

## **The Strong and the Weak and Disputable Matters: What is a Church to Do?**

Romans 14:1 – 15:7

Turn to Romans 14 please. The title is “the strong and the weak and disputable matters: what is a church to do?” This title comes from Romans 14:1 – *Welcome the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters*. If Paul says, “welcome the one whose faith is weak,” there must also be those whose faith is strong, and he’s actually talking to the strong. “You who are strong in the faith, welcome the one whose faith is weak.”

“Without quarreling over disputable matters.” What is “a disputable matter”? Some writers say a disputable matter is a non-essential for our faith. But that’s the problem – some think it is non-essential and some think it is essential. So today we’ll talk about strong in the faith, and about weak in the faith, and about disputable matters. And about how the Lord wants churches to handle these things.

People in our church have different opinions about things, and we still get along pretty well. The differences don’t usually cause tension or division. But, people, it is happening all around us. I have too many stories in my head, from Southern Manitoba and from other provinces, where disputable matters actually divide churches. People leave and churches split over disputable matters. We’re going through our text today as an ounce of prevention for us. I want to help us guard ourselves against how different opinions can go wrong.

I also hope that somehow what I say here can have an effect on other churches and other believers. The teaching of Romans 14 is so important. Our text today is Romans 14:1 – 15:7.

### **1 Do Not Judge your Brother or Sister – Romans 14:1–6**

*Welcome the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*

*One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.*

There were two main issues going on in the church at Rome, and third minor issue. I will explain their disagreements. I will not talk about ours. I just want you to get the principles that this Scripture teaches.

First concern in Rome: whether not to eat meat. We're not sure why some Roman believers did not eat meat. Possibly, because it was idol meat. People worshiped idols in all these cities. Priests offered an animal to their god or goddess, and then they sold the animal to the local butcher. Some believers, especially those who came out of idol worship, refused to eat an animal that had originally been offered to an idol.

Or, Jewish believers in Rome might have been following Old Testament food laws, which were strict about what animals to eat, and about how animals should be slaughtered. We know there were Jewish believers in that church. Either because of Old Testament laws, or because of idol worship, some did not eat meat that other believers in the church felt free to eat.

The second concern was about special days. Verse 5: *One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike.* This is almost certainly about the Jewish Sabbath. Jewish believers found it very hard to let go of one of the ten commands. Other believers had no concern about the Sabbath. The Sabbath command is the only one of the ten commands that's not repeated in the New Testament.

A third minor concern comes up later in 14:21: drinking wine. Probably some people knew the Old Testament warnings against drunkenness, and they saw debauchery around them, and decided that the only godly way to live was never to drink wine.

Let's be clear: Not everything that Christians might disagree about is a disputable matter. In Corinth, a man in the church was living with his step mother, his father's wife. The church was doing nothing. In that church, this was a debatable matter. But biblically it was not. That was sexual immorality, and Paul insisted that the man be put out of the church. In the next chapter Paul writes, "Flee sexual immorality!"

Certain behaviours, like sexual immorality, are condemned from Moses to Revelation. Several places in the New Testament list sins. They list the behaviours that God tells us are wrong. There's a list like that in 1 Corinthians 6. There are sin lists also in Mark 7, Romans 1, and Galatians 5. Believers still sin. We sin. We are all poor in spirit. We do these very things. What we *don't* do is debate whether or not they are sins, because God said they are. Romans 14 is not about sins Paul described in Romans 1. Romans 14 is about disputable matters.

Here again are their disputable matters: eating meat, holy days, and drinking wine. The believers with strict views about these things had clear biblical support for their views. Scriptures said we should have nothing to do with idolatry, and only eat certain meat, and keep the sabbath day, and avoid drunkenness.

For these people, Scripture supported their views, and their conscience insisted that they live this way. In short, for the believers holding these views, these were not disputable matters.

The people who are strict in these matters are the weak in the faith, and most of our Scripture today is written to those who have strong faith. To those with strong faith, these are debatable matters. That's why Paul opens as he does: *[You who are strong,] welcome the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over debatable matters.* Chapter 15 verse 1 says the same in different words: *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*

In Paul's whole discussion, 14:1 to 15:7, no one needs to change their mind about anything. Make sure you catch that. Everybody can keep the view they have, and conscience they have. No one need to change their conscience. But both sides need to improve how they treat each other.

*The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt, must not despise, the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge, must not condemn the one who does, for God has accepted them.*

When we are strong in the faith, we want to despise those with such strict and unnecessary rules. It seems childish. When we are weak in the faith, we condemn the strong, because they are sloppy and careless about something that's important to God, and they should know it is important to God!

