

# Unity Encompasses Liberty

By David Harrell

**Bible Text:** Romans 14:1-12

**Preached on:** Sunday, December 2, 2012

Will you join me by taking your Bibles and turning to Paul's epistle to the Romans? We now come to chapter 14 and I have entitled my discourse to you this morning, "Unity Encompasses Liberty." And as we learn more of what the apostle is telling us in this text, you will understand a little bit more of what I mean by that title, "Unity Encompasses Liberty."

We will be looking at the first 12 verses of this portion of Scripture. Let me read them to you beginning in verse one of Romans 14.

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD." So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.<sup>1</sup>

Thus far in Paul's epistle he has gone to great lengths to help us understand man's utter depravity and inability to save himself apart from sovereign grace. He is gone to great lengths to explain how all of salvation from beginning to end is a work of grace. He has helped us to understand more specifically what it means to present our bodies as a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God. And he has gone on to explain how that is manifested with respect to having a proper attitude toward God, toward other believers, towards all people, towards civil authorities. And he has underscored the urgency for

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 14:1-12.

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every believer to have an all encompassing love that will clearly reveal to the world that we have laid aside the deeds of darkness and we have put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

And now in the two chapters ahead of his here, specifically in chapters 14 and 15, he is going to flesh out how these truths should be manifested within the Church, within our relationship with one another. Shall we say here is where the rubber really meets the road very specifically?

You know, it is characteristic of our flesh to amen all of the general preaching regarding self sacrificial love and so forth, all that we read in chapter 13. We hear that and it is, oh, amen, boy, that is...oh that is so good. Praise God for those truths. And we mean that, but beloved, it is all together a different matter to embrace them when they directly challenge something in your life, maybe when it directly challenges the legitimacy of some closely held personal conviction or some self righteous animosity that you have towards someone else who doesn't share your conviction over some grey area in Scripture.

Well, this is precisely what was going on in the Church at Rome. So shall we say when Paul came to this portion of the epistle he was throwing the cat in amongst the pigeons in the early Church as I am sure he will do here today? And whenever that happens the feathers begin to fly a little bit.

Let me give you the context, because we are all going to stand guilty here in various ways. And it is important to know the dynamic of what was happening back in the early church. Think of it as the wild west. There were two radically different cultures that were coming together, maybe like the cowboys and the Indians, but the point is there were problems with the various cultures, especially between the two dominant cultures, the Jews and the Gentiles. Some of the Jewish Christians were reluctant to abandon the Old Testament law. They were unsure how their newfound faith really affected certain regulations. And sometimes just superstition, superstitious taboos that they had in their life and how those things governed their life. So they were confused about those things. You might recall that Paul just literally dressed down Peter and Barnabas in front of the church in Syrian Antioch because they had caved in to the pressure of some of the Jewish believers from Jerusalem who had insisted that their Gentile brothers obey certain aspects of the Mosaic law as a source of righteousness. And because of that hypocrisy in Galatians 2:11 Paul says:

“I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.”<sup>2</sup>

Now later in Corinth Paul had to address similar issues concerning eating meat sacrificed to idols. You may recall that whole study in 1 Corinthians eight and here in Romans 14 the issue is rising again with respect to whether you eat meat or you are a vegetarian with

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 2:11.

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respect to how these things are perceived by these individual people. After all, you don't want to eat something that was sacrificed to an idol, some were thinking and so forth. And there were also issues pertaining to the observance of the Jewish sabbath and of certain other special days in Jewish custom. And also some of the Gentiles had various days and seasons that they were concerned about. For some it was a big deal. For others it was like... what in the world? In our liberty in Christ, I mean, I don't understand. So you have this dynamic going on in the early Church.

You will recall that with respect to this clash of religious cultures James the pastor of the church in Jerusalem, who, by the way, was the very pastor who had sent the confused and hypocritical Judaizers to influence Peter and Barnabas, James ends up having a change of heart. He understands Scripture better. Later on then he meets with the elders and the apostles and there was that great debate there on these issues in Jerusalem. We read about it in Acts 15. Sometimes it is called the Council of Jerusalem. And there pastor James made the final decision of which all of the rest agreed and he drafted a letter to the churches that was sent out to encourage the Judaizers to lay off, you know, quit troubling and annoying the Gentiles by requiring them to keep the law and observe certain rituals that were really not requirements for salvation and then also for the Gentiles to be sensitive to their Jewish brothers whose new found faith and their understanding of grace was still weak. It was still uninformed. That letter from the Jerusalem council included these words recorded in Acts 15:29.

