

**Receiving One Another with Understanding, Part 1**

Scripture: Romans 14:1

Code: 45-108

Well, it is a real thrill after, I think, nearly three months of hiatus from the wonderful book of Romans to be back tonight in chapter 14. And I'm excited about what the Spirit of God is teaching me, I trust you will be as well. Let's open our Bibles together, Romans chapter 14, I want to speak to you out of this chapter on the subject, "The unity of strong and weak believers."

Now let me just introduce this passage by approaching it from sort of another direction. All of us who are Christians, who are part of the church of Christ, who understand the Word of God are very much aware of the power of sin to devastate a church congregation. We know that sin in a church can cripple its function. It can destroy its harmony. It can sap its strength and it can for all intents and purposes negate entirely its testimony. So throughout the New Testament there is a ringing call for the purity of the church.

Jesus introduced this really in Matthew chapter 18 when He said if a brother is in a sin, you go to him, if he doesn't hear you, take witnesses, if he doesn't hear them you tell the whole church. And the idea of that passage, of course, is to instruct us that we need to deal with sin in the church because sin has such a debilitating and crippling effect.

We find as we come into the Pauline epistles the same thing is true. The Apostle Paul reminds the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians chapter 5 that if they have just a little leaven, it will wind up leavening the whole lump, right? In other words, a little bit of sinful influence will have a pervasive effect like leaven does on a whole loaf of bread.

In the second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 7 verse 1, he cries out and says, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh, perfecting holiness in the fear of God," again calling for holiness in the church. We are also instructed that if we find anyone in the church who's in sin, we're not to fellowship with him. He told the Philippian...the Thessalonians that. We're not to have any time to eat a meal with him, and to accept him and make him feel welcome in the assembly because the potential for destruction is so great.

And then our Lord and the Apostle reiterating encouraged us to come frequently to the Lord's table and every time we come to the Lord's table we are to do what? Examine ourselves, take stock of our own lives and see if there is sin there because sin is the single great danger to the church that we are most aware of. And the Scripture is filled with injunctions and exhortations in regard to that.

In fact, were we to go back in Romans...and we won't do that...we would find that in the book of Romans, the epistle of Romans, there are many injunctions for the purity of the church. They begin really in chapter 12, after 11 chapters of doctrine, 11 chapters of delineating the meaning of justification by grace through faith, after he has laid out the significance of salvation, then come the injunctions, exhortations, commands beginning in chapter 12. And the first one is to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God which is an act of spiritual worship and not be conformed to the world, and so forth. And then we launch in from chapter 12 to a whole series of commands and exhortations about the purity of the church.

First of all, our relationship to God is dealt with in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 12. Then our relationship to the members of the body in terms of ministry, verses 3 through 8. Then our relationship to everybody, verses 9 to 21. It talks about love and kindness and understanding and affection and rejoicing and prayer and distributing to people who are in need and not being vengeful toward those who wound you and bless those who persecute you and feed your enemies. And it's summed up in verse 21, "Don't let evil overcome you but overcome evil with good." And all of those are exhortations for the purity of the church as each individual believer is purified.

So, we are then to examine our hearts and be pure toward God in terms of ministry to the body and in terms of all our relationships. And then in chapter 13 verses 1 to 7, he talks about the church's relationship to the government. We are to have an exemplary Christ-exalting, God-glorifying relationship to the government which means we submit to the authority and we pay our taxes. Then beginning in verse 8 of chapter 13, he talks about the relationship we're to have to our neighbors. And that is a relationship of love. We are to owe no debt, that is not properly paid. The only debt that we are to owe that we will never be able to fully pay is the debt of love.

And then he closes out chapter 13 by telling us how urgent it is to live a pure life, how urgent it is to make the dedication to be the person, to be the church that he has just described. We are to, first of all, realize the time is late, the night is far spent. We are to take stock of where we are. We are to begin to change our life pattern if need be by casting off the works of darkness, verse 12, getting rid of sin and putting on the armor of light. We are to walk with integrity, not in partying and drunkenness and immorality and shamelessness and arguments and envy and all of that. In other words, all of this in chapters 12 and 13 is a call for purity in the church because sin is not the proper response to justification by grace through faith, righteousness is. And then verse 14 sums it up, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts."

So, Paul then deals with the matter of sin among believers. And we're all very much aware of that and we don't need to make anymore of it because I know you're sensitive to that matter. The church must be pure. We have to deal with that. That's why we have church discipline. That's why we call for confession of sin. That's why we read the Word of God that we may be exposed. That's why we

pray that the Spirit of God may reveal to us anything in our life that isn't right. That's why we go to one another to give rebuke or a reproof or instruction or guidance or wisdom, to assist in the spiritual growth and purity of the church.

But I want to introduce to you the thought that sin simply stated is not the only problem the church faces. There is another category of problems that is not strictly speaking a sin problem with which the church has to deal and which also has potential to create a sinful situation which will cripple the life of the church. And this is a very important issue. It is the relationship between strong and weak Christians within the church. Now in any church, I don't care whether you're talking about the church at Rome to which Paul wrote, or any other church in his time, or any church in all the centuries until now, or whether you're talking about this church. All of us face the inevitable potentiality of severe problems in the church because of the potential conflict between strong and weak believers. Paul then deals with that in chapter 14 and chapter 15. From chapter 14 verse 1 through chapter 15 verse 13, now that's a lot of verses, 26 verses to deal with this issue of the strong and the weak Christians. And the whole point here is the unity of such, the oneness of such.

