
“God Has Welcomed Him”

ROMANS 14:1-4

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AT A GLANCE

Christian, you will spend eternity with people with whom you have nothing in common except faith in Jesus. We are so prone to separate ourselves from people the Lord has bound us to forever. This must grieve the heart of God! To divide over non-essential matters and use those to judge one another is not right. Paul helps us understand how Christians with conflicting personal convictions can live in harmony. We should strive to that end! We should welcome our brother with whom we disagree if for no other reason than God has welcomed him!

INTRODUCTION

“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.” Author unknown, quoted by Kent Hughes.

It’s amusing to think about the truth of this poem when it’s happening in other churches. But when you find yourself in the midst of a dispute with warring factions, it’s no laughing matter. Evidently, this was the case with the Romans. It’s hard to know the predominant purpose of Paul’s writing to the Romans, but it’s safe to say this was no tertiary matter to him. Unity in the church centered on the Gospel was of utmost concern for Paul.

No matter how passionate we might feel about something, if it’s not about the Gospel, it’s non-essential. Fine to have discussions. Fine to have personal convictions, to stand on those convictions, and do as the Lord leads you. But if it’s not about the gospel, it’s wrong to break fellowship over.

WE ARE FIRST A BELIEVING COMMUNITY

Paul must have understood how difficult this is for the church. The faithful church is centered on right doctrine, on right beliefs. As Daniel Doriani puts it, “We put beliefs first, practices follow.” We’re first a believing body, then a doing body.

Because of this, it’s so easy for diverse Christians to elevate their beliefs to the point of breaking fellowship. So the question is, “How does a diverse body remain unified when there are competing, sincerely held beliefs?” Romans 14 gives us the answer.

The most common solution is to part ways. It’s easier that way. It’s more expedient. You don’t have to do the hard thing of loving people that disagree with you, that confront your deeply held convictions. Whole denominations have been developed over differences of opinion that fall way short of gospel.

Churches split over the most ridiculous things like the order of worship, differing opinions about going to the movies, dancing, drinking alcohol, using tobacco, which translation of the Bible you use, the dress code, and so on.

Don't you know this must grieve the heart of God? What do faithful Christians do when our convictions conflict with those of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ? We welcome our brother because God has welcomed him. That's it. That's the solution. We humbly live in the tension.

ROMANS 14:1-4

¹As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ²One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

WEAK IN FAITH

Verse 1 begins **As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions**. Commentators vary on what Paul means here by **weak in faith**. But what is most widely held is that these were Jewish Christians who, although sincere in their faith, believed that the most appropriate response to the grace given them in Christ was to bind themselves to observing the Law.

This, they reasoned, was the most pleasing and grateful way to live. These were people who likely represented a minority view in that church. They were Jewish believers in a Gentile-heavy church. I can imagine they felt like outcasts in what was supposed to be their church family.

I believe it is safe to say that the Roman church was dealing with different issues than the Galatian church. Had these Jewish believers fallen in the trap of the Judaizers, who believed and insisted that observing the Mosaic Law was necessary for salvation, Paul would have rebuked them sharply.

These Christians understood that salvation was by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. But their response to that grace was to restrict themselves from certain things and observe certain days. And they probably believed that everyone else would be a better Christian if they all did the same.

Paul says to **welcome him**, that is the one who is weak in faith. The church was to embrace the one with a restricted conscience. That means to welcome them with open arms, not to bring them in with a goal of convincing them.

MORE THAN TOLERATE

This is where it gets really difficult for me. We believe what we believe, and we are sure we're right. And here we're told that it's not enough to just tolerate these people. We must accept them, differing opinions and all. This is evident when he says **welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions**.

The church is not to be a place where people who think they have it all figured out make people who believe differently feel like outsiders. I'm just going to tell you, this is the most difficult pill to swallow for me and maybe for you.

I think I've learned to tolerate people who think differently than me, but I'm not sure I've learned to welcome them for the way Paul means here. Can I just be completely honest? This is a difficult text to preach because I know I have not completely embraced it myself. Lord, forgive me. I believe, help my unbelief.

To be clear, this is not a call to water down the Gospel and welcome people who twist it or reject it. Paul minced no words when it came to preserving the Gospel, *"As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."* Galatians 1:9

That is, “cursed to hell.” Anyone who would pervert the gospel in any way, deserves to go to hell. That’s strong language. And appropriately so, because a perverted gospel sends people to hell while promising Heaven. Anyone who perverts the gospel deserves to be cursed.

But in non-essential matters, in matters that do not deal with eternal salvation, which is just about everything Christians fight about, Paul tells us to welcome people who disagree with us. In matters related to the gospel, we must not waiver. But with non-essentials, personal convictions, there is room for Christians to humbly disagree.

THE DIVIDING ISSUE

Paul identifies the dividing issue, a non-essential issue, in **verse 2. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.** The issue was that meat sold in the marketplace was usually meat sacrificed to idols. Paul dealt with this same issue in 1 Corinthians 8.

“Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up...Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’...However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” 1 Corinthians 8:1, 4, 7

Paul, and evidently many in the early church, understood their liberty in Christ included the freedom to eat anything they wanted without guilt, including meat sacrificed to idols. Afterall, “an idol has no real existence.”

However, the former Jewish believers felt convicted about eating meat sacrificed to idols. Since they could not ensure meat sold in the marketplace was kosher, they opted to abstain from meat altogether and ate **only vegetables.** It was their way of guarding themselves from a conflicted conscience, as uninformed as that conscience may have been.

The **weak person** was bound in their conscience where the bible did not bind them. They were free in Christ, but their conscience was weak. On the other hand, the **one person believes he may eat anything.**

WHERE IS ‘THE STRONG’?

