

What It Means To Love One Another – Part 1

By David Harrell

Romans 14:19

Take your Bibles and turn to Romans chapter 14. This morning we will continue the topical series that I began several weeks back on the issue of the heart of love. You will recall that we began by examining John 13 in a discourse entitled “The Basin and the Towel,” where we learned that we are to model our Lord Jesus Christ who is the supreme example of love. We are to model a love that is self sacrificing, self humiliating and self controlled.

And after that we examined 1 Corinthians 13 where I explicated that text for you under the heading, “The Greatest Gift,” referring to the gift of love. And now, as promised, I want to embark upon a study for the next few Sundays on the one another passages that we find in the New Testament. And this will further demonstrate what love looks like. And it is for this reason that I have entitled this final little series, “What it Means to Love One Another.”

Since there are numerous passages on what it means to love one another I have decided to just examine these in three very practical categories that really address our duties as Christians. We are going to look at what it means to love one another with respect to, number one, fellowship needs; number two, spiritual needs; and, number three, physical needs. And this morning we are just going to look at the issue of fellowship needs.

And I want to give a bit of a disclaimer here, too. This is a bit uncharted territory for me as a Bible expositor. I am used to going through verse by verse and it is very hard for me to kind of skip over things that I think are so important for you to know. But in order to give you the big picture—not to mention to cover many very relevant texts—I will have to skip over a lot of things and not go into the detail that I would normally do.

Now, by way of introduction, when you look at the passages in the New Testament that speak about how we are to conduct ourselves toward one another, you will see that they are predominantly focusing on the issue of preserving unity in the Church, that is how we are going to get along.

And you might ask the question, “Well, I wonder why that is so important for us to be united other than we just don’t like conflict.” Well, it is very important because if we are obedient, what happens? If we are united God blesses us when we truly love one another. And, therefore, he empowers us. And so not only are we to be loving towards one another in order for him to bless us, but also so that he will be glorified. So, when we look at these things we realize that the Holy Spirit has given them to us for our good and his glory. He blesses us when we are obedient and he empowers us to do what? To preach the gospel. And then when people come to a saving knowledge of Christ what happens? God is more glorified and on we go.

It is for this reason that Jesus told his disciples on the night before his crucifixion, you will recall, in John 13 beginning in verse 34:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.¹

¹ John 13:34-35.

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Why is it important for men to know that we are his disciples? The answer is: to confuse them with our love for one another. And it is confusing to the world when they see Christians truly loving one another when many times we are not deserving of each other's love.

You see, when we love one another it causes those who do not know Christ to begin to examine their own heart and the wickedness of their own heart. And love, then, becomes a powerful tool for evangelism. We are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart, mind, soul, strength. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves. And when the unsaved see our love for God and for each other, they quickly are able to contrast that with their hate for God and their love for themselves. So we provide that contrast when we love one another.

So the Holy Spirit addresses the issue of purity and unity and love within the church repeatedly. And this is what we see predominantly with the passages on one another.

So what does it mean to love one another with respect to fellowship? You will recall the word "fellowship" *koinonia*, it refers to the mystical union that we have with Christ through saving faith, but also the experience of unity that we have in the body of Christ where we share a common purpose that is to preach the gospel and to live the gospel for the glory of God.

So in order to begin putting some of these thoughts together, I thought I would take you to Romans chapter 14 verse 19. This will be kind of the foundation passage that we will use this morning. If you will notice in that text the apostle Paul says, "So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another."² So what we are going find here, dear friends, is here is an example of what it means to really love one another. It says we are to pursue the things which make for peace.

"Pursue" in the original language means to diligently follow after something, to press towards something, to run swiftly in order to catch something that is important. And what is it that we are to pursue? Well, really two things. First of all, the things which make for peace. In other words, the things that produce harmony between brothers and sisters in Christ. Peace is a word that refers to a place of tranquility and joy and rest, the absence of conflict and rancor.

Not only are we to pursue that, but also, secondly, the building up of one another. This is referring to the edification of our brothers and sisters in Christ. In other words, we are to pursue their spiritual growth. We are to pursue whatever we need to do in order to help them grow in wisdom and happiness and holiness. We are to be passionate, therefore, about helping our brothers and sisters in Christ build a spiritual edifice of Christ likeness.