Now let me give you a little bit of an idea of what we're talking about. Now you look around you tonight and you see a tremendous amount of diversity. I mean, you see people at all different levels of life chronologically, young people all the way to old people. You will see people at all different chronological spiritual ages. There are people here who have been saved 50 years. There are people here who have come to know Christ, as I met a young man this morning, within the last 48 hours and everything in between. There are people who come from irreligious, atheistic humanistic backgrounds. There are people who come from Roman Catholic backgrounds. And there are people who used to be Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and who knows what. And then there are people who have come here from very hard-line legalistic hair-splitting super-hyper fundamentalist churches. And then there are people who come here from very loose, free-wheeling surfer churches...and every conceivable thing.

Now the potential of all of that is to create a lot of problems because basically, people, we do not have homogeneity in this church. And that's as it ought to be. We have every kind of person and personality. We have Christians at every level of maturity. We have believers, all of us here, who have one thing in common, we all have though we are redeemed unredeemed flesh. And the potential of unredeemed flesh all coming from varying backgrounds bumping into each other could create some great problems. And I would confess to you that it is as much an issue to deal with the banging and the clanging and the bumping and the crashing of a whole lot of diverse people with unredeemed flesh as it is to deal with overt sin. People who say, "Well, what you do in the church, we didn't do in our church." I mean, people will say to me things like, "Why don't the ladies wear hats?" And they're very concerned about that because they came from a background where the ladies wore hats. And we have people who say, "Why don't you have any candles? Where are the candles?" Because it's hard for them to worship without candles because that's just been a part of

the genre of their experience.

And there have been people who have come and are very offended by certain hair cuts. There are churches, you know, where if you're hair's not an inch above your ear, you're not spiritual. And that's the way some people have been raised. And then there are people who come out of certain backgrounds, even musically and they hear something and they say, "Boy, that brings back to me everything I used to be a part of, I don't like that, why do you do that?" And then there are some people who come and say, "Hey, I don't have a problem with drinking, you know. I can handle it." And other people come and say, "That's a vile sin. I mean, I was raised that way, that's intolerable." And there are some people who wouldn't miss the latest movie and there are some people who wouldn't darken the door of the theater for fear that God would strike them dead like Ananias and Sapphira at the box office.

And you have a tremendous spectrum of people with all kinds of orientations that can potentiate great discord in the church. There are new Christians still holding on to old traditions, old life style patterns, Jewish Christians who still hold to the tradition. We have many Roman Catholic people who come to the Lord Jesus Christ and they go to mass and then come here. And it takes them a time before they can let go of that because it's so ingrained in them. And others who come here from the Episcopalian background or Lutheran background where they're used to people with backward collars and standing up and sitting down 20 times during a service. And they don't understand why we don't have that and they sort of struggle with the casual perspectives and freedoms of others. There are preferences in all kinds of things, preferences in dress, in music and diet, entertainment, programming, all kinds of things.

And that was true in the early church and I would probably guess that it's even more true now than it was then because we are such a melting pot of diversity today. But here you have what we will call non-moral preferences that we want to talk about here...non-moral preferences. In other words, it isn't necessarily a sin issue in and of itself to do or not do these kinds of things we're talking about but it can become a very, very serious issue in the church and it needs to be confronted and we have to understand what the Bible teaches about it so that we can get along well with each other. So, from 14:1 to 15:13, Paul deals with this whole matter of unity among strong and weak believers.

Now keep in mind that the issue here is the essential of maintaining unity in the church, that is the issue. It's Ephesians 4:3 endeavoring to keep the bond of peace, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. That's what it is. It's what Paul said in Colossians 3:14, it's maintaining love which is the bond of perfection which ties every one together. It's unity we're talking about here. It is loving compatibility of very diverse people. And it's a real important issue. Our Lord Jesus in John 13 said that men are going to know that you're My disciples if you have what? Love one for another. And Jesus prayed in John 17 that we would be one, not only redemptively but certainly in the sense of how we demonstrate our redemption in the world. And this comes with

difficulty. It comes with grave difficulty because the church is made up of such diverse elements of people.

Now, in Acts chapter 20 and we'll just take a couple of passages that will illustrate this point, in Acts chapter 20 and verse 35, listen to what Paul says, "I have shown you all things," he's talking to the Ephesian elders in this very familiar passage, "I have shown you all things, I've demonstrated to you how that so laboring," listen to this, "you ought to support the weak." You ought to support the weak. And he identifies the fact that in the church there are going to be the weak. And if there are the weak in the church we can conclude that there are also the strong and everything in between. And Paul says you must be very conscientious about supporting those that are yet weak.

