

Receiving One Another with Understanding, Part 2

Scripture: Romans 14:1–12

Code: 45-109

INTRODUCTION

It is obvious from Scripture that the Lord is concerned about how Christians treat one another. In Matthew 18:6 Jesus tells His disciples, "Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones who believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." Jesus was not talking about infants, but about believers. He likens believers to little children. From verse 6 we learn that how we treat one another as Christians is a serious matter to the Lord. In verse 7 Jesus says, "Woe unto the world because of offenses!" We expect the unregenerate world to offend believers, but we certainly don't expect believers to do that. Then in verses 8-9 our Lord uses two familiar proverbial statements of His day to emphasize the point: "If thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut it off if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out." The idea is that if you're led into sin by either of those bodily parts, you'd be better off without them. The Lord's point is that sin must be dealt with drastically. We must be careful not to offend another believer. If we find we are doing that, we must take drastic measures to stop. In verse 10 Jesus wraps up the thought by saying, "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father, who is in heaven." You certainly don't want to be at odds with the holy angels and God the Father! In those verses our Lord established a very important truth: we must take great care not to offend or look down on any other believer.

REVIEW

Paul picks up the same theme in Romans 14. His great concern is that believers learn how to get along. We are all aware that sin causes a rift in the fellowship of the church. But another area that creates great conflict is the struggle of strong and weak believers over preferential issues. A great diversity of people are brought together in the church when they come to believe in Christ. There exists the potential for clash when preferences for external forms of worship or lifestyles differ. Paul focuses on two sets of believers in his discussion: the weak and the strong. Disharmony results when the strong despise the weak for being smallminded and the weak condemn the strong for abusing their liberty.

To help us understand how strong and weak believers are to get along, Paul makes four points in Romans 14:1[en]15:13. We're looking at the first, the matter of receiving one another with understanding.

I. THE RECEPTION (v. 1)

"Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations."

Paul tells the strong to embrace the unemancipated into their fellowship and love instead of passing judgment on them. Then he tells them why.

II. THE REASONS (vv. 2-13)

A. The Lord Receives All Believers (vv. 2-3)

1. Paul's generic description (v. 2)

"One believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs."

One who is strong in the faith believes he can eat all things. He doesn't have any dietary constraintshe's not bound by the old Mosaic dietary laws. However, there are others, who, being weak, eat only vegetables.

a) Of the strong The strong believes he can eat everything. But are they right? Can they eat everything? Yes.(1) 1 Timothy 4:45"Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused, if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer." Paul made that statement in response to those who forbade others from eating certain foods.(2) Acts 10:15After the Lord declared all animals clean, He told Peter, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common."The strong believer is rightyou can eat anything, at least anything that is not injurious to your body. There are no dietary restrictions. We are not under the ceremonial laws of Moses. Every so often I hear some churches say believers shouldn't eat anything that was considered unclean in the Old Covenant. But that's not true there are no such restraints in the New Covenant.Paul in verse 2 may have been referring to strong Jewish believers, who were not burdened by eating pork or having their food cooked a certain way. He may also have been referring to strong Gentile believers, who understood that food offered to idols was no big deal because an idol is nothing.b) Of the weak(1) Abstinence from vegetablesAccording to Paul's analysis in verse 2, the weak believer ate only vegetables. Based on history, we know that neither Jews or Gentiles had significant restrictions on eating vegetables. However, we do know vegetables were offered to idols as well as meat. The best interpretation is that Paul had in mind a particular Jewish group that was fearful of eating either meat offered to idols or meat that was unclean by their standards. So they opted for vegetables only as the easiest way to avoid any problems. Some segments of the Essenes, the Jewish monastic sect that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, appear to have been vegetarian.(2) Abstinence from drinkIn Romans 14:17 Paul talks about food and drink. Apparently some also abstained from drink. This was probably not a Jewish issue because the wine the Jews drank was diluted with water. Paul may have been referring to a Gentile Christian with a Bacchanalian past, having once participated in worship of false gods in a drunken stupor. Also, some of the Essenes practiced total abstinence.Paul wasn't trying to identify every person or group; he was merely pointing out that for whatever reason, some believers were preoccupied with what they ate while others weren't. His description in verse 2 is generic some are free to enjoy their liberty, while others remain bound by the past and cannot.

