

Romans 14:1-23 (NKJV)

1 Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.

2 For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables.

3 Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.

4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

5 One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.

6 He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.

7 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.

8 For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

9 For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

11 For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God."

12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.

13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

15 Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.

16 Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil;

17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

18 For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.

19 Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.

20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.

21 It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.

22 Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

Romans 15:1-7 (NKJV)

1 We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.

3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."

4 For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

5 Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus,

6 that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.

I made Brad work hard this morning. I thought it was important that we have the full context of this passage before we begin to break it down.

We are not kept guessing about what this text is primarily about. Chapter 14 verse 1 begins with the command to receive one another.

Chapter 15 verse 7 ends with the command to receive one another.

So what is this about? Receiving one another.

And who should we be receiving? Those who are weak in the faith.

And what should not be part of that receiving? That the reception is not for the purpose of **disputing the doubtful things**.

This first verse is pretty much a summary of the whole text. Let's outline this text and then we will begin the process of looking it over.

I Verses 1-12 States the case, grants a general principle and tells us the way in which the matters should be considered.

II Verses 13-16 Show us the importance of viewing the process in the light of the God's family

III Verses 17-20a Shows the importance of remembering the nature of the Kingdom of God

IV 20b-23 Shows us the responsibility of individuals to their conscience

V Chapter 15:1-4 Gives a final appeal to our whole relationship with Christ.

So, let's go back to the first verse.

1 Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.

What does that mean?

First let's look at the word **receive**.

This word carries with it the picture of a very warm welcome. It is the difference in how I welcome a stranger knocking at my door and how I welcome Steve and Ash when they are bringing Emma to visit. The word for receive here is the Emma word.

We may recognize from the start that the person we are about to greet is weak in the faith. We may understand the differences we have from the get go. But that is not to change our greeting.

And what **is our example** for how we should greet them, how we should **receive** them? **7 Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.**

We should receive the person weak in the faith the same way that Christ received us. Do you remember when you first came to Christ? How much did you know? How much did you really understand? Were your expectations of God realistic? Did you think that maybe you knew more than you really did? Were you confident of some things that you really had no reason to be confident of? Well how did Christ receive you?

He received you graciously. He welcomed you warmly to come to Him. And he received you, not as you **SHOULD** be, but as you **are**.

Well, I think we have all the clarity **that we need** to understand what this means.

We are to welcome and receive those who are weak in the faith into our fellowship **the same way** that Christ welcomed us. And we don't welcome them as they should be. We welcome them as they are.

OK, what about the next phrase?

1 Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.

Weak in the faith. What does that mean?

There are people who have **weak faith** and there are people who have **strong faith**. We see an example of that in the life of Jesus. Jesus said of a centurion asking Him to heal his servant that “Matthew 8:10 (NKJV)

10 When Jesus heard it, He marveled, and said to those who followed, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!"

So some people just trust God to do what He says and they don't waver. But that is not what this passage is about. This is not about **strong or weak faith**. This is about people who are strong or weak **IN THE FAITH**. In other words this is about people who either have a clear and strong understanding of how the Christian life is lived and how it works, and those who do not. There is a parallel passage in I Cor 8.

We will probably be referring to this passage several times in this study so I will read it in its entirety.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (NKJV)

1 Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge.

Knowledge about what? Knowledge about the world from God's perspective, knowledge about how things really are. True knowledge. Accurate knowledge.

Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.

2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know.

Do you have perfect knowledge? Of course not. No matter how much you know there are things you don't know.

3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.

4 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one.

5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords),

6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

7 However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.

9 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.

10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols?

11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?

12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.

13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Now the purposes of the Romans passage and the I Corinthian passage are a bit different. **Romans** is telling us largely **how to treat the weaker brother** and why we should treat them that way. **I Corinthians** is telling us more **how our exercise of freedom can do damage to that brother**. But the most important thing to note right now is the use of the word “knowledge” in this Corinthian text. The person **with knowledge** is stronger **in the faith**. He may not be superior in love, but he has a better grasp of how salvation works. He has a better understanding of the realities of this life in view of God’s Word. He sees how the parts fit together.

So the person who is weak in the faith has some misconceptions. They may sometimes mix up **the truth** that a Christian does works **because** he has salvation with **the error** that he does works to **earn** salvation. He may not have a firm grasp of the difference between the law as it applied to Old Testament saints and our relationship with the law as New Testament Christians. He may be fixated on a narrow understanding of a single verse instead of a broad understanding of all of scripture and how that verse ends up being more fully understood.

It is possible that a person with very strong faith can be weak **in the faith**. A person may have a bulldog like belief in God such that he will not waiver in the slightest, but he may be expecting of God things that God has not promised. In fact we can have all kinds of combinations in the life of believers. But we are to receive them all, if they are truly believers, like Christ received us.