Another text that seems to speak to this matter is in Galatians 6:1, "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in a fault, a paraptoma, he falls, you who are spiritual restore that one in the spirit of meekness." And again Paul says you are going to have some stumbling brethren and some strong brethren who are going to come along and assist. In 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 and verse 14 Paul says...and this is a very important verse, 1 Thessalonians 5:14, "We exhort you, brethren," watch this now, "warn them that are unruly." Now these are the people who want to push the limits all the time. These are the people who lack caution and they want to run their freedoms in Christ right out the end. And they tend to be unruly, undisciplined. Warn them, warn them of the danger of living on the edge of your liberty. And then he says encourage the faint-hearted, those are the people huddled in the middle scared to death of their liberty. They haven't got the courage to even venture out. And then he says support the weak and be patient with everybody.

So, you're going to have the unruly in the church and you're going to have the faint-hearted who don't take a step in any direction, they just hold on to what they've got. And then you have the weak who are trying to go from being faint-hearted to being strong, in fact maybe unruly. And in the process they're so weak they've got to be helped along. So the church has all of that to deal with. In 1 John 2 it tells us there are spiritual infants, spiritual young men and spiritual fathers, all on a continuum of spiritual growth. And in order to develop a loving capability of all of these people, we have to understand what Paul writes to us here in this very important passage in Romans 14 and 15. And I know that you're going to get excited as we get into it because it's so marvelously rich with truth.

Let me just give you the simple scene as its existing in the mind of the Spirit of God in the passage. The temptation in the church is this, the temptation is...and you can see this if you think about it, I've seen it for years, see it all the time...the temptation is you've got the liberated brothers and sisters out here who really fully understand what it is to be free in Christ, they're not hung up on old tradition, they're not hung up on old ritual, on old routine, and old forms of religion. They understand fully they are free from sin and death and hell and Satan and they understand the freedom which they have in Christ no longer involves religious formats and rituals and holy days and ceremonies and candles and all of that kind of thing and they are very free to make choices dependent on the Spirit of God's

moving in their heart. Those we will call the strong. Strong in faith in that they understand their freedom, they understand their liberty.

On the other hand, you have the weak in faith who are still so close to the pass that they can't quite let go, they can't quite move away from what it is that holds them down. And so they can't believe that they have the freedoms they really have. They really do have some freedoms but they can't believe it, they can't accept it, they can't handle it because of preferences that have been brought to bear on their life in the past. And so they can't enjoy that freedom and they stay huddled in the middle in a sort of faint-hearted way, maybe making some crawling efforts toward that understanding of freedom.

The temptation then is this, the strong will be tempted to look down on the weak as legalistic faithless weak pitiful people who just get in the way of these people trying to enjoy their liberty. And some guy comes in and says, "You can't do that, that offends me, that makes me stumble, that's a sin." And your reaction to him is to despise that person or look down on that person as one who doesn't understand his freedom, who hasn't grown up to understand what liberty is available in Christ, who is bound by needless preferences and so there's a tendency on the strong's part to look down on the weak. Conversely, the tendency on the part of the weak is to condemn the strong for what they read as an abuse of liberty and to condemn them for freedoms which they feel they shouldn't exercise. And so you have the weak wanting to condemn the strong and the strong wanting to despise the weak and therein lies the problem.

And it does happen...it does happen. There are people in the church who would run their freedoms out to the edge. And there are people in the church who want to hold them in the middle tightly clenched in their little hands because they are bound to a tradition and they're conformed to that. And we'll get specific as we get into the text. And the clash of those two people comes when one despises the other and the other condemns the other.

There are in this church believers who comprehend their freedom, who enjoy their freedom. There are believers who think they abuse their freedom. There are believers who are very weak and who don't understand their freedoms in Christ and are still holding on to vestiges of the past and living under self-imposed and unnecessary rules and rituals and routines. And they are often looked down on by the rest. But the principles that Paul gives us here will teach us how we can have unity even with the strong and the weak. And it's essential...essential that we understand this.

Now let's say at the very outset that we do have freedom in Christ. We are free from sin in terms of its ultimate penalty. We are free from death in terms of its ultimate power. We are free from hell in terms of its ultimate punishment. And we are free from Satan in terms of his ultimate persuasion. We are free in those areas, free to worship God, free to love God, free to be forgiven, free to go to heaven.

But there's another dimension in which we enjoy freedom, too. And that is this, we are free as new covenant Christians from all the Old Testament laws that were strictly external and ceremonial. We are not free from the Ten Commandments and we are not free from any moral laws given in the Old Testament, because God is the same God. But we are free from external ceremonial rules and rituals that were attached only to a period of time and a given people, the people Israel. We have entered into a liberty that is cut off from ceremony and ritual and routine that was part of the old economy.

But, we may enjoy that...many of us enjoy that immensely. In fact, most people in this church would be liberated in that sense. But there are a few Jewish people in this church who are still somewhat bound to the Old Testament tradition in which they were raised. Well, if that can be an existing problem here, you can only imagine what kind of a problem that was in Rome in the time of Paul. You had Jews who were being saved right out of Judaism and finding it really impossible to let go of deeply ingrained tradition. Tradition, for example, along the lines of dietary laws. Tradition along the lines of, for example, holy days, feast days, festivals, new moons, sabbaths which all their life they had been prescribed to maintain. Many had come out of Judaistic legalism and they were still bound in their conscience to life-long ritual ceremony and tradition. In fact, in Acts 21:20 the implication there is that most Jews were still bound to the Mosaic disposition. Their consciences put...notice this...unnecessary bondage on their liberty.

