

# Pentwater Bible Church

*Romans Message 47*

*May 21, 2023*



Bathsheba Makes an Appeal to David By Arent de Gelder Cir 1685-90

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# Pentwater Bible Church

## The Book of Romans Message Forty-Seven

Living Harmoniously With Other Believers

May 21, 2023

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JUDGMENT AND TOLERANCE

Romans 14:1–3

*<sup>1</sup>Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. <sup>2</sup>For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. <sup>3</sup>Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him (KJV).*

This section of Scripture is directed to the stronger and more knowledgeable Christians among the Romans. It focuses on how they are to behave and think towards those that were lesser advanced in Christian knowledge and doctrine. It discusses practices mostly ritual and ceremonial. Paul wants mature believers to understand how to deal with *him that is weak in the faith*. Here he means either one that is weak in how he conducts himself in the working out of his new found conversion to faith in Christianity. These people have many misgivings of heart, and fluctuation of mind, about how to conduct themselves. These are people who are weak in the doctrine of faith and are light in the knowledge and the truths of the Gospel. They have very little in ability to distinguish truth from error and can't digest the greater and more sublime doctrines of grace. They need the milk level of doctrine, and can't yet assimilate doctrine in the strong meat category. They fluctuate and are unsettled in principles, and like children tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine: or rather one that is weak in his knowledge of that branch of the doctrine of faith, which concerns Christian liberty.

The key word is *accept* (Gr. *proslambanesthe*), which also means “receive” or “welcome.” Believers in the church in Rome came from a wide variety of backgrounds as they do today as well. Mostly because of backgrounds there were and still are major differences were between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. But there were other differences besides religious practices too. Some believers were slaves, some were masters; some were wealthy, most were poor. Additionally, they were all at different stages of spiritual maturity. Growing in the spirit is like growing physically—everyone grows at different rates as God works in each life. So, the first instruction Paul gives the church is to *accept*, welcome, and love one another without judging or condemning. He said this knowing that some are *weak*, immature, or unlearned. Acceptance allows an opportunity for growth to continue. If they were rejected, their growth in spiritual development would be stunted.

Who is weak in faith, and who is strong? Most believers are weak in some areas and strong in others. A person's faith is strong in a particular doctrine if he or she can survive contact with sinners without falling into their patterns. The person's faith is weak in an area if that individual must avoid certain activities, people, or places in order to protect his or her spiritual life.

Without passing judgment *but not to doubtful disputations*. This statement assumes that the church will contain differences of opinion (*disputable matters, scruples*). These kinds of disputes are not about doctrines essential to salvation, but are discussions about differences of life-style. We call these things secondary issues. Paul says we are not to quarrel about issues that are matters of opinion. Differences should not be feared or avoided, but accepted and handled with love. We shouldn't expect everyone, even in the best church, to agree on every subject. Through sharing various interpretations of Scriptural secondary issues we can come to a fuller understanding of what the Bible teaches. Our basic approach should be to accept, listen to, and respect others. Differences of opinion need not cause division. They can be a source of learning and richness in our relationships. One way to behave in this area is to have unity amongst believers in things fundamental to salvation, in things not necessary to salvation, liberty; and in all things grace.

The Christian faith is not a dictatorial system that demands adherence to each point in a long statement of doctrine. Never in church history have all true believers agreed on every point of doctrine. But they do agree on these primary teachings: that the Lord Jesus Christ is God Almighty, the second person of the Godhead; and that, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, He became man in order to go to the cross and die for us, and that He arose from the dead. These are the fundamentals—the irreducible minimum which one must believe to be saved.

The Bible teaches spiritual separation from the enemies of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Scripture does not us to separate from someone who does not regard secondary doctrines in the same way that we do. There is no justification for separating in order to emphasize one or another doctrine. We are not being biblical when we separate from another believer because he differs from us in his interpretation of biblical secondary issues. One example is about the Lord's Supper. Some maintain that they should use only unleavened bread others think that ordinary bread would be proper. Some think the Lord's Supper should be done each week and other have a different frequency. Such division reveals failure to understand the nature of Christian oneness in Him. Believers are never to separate on points of practice. It is contrary to the Lord's love for us to fight over the symbols of the very death of Christ which was meant to unite us. Believers are led by the wrong spirit when we consider the form more important than the meaning of a celebration of His death and resurrection. That is, when the ceremony is considered more important than that for which it stands.

