

With One Voice

Romans 14:1-15:7

Introduction

What a strange dinner table. There is the 70 year old man with his three piece suit looking uncomfortably conservative. There is a young hispanic man with heavily tattooed arms wearing excessively baggy pants with a cigarette behind his ear that he nervously strokes with his nicotined-stained fingers. There is the young single mother with the “plunging-too-low” neckline. There is the parents whose kids seem slightly out of control as they sit disturbingly unconcerned. There is the other set of parents whose kids are quiet and seated but they seem consumed with their behavior. There is the young single girl who is nervously looking at the meat because she is a vegan. There is the middle aged woman wearing nearly a store full of expensive jewelry and stroking the head of her little dog that sits in her way too expensive handbag...

This strange dinner table is the Lord’s Dinner Table. These are the people God has invited to His table. It is a group of people with all kinds of massive differences. It is a group of people with all kinds of imperfections, misunderstandings, and sins. But it is a group of people who have been welcomed by God and IF....IF...they welcome one another can glorify God with one voice.

Read Romans 14:1-15:7

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 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. 7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; 11 for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”

12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

13 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. 14 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. 15 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. 16 So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. 19 So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

20 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. 21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. [3] 22 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. 23 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.

15:1 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” 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. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

The thrust of Romans 14:1-15:7 is a command...welcome one another...We see it in 14:3 and 15:7 as bookends to the passage. The passage comes to a climax in 15:6 where Paul tells us that we welcome one another “that together you may with one voice glorify the God an Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What is the historical situation? In what circumstances was Paul exhorting the Roman church to welcome each other?

There were Jewish Christians in Rome who were convinced that the torah (OT commands tied to the Mosaic Covenant) was still authoritative for Christians. They claimed that a sincere Christian should avoid meat and wine and should observe the Sabbath and Jewish holy days. Only by following such practices could a Christian avoid ritual contamination and please God. They truly believed that this was the way to be a “good Christian” or a “better Christian.” Paul was telling strong Christians—Christians who had a more correct understanding of how God wanted them to live—Paul was telling them to live at peace with these people.

*****IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER** These weaker Christians did NOT believe that obedience to these rules earned salvation. Paul did not want unity with people who believed that we obey in order to be saved. This is how he spoke about people who believed that salvation was by works:

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— **7** not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. **8** But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. **9** As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:6-9)

2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. **3** I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. **4** You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. (Galatians 5:1-4)

So, Romans 14:1-15:7 is all an exhortation to live in unity as God's people. It seems that there are **four general approaches** that people have toward other believers in the body of Christ. These are not types of people but general approaches or tendencies and you might have seasons of tending toward one and then another. Here they are:

1. There are Pushers:

God has taught you a lot. And you have an overwhelming desire to change people in the church because you know that they would be happier or even better Christians if they simply took your advice.

2. There are Judges:

You know better than to try to change people. So you simply stand back and evaluate (judge) people in the church. He is a... And she is a... And you put each person in their neat little box.

3. There are Spectators:

You know you have problems and so does everyone else. So you don't want to change anyone or to judge anyone. So you just come to church, sit quietly, listen attentively, and go home quickly.

4. There are Welcomers:

You know you are a sinner loved by Christ. Therefore you proactively welcome people in the church just as Christ has welcomed you.

There are two kinds of people that Paul singles out as people who tend to quarrel: **The weak and the strong.**

What does it mean to be weak?

“In Christian books and from Christian pulpits one sometimes hears Romans 14 applied something like this: Believers should refrain from drinking alcohol out of deference to other Christians who might be inclined to overindulge and abuse alcohol. Those other Christians are the ‘weaker brothers’—weak because they have a weakness for alcohol. The principle, of course, is valid enough. Christians should recognize the weaknesses of fellow Christians and do what they can to keep them from succumbing to those weaknesses. But we must point out that this idea of ‘weakness’ is not what Paul is talking about in Romans 14. The ‘weak brother’ in this chapter is the one who is ‘weak in faith.’ He believes that his faith does not allow him to do certain things. His weakness has nothing to do with an emotional or physical susceptibility. It is a theological weakness. Indeed, rather than referring to a Christian who is overly fond of alcohol, the ‘weak brother’ is one who is convinced that drinking alcohol at all is wrong and condemns others for doing it.” (Moo, EBR, p. 197).