2. Paul's specific injunction (v. 3)

a) The restriction (v. 3ab)(1) For the strong (v. 3a)"Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not"The Greek word translated "despise" means, "to treat someone as nothing" or "to look at someone with disdain or contempt." The strong believer should not look with contempt on one who doesn't fully understand his freedom in Christ. Sad to say, the church is full of liberated brethren who want to condemn those who are more confined in their thinking. I see that tendency in the church, and I sense that tendency in myself. When we come across believers who want to subject us to a pile of unnecessary rules, we're tempted to view them with contempt.(2) For the weak (v. 3b)"Let not him who eateth not [the weak believer] judge [Gk., krin[ma]o, "condemn"] him that eateth"Weak believers have a tendency to condemn the strong because they don't understand the believer's freedom in Christ. Some are afraid to venture outside the bounds of legalism because they believe they will lose all control. I faced that kind of environment in college. The administrators were under the assumption that if they allowed the students any freedom, we'd all go completely off the deep end. They wanted to keep everyone safe. When they did see someone who lived out his liberty in Christ and wasn't confined by the rules, they assumed there was sin in his life. That's because they weren't abiding by the external and artificial standards they saw as indicators of true spirituality.Within the church of Jesus Christ are those who do not understand their freedom in Christ, and condemn those who do. Those who do understand their freedom tend to despise those who don't. The unity of the church was a vital issue to Paul. That's why he said, "Ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God" (Rom. 15:6).b) The reason (v. 3c)"God hath received him."Who are we

not to receive whom God has received? Although the word "him" in verse 3 is nearer to the phrase that discusses the weak's condemnation of the strong, we don't need to limit it to that. Neither are we to condemn or despise the other. If you understand your liberty in Christ, yet you have a tendency to condemn a brother for being legalistic, remember that God has received him through his faith in Christ. If you tend toward legalism, and you see a brother who doesn't adhere to the rules you do, don't condemn him because God has received him, too. Since the Lord receives the weak, we ought to receive the weak. Since the Lord receives the strong, we ought to receive the strong. We have to learn to work together.

B. The Lord Sustains All Believers (v. 4)

The strong tend to despise the weak and the weak tend to condemn the strong. To justify our concern, whichever one it might be, we believe the other person is in danger of falling away from the faith. The strong fear the weak will eventually despair of the Christian life with all the rigidity they impose on it. However, the weak fear the strong are going too far away from what God wants. Both groups are fearful of spiritual disaster.

1. The position of believers (v. 4a)

"Who art thou that judgeth another man's servant [Gk., *oiket[ma]es*, "a household slave"]? To his own master he standeth or falleth."

Paul is questioning any believer's right to evaluate someone else's servant. Their opinion doesn't improve or impair that servant's position before his own master. Judgment by an outsider is irrelevant. That's why Paul said, "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.... But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment; yea, I judge not my own self. For I know nothing against myself, yet am I not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me is the Lord" (1 Cor. 4:1, 34).

Paul here uses "his own" (Gk., *idios*) for emphasis. Before his own master a servant stands or falls. Who is the master of the weak brother? The Lord. Who is the master of the strong brother? The Lord. It is Christ's own evaluation of a believer that matters. He will decide whether that believer is doing right or wrong.

2. The power of God (v. 4b)

"Yea, he shall be held up; for God is able to make him stand."

If a person truly belongs to the Lord, you don't need to worry about him. Even believers who are bound by so many constraints are useful to God. They may not enjoy the fullness of their liberty, but the Lord is able to make them stand. Why? Because whomever He justifies He eventually glorifies (Rom. 8:30), whether strong or weak. According to the textual variants, the best rendering of verse 4 is: "He shall be held up for the Lord is able to make him stand." You don't need to worry about a believer's collapsing because God will make him stand.

The Greek word translated "is able" is a form of *dunamis*, the source of the English word *dynamite*. Our God is powerful!

a) John 10:28-29 Jesus said, "Neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, who gave them to me, is greater than all, and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand." b) Romans 8:35-39 Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ because those whom He predestined, He will bring to glory (vv. 29-31). c) John 6:37 Jesus said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me, and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." d) Jude 24-25 Jude said, "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling ... to the only wise God, our Savior." e) 1 Peter 1:5-6 Peter said that we "are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this ye greatly rejoice."

We don't need to fear that our legalist brothers or those who live out their freedom in Christ will fall away.

Subtle Evidence

In Romans 14:3 Paul says that God has received both weak and strong. In verse 4 he says that God is able to make them stand. In verse 6 he says, "He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord He that eateth, eateth to the Lord; for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks." In verse 8 Paul uses "Lord" three times. And in verse 9 he identifies Christ as the Lord. That interchange of Lord, Christ, and God is great subtle proof of the deity of Jesus Christ.

C. The Lord Is Sovereign over All Believers (vv. 59)

The Motives of the Strong and Weak

Paul's point in verses 59 is that even though the practices of both strong and weak do vary, their motives is the same. Why does a weak brother keep the law and the traditions? Because he believes in his heart he is pleasing the Lord. Why does a strong brother enjoy the freedoms he's been given in Christ? Because he believes in his heart that pleases the Lord.

Being weak in the faith is not synonymous with being disobedient or sinful. A weak believer can be spiritual. Spirituality is an absolute. At any moment you can be either spiritual or fleshy. You walk either by the Spirit or your flesh. Maturity is the end product of spirituality.

