

August 17, 2014

“Aim for Harmony” or, “Don’t Push Anyone Off the Bridge”

Romans 14:1-15:13

(read Romans 14:1,4, 10-13, 17-19 & 15: 5-7, 13)

Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let him judge whether they are right or wrong. And with the Lord's help, they will do what is right and will receive his approval.

So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For the Scriptures say

"As surely as I live,' says the LORD,  
'every knee will bend to me,  
and every tongue will confess and give praise to God.'"

Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.

For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.

I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sin can certainly destroy a church, but so can certain attitudes that hurt our fellowship, our fruitfulness and our witness. I am talking about differences between Christians over matters that are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. Matters of personal preference, and tradition, which we impose on one another and cause confusion and disharmony.

Our text from Romans 14&15 is a difficult section of Scripture from Paul. He begins by saying, **Romans 14:1 THE MESSAGE**

Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with.

Then he gives a “for instance” that may be confusing to us today. Paul is writing to the church in Roman which was made up of Jewish Christians, Jews who had come to faith in Jesus Christ, and Gentiles who were pagans but had been wonderfully transformed by coming to faith in Christ. Some Jews still followed Jewish law in the preparation of food. The Gentiles had another concern.

The Greeks and Romans believed in and worshipped many gods, they also believed in many evil spirits. They believed that