And there were others out of the Roman society. There were those out of the Roman society who were saved out of paganism, saved out of idolatry, set free in Christ, but even their background limited them. Even their background constrained them because of past pagan religious experience so that they couldn't enjoy some things they had every right to enjoy.

So, you had in there this Jewish Gentile factor, Jews wanting to hold on to what they had all their life known and Gentiles, many of them holding on and others of them wanting to avoid things that they had known in the past. And when they saw things in the church that were similar, they wanted to avoid those, too. And then you had the sort of natural conflict between a liberated Gentile and a legalistic Jew. And so this was the conflict potential. Jews clinging to the Old Testament and some Jews who were just as free as they could be and they were very offensive to the Jews still bound. Gentiles just delivered out of paganism, just delivered out of debauched orgies where they had eaten food offered to idols and other Gentiles free from any concern about that in the past and free to exercise all their liberties but some things they did like eating food that was once offered to idols just totally offended those new Gentile converts that had come out of paganism because they couldn't believe that you could eat food offered to idols which were so much a part of their debauched past.

So, as a result there was this conflict. The legalistic believer sees liberty as sinful. The liberated believer sees legalism as sinful. Now to deal with this, Paul gives what I think are marvelous,

marvelous principles...four of them. And we're only going to begin to look at the first, but I'll give you all four because they stretch all the way to chapter 15 verse 13. The way to solve the problem and the way to maintain the unity is number one, receive one another with understanding...receive one another with understanding. That's verses 1 to 12.

The second one, not only receive one another with understanding, verses 1 through 12, but build up one another without offending, verses 13 to 23. Build up one another without offending. The third principle, please one another as Christ did, and that's chapter 15 verses 1 to 7...please one another as Christ did. And then fourthly, rejoice with one another in God's plan, that's chapter 15 verse 8 through 13. So he says receive one another with understanding, build up one another without offending, please one another as Christ did, and rejoice with one another in God's plan.

Now over the next few weeks as we are able, we'll be dealing with these principles...marvelous, marvelous principles. And I'll take you through the four principles and then when we pass verse 13 we'll be in what is really the conclusion of this entire epistle to the Romans.

Let's start with number one and we'll at least kind of get our feet wet a little bit. The first principle is receive one another with understanding...receive one another with understanding. Verse 1, and this, of course, is directed to the strong because it says, "Him that is weak in the faith, receive...receive, but not to doubtful disputation," and I'll explain that phrase.

Now before we look specifically at the verse, we need to get a little bit of a feeling for the background. The Jews had been raised to do what was kosher...kosher comes from a Hebrew word, the word is kashar(?) and it means fit or right. Anything that is kosher to a Jew is right, it is fit, it is proper, it is acceptable. And there were two things that were very, very dominant in terms of the category of what was kashar. One was diet and the other was days...special diets and special days. In Leviticus, you go back and read chapter 11, just read all the way to verse 45 or so and you'll see all the dietary restrictions. Then go to Deuteronomy and read chapter 14. And then refresh yourself on the story of Daniel who when taken captivity into Babylon was told he was supposed to eat the king's meat, right? He was supposed to eat all the food the king provided and in chapter 1 verse 8 he says, "I will not do that." His conscience would not allow him to do that. He had three friends, Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael whom the Babylonians named Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, those are their pagan names, their real names I gave you first. And they along with Daniel said we will not compromise our Jewish convictions. So they were typical of the no-compromise Jew who will keep his dietary laws no matter what the price might be.

And by the way, all of those dietary laws and all of those special days were ordained originally by whom? By God and so they had a real reason for affirming their validity.



On the other hand, you had the Gentiles. And they were used to pagan feasts and pagan festivals. What we celebrate today is Christmas is more akin to the feast of Saturnalia than it is to anything to have to do with the birth of Christ. It was a pagan festival and their festivals, Saturnalia and many other ones, involved drunken gluttonous orgies which left them vaccinated very often against certain things that as Christians they would be free to do. But because of their experience in the past identifying those things with paganism, they wanted nothing to do with them.

Now we can see this illustrated in two passages. The first one deals with the Jewish problem, it's Galatians chapter 2. Let's look at Galatians chapter 2. And we're not going to be in any hurry because I want to cover these things clearly and carefully as we go through because I think they're so important. So let's just get it set in our minds what we're speaking of and we'll go from there in the weeks to come.

Now Peter came to Antioch and Paul says I confronted him to the face because he was to be blamed. One thing about Paul, when something needed to be said he was the kind of guy who said it, right? And in this particular case something needed to be said to Peter and, you know, Peter was a significant person. Peter was a main character. Peter was uniquely the Apostle of Christ in a way that even Paul had not enjoyed, that is to live during the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ and walk with Him. And yet Peter did something that caused Paul to rebuke him to the face. What did he do? Well, verse 12 says, "Certain men came from James," now James was the brother of our Lord who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem and there were certain Jewish men in the church in Jerusalem who came to Antioch. Antioch would be a rather long journey north. "And before certain men came from James, Peter ate with the Gentiles." He'd sit down and have a ham sandwich with a Gentile...you know, or a pork chop...or whatever.

