

How sad it is... that I have heard it said... and many of you have too... that
“*Judging one another is one of the favorite indoor sports of Christians today.*” ... What is even sadder... is that some of you have actually experienced it.

*Believe as I believe,
No more, no less;
That I am right,
And no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel,
Think only as I think;
Eat what I eat,
And drink but what I drink;
Look as I look,
Do always as I do;
Then, and only then,
Will I fellowship with you.*

Our passage today... will address this seriously wrong attitude!

(You see) disunity has always been a major problem with God's people. Even the Old Testament records the civil wars and family fights among the people of Israel... and almost every local church mentioned in the New Testament had divisions to contend with.

The Corinthians were divided over human leaders (Paul and Apollos)... and some of the members were even suing each other (1 Cor. Chapters 1 and 6). The Galatian saints were "biting and devouring" one another (Gal. 5:15)... and the saints in Ephesus and Colossae had to be reminded of the importance of Christian unity (Eph. 4:1-3; Col. 2:1-2). ... In the church at Philippi... two women were at odds with each other and... as a result... were splitting the church (Phil. 4:1-3).

But clearly God wants unity and He rewards it. The psalmist wrote:

Psalm 133:1-3 (ESV)

¹ *Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!*

² *It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes!* ³ *It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.*

The theme of our passage of study in Romans today is: How to have unity among diversity. ... The church at Rome was **very** diverse. ... Here was the situation...

Christ's love had brought together a remarkably mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Their backgrounds had very little in common. And to make matters worse... these **Roman** Jews often outdid the **Jerusalem** Jews in their zeal for "Jewishness."

But don't get me wrong... these Jews were Christians! — They knew salvation was all by grace. ... But even though they understood this... they did not entirely escape the thought that observing the Law was pleasing to Christ. ... They thought their legalistic ways were an appropriate response to God's grace. Their position was understandable - but not Biblical.

In their zeal for "all things Jewish"... some had become vegetarians. Though the Old Testament Law did not command vegetarianism... these Jewish Christians came to the conclusion that a vegetarian diet was the safest... because it was so difficult to be sure the meat was *kosher* in Rome. ... So they did what Daniel did (in the Old Testament). ... Daniel refused to defile himself and only ate vegetables. ... So they formed an anti-meat-eating... Law-observing... segment in the Church of Rome.

As Paul writes to Rome... these two parties have been given labels. The Law-observing Jewish Christians are called "weak" (I will explain why in a minute)... and the liberated Gentile Christians are called "strong." ... So naturally... the tension between the two groups was very intense at times.

Author Kent Hughes sets up the scene in Rome this way: Imagine a Gentile brother just returning from the corner store with an armload of meat... and he meets Boaz (a Jewish brother.)

Boaz cheerfully greets him. "Grace and peace, friend! What have you got there?"

"Oh, we're having a barbecue tonight, so I've got some meat. Great prices—New York strip eleven cents a pound, T-bone nine cents, and pork is a steal! Why don't you bring the wife and kids and join us?"

Boaz assumes a grieved expression and leaves without speaking. The Gentile brother is taken aback, and then he realizes what is going on. He's angry at being judged!

Now I ask you... wouldn't the "easy" solution to this problem... (the way we would handle it today)... be to form two churches: "Vegetarian Bible Church" and "Christ's Church of Carnivores?" (Which would not be too bad of a name for a church that loves to judge each other!) ... But dividing into separate churches is not God's solution. God wants unity in the midst of diversity in His church. Division should not be our primary option. So Paul tells us *what we need to know if we are to maintain unity amidst the diversity of the Church.*

What a message for the church of our day... because unfortunately... we have similar problems today with many "*gray areas*" of life... that are not clearly right or wrong to every believer. Some activities we ***know*** are wrong... because the Bible clearly condemns them. Other activities we know are ***right***... because the Bible clearly commands them.

But when it comes to areas that are not clearly defined in Scripture... we find ourselves needing some ***other kind*** of guidance. And today's passage gives principles of this guidance. It explains how believers can disagree on ***non***essentials... and still maintain unity in the church. ... This passage of Scripture seems all but made to order for those situations where there are divisions within a church (based on differing perceptions of the correct way to live out the Christian faith.)

