
Community Living in Liberty: Part 1

Romans 14:1-15:7

Russ Kennedy

What do we do when:

People are raising hands or bouncing up and down in worship...

A Christian friend orders a wine at dinner...

You want to get a tattoo...

You are getting your hair colored...

Here is the problem we face as a people called out of all nations and all cultures. How can we function as one in the midst of our diversity? How were the Christians in Rome, some of whom were converted Jews reared in Judaism and the rest of whom were converted Gentiles reared in Paganism – how are they to sit down together at the Agape Feast? Some would be bringing in pork and some wine to drink – while for others the food should be kosher and wine was forbidden. You see, there is a very practical problem of dealing with issues that weren't doctrinal yet were very difficult practically.

Today, we face many of these same kinds of issues. We call them things that are in gray areas. How do we function as one when some of you really are uncomfortable without a tie at church and some are coming in shorts? How about earrings, ponytails and so on? What about Christmas trees and celebrating mother's day at church? What about serving wine instead of or along-side of grape juice – or just grape-juice?

And we are a relatively mono-culture church – I pray that God would give us the opportunity to more reflect in our membership the scene around heaven's throne – we are not challenged very much as we could be.

Paul has been arguing for the essential oneness of Jew and Gentile – in sin, in salvation, in sanctification, under God's sovereignty, in service – now, it comes to a head in whether they will function according to the doctrine they have learned. How do I know that? Because this long pericope ends in Romans 15:9-12 by celebrating God's purpose of unity for Jew and Gentile in Christ.

One other point – there is a companion text in 1 Corinthians that articulates other principles not given here. So, our study this morning is not all that is to be said about how we function in liberty – for example, it does not address at all what we do when we are different in our opinions and are in the presence of unbelievers.

Its Positive Precepts

(14:1-2)

Paul addresses a problem in the church at Rome – how are Jews and Gentiles to be one when they are so different in their personal preferences.

¹ As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

What is Required

Those who are weak in faith are to be welcomed or received – accepted. This is the core precept. Differences of opinion about certain lifestyle issues are not to be the grounds for rejection and division. Furthermore, they are to be received but not to quarrel over opinions. In other words, these differences that he will elaborate on are not to be the source of arguments, debates, cliques and so on.

Who are the Weak

The ones who are to be received are those who are weak in faith. Verse 2 tells us that the weak are those who only eat vegetables and do not eat meat. The weak have self-imposed rules for living that the strong do not have *that are not related to moral issues*.

Stott writes, “We are not to envisage a vulnerable Christian easily overcome by temptation but a sensitive Christian full of indecision and scruples. What the weak lack is not strength of self-control but liberty of conscience.” (Stott, *Romans*, p.355). We are to see in this text, primarily Jewish believers whose upbringing in the Law meant they had lots of rules and do’s and don’ts. So the *weak in faith* are not weak in doctrine, but whose faith is not strong in Christian liberty. The weak are the ones who have a lot of rules and regulations for their walk with God. Seems backward, doesn’t it. While we must be very careful about sin, we must not elevate our personal preferences to the level of being sin for all.

What it is Not

Now this tells us then that Paul is not creating a refuge for evildoers, legalists, or Pharisees who use their narrow views and may even appeal to this text to require and compel others to agree with their views. In fact, legalism is the clear enemy of liberty of conscience.

It also tells us that Paul is not here talking about liberty in doctrine, per se. Romans 14-15 is not a refuge for those who are a-theological nor for those who hold to error. In the text itself, it is about personal preferences whose practice has some Biblical justification. We will make the broader applications to our day, later.

Its Negative Prohibitions

(14:3-23)

I want to present these as an exquisite piece of jewelry – multiple, linked settings of silver and gold of what we ought to do in which is a centerpiece of why we ought to do it.

Vulnerability to Mutual Disregard

(v.3-12)

Paul begins with the primary problem that plagues our differences.

³ 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. ⁴ Who 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.

⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹ for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." ¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Its Typical Expression

Those with stronger consciences despise and look down on those with more sensitive consciences. Those who are free have a superior attitude and treat others with unloving condescension.

