



An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

(15) The Strong and the Weak

Romans 14

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Today we return to our series on Romans. We have had some interruptions lately, but they are good interruptions – like babies needing to be baptized and a Thanksgiving Day service. But now we return to our regularly scheduled series and this morning we will hear God's word to us from Romans 14.

Romans 14 is about showing love in situations where there is a difference of opinion about the legitimacy of certain behaviors by Christians. This chapter deals with a very specific way of treating one other with love within the Christian community. The different opinions that are under consideration are not equally valid. One is right, and the other is wrong. Paul uses the distinction between some who are strong and others who are weak in this chapter. The opinions of the strong in this chapter are objectively correct while the opinions of the weak are objectively incorrect. But at the same time the differences of opinion are not over things that are part of core-orthodoxy or core-morality. The weak people in this chapter are not doing things or believing things that are soul-destroying and that cannot be tolerated within the Christian community.

So, we are learning how to treat one another in a loving way when some people in the congregation think a certain behaviour is wrong and other people in the congregation think that there is nothing wrong with that behaviour. This already points out something important and interesting about the Christian life and about God's way of regulating our lives.

As Christians we are under God's authority which means that he tells us how to live. He tells us what is right, and he tells us what is wrong and a huge part of being a Christian is doing what he says. But God's instructions to us about how to live are not overly detailed. You might think that the Bible is a pretty big book, but it is very very small compared to, let's say, the laws of Canada. I don't know how many volumes it takes to contain all the laws of Canada, but there is no doubt that it is many more volumes than the Bible. God has given us the Ten Commandments. He has given us a number of chapters in the New Testament about how God requires us to live. If you take everything in the Bible telling what we can and cannot do and what we must and may not do, you would end up with a fairly slender volume. God has given us principles. He has given us examples. He has gone into specifics in some areas. But what he has not done is give us exhaustive legislation that governs all the details of our lives. This is especially true of New Testament Christians because we do not even have anything like the laws that we find in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. New Testament Christians are treated as mature adults who can apply the general laws and principles of God's word to the specific situations that we face.

But that leaves room for different conclusions on at least some of the specifics. The way God governs us by not legislating our lives in exhaustive detail will inevitably result in differences of opinions in some areas. And that means that we Christians have to deal with each other when we do not always agree about certain things that the Bible does not address explicitly.

There are many areas where right and wrong and true and false are totally clear and the Bible is totally clear about how we are to deal with one another in those situations. But this chapter and a few other similar chapters in the New Testament teach us how to deal with one another in situations where there are differences in areas where neither of the opinions disqualify a person from being a Christian.

So, we are not dealing here with a subject like homosexuality as some people who call themselves Christians would claim. The Bible clearly and explicitly says that homosexuals who do not repent of their

homosexuality will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. This passage is not dealing with issues like that. Rather it is dealing with issues where neither position disqualifies one from the kingdom of God.

The two issues that Romans 14 addresses are whether or not it is right to eat meat and whether or not one should keep the Jewish feast days. Verse 2 says, "One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables." And verse 5 says, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike."

Now part of the difficulty in interpreting this passage is that we do not have much detail or context for these two issues. Many New Testament theologians think that they had something to do with the Jewish/Gentile divide and that is probably true, but there is nothing in the Old Testament ceremonial laws about refraining from all meat, so we really don't know why some people in the early church felt that in order to please God they had to eat only vegetables.

What is clear however, from this passage is that there were people in that congregation who felt that not eating meat and eating only vegetables was pleasing to God. They were wrong about that. That is why they are called the weak. There is nothing anywhere in the Bible that teaches that being a vegetarian is more pleasing to God than eating the normal human diet that includes steak and hamburgers on the grill. You can make the argument that eating too much steak and too many hamburgers is a violation of the sixth commandment because that kind of diet will end up killing you, but having a piece of steak the size of a pack of cards along with a good size salad is no less pleasing to God than having tofu with your salad, as long as you receive it with thanksgiving.

