

CLASS 13: STRONG CHRISTIANS AND WEAK CHRISTIANS (Romans 14:1 – 15:13)

4. Weak and strong brothers, ch. 14 - 15:13

Much of the trouble in the churches was caused by the varying understanding of the Christians. Some were strong, recognizing what God required and the freedom he has granted, especially in external matters. Others were weak, thinking that God has imposed external regulations besides those of the moral law; for them to do what the strong Christians were doing would be sin, for they thought those things were wrong; the weak brothers might easily return to their former sinful life.

The particular issues that troubled the church were eating food offered to idols, and keeping certain religious days.

Paul enjoins both groups to tolerate one another in brotherly love and acceptance. Let each person have his conviction, and live by it. Let not the weak judge the strong, nor the strong look down on the weak. On the other hand, the strong were in a position to sacrifice much of their own freedom in order to protect the weak (14:15-21).

To love one another above the exercise of one's own freedom, requires the grace of God, which he will bestow (15:5).

We are accountable to God

14:1 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 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.

Jesus often was faced with censoriousness; we must reject false teachers (Matt 7:15-20), but we must receive and welcome fellow believers (Matt 7:1-5).

The tension of the weak and the strong:

Strong:

- Understand the principles of law and liberty (v. 1, *diakrisis*, NIV “disputable matters”)

Weak:

- Religious scruples that are not commanded
- In danger of falling

The issues at that point:

- Food (v. 2; cf. food offered to idols in 1 Cor 8:1-7)
- Days (v. 5; cf. Gal 4:10-11; Col 2:16-17)

The treatment of the weak and the strong:

Maintain personal integrity (v. 5b; cf. 4:21, *plerophoreo*, “fully persuaded”)

Receive brothers as God does (vv. 1, 3-4)

Do not judge others (vv. 3-4, 10; Paul did not judge even himself, 1 Cor 4:3-5)

Recognize Christ as the only Lord of us all (vv. 6-8)

Be ready for our judgment by God (vv. 10-12)

The testing of the weak and the strong:

God has received us (vv. 1, 3)

God supports us and sanctifies us (v. 4)

Paul’s argument *a fortiori* (“from the stronger”)

Christ is the Lord of the dead and the living (vv. 7-9)

Therefore, Christ is the Lord of Christians enjoying liberty and those abstaining (v. 6)

Note on this type of argument: Common in the NT (Rom 8:32; see also Heb 2:2-4; 1 Pet 4:17-18)

God will judge us all; this is where our “test” will be graded (vv. 10-12)

“Judgment seat (*bema*) of God”

Cf. “judgment seat (*bema*) of Christ” in 2 Cor 5:10; we will be judged personally by Christ

Quotes Isa 45:23

Consider the weak

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.

Unlike the evolutionary model of the survival of the fittest, the Christian follows the opposite principle, that the strong help the weak, even if the action is sacrificial.

The position of the weak (vv. 13-15, 20-21)

Immeasurable value:

- God made them (v. 20; Eph 2:10)
- Christ died for them (v. 15)

Immature judgment:

- Wrong opinions (vv. 2, 14, 20)
- But they must follow them (vv. 14, 20; cf. v. 5)

Imminent danger:

- Weak (vv. 1-2)
- Apt to stumble, be scandalized (vv. 13, 20-21)
- Easily grieved, pained (v. 15)
- Easily destroyed, crushed (v. 15)
 - “Crush” (v. 15, *apolluo*)
 - “Fall apart” (v. 20, *kataluo*)

Care for the weak (vv. 13, 15, 20-21)

Respect (v. 13):

- Not judging or condescending (vv. 3-4, 10)

Love (v. 15):

- Not grieving (same as “grieving” the Spirit in Eph 4:30)

Consideration (vv. 20-21):

- Refrain from liberty voluntarily
- Compare the Jerusalem Council decision of A.D. 49 (Acts 15:20-21)
- Compare Paul’s practice (1 Cor 8:9-13; 9:19-22)

Appreciation from the weak (vv. 16-19)

Avoid criticism and strife (v. 16)

- Cf. Paul’s offering (Acts 15:26; 2 Cor 8:19-21)

Enjoy peace and edification (v. 19)

Enjoy respect and confidence of the church and the approval of God (v. 18; 1 Cor 9:22-27)

Anticipate the kingdom of God (v. 17)

Christ is our example in showing the proper attitude of the strong to the weak (Rom 15:3).