Those with weaker consciences denounce and condemn those with strong consciences. All of their rules for their own personal holiness become the standard by which others are judged.

Therefore, those who are free are to honor and protect the weaker, not looking down on them. Those who are weaker must not impose their rules and regulations on others, evaluating their spirituality on a self-imposed standard.

Its Biblical Correction

Paul supports this with major challenges to way we think and want – areas in which we must examine ourselves and repent. These are not just random thoughts, but rather are a logical development, a progression of ideas in an argument.

God has received them and thus He is their master (v.3-4) It is not right to look down on or to judge the performance of another servant over whom you do not have authority. Paul places this in the context of dietary regulations.

We live under the Lordship of Christ to honor and glorify Him, not ourselves (v.5-9). Paul adds the context of celebrating special days (proba-

bly, Jewish feast days). Each one is to be firmly convinced in his own mind and thus aims his practice to honor and glorify Christ. Pleasing Christ is each person's aim. And both practices can and do please Christ *even though they are different*. The reason is that our lives are not self-oriented (my individual holiness) but Christ oriented, pleasing Him in all we do.

We will give an account to Christ (v.10-12). Since this paragraph begins with reminding both parties of their sinful tendencies then this is being addressed to both. There is a very real sense in which Paul points us away from being accountable to one another in these areas.

So, we are not to despise or condemn one another in these areas because we serve and are accountable to God, who is our master, Lord and righteous Judge.

Vulnerability to Mutual Destruction (v.13-23)

The next two paragraphs speak to the practice of our liberty, describing those attitudes and priorities that govern practical choices and conduct.

In our Private Interactions (v.13-19)

¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

In our private relationships, there is the possibility of causing harm to the weak in faith (v.13-19). We must not destroy or grieve others by causing them to actively violate their conscience (stumbling/hindrance) (v.15). Paul, one of those who are strong in faith, says that nothing in and of itself is ceremoniously unclean in Old Testament categories (v.14). For the weak, their conscience renders the thing unclean for them and the strong, they must practice their freedom so as not to cause what is OK to be denounced as evil. Overarching all this, Kingdom priorities of love (v.15), righteousness, peace and joy in the Spirit (v.17-18) motivate us to serve Christ in a way that is acceptable to Him and approved by others. Our primary pursuit is not self-serving insistence on our preferences but on the pursuit of corporate peace and mutual edification.

In our Public Contexts (v.20-23)

²⁰ Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Second there is the possibility of causing harm to the work of God (v.20-23). In what we do in public ministry contexts must not cause people to violate their consciences. And those with weaker consciences must not violate them. If they doubt, they must not partake and those who have faith, must graciously accept, provide and support them.

This is not to say that what is allowed is to sink to the level of the most sensitive conscience in the congregation. What is required of all, however, must not require and force those with sensitive consciences to actively participate. So the Gentile believers are not to make Jewish believers eat pork at the Agape Feast, but pork can be brought to be enjoyed by those who were free to do so.

In all these areas, there is a very simple question that we must ask ourselves: do I question that practice for myself? Do I have doubts? Does it bother me to do that? Then DON'T. When you do, you sin. But if, under instruction, your conscience becomes Biblically taught and you no longer doubt, then you may. And if you have questions, don't condemn others who are free. You who are free, help the weak to please God by encouraging them not to violate their consciences nor putting them in positions where they have to.

Its Shaping Principles

(15:1-7)

This is one of those very poorly placed chapter breaks. The break ought to go after 15:7 or even possibly after 15:13. So this paragraph is part of what Paul is teaching in chapter 14.

¹ We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³ For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." ⁴ For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. ⁵ May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, ⁶ that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

The Pattern of Christ

(v.1-4)

Our obligation to bear with others and to not please ourselves is grounded in the example that Christ has left us and the instruction the Word gives to us.

Paul here shows us how Christ's own selflessness exposes our own tendencies to please ourselves (v.1-3). When we are mostly about plotting and planning our own agendas, then we will almost certainly harm people and destroy the church. Yet Christ has established a pattern of persistent love and enduring sacrifice, even when He was being reviled for it. So we must not only be a people who embrace these truths in practice, but we must endure when it is hard and controversial.

