PEI, there were some of the ladies that were offended by a prayer time in which candles and soft music were used to set a worshipful mood, but to some of the women, who were from a Catholic background, it reminded them of a spiritual background they had left behind, and it bothered their conscience.

Other issues might be the very familiar worship wars that so many churches have gone through when introducing contemporary music and instrumentation. Often, we consider what is most familiar with what is better. Participating in dances, playing cards, whether Christians should go to movies, or whether Christians young people should read Harry Potter. Have all been issues hotly debated between Christians. As has whether Christians should drink alcohol, or whether we should use instruments in our worship, or whether a minister should have a beard. All of these things have been "matters of conscience" that have caused disputes and unloving attitudes among Christians.

Moving on, Paul continues: ² *One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.*

Notice the way Paul words this: "One man's faith allows him to eat everything." Paul isn't talking about Christians who don't pay attention, or who don't care, or don't think about what they do. No, the freedom to eat everything has only been arrived at by considering what is appropriate to their faith. They have thought this through. They have done the work necessary to come to this conclusion. So, this isn't an issue of those who take their faith seriously, and those who don't. Both take their faith seriously. Both the "weak" and "strong"

are mindful of wanting to live their lives in a way that honours Christ—even if both groups don't consider that to be the case!

Continuing with verse 3: *The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.*

Here we have the problem in a nutshell: The person who eats everything, in other words, the “strong” looks down on the “weak” and the “weak” condemns the “strong.”

Both attitudes should be very familiar to us. We see them all the time. In this case, the “strong” are no longer ruled by the restrictions of the past. They are part of the new. They honour Christ by living out the full implications of what it means to be saved by grace through faith, but the problem with them is that they see themselves as more enlightened than those who Paul characterizes as “weak.” They seem themselves as more progressive, and quite frankly superior to those who, on the issues of disputable matters, seem to be stuck in the past. They consider them legalistic and narrow-minded.

Listen very carefully, because this is important for us to understand. In this case, those who can eat everything are right. They have a better, more mature and developed understanding of the implications of being in Christ. But being right doesn't mean that their attitude is right. In fact, their attitude is sinful.

Their attitude violates the clear, indisputable teachings of Scripture. Their interaction with those who are weak plays into their pride and self-importance. They think things like, “These poor, poor, backwoods, out of touch, stuck in the past people, are ridiculous. They need to wake up and get with the program, or they are going to be left behind and maybe they should be left behind because they are no fun to be with!” So, from the “strong” we learn that you can be right and wrong at the same time. You can be right but have the wrong attitude. You can be right about “a matter of opinion,” and violate the law of love. This is something we

all need to learn. Our need to be right should never violate the law of love. I have won arguments and damaged a weaker brother or sister's faith in the process. Shame on me! Some of those acts of immaturity still haunt me today and I wish I could change them.

But then we have this second attitude. The attitude of the "weak." The problem with the "weaks'" attitude is that they see the "strong" as liberal and soft on doctrine and they are convinced that the "strong" are not taking their faith seriously enough. They think the strong lack respect for the traditions of God's people. They lack respect for God's Word, so they condemn the approach and attitudes of the "strong." The word "condemn" here points to standing in judgement of someone. It is finding their actions to be wrong and sinful.

So, in the church in Rome you have those who see themselves as the future. Those who see themselves as the "enlightened ones" and we have those who see themselves as the ones who are holding onto the traditions that honoured God. They error on the side of caution. They don't want to abuse their freedom. But what Paul teaches in this passage is that regardless of what position you take on these "matters of opinion," what it is absolutely wrong to do is either judge, or feel superior to those who disagree with you, or who see things differently.

Speaking to the "weak" Paul says, ⁴ *Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*

Paul is saying, "It isn't your place to judge another Christian, because they are a servant of Christ, not you. Christ is their master, not you! Whether that person is acceptable will be determined by Christ and Christ is able to make them acceptable. Christ is able to make them stand! Paul is reminding the "weak" that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ's work upon the cross and by Christ's work, through the Holy Spirit in our lives." The point is, we overstep our boundaries, when we judge others by what we think is right. Again, let me remind you. We are not talking about judging someone's behaviour based on the clear

instruction of God's Word. Evaluation is allowed, judgement isn't. But, more to the point, the purpose of us evaluating someone's behaviour isn't to judge them, it is to help them, and if need be, restore them. What the weak are doing is being critical and divisive. They weren't motivated by reconciliation and restoration.

