

# Unifying the Strong and the Weak

By David Harrell

**Bible Text:** Romans 14:13-23

**Preached on:** Sunday, January 6, 2012

We return this morning to our expositional study of Paul's epistle to the Romans. So if you will take your Bibles and turn to Romans chapter 14, we will be examining specifically this morning verses 13 through 23.

I have entitled my discourse to you, "Unifying the Strong and the Weak." Let me read the text to you beginning with verse 13.

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this — not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.<sup>1</sup>

Paul loved the Church, the body of Christ, this great mystery that was revealed to him, a mystery hidden from the Old Testament saints. Once he was a zealous Pharisee bent on destroying the Church and then he became, by God's grace, a zealous slave of the head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ. And he gave his life to building up the Church. We see this in every aspect of his life, every aspect of his ministry.

I want you to ask yourself this question this morning. Is this your desire? The Church is God's building, this body of Christ. Do you have a passion to see it built up, to see it grow in its breadth that more people will come to Christ, to see it strengthened by your sacrifice and by your service? Is this the passion of our heart? I hope it is. This was certainly the driving force of Paul's ministry and we see this in his passion to communicate the truth of the will of God to the Church in the early days as well as today.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 14:13-23.

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So with supernatural clarity Paul has communicated God's truth to us thus far in his epistle to the Romans concerning man's utter depravity, man's utter inability to save himself. He has communicated the truth about salvation being solely a work of God's grace and for this reason he comes to chapter 12 and he tells us that we need to present our bodies as a living and as a holy sacrifice. That is what is acceptable unto God. And this includes having a proper attitude toward God as he tells us, a proper attitude towards fellow Christians, a proper attitude towards people and even civil authorities. He underscores the urgency for every believer to manifest an all encompassing love that clearly reveals to the world that we have been radically transformed by the gospel of grace so that now we live out a life that reflects the glory and the love of Christ.

Now sadly many Christians have observed something that is hardly even talked about in the Church, especially in the Church of our modern day. However, this has been true down through the centuries. Many have observed that Christian fellowship is very precious. It is very sweet as long as it is superficial. But once you start working closely with people. Once you encounter some form of disagreement or once you have to confront someone on a particular issue, fellowship evaporates very quickly and friends suddenly become enemies because we all have a rabid commitment to self will. And without even knowing it, our self will can unseat Christ from his rightful throne in our hearts and pride begins to reign supreme.

I remember a little phrase I heard many years ago. It summarizes this tragic thing rather well. It goes like this. To dwell above with saints we love, oh, that will be glory, but to dwell below with saints we know, now that is another story.

Beloved, we are all hopelessly biased in favor of ourselves. We do not rightly understand the depths of our own pride, our own self will. It is far worse than we admit. This is why John called it the boastful pride of life, because it is, indeed, a life dominating, a life long foe of Christ like love and humility. And this is often what rips churches apart. This is what separates marriages and families. And this especially happens in a church when different cultures collide, when different backgrounds, especially religious backgrounds collide, especially when you are dealing with those grey areas of Scripture, those areas of discretionary liberty.

As I was thinking about it I found these words coming to my mind and I wrote them down. When saints divide and tempers flare over some odd thing no Scripture bears, know full well what evil lurks, demanding pride is hard at work.

This was what was going on even in the early Church. Let me give you the context of our passage. It has been a few weeks since we have been here. There was very little tolerance between the Jews and the Gentiles. They hated each other before they came to Christ and, unfortunately, even when they came to Christ some of those old prejudices were still very powerful. I can just imagine looking out at the Roman church. It probably got the Jews

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sitting over here and the Gentiles over here and kind of got their arms folded and very seldom would they really come together very much. Some Jewish Christians were reluctant after they had come to Christ to relinquish, abandon some of the Old Testament law. They were unsure how their new found faith affected certain regulations, certain even superstitious taboos that had once governed their life, issues pertaining to certain foods and drinks that were forbidden. And now all of a sudden they are hearing that this is ok. Even the observance of the Jewish sabbath and other days that they held sacred, it was a real problem. And so they felt like, well, I think we probably need to still hang on to these things. And the problem came in when they insisted that the rest of the people agree with us on this. So all the fight begins to occur.

