

A Plea for Unity
Romans 12:14-21

As most of you know, my mother is Jewish; she came to faith in Christ in her 20s. But her Jewishness has always informed how she practices her Christianity. For example, my mom has a strong sense of what you should and shouldn't do on Sundays (analogous to not working on the Sabbath). One thing you don't do on Sunday is iron clothes. Her "work" raising four boys involved lots of ironing, so that's something that she didn't feel the freedom to do on Sundays. If you didn't iron your clothes on Saturday night you went to church with wrinkled clothes.

One Sunday morning (in the 70s, I think) she found herself with a very wrinkled dress. She reasoned that her "ox was in a ditch" and she needed to get it out; so she gave herself an exemption from her "no ironing on Sunday" rule. She plugged in the iron and "poof" - sparks flew and her iron started smoking. Needless to say, she hasn't tried ironing again on Sundays.

When I'm home visiting my mom, how should I respond to her conviction that one should not iron on Sunday? Even though I have full freedom before God to iron a shirt on Sunday mornings, I should respect her conviction, right? I shouldn't belittle her and accuse her of being legalistic or superstitious. I shouldn't take every opportunity to point out, "Mom, the Bible doesn't say anything about not ironing on Sundays." If I need to iron something for church I shouldn't wait until Sunday; I should iron my shirt on Saturday night.

That's a pretty safe example because "ironing on Sunday" isn't exactly a hot button issue in the body of Christ and because she's 950 miles away. But there are other areas in which we have differing convictions that are more challenging. When I say differing convictions, I'm talking about two valid, acceptable convictions. I'm not talking about obedience and disobedience; I'm talking about two acceptable convictions.

For example, when it comes to alcohol one person drinks in moderation while another person abstains completely. People have differing convictions about how to educate their children - whether public school, homeschool or Christian school. People have different convictions about entertainment in relation to the movies they watch and the places they frequent. People have differing convictions about how science and faith intersect and inform each other. People have different political convictions and grids for evaluating candidates and policies.

We consider the issues I mentioned to be "non-essentials." They aren't non-important; they are very important issues. But they aren't essential for our unity. Here at Faith we have a doctrinal statement which expresses the core of our doctrinal unity. It spells out what we understand the Scriptures to teach about God, Jesus, and the Spirit, about salvation, about our mission. Unless we agree on these core things, our unity is rather superficial. But the issues I just mentioned aren't addressed in our doctrinal statement.

Today's passage, Romans 14:1–12, tells us how to think about and treat others with convictions that differ from yours. This passage provides a case study in differing convictions that I think you'll find challenging and insightful. For Paul accepting fellow believers with differing convictions is a way to live out the command to "love one another." As we go through this passage specific people might come to mind whose convictions are different from yours. Allow God to speak to you about your attitude toward them.

Case Study in Differing Convictions: The "strong" and the "weak" in the Roman church. (Romans 14:1-12)

In Romans 14:1 Paul introduces the categories of the "strong" and the "weak"; these categories will run through the middle of chapter 15. We aren't told the exact identity of the strong and the weak, but our best understanding is that the weak were Jewish Christians who didn't walk in full freedom in Christ. They didn't have the freedom to eat or drink anything and who felt it important to observe special holy days (such as Passover and the Sabbath). It's clear from this passage that the weak were genuine believers; they weren't legalists whose convictions in any way compromised the gospel (note the contrast with Paul's attitude in Galatians 1:6-9).

The strong are those who understood their freedom from the OT law, specifically freedom from the dietary laws and from observing the holy days. Paul puts himself in this category. He understood that "nothing is unclean in itself" (14:14). The strong have freedom to eat and drink anything; the strong have the freedom not to observe special days like the Sabbath (sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday).

His initial challenge is for those who are strong to accept those who are weak.

1 Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.

The term "accept" is sometimes translated "welcome" or "receive." The strong should welcome the "weak in faith" into full fellowship; they shouldn't be made to feel as if they're second-class Christians. Their faith in Christ alone is solid and sure; but their faith is weak in the sense that they don't understand their full freedom from the demands of the OT law.