But, when they showed up, the Gentiles and the Jews met. When the Jews arrived, he withdrew from the Gentiles and he separated himself from Gentile food and Gentiles period fearing them who were of the circumcision. He was afraid of the Jews. He was afraid of what the Jews would think. And thus you know what he did? He overtly and openly denied the liberty that was his in Christ.

The dietary laws had been set aside, hadn't they? Weren't they set aside specifically for Peter in Acts chapter 10 when the Lord gave him a vision of a sheet coming down out of heaven and all the animals were in the sheet, clean and unclean? That is, those that could be eaten and those that couldn't be eaten? And the Lord said in the vision to Peter, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." And Peter said, "I can't do it, I can't eat anything that isn't kosher." And the Lord says, "Don't you dare call unclean what I have called clean." And in effect the Lord was saying all that dietary stuff is wiped away. It's omitted. And even in the life of Peter as well, the Lord began to remove the significance of the sabbath.

When He came He said, "Look," He said, "I am the Lord of the sabbath." And He, as far as the Jews were concerned, overtly violated their sabbath, breaking their traditions. And eventually rose from the dead not on a sabbath but on the first day of the week and established a whole new era in which the sabbath has no longer any necessary place.

And so, Peter knew that because Peter was with Christ. And saw Him after the resurrection and knew when the church met on the first day of the week. And here when the Jews come, he reverts and he puts himself back under Mosaic law and Paul rebukes him for such a silly retreat from liberty in Christ because all it will do is confuse everyone. And all the other Jews, verse 13, dissembled in like manner with him. He was such a leader that when he did that all the other Jews backed away from the Gentiles, too, and Paul could see a fracturing of the church. And you know who became a victim of this? Even such a man as whom? Barnabas was also carried away with this hypocrisy. "And when I saw that they didn't walk uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, If you being a Jew live after the manner of Gentiles and not as do the Jews, why are you compelling the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?"

I mean, if you don't mind coming up here and living with the Gentiles, why are you now going to back into the Jewish camp and then make those Gentiles live like Jews? Peter, you're wrong. And he withstood him to the face. But all I want you to note is that the situation existed in which that tension was there. Because the pressure in the early church among the Jews was to hang on to Judaism. You remember in the council in Acts 15, there were some in that council that wanted to make sure that people held on to Judaism. There were the Judaizers who said you can't be a Christian unless you keep the Mosaic law and get physically circumcised. In fact, Josephus, the great Jewish historian, says there were Jews living in Rome at the time of the Roman epistle, there were Jews living in Rome who lived on fruit all the time for fear of eating something unclean. Now this can happen even among believers in Rome because they're still stuck on laws which have long ago been abrogated(?) Jesus even said, didn't He?, "No longer is it that which goes in the man that defiles him," Mark 7, "it is that which...what?...comes out of the man," Mark 7:15 to 19.

So, we can see then that the pressure was on the Jews to maintain their heritage. And they clung to it. And it's understandable.

Then I want you to notice the problem the Gentiles had. And we've alluded to it, but let's look at 1 Corinthians chapter 8, 1 Corinthians chapter 8...and this is a very, very important insight into some of the Gentile tension in the early church and parallels many things today, as we shall see. "Now concerning or touching things offered to idols..." now here's the problem in Corinth, right? Here's the problem in Corinth. Let's say you're a pagan, typical pagan and you do your worshiping. Here's how you do it. You go to a temple of a pagan deity, and they had many deities, but you go to the deity that you want to worship, or you go to the festival of the deity that is throwing the banquet and you bring in a sacrifice. It could be vegetables. It could be fruit. It could be meat. It could be whatever. It could

be even a drink of some sort. You bring your offering and you put your offering on the altar, let's say you've been invited there as a copy of an invitation from that time that says "Antonious invites you to dine at the table of our lord Serapis." Serapis was a pagan deity.

So, let's say you got invited to the banquet of Serapis. So you go and you've got your little piece of meat. And those banquets were sort of like pot luck, everybody brought something. You put it on the altar. Part of it might have been consumed in a ceremony. Part of it would be eaten and whatever was not eaten in that banquet that night would be taken right out the back of the temple and sold the next day in the market so that the priests could make money off of it. So when you went through the marketplace, the agora, and were doing your shopping, you could theoretically be purchasing food which had been the night before offered to idols.

Now if you happen to be a pagan who was all your lifelong trapped in idolatrous worship and what came in your life was the gospel of Jesus Christ and you were totally transformed and redeemed and a new creation, you would have an animosity and a hatred for all that past. And the thought that you were invited over to the home of some Christian brother who was a liberated brother and he was offering you a wonderful meal but you in your mind thought that this might have been offered to the god Serapis, that could bother you greatly. And so you might not be able to eat that meal and therefore you would be a great offense to that host, maybe a Jewish host who wasn't bothered by idols, just as a Gentile could greatly offend a Jewish guest by offering him some pork or other unclean animal.

So, the problem in the Corinthian church is this same thing. They're struggling about what do you do with meat offered to idols. So he says let's give you some principles...some simple principles that will help. Principle number one is everybody has knowledge but love must rule. Knowledge just puffs up but love builds up. "If any man thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing as he ought to know. If any man loves God, the same is known of him."