Well, some Gentile Christians had similar issues concerning drinking wine or eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. And here in Romans 14 this issue will come up again and we will see how that there were those who drank wine and ate meat that was sacrificed to idols and it didn't bother them. And then others said, "No, I just can't do this. And I think it is wrong for you to do it." And then those people would say, "Well, I think you are nuts for thinking that you can't do it." And so the battle would begin to brew.

Well, none of these things were either commanded nor condemned by the Lord, but those who regarded these things as off limits Paul labels as weak in faith. Those whose faith allowed them to ignore, for example, the sabbath restrictions and to drink and eat whatever they want, he described as strong in the faith.

Now may I remind you that weak in faith does not have anything to do with being unspiritual, with being carnal. In fact, you can be weak in faith or strong in faith and still be unspiritual in various areas of your life. Nor does weak in faith denote a person who trusts in Christ very little, a person that you might say has a feeble faith. No, that is not what it meant. He is merely referring to those who have a weak understanding of faith with respect to how it should be lived out in Christ pertaining to certain issues of their life. A person with weak faith has a faith that is not strong enough to enable them to perceive the full liberty that they have in Christ. Their conscience is poorly informed. So it causes them to hold to non essentials and self imposed restrictions, typically things that were carryovers from their former life before they came to Christ. So they have kind of an immature grasp of grace and the Word of God. They still live under self imposed bondage to certain kinds of religious compulsions or restraints. Again, many times things related to their past. Things that God doesn't command, things that God does not condemn, but they think that he does and so they think that they need to continue to live this way and then, of course, the problems comes when they start condemning other people because they are not living that way.

But Paul makes it clear when a brother's conscience is fully developed, when it is accurately informed by the Word of God he will become strong in his faith. He will

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understand his full liberty in Christ. He will not be concerned about committing these kind of religious offenses and so forth. And so he will not encumber himself with self imposed restrictions and so forth, things that are meaningless to God.

Now each of us can be found in both categories depending upon the issue. I know I found myself on both sides of these issues. We all struggled with self imposed restrictions on non essentials that really make no difference to God. And we can all also fall off the other end of the spectrum and abuse our liberty in Christ, which becomes a license for sin.

Now at Calvary Bible Church we don't find ourselves quibbling over meats sacrificed to idols or certain religious days, necessarily. There are some that have struggled in the past with sabbath restrictions. But we do at times struggle with disputable matters, grey areas in Scripture, non essential discretionary matters, a personal conviction that really have no basis in Scripture, certainly have no merit in salvation or sanctification. And what often happens is sincere, godly people can appeal to certain biblical principles and certain guidelines and begin to work things around in such a way as to affirm a certain position that they might have. The problem is Scripture isn't clear about that, even though they want us to believe it is. And then you have other people who hear their positions and think, you know, I just don't see this. And for me this is just not an issue.

I gave you a list of... last time we discussed this. I won't complete the whole list, but we have had things like issues pertaining to music. You know, some people think that certain styles of music, certain instruments and so forth are of the devil. And, as I say, the big issue is, well, whose to determine the criteria? There has been fights over hymnbooks versus words on the screen, old versus new hymns, the consumption of alcoholic beverages, the use of alcohol, tattoos, sabbath day restrictions and on and on it can go.

Now given our proclivity to pride which you never want to underestimate and given the inevitable clashes that come from our various cultural and religious backgrounds and traditions, the real question comes to us that we have to ask and that is: Biblically, how are we supposed to get along with all of this? What does loving your neighbor look like when you do not share your neighbor's convictions?

Now it is interesting. The New Testament record reveals that the weak are typically in the minority and they are prone to judge the strong and they are typically the most vocal and the most divisive and the strong are prone to ridicule the weak and break fellowship with them. Now obviously this does not build up the church. This tears it down.