And, Paul adds, "not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions." The strong shouldn't welcome the weak so that they could straighten them out; they weren't supposed to quarrel with the weak and agitate them because of their opinions/convictions. In a healthy church, freedom from the Law is taught so that the weak eventually become strong. But here Paul's challenge is for the predominantly Gentile, "strong" congregation at Rome to accept the one who is weak in faith.

Labeling another Christian as a "weaker brother/sister" is rather complex. Just because someone has convictions that are more restrictive than yours doesn't mean that s/he is weaker in faith. For example, someone who abstains completely from alcohol might do

so for a variety of reasons. There might be something in their history or in their personal make-up that makes it wise for them not to drink alcohol. I would encourage us to be cautious about labeling others as “weak.”

At the same time, the attitudes that Paul articulates in this passage are relevant anytime there are differing convictions. If someone isn’t “weak in faith” but has more restrictive convictions than you, Paul’s directive stands: accept that person into full fellowship.

In verse 2 Paul flags one issue that separated the weak and the strong. This may seem like a strange, obscure issue to us, but some within the Roman church were vegetarian while others ate meat.

2 One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.

Numerous passages in the NT make clear that what we eat no longer has any spiritual implications (Acts 10; 1 Timothy 4:3-4). The strong in faith understand this; they gratefully enjoy everything God has provided. But “he who is weak eats vegetables only.” People become vegetarian for all sorts of reasons. But here the weak “eats vegetables only” because of spiritual convictions. It’s likely that these were Jewish Christians who couldn’t be sure that the meat they bought in the market was properly prepared according to the Law (a.k.a. kosher). In Corinth some Christians didn’t eat meat because it might have been sacrificed to idols and then sold in the market; but Paul’s reference to not eating meat in this passage isn’t that specific.

Notice how evenhanded Paul is in verse 3:

3 The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.

The strong isn’t to “regard with contempt” the weak, thinking, “You’re such an immature, weak Christian.” And the weak isn’t supposed to “judge” the strong as irresponsible and loose. Why? “For God has accepted him.” This is a foundational perspective if we want unity in the body of Christ: we shouldn’t have standards higher than God’s; if God has accepted someone (either the one who eats or the one who doesn’t), we should also. Verse 4 continues this line of thought:

4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Paul reminds us that since Jesus is Lord, the weak shouldn’t **act** as lord in these nonessential areas of practice. The context is important here. Paul isn’t saying that we should never correct (or even rebuke) a brother or sister who is living out of the will of God. In chapter 15 Paul will even tell the Romans that they were “able to admonish one another” (15:14). If we’re really committed to each other’s spiritual health, there **will** be

times when we humbly confront something we see in another's life; that's a basic way that we help each other spiritually.

Here Paul is talking about **not** judging others who are living in the will of God; it's simply the case that their convictions are different than yours. In that case, Paul says, "Who are you to judge the servant of another?" The implication is that you don't have the authority to boss around somebody else's servant. When I was in high school we had a way of telling each other to stop being bossy; we'd say, "You're not my daddy." In the body of Christ Paul is saying, "You're not my Lord; and I'm not your Lord. Therefore we can't go beyond Scripture and boss each other around." In other words, God doesn't need us to be "lifestyle referees" (Bill Hybels' term) or conviction police.

"Wait a minute!" you might say. "You mean to tell me that the strong shouldn't lecture the weak about their lack of freedom and the weak shouldn't pester the strong about the possibility of their freedom leading to sin?" I think that's exactly what Paul is saying. I think he says this because of his great confidence that **Jesus is a very competent Lord**. If someone really is a servant of Jesus Christ, s/he "will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." This ultimately means that genuine believers will stand before God in the full righteousness of Christ. The Lord is able and willing to make them stand (instead of letting them fall). This whole passage presupposes that for both the strong and the weak "Jesus is Lord" is more than a cliché; both the strong and the weak are humbly walking with Jesus.

In verse 5 Paul introduces another area in which the strong and the weak had different convictions: observing special/holy days.