So, in this example in Romans 14, the vegetarians were objectively wrong, and the meat-eaters were objectively right. That is why the vegetarians are categorized as weak and the meat-eaters are categorized as strong. However, being a vegetarian is not a soul-destroying violation of God's law. And so, the strong meat-eaters are exhorted here to welcome the vegetarians and not to despise them because of their scruples and the vegetarians are exhorted here not to pass judgment on the meat-eaters. And both sides are exhorted not to quarrel and to treat one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

This is very different from the way a person is to be treated who is sleeping with his father's wife. When Paul deals with that issue in 1 Corinthians 5, he tells the congregation, "you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord." In both cases the motivation is love but love towards a vegetarian looks very different from love to a man who sleeps with his step-mom which is probably what Paul was addressing in 1 Corinthians 5.

The second area of disagreement that is mentioned in Romans 14 is the matter of special days. Now how you parse this matter depends on whether you are a Sabbatarian or not. (In case you are not familiar with that term, a Sabbatarian is a Christian who believes that the Fourth Commandment still applies to us today.) Let me re-read verse 5, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike." To most Christians living today, you and I are the weaker brethren in this scenario because we believe that the first day of the week is the Christian Sabbath, a special day and that it is pleasing to the Lord that we keep it holy according to the Fourth Commandment.

Most Christians think that we Sabbatarians have missed the transition between the old and new covenant and so we are weak because we do not esteem all days of the week alike. We, on the other hand, think that the majority is weak in this area because they do not understand that the sabbath command is rooted in creation and that Jesus has transferred the Sabbath from the seventh day of the week to the first day of the week when he rose from the dead on the first day (which made the first day the sabbath of the new creation) and told his disciples to start doing sabbath-things on the first day instead of the seven.

So, the rest think that we are weak, and we think that they are weak, but we can both find enough in the rest of this passage to guide us in how to treat one another in love. We think that they are breaking the fourth commandment by going to restaurants after church on Sundays, but most of us think that they are weak and not rebellious in doing that so that we can still treat them as weaker brethren instead of those who are living in rebellion against God. And they look at us as weaker

brethren because we think that God is pleased when we do not go to restaurants on Sunday because that is at least part of what it means to keep the Fourth Commandment holy.

Now in that last little bit about the Sabbath, I'm not using the terms strong and weak exactly the same way that they are used in this passage. So, I need to correct that. In this passage the weak are those who refrain from doing things that God permits them to do and the strong have a better understanding of the freedom that they have from man-made restrictions.

So, regarding the issue of eating or not eating meat. The Bible does not forbid us from eating meat. In the Old Testament there were certain restrictions, but in the New Testament there are none. So those who eat meat are stronger in the way that this passage is using that term and those who eat only vegetables are weaker. Likewise concerning the esteeming of days. The weaker brothers were those who thought that God required them to esteem some days better than other days and the stronger brothers esteemed all days alike. In the Sabbatarian interpretation of this passage, the days in question are probably Old Testament feast days and not the weekly Sabbath.

So, the weak in this passage are people who believe that they must refrain from things that are not restricted in the Bible and the strong are those who have a more mature understanding of where God has given us restrictions and where God has given us freedom. This is the kind of difference that this passage is addressing. It is a very specific application of the use of the ideas of strength and weakness. The strong are not necessarily strong in every respect and the weak are not necessarily weak in every respect. The strong have a more accurate understanding of where God draws the lines in his word and the weak tend to draw lines where God has not done so.

Now it's easy enough to understand who is weak and who is strong in the examples that Paul gives in this passage because he tells us. It is more difficult to come up with examples that are part of our experience so that this passage has some contemporary relevance to us. The one example that is used in the commentaries that I read is that Sabbatarians are the weaker brethren and non-Sabbatarians are the

stronger brethren. That seems an obvious application to non-Sabbatarians. It's not so obvious to us. We believe that that Fourth Commandment still applies to us today and is not optional.

One example that is pretty clear, I think, is the example of drinking alcohol. There are Christians who believe it is wrong to drink alcohol. According to this passage those who hold to this scruple would be categorized as weak in the sense that this passage uses that term and those who understand that the moderate use of alcohol is consistent with godliness would be categorized as the strong according to this passage. This does not mean that you have to actually drink alcohol in order to be strong. To be strong according to this passage all you need to do is understand that you may drink alcohol and to be weak according to this passage is not just to refrain from drinking alcohol, but rather to believe that it is wrong to drink alcohol.