Now by way of review Paul begins chapter 14 and the verse 12 verses by giving us three reasons why all believers, weak or strong, are to be accepted and loved by all other believers. Let me just review them very quickly. First we learned that God has accepted them both, both the weak and the strong. So in verses one and through three we learned that the strong are commanded to accept the weak, lovingly accept them, not ridicule

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them. Nor should they in any way try to cause them to violate their conscience so that it will conform with theirs. So if a strong Christian forces a weak Christian to violate his conscience on even a non essential, the weak will feel guilt. They will go into deeper Legalism and so forth. Secondly, we learn that God alone is the sovereign master of both the weak and the strong. God has not put us in charge, ok? So we need to leave our brother alone. It is by his power that the weak and the strong will stand regardless of what they believe. And so it is out of place for us to even question the convictions of other believers in matters not central to faith. And, thirdly, we learn that God alone will judge both the weak and the strong. God is our judge. Only his verdict counts. So we must remember that we must give account of our own life, not of our brothers. So let's focus on the log in our own eye, not the speck in our brother's eye.

Practically speaking what Paul was doing here is fleshing out this idea of what it means to present our bodies as a living and a holy sacrifice. He is helping us understand according to verse 10 what it means to prefer one another in honor and, verse 18, what it means to be at peace with all men. What does this really look like?

So, again, in this context, here in this passage, those who were weak in faith, the minority, were predominantly Jewish. And they tended to sit in judgment of the strong that were predominantly Gentile and they would condemn them for enjoying their greater freedom, their liberty in Christ. And the strong in the faith, the majority were prone to retaliate against the weak and ridicule them, treat them with contempt and alienate them from fellowship.

Now in our text this morning I am going to break it down into six very clear admonitions that the apostle Paul gives to the weak and to the strong to help us understand how to accept one another in Christ, how to build up one another, how to produce unity in the body, because, after all, we love each other and we are going to share heaven together. And so we need to learn to get along and this will greatly benefit all of us and it will have a profound impact on a watching world.

The first way to build up one another despite our differences, number one, don't be a stumbling block. Let's look at verse 13. He says therefore. Now therefore is reaching back to verses 10 through 12 where he reminds us that God alone is our judge. It is only his verdict counts. He does not give us the authority to judge our brother.

“Therefore let us not judge one another anymore.”<sup>2</sup>

Grammatically this is in the present tense. It indicates that this was going on in the Church in Rome. By the way, who wants to go to a church where you have got people judging one another on non essentials, you know, where you have got a bunch of self

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appointed Barney Fife's running around, you know, people have a bullet and a badge and everybody is getting tickets and everybody is going to jail. I mean nobody wants to be in that kind of an environment.

{?} has well stated, quote, "Christian history reveals numerous examples of saints who utterly earnest about non essentials who have felt at liberty to break the unity of the Church for the sake of their particular fetish," end quote.

Over the years I have seen precious people, even in our church, so obsessed over some issue, an issue that really can't be supported biblically, an issue that they are convinced that God hates as much as they do, so obsessed over it that they are willing to destroy the church in order to have their own way. And, again, I have seen this from folks over issues like the use of alcoholic beverages, issues over musical style, instruments, oh, altar calls. Boy, that was a big one a number of years ago. People just absolutely got furious because I would have altar calls and they left the church. Also issues over revivals. Why don't we have revivals? I have got very strong reasons why we don't do that. And theological reasons, but Sunday school curriculums, ministry methodologies. Oh, my goodness. Dancing at wedding receptions, Bible translations. On and on it goes. And on the basis of Romans 14 and 15, the elders have to lovingly respect these differences, but we simply cannot pass judgment and establish church policies over discretionary liberties that make really no difference to God.