Now, I ask you. Does this describe your life? Can we look at your life and say, "Boy, there is a person who truly pursues these things. We see in this man or this woman a passion to extend their energy, to literally chase after people in the Church, in their families so that there can be peace and these people can be built up in Christ, passionate about this commandment in order to have true fellowship?"

To put it a little bit differently, would this be somewhere in maybe the top five categories of your prayer list? It should be. This is a command that we are to pursue these things. This is part of what it means to truly love one another.

² Romans 14:19.

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Several of you have confessed to me how that this series over the past several weeks has really exposed some significant failures in your life. I am glad to hear that so that I don't feel all alone. Some of you have said—and this is probably the top feedback that I get—“I am really convicted about how moody I tend to be and I am beginning to see that as a sin.” Others have talked about how they tend to keep a record of wrongs on their brothers and sisters in Christ and how easy it is to be judgmental and proud. Somebody offends you and all of the sudden you just write him off. That's it. Don't want anything to do with that person anymore. That is not what we are to do. We are to pursue the things that make for peace.

When offended, many have told me that your first thought is not to seek peace, but revenge. You begin to slander. You begin to gossip. You can't wait to tell somebody how so and so mistreated you rather than covering up that particular offense and, as a result, you begin to separate from them in fellowship. And do you know what happens? The world begins to look upon that type of behavior and says very smugly, “Yeah, look at all those hypocrites. They can't get along. They talk about the love of Christ and how they love one another. Yeah, look at that church split now the fourth time.” And on and on it goes.

Most believers, unfortunately, live in isolation. Maybe that applies to some of you. You literally avoid fellowship. You avoid one another. In your heart you basically say, “You know, I am so busy with everything in my life and, frankly, I just want to be left alone. I really don't like being involved in the lives of other people in the church, especially when it comes to somehow restoring broken fellowship or being personally involved in a way that I could somehow help someone grow in Christ, you know, this idea of pursuing the things that make for peace in the building up of one another. You know, that is really not for me. That is for other people who have been called to that like the pastor or the elders or the youth people or whatever.”

You know, friends, that is a very, very dangerous attitude and if that is your attitude, and certainly the character of your conduct, you are violating what that Lord has called you to do. And, therefore, you are forfeiting blessing in your life and you will be living under divine chastening and you may not even realize it. It is so easy for us to say, “Well, that text doesn't apply to me.” But I would submit to you that this text applies to every one of us.

In 2 Timothy two and verse 22 the apostle Paul “Pursue righteousness,” the same word. “Pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”³ We are supposed to run after these things, not run away from them. In 1 Peter three and verse eight Peter says, “Let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead.”⁴ And then in verse 11 at the end he says, “SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT.”⁵

Sadly, most Christians do not love like this. Let me tell you how it typically goes because I have heard it 1000 times over the course of my ministry. Something happens in a relationship. Somebody gets hurt. Somebody gets angry. Bam, fellowship is broken. That is it. “I want nothing else to do with that person.” There is no thought of pursuing the things that make for peace or building that person up in edification.

³ 2 Timothy 2:22.

⁴ 1 Peter 3:8-9.

⁵ 1 Peter 3:11.

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Yet the apostle Paul tells us in Romans chapter 12 and verse 18, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”⁶ In other words do all that you can. Paul expands upon this in Philippians two beginning in verse one.

If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.⁷

So, beloved, I would exhort you as we examine this text this morning to examine your heart. Are you pursuing the things which make for peace and the building up of one another?

Now, the context of this particular verse, this particular chapter is very important to understand because it is very practical. There was a problem in the early church, the same problem that has existed to this very day and will exist until the Lord comes and takes us away. It was a problem beyond just overt sin. And certainly there was some of that. But this was an issue that created a very volatile atmosphere within the church. It would be kind of like leaving the gas on in the house, just a slight spark could cause things to blow up. And the problem was the issue between what the apostle Paul called the weak versus the strong in faith, Christians trying to get along. Frankly, they had a hard time doing what we are talking about here, what the apostle said to do, to pursue the things which make for peace in the building up of one another. So the Holy Spirit speaks through his apostle to deal with the issue and Romans chapter 14 as well as Romans 15 all the way through verse 13 as well as numerous other passages in Acts as well as the epistles.