Now what he means to say in those verses is a very simple thing. He's saying don't force your knowledge on a person, rather force your what? Your love on him. If it's going to offend him, don't give it to him, be sensitive. Knowledge is fine but love should rule.

The second principle he gives is that idols aren't anything anyway but not everybody can handle that. Is there such a thing, let me ask you a question, is there such a thing really as a false god? Is there? Are there any other deities floating around? No. There aren't any, so whatever is offered to a false god is offered to a nothing. There aren't any. So he says in verse 4, "As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world and there is no other God but one," so what are you worried about? It was offered to nobody. Well, it's easy for you to say, it's hard to understand. O, verse 5 says, "There be that are called gods whether in heaven or in earth, as there are gods many and lords many, but to us there is but...what?"

One God the Father of whom are all things and we in Him and one Lord Jesus Christ by whom are all things and we by Him."

So, you shouldn't be hung up on that because there aren't any other Gods anyway. So it's offered to a nothing. However, verse 7, very sensitive, there's not in every man that knowledge. See, not everybody can handle that. For some with conscience of an idol, I mean, to them there is an idol and with an idol all the garbage. To this hour they eat it and they're eating it as a thing offered to an idol and their conscience being what? Being what? Weak...underline that because that's the definition of the weak person. The weak person is the person who has not yet come to believe his freedoms, that's the weak person. He does not yet understand that he is free to eat that. And if he eats it without understanding it, he'll defile his own conscience. He will because his conscience is screaming don't eat that, don't eat that, you can't eat that, that was offered to an idol, don't eat that.

Now if you go in there and force him to do that against his conscience, you will defile his conscience and his conscience will accuse him because your conscience, you have to understand this, your conscience is totally controlled by your mind. The conscience does not act independently of what you know. The conscience is simply set in motion. The engine is your mind, the conscience is just a flywheel, that's all. It's just sent spinning by your mind. And when it's engaged, it moves you but your conscience reacts to your thinking. And if you are in your mind convinced that this is to an idol offered and you go ahead and eat it anyway, your conscience will react negatively because your conscience can only respond to what you know. That's why he says not everybody has that knowledge. And the first three verses, you might have that knowledge but knowledge alone does what? Puffs you up and you'd be better off to act not out of knowledge but out of love.

So, love must rule. Secondly, idols are nothing, but not everybody can handle that. And there's a third principle he gives toward the end of the chapter and that is the principle that food is no issue with God anyhow. Food commends us not to God, verse 8. Could that be simpler, folks? We should say that to people we know who are Seventh Day Adventists because they believe that God wants them to be vegetarians. God could care less what you eat in terms of any ceremonial effect or any religious impact. I'm sure you have enough sense to know God doesn't want you to stuff food in you that's going to ultimately shorten your life or your capability to function as a human being. But God is not concerned with whether you eat this or that in terms of food. It doesn't matter where it came from or who it was offered to or what it was intended for, that isn't an issue with God. And I know there are many people who think that vegetarianism is spiritual and that meat eaters are not. That's not so. For neither if we eat are we any better, and neither if we don't eat are we the worst, it doesn't matter. And he doesn't mean by that if we never eat. Obviously if we never eat, we will be worse. But what he means is the meat offered to idols, it doesn't matter if you eat it. It won't make you any better and it won't make you any worse.

But the issue is this, and here's the fourth principle, verse 9, "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours becomes a...what?...stumbling block to someone who's weak." So if it offends someone, don't do it.

And that was a good word to the Corinthian church because there were some, you know, believers who had been saved some years before, they had sort of lost their connection with paganism and they were just going down the marketplace and if the meat was cheaper at the temple butcher shop, they got it there. And it didn't bother them at all. And they'd invite some new converts over and they would be saying, "Could I ask, where did you get this meat?" "Oh yeah, well last night this was offered to Zeus." Can't handle that. Can't handle...how can you eat that? You are entering into the worship of a false god because that was given for that purpose? And the liberated guy says you're out of your mind, man, don't you understand your freedom, eat up. In fact, if you don't want it, I'll eat it.

See, verse 11 says, "Through your knowledge shall the weaker brother perish for whom Christ died?" Would you really want to devastate someone for whom Christ died? No you wouldn't. No you wouldn't. So don't sin against the brethren and wound their weak conscience because when you do that verse 12 says you sin against whom? Christ. So Paul says meat...or food's going to make my brother offend, I'm not going to eat any as long as the world exists because the one thing I don't want to do is what? Offend my brother.

So, we see then from the Galatian passage that there were some Jews who were very hung up on maintaining Jewish tradition, dietary laws, sabbath laws. There were some Gentiles who were very hung up on not maintaining their past tradition. And the potential in the church was for all kinds of conflict because of these particulars. And these were the issues facing the early church. And they're very, very tantamount to issues facing the church today as we shall see. There was an immature weak faith, it's always called a weak faith. The weak person is always the person who does not understand his freedom. He doesn't believe he is as free as he is. He thinks he is bound to certain preferential external traditions when he's not. The strong believer is the one who knows he is not bound to those things. Now we're not talking about moral issues or sin issues. Obviously Christian freedom is not the freedom to do wrong, is it? It is freedom from externals, traditions, preferences, rituals, ceremonies.