Revelation 22 verses 18 and following the Lord makes it very clear at the very close of the New Testament canon that God is absolutely opposed to us tampering with the truth, the Word of God. We are not to falsify it. We are not to mitigate it. We are not to add to it. We are not to alter it. We are not to misinterpret it. So, my friends, where God is silent, we need to be silent as well.

So Paul begins with this section with a strong admonition, verse 13.

"Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this."<sup>3</sup>

Now let's stop for a moment. There is a play on words here and we see it in the translation of the New American Standard Bible that I use. The word judge, the verb κρινω (kree'-no) in the original language, has a negative connotation. It means to judge a person to be guilty and liable to punishment. So it carries with it the idea of condemnation. But the same verb is also used and it is translated determine later on in the sentence. Now this has not a negative, but a positive connotation. It means to come to a decision, to be discerning in order to make an accurate assessment.

So what is he saying here? He is saying, "Folks, stop criticizing and condemning one

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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another. He didn't put you in charge." And, by the way this is applied to both to the weak and the strong. But rather, determine. In other words, I want you to use wide judgment here, wise judgment. I want you to be discerning with respect to something else. Well, what is that something else? Rather determine not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

Now here he is targeting primarily the strong who are prone to condemn the weaker brother whose conscience is unnecessarily sensitive to certain issues or activities. For example in that early church it would have been wrong for a mature believer in the church to purchase meat that had been sacrificed to an idol and offer it to a brother who believed that that eating of that meat was sin. That would be wrong. And evidently the strong were doing things like that. And when the weaker brother wouldn't eat of it, they would condemn them. And then, of course, it would go back and forth.

So the big issue here is the issue of being a stumbling block, encouraging a weaker brother to participate in something that he considers to be sin. Now, again, in our culture that is not an issue, but it may be an issue, for example, for some going to a theater and watching a movie or drinking alcoholic beverages or going to certain kinds of musical concerts or enjoying recreation or even working on Sunday. Some people have very strong convictions about those things.

Now while none of these things are forbidden in Scripture for reasons we may not understand they may violate the conscience of a weaker brother. Theaters and movies, certain kinds of music and concert venues may trigger bad memories for certain people. And some may have very strong reasons that they believe that God is with them on this and that nobody should do this type of a thing. Or maybe the issue is drinking alcohol even in strict moderation. That can be devastating to someone who has had a problem with that in the past. By the way, that is why we do not use real wine with our communion. We don't want to be an offense to anyone.

But he is saying here, "Don't condemn them, but rather determine not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in their way." In other words, out of love for your brother what you need to do is voluntarily restrict your liberty and conform to the stricter convictions of your weaker brother. You see, that is what pleases the Lord. Because it builds up one another. It builds relationship. It promotes love and peace and unity.

Again in verse 10 of Romans 12 we are told:

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:10.

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Well, this is what it looks like. A second way to build up the body and bring unity is don't destroy or don't hurt, I should say, or destroy your brother, Paul tells us.

Notice verse 14.

“I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.”<sup>5</sup>

This is a fascinating statement. He is saying here that the Lord specifically revealed this to me. All right? So I have got it on good merit here.

“I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Now this is a very important statement. You need to understand the background. According to the Mosaic law, for example, in Leviticus 11, some foods for the Jews were strictly forbidden. They were foods that were considered to be ceremonially unclean. What God was doing was using very tangible areas of life to teach them about his holiness. Some things were clean. They were acceptable to God. Other things were considered unclean, unacceptable to God. And also in areas of diet God made certain animals unclean. This would also, by the way, make it very difficult for the Israelites to socialize with the idolatrous people around them, because they {?}. All right? He wanted to protect them.

But with the coming of the new covenant, when grace replaced law, and with the coming of the Church that would include Jews and Gentiles, God permanently ended these dietary restrictions. You remember Peter's vision in Acts 10 where God commanded Peter, “I want you to kill and eat.” He was having a terrible time with this. By the way, it is really fascinating. Do you know what happened just after that? He was called to go into Cornelius' home, a Gentile's home, to present the gospel and so forth. So by eliminating these restrictions God opened the door to Gentiles to be able to enter the Church. But this was tough for a lot of the Jewish people.