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.<sup>3</sup>

And it is interesting the reaction, verse 31.

“And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.”<sup>4</sup>

Now it is no surprise that these same kinds of issues were surfacing in the church at Rome. It was causing division. Those Jews and perhaps some Gentiles who were over scrupulous who ate nothing but vegetables and regarded certain days as more sacred than others are those that Paul calls weak in faith, those whose faith allowed them to eat whatever they wanted were called strong in verse one of chapter 15.

Now I want to clarify some things here. Weak in faith does not mean unspiritual. It does not mean carnal. You can be weak in faith or you can be strong in faith and still be unspiritual if you allow certain areas of sin to dominate your life. Nor does weakened

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 15:28-29.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 15:31.

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faith denote a person who trusts in Christ very little or a person who has some kind of a feeble faith, but rather it meant that these people were weak in their understanding of gospel truth with respect to their liberty in Christ, with respect to their faith and how it should be lived out in Christ over certain specific issues, not necessarily over everything, but certain issues.

And, again, we have all fallen into these categories and we will from time to time. But this person's faith, a person who has what Paul describes as weak faith is not strong enough. Their faith is not strong enough to enable them to perceive the full liberty that they have in Christ. Their conscience is poorly informed and therefore it holds them to non essentials and self imposed restrictions, various forms of what we might call Legalism. They have an immature grasp of the Word of God in this area on certain specific issues. So therefore they have imposed themselves in certain aspects of bondage to certain kinds of compulsions or restraints. They do not see how their conduct really needs to be lived out completely in their faith, nor, therefore, are they able to enjoy certain kinds of things.

Some of you struggle with these things. I have from time to time. One of the things that I have noticed in you and in me that it is always very difficult for us to admit that we struggle with being weak in faith in certain areas. As Paul will make clear when a person's conscience is fully developed, when they have an accurate understanding of the Word of God on specific issues, then we are going to see that it is going to be ok for them to partake of this meat that was offered to idols. It is ok to abandon some of those days that were venerated by others. It is ok to do that. And he goes on to describe the other class of believers in Rome as the strong. And you see this in verse one of chapter 15, those who understood their full liberty in Christ and they weren't concerned about committing certain kinds of religious offenses. They did not encumber themselves with self imposed restrictions that are meaningless to God. However, the danger there is always of pushing the limits of liberty way too far.

But, as we are going to see, the real problem arose when the weak in faith who, by the way, were in the minority and predominantly Jewish, sat in judgment of the strong, that were predominantly Gentile and then condemned them for enjoying their greater freedom in Christ, their liberty.

Throughout the New Testament record you will see that the weak are always the most vocal. They are prone to be the most divisive which is characteristic of every church down through history. It has certainly been characteristic here at our church. But sadly the strong in faith which were the majority were prone to retaliate against the weak in faith by treating them with contempt and alienating them from fellowship. It sounds just like us, doesn't it? Isn't that how we typically work because of our sin?

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So these dynamics were at play in the early church and they needed to be addressed and they were addressed throughout the New Testament, two radically different religious cultures coming together in one body in the Church and each group bringing with them their religious and their cultural baggage including superstitions and traditions and personal preferences. They were provincial say we say, some of the, narrow minded, antagonistic towards people that aren't like them culturally and so forth. So the question is: How do you handle this? We have got to understand how we deal with this in the church. This can be so divisive. This is the opposite of love that Paul has been talking about. And left unchecked it can rip a church apart.

And I have seen it over the years in our church especially as our church continues to grow and you bring in people from other parts of the world literally with all of their backgrounds and they all come together in one family. We don't necessarily have squabbles over meat sacrificed to idols, because that is not an issue we deal with in our culture today. Nor do we necessarily have many squabbles over religious days even though we have had a few. There are some who are adamantly opposed, I know some of you are adamantly opposed to having anything to do with Christmas and anything to do with Easter, because it is rooted in Paganism and so forth. But other disputable matters, those non essential gray areas of Scripture where people have strong convictions about things that Scripture neither forbids nor commands, are the types of things that we end up dealing with. And this was what Paul was dealing with.