Now I guess it is important to note here that the things they are weak on are **not the essentials**. These people are regarded **as brothers** so these people **do** understand the basic gospel plan. These people should be able to say, in their own words, that they understand that they were lost in sin. There was nothing they could do to win favor with God. They fully deserved damnation. But Christ died in their place. Christ took upon Himself all the sin that they deserved to die for. And because of that they can be saved. And that process is something that

God does, in that He **not only takes away our sin** but He **gives us a new nature**. And all of that was accomplished by Christ's burial, death, and resurrection. So we are talking about people that on some level understand and appreciate the true Gospel.

The issues where they are weak in the faith are other areas, not essential areas. We should make no mistake that Paul allowed **no alternate opinions** of those things that were core to the Gospel. If a person claimed a different view of the Gospel and wouldn't back down, Paul was very quick to pronounce their error and to issue very quick discipline on those people. So we know that what Paul is saying here is not in the line of some liberal theologians that would say there is no doctrine worth dividing over. No, that is not the case with Paul.

But on the other side of this, there are some churches where you have to sign an agreement on all kinds of **non-essential doctrines** before you can join the church. Some even include end times doctrines and things that are clearly man's opinions. This would have been foreign to the apostle Paul. He would not have demanded such a thing. Our job as elders is to **include those who Christ would include** and **exclude those who Christ would exclude**. There may be times when it might appear to people that we are soft on sin. It might appear that we are slow to act. Those might even be valid criticisms. I can't say for sure. But I am sure that we err on the side of caution. We would rather **include** someone who should be **excluded**, than **exclude** someone who should be **included**. And in scripture, it is frankly amazing some of the people who Paul included in the church. In I Corinthians 15 there were clearly some in the church, who Paul regarded as believers, who did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. That seems to me to be a core doctrine. But Paul did not advise kicking them out. His first recourse was to offer correction. Maybe they never knew. Maybe they had never heard it clearly explained in a way they could understand it. Maybe those who had first explained it did it in a way that didn't make sense. It is hard to know. But Paul showed a great deal of patience.

Brad and I believe that what is in a person will come out. And if we give it enough time, we will see what the heart is made of. So **instances** of rebellion and disobedience don't immediately prove a **state** of rebellion. Heretical **statements** don't prove a heretical **heart**. A process must be engaged that will be used to determine where a person's heart is. We don't proclaim to be perfect in our attempts. But we are sincerely doing what we believe we should do and what we would want others to do for us. And I thank you for your granting us the benefit

of the doubt as we carry out these responsibilities. You as a church have been very supportive of our leadership.

Also it is important to note that the way Paul forms this in the Greek means that they are **currently** and **temporarily** weak. This implies a temporary state. This is not something whereby a Christian can say, but I am just weak this way. I can't help it. I just can't understand these things. No. The implication here is that we all must grow in the faith. We all must keep pressing on.

We also know from scripture that none of us have arrived at a perfect understanding of the faith. We are all weak at **some point** of understanding. We may have a misunderstanding that we are not quick to recognize or relinquish. We may be **convinced**, but we are still wrong. None of this should be shocking and none of it is reason for dis-fellowship.

Now back to our text:

1 Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.

What are disputes over doubtful things?

Dispute means thinking deliberately with one's self about a given question. This word is talking about inward reasoning, the talking we do within ourselves when we are trying to work out a solution.

Doubtful means the power of distinguishing between right and wrong.

So to paraphrase, this verse is saying that we should not greet a Christian brother in the church who we know does not have a proper understanding of some issues of life with the purpose of sitting in judgment upon his opinions.

I think maybe another way of putting this is that we shouldn't make it our top agenda to fix this lack of understanding.

When I encounter someone with an Armenian understanding of salvation, I want to straighten them out. It is easy for me to have an agenda to want to fix them. It is easy for me to bring this up at every encounter. And that is a perfect illustration of a violation of this command in our text.

Now at this point you might be like me and you might be asking, well shouldn't any of these topics be addressed? Does this passage mean that we cannot talk about these things?

The answer is **yes** and **no**.

It is **no** if this topic becomes the **most important thing** or the **sole thing** we want to talk about with this person. I think there is a simple rule of thumb to determine if we are crossing this line. When the person who is weak in the faith sees us, do they think, oh no, here we go again on this topic? Now keep in mind

this is not talking about offering **correction for behavior**. It is talking about **mistaken beliefs**.

There are lots of ways that we can disobey this command. Maybe we continually make it a **topic of discussion** with this person. Maybe we keep **kidding** the person about this issue. Maybe we **belittle** them in public discussion. Maybe we build up **animosity** toward them. Maybe we address the topic from the pulpit in a way to dress them down. It is easy for self to slip in and for us to do harm to the person who is weak on some issues of faith.