And so, this was the conflict. Now let's go back and at least take a brief look at that first verse and get ourselves set for the rest of the chapter. Him that is weak, now we know who the weak one is, don't we? He's weak in faith. The present participle is used here, the one who is in the present tense being weak. The participle seems to indicate to me that this is a failure of faith at a given moment or a given circumstance. Not necessarily a permanent state but this is where he is at the time.

The article "the" is present, he is weak in the faith. He is not weak in saving faith, he has come to saving faith. But he's weak in the faith that it takes to believe he's really free to enjoy any kind of food and he's free to enjoy any kind of day and he's free to cut off the connection from the past, traditional Judaism and he's free to eat the meat that was once offered to an idol and he's free to enjoy all of those things but he's too weak to believe that. And so Paul says to the strong, receive him...receive him. It literally means take to oneself, receive with a preposition at the front, prosintensifies, receive strongly. It's an imperative, it's a command. Take him fully into your fellowship. Take him fully into your love, fully into your companionship, fully into your communion. It isn't...it isn't the idea of letting him join the church, it's the idea of embracing him in your arms in your love and your fellowship. Those with a clear understanding of Christian freedom are to embrace the unemancipated, the ones who are still hung up on legalistic backgrounds.

I remember having a wonderful occasion one time when I was back in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, what a beautiful part of the country that is. And we're on the radio broadcasting in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and God has blessed that radio ministry over WDAC in that area. It's a pocket of great history. Among the people who live in the Lancaster area are a very curious group of people known as the Amish. Any of you who have been there know about the Amish, they have a very strange kind of standards. All of them dress a very, very unique way. The women have their hair pulled back and I mean pulled back. They literally stretch their heads in the way they pull their hair back. And they tie it in the back of their head. They're very domestic. They have farms, magnificent beautiful farms, very prosperous farms. But they do not believe it's right to be transported from one place to another with the use of a vehicle or with wheels that's powered by a motor. So they ride around in horse carts, horse and buggies. So you're driving down the road in your car and you're weaving in and out of horse carts, these little black carts pulled by a horse. They have their black hats and the ladies had their heads covered and they have this very prescribed kind of thing.

We visited many Amish farms because Patricia was trying to find some quilts. And the Amish make these magnificent quilts and so we'd go from one little Amish farm to another one and go down in the basement where all the daughters were being trained by the mother to make the quilts. And so you go into the basement and all these girls, very gracious, sweet girls are making these quilts. There are no televisions. There are no radios. There are no electrical appliances and there are no automobiles.

But what's curious about it is you will see a brand new Alice Chalmers(?) massive combine harvesting a field pulled by two horses. Really...and the machine is chewing up the stuff and baling it and spitting it out the rear end and the whole thing is being pulled by two horses. It's a little inconsistent, at least for my viewpoint, but interesting.

Well, anyway, we went to this one Amish farm and the guy took us into his barn to show us his car. He had a car under secret cover. And he also, God forbid, had a...will you believe this?...radio. He

had a radio. And he said to me, somewhat sheepishly, "I'd like to ask you some Bible questions." I said you would? He said yes. He said, "I've been listening to you." And he said, "I really appreciate what you teach." And it was obvious to us that he had come to know Christ. And many of those people do not know Christ. They know a form of religion, they don't know Christ. And he was fighting the liberation. And he was starting to let go of some things but maybe unable to let go of some other things. He was letting it be known that he had a radio. That was a big...that was a big liberty, folks. He...he had let it be known that he had a radio. And I think he'd even driven in his car in the daytime. And he wanted to know all about the book of Revelation because they never...he said, our people never interpret the book of Revelation, it's a closed book. We're not into Revelation, we don't know what it means.

So, Patricia and I sat...everything happens in the kitchen, the easy chairs are in the kitchen, life is in the kitchen, so we sat in the kitchen. And we answered questions and questions and questions about the book of Revelation and about the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and about all these things. And I could see that it was going to be a great, great difficulty for this man to ever fully understand the freedom that he would enjoy in Jesus Christ because he was probably 65 years old. And he had only been married, Patricia could correct me on this, I think he had only married about three years. Is that about right? I think that's about right. And that's a big enough step in life, you know, when you've waited that long. And he had a gracious and sweet wife.

But that's the kind of situation in my mind that I could just see happening in Paul's culture in a Jewish context where the ability to divorce yourself from...that was almost impossible. And it would take a long period of time. And if some guy came in there and just dropped down a tape and started playing Christian rock, you know, it would just destroy the guy, or try to force him immediately to go down and go to Harris & Frank and come out with a three-piece pin striped suit, you know, it just wouldn't fly...or buy a convertible.