By the way, I am so glad he did that, because I love bacon. I love barbeque sandwiches. I love pork chops.

1 Timothy four verse three we read:

“God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 14:14.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 4:3.



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So at the end of verse 14 he says:

“...nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”<sup>8</sup>

So, again, for the strong Christian eating these things and so forth. It is ok. It is not a big deal. Not so for the weak. They struggle with it. And perhaps you have certain areas in your life that you struggle with things that Scripture does not necessarily condemn or command. But you just can't bring yourself to do it. What should you do? Don't do it. Don't violate your conscience, but also don't condemn also that may not agree with you.

Let me digress for a moment. Sometimes our choices not to do certain things are not based upon this issue of weak faith. It is sometimes we choose not to do certain things not because we are unable to perceive our full liberty in Christ or we are living under some self-imposed bondage or restrictions from our past religious backgrounds or whatever. It is not because we believe that God is somehow commanding that we do certain things. Sometimes our choices are governed by two other reasons. Let me give them to you just very briefly. And this might be something to discuss further in our small group meetings. One reason why we may restrict ourselves is because of concern for others, this issue of a stumbling block. For example, I choose not to smoke. I choose not to drink alcohol, not because I perceive that God forbids it, not because of the weak faith issue, but because I don't want to be a stumbling block to people who struggle with it. I don't dance at wedding receptions, not because God says that that is wrong. I don't do it partially to avoid undue embarrassment for my children and my grandchildren, but also I don't want to be a stumbling block to some people who find that to be something that they really struggle with.

Secondly, sometimes our choices are governed by caution for self, not only concern for others, but caution for self. Let me explain what I mean by this. I don't want to allow my liberty in Christ to suddenly be used by my flesh to cause me to be conformed to the world. You know, Paul makes a big issue about this in Romans 12:2, how subtly the world, without us realizing this, can shape us into its image so that we begin to manifest the world in our life without us really even knowing we are doing it.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12:

“All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 14:14.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:12.

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You see, I want to keep certain restraints on my liberty in Christ lest my freedom become a doorway to excess in my life. And I know where those things are in my life and you need to know where they are in your life. For example, there are some styles of music that I perceive have a strange appeal to my flesh, that in subtle ways causes me to want to be more like the world rather than loosen my grip on it. I want to guard myself against that. The issue of getting a tattoo. The Bible doesn't necessarily say you can't do that, but for me I don't want to be identified with the most base element of our society. Also for me I know my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and I don't want to put graffiti on it. And I also know that most people that do that eventually wish they hadn't done it. I think it sends the wrong message for me. But I also find that in my flesh I tend to want to see how close to the very edge of the world I can possibly walk without falling off into it, rather than the wise thing and that would be to walk as far away from the edge as I possibly can lest I slip and fall. And the tattoo would just be an issue for me that I would choose not to do. But I am not going to tell you you can't. I am not going to condemn you and so forth nor am I going to try to create some biblical passage to say that this is wrong.

Another issue that came to my mind. I know that in my freedom in Christ I can wear whatever I want to when we come together to worship the Lord. I know that. But I choose to dress up. I don't do that because there is a Bible verse that tells me to do that. I don't do that because of weak faith. I do that because I know how I function. And I know that in my flesh I tend to want the whole world to orbit around me and my needs rather than God and his glory. I know that for me my flesh is all about me. And this is one area when I am going to take a stand. My flesh is prone to a very low view of God and a high view of me. My flesh resents the idea of transcendent glory and holiness and this is one place where I am not going to allow my flesh to dominate me.

There is very few things that are transcendent in life. But for me, coming here to this place to worship the Lord is transcendent. It is glorious. And certainly as a spokesman of the most high God I want to represent that in a way that I believe is honoring to him.