A weak Christian can be more godly than a strong Christian. He can be more mature, more fruitful, and more pleasing to God. This is very important for the strong to recognize because they have a tendency to despise those who are weak.

What does it mean to be strong?

“Strong” does not mean that the person has more faith. It does not mean he has a stronger relationship with God. It simply means that he has a clearer understanding about what God asks of him. Paul, of course, would fit in the group of the strong, and he says in the passage that the strong are correct in their understanding:

“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself”
Romans 14:14a

What did the weak and the strong quarrel over in Paul’s day?

Eating, drinking, and keeping certain days holy.

They quarreled about whether these things were part of God law that was binding for today. They quarreled about whether doing or not doing these things made you a better Christian.

Things we quarrel over today?

Entertainment

Drinking Alcohol

Smoking

Watching certain TV shows or movies

Getting a tattoo or body piercing

Social Class or Status

The kinds of houses we own, cars we drive, etc. How much is too much?

Theological

1. Practice

Must women wear skirts or are pants permissible?

Must we dress up for church?

Parenting styles- strict? lenient? spank or not? Are you growing your kids

God's way or not?

2. Theory

Are you a Calvinist or an arminian?

amillennialist/premillennialist?

CT, NCT, DISP?

Do you believe miraculous spiritual gifts are for today or not?

How did their quarreling manifest sinfully?

The strong despised the weak. This is what it might have sounded like if we could have listened to the thoughts of a strong person.

“Those people are WRONG. They don’t know what they are talking about. They are stupid and immature. They are legalists and prudes. They make Christ look like a nitpicking rule-keeper. I wonder if they are even Christians at all.”

The weak passed judgment on the strong. This is what it might have sounded like if we could have listened to the thoughts of a weak person.

“Those people are WRONG. They don’t know what they are talking about. They are stupid and immature. They are antinomians and sinners. They make Christ look like a loose living man who does not care how you live. I wonder if they are even Christians at all.”

They got together at church and they talked about their differences and tried to convince each other. They thought their differences were SO VERY IMPORTANT. They were on a mission to convert each other, not to Christianity, but to their particular brand of non-essentials!

The results:

The weaker brother was grieved, caused to stumble, and even destroyed by the stronger brother. 14:15, 21

The stronger brother was judged and therefore causing disunity in the church.

God says we must welcome one another.

He gives four reasons.

1. God has welcomed us and Christ has welcomed us. 14:3
2. God is the master of all...not you. 14:4
3. Christ lived and died to be Lord of all, not you. 14:8-9
4. God is the judge of all and we all give an account to God...not to you. 14:10-12

Remember God is pleased with the weak and the strong (when they are not judging and despising each other)!

14:5-7

- God is pleased by the way the weak honor God when they abstain or keep certain days holy (even though they are wrong) by being fully convinced that he is pleasing God with his behavior and by giving thanks to God.
- God is pleased by the way the strong honor God with their freedom, eating all things and esteeming all days the same by being fully convinced that they are pleasing God with this behavior and by giving thanks to God.

“The materials at hand [sabbath keeping, abstaining from meat, abstaining from alcohol, only wearing ankle length skirts] have to be ‘converted,’ turned towards Christ in the process” (Wall, 79).

And

“Conversion, we must constantly remind ourselves, is about turning what is already there; it is more about direction than about content” (Wall, 79).

We will speak in terms of REDEEMING the things that you once did not use for God. If you used to use a nice car and a cabin by the lake for selfish purposes, now use them for the glory of God. If you abstained from alcohol or watching movies for legalistic purposes, now abstain to the glory of God and give thanks to Him! If you wore pants as a woman out of rebellion to your upbringing, now wear them fully convinced of your freedom and with thanksgiving! Redeem your wealth, redeem your traditions, redeem your entertainment and do it fully convinced, for the glory of God, and with thanksgiving!