I want to point something out here. Do you find yourself looking for Paul to contrast “the weak person” with “the strong”? That does seem to be the alternative to “the weak,” right? Why doesn’t Paul use that term to describe the other group? Why does he keep saying, “the weak” and “the one person?” He does so in verses 1, 3, and 5. I keep looking for Paul to say, “but the strong...eats anything.”

Why doesn’t Paul call those who, like him, exercised their freedom in Christ, “the strong”? I don’t know Paul’s heart on this, but I do know my own. And because of that, I would have to surmise the reason is: human pride. It is so like us to assume we are the strong ones when we disagree with others. Perhaps Paul did not want to inflate the ego of those who already assumed the position of strength.

We want to feel strong. We want to be superior. But in our desire for moral superiority, we prove our own weakness. This is exactly what Paul is warning against; the sinful, prideful, judgmental heart of man.

SILLY CONVICTIONS

Verse 3 says Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

Here Paul identifies the two parties not as weak and strong, but by what they do. I think it is so insightful for Paul to do this because when it comes to matters of conviction, we get so high and mighty about our opinions, our beliefs, and our convictions.

And Paul is like, 'you eat meat and you eat vegetables...that's what makes you different.' The one group is convinced they're better than the other. That they are more grateful, or they are more enlightened, they are more obedient, or they are freer, that they are holier, or they liberated from legalism. "See how righteous I am?! See how committed I am?," asks the one who abstains. "Yes, but see how much more understanding I have than you?," replies the one who eats. We make this a matter of superiority of intellect, or righteousness.

"No," Paul says, "You eat meat. And you eat vegetables. That's the distinction." It's lunch. Get over yourselves. What you have elevated to the point of moral superiority is nothing more than a silly meal.

We need to hear this. We need to hear this so badly in the church today. We love to ride hobby horses. I'll admit I'm speaking to myself. We love to puff ourselves up with our supposed "knowledge" or righteousness.

I hate to be so blunt about this, but I think I'm preaching to you the heart of Paul's message here. And I want to confront my own heart as well as yours. So much of what we are convinced is the right way to live is nothing but silliness. Sincerely held, no doubt. But sincerely held silliness.

STOP IT

What is not silly is the mandate that we stop judging one another. That is serious. That is unwavering. Paul warns both factions.

He tells those who eat anything not to **despise** and those who abstain from meat not to **pass judgment**. See? Judgmentalism is a two-way street. People on both sides looked down upon one another.

People who restrict themselves where they are free are prone to view others as living licentiously. People who enjoy their freedoms tend to view those who don't as legalists or pharisees.

The one looks at the other and assumes that because they exercise their freedom in Christ, they're going to fall into sin. The other looks down upon the as inferior in the faith. Both are wrong. Both need to give grace. We're all sinners trying to put our flesh to death and live a life that pleases our Lord.

RADICAL, UNCOMMON HUMILITY

This is a call to radical, uncommon humility. It is a call to see our brother in Christ as exactly that – our *brother* in Christ. **God has welcomed him.**

Think about what this is saying! God almighty has applied the blood of Christ to your brother's sin and forgiven him, He has received him into His family, and welcomed Him. Who are you to reject him?

Which is what Paul asked in **verse 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls.**

Our ears should perk up anytime we hear those words in scripture, **who are you?** Since all scripture is God-breathed, inspired and inerrant, it is the very word of God. When Paul speaks, Christ speaks. When Christ speaks, God speaks.

When Paul asks, who are you? God is asking, who are you? Brother and sister this should cause every last one of us to quake in our boots. It is the height of arrogance to look upon our brother or sister in Christ, **a servant of another**, and pass judgment upon them.

It is the height of arrogance for you and me to stand in judgment and reject a person God has welcomed. Each of us will give account of our life as a servant to his master. It is **before our own master that we stand or fall.**

LET'S JUDGE OURSELVES, NOT OTHERS

If we took this more seriously, we would be content to worry about ourselves more and leave it to the master to judge our fellow servants. And praise the Lord for this comforting thought, **And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.**

Our brothers will stand in the day of judgment just as we will stand in the day of judgment. For as Paul says, *"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."* Romans 5:2

The faithful in Christ, whether they eat or abstain, will stand in the judgment not because they ate or abstained, but because they are clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

We are going to spend eternity with people who believe the opposite of just about everything we do. We are going to walk the streets of gold with people with whom we have absolutely nothing in common.

Nothing except Christ, that is. Nothing except faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not worship style. Not how we dress. Not how we educate our kids. Not how we sing. Not how we vote. Not how we use our money. Not convictions about dancing, drinking, smoking, playing video games, or social media. Not about our opinion on the paint color in the worship center, or what type of building a church should meet in, or which bible translation we should use, or whether we wore a suit and tie or shorts and flip-flops, or a tribal gown.

We will not have spoken the same language, eaten the same foods, watched the same movies, listened to the same songs, or shopped at the same stores. We will not have landed at the same place on church leadership, or how communion should be observed, or how to send and support missionaries. We will have disagreed about how a church budget should be set up, how the grass gets mowed, and the flower beds stay cared-for. We won't have the same interpretation on the end times, or election, or gifts of the Spirit.

And in spite of all of that, we're going to spend forever united together in paradise. These people who drive us crazy here on earth are going to be part of the glorious tapestry of Christ's love, just like us. Christ's trophies of grace, every one of us.

We don't have to be best friends, we don't have to agree with one another, we certainly don't have to convince one another, but we do have to welcome our brother for this reason alone: God has welcomed him. God has welcomed Him by the blood of His one and only Son. Amen?!

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