Sincere, godly people who have radically different opinions about certain issues and they don't agree on them. Let me give you a partial list of what I have dealt with at Calvary Bible Church. And I say this in love, because people that hold to some of these positions—I may not agree with them—but they are sincere, godly people. Some people think that certain types of music is of the devil. The question is: Who decides the criteria? I have had issues of Bible translation that we should only use the King James version only. The consumption of alcoholic beverages, use of tobacco products, Christmas trees, Easter celebration, forms of recreation such as movies and dancing, Christian schools versus public schools versus home schooling. Oh, boy, that is a big one. Family integrated services. Some people believe that the children should never be separated from their parents. There should be no Sunday school, no youth ministry, no children's church. They disagree with the idea of age appropriate segregation and training. Head coverings for women. That has been an issue from time to time. Women shouldn't wear slacks, shorts, jewelry. There needs to be dress codes. What about bathing suits? Boy, there is big one there. Should our children, should our youth, should our adults ever go to the beach? Some insist that communion be done on only in the church, never in a home fellowship group. And the pastor has to be present. Some believe that it is sinful to own certain luxury items like a fine car or expensive pieces of jewelry and so forth.

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That is just a sample of what we have dealt with here at Calvary Bible Church over the years. So how do you lovingly resolve these inevitable differences over really just standards? How do you deal with this? You know, we are all one body, right? We are all united to Christ by faith but we are not always unified. I can take a coon and I can take a possum and tie their tails together with a piece of leather and they will be united. But, brethren, they will not be unified. And many times that is the way we are here.

So this is what Paul addresses and I want to give you three reasons that emerge from this text why all believers, whether weak or strong on a particular issue, are to be accepted and loved by all other believers. Number one, because God has accepted both the strong and the weak. We will see this. Number two, God alone is the sovereign master of both the strong and the weak. And, number three, God alone will judge both the strong and the weak.

So let's look at the first concept that God has accepted both the weak and the strong. Notice verse one.

“Now accept the one who is weak in faith.”<sup>5</sup>

This, beloved, is a command, not a suggestion that the strong accept the weak. You don't ridicule them. You don't look down on them just because their conscience will not allow them to exercise the same kind of freedoms you are convinced the Lord allows. You don't pressure them to violate their conscience so it conforms to yours. Now let's look closely at the exegesis here. The word accept it comes from the Greek term προσλαμβανω (pros-lam-ban'-o) and it means to receive or welcome a person as a guest. That pretty well says it all, doesn't it? Moreover, grammatically it is in what we call the middle voice which denotes it needs to be a personal, willful desire to accept another person. You don't do this out of duty. You do it out of desire.

Luke uses the verb in Acts 28 verse two to describe the extraordinary kindness of the natives of Malta who took in the ship wrecked sailors along with Paul. He says there:

“...for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all.”<sup>6</sup>

The verb is used twice in this very context in Romans 15:7. There we read:

“ Wherefore, accept one another...”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Romans 14:1.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 28:2.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 15:7.

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And the context here is especially over issues of conscience.

“Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.”<sup>8</sup>

This is very clear, brethren. It is ... this is not complicated. This is what we are commanded to do. So you want to ask: Does this describe your attitude and actions towards those who because they are weak in faith you might consider to be hopelessly legalistic or not as spiritual as you.

Now weak in faith translates a Greek, what we call a present participle and all that means is that it indicates that this is a temporary condition on an individual. However, in the original language it includes the definite article the in front of faith. So it could be translated weak in the faith. They are weak in their understanding of the full essence of saving grace as expressed in the gospel of God. For example, Paul admonished the Colossians in Colossians 1:23 to continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast. So weak in faith does not suggest being weak in the realm of faithfulness or spiritual trust. They just... it is as if they just don't trust God enough. That is not the idea here, but rather they are weak in their understanding of the full essence of saving grace expressed in the gospel and the liberties that are there to all who believe in him.

Now I might also add that the concept of accepting those who are weak in faith does not mean that the self imposed issues that they keep that really keep them in bondage are never to be addressed, that you are never to ever say anything about them, especially if those convictions have anything to do with salvation. My goodness, if it has to do with salvation, of saving grace, it not only needs to be addressed, it needs to be strongly rebuked. Remember the harsh tone that Paul used in his epistle to the Galatians when they tragically allowed the Judaizers to influence them. Remember in Galatians 5:1 Paul says:

“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.”<sup>9</sup>

And in Galatians six verse one he says:

“Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.”<sup>10</sup>

But I might add that there is no indication that the weak here in our text before us in Romans attached any saving merit to their convictions. And that is why Paul's tone here

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 5:1.