The principle here is that God alone is the Lord of the conscience. Our Westminster Confession of Faith expresses it like this in 20:2, "God alone is the Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are – in anything contrary to his Word, or which – in matters of faith or worship – are in addition to it. Therefore, anyone who believes such doctrines or obeys such commands out of conscience betrays true liberty of conscience."

This is why the strong in this passage are strong and the weak are weak. To draw lines where God has not drawn them is to be weak in the faith and not to go beyond the word of God is to be stronger in the faith. It is clear from this passage that a person who is strong may voluntarily choose to refrain from something that he knows he is allowed to do - for later on in the passage Paul will describe a situation in which he should do so. But the strong will have a clear understanding of where God draws the lines and the weak will have a tendency to be conscience-bound to man-made rules and traditions. The issue at stake here is, who is Lord of our consciences.

However, the main concern of the passage is how the strong and the weak are to relate to one another. The passage assumes that there will be people who are stronger in faith and that there will be people who

are weaker in faith and Paul's concern is with how these two kinds of people relate to one another.

The strong are not to despise the weak and the weak are not to pass judgment on the strong. These are the two tendencies that Paul mentions. Those who are stronger have a tendency to despise those who are weaker than they are (in the sense that this term is used in this passage) and those who are weaker have a tendency to judge those who are stronger. Instead Paul tells the strong to welcome the weak and he tells both not to quarrel over opinions. He assumes that there will be differences in this area in the congregation and his concern is that these differences not cause division, but rather that the two kinds of people accept and welcome one another.

And the great principle that both sides are to keep in mind is the principle that we are all accountable to God and we must all make our judgments in these disputed matters in the light of the fact that we will all answer to God. The basic idea in verses 5-12 is that whether we are weak or whether we are strong, we must be convinced in our own minds that our actions and our convictions on these matters are pleasing to God and will be approved by him on the Day of Judgment.

Verses 10-12, "Why do you pass judgement on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' So, then each of us will give an account of himself to God."

This puts this whole matter in a very sobering and serious context. It is not that those who consider themselves strong in this area are free to do whatever they please. And it is not that those who tend towards the weaker side in this area can make rules wherever they please. The decisions that we make in disputed areas will be evaluated by God in the final judgment. That means that we must not make our decisions and judgments in any area lightly. We must not just make the decisions that come most naturally to us. These things must be weighed carefully seeking to discern whether our decisions in disputed matters are truly pleasing to God.

The danger on the part of the strong is that they take their freedom into forbidden territory and the danger on the part of the weak is that they are judgmental towards their fellow believers. Neither of those possibilities is pleasing to God.

Furthermore, we must presume that those who make decisions on disputed matters that are different than the decisions that we make, are making their decisions in good conscience and are truly seeking to honor the Lord. Verse 6 says, “The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.” So, we are to judge one another with the judgment of charity. We are to presume that those who draw the lines in different places than we do, are genuinely seeking to honor the Lord by the decisions that they make. We are to assume good motivations on the part of brothers and sisters who see things differently than we do in the kinds of issues that are being addressed in this chapter.

Now as I have said before, love requires a different response when a brother or a sister is breaking a commandment. Love sometimes requires that we correct one another or that we admonish one another. But the kinds of behaviours that this chapter addresses are behaviours that are consistent with godliness as godliness is defined by the word of God. The kinds of behaviours that this chapter addresses are behaviours that can reasonably be done to the honor of God. And the point of the first half of the chapter is that when there are differences in these areas we are to welcome one another. We are not to quarrel over opinions. The strong are not to despise the weak and the weak are not to judge the strong.

It is interesting to consider that this distinction between the strong and the weak are Paul’s categories in with respect to the issues that he identifies. These are not necessarily self-designations. The strong probably think that they are strong. But the weak probably think that they are strong too. People who are overly scrupulous do not usually think that their scrupulousness is a sign of weakness. They usually consider it a sign of strength. In the light of this passage, however, if you

are often tempted to judge other people because they are less rigorous than you are in debatable areas, you should probably consider that a sign of weakness.