#### THE EXAMPLE OF FOOD SACRIFICED TO IDOLS

I Corinthians 8:1

*<sup>1</sup>Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies (NASB).*

Idols and their sacrifices were everywhere, and it was almost impossible to avoid this situation in the Roman and Greek cultures. In chapter 5:9-11 of I Corinthians, Paul prohibited contact with idolatry. This situation was more delicate; people in that society often ate wedding meals and other meals of social occasion where meat was served that had been offered to an idol. The Corinthian believers were concerned about attending such functions, and more so, about purchasing the meat at the market that had been previously dedicated to an idol. This was the question: Would they be engaging in idolatry if they ate these meals? Just as he had begun his reply on marital questions, Paul may have quoted a Corinthian sentiment (“*we all have knowledge*”) with which he basically agreed, but which required clarification. Knowledge is essential to correctly respond to their questions; but as Paul would show, those who thought they had it did not. Acting on knowledge alone, without regard for God or others, is empty even if one is correct in what they assume.

Paul points out that loving God builds us up (“*edifies*”) and makes us more discerning.

I Corinthians 8:2-3

*<sup>1</sup>If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; <sup>2</sup>but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him (NASB).*

In the first place, knowledge about God was always partial. In the second place, true knowledge leads to God and a love for Him and results in love for others (I John 4:20-21). Knowledge without love leads to pride; love without knowledge leads to an unbridled sentimentalism. This is the situation where people love anything without regard for truth. We see this in the church where we over-do the concept of “love the sinner and hate the sin”. Some do not realize the extent of sin and believe that just loving corrects all things. The following section of Scripture has relevance in our modern church concerning supporting weaker believers in a host of behaviors because we do not want to cause them to stumble.

I Corinthians 8:4

*<sup>4</sup>Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one (NASB).*

Paul makes two points here. First, an idol is nothing at all and “*there is no God but one*”, which is an affirmation that there is only one God. Second, eating food sacrificed to idols was, in itself, inconsequential. The idols had no authority in their lives, as they apparently affirmed in their letters to Paul. (We have to assume the content of the questions as we read Paul’s answers.)

I Corinthians 8:5-6

*<sup>5</sup>For even if there are so-called gods whether in Heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, <sup>6</sup>yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him (NASB).*

The Greeks and Romans had many gods, but God alone is real (Deuteronomy 10:17). The Father is the source of all and the One for whom the Corinthians should live. The Lord Jesus Christ is the agent of Creation and the One *through* whom we reach God the Father (I Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:23, Colossians 1:16).

I Corinthians 8:7

*<sup>7</sup>However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled (NASB).*

If all Corinthian Christians could agree that an idol was nothing and that there was only one God (v. 4), then they might have eaten the idol meat without a second thought. However, this was not the case. All, in fact, did *not* possess this knowledge. This truth did not strengthen the conscience of some Christians who were still ignorant and had not come to the point where they could accept eating this kind of meat as a matter of indifference. For them it was wrong, and to eat it was sin (Romans 14:23). The same is true today with particular behaviors where weak believers become rule oriented (and some even legalistic to point of

desiring to adhere to a set of rules) and not realize the love and liberty we have in Christ. These people have a *weak conscience*. This mindset regards a particular activity as wrong when it is not wrong. Or, they are still unclear about what is wrong and right in Christian behavior. The possibility exists that the newer believer, or even people with a weak conscience, tend to slide back into old behaviors if they see stronger believers exercising the freedom they have in Christ. This does not mean that a believer cannot sin. The issue here is the weak believer is unable to discern between right and wrong. They are still at the “milk” level of sanctification and have not grown to the “meat” level.

Another example is women’s dress. Some women prefer to wear slacks to church instead of a dress. The legalists in some denomination appeal to Deuteronomy 22:5 as support to deny women that form of dress and take steps to forbid it.

#### Deuteronomy 22:5

*<sup>5</sup>A woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto Jehovah thy God (ASV, 1901).*

This passage is designed to let the offenders know the Lord does not accept transsexual or transvestites both of which are striving to become the opposite sex that the Lord created for them. If the error that the legalists follow were expanded, they would deny the Lord Jesus’s dress of a flowing gown and even a Scottish military kilt both of which and not intended to be outside of the intent of Deuteronomy 22:5.