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 6:1.

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is much more subdued than it was in Galatians. Nevertheless it is still confrontive. So we are to accept the weak, but that is not synonymous with just ignoring some of their convictions. The mature should always teach the immature about their freedom in Christ and so forth, to do it with patience, do it with humility, as you will see, accepting them right where they are regardless of their conviction.

Now notice at the end of verse one he says:

“...but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.”<sup>11</sup>

This is why we accept them. We are to accept them, but not to the purpose of having a literally a contentious debate. The King James puts it this way,

“...but not to doubtful disputations.”<sup>12</sup>

The new Revised Standard Version says:

“...not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.”<sup>13</sup>

And I like the NIV.

“We are to accept them without quarreling over disputable matters.”<sup>14</sup>

You see, again, the opinions of the weak are very sincere, albeit they may be undeveloped, without biblical support, though many times they will try to argue based on certain texts that many times are tortured to somehow prove their point. A great example of this if you study the home church movement and their conviction as to why what we are doing here as a church is wrong, you will see that they have done some exegetical gymnastics and tortured the Word of God to somehow get us to agree with them. The same thing with the whole family integrated church movement and so forth.

But the strong are not to despise them. They are not to bicker with them over these non essential matters of conscience. You may have noticed when well meaning folks—maybe you have been one of them—have come to lobby me over some personal preference, maybe some strong conviction that you have, if it lacks biblical support I will gently share that with you and lovingly accept you where you are, but I will not get embroiled in some debate over the issue. I am not going to waste my time with that. Moreover that would be a violation of what we see here in this text.

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<sup>11</sup> Romans 14:1.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

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Now if you become a champion of others who hold your view and you become divisive within the church then you will hear a little different tone coming from me and from the elders. You will receive a rebuke and certainly the weak, as we are going to see here, are prone to judge the strong. And that is a grievous sin that divides rather than unites.

Now Paul gives some examples here beginning in verse two and the example that he is going to give—let me just give you the summary of it—is that Christian liberty allows us to eat what we like. Now that might have been a real blow to some of the people that didn't believe that, but this is what he tells them. It would be hard for them to hear that they... that it is ok, that God doesn't care if you eat meat that was sacrificed to a pagan idol, that it is not ceremonially unclean. So you don't have to be a vegetarian.

By the way, I am not a vegetarian. Don't even go there with me, ok? Meat is what is for dinner.

Now you will remember that Peter struggled with this very thing. Remember in Acts 10 God had to reveal to him this great vision of what was appropriate to eat. And he says in verse 15 and following:

“What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.”<sup>15</sup>

And so forth. So notice what Paul says in his example here.

“One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat.”<sup>16</sup>

In other words, he is speaking here to the strong. The strong are not to ... that regard with contempt translates a Greek verb that means to literally regard with contempt of despise someone as if they are nothing. In other words he is saying here, don't look down on your nose at people if they don't agree with you, if they don't want to eat meat which is fine to eat meat. Get off your high horse. Stop thinking you are superior. Then he shifts the focus to the weak. He says:

“...and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats.”<sup>17</sup>

The term “judge” here from the Greek term κρινω (kree'-no) means to judge a person to be guilty and liable to punishment. It carries the idea of a condemnation towards a person, an isolation. So the phrase to regard with contempt and to judge are basically

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 10:15.

<sup>16</sup> Romans 14:2-3.

<sup>17</sup> Romans 14:3.

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synonymous terms. But Paul's point in these first three verses is to draw us to a very important and obvious conclusion stated at the end of verse three and that is:

“...for God has accepted him.”<sup>18</sup>

The context here indicates that the him refers to both the strong and the weak. Who are we to judge when God has accepted the strong and the weak? So I ask yourself. And, again, we have all been on both sides of these types of things. How have you treated your brother or your sister who does not share your convictions? Do you treat them with contempt? Or do you accept them warmly as a friend?