Now, again, I would not ask any of you to share my conviction. I will not condemn you for what you wear to church. You can wear whatever you want. But you must understand that sometimes out of caution for self we are going to make certain decisions that we believe are honoring to the Lord, yes, but not necessarily commanded by the Lord. You see? So there is a few ideas that you might want to think about. I guess I have got one more I will give to you. I refuse to listen to certain kinds of music, especially certain kinds of Christian music that I believe frame the glory of Christ in something far beneath him. There is not a Bible verse that tells me these things and there is continuum here and everybody has got, you know, various places where they will restrict themselves. And I will be careful not to impose my convictions on you. But for me I would say why use the music, sometimes even the noise of the most depraved, the most demonic element of our

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culture to accompany the songs of redemption to be used to give praise to the most high God.

So I know that my flesh is prone to want to go that way anyway. So out of caution I am going to build certain things into my life to guard me, not because of weak faith.

Now having said that, let's go back to this issue of weak faith, because I struggle with that in certain areas as I am sure you do.

“...nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”<sup>10</sup>

So the point here is: Don't condemn your weaker brother, nor insist that he violate his conscience by somehow doing something that would be hurtful to him, that he considers sinful. Because ultimately Paul is saying that will hurt him. Notice verse 15.

“For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.”<sup>11</sup>

You see, when a weaker brother sees a stronger brother doing something that he considers to be sin, his conscience is grieved. We have got to guard against that. Worse yet, the weaker brother may be emboldened to somehow participate in what he perceived to be sin. And when you participate in something you perceive to be sin, whether God says it is or not, then what happens? You experience guilt. And very often with these people this guilt drives them further away from grace and deeper into Legalism. The Lord doesn't want this to happen.

Have you ever been around very legalistic churches, legalistic institutions? One of the things that you will find is that there is no end to the rules. There has to be a new handbook written like almost two times a year. You see, Legalism, my friends, offers only the illusion of spirituality.

So since it never fills the void, new regulations must be constantly introduced to appease the conscience. And by wounding another brother and causing them to violate their conscience, many times they will move deeper into that kind of thing.

You know, a great example of this, if you read the Jewish Talmud which was basically a compilation of Jewish traditions, you will see that they have got 24 chapters concerning rules for the sabbath. Now, by the way, this went way beyond anything that God gave them in the Mosaic law. For example, one law says that you can only travel 3000 feet

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 14:14.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 14:15.

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from your house, ok? But catch this. They came up with a way if you placed food at the end of that 3000 feet then that extends your house so you can go another 3000 feet. And I could give you literally hundreds of silly illustrations. We think they are silly, but this is what happens once we move away from grace.

So Paul is saying don't hurt or destroy your brother by ... with your condemnation or by flaunting your freedom in his face. Instead, it is ok to maybe gently communicate what you believe Scripture teaches, but then be willing to restrict your own liberty and conform to his stricter standard, especially while you are in his presence. This builds relationship. This strengthens the bond of love and provides an opportunity for learning so that perhaps over time the weaker brother will become stronger and so forth. This is precisely the emphasis of 1 Corinthians eight. There Paul gave an example of a weaker brother being harmed by watching a stronger brother eating meat sacrificed to idols.

Now he lets us know in that text that God says, you know, it is perfectly ok to do that, but in verse seven he says:

“However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.”<sup>12</sup>

Verse nine:

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.<sup>13</sup>

Here we see how much God loves his people and how much we should love those for whom Christ died. And we can also see the astounding premium that God places on unity and love within the body of Christ.

You want to ask yourself. Do you hold your brothers and sisters in this high esteem?

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:7.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

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A third way to build put the body and bring unity is don't abuse your liberty and ruin your testimony. Notice verse 16.

Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Folks, you need to underline that in your Bible, those three terms. This is what should characterize the Church. Righteousness, peace and joy, not a list of regulations and dos and don'ts about non essentials, you know, like what we can eat and what we can't eat and what you can't drink and so forth. Certainly we shouldn't be characterized by internal strife between the weak and the strong.

Verse 18.

