

Sermon Growth Guide

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THE WEAK AND THE STRONG | Romans 14:1-15

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Key Verse: Romans 14:4 - "Who are you to judge someone else's servant To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand."

Big Idea: On matters of opinion, even strong opinion, Christians are not to let their different views bring division into the church by condemning or despising one another. Rather, in love they are to restrict their own freedom so as not to become a stumbling block for a weaker believer.



Foundations

The early Roman church was composed of converted Gentiles and Jews living alongside one another in a highly pagan environment. Their own backgrounds led to strong difference of opinion on multiple issues. Here Paul deals with two: diet and calendar. Whether or not to eat meat involved the realization that meats bought from the public market invariably came from animal sacrifices performed at the multitudes of Greek and Roman temples honoring the pagan pantheons.

Was such meat tainted, having been devoted in worship to an idol? And which day of the week was the true God to be worshipped on – the Sabbath (Saturday), as God commanded the Jews, or the day of resurrection (Sunday) in honor of the New Creation inaugurated by Jesus? How does love navigate between personal freedom and concern for those in opposition?

Understanding God's Word

Together read Romans 14:1-15.

Paul identifies two groups within the church: the weak in faith, and by implication, the strong. His command to the strong is to welcome (a bit stronger, I think, than "accept") the weak. He is clear, though, that fellowship must not become a battleground over heated opinions. The strong in faith face the danger of despising the weak, of treating them with contempt and unworthy of respect because of their legalism. The weak face the danger of judgment and condemnation of the strong, believing them to be sinning against God by their failure to toe the line on matters of faith.

The key to success in both groups is their embrace of the deeper truth that all of us, whether "strong" or "weak", are equally servants of Christ. It is not the place of one servant to render judgment on the behavior

of another servant; that role belongs to the master. Concerning judgment, our only concern should be how we will answer to our Lord when we stand before Him.

Applying God's Word

On matters of opinion, where there are no clear commands of Scripture, where would you place yourself on the scale of "weak" to "strong" with regard to living out your discipleship in today's world? What are some contemporary issues with which Christians struggle and are prone to judge one another? Alcoholic beverages? Video, TV, movie content? Republican or Democrat? Worship styles? Tradition vs. innovation? Tattoos and piercings? How willing are you to offer grace and liberty to those who stand on the other side of these secondary issues?

Paul's ultimate conviction concerning others in the body of Christ is that he would do nothing that might be perceived as a stumbling block or hindrance to the faith of a fellow believer. If that meant constraining his own freedoms in Christ, so be it. My freedom in Christ is not of highest importance; love for the welfare of my fellow believers is.

Witnessing God's Word

Do you see any examples in the Church (across the globe) where the believing community exhibits love toward one another while the culture around it is riven by strife and condemnation? Do you see evidences of this in the life of First Pres? If not, why do you think that is? If so, what has contributed to this harmony trumping division? Where in your own life have you shown the willingness to limit your own freedoms in Christ out of love for others who might otherwise disobey their consciences by imitating you, or who might harm their souls by giving in to a condemnatory spirit against you?

Why is there so much hatred in the world? Wars, murders, nationalities badmouthing other nationalities, divisions within cultures, racial hostilities, parental fistfights at kids' soccer games, sports fans cursing opposing teams' sportsfans. If you go on social media, where people can hide in anonymity and spew what's in their hearts, you quickly discover how much darkness turns people against each other. Ironically, humans, the very beings God created to love and be loved, have instead filled God's world with strife and warfare.

A few weeks ago, I was parking at Penrose Main Hospital to visit a friend there. As I got out of my car, I noticed the license plate of the car parked across from me. My first thought was, "I hope that's not the car of a doctor or nurse." Most people don't advertise these sentiments, but if we're honest they lurk in our hearts more than we wish to admit.

In Dostoyevsky's massive novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is a scene where an Orthodox priest, Father Zosima, is consoling a woman anxious over her inability to actively love others. He recalls the words of an old and cynical doctor who had visited him in the past:

"He was a man getting on in years, and undoubtedly clever. He spoke as frankly as you, though in jest, in bitter jest. 'I love humanity,' he said, 'but I wonder at myself. The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular. 'In my dreams,' he said, 'I have often come to making enthusiastic schemes for the service of humanity, and perhaps I might actually have faced crucifixion if it had been suddenly necessary; and yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone for two days together, as I know by experience. As soon as anyone is near me, his personality disturbs my self-complacency and restricts my freedom. In twenty-four hours I begin to hate the best of men: one because he's too long over his dinner; another because he has a cold and keeps on blowing his nose. I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me.'"