Now why would it be wrong to treat them with contempt? Because, again, God has accepted them both. And I want you to remember this the next time you lob some grenade over into the enemy camp, you know, to try to humiliate them and embarrass them because of some position that you hold that they don't hold or whatever. What arrogance, my friends. I would even go so far as to say that this is blasphemy. Will you reject the one whom God accepts? Ask yourself that. Since when is your conscience the standard of righteousness? To put it differently, who put you in charge? Are you the judge?

I remember my little daughter Janna once having a confrontation with her dear grandmother who corrected her. And the little tyke looked up at her grandmother and said, “You are not the boss of me.” Well, she learned a little bit differently, but... and the analogy breaks down at some level, but I think you get the point. God is our judge. He accepts us.

Now the second reason why all believers, weak or strong are to be accepted and loved by others is because God alone is the sovereign master of both the weak and the strong. Notice beginning in verse four.

“Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”<sup>19</sup>

This is a fascinating truth. And perhaps a very practical illustration will give you some better understanding of it. Let's say you have got a weak brother whose religious traditions combined with his personal preferences and certain convictions that he has based on certain things that he has read in Scripture lead him to believe that certain kinds of instruments and certain styles of music are of the devil and they must never be used in a church. And so he holds to a very narrow portion of the continuum of musical acceptableness, if I can use that term, that others might agree with. So certain

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Romans 14:4.

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instruments, certain styles are repulsive to him. He associates them with the rock and roll culture, with the drug culture, a sincere, a godly man that loves Christ, does not want to dishonor him. And he believes this is dishonoring to him. He just can't worship with this type of music unless the music and the instruments all fall within a very narrow parameter. So his faith is not strong enough to enable him enjoy his whole liberty in Christ so that that continuum could be broadened some. And we all know as believers that there are certain ends that you can fall off of, but that rather than where most people would be, shall we say, is three feet his is an inch in terms of what he would accept.

Now his strong brother, on the other hand, who has a better understanding of Scripture realizes that there is nothing in Scripture to prohibit these things that he is prohibiting believes, my goodness, this is just over the top. This is just superstition. I just don't see this anywhere in Scripture. Moreover, the very music and some of the instruments he condemns are those very ones that have brought tears to my eyes. I have worshipped with this, with my... we sing these things.

So, you see, there is a problem. So both men have a choice. They can either judge each other and have contempt towards each other and break fellowship, call each other names or they can agree to disagree and maintain love and unity. Verse four argues for the latter. And the previous three verses we know that God has accepted them both and here in verse four we see that both men are serving Christ. They have a difference of opinion here on these things. They both serve the same master. So who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls. And stand he will for the Lord is able to make him stand.

So he is telling both the strong and the weak, leave your brother alone. God is his judge. His is the only verdict that counts. And it is with his power that the will make both men stand.

Aren't you thankful as Paul said in Philippians 1:6:

“He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”<sup>20</sup>

And that great doxology in Jude 24.

“Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy.”<sup>21</sup>

So it is the Lord that does that.

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<sup>20</sup> Philippians 1:6.

<sup>21</sup> Jude 24.

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By the way, skip down to verse 10 for a second. He says:

“But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.”<sup>22</sup>

And Paul goes on to give his own illustration here now. He says in verse five:

“One man regards one day above another.”<sup>23</sup>

Now this would be referring to the weak Jewish believer who is compelled to observe the sabbath and various restrictions associated with that and various feast days and so forth. And also it would include the weak Gentile that wanted to separate himself as far as possible from anything that would be associated with Paganism, just like some believers would with respect to Christmas or Easter or whatever. Then he says:

“...another regards every day alike.”<sup>24</sup>

And there is the strong believer, the mature believer. He is unaffected by those things. So what does he say?

“Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”<sup>25</sup>

In other words, don't merely join in with the strong without holding this same conviction. Otherwise you will violate your own conscience. And you don't want to do that. You know, it is very important here the strong to remember this. Don't insist that others enjoy your liberty in Christ if it violates their conscience, even if it is a non essential, even if it is something that cannot be substantiated in Scripture. Even if what they believe is not forbidden or commanded, because if you case them to violate their conscience, do you know what will happen? They will feel guilt and that will typically drive them even deeper into Legalism. So don't do that. Knowledge may prove that something is perfectly acceptable, but love will say if it violates my brother's conscience, it leads him into what he believes is sin, I will gladly accept him where he is and not insist that he agree with me.

1 Corinthians eight beginning at verse nine:

But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an

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<sup>22</sup> Romans 14:10.