5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike.
Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

Paul may be referring to Jewish Christians who still felt it important to follow the spiritual calendar they had practiced before believing in Jesus. Perhaps they felt it important to observe the Sabbath or the regular days of fasting or the festivals. Whatever the case they weren't suggesting that your standing before God depending on observing these days. If they had Paul would have reacted the way he reacted to the Galatians; he would have called it a "different gospel" and said that those who preached that gospel are *anathema* (accursed) (Galatians 1:8). But here Paul acknowledges that some people regard one day as more special than the rest; others regard every day alike.

Notice that Paul urges each person to develop strong convictions for their own lives: "Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind." It's not okay to be wishy-washy about your own life; we each need to know Scripture and ourselves well enough to cultivate strong convictions about how we should live our lives. At the same time, Paul argues throughout this chapter, we need to let other people live their lives consistent with **their** convictions.

In verses 6 through 9 Paul emphasizes that since Jesus is Lord, each one of us needs to live and die for the Lord. Next week we'll see that there are times when we limit our

freedoms so that others don't stumble; but here the emphasis is upon living out our convictions before God.

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

People with very different convictions each observe special days (or not observe special days) for the Lord. People who eat meat and those who don't each eat "for the Lord" and give thanks "to the Lord." Even though their convictions are different, their commitment to the Lord is the same.

7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Because Christ died and rose again He is Lord of our lives in a very comprehensive sense. If we live, we live for the Lord; if we die, we die for the Lord. We seek to please Him. And we will answer to Him.

In verses 10 through 12 Paul gives the final challenge to both the "strong" and the "weak." He repeats several of the thoughts he's already expressed and then reminds both the strong and the weak of our ultimate accountability to God.

10 But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Paul confronts both the weak and the strong, asking why they judge or regard with contempt their "brother" - another person whose Father is God. Judging each other is inappropriate because "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." He quotes from Isaiah 45, a chapter in which the Lord says, "I am God, and there is no other." In other words, people answer to Him alone.

11 For it is written,
"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me,
And every tongue shall give praise to God."

12 So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

This is a sobering truth. We know that if we are in Christ we are forgiven and that we don't have to pay for our sins; Jesus has paid for our sins. But we are still accountable for what we do in this life and for how we treat each other. In 2 Corinthians 5:10 Paul said something very similar: "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."

There's a lot of speculation about the nature of rewards for good deeds and the consequences of evil deeds. We aren't given details of what will happen at the judgment seat for believers. The main thing we are told is that we are accountable to God Himself. Paul mentions this reality in Romans 14 to stress that instead of spending my time either judging or holding in contempt other believers, I should pay attention to how I'm living my life. I am accountable to God. You are accountable to God.

As a pastor and as a brother, I am aware of how challenging it can be to stay in close fellowship with people who have differing convictions. If you keep your distance from people, this isn't a very big deal. But if you serve alongside people with differing convictions or if you are in life group with people with differing convictions, you will have to internalize the things we've talked about this morning and the things we'll discuss next week.

Paul has put forth a very God-centered, Christ-centered approach to relationships in the body of Christ. If we are self-centered, we won't put up with people who disagree with us. If we are others-centered, we'll either be people-pleasers or else we'll judge people or hold them in contempt. But if we are God-centered, we'll walk in humility and we'll experience a sweet, substantive type of unity.

At the bottom of your sermon outline I've listed five affirmations that flow from this passage. I've listed them in the first-person singular since Paul has stressed how "each one" needs to live out these truths. As we prepare to receive the Lord's table I'm going to read these five affirmations. If God brings to mind a person(s) you need to "accept" or receive into full fellowship, bring that person to God in prayer. The Lord's table should be an expression of our unity (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-34). The bread and the cup remind us that Jesus' body was broken and that Jesus' blood was shed so that we might become one with Him. There is one Lord and one body of Christ.

Personal Affirmations related to differing convictions:

1. I will accept those whom God has accepted.
2. I will neither judge nor hold in contempt brothers and sisters with differing convictions.
3. I will seek to be fully convinced before God of my own convictions.
4. I will not act as lord over others' convictions (because Jesus is Lord).
5. I will one day give an account of myself to God.