There are weak Christians just coming out of a religious tradition who are spiritually minded. They want to serve God with all their heart and soul. Their problem is they don't yet understand their freedoms in Christ. And some of those who do understand can be fleshy. Therefore we can't assume those who are weak in the faith do not desire to please the Lord.

1. The manifestation of a good conscience (v. 5a)

"One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike."

If a believer came out of Judaism, he would probably consider some days as more important than others, such as the Sabbath, feast days, and holy days. A similar veneration of days was part of paganism as well.

a) Elements of an old system The veneration of days is a weakness. In Colossians 2:16 Paul says, "Let no man, therefore, judge you ... in respect of a feast day, or of the new moon, or of a sabbath day." In Galatians 4:9 he refers to such things as "beggarly elements." They are part of an old system. The New Covenant frees us from having to observe special days. b) Examples of a cultural system When I was a little boy living in Philadelphia, I can remember having to sit on the couch on Sunday. My family would come home from church and eat a big dinner, and then we would sit. We couldn't play catch, read the paper or a magazine, watch television, or listen to the radio. That was part of the culture. Some people still view Sunday in that manner. Some people regard the day; some people don't. It was so then; it is so today.

2. The maintenance of a good conscience (v. 5b)

"Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind."

a) Deferring to one's own conscience Paul is saying to do whatever you think you ought to do. Why? Because the veneration of days is not a moral issue. The Sabbath has been set aside. Paul is not concerned with Sabbaths and feast days, but he is concerned that people not train themselves to violate their conscience. If conscience tells you to keep a certain day, then you ought to keep it. If you train yourself to ignore your conscience, you will have problems because the Spirit of God leads subjectively through a person's conscience. Paul does not want anyone to have a conscience seared with a hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2) a scarred conscience insensitive to truth and the prodding of God's Spirit. Don't train your conscience to do wrong. If your conscience tells you to abide by certain preferential traditions and taboos, then do so if you believe it pleases the Lord. Don't let anyone tell you not to. In Garry Friesen's Decision Making and the Will of God (Portland: Multnomah, 1980), the main point is that everything God wants you to know about His will for you is in the Bible. That's true, but I believe he ignores some things that Scripture teaches about keeping a pure conscience so God's Spirit can subjectively lead you. b) Deferring to another's conscience First Corinthians 8:7 says,

"There is not in every man that knowledge; for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled." In verse 8 Paul says that if it bothers a person to eat food offered to an idol, then don't make him eat it. In verse 9 he says, "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak." I often hear believers criticizing weaker brothers for their attachment to something they need no longer hold to. By doing so they are pressuring them into doing something that will defile their conscience. That will make them feel guilty and drive them deeper into legalism. We all have to be patient for the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the community of believers to bring that person to maturity. Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 8:11, "Through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" Do you want to destroy a weaker brother by forcing him to abuse his conscience? Of course not! The conscience is a very important tool in the hands of God. Acts 23:1 says that "Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God." Paul not only obeyed the Word, but also did what he felt the Spirit of God prompted him to do in his conscience.

3. The motives of a good conscience (vv. 67)

a) Giving thanks to God (v. 6) "He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord He that eateth, eateth to the Lord; for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks." The strong brother eats everything in sight and thanks the Lord for his freedom. The weak brother eats according to his ceremonial diet and thanks the Lord that he makes a sacrifice on His behalf. In either case the believer thanks the Lord, so the motive is the same. b) Doing what pleases God (v. 7) "None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself." Paul is saying that whether weak or strong, we do what we do for the Lord, not for ourselves. That's the way it should be with Christians. We submitted to His lordship when we became Christians we left our self-centered life behind. Now our most basic desire is to serve Him.

4. The manager of a good conscience (vv. 89)

a) The affirmation of Christ's lordship (v. 8) "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord; whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." The Greek text literally says, "To the Lord we live; to the Lord we die." We live for Him; someday we'll die for Him whether weak or strong, newborn Christian infants or mature believers. The last phrase of verse 9 is one of the greatest injunctions to holy living in all the Bible: "We are the Lord's." Every Christian is subject to the unconditional sovereignty of God. We are the Lord's we are His possession. First Corinthians 6:19-20 says, "Know ye not that ... ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price." I'm not my own, so I don't live to myself and I don't die to myself. I am His, so I live to Him and I'll die to Him. All believers have the same relationship to the Lord; we all serve the sovereign Lord we have embraced as our Redeemer. If we're weak and we limit ourselves to living a certain way, we do so because we believe we are pleasing Him. If we enjoy our freedom in Christ, we do so because we believe we are pleasing Him. Since those are matters of preference and not sin, let's not cause a rift in the church over them. Romans 14:8 brings much to bear on the issue of the lordship of Christ. A true Christian longs to submit to Christ's lordship. First Corinthians 15:23 includes this short phrase: "They that are Christ's." The greatest injunction to holy living is that we are the Lord's. We belong to Him, whether weak or strong. Some would have us believe that weak believers accept Jesus as their Savior, but not as their Lord. He may not yet understand all that his new life in Christ means, but he understands the basics of the Christian life and nothing is more basic than the lordship of Christ in the believer's life. No one can tell me that I can have Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. In all the years I've known Christ, there has never been a time when I didn't sense a tremendous weight of responsibility to obey Him. Jesus is Lord. b) The accomplishment of Christ's death (v. 9) "To this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living." Scripture specifically states that Jesus died to be Lord (as opposed to Savior). It is hard for me to conceive how people believe someone can have Jesus as their Savior, yet not have any sense of submission to His