<sup>23</sup> Romans 14:5.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

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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 thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.<sup>26</sup>

Well, let me digress for just a moment to address something that I know comes up with some from time to time in light of this. Some will say, "Well, then, there are things within our church that offend me. And you are making me violate my conscience. So according to this there are some radical changes that need to be made here at the church."

Now I might add that if you feel strongly this way it also reveals some pride and a little bit of self-righteousness, but nevertheless the strong must be sensitive to the weak, accepting them, not judging them and instructing them and so forth. And certainly in the context of our private interactions and our private fellowship of one another we need to make every precaution not to offend our brother who is weak, not to make him in any way feel guilty because he is not enjoying some freedom that we believe is acceptable. So, for example, if the group gets together and got a brother who is offended by going to a movie, even though the Scripture doesn't forbid going to see movies, well, you know what you need to do. Find another form of entertainment. If you have a brother who is offended with the consumption of an alcoholic beverage like wine if they come over, you don't serve the wine. Serve something else. Is that so hard? If they are offended with certain kinds of music and you are fellowshiping with them, play the music they like.

But when it comes to the policies of the church, it would be absolutely impossible to structure our church in such a way that would remove offense from everyone. And, by the way, if you did do that, you would just breed Legalism, if not completely alienate most of the people within the church. For example, if this church here is what it would look like if we tried to make sure that no one was offended. We would have no instruments whatsoever. We would have to tear down the screens. Some are offended with that. We can only use the hymnals and the hymns in the hymnals. There would be a strict dress code. No slacks for the ladies, skirts below the knees. There would be head coverings. Men, you would have to wear a tie. No jewelry or expensive watches.

By the way, some of you need to get rid of some of your expensive cars and trucks. We couldn't... I don't know what we would do with communion. Some are offended because we don't use wine and others would be offended if we did. No children's church. No Sunday school. No student ministries. I would be preaching only from the King James version. There would be no celebration of Christmas or Easter. All of you would be home schoolers. And, you know, you could do all of that and somebody would still be offended.

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 8:9-12.

# Unity Encompasses Liberty

By David Harrell

**Bible Text:** Romans 14:1-12

**Preached on:** Sunday, December 2, 2012

I remember once a number of years ago a man came up to me after church and I mean, I could tell when he was coming towards me, he was beet red. He was mad. And I thought, oh, boy, what have we done? Well, we had a gospel quartet at that time. Some of you remember those days. And he was absolutely livid that we would sing gospel quartet music. And he started addressing the fact that all of that comes from the devil, that those gospel singers that they are drunks and womanizers and how... he had some long spiel of how it came from Elvis and all of this type of thing. And it was a very difficult interaction.

So what do you do? Well, you lovingly accept. You don't show contempt. You don't try to insist. By the way, I told that brother that, you know, I don't agree with you. Here is why? But I want you to know I appreciate your sincere conviction. If you hold to that, I certainly don't want to violate your convictions. So the next time—and there will be other times when we will sing some gospel quartet music—and on the real issue is the integrity of the musicians and the lyrics and all of that, not the style, we will make sure that you know so that you won't have to endure this, because we don't want to violate your conscience.

Well, he never came back. But I think you get the idea.

So you can't let the weak minority force the strong majority to promote practices that are not commanded or forbidden in Scripture. Because, again, the bigger issue is love and unity for the sake of the gospel. You have to find balance. You have to find compromise. And then all of the rest of us have to accept one another and love one another because we have got bigger fish to fry.

Notice he goes on to describe the motives in both the weak and the strong. And that is to honor the Lord, verse six.

“He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.”<sup>27</sup>

So the issue here regarding personal preferences and convictions is not so much what we believe or what we don't believe, but our motive for believing them. And in both cases here Paul is saying for the most part whether you are weak or strong, your motive is to honor the Lord. So let's leave it at that.

You know, Paul dealt with this in Colosse. Remember, Colossians 2:16 he admonished the brethren there saying:

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<sup>27</sup> Romans 14:6.