Can a Christian ever drink an alcoholic beverage? ... Can a believer have their body tattooed... their body pierced... or cremated when they die? ... What kind of music is a believer allowed to listen to? ... What translation of the Bible should they read? ... What are we to do with a person who speaks in tongues (privately) in their own home? ... Can we fellowship with them? ... Or what if someone does not share the same belief with us about the timing of Christ's return? ... What kind of activity is permitted on Sunday? ... Can believers attend a sporting event? ... Such questions are not without controversy among evangelicals.

This passage in Romans offers a variety of insights on ways such questions are to be answered. ... (And here's a "heads-up!") - The very first insight is based on the need to be welcoming of those whose convictions differ from our own. We are told that those who are mature in

the Christian faith are to embrace unconditionally those who are weak or immature in the faith.

Whaaaat??? We are to simply accept them unconditionally...??? What if they have harmful beliefs (not to mention – harmful behaviors)...? ... Is this a call to become a bunch of wishy-washy Charlie Browns?Not at all!

What we are about to read (obviously) is not to be construed to mean that once a person is born again – “*anything goes!*” ... Of course there are limits to what is permitted as Christian behavior. The church must be uncompromising in its stand against activities that are expressly forbidden by Scripture (like adultery... homosexuality... murder... and theft.) That can be confirmed by a glance at the list of actions Paul already wrote about in chapter 1... verses 29-31.

Certainly some issues are central to the faith and worth fighting for... but there are quite a few that are merely based on individual preferences and should not be legislated. ... Our principle should be: In ESSENTIALS – unity!... .. In NONESSENTIALS – liberty!... .. In EVERYTHING – love!

Romans 14:1

Notice please... that this verse assumes there will be differences of opinion in the church about what is right or wrong. ... (It is not just the churches that you and I have been part of... that have had struggles.) ... But Paul says we are not to quarrel about issues that are matters of opinion. ... Don't expect everyone... even in the best possible church... to agree on every subject. ... However... through sharing insights we can come to a fuller understanding of what the Bible teaches.

We must accept our Christian brother and sister who differs. ... Differences should not be feared or avoided... but accepted and handled with love. If you are an abstainer... you must not judge the participator. ... If you are a participator... you must not disdain the abstainer. ... This call to acceptance comes to us as a command of God. If we are to obey Him... we have no choice.

"The one who is weak in the faith" does not mean one who is weak in the great truths of the gospel -- the facts of faith -- but rather it refers to the quality of faith. Those who are "weak"... seek to maintain their righteous standing before God on the basis of what they do... or don't do. If they don't perform... it is as though they will lose God's favor. That is not a full faith. It tries to walk by sight (what they can observe as obedience or non-obedience.) ... But the "strong" understand that their righteous standing before God is not (and has never been) on the basis of what they do (or don't do.)

Those who are "strong" (or mature) in the Christian faith... are to embrace unconditionally those who are "weak" (in other words... those who are trying to walk by sight... in terms of focusing on the presence or absence of certain behaviors.) ... Christ is our example. Just as Christ received us in our weakness... so we should receive others. This weaker brother or sister may be a new believer... or an older believer who keeps trying to earn God's favor.

Acceptance of them creates room for their growth to continue. Rejection stunts their growth. ... "Welcome one another!" was Paul's first admonition; and he gave four reasons why they should.

- I. **God has received us (vv. 1-3)**
- II. **God sustains His Own (v. 4)**
- III. **Jesus Christ is Lord (vv. 5-9)**
- IV. **Jesus Christ is Judge (vv. 10-12)**

So... lets spend time with this first reason why we are to welcome those who differ from us. ... **God has received US**.

Romans 14:1-3

It is **not our responsibility** to decide the requirements for Christian fellowship in a church – only the Lord can do this. To set up man-made restrictions on the basis of personal prejudices... preferences... traditions (or even convictions)... is to go beyond the Word of God.

Those whose comfort level resides with a different version of the Bible than mine – are welcome here! ... People with tattoos and body piercing are also welcome here! ... People who watch football on Sundays are welcome here... and people who don't are too. ... Because God has received us... we must receive one another. ... So we must not argue over these matters... nor must we judge (or despise) one another.