In Galatians 6:1 Paul says, *“Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.”* **(Galatians 6:1)**.

So, even when a person is caught in sin, which isn't the case here, even though the weaker brother considers the liberties taken by the stronger as sin, our motivation is to restore gently. It is to approach the person in a humble way knowing that we too are tempted.

Continuing on with verse 5-12, Paul writes: ⁵ *One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.* ⁶ *He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.* ⁷ *For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone.* ⁸ *If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.* ⁹ *For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.* ¹⁰ *You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.* ¹¹ *It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God."* ¹² *So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.* **(Rom 14:5-12)**

What Paul is saying really all boils down to one thing: “When it comes to Christian life, it is all about our motivation.” We need to wrestle with something until we are fully convinced that it is the right thing to do and then we must do it to the glory of God.

And obviously if we are trying to glorify God, we are not going to find ourselves wrapped up in feeling superior to others, or judging others, because we know that is something that is unloving and fleshly and damaging to the Body of Christ.

When Paul says, *“none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone,”* he isn’t referring to our connection to each other, he is referring to our connection to Christ.

As Christians, we live in Christ, and we will die in Christ, so both our lives and even our deaths are under the presence and authority and power of Christ. Christ death and resurrection secured that place of authority, so our convictions and our focus, needs to be on pleasing Christ! We need to live out our convictions with sincerity, to glorify Him, because He is our judge, not each other. What that means is the call to love each other as Christ has loved us trumps any tradition, any preference, any matter of opinion that is not a clear teaching of the law of Christ.

Let me quickly leave you with 4 things that the weak have forgotten.

1. We are all justified by faith—why are we not to condemn our fellow Christians? Paul says at the end of verse 3, that it’s because “God has accepted him.” This word “accepted” is the same word used in verse 1 when we are challenged to “accept” one another. In other words, Paul is saying: You should welcome and accept one another because God has already welcomed and accepted you! You are only following Christ’s lead. This is powerful! The point is that whatever a Christian’s strength or weakness in behavior or views are, he or she is completely loved and accepted by the Father through Christ. That is what the whole book of Romans is about!

2. God is the Only Judge—second, the weak have forgotten that God is the only judge. Verse 4 is a strong warning against denouncing a Christian who differs from you in a matter of conscience. As we have already mentioned, the word “judge” here does not mean a simple evaluation but a condemnation and denunciation. Paul’s answer to such an attitude? Stop

playing God. You are not your brother or sister's master: Jesus Christ is! And only He is qualified to judge, not you.

3. We need to Think and Wrestle with what it means to live for Christ—the problem with the “weak” was that they just fell into old patterns and customs from their backgrounds and experience. How many things are there that we just do because we have always done it that way? How thoughtful are we about what it means to live out our lives in Christ? In verse 5, Paul says, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” In other words, Paul says that we need to think out our behavior. We need to work through what we do and why we do it. First, we need to see whether the Bible really commands or forbids some practice, or whether it leaves the conscience free. Second, even if the Bible leaves us free, we may decide to abstain from the practice because it leads us as individuals to sin, or it leads others to sin. Or because it reminds us of something we used to do outside of Christ, and therefore we can't possibly participate in it and, at the same time, be glorifying to God. Determining all this takes thought and prayer! It takes the study of Scripture. Paul is especially telling the weak to do this, since many people with a tendency to legalism, have stopped looking for answers since they feel they already have all the answers.

4. We need to act according to our Conscience—finally, we need to act according to our conscience. In verse 6, Paul gives an idea of how to evaluate whether a practice can be done or not. “He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.” The Christian must look at any practice and say: Can I do this before Christ? Can I do it with an eye upon him? Can I do it in His name, thanking him for it?