The privilege of the strong

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.*

While parents must suffer much inconvenience and sacrifice to rear their children, they would not wish to change places with them. Being strong in faith brings many joyous rewards, but also entails more responsibility and obligation.

The joy of the strong (14:22-23)

The strong have cause for joy (v. 22)

- Clear fellowship with God
- Clear conscience in a joyful life
- Blessedness in enjoying God's gifts (Eccl. 5:18)

The weak have a more restricted life

- Sins if he eats (vv. 14b, 20b)
- All deeds not of faith are sin (Heb 11:6; 1 Cor 10:31)

The responsibility of the strong (15:1-2)

Not to please themselves (1 Cor 10:33)

To bear the responsibilities of the weak

"Bear, carry" (*bastazo*), not just "bear with, tolerate" as in most English translations (e.g., NKJV, NIV, ESV) – Rom 11:18 (root bears branches); Jesus bore the cross (Luke 14:27)

The strong are to help the weak carry their extra burdens

To please their neighbor

- Not as in Gal 1:10, but as in 1 Cor 9:20-23
- Seek their neighbor's good (14:15)
- Build up their neighbor (14:19)

The encouragement for the strong (15:3-4)

The example of Christ

- He did not please himself (cf. v. 1)

- He died (14:15)
- He received insults directed to the Father (quotation from Ps 69:9; a Messianic Psalm)

The encouragement of the Scriptures

The OT was given to us for our endurance, encouragement, and hope (Rom 5:3-4; Phil 1:20; 1 Thess 1:3)

The unity of the weak and the strong

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.* ⁸ *For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ *and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name."* ¹⁰ *And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."* ¹¹ *And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him."* ¹² *And again Isaiah says,, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."* ¹³ *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.***

Striving for unity (vv. 5, 7-8)

The spirit of unity (v. 5)

"The same mind," (*to outo phronein*, "to be thinking the same thing," differences within general agreement, same attitudes)

Similar to 1 Cor 12:12-27

Mutual acceptance (v. 7; Rom 14:1)

The spirit of serving (v. 8; vv. 2-3a)

God gives endurance, encouragement, Christ as the Leader in service (v. 5)

Enjoying our unity (vv. 6, 13)

Three-fold unity in v. 6:

- Unity of mind (*homothumadon*; Amos 3:3)
- Unity of voice

- Unity of confession

Chain in v. 13:

Hope (= believing) → joy → peace → abounding in hope

All these are strengthened in conjunction with each other

Praising God by our unity (vv. 6-12)

The goal, to glorify God (v. 6)

The purpose of Christ's life, to glorify God (v. 7)

What Jesus did – he became a servant to the Jews (v. 8a)

Why Jesus did it – to keep God's truth (v. 8b)

To confirm the promises to the Jews, that the Jews would glorify God (v. 8c)

To bless the Gentiles, that the Gentiles would glorify God (v. 9a)

Cf. the offering that glorifies God (2 Cor 9:11-13)

The proof of the Gentiles glorifying God, OT texts from the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (vv. 9b-12)

From Ps 18:49, As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name."

From Deut 32:43, ¹⁰ And again it is said, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

From Ps 117:1, ¹¹ And again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him."

From Isa 11:10, ¹² And again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope."

Our efforts at unity:

- Strive to be strong
- Strive to help others to become strong
- Strive to be at one with all the fellow believers
- Strive to have all the believers glorify God