lordship. Jesus died and rose that He might be Lord. The Greek verb kurieu[ma]o is translated here as "might be Lord." The noun form is kurios, the common word for Lord. Jesus died and rose to be Lord of both the living and the dead. The dead refer to saints already in glory. Christ died to reign over the saints in His presence and the saints still on earth. He has dominion over all creation and a special mediatorial function on behalf of His own people (Heb. 2:17; 7:25). It is impossible to deny the lordship of Jesus Christ without denying His work on the cross.

D. The Lord Alone Will Judge All Believers (vv. 10-12)

1. The imperative questions (v. 10a-b)a) Why do the weak judge the strong? (v. 10a) "Why dost thou judge thy brother?"b) Why do the strong despise the weak? (v. 10b) "Or why dost thou set at naught thy brother?"
2. The inevitable judgment (vv. 10c-12)a) All will stand in judgment (v. 10c) a) "We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ [God]."The Greek text says "God" [theou] not "Christ." It is in 2 Corinthians 5:10 where it is called the judgment seat of Christ. Those two verses are more evidence of the deity of Christ because He is spoken of interchangeably with God. First Corinthians 3:12-13 says that when we stand before the judgment seat our works will be put on display, whether gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or stubble. First Corinthians 4:5 says the Lord "will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise of God."b) All will bow in judgment (v. 11)"It is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."That is a quote from Isaiah 45:23. Paul used a portion of that same verse in Philippians 2:10-11. Every one of us at one point in the future will bow before the judgment of God. When we judge others, we are playing God--and that's a blasphemous thing to do.c) All will give account in judgment (v. 12)"So, then, every one of us shall give account of himself to God." There will be a time for an accounting. We will all stand before God and have our works examined. Then we'll receive the praise and the reward God has planned to give us.

CONCLUSION

Why should we open our arms and receive each other? Because God receives us. He holds us up. He is sovereign, and ultimately He alone has the right to judge us. Many conflicts in the church arise over non- essentials, but they can be stopped if we'll receive one another. Drop unnecessary criticism. Let the Lord be the judge. Better that we should love one another.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What important truth did Jesus establish in Matthew 18:6-10?
2. Is it right for the strong believer to eat anything he wants? Why or why not?
3. What group of people did Paul probably have in mind in Romans 14:2 when he said that they ate only vegetables in Romans 14:2?
4. What was Paul's specific injunction for the strong in Romans 14:3? What was his specific injunction for the weak?
5. What was Paul's reason for giving those injunctions?
6. Explain how the weak and the strong think each other will fall away.
7. Who is master of both the strong and weak believer? Why is that important?
8. Why shouldn't we worry about a believer's collapsing (Rom. 14:4)?
9. How secure is the believer in Christ? Cite some verses to support your answer.
10. What motivates both the weak and strong believer to act the way they do?
11. Why did Paul say that a person ought to regard certain days if that's what their conscience led them to do?
12. What might strong Christians pressure their weaker brothers into doing by criticizing them for their beliefs?

13. What should be the motive of every believer (Rom. 14:7)?
14. Why shouldn't believers live for themselves?
15. According to Romans 14:9, why did Christ die and rise from the dead?
16. What do people effectively deny when they deny the lordship of Christ?
17. What will happen to all believers when they are brought before the judgment seat of God?

Pondering the Principles

1. Look up the following verses: Psalm 37:17, 24, 28; John 10:28-30; Romans 8:31-39; Hebrews 7:25; and Jude 24. In your own words, record what those verses tell you about your eternal security. How does that help you to view the security of other believers? The next time you are tempted to judge the ultimate outcome of a believer who holds to a different preference in some non-moral area, what will you do?
2. Read Romans 14:8-9 and review the section on the manager of a good conscience (see pp. 9-11). Do you treat Christ as Lord of your life, or do you merely thank Him for your salvation, yet do what you want? In light of Paul's teaching, how do you need to change your perception of your relationship to Christ? What do you need to change in terms of your obedience to Christ? Make the commitment this week to focus your time and energy on those activities that will be pleasing to Him.

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