“For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”<sup>15</sup>

Folks, think of this way. Christ is watching. Do you realize that right now? Christ is here. We can't see him, but he is watching. He is watching your life. He watches my life. He watches how we function in the body even when we are not together. Moreover, the world is watching. Don't think for one second they are not. I could give you many illustrations having taught with Robert {??} of the last few days of the nurses and doctors who have been watching Robert Jerry Ann and all of us that have been interacting with them. They are watching. What do they see? Do they see righteousness? Do they see peace and joy? Or do they see sin and hypocrisy and ridiculous rules or unrestricted freedom, endless strife, church splits?

Do you know why most people want nothing to do with the Church? I have heard this a thousand times at least. Let me summarize it for you. People will say the church is nothing more than a bunch of hypocrites who don't really even like each other much less love one another, who fight over ridiculous issues like selfish children in a sandbox. I don't want any part of that. You know what? I don't either.

Why do you think there are approximately 1000 evangelical churches just in Davidson County, because of church plants, because people are coming to Christ? Because of church splits. Most churches teach a distorted gospel that fills the church up with tares. The rest of the saints are so spiritually malnourished they don't know how to function. They are poorly shepherded and they end up destroying each other. Often this is because Christians have abused their freedom in Christ. Paul speaks of this in Galatians five verse 13. He says:

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<sup>14</sup> Romans 14:16-17.

<sup>15</sup> Romans 14:18.

# Unifying the Strong and the Weak

By David Harrell

**Bible Text:** Romans 14:13-23

**Preached on:** Sunday, January 6, 2012

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.<sup>16</sup>

That admonition precedes that glorious treatise on walking by the Spirit. What a contrast.

Now Paul's admonition here in verses 16 through 19 is directed primarily toward the strong and basically he is saying, "Folks, don't abuse your liberty and ruin your testimony. Seek the welfare of your brother. That is what is more important."

To give you another illustration of this in 1 Corinthians 10 beginning in verse 23 Paul says:

All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor. Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS. If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.<sup>17</sup>

Think of some of the Jewish brethren in those days. Many had lived lives under the rules and regulations of the Mosaic covenant, the strict prohibitions against, for example, eating meat that still contained any blood or eating an animal that had been killed by strangulation. So what do you do if this comes up and it is being served? Well, unfortunately what was happening is the strong would condemn them and make fun of them and try to get them to violate their conscience. But what we are told to do is no, restrict your own liberty. Refuse to eat the meat.

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<sup>16</sup> Galatians 5:13-15.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:23-33.

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Beloved, this is the stuff of the kingdom of God. This is the stuff of love. This is why Paul says the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. This is why he said in verse 19:

“So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”<sup>18</sup>

You know, I want people to look at Calvary Bible Church and say, “My those people will go to any length to pursue peace with one another even though they differ on various things. They truly love this Christ that they serve and they have a passion to build up their church in terms of the welfare of its people. They will go to great lengths not to tear down.”

You know, this is what strengthens or witnesses in the world. Didn't Jesus say in John 13:35:

"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."<sup>19</sup>

And this was also Paul's loving admonition to the church in Corinth. Remember, in 2 Corinthians 13:11 he said:

“Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.”<sup>20</sup>

Well, finally, two more very quickly. Number four, don't tear down the work of God. Notice verse 20.

“Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food.”<sup>21</sup>

Again, present imperative, the idea that this grammatically we see that this must have been going on in the Church. In other words, food and drink were huge issues to both the Jews and the Gentiles for different reasons, but the overarching issue here pertains to this gift that we have of discretionary liberties. We are not encumbered with all of these things. He goes on to say:

Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is

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<sup>18</sup> Romans 14:19.

<sup>19</sup> John 13:35.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:11.

<sup>21</sup> Romans 14:20.

