

ROMANS – LIVING BY FAITH
LOVING GOD AND LIVING GODLY – Chapters 12-14

LESSON 48 – ACCEPTING EACH OTHER – Romans 14:1-13

One of the saddest challenges we face in the church is conflict between people who are supposed to be brothers and sisters in Christ...people who say they love each other but can't seem to accept each other. Sadder still is that most of these conflicts take place over things that, in the great scheme of things, don't really matter at all. So what is the church to do when these types of disagreements come up and there is no clear teaching or direction from the Bible?

Thankfully, everyone in the church is not the same. We are different and there will be differences of opinion as we try to interpret the Christian life in areas where clear guidelines don't exist. What we always have to remember is that God wants us to be totally united on the fundamentals of our salvation and not divided over the things that don't really matter.

Unfortunately for too many, it seems that instead of loving the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves, we spend time setting up boundaries to identify who we will and won't fellowship with.

In chapters 14 and 15 of Romans, Paul deals with conflicts that arise when people setup these artificial boundaries and call them truth. He instructs the church on how to live together when people have different opinions about what the truth should be. He uses two terms that we need to define right away...the weaker and the stronger.

The weaker, according to Paul, is a Christian who is still controlled by certain traditions, rituals and customs that prevent them from fully enjoying freedom in Christ. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul uses the example of eating meat that had been offered to idols and was now available for purchase in the marketplace. Some of the Christians in Corinth came from idolatrous, pagan backgrounds and were really bothered by the idea of eating this meat. The truth was there was nothing sinful about eating it, but some of the church members had a real problem with it and it was causing division in the church.

The stronger, on the other hand, is the Christian who understands that the old life is not to control the new life in Christ. They could eat the meat purchased in the marketplace and not be bothered by where it came from. The temptation here is to push the limits of freedom in Christ beyond where they should go and actually enjoy liberties that lead into areas of actual sin. While the weaker is more constrained that they should be, the stronger sometimes isn't constrained enough.

This is the issue Paul starts to deal with in Romans 14 and it's an important one for us today. Too many churches are caught up in debates over things that don't really matter when it comes to salvation and fellowship with God. Some Christians will only fellowship with those who look and act exactly like them...and that's wrong.

The Appropriateness of Accepting Each Other

The first thing Paul says is to, "Accept the one whose faith is weak." Acceptance is the priority in the body of Christ.

We Are to Accept Genuinely – Suppose someone comes to our church who has never been taught the Biblical truth about the eternal security of the Christian. They believe that it's somehow possible for you to lose your salvation. Do we allow them to attend and fellowship in our church? Absolutely! They are a Christian and because of that, we are united by our faith in Christ and that's the important thing. Sometimes Christians with differing views are accepted with a hidden agenda...to straighten out their theology or their life as soon as they get settled in the church. Love and fellowship should be the only basis for our acceptance of each other.

People need to feel free to come to church with their own beliefs and opinions and find genuine acceptance and fellowship in Christ. There may need to be an agreement to disagree on certain things. As long as there is unity around Jesus and the things necessary for salvation, there can be fellowship in the Lord.

We Are to Accept Graciously – Starting in verse 2 of Romans 14, Paul discusses eating habits. In the church at Rome, there were believers who had been saved out of Judaism. Rather than run the risk of eating anything non-kosher, they became vegetarians. This may sound strange to you...that someone would invent rules like that to govern their spiritual life, but it is still done today.

Here are four guidelines for graciously accepting your fellow Christians when you might not agree with everything they do or say...

1. We Must Never Despise Each Other

Despise is a strong word and you may be thinking, "Do Christians really despise each other?" That's the word Paul chose to use because that's the way some people in that church felt toward others. And yes...it happens in our churches today.

Apparently some in the church felt the freedom to eat whatever they wanted and looked down on those whose conscience wouldn't allow them to do the same. They would pass judgment on them and talk bad about them in the church, and Paul says we are not to do that.

2. We Must Never Disgrace Each Other

Here the problem is reversed. In verse 3 we see the vegetarians turning the tables on those who eat everything...so the sin of despising and disgracing our fellow Christians can work both ways. Neither is acceptable to the Lord and both must be avoided in the body of Christ.

3. We Must Never Discourage Each Other

Paul uses the issue of sacred or special days as an example in verse 5. One person will hold a certain day special while another does not. Every Christian has the responsibility to judge spiritual things for themselves. The center of the Christian life is faithfulness to God regarding the fundamentals of our faith. It's okay to have convictions and hold a position on certain things, but you can't make that the standard for others to follow.

4. We Must Never De-motivate Each Other

In Romans 14:6, Paul highlights the issue in all our actions as Christians...motivation. The question of motivation is determined by whether or not we can give thanks to the Lord in the midst of whatever it is we are doing. Can you enjoy your actions in a spirit of thankfulness and praise to God while you're doing them? If not, you may need to examine the behavior and make sure you have confidence in what you're doing.

Most importantly, make sure you are not criticizing someone who has differing convictions from yours. We're not to de-motivate those whose motivation comes from thanking and praising God.

The Absurdity of Judging Each Other

In verses 10-13, Paul says when we remember that there is a future judgment coming for every Christian...and it's the only judgment that matters...it is absurd for us to set ourselves up as judges over others. It makes no sense and is not worth the time and energy we invest in it.

Unfortunately, we use the words "brother" and "sister" in Christ too loosely. The fact that our fellow Christians are our brothers and sisters in Christ is exactly what makes judging them so absurd. Because we are all part of the family of God, we should love, encourage, support and build each other up in the faith.

We forget how diverse our individual backgrounds and life experience are and how that leads to different attitudes and actions in our lives. You may not agree with your brother or sister, and you may not approve of what they do; but you can accept them in love and faith. We have a debt of love to pay to our fellow Christians and it cannot be paid by judging.

Every Christian will one day stand before the judgment seat of Christ. This is not a judgment to determine the salvation of the one being judged, but rather a judgment to examine the works of the Christian in this life. There is a Judge who will one day judge everyone. God doesn't need our help in judging the world. In fact, Jesus made it clear in Matthew 7:1 when He said, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."

The judgment of God for Christians will one day reveal the true test of our hearts...the motivation with which we have acted. The attitude of the heart toward God is the very basis on which we will be judged by Him. Since the Lord knows our hearts, why do we feel the need to add our own judgmental opinions?

If churches would put into practice what Paul teaches in this part of Romans, there would be far fewer conflicts and divisions. That goes for our friendship and family relationships as well. "Do not judge, or you too will be judged."