How can we do this and still live together as a church?

Keep three verses in mind

1. Romans 14:17

“The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking”

The kingdom of God is not about franchising your particular brand of nonessentials of the Christian faith. That mission is as important as going as a missionary to another country and making it your goal to have everyone dress like you! Remember, our hearts must be set on glorifying God and proclaiming Christ to a dying world. What would you fight for in another continent...!

2. Romans 14:19

“Pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding”

Since I have been a Christian I have heard many many more heated discussions about whether we should keep the Sabbath or not and whether we should watch a particular television show, than encouragement to regularly repent of sins and to be diligent in prayer. I have heard (and instigated) many many more heated discussion about premillennialism than I have about encouragement to trust in Jesus. Pursue topics of conversation that make and increase peace with one another and build up one another up!

3. Romans 14:22

“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God”

That is, the correct understanding that you have about non-essential things, keep quiet about. This is perhaps the simplest and most helpful command in the whole passage. Just SHUT IT!

Missing the Point

But now I know some of you are just dying to ask certain questions like: should we drink in public? How many can we drink? Can we go to see PG 13 or R rated movies? And on and on...

I recently read a story that might help answer these questions as they relate to these verses.

A school administrator in Norfolk England has said there have been no absences from his school since he started rewarding pupils with chocolate for good behaviour. Dr Andrew Sheppard began the scheme in 2005, since then absent days at the Primary school have dropped from 65 a year to zero...

In September 2005, Dr Sheppard pledged to give all 240 pupils a bar of chocolate if they made it to Christmas break without any absences. The scheme proved so successful it was extended term by term.

But, the School Food Trust has criticized Dr. Sheppard for his food choice and stepped in and asked him to consider using healthy food as a reward.

What we have here is a story of competing agendas. The Food Trust is all about the diets of the students. Dr. Sheppard is all about the attendance of the students. The Food Trust hears this story about Dr. Sheppard and all they can hear is "candy bar" and that leads them to a particular set of concerns and questions. Dr. Sheppard simply sees the attendance stats rising and thinks its all good.

Shepherd focuses on attendance
The Food Trust focuses on diet...

But both of them, by focusing so narrowly seemed to be doing real harm the very students that they are supposed to be helping.

DON'T MISS THE BIG PICTURE

Are we focusing so narrowly on our perception of the lack of proper God-honoring behavior of our brothers and sisters that we are actually causing our brothers and sisters to be destroyed and God to be dishonored?

You see most Christians read Romans 14:1-15:7 and think that they are getting grid of how to debate non essential issues. But that is NOT what Romans 14 is about! **Romans 14 is telling us what is at stake if we focus on debating about these issues: The eternal lives of our brothers and sisters and the Glory of God.**

Conclusion:

Don't be a pusher, a judge, or a spectator any longer. Be a welcomer for the glory of God. Proactively showing your love and acceptance creates "a unity in spirit and attitude, an underlying sense of belonging to each other and loving each other that creates a loving context for the differences that inevitably exist among believers. It is when we exhibit this kind of united spirit that the church is able to praise God as he desires to be praised (v.6). God is especially honored when his people unite, "with one heart and mouth," in their worship of him. Corporate worship should involve more than a group of isolated individuals who happen to come under the same roof at the same time of the week. It should be a union of like-minded people, all dedicated to each other" (Moo, Encountering the Book of Romans- EBR, 199). If we are able to stop judging and despising one another and to start wholeheartedly welcoming one another then God will be glorified with our one united voice. But notice, in our passage that Paul immediately moves in 15:8 to His mission to make the nations glorify God for his mercy. Why? Because once we can put away our petty disagreement and backbiting, our despising and judging, and once we are united with one voice, we can speak clearly and with all of our energy to a dying world about our glorious savior. We can once again, be on the mission God created us for, to spread His glory from sea to sea.

No Time for Kicking

"A horse can't pull while kicking.

This fact we merely mention.

And he can't kick while pulling,

Which is our chief contention.

Let's imitate the good old horse
And lead a life that's fitting;
Just pull an honest load, and then
There'll be no time for kicking."