Or in the words of the well-known philosopher Linus Van Pelt:

"I love mankind; it's people I can't stand."

In our Scripture text for today, Paul acknowledges that bitterness and rancor exist not only in the world but also in the church, among God's people. After urging the Roman church in chapter 13

to "Owe no one anything except to love one another" and declaring that "Love does no wrong to a neighbor", Paul now wades into two controversies (Paul calls them "disputable matters/opinions") that are threatening to divide the church into rancorous camps shaking fists at each other.

He speaks of these camps as the "strong and the weak". The strong are those who know their theology on these two issues and are convinced in their own minds that they are free to act in any way they wish in these matters because God doesn't care. The weak, on the other hand, have scruples which prevent them from acting like the strong in these matters, believing that to follow the lead of the strong is to sin against God.

Here are the two controversies. Paul first addresses the issue of eating meat or abstaining. The question is not vegetarianism, but the fact that most meats available in the marketplaces of the Roman Empire were supplied by the pagan temples which had first used the meat in their daily sacrifices to their gods. Those strong in faith reasoned like Paul that animals are a gift from God and that any meat, if eaten with gratitude before God, is in and of itself clean. Their theological knowledge leads them to freedom in their actions. The weak in faith, however, worry that such meat has been tainted by pagan rituals, and that eating such meat pollutes one's spirit because it has been sacrificed to a false god. So as the strong sit down with their knives and forks, the weak hover around them and say, "That meatloaf belongs to Mercury; that's a Poseidon Porterhouse you're about to take a bite of; that T-bone belongs to Thanatos; eat that and God will strike you dead."

The strong say, "You weak-minded, meager-faith people, loosen up. Drop your legalism and grab a hamburger!" But the weak say back, "Take a bite and you're going to hell!" The upshot of this is that these two camps grow angry with each other. The strong begin to despise the weak, to hold them in contempt. In fact, the Greek verb Paul uses in vv. 3 and 10 has within it the term "no one/nobody" and carries the sense of treating another person as worthless, not deserving any attention or response. The weak on the other hand face the danger of judgmentalism, of condemning the strong as destined for hell because of their determination to eat idol-tainted meat. And so the battle lines are hardened, and

with them the hearts of Christians, one against the other.

The second issue had to do with the right days for worshiping God. Gentiles coming out of their paganism had observed prominent religious days in the Roman calendar. Should they still observe those days, recasting them as Christian holidays, or jettison them altogether? Christian Jews had known Saturday, the Sabbath day, the last day of the week, the day of rest as the holy day on which God was to be worshiped. But as a result of the resurrection of Jesus on Sunday, the first day of the week, some began to think of it as the first day of the new creation, and so as the most appropriate day now to worship the Risen Lord. The strong said, "It doesn't matter which day of the week you choose; just choose one to keep holy!" The weak said, "If you don't worship on the correct day, you will be dishonoring God and sinning against Him." As a result, the strong despised the weak for their ignorance and legalism, and the weak condemned the strong for their innovation and disobedience. Christians, called to the rule of love, now descend instead into division and animosity.

Of course, things like this don't happen in the church today, do they? Well, the issues may be different, but the strong and weak in faith still exist. Years ago, I served as a solo pastor in a small church of 160 located in a suburb of Phoenix. We had a vibrant group of young marrieds who planned a guided trail ride to be followed by a wine and cheese-tasting party under the ramada of a nearby park. Wanting to make that opportunity available to all, they created an announcement and gave it to my part-time secretary to add to the Sunday bulletin. By Sunday afternoon, my phone began ringing. How could I allow the promotion of an event where alcohol would be served? "You mean the wine-tasting?" I asked. "Of course," they answered. The teetotalers came out of the woodwork. Descendants of the apostle Peter who in Acts 10 declared to God, "Nothing unclean has ever passed these lips", this group of beloved members said in essence, "No drop of alcohol has ever slipped down my throat", and the implication was, "It shouldn't slide down anyone else's throat either!" In an attempt to mollify them, I went to the group of young marrieds and asked them, "Would you be willing to cancel the wine part of this event out of

concern for their conscience?" Their response was, "Are you kidding? There's nothing wrong with our planned outing. Why should our freedom to enjoy the day be curtailed by some legalists?" Both sides dug in their heels? What would you have done in that situation? I'll tell you what I did. I resigned on the spot (Just kidding.) I went to the couples and presented them this teaching in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 6, 8 and 10, and urged them to view their offended brothers and sisters in the congregation as those whom they were called to love by being willing to forego their freedom in this matter out of concern for the spiritual welfare of their teetotaling friends. To paraphrase Paul in v. 15, I said to them, "If your brother is injured by what you drink, you are no longer walking in love." After my persistent efforts, they finally agreed to host the trail ride, and removed the part of the announcement about wine and cheese-tasting. The anti-alcohol group was satisfied, and peace was restored.