Paul's word 'welcome' (*proslambanō*) means not merely 'receive,' but 'thoroughly receive,' 'warmly welcome.' Luke records that when he and Paul were shipwrecked on Malta, 'the natives showed us unusual kindness for they kindled a fire and *welcomed* (*proslambanō*) us all' (Acts 28:2).

Such a 'welcome' must be the universal hallmark of genuinely Christian congregations. We do not all have to believe exactly alike... nor do we all have to behave exactly alike. ... God does not make all people by pouring us all into the same mold.

Let's look now at the second reason we are to welcome those who differ from us. **God sustains His Own.**

Romans 14:4

God is the Master... and every Christian is His servant. And God is able to make each of us stand. ... Do you even DARE to interfere with this relationship. (You see) Paul quickly pointed to the core issue:

accountability. They are answerable to God. ... Who are you to criticize someone else's servant? ... The Lord will determine whether his servant has been successful. ... To put his question in a modern (business-world context)... "*Who are you to review the performance of someone else's employee?*" ... Remember two things.

1. *The other Christian is **not** accountable to you - but to **God**.* ... They answer to Jesus. Therefore... leave it with Him. ... And remember that Jesus is **more** concerned (and better at making them live an upright... strong... and spiritually profitable life) - than you are.

2. *God has already accepted the other Christian as he or she is.* We know this by definition... since a Christian is one who stands before God **not** on the basis of how they perform (especially in relation to your preferences.) The other believer has been accepted (and not rejected by Jesus) – on the basis of His grace and mercy. And on that same basis (grace) – you should accept the believer who differs.

Of course... no one is always right in everything he or she does... but let Jesus worry about straightening the other Christian out... in those areas

that the Bible does not specifically address. (LISTEN!) God sustains His own.

O.K. ... Let's get to reason number three as to why we should welcome those who differ from us. **Jesus Christ is Lord.**

Romans 14:5-9

The word "*Lord*" is found eight times in these verses. ... No Christian has the right to "*play God*" in another Christian's life. ... We can pray... advise... and even admonish... but we cannot take the place of another believer's **ACTUAL** Lord.

To be "*fully convinced — in his own mind*" (verse 5) means: Let every man see to it that he is really doing what he does - **for the Lord's sake**... and not merely on the basis of someone else's preference... prejudice... whim... (or whatever) !

Paul is willing to treat each believer as a responsible... thinking person (not merely one to be led about passively... by a self-styled "stronger" believer... with an overbearing personality.) ... We all have a responsibility (each one of us) to develop our own convictions (as to how we will honor our TRUE Lord) on these matters that the Bible does not specifically address. ... It is not good for anyone (for example) to simply say... "*Well I grew up in a church that said it is wrong to have a glass of wine at dinner... so I guess I shouldn't...*" Or... "*My pastor believed that having your body cremated when you die is wrong... so I guess I'll make sure my kids put me in a casket when I die...*"

We should be fully convinced in our own mind... BUT... there are some guidelines for us in these same verses... for how we may know what we should or shouldn't do. It is three-fold: personal conviction... conscience... and consideration for others.

A Christian should have a **conviction** about what he does. Does he look forward to what he is going to do in high anticipation and enthusiasm? ... (LISTEN!) If the Lord convicts you that something is wrong... you had better not do it (even if other Christians are doing it!)

The second guideline is **conscience**. ... Will you be able to look back on what you have done... wondering if you were right or wrong? ... Is there any chance that you will feel guilty for what you have done?

The third guideline is **consideration** for others. Are other people adversely affected by what you would do? Verse 7 makes it clear that what you do affects others. ... It might go far to establish us in godliness and cause us to live for Christ wholeheartedly if we really understood that in one way or another everything we do, whether for good or ill, always affects other Christians, usually beginning with those who are closest to us.

These three guidelines (conviction... conscience... and consideration) give us principles of conduct for our Christian lives. But there is one more (mentioned in verse 6) that summarizes these three.

