

## Welcome One Another

Part 1 of 2

David Flatt

There is no greater example of Paul explaining the challenges of unity among saints than this section in Romans. Paul does more than just command saints to be united. He deals with specific issues that were threatening the unity of the saints. While we may not necessarily struggle with the specific issues at hand, we are often challenged to be respectful of one another's conscience.

### Welcome the weak in faith- Romans 14:1-6

Being vegetarian is not new to our time. In the ancient world, people chose vegetarianism for religious reasons. For example, Jews living outside Israel might have chosen to be vegetarian. Most meat sold in the market was sold by pagans. Jews could not ensure the meat was prepared according to *kosher* standards. Also, pagans who had converted to Christianity were all too familiar with meat being sacrificed to idols. This meat was only a reminder of the lifestyle they once lived and had renounced. So, Paul addresses a practical concern of his time.

This opening paragraph is similar to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8. In that passage, he makes two points: 1.) God is the creator of all; therefore, all meat could be eaten with thanksgiving. 2.) If someone's eating of meat harmed another saint's conscience, he or she should not eat meat in the presence of that saint(s). Now in Romans 14, Paul expands the discussion of this issue.

First, notice Paul's tactful approach in this passage. He does not assume Jewish converts are vegetarians and Gentile converts are meat-eaters. Why? There likely were vegetarian and meat-eaters among both groups. Making sweeping generalizations would only reinforce the differences which were keeping these two groups segregated. Paul is trying to remove cultural barriers between these two groups. Ultimately, Paul wants these two groups to worship together as servants of the same Master (Rom. 15:5-7).

Also note, Paul is dealing with a specific consequence of the doctrine of justification by faith. If we are justified by faith, then, what people eat or the days they exalt are not important. Matters of personal conscience are not and cannot be the basis of unity. Only faith in what God did through the Messiah can be the basis of unity.

Therefore, saints cannot look condescendingly at one another due to personal judgments based on conscience. The one who abstains is not holier than the one who partakes. The one who observes a certain day as sacred is not holier than the one who views that same day as common. In Christ, saints have flexibility concerning issues of conscience. But, who are the "weak in faith?" What does Paul mean by this description?

Well, Paul does not mean the “weak in faith” had a shallow commitment to Christ. They did not doubt the Messiahship of Jesus. This group had not yet realized the total consequences of being justified by faith (Rom. 1:16-17). They still felt observing certain dietary guidelines and or keeping certain holidays was necessary for their justification.

This was the central issue regarding the situation at Corinth. Paul wrote, “For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled (1 Cor. 8:5-7). These saints knew there was one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ. They had obeyed the Gospel; however, they did not fully recognize the consequence of this truth.

With the saints at Rome and Corinth, Paul was dealing with issues of conscience. The word conscience means “with knowledge.” We make judgments and form opinions based on the knowledge we possess. As we grow in our knowledge or discernment, our judgments and views often change over time and experience. This is partly why we must be respectful of one another’s personal opinions and judgments: our knowledge and experiences vary.

Also, it does not appear the “weak in faith” were imposing their views on other saints. If some of this group were Jewish, there is no indication they were like the Judaizing teachers Paul frequently engaged. When Paul dealt with Judaizing teachers, he rebuked them and declared them to be false teachers. Paul never permits tolerance towards false teachers.

On the contrary, Paul begins this chapter by instructing the “strong” to welcome the “weak.” In chapter fifteen, Paul tells the saints to receive one another as Christ had received them (Rom. 15:7). To receive means “to grant access into one’s heart; to take into friendship” (Greek definition of the term translated “receive”). Christ receives us based on faith; our belief and obedience to Him. Therefore, faith in Christ is the only basis by which we are to receive other saints. Food was not a test of receiving other saints.

At this point, we would be wise to consider if we are guilty of judging one another by criteria that Paul would say God is indifferent. Building barriers along cultural and ethnic lines is easy to do. Using worldly standards of judgment, however, will never bring unity. We must not conform to the world, but seek transformation by the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:1-2).

### **Only God’s final judgment matters- Rom. 14:7-12**

Paul is trying to reconcile opposing parties in the church. Sound familiar? It is as if an older brother is trying to get his younger siblings to get along. But who are these disputants? Consider the following scenario N.T. Wright uses in his commentary on this passage.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Wright, N.T. (2004). “Paul for Everyone: Romans Part Two.” Westminster John Knocks Press, pg. 100-101.

*One Christian has a strict conscience. His background, upbringing, and temperament all incline him toward a stringent view of his moral responsibilities. To him, the world is a wicked and corrupt place and needs to be shunned. If this view demands he abstains from meat, then he will choose to be vegetarian. But then, he notices a fellow-Christian. She goes to the market and buys meat which obviously came from the pagan temple. To him, this is appalling. He thinks, "What kind of a Christian would buy this meat and feed it to their family?"*

*This woman, however, has been taught the truth that God is creator and redeemer of all things. The whole world belongs to Him; even the meat she buys for her family. She knows she has been called to live a holy life, distinct and different from the pagan world. But, she also knows that outward regulations about what you can and cannot touch or eat do not get to the heart of genuine holiness. She gets tired of being criticized by other Christians who have not seemed to have learned one of the most basic, liberating concepts of the Gospel. To her, such Christians are small-minded, driven by fear, and unable to see beyond their own front doors.*

As Wright goes on to observe, both of these perspectives come from a clear understanding of one part of Christian truth<sup>2</sup>. However, Paul reminds the saints of a truth which rises far above both perspectives. Mainly, there is one Lord and it is before Him alone that every Christian lives and dies; stands or falls. This is why no one has the right to look with disdain towards their fellow-Christian. No one is in the position to pass judgment on another based on his or her personal conviction.

Knowledge of God's judgment must temper our judgments of others. Jesus taught this in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:1-2). If we are harsh, hypocritical, and or merciless in judging others, Jesus says we will receive judgment without mercy. God will have the final say over us all. Before enforcing our day-to-day judgments on others, we must be shaped by the knowledge that God is our judge.

Also, determining areas in which God gives us flexibility and areas He demands total conformity requires a complete examination of the Scriptures. As issues develop, each must be approached case-by-case. Matters in which disagreements arise cannot be resolved by simply "agreeing to disagree." Why? God's judgment of us all. If we are practicing something or failing to practice something which will bring God's judgment upon us, we owe love to one another in proving this with the Scriptures.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.