Paul says, don't despise anyone, don't condemn anyone, because God has accepted them, God welcomes them, and God is entirely able to take care of them. He will make sure they stand. That's his business. Paul says to us, "the one you differ with in these things is doing fine with the Lord, so leave them alone."

## **2 Do Not Make Your Brother or Sister Stumble – Romans 14:13-23**

The main message of this section is to the strong ones. In short: "Don't press those weak in the faith to go where they are not ready to go, because by pressing them, you put their faith in crisis." Let's read:

Verses 13–15 *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.*

Verses 19–20 *Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.*

We're not talking here about making another believer grumpy. No believer should say to another, "what you are doing offends me, so the Bible says you should stop." That's not what Romans 14 is about. It's about talking about believers losing their way.

V15 *Do not by your eating **destroy** someone for whom Christ died.* V20 *Do not **destroy** the work of God for the sake of food.* That is what an offence and stumbling means in this chapter.

### **3 The Strong and the Weak Reconsidered**

In every instance in that church, regarding food and sabbath and wine, the stricter and more careful view of godliness came from weaker faith, and the more relaxed and tolerant view of godliness came from strong faith. In every instance, the weaker ones had Scripture that supported their view, and their conscience was strong and clear, and they were the weak.

In my early twenties, I had occasion to teach Romans 14 in detail, spread over several days. I remember reading this chapter over and over and thinking, can this be true? That the weaker faith had a more rigorous view of godliness? The stronger ones had a more flexible view? Was that even possible? I had never heard anything like that. But the more I read, the clearer it became.

In my Christian environment, if there had been actual idols around, the believer that refused to eat meat that had been offered to an idol was of course a more righteous person. In my Christian thinking, if someone was more careful about Sunday activities than the rest of us, that of course was one with greater devotion to Christ. If someone decided that believers should never touch wine, because there was excess around, that person was of course a superior servant of Christ. I just assumed these things.

Our text, Romans 14:1 to 15:7, stands all that on its head. It was to me a new view of righteousness. It was one of the first times that reading the Bible changed my mind.

A few years later, the pastor of my home church, E.F.C. in Quesnel, preached Romans 14 to the congregation. He was calling us to be kind to fellow church people who had different opinions. It was a good message. Near the end he said, "In Romans 14, it seems to me that the people with stronger faith have more relaxed and tolerant views of godliness. I'm not it is actually saying that," he said, "but it does sound like that."

That's all he said. Like me, he could hardly believe what Romans 14 was showing him. He dropped it after that. Remember, we're talking about disputable matters.

The message of 14:13–23 is: Strong ones, don't press the weak to do what they are not ready to do. Don't put their faith in danger. They have biblical reasons to think what they think, and their conscience is clear about this, so you be good to them, and pursue peace.

#### **4 Please your Brothers and Sisters, Not Yourself – Romans 15:1–7**

*We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.*

*May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, and so bring praise to God.*

Romans 14:1 began with words to the strong: *Welcome the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.* Romans 15:1 also spoke to the strong: *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.* Welcome the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling. Bear with the failing of the weak, don’t just please yourself.

What if everybody in the church thinks they are the strong and the other side of the debate are the weak ones? This still works. You are one of the strong ones and the other side is weak? Fine. You are strong. You’ve been told how to handle those weak believers around you. Put your strength into action. Welcome them and bear with their failings, let them carry on, don’t quarrel with them, and don’t just please yourself.

Romans 14:1 began, *Receive and welcome the one whose faith is weak.* Romans 15:7 begins almost the same way: *Receive and welcome one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.* The strong and the weak and disputable matters: what is a church to do? This is what a church should do. Receive and welcome one another, just as Christ received and welcomed you.

#### **5 And So Bring Praise to God – Romans 15:7**

Let’s end by taking a good look at the last verse of our text, 15:7: *Welcome one another, then, just as Christ has welcomed you, and so bring praise to God.*

Welcome one another. Accept one another, receive one another. That’s been covered. Just as Christ has welcomed you. In our heart of hearts, we know that Christ has welcomed us warmly and with open arms, without reserve, knowing all the unpleasant stuff. We know that Christ has received us completely.

If “just as Christ has welcomed you” sets a high bar for you, you are enjoying a remarkable gift. Because you actually know how Christ has welcomed and received you. You and I know that the way he takes us in is almost unbelievable. We know it because the Holy Spirit bears witness with our spirit. If we know his welcome, we are rich.

*Welcome one another, then, just as Christ has welcomed you, and so bring praise to God.* I don't know who gives God glory, or when. But it starts with us. Keep welcoming and receiving one another. Pass on to each other what Christ did for you. Amen.

PRAYER: Almighty God, Holy Father: protect us by the power of your name, the name you gave Jesus, so that we will be one the way you and your Son are one. Keep us, guard us, protect us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.