The point is, what we do as Christians is not simply a matter of acting as we please in the freedom of Christ. Because God has called us to love others, we are to consider the well-being of other believers. If we know that our freedom might become a stumbling block or snare to others who don't share our freedom but might be led to imitate us against their own conscience, or be tempted to take the role of judge, jury and executioner against us rather than leave it to God, then in love we are called to forego our freedom for the sake of their conscience. As Paul says in 1 Cor 8:13

Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

As a disciple of Jesus, love for my neighbor transcends my personal liberty.

Of course, all this has to do with matters of moral indifference, i.e., things that the moral Law of God is not concerned with. The Greek Stoics had a particular word for this – matters of moral indifference. I'm going to give you an added gift today – so you can drop this word into your conversations this week and astonish others with your exotic vocabulary. The Greek word is ADIAPHORA and means literally "without distinction or difference." So here are some ideas:

Kids, when your parents ask you this week, "Do you want pizza or burgers?" you can respond: "Hey, total adiaphora to me. I'm just hungry – you pick."

Husbands, when your wives ask, "Which outfit looks better on me?", you say,

"Pure adiaphora, honey. You look beautiful in both!"

When your waitress asks you, "Regular or decaf?" you reply "Complete adiaphora. Surprise me."

When your teacher says, "Shall we study vocabulary or statistics in the next hour, you say, "Absolute adiaphora, Teach. Whatever you want." No, actually, you choose vocabulary, because words are always more important than statistics!

So, Paul would say on these matters of eating meat and days of worship, they are adiaphora – matters of moral indifference. The only caveat he entertains is that if you have a particular moral scruple on such matters, then you must follow your conscience. But you should not impose your conscience on another believer when God has not spoken clearly.

One last and most important insight from Paul. There is only One final judge of all. As Christians we recognize Jesus as our Master – my Master and the Master of the one sitting next to me, or the one to whom I'm married, or whom I work alongside. Since you and I are equally servants of Jesus, I have no right to usurp the role of Master and assume I can judge you for your actions in such matters. Likewise, you are not my Master and must not try to sit on that throne. As Paul says in v. 13,

So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

In other words, "Tend your own garden." Don't meddle in the garden next door and start pulling weeds there. Sufficient to the garden are the weeds thereof. God has already accepted the believer you are so eager to correct or improve. As Paul says in v.4,

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

When we grasp how much Jesus loves us and our neighbors, we are moved to love rather than judgment.

Early one summer a young boy was given a whittling knife. He decided to fulfill his dream of whittling a boat he could sail in the lake downtown. Getting a block of balsa wood, he whittled and sanded away, made masts and sails and finally it was ready. He took it to the lake and launched it from the shore, proudly watching as a brisk wind picked up and carried it effortlessly over the water. Soon however, it sailed too far, and he lost sight of it. Running along the shore, he searched worriedly until the sun was setting and he knew he had to get home. With a broken heart he walked back through town. As he passed the local pawn shop he saw the owner putting his boat in the display window. Running in, he cried, "Mister, that's my boat!"

"Sorry, son," the man replied. "I just paid \$5 for it. If you want it, you'll have to buy it from me." The boy exclaimed, "Don't sell it to anyone else. I'll be back as fast as I can!" Sprinting home, he spilled out his piggy bank, counted out \$5 in coins, ran back, and laid out the money before the pawn broker, who gladly handed him his prized possession. As the joyful boy left the store cradling his boat, he looked at it and said, "Little boat, you belong to me now for two reasons: I made you and I bought you."

This is what God says to each of us in Christ: "My child, I created you and I redeemed you – that is how much I love you." Rest securely in that truth. But remember that what God says about you He also says about fellow children of God you are tempted to despise or condemn. Hate, whatever its form, has no place in the body of Christ.

So, let's tend the gardens of our own hearts and root out the weeds of hatred within our own souls. And then together let's tend the garden of our church fellowship, joining as one to eradicate the weeds of discord, friction, hostility, backbiting and gossip. Then, once we have our house in order, perhaps then we can turn to the larger world in all its turmoil and say, "Hey, come and see; we've discovered how to love one another. Perhaps we can offer you some help. There's a better way than fighting. Come, let us teach you the way of Jesus."