

Welcome One Another

Part 2 of 2

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As saints, we have been justified by faith and welcomed into God's family. Therefore, we owe one another mutual love and respect. This is the background of what Paul emphasizes in the second half of Romans chapter fourteen.

Love is the path to peace- Rom. 14:13-23

To prove how love is the path to peace, Paul uses the illustration of walking. Paul warns against the danger of clearing our path, but in so doing, obstructing the path of another. During Ohio winters, plow trucks would plow snow off the street. However, the plowed snow from the trucks would block my driveway. In clearing our path in life, we must be considerate. If not, we may put stumbling blocks in the path of another. We must never make the path to Heaven for our brethren more rigorous than it already is. Paul is teaching us how we can help each other get to Heaven despite our different personal convictions over food and holidays.

We must be cautious when determining our path regarding issues about which God grants us liberty. We must concern ourselves less with how such matters affect us personally and more about how our approach to such issues will affect those around us. Sometimes we are tempted to tell someone who is "weak in faith" that he or she needs to "study more and grow-up." While Christians need to study more and grow, this is not Paul's primary focus in this passage.

Those who are "weak in faith" are not necessarily immature in the faith. Although Paul offers guidance on meats and days, he never tells the "weak in faith" that they must change their practice. Those who are "weak in faith" may, in time, recognize more fully the consequences of being justified by faith and cease struggling over food or holidays. The weak brother must not condemn the strong, nor vice-versa. It was unnecessary for either group to alter their practice on these issues, except where one might cause his brother to sin.

Overall, Paul is saying that something may not be wrong in and of itself, but become wrong due to how people regard it. Food is food; however, some food became wrong due to how some saints regarded it. Therefore, Paul appeals to saints who were willing to eat anything. They needed to act with love and restraint towards brethren who did not believe they could eat everything.

For example, if a meat-eater invited a vegetarian into his home for dinner, Paul would have told him not to serve meat. His vegetarian brother views eating meat as sinful. If the meat-eater served meat to the vegetarian brother, he would put his vegetarian brother in a position to violate his conscience. Paul says the vegetarian would be condemned if he ate. In other words, the meat-eater could cause the vegetarian to quit serving God altogether: abandon the faith. Paul could not accept the thought of potentially obstructing another's salvation.

There may be occasions when our liberty must be restrained for the sake of those who have not realized the full extent of being justified by faith. Paul wants the “strong” to understand that using their freedom in certain situations could do irreparable damage to their brethren who were “weak in faith.” Such restraint is a demonstration of brotherly love (Gal. 5:13-16).

Love is the path to peace in the local church. Just as the Messiah redeemed humanity by self-giving love, the least we can do is sacrifice for the sake of another’s salvation. At the same time, we need to be warned about selfishly taking advantage of one another. Some may be tempted to object to a practice by claiming to be “weak in faith.” In reality, he or she is being manipulative. This temptation must be resisted. Remember, maturity is not found in being weak or strong. Maturity is found in being able to recognize an opinion as such and not imposing it on others.

Forbearance Exemplified- Rom. 15:1-7

The strong are to bear with the weak. The strong are to be considerate of the personal judgments of the weak in faith. Paul reminds the saints how the Messiah had to do something difficult (Psalm 69). The Messiah bore the suffering of the world for the benefit of everyone and to please His Father (Phil. 2:5-11). The Messiah exemplifies the strong bearing the infirmities of the weak. Therefore, in a much smaller sense, Paul is asking the strong to do for the weak what the Messiah did for the world.

The principle of the strong bearing with the weak was also exemplified in the Old Testament. The Old Testament shows how hope is realized by forbearance. The text is filled with harrowing accounts of God’s people doing what is difficult and cautionary anecdotes of God’s people succumbing to worldly influences. The Old Testament gives examples of the principle of forbearance that Paul advocates in Romans.

Paul uses the cases of the Messiah and the Old Testament to encourage unity between the strong and weak. The Messiah and Old Testament become the foundation of unity. Paul wanted the weak and strong to look at each other with love and equality. They were together in Christ. By shared belief in Christ, they would be able to glorify God with one voice.

Conclusion

While Paul went into detail about a specific matter hindering unity, there did not seem to be an open hostility among the saints in Rome. The issue of eating meat could have been as subtle as how brethren of different convictions thought of each other. Regardless, open hostility and subtle condescension are equally destructive to unity.

We live in a time of heightened polarization. As a society, we are deeply divided politically, racially, and economically. The chasms are only widening. Sadder yet, is how this polarization has shaped the attitudes and behaviors of some saints. Evidence of conformity to the world is proven by discourse on social media and elsewhere. Worldly opinions, sentiments,

and philosophies are dividing God's family. Our light, which is only illuminated by unity, is being dimmed. Therefore, this section of Romans is of urgent necessity in our study and teaching.

How we view each other significantly impacts our relationships. If we think less of certain saints, we will be less likely to engage them in conversation, give thought to their needs, be sympathetic to their problems, and or value their perspective. When we overtly or quietly treat each other with disdain, we create a corrosive atmosphere in the local church. Paul was deeply concerned about this happening among the saints in Rome. Rather than being at odds with each other, he wanted them to lovingly treat each other as family. Unity demands renewal (Rom. 12:1-2). Only renewed faith and love in the Messiah will bring us together to glorify God with one voice.