Anyway – in spite of the difficulty deciding who is weak and who is strong and exactly what issues fall under the purview of this passage, the basic thrust and application for us is clear enough. Welcome one another. Don't quarrel over opinions. Do not despise or judge fellow believers who differ from you in disputed areas of the kind that this passage addresses.

Finally, the last part of the chapter addresses the strong and Paul tells the strong restrict their freedom so as "never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother." In verse 15 he says, "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." In verse 20 he writes, "Do not for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for another to make another stumble by what he eats." Verse 21, "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble."

Now the basic idea here is clear enough. We are not to indulge in behaviours that are not wrong in themselves if doing so will be a stumbling block or a hindrance in the Christian life of a brother or a sister. And a stumbling block is described as something that grieves and destroys that brother. We are to voluntarily restrict ourselves if indulging our freedom in some area is a stumbling block for a brother.

The stumbling block seems to be tempting a brother to do something that violates his conscience. Verse 23 says, "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."

In terms of this passage, if a person eats meat when he thinks it is wrong to do so, his eating is not of faith – he is sinning and that could well lead to his destruction. That seems to be the point that Paul is making. By observing the freedom of a brother or a sister, a weak brother may be tempted to follow their example violating his conscience and therefore sinning against God. Even if the behaviour is

not objectively sinful, someone who thinks that it is sinful, and does it anyway is sinning and that is a serious matter because going against your conscience hardens your conscience and could well lead to destruction and even if it does not it could be a real hindrance in that person's spiritual life.

Here are a couple of quotations that express the principle. From the notes in the Zondervan NIV Study Bible, the strong, "must be willing to avoid practicing their liberty in situations that might cause spiritual harm to others." From the Reformation Study Bible, "Superstition or scruple may lead a person to count as sinful an action that according to God's word is not sinful. But for such a "weak" conscience (Rom. 14:1, 2; 1 Cor. 8:7, 12) to go against itself and do what it mistakenly judges to be wrong would be sin (Rom. 14:23). Those whose conscience is "weak" should never be pressed or cajoled to do what destroys their good conscience."

The idea here is that we are to voluntarily limit our freedom in situations where indulging our freedom would tempt the weaker brother or sister to imitate us in violation of their conscience. The idea here is that we are to limit our freedom in situations where indulging our freedom would cause spiritual harm to others. That is a very specific scenario. It does not mean that it is always necessary to conform to the opinion of the weakest member of the congregation. That would result in a tyranny of the weak and that is not what Paul is speaking about here.

We are to restrict our freedom where indulging it would tempt others to violate their consciences. This might be in a situation where the weaker brother or sister is in a minority and might feel pressure to conform to the majority against their consciences. One example might be a group of young people out for the evening. One of them feels that it is wrong to go to a movie – any movie. The majority feels that they can watch a good clean movie with thankfulness to God. In that kind of situation, the movie-goers should not indulge their freedom to watch a good movie because this is a situation in which the person with scruples would feel pressure to conform to the majority and violate his or her conscience.

Now, from my experience at least, this is not something that we run into very often in our context. I have a hard time thinking of examples where indulging a legitimate freedom would actually cause spiritual harm to another believer. We must understand that the time of the early church was a time of massive change especially for Jews who had been shaped by the whole ceremonial system of the Old Testament plus the extra biblical laws that had accumulated over the centuries. Moving from that to the freedom of the gospel was a very great change and it is not surprising that it took time for people to adjust.

However, the basic principle has many different applications. The gospel calls us to deny ourselves for the good of our fellow believers. The love that God has shown to us in Jesus Christ is to shape our attitudes towards the people around us and particularly our fellow believers. How we treat others is to benefit them spiritually and it may never harm them spiritually. And we are to be willing to deny ourselves in various ways to make that happen. It may be that there are not many times that we are faced with the exact scenario addressed in this passage. But we are constantly faced with the calling to deny ourselves in order to be a blessing to others. May this passage be an encouragement to do that, in restricting our freedom when indulging it would spiritually harm others, but also to deny ourselves in other ways in order to be a blessing to others. That is what it means to love.