Just to give you a flavor of it, notice in verse one he says, “Now accept the one who is weak in faith.”⁸ And then he contrasts the weak with the strong over in chapter 15 verse one. “Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.”⁹ And then in verse seven, for example, he says that you are to accept one another just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.

Now how does he define the weak versus the strong? And before I go any further let me just say that there is not a person in here who doesn’t fall into one of these categories sometime in their life. There are areas where I have struggled with this weak faith as you are going to see. There are places where you struggle with it. There are places where we may be strong, but we don’t handle it properly and so forth.

So what is this issue of weak versus strong? Well, notice verse one of 14. It says, “Weak in faith.” Actually in the original language the definite article is included there, the word “the” and so it is a present participle and it is literally saying here one who is in the present tense being weak in the context of some issue, not that there are weak in saving faith. No, they have got saving faith. They are believers here. Nor does it necessarily mean that they are in a constant state of weakness in all things, but on certain issues they are weak.

⁶ Romans 12:18.

⁷ Philippians 2:1-4.

⁸ Romans 14:1.

⁹ Romans 15:1.

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And, really, what it is referring to, as we are going to see, is this refers to a man with a weak conscience pertaining to his liberty in Christ. His faith is not strong enough to help him really perceive the full liberty that he has in Christ. And so he lives in fear, fear that he might dishonor the Lord. And that fear begins to translate into areas of legalism. This is the type of person that can't really let go of some of their past traditions, some of their cultural taboos. And many times they will end up creating new rules that they have to obey. This is the person whose conscience really binds him to non moral, non essential issues, diet restrictions, self imposed rules and regulations, routines that that person is certain will make him more spiritual.

Really, they are nothing more than personal preferences that are elevated to be equal with Scripture. And, many times—and I have been guilty of this as some of you have been guilty of it—you end up torturing Scripture to somehow bolster your rule, your position.

Weak faith, by the way, does not mean carnal. It does not mean that the person is living in sin. Indeed, a person can be weak and still be very spiritual in many areas, but the point is, in some areas of their life, the person is convicted that their preferences are really God's demand when, in truth, the Lord really doesn't care because they are non essentials.

So a weak believer, as Paul describes him, has a sincere, but undeveloped faith, believers whose conscience holds them to what they will consider to be God honoring essentials when, in fact, they are nothing more than personal preferences. So because of the fact that he is afraid of committing certain types of religious offences over non essentials, this person will surround himself with self imposed restrictions and typically he has a rule or a strong opinion on many different things.

Now, the context here certainly bears this out. If you look at the early Church, it was filled with new believers that came out of both the Jewish background as well as the Gentile background. The Jewish believers came out of a very legalistic lifestyle. They had laws that dictated every aspect of their life. If you know anything about Judaism, especially in those days, there was a law about how you cooked you food, what utensils you used. And when we have our Passover Seder here you will see some of that explained. There was a law about what you could eat, what you couldn't eat, where you went, how long you could stay at a certain place. There were laws about certain days that you were to celebrate, certain feasts and festivals, all kinds of restrictions about worship, rules about things that were clean and unclean and washings and rituals and on and on and on it goes. There were literally rules that dictated every aspect of their life.

Now, imagine coming to Christ and all of the sudden there is grace. The rules don't apply anymore. You don't have to do these things. Well, that freedom in Christ was hard for them to deal with. Liberty in Christ? And then what began to happen is what I call the tyranny of the "yes, but." "Yes, there is grace, but..." and then the but had all of these... we still need to do these things, we need to maintain the dietary restrictions. I mean, after all, no pork chops or country ham for us, you see. After all, we still need to worship on Shabbot on Saturday, not on the first day of the week. And you have all these things going on. So the Jewish people would bring all of this baggage into the Church.

Well, now let's stir that into the pot of the body here, not to mix the metaphors, but the idea of stirring it all in together in one big group of people. Now you have got the Gentiles that come on. All right, Gentiles totally different background. They were saved out of pagan idolatry. They would sacrifice meat and vegetables and fruits to pagan deities. They would have what we would call a pot luck dinner to their favorite pagan deity.