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Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day — things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.<sup>28</sup>

That is in verse seven. He expands on the importance here of living consistently with the convictions that we hold, believing they are honoring to God. He says:

For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.<sup>29</sup>

So what Paul is saying is that all believers live out their lives before the Lord. Even in death we live before the Lord, remember 1 Thessalonians five verse 10. Paul says:

“...who died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.”<sup>30</sup>

So, indeed, the Lord is Lord of all. That is the idea, especially those he has redeemed and I love that phrase at the end of verse eight. We are the Lord's. He goes on to say:

“For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”<sup>31</sup>

Beloved, can there be any statement stronger in all of Scripture to call us to holy living? Can there be any stronger statement in all of the Word of God that calls us to present our bodies as a living and a holy sacrifice acceptable to God? To submit ourselves wholly to his sovereign lordship over our lives?

And so Paul's point here in these verses is that we, whether you are strong or weak, we live to please Christ. In fact, it is interesting. Jesus is Lord was the earliest and most common confession of the early saints. So, beloved, as our Creator, as our Savior, as our Mediator, our Lord has the irrefutable right to exercise his lordship over the living and the dead. And it is therefore our responsibility to joyfully submit to him, even with what we are learning here. And so this is what our motivation must be for whatever conviction we hold. And therefore Paul's point is that it is out of place for any believer to question the motivation and the conviction of another believer in matters not central to their faith because God is the judge. And this is so freeing to me.

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<sup>28</sup> Colossians 2:16-17.

<sup>29</sup> Romans 14:7-9.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:10.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 14:9.

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We don't have to have preference police running around. We are not all going to agree. And, as I say, we have bigger fish to fry. I love what he says in verse 20.

“Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food.”<sup>32</sup>

Beloved, let me put it to you this way. The eternal destiny of men's souls are at stake in what we do here at Calvary Bible Church. And you are upset over what? Do you get the point? Come on. Sometimes we are like children fighting over the remote control of the television while the house is burning down. And we need to reexamine our priorities here, because Jesus is Lord over every believer. Let him be Lord. I am not running around trying to impose my convictions on you. I don't agree with a lot of your convictions. Frankly—and I hope you hear this with love—I don't really care about yours. It is between you and the Lord. I only care if you get divisive about it. But don't waste your time or mine trying to convert me. I am confident in what I believe and like Paul said in 1 Corinthians four verse three:

But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord.<sup>33</sup>

So we leave it at that. We love each other and get on with the work of the gospel. The body of Christ should be united around those clear truths and then from there we grant generous amounts of liberality toward one another. That is why I say that unity encompasses liberty. It doesn't flaunt it, nor does it attack it. It encompasses it.

And finally, in light of the sovereign lordship of Christ over the weak and the strong, Paul says in verse 10:

“But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.”<sup>34</sup>

And I close with this final point that Paul makes and that is that God alone will judge both the weak and the strong. That is why we accept each other. Verse 10:

“For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.”<sup>35</sup>

Beloved, we are all going to have to give an account of our life, not our brother's life. So

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<sup>32</sup> Romans 14:20.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:3-4.

<sup>34</sup> Romans 14:10.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

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stop looking at the speck in your brother's eye. Start focusing on the log in your own. To emphasize this he goes on in verse 11 and says:

“For it is written, ‘AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.’”<sup>36</sup>

Quoting from Isaiah 45:23 and even Philippians 2:10 following.

So, folks, I don't know about you, but my platter is full dealing with Dave Harrell, ok? I have got my hands full. And I am not even good at that. And I am certainly therefore not going to usurp the lordship of Christ by trying to judge your motives. That is the point with all of this.

So we are to lovingly accept all believers because God has accepted them, because God alone is their sovereign master and because God alone will judge them, the weak and the strong at the judgment seat of Christ. You can read about that more in 1 Corinthians 3:13 ff.

So, folks, let's celebrate the vast diversity that we have here in Christ. I hope you don't hear that as some corny politically correct thing. I hate that whole concept, but there is something true about that within the body of Christ. We are not all going to agree. So let's accept one another, bear with one another in all things in love, especially on matters of conscience.

And I close with what Paul said in verse 19.

“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.”<sup>37</sup>

Let's pray together.

*Father, thank you for these truths that are so practical to us. Lord, we confess that we have all been weak on some issues. We have been strong on others. Lord, we struggle with these things all the time, because of our flesh, because of our background. And, Lord, I pray that by the power of your Spirit you will soften each of our hearts and cause us to live consistently with these great truths that you might have the preeminence in our lives and that the gospel will go forth unabated. We ask in the precious name of Jesus our Savior. Amen.*

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<sup>36</sup> Romans 14:11.

<sup>37</sup> Romans 14:19-20.

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