

The Book of Romans

Lesson 13: The Weak and the Strong; Final Greetings -- Romans 14:1-16:27

Picture a congregation in Rome where two believers sit down to share a meal, and an awkward silence falls over the table. One of them eats anything with a clear conscience, grateful to God. The other, perhaps a Jewish believer with a tender conscience, or a Gentile recently out of paganism, eats only vegetables, afraid that the meat might have been tied to idol worship or might violate scruples he cannot shake. Each looks across the table at the other and quietly draws a conclusion. The strong one thinks the weak one is fussy and immature. The weak one thinks the strong one is loose and careless. And just like that, over a plate of food, the unity that Christ died to create begins to fracture.

Paul has spent fifteen chapters building toward a community united in the gospel, and he is not about to let it splinter over secondary matters. So he gives the Roman church, and us, some of the wisest counsel in all of Scripture for living together in love amid genuine differences. As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. Notice that word, opinions. Paul is dealing here with disputable matters, areas where sincere Christians, equally devoted to the Lord, land in different places: what to eat, whether to regard certain days as special. On these matters, Paul says, let each one be fully convinced in his own mind, and let no one despise or judge a brother whom God has welcomed.

But Paul is doing something delicate, and we must follow him carefully. He is not saying that everything is a matter of opinion, or that conviction does not matter, or that clear truth can be set aside in the name of tolerance. He still warns, at the very end of the letter, to watch out for those who cause divisions contrary to the doctrine you have been taught. What Paul is teaching is the hard, mature art of telling the difference between a matter of faith and a matter of liberty, and then holding the first firmly while holding the second with grace. The strong must not wound the weak by flaunting their freedom; the weak must not condemn the strong over scruples Scripture does not bind. Above all, both must remember that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

And then the great letter draws to a close, not with a doctrine but with a long, warm list of names. Greet Priscilla and Aquila. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junia. Page after page of ordinary saints, because in the end the gospel Paul has been expounding comes to rest in real people who love and serve one another. He commends Phoebe, warns against those who divide the church, promises that the God of peace will soon crush Satan, and closes with a soaring doxology to the God who is able to strengthen us, to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations. Read these final chapters, and as our study of Romans ends, let Paul teach you to hold truth and love together: firm where God has spoken,

gracious where He has left us free, and devoted, always, to the peace and unity of Christ's church.

Group Discussion: Paul tells the Romans to welcome one another over differences in disputable matters without quarreling or passing judgment (14:1–4). What kinds of secondary issues tend to cause friction and division among Christians today, and how can a congregation learn to handle genuine differences of opinion without either fracturing into factions or pretending that nothing matters?

Personal Reflection: Paul says, Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind (14:5), and warns against both despising and judging a brother over matters of opinion (14:3–4, 10). Be honest: are you more tempted to look down on other believers as too strict and narrow, or to judge them as too loose and careless? How does this passage call you to a different posture toward those who differ from you?

Read Romans 14:1–16:27

Study Questions

1. Paul writes, As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions, and warns that the one who eats must not despise the one who abstains, and the one who abstains must not judge the one who eats, for God has welcomed him (14:1–4). What does this passage teach about how Christians are to receive one another across differences in disputable matters, and what does Paul mean by the weak and the strong here?
2. Paul forbids both despising the weak and judging the strong (14:3–4, 10). Which is your greater temptation, looking down on fellow believers you consider too strict, or condemning those you consider too lax? What would it look like this week to extend to them the same welcome God has extended to you?
3. Paul says that each person should be fully convinced in his own mind, that whoever observes a day or eats does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God, and that none of us lives or dies to himself, for we are the Lord's, and we will all stand before the judgment seat of God and give an account of ourselves (14:5–12). What does this passage teach about living everything before the Lord, about the role of personal conviction in matters of liberty, and about why we should leave the judging of one another to God?
4. Paul says we will each give an account of ourselves to God (14:12). When you are tempted to pass judgment on another believer over a matter of opinion, how does remembering that both of you answer to the same Lord, and that you must give your own account, change the way you treat them?
5. Paul shifts from our right to our responsibility, urging us never to put a stumbling block in a brother's way, warning that we can destroy by our liberty the one for whom Christ died, and reminding us that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, so we should pursue what makes for

peace and mutual upbuilding (14:13–23). What does this teach about how love limits the use of our own liberty, and why does Paul treat wounding a weak brother's conscience as such a serious matter?

6. Paul warns the strong not to wound a weaker believer by the careless use of their freedom (14:13–21). Is there a liberty you enjoy that, exercised without care, might harm or stumble a weaker brother or sister? How does love sometimes call us to limit even things we are genuinely free to do, for the sake of someone else?
7. Paul calls the strong to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please themselves, pointing to Christ, who did not please Himself, and urging us to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us, so that together, Jew and Gentile, we may with one voice glorify God (15:1–13). How does Paul ground the call to unity and mutual acceptance in the example of Christ, and what does it mean to welcome one another as Christ welcomed us?
8. Paul holds up Christ, who did not please Himself but bore with others for their good (15:1–3), as the pattern for how we treat one another. Are you more often a builder of peace and unity in your congregation, or a source of friction, criticism, or division? What is one concrete way you could pursue what makes for peace and build others up this week?
9. In handling the weak and the strong, Paul calls each to be fully convinced in his own mind (14:5) and says whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (14:23); yet he also warns at the letter's close to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught (16:17). How do we rightly distinguish matters of opinion and conscience (where we extend liberty and welcome) from matters of faith and clear doctrine (where we must stand firm); why must Romans 14 never be used to relativize what God has plainly taught; and what does it mean that whatever is not from faith is sin?
10. As our study of Romans ends, look back across this final section and the whole letter. Paul has called you to welcome one another, to hold truth and love together, to pursue peace, and he closes with greetings to ordinary saints, a warning against division, and a doxology to the God who brings about the obedience of faith among all the nations (16:25–27). Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these chapters and through the book of Romans as a whole. What is the single truth you most need to carry forward from this study?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 1 Corinthians 8:9–13, taking care that our liberty does not wound a weaker brother; 1 Corinthians 10:23–33, doing all to the glory of God and seeking the good of others; Colossians 2:16–23, freedom from human rules about food and days; Ephesians 4:1–6, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; Romans 16:25–27, the closing doxology and the obedience of faith among all the nations