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So you would come and you would, you know, give whatever food you have. Some of it you would eat. The rest of it would go to the deity and, ultimately, to the priest that would get their portion. And then you would typically get just stone drunk out of your mind. Many times there would be immoral orgies that would take place. It was just pure debauchery. And then all of the sudden God saves them. Their heart is transformed. The old things pass away. The new things come. They begin to hate those things and rightfully so. They want to honor Christ.

But they have a real hard time perceiving their liberty in Christ. For example, in their day when there was food that was left over, especially meat that would be sold the next day down at the local market. And since it had been offered to an idol, many of the Gentiles that were saved out of that thought, “man, there is no way I am going to eat that stuff because that is taboo. That was offered to an idol.” So they are coming out of that kind of background and it was very, very difficult for them. And yet as we read in the New Testament, it was not big deal to the Lord. It was a big deal for them.

So if you had some of these folks over for dinner and you served them some of that meat that was bought at the local market that had been sacrificed to an idol and you had a Gentile believer. They might be very, very offended. Some of them would be. They had weak faith. They did not fully perceive their liberty in Christ. Their conscience was still too weak to help them see that there was nothing wrong with that in God’s eyes. In fact, the idol, as Paul says, was a nothing. The idol is just a figment of your imagination.

Well, this is what was going on and there are many other examples on both the Jewish as well as the Gentile side. Now, some Jewish believers, probably many, as well as many Gentile believers began to understand these things and they mature to a point where they understood their liberty in Christ and they had no problem abandoning some of these types of traditions and taboos. They had no problem eating meat sacrificed to idols or worshipping on the first day of the week or whatever. But others insisted that their convictions were God’s convictions. And they were more than just mere personal preferences. So the conflict began.

So the problem, as we see it here in Romans 14 was that the weak were prone to judge the strong, but the strong were prone to have contempt towards the weak. There is the conflict. We see this, for example, in verses one through three in chapter 14. He says:

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.¹⁰

Notice another text in verse five. “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike.”¹¹ So you have got the Jews here trying to force some of their traditions on the Gentiles with respect to certain days and so forth. And it is fascinating.

Notice in verse 14 Paul says, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.”¹² Literally what he is saying here is the Lord has revealed to him through special

¹⁰ Romans 14:1-3.

¹¹ Romans 14:5.

¹² Romans 14:14.

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revelation that these things don't matter to him. They are non essentials. They are just mere personal preferences.

But notice what he goes on to say. "But to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."¹³ In other words, even if he is wrong, he is still convinced. So don't cause him to violate his conscience. And I will tell you more about that in a moment. So don't come to him and say, "Oh, come on. You know, eat the ham. Don't be such a Legalist" or whatever. In fact, he is going to say in verse 13, "Don't judge him. Don't put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way." 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."¹⁴ So this gives you a flavor what was going on.

Now, we see similar things in churches today. We have had similar things in our church, religious taboos that cause division when people violate what other people believe they should or should not be doing. Some of you have been saved out of Roman Catholicism and you come into a church and you kind of wonder why we are not standing up, sitting down. Where is the liturgy? Where are the candles? You know, all of these types of things.

A number of families have come out of very hyper Legalistic backgrounds and you are used to a myriad of rules. The only Bible you will use is the King James Version. I can't tell you how many people have called me up to check on this church. The first question they ask is what translation of the Bible do you use? Well, I explain to them and they almost hang up on me.

Some will have positions on how your hair is supposed to be cut for a guy, for a girl. I remember when I was a young man, if the hair got on your ears at all or on your collar, that was a sign of not being spiritual. And it was funny. When I went to Moody Bible Institute you weren't allowed to have hair on your ears or hair on your collar and no facial hair. But if you walk into the main entrance there is a picture of D L Moody. He had a full beard, hair over his ears and over his collar. It was a little bit hard to, you know, separate that out. But you get the idea.

There are people that come out of that background who, for example, I know dear brothers in Christ who would never ever wear shorts as a man, men that would never wear blue jeans because that is too much like the world. Shirts have to have collars. Women that would never wear shorts. There are some women, perhaps even here, that would never be caught dead in a pair of slacks here at the church. Many to this day only will wear dresses or those... I was going to say tent looking things, but culottes I think they are called. I don't mean to be offensive, but you get the idea.