The principle of giving thanks is a great help for discerning what we ourselves should do in doubtful situations. ... (What may I do in such-and-such a situation... where the Bible is not explicit... or at least where I do not

understand how it is explicit?) One very good answer is this: *Can you enjoy it in the Lord and give thanks for it?*

"May I allow myself this or that pleasure? Yes... if you can enjoy with the Lord right there with you in that activity... as you give Him thanks for it. But "no"... if you cannot receive it as a gift from His hand... and enjoy it with Christ participating with you in it. ... [P A U S E] ...

Our relationship to Jesus Christ is the fundamental criterion that affects everything we do. ... In His sacrificial death and His resurrection... He became the Lord of both the living and the dead. ... He is Lord over all those whom He has purchased with His blood. (And) all of the other "issues" are secondary to this. In fact... they are much further down the list (*much* less than secondary)... they are *irrelevant*!

Fundamental to this whole discussion... is the reality that the Christian's life is not his own. ... Both in life and in death... Christians belong **to the Lord**. We live unto the Lord. We live to do His will... and to promote His glory. This is the grand purpose of the life of the Christian. (And do you know what?) Differences of opinion here on earth are going to fade into insignificance... when death enters the picture.

Now let's get to our fourth and final reason why we need to accept others who differ from us. *Jesus Christ is judge*.

Romans 14:10-12

That all will be judged — even Christians... even *faithful* Christians — is a regular emphasis of Paul (Here are just two passage – of many).

1 Corinthians 3:8-15 (ESV)

⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

2 Corinthians 5:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

The judgment mentioned here is of the believer's works... not of his sins. It is not a judgment by which one is deemed worthy of salvation or not. Our sins have been judged at Calvary and are remembered no more forever (Heb. 10:17). ... However... every work has to be brought into judgment. The result of this judgment (which takes place at the return of Christ)... will be either reward or loss for the believer.

Paul solemnly reminds us that criticizing another brother will be called into account at the judgment seat of Christ. It is presumptuous for us to criticize others. If we turn the searchlight within our own hearts... we will find plenty to keep us humble before the Lord... without being occupied with other people. ... We will have enough to do at the judgment seat of Christ...

answering for our own behavior... without taking on the additional burden of shaping (in minute detail) the lives of other Christians!

OK... As I close... let me put it all together (Romans 14:1-12.)

1. Stop judging your neighbor. Most of us are guilty of this... and it is one of the most harmful things that takes place in Christian churches. ... We think that because there are standards to be maintained... we must be snooping out the shortcomings of others. ... We are not called to do this. If you are worried about standards... make sure you live up to them yourself. Or let the people God has appointed to deal with them — the elders in a local church — do the shepherding work.

2. Take inventory of your own actions and behavior. Unless you are perfect (or *nearly* perfect) - which I doubt you are - that will be enough to keep you busy for a very long time... and we will **all** be better off. ... Besides... you will help others be better... because people are always helped **more** by a loving example of what should be done... than by moral nitpicking or outright condemnation.

3. Do what you can to build up the body. Being judgmental tears down. Modeling builds up, and that is what we most need. And remember that it is spiritual work that will last. Most of what you have been spending your time on will pass with the passing of this world and be gone forever.

One of the commentaries that I was reading on this passage of Scripture... told about a play he saw... which portrayed an intense conflict between a father and a son. ... The point came when the father and son agreed to part. But in the middle of the night the son had trouble sleeping... so he

went down to the kitchen to fix himself a sandwich... and there was his father (who couldn't sleep either.)

After they fixed their sandwiches... they began to reminisce about the past — about the years in Little League... about their great hunting expeditions... about their swimming together... about their fishing trips.

As some needed healing was taking place... the son said, "*Dad, do you remember the time we were out on the lake in that green boat?*" His father said, "*The boat was blue, son.*" The son said, "*No, it was green.*" The father said, "*You are mistaken—it was blue.*" "*Green.*" "*Blue.*" "*Green.*" "*Blue.*" And his son departed... never to return.

Some things just don't matter.

May we allow God to give us the wisdom to see what is essential and what is not.

In ESSENTIALS – **unity!**... .. In NONESSENTIALS – **liberty!**... .. In EVERYTHING – **love!**