#### I Corinthians 8:8-9

*<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (NASB).*

Paul is simply saying that food is neutral. It has no good or evil properties even if it has been sacrificed in a temple to some inanimate idol. The central issue is actually how the person with weak faith, or the new believer who does not understand these things, would view our behavior. We should not push the weak believer into a behavior that would be troublesome for them. Strong believers understand Scripture and can control their behavior accordingly. The weak however might stumble into sin if they see the strong believer exercising their Christian liberty. The strong believer, not acting in love, might openly flaunt their freedom whether intentional or not and offend the conscience of others. This is inappropriate.

The overcompensating weak Christian may try to apply their particular weakness to others and cause dissention in the body of believers. We must be strong in the faith, ever growing and still sensitive to other’s weakness. If the weak Christian is properly taught in the Bible, they will, eventually with the love of the body of Believers, come to fully understand Scripture and realize their freedom.

#### I Corinthians 8:10

*<sup>10</sup>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 (NASB)?*

As an illustration Paul posed a situation in which a weak Christian saw a knowledgeable brother enjoying



a meal in an idol's temple and by this example was encouraged to join in, even though he could not do so with the clear conscience before God. In other words, the weak one can fall if he senses the urge to go back to a sin he left, or if he is so new in the faith that his self-control has not matured. Stronger believers should not tempt the weaker ones by encouraging them to do so. This is not acting in love but at best is acting out of ignorance and certainly not Christ-like behavior. In these situations the strong believer can exercise their freedom away from the weak or new believer. The strong believer should restrain their behavior for the sake of the weak and not create bondage in the conscience of the weak believers. This is legalism.

#### I Corinthians 8:11

*<sup>11</sup>For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died (NASB).*

Paul points out that the conscience of a weak believer can be ruined, and his capacity to distinguish right from wrong lost, leading to his spiritual ruin and even possibly to physical death (I Corinthians 10:9-10; Romans 14:15 Titus 1:15). The Greek word for “ruined” is *apollytai*, which means destroyed and refers to physical death (Matthew 2:13; Acts 5:37). The selflessness of Christ is an example for the strong knowledgeable believer. If Christ loved the weaker brother so that He was willing to give up His life, surely the strong could give up his right to eat such meat (Philippians 2:6, 8). For example, a weak Christian who is addicted to gambling might fall back into that sin if he sees a brother playing harmless card games. The weaker ones must also grow stronger with their *faith* and knowledge; simply acting like they have more knowledge is not enough. They need to actually study God's Word to show a genuine desire to follow God (II Timothy 2:15). Some of us stay at the milk level our entire lives because we are unmotivated to advance in our faith. Paul condemned them in the earlier chapters of I Corinthians, (I Corinthians 3:1-4).

#### I Corinthians 8:12

*<sup>12</sup>And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ (NASB).*

If we are arrogantly indifferent to the needs of weaker Christians, it results in our sin not only against them by wounding their weak conscience, but also against Christ of whose Body we are members (12:26-27; cf. 1:30; Matthew 25:40, 45).

#### I Corinthians 8:13

*<sup>13</sup>Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble (NASB).*

In summary Paul stressed the priority of brotherly love. He did not demand that the knowledgeable relinquish their right, but he illustrated how he would apply the principle to himself. Paul did not want any brother to fall (v. 9) but to be “built up” (v. 1) in knowledge and governed by love to accomplish that goal.

As a final note to I Corinthians it should be understood that Paul did not say that a knowledgeable Christian must abandon his freedom to the ignorant prejudice of a “spiritual” bigot. The “weak brother” (v. 11) was one who followed the example of another Christian, not one who coerced a knowledgeable Christian into a particular behavioral pattern. Also, it was unlikely that Paul saw this weak brother as permanently shackling the freedom of the knowledgeable Christian.

*Despise him that eateth not.* When believers differ over matters of opinion, they should not look down on or condemn each other. The weaker one is in danger of condemning the stronger brother or sister. Neither attitude is acceptable. Believers should not despise or condemn, because God does not; instead, God has accepted them both. (The Greek word for *accepted* here is the same word used in verse 1, where Paul explains what we must do.) We all need to remember, first of all, their collective status as believers. We are forgiven and saved by God. God accepts people who some of us might feel are unacceptable because of their beliefs or practices. Paul responds to both brothers in love. Both are acting according to their consciences, but their honest scruples do not need to be made into rules for the church. Our principle should be: In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in everything, love or grace.

Next week; ROMANS 14 CONTINUED

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