There are some that believe, for example, when you come to church you have to have your head covered. I have had people not come here because they are afraid that people are going to laugh at us because we are convinced as women that we need to keep our heads covered. And there are those who would never have their shoulders exposed, never wear jewelry. Many would never wear makeup. Then there are people who believe that to drink an alcoholic beverage is a terrible sin or to use tobacco or go to a movie or some watch television, no playing cards. There are some cards that are ok, others that aren't, you know, those types of things.

And then, of course, there is the music issue. That is always a lightning rod with people, especially music in the church. Some styles are ok to listen to in your car, others aren't in the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Romans 14:15.

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church. Some instruments are ok, others aren't and so forth. People that are offended with accompaniment tracks and others that aren't and on and on it goes.

And then, of course, there is the Sunday issue. Many people would never work, never do anything on Sunday. You could only just kind of sit around and it is a day of rest. And then there is Christians who insist upon certain dietary restrictions. You see this very strongly in the Seventh Day Adventist movement that they are primarily vegetarians.

There are people that we have had in this church, maybe some of you, that are profoundly offended when they see a Christmas tree put up. "Oh, that is pagan. You can't do that."

I have known of several people who are offended with the term "pot luck." That is offensive to them because God is a sovereign God. There is no such thing as luck, so we ought to call it a "pitch in."

And so, you know, you have these types of things that go on and sometimes, you know, we laugh, but we have all got these things and we bring all that stuff into the Church and in many ways it is kind of like the Jews and the Gentiles.

Now, I want you to be careful. To merely have a personal preference does not mean that you fall into this category of weak faith. For example, just because you don't like drums and guitars in a worship service, it does not mean you have got weak faith. Weak faith is when you believe that drums and guitars in the worship service is dishonoring to God and makes you more spiritual to abhor them like God does and then you start judging other people. That is weak faith.

To have a personal preference to abstain from alcoholic beverages does not mean that you have weak faith. But when you insist that God clearly and categorically prohibits such a thing and agrees with you, and you try forcing it on other people, then you fall into that category.

You see, God is not concerned about things like, what, drums and guitars in worship service or whether you have a glass of wine with a meal or whether you eat a pork chop or wear slacks to church or whatever. These are non essentials. They are non moral issues, matters of personal preference. And our freedom in Christ, dear friends, allows for a myriad of things like these that we can enjoy which in and of themselves are not sinful.

Of course, we are never free to sin. But because those who are weak in faith cannot perceive their liberty in Christ many times they will remain bound up in a self imposed and, frankly, unnecessary world of rules and rituals and ideas and they tend to force this Legalism on other people. And this is the judgmentalism that caused dissension in the early church among the Jews and the Gentiles.

But not only were the weak judging the strong, but to make it worse, the strong were showing contempt for the weak. I want you to notice again the first three verses of chapter 14. "Now accept," underscore that. "...accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions."¹⁵ In other words, that is what they were doing. They were judging them and trying to pass judgment on their opinions, those who are weak in the faith that they were supposed to accept them. The word "accept" it could also be translated "receive" proslambano (pros-lam-ban'-o) in the original language, very powerful term. It means to take to one's self, you see. "Now, take to one's self the one who is weak." It means to take as a companion. It means to grant one access into your very heart. It is the idea of embracing a

¹⁵ Romans 14:1.

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weaker brother who is struggling with these things and who might even be judging you because you are not, but to embrace them with an intimate friendship and kindness, to receive them into your heart. Well, obviously the strong were not doing that. And we see this all through chapter 14 and 15.

For a moment let me take you to another text. They were dealing with this in Galatians, the church in Galatia, Galatians chapter five verse 13.

The apostle Paul says:

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 lest you be consumed by one another.¹⁶

And that is the warning that we must take to heart. So that is what chapter 14 verses one through three says. "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions."¹⁷ In other words, take them into your embrace of fellowship and friendship. And the idea here, as we are going to see, is gently lead them through a process of understanding some of their self imposed bondage and even begin to lovingly expose their sin of being critical and judgmental towards those who don't share their preferences.