We look to the pattern in Christ by studying the Word of Christ, the Scriptures (v.3-4). Paul can quote this Old Testament text into theirs (and our situations) because it points to Christ. The Scriptures are written about Christ for us in our sit-

uations so that, being instructed, we will persist with joy – endure and be encouraged. Paul is showing us a Biblical hermeneutic. Rather than using the Old Testament in a way that enforces dietary restrictions and ceremonial feast days, the Old Testament is relevant to us as we bring it forward through Christ and in Christ.

The Prayer for Unity

(v.5-7)

Paul closes this section by praying for the grace of a God-honoring harmony. This prayer points our harmony towards a unified glorifying of God. The purpose in living together in harmony is to glorify God – with voices in exaltation and evangelism.

It has been my observation over 25 years of ministry that mutual regard in these matters – true loving consideration almost always allows for a practice to exist without constraint of the strong or sin by the weak. I have also noticed that the tendency of the weak is to be legalistic and then to retreat into liberty to enforce their legalism through language like, “What you are doing offends me.” One of the mistakes is to equate being offended by someone else’s practice with stumbling. Paul always uses stumbling to refer to active participation. Certainly, the strong may, in sacrificial love, give up whatever even offends – but the weak may not Biblically require it.

So, Paul says, welcome one another AS – in the way that – Christ has welcomed you. Do so aiming to magnify the supremacy and worth of God.

Summary

Welcome One Another (14:1;15:7)

Term		Weak	Strong
Identification <i>Church in Rome</i>		Christians whose consciences were instructed by the Law Primarily Jews	Christians whose consciences were free Primarily Gentiles. <i>Paul (14:13)</i>
Issues	Food	Abstain	Eat
	Holy Days	Honor/Celebrate	Not Recognize
	Worship Application	Not raise hands	Raise hands
Tendency		Judge & Criticize	Despise/Look down on
Correction		Humbly teachable	Honoring and protecting
Commands		No stumbling block	
		Not destroy	
		Make for peace	
		Live in harmony	
		↩	Bear their failings
Reasons		God has received us (14:3; 15:7)	
		God is our Lord and Master (14:8)	
		God is our Judge – we answer to Him (14:10)	
		The Kingdom is a priority (14:17)	
		Christ did not please Himself (15:3)	
Standard		All by faith	
Aim		Unified glorifying of God	

Welcome One Another		
Term	Weak	Strong
Identification	Christians whose consciences were instructed by the Law Primarily Jews	Christians whose consciences were free Primarily Gentiles <i>Included Paul (14:13)</i>
Issues	Food	Abstain
	Holy Days	Honor/Celebrate
	Raising Hands	Not Raise Hands
Tendency	Judge & Criticize	Despise/Look Down
Correction	Humbly teachable	Honoring & Protecting

Welcome One Another		
Term	Weak	Strong
Commands	No Stumbling Block	
	Not destroy	
	Make for peace	
	Live in Harmony	
	↩	Bear their failings
Reasons	God has received us (14:3;15:7)	
	God is our Lord and Master (14:8)	
	God is our Judge – we answer to Him (14:10)	
	The Kingdom is a priority (14:7)	
	Christ did not please Himself (15:3)	

Welcome One Another		
Term	Weak	Strong
Identification	Strict Consciences	Free Consciences
Issues	<i>Not raise hands</i>	<i>Free to raise hands</i>
Tendency	Judge & Criticize	Despise & Look down
Correction	Be teachable	Not force
Commands	No stumbling block, Not destroy, Make for peace, Live in harmony, Bear their failings	
Reasons	God has received us, God is our Lord and Master God is our Judge – we answer to Him The Kingdom is a priority, Christ did not please Himself	
Standard	All by Faith, not by Doubt	
Aim	Unified glorifying of God	

Reflect and Respond

Romans 15:5-7 (Adapted)
Read together as a prayer.

May the God of endurance and
encouragement grant us to live in such
harmony with one another,
in accord with Christ Jesus,
that together we may with one voice
glorify the God and Father
of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Therefore welcome one another
as Christ has welcomed us,
for the glory of God.