You know, there are people like that we just have to love. And we certainly don't want to do anything to offend them. And that's really what Paul is saying. You that are strong, I mean, it has to start with you, if we're going to have loving unity in the church among these diverse people, who are the ones that are going to have to reach out and give? Got to be the strong...got to be the strong who are willing to sacrifice their liberties. And I'm pleased to do that. I'm rejoicing to do that because I want to do what I do for the sake of those that might be offended by it and I want to receive them fully into the fellowship and I want to be sure that I'm sensitive to people who believe you ought to live a certain way and dress a certain way and do certain things and act in certain manners and restrain from certain habits. I want to be sensitive to that until they perhaps can grow better to understand the emancipation they have in Jesus Christ.

Now I want to close with this. Paul is very gentle here, but I want you to note one thing and we'll just leave it at this...he is very gentle here and it is very different than the way he rebukes in Galatians and

Colossians. Let me just show you, just quickly now, this is just fascinating. Galatians 1 and we'll just look at it for just a brief moment. All right, Galatians 1:8, he says, "Though we are an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." As we said before, so say I again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that you have received, let him be accursed. Now he says I pronounce a curse on anybody who preaches any other gospel.

Now you have a distortion of salvation here. You have a distortion of the message of redemption here. And over in chapter 4 of Galatians, in verse 8, he says, "Nevertheless, then when you knew not God, you did service unto them which by nature are no gods, but now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, why are you turning back again to weak and beggarly elements unto which you desire again to be in bondage?"

You know what was happening in Galatia? Paul came through, preached the gospel, Judaizers came through and said that gospel can't save you. You can't be saved by grace. You have to be circumcised, you have to keep the Mosaic law. And so he says in verse 10 you are observing days and months and times and years and I'm afraid that I have bestowed on you my labor in vain, I've done what I've done for nothing.

And so in chapter 5 verse 1, he says for freedom Christ has set us free, therefore stand fast and do not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage. And he's really strong. In fact, he goes down here and says, "If any of you are circumcised, Christ is no effect to you." Now why is he so strong and so bold and so straightforward?

Here's the difference. In Galatia they were teaching that the law and the Mosaic ceremony and the Mosaic economy with all of its ceremonies and rituals was necessary for salvation. And he blasts that as another gospel. In the Roman church, they weren't advocating those things as a part of salvation, they had come to believe in salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They were just holding on to those things as vestiges of past tradition and habits. That was the difference. That's why he could speak gently to the Roman church because they weren't affirming these things as elements of salvation, but the Galatians were.

Same in Colossians, Colossians chapter 2 and verse 16, "Let no man judge you," he says, "in food, in drink, in respect of a feast day, a new moon, a sabbath day." What he's saying is resist that. Don't let anybody lay that trip on you. Why? They're only a shadow of things to come but the body is Christ. He says you've got to avoid those things. Why? Because in Colossae it was the same thing. People were saying in order to be a true Christian you've got to have the food and the drink and the feast and the new moon and the sabbath all in line with the Mosaic economy. And again they were advocating that as an element of salvation. And so he defiantly rejects that. He is dealing with Judaizers who are advocating another gospel, an intolerable legalism that was unacceptable and



would damn men to hell. But in the Roman situation, they were just vestiges of past religion. They were being pushed as necessary to salvation, they were just being held on to as necessary parts of spiritual growth. And that was the difference.

And so he says, "Look, be easy on them. Open your arms to them and bring them along." The climate was very different in Rome from Galatia and Collosae. And then in that first verse is still introductory, he says when you receive them, and I love this, just a little footnote, don't do it for the purpose of passing judgment on their opinions. In other words, don't do it just to get in an argument with them. Yeah, we'll receive them, come on over...come on over...and then argue with them and fight with them. Not to harass them, not to wrangle with them, not to argue, not to force your opinion on them, not at all, but to love them.

You see, to push them too fast is going to injure them. It's going to make them stumble. They're going to offend their conscience. Go slow and be gentle. You remember Galatians 5 where he says don't use your liberty to injure other people, verse 13 and 15 of Galatians 5? So the basic principle then comes in verse 1, this is the first part...there are four parts, 1 to 12, 13 to 23, chapter 15:1 to 7, chapter 15:8 to 13. The first one is receive one another and that's introduced in verse 1. Having said that, there are several reasons why we're to receive one another and we'll look at those next Sunday. And they'll begin to take us from verse 2 down through verse 12. Dynamite truth, may God bless to our hearts the things we're going to learn. Let's bow in prayer.

It's so good to be together tonight, Lord, so blessed to sing songs of the faith and rejoice in Christ Jesus, to be with those who love the Lord, love His Word, love His people. So good, Lord, to rejoice, to have a merry heart and it's good, Lord, it's best of all to commune with You and Your precious Word and to understand the unfolding of truth. O Lord God, we would desire that this church be free from sin and we would desire that this church also be free from the conflict that can come between the weak and the strong. And we know it begins when we learn to receive each other, particularly the strong who are willing, even with all their understanding of freedom, to in love embrace the weak, not for the purpose of arguing with them or changing their opinions or passing judgment on their views but just with the purpose of nurturing them and loving them and helping them along until they can come to a full understanding of their freedom in Christ. O Lord, help us to reach out to each other, not only for the sake of purity but for the sake of strengthening the weak that they may come to full freedom in Christ. We bless Your name for the instruction we hear from You in this regard. And we look forward in the days ahead, Lord, for what You have for us as we move through this great text, for Christ's sake, amen.

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