Another passage just for a moment to digress, go back to Galatians and chapter six and verse one. We read, "Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual..."¹⁸ What ignore them? No. It says, "Restore such a one in the spirit of gentleness."¹⁹ Restore or correct. The original language is *katartizo* (kat-ar-tid'-zo) and it is a term that you have heard me say before was a surgical term that was used to describe setting a broken bone or putting a dislocated joint back into place. It require a firm but tender hand. It was also used to describe sailors mending their nets. We even find it used to describe the process of appeasing factions and restoring unity.

Now I ask you. Is this how you conduct yourself with those who have weak faith on a particular issue, those who are struggling with some kind of, maybe even a life dominating sin. Or do you look down on them and show contempt on them and judge them and want to rub their nose in the freedom that they have? Well, this is what it means, dear friends, to love one another.

Back to Galatians six and verse two. It says, "Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ."²⁰ He is literally saying, "I want you to come along this brother and I want you to get underneath his heavy load of unnecessary Legalism, under, perhaps, even the weight of some habitual sin that keeps dragging him down. And I want you to love him and to help him with that and thus fulfill the law of Christ." What is the law of Christ? That we should love one another.

¹⁶ Galatians 5:13-15.

¹⁷ Romans 14:1.

¹⁸ Galatians 6:1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Galatians 6:2.

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In 1 Thessalonians chapter five verse 13 at the end, Paul says, “Live in peace with one another. And we urge you, brethren...”²¹ By the way, whenever you hear that, “We urge you...” you want to underscore that. You want to get out a piece of paper and say, “This is big time important,” all right? I urge you, brethren, to do what? First of all to admonish the unruly. These are the people that push the envelope with their Christian liberty. These are the people that are the undisciplined. These are the ones that are always on the fringe of going over the precipice of Christian liberty and falling into sin. Admonish them, instruct them, warn them.

Then he says, “Encourage the faithhearted.”²² Who are the fainthearted? Well, these are the people in the middle. These are the ones who are timid. These are the ones that are easily discouraged, the ones that are intimidated easily. They are kind of afraid of their freedom in Christ and so they just kind of hold themselves together in the middle and kind of watch what everybody else does.

And then he says something very interesting. He goes to the opposite end of the spectrum and he says, “Help the weak.” Here we have it again. These are the ones that are spiritually weak when it comes to understanding grace. This can be the Legalist that lacks discernment. And then he says, “Be patient with all men. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men.”²³

We even see in Acts 20 and verse 35 Paul says, “You must help the weak.”²⁴ Don’t look down on them. Don’t ignore them or disdain them. Help them. So, again, back to Romans 14 he says, “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.”²⁵ In other words, this is the mature believer whose faith is strong enough to perceive his liberties in grace.

“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.”²⁶ Again, referring to both the strong and the weak. Verse four. “Who are you to judge the servant of another?”²⁷ Such a powerful statement. Another man’s slave, he is serving another master, who are you? The guy doesn’t respond to you. He doesn’t answer to you. He says to his own master he stands or falls.

And I love this. “And stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”²⁸ You see, the Lord is able to make even the one who has weak faith to hold him up. Is not the Lord the one who is going to make us stand in the presence of glory blameless with great joy? Of course it is. So what Paul is saying here is, “Hey, folks, back off. Mind your own business.”

Drop down to verse 10. “But you,” referring to the weak, “...why do you judge your brother? Or you again,” referring to the strong.

²¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:13-14.

²² 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

²³ 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15.

²⁴ Acts 20:35.

²⁵ Romans 14:1-2.

²⁶ Romans 14:2-3.

²⁷ Romans 14:4.

²⁸ Ibid.

What It Means To Love One Another – Part 1

By David Harrell

Romans 14:19

...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.²⁹

So he is saying here, "The Lord is the one who is going to judge, not you."

At the divine bema, at the judgment seat the Word of God tells us that the Lord is going to ask us to give an account for our sins. He is not going to ask you to give an account for my sins. You will answer for your own. That is the idea. So he is saying, "Mind your own business. You weak, quit judging the strong and you strong quit showing contempt towards the weak."