# Unifying the Strong and the Weak

By David Harrell

**Bible Text:** Romans 14:13-23

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good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.<sup>22</sup>

And so he comes back full circle here. Be sensitive to your weaker brother. Don't tear down the work of God for the sake of food. You see, that is the opposite of building up. And what is the work of God? Beloved, it is the sanctifying work of God that he has performed thus far in the weaker brother and the strong have been united by faith. Indeed, all believers are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus, Ephesians 2:10.

So you want to ask yourself. Are you willing to tear down just to prove your point, just to have your own way over some discretionary issue? I remember a number of years ago in the church I had a Christmas eve service. Some of you in here were there and you will laugh when you may be reminded of this, but one of our musicians wore a Santa Claus hat and there were some people that absolutely went, I mean, they went straight through the roof. They were so profoundly offended. Well, the response was, well, I am just going not wear it on Sunday morning, too. Well, no, you are not, because that is not the way we need to handle these things. But it is still life that, ridiculous sandbox stuff that destroys unity in a church and sends a message to people outside saying, "Look at those people and you want me to come be part of that? That is Christianity?"

When I am around my separatist brothers and sisters I am going to humbly conform to their rules, their restrictions. When we go to their churches Nancy won't wear jewelry. I will make sure that when I read Scripture it is in the King James only. I am going to do that out of love for my brother. When I am around my African brothers and they believe it is absolutely disrespectful not to wear your very best even when you come into a little shanty of a church, you know what? Whatever I have got in my suitcase I am going to wear my very best. When I am with my Russian brothers and sisters and they say, "Don't you dare cross your legs in a church service because it is dishonoring to God and to the bothers and sisters of anyone to see the sole of your foot," I am not going to cross my legs. There is no Bible verse that says that. But I am going to do that or not do that, restrict my freedom because of my love for my brothers. When they say, "Don't put your Bible on the floor that dishonors Christ and don't put any other book on it, the Bible has to be on top," do you know what I am going to do? I am going to observe that.

Is that all that hard? Or am I going to say, "Oh, come on." You know, give me chapter and verse on that.

Beloved, let's don't do anything that will cause offense to a weaker brother.

And one final thing. Don't denounce your freedom in Christ, verse 22.

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<sup>22</sup> Romans 14:20-21.



# Unifying the Strong and the Weak

By David Harrell

**Bible Text:** Romans 14:13-23

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“The faith which you have...”<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting here in the original language Paul actually opens this section with you in the emphatic position underscoring the personal application of about what he is about to say.

“The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.”<sup>24</sup>

So, beloved, when we are certain of our understanding of Scripture on a particular issue, a certain practice or whatever, don't denounce that as if it is sinful. No, you can rejoice in that. Don't allow your conscience to condemn you. Just because maybe a more immature brother does.

And then one final word to the weak, number six, don't succumb to what your conscience condemns, verse 23.

“But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”<sup>25</sup>

So, like he said in verse five, let each man be convinced in his own mind. If something for you is sin, don't do it. If you are not convinced that this is ok, don't do it. If there is lingering doubt. I have Jewish friends that have come to Christ that still struggle with these issues. I have got some reformed friends who struggle with sabbatarian issues and my response is, ok, do those things. Don't condemn me because I don't, but when I am around you, I will lovingly acquiesce to what you do.

Beloved, my challenge to you this morning is to answer this question in your heart. Am I committed to the unity of the Church or am I more committed to having my own way? On some issues you may be in the category of the strong. On other issues it may be in the category of the weak. Only Scripture can decide that fact. But regardless, remember, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ and we are all commended to pursue the things which make of peace and the building of one another.

Could I encourage you as we close this morning to spend time this week just examining your own heart, pleading with the Lord that he would show you specific areas in your life where you are not doing this, where your heart needs to change? And, my, if we all get serious about this, what an amazing benefit it will have in our own body and what an amazing testimony we could have to a lost and dying world that is watching us.

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<sup>23</sup> Romans 14:22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Romans 14:23.

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Let's pray.

*Lord, thank you for these truths. Help us to apply them to our lives that our lives personally and this church corporately might bear much fruit. We ask this that you might be glorified in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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