I think this would be a good time to talk about disputes. There are some **quotes** from Martyn Lloyd Jones that are too good to pass up. He was talking about what we frequently do with believers who misunderstand some doctrines. We tend to **start arguments**. Mr Jones says that the essential difference between a discussion and an argument is this: if you are in an argument you are generally just out to win, and to prove you are right. He goes on to say that the trouble with an argument is that at the end **you are more certain of your own position, but so is the other person**.

A **dialog** or a discussion is aimed at knowing the truth and applying the truth. It is aimed at **finding out what God says** and how it applies to our actions and motives. A discussion and an argument may sometimes **look** the same but they cannot **be** the same. I find that so many arguments do everything but **discover** and apply truth. They often take such circuitous routes that it would be a miracle to end up at a truthful destination. Often these discussions truly begin as discussions but they quickly become arguments. One party refuses to stick to the topic. They respond in tears or in anger or in attacking the motives of the person who began the discussion. Maybe we have learned that the person who expresses the most emotion wins. What we need to understand is that when we resort to those things, it becomes our fault that no solution is arrived at. It becomes our fault that no understanding is reached. We are cheating. We may think that we are just defending ourselves from an attack. Or we may think that we are just being real with our emotions. But ultimately, for whatever reason, we are averting the truth. We are clouding it. We are diverting it to maybe another truth that we would prefer to focus on. If we are to meaningfully discuss things, we must wean out the flesh in all the ways it displays itself. If we were to follow the text of our discussions **that go awry**, you would be able to chart where it started. One party, or both, caused that to happen. And when we do, the outcome is then our responsibility.

This is a side point to our text today, but I am convinced if our motives in our discussions with fellow body members was primarily to discover and implement truth, a very large degree of frustration would disappear. It is important when you are talking to someone about something that means a great deal to you that you keep asking this question: do I **want to win**, or do I want to change the topic, or do I want to inflict harm because I am being harmed, or do I just want the truth no matter what the cost? Also we need to ask the question, am I helping to solve the initial issue or am I using this as an opportunity to air grievances?

The next thing I want to bring out of our text today is the danger. We always tend toward one of two extremes. In our text the clearest danger is the place where the brother who is weak in the faith goes. I read in a couple of commentaries the phrase **morbid scrupulosity**. That is an interesting phrase. But this is what people who are weak in the faith tend to do. They are afraid to do so many things because **they are afraid that they are wrong to do**. They tend to come up with **rules** to keep them from doing wrong things. They get a lopsided view of the faith. They fail to see that our faith **frees us** to live a Godly life. They think of it more in terms that our faith is a process of **never doing the wrong things**. So they come up with rules. And the tendency is to believe that those rules apply to **everyone**. So those who are weak in the faith tend toward legalism. They tend toward the touch not, taste not, handle not error. They think that this will foster spiritual growth, but it doesn't.

The other danger, the other extreme, is antinomianism. Antinomianism is anti law, anti rule. These people say that in Christ we have no restriction. There is no longer any prohibition, or if there is, it really doesn't matter. As Mike used to put it, they think "we like to sin. God likes to forgive. That seems like a good deal." But we know that this, too, is as great of an error as legalism.

So we are dealing in this text with people who are weak in the faith who will tend to carry out a personal legalism. And they are in danger of then pushing a form of legalism on the congregation.

Notice that it is the weak person who is the most legalistic. Don't legalists often present their position as being the spiritual **high ground**? Don't they often act as if they are more spiritual than you because of all the things they don't do? Mike always said the way to beat a legalistic is to be more legalistic. Has it been your experience that they tend to be the most forceful people? Doesn't that appear to be strong? But look what our text here says. They are the **weak** in the faith. They are not allowing that which God allows. They are not in the position of strength. They are in the position of weakness.

Now, is our text this morning saying that these ideas should never be corrected? Should they never be addressed?

No, that is not what it is saying at all. But we should love each other in spite of our differences. Then as we have the opportunity to address the issues, we should do so. It should be in an environment of love. If the weaker brother starts to push his legalisms, if he starts pushing his position as if it is a superior godliness, then it must be addressed. The leadership can never sit back and allow weakness preached as strength or legalism posed as holiness. The preaching and teaching should treat all these topics in the context of what comes up. If the text deals with the topic, preachers and teachers should preach and teach the truth. This has been an introduction to our text.

I hope you have found some application. The application that strikes me the most is the one that I have seen the most harm from. We as believers have got to love truth. And we will most often learn the most important truths in the context of those people God has placed closest to us. We have got to be very strict inside our own minds in our communication. How much harm could be diverted if we would simply speak the truth in love, even in those conversations that are the most emotionally charged? We have got to become experts at having dialog and discussions. And we have got to develop a sensitivity to when we **violate** those precious conversations. We have got to take responsibility for the ways we make those conversations ineffective. It is not **no-one's fault**. It is always **someone's fault** that they go awry. It is always at least **one person's fault** and often it two people's fault. I am convinced that we would experience some radical results in our relationships if we would just do that one thing. Seek and guard truth in our conversations.