1 Corinthians chapter four beginning in verse three. The apostle deals with this there as well.

He says:

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.³⁰

Boy, isn't that true? We can examine our own heart and a lot of times not see anything. But that doesn't mean that there is not something there. It is like Paul saying just because I don't see anything doesn't mean by this I am acquitted. The one who examines me is the Lord. He is the only one who is qualified to judge me fairly. So he goes and he says, "Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."³¹

Now, notice chapter 14 of Romans once again and verse 13. He says, "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."³² So here he is saying here that the strong must be willing to limit his liberty for the sake of his weaker brother who lacks a complete and mature understanding of his liberty in Christ which is therefore causing his conscience to hold him unnecessarily to non essentials, to things that really he shouldn't be so sensitive to.

Let me give you an example. The New Testament does not forbid the drinking of alcoholic beverages, although I would hasten to add there are some very good reasons for abstaining that would not place one in the category of weak faith. But to serve an alcoholic beverage in your home to someone who is struggling with this, especially someone who, perhaps, has come out of this type of thing, perhaps someone who has even struggled with alcoholism, that would be a stumbling block. That would be so wrong, so insensitive, so unkind.

Speaking to this whole issue John MacArthur says something I wanted to share with you and I quote, "Most churches include dedicated, faithful believers whose conscience do not allow them

²⁹ Romans 14:10-12.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 4:3-4.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 4:5.

³² Romans 14:13.

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to participate in or approve of certain practices. When stronger believers, out of love for those brothers and sisters in the Lord voluntarily restrict their own lives to conform to the stricter standards of the weaker believers, they build closer relationships with each other and the Church as a whole is strengthened and unified. And in that loving environment the weaker believers are helped to become stronger.”

He goes on to say, “Our Christian liberty is vertical before the Lord, but the exercise of that liberty is horizontal, because it is seen by and affects others. To rightly understand and use our freedom in Christ brings great satisfaction. But that satisfaction is multiplied when we willingly surrender the exercise of the liberty for the sake of other believers. More importantly, it greatly pleases our Lord and promotes harmony in his Church,” end quote.

Beloved, this is so important for us to learn as we grapple with this issue of what it means to really love one another, what it means to pursue the things which make for peace in the building up of one another. And I fear all too often we are more concerned about promoting our own agenda, promoting our own preferences than we are about building peace into the body and building up one another.

You know, I am constantly amazed at the depth and the breadth of God’s grace and therefore the enormous freedoms that we have in Christ. We can enjoy so many things.

But we must be reminded of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians six verse 12. “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”³³ And later in verse 23 he says, “All things are lawful, but not all things edify.”³⁴ And this is certainly true when we cause a weaker brother to stumble by offending him with some liberty.

Back to verse 14 we read, “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.”³⁵

So he is saying here, “Don’t do anything to cause a person to violate a conscience.”

This is what we want to keep in mind. Beloved, think about it. What happens when you violate your conscience? You feel guilt, right? And you should. And the more we grow in Christ, we find that we sin less, but we hate it more. But when we violate our conscience we feel guilt.

Now if you cause a person who struggles with weak faith to violate their conscience, to do something that they are really struggling with, then that is going to produce guilt and more often than not what it is going to do is drive him further into Legalism. It is going to produce just the opposite. Or, it is going to do something that could be even worse and that is learn to ignore their conscience, something you don’t want to happen.

Come on, Jewish Christian, eat the ham. Come on, Gentile Christian, eat the meat offered to idols. Come on, former alcoholic, have a beer. You see how wicked that can be. Go against your convictions. Ignore your conscience. Enjoy your liberty in Christ.

Well, sadly, that is all too often the attitude of the strong.

In verse 15 he says, “For if because of food your brother is hurt,”³⁶ which means to cause grief or to offend. “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.”³⁷

³³ 1 Corinthians 6:12.

³⁴ 1 Corinthians 10:23.

³⁵ Romans 14:14.

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Do you realize, dear friends, that when you cause a brother to violate his conscience, you not only hurt him, but you sin against Christ who purchased him by his very blood.

In 1 Corinthians eight, which, by the way, was written over a year earlier than what we are reading here in Romans, some Gentile believers were saved out of this pagan idolatry and they could not stand, again, having any thought of doing anything that was associated with their background, not even eating food left over from an idol pot luck that was sold at the market.

And to that issue Paul says in verse seven, “However not all men have this knowledge,”³⁸ in other words, with their liberty in Christ, “but some,” he says,

...being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. 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 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. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble.³⁹

Beloved, that is what it means to love one another.

Now, sometimes people will ask, “Ok, well, pastor, where do you draw the line? Where do you draw the line here with weaker brothers?”

Let me answer that very briefly. Number one, when it comes to the gospel. If somebody believes that you need to do something legalistic in order to be saved, that is where you draw the line. You never compromise on the gospel and that, by the way, was why Paul’s rebuke to the Galatians and to the Colossians was so severe, because that was the issue there. That was an issue of justification, not one of sanctification, not one of mere preferences that people were holding to they thought that made them think they were more spiritual.

But another place where you draw the line is when it causes division in the body. That is where you have to come along and you have to find some common ground. Let me give you an example. Not too long ago we had the issue of music here in the church and preferences are all over the place when it comes to music as we all know. And some people just had preferences against certain things and others, I am sure, had weak faith. And some, for example, didn’t like certain instruments. Some wanted the old hymns versus some of the newer hymns and some want the piano only. Others would like maybe just guitars and drums and so forth, no electric anything and some didn’t mind that. And all of these things began to flare up and all manner of non biblical arguments were being thrown around to justify everybody’s position. And before you know it, we had this same type of dynamic. You had some who were weak in the faith judging

³⁶ Romans 14:15.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 8:7.

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 8:7-13.

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those who were stronger and some who were stronger showing contempt towards the weaker ones. And that can cause disunity. So what do you do? Well, you find a suitable compromise and that is what we did. You know, you can't please everybody, but you try to please the majority.

By the way, they had a similar situation to this in Acts chapter 15. You will recall at the Council of Jerusalem remember, again, the Gentiles, Jews bringing all this baggage into the Church and they were concerned that two churches were going to form, you know, just like sometimes you see that in our churches where you have got the contemporary Christian music Church and you have got the traditional. You know, you can have the same type of thing flaring up.

Well, they didn't want that to happen. So they apostles and the elders come together, they hear all of the sides. They meet with people. They hear all of this debate and then finally it is fascinating. Even with the apostles there and all of these other people from other churches that are there and all of the elders finally the half brother of Jesus, James, the senior pastor of the church stands up and says, "Brethren, listen to me. Here is what we are going to do." And he passed judgment on the situation. That judgment was drafted, a unified resolution in terms of their decision. You can read about it in Acts chapter 15 verses 23 through about 39 or 29. And that was sent out to all of the churches. It was first delivered to the church at Antioch. And here is how they responded

In verse 30 of Acts chapter 15 it says, "And having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter."⁴⁰ Now, mind you. You have got all these factions out here. They are waiting to hear, you know. What is going to happen here? Are these people going to, you know, hear what they need to hear? All right, they gathered the congregation together. They delivered the letter. "And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement."⁴¹

Beloved, that is the way it should be. When there are times where we can't seem to find preferences that meet everybody's need we come along, we come up with something and that is the end of it and we move on. That is how we love one another.

My time is almost gone. If we go back to Romans 14 and verse 16 he says, "Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing,"⁴² referring to Christian liberty:

...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.⁴³

In other words, we have many discretionary liberties in Christ. "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."⁴⁴

And then if you drop down to chapter 15 verse one.

⁴⁰ Acts 15:30.

⁴¹ Acts 15:31.

⁴² Romans 14:16.

⁴³ Romans 14:17-20.

⁴⁴ Romans 14:20-21.

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Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.⁴⁵

And then over in verse five.

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.⁴⁶

Beloved, may I challenge you to that end? May I challenge you to pursue the things which make for peace and for the building up of one another, especially when it comes to non essential preference issues of conscience, all right? And as we do that the Lord will be honored. We will be blessed and people will come to a saving knowledge of Christ because of our testimony.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these truths. Lord, we all stand guilty at various levels as we examine these things. And I pray that by the power of your Spirit you would cause us to be appropriately convicted and that we would change our hearts and our minds that we might enjoy all that is ours in Christ Jesus and that you might be glorified fully in our lives. I ask this in Jesus' precious name and for his sake, Amen.

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⁴⁵ Romans 15:1-2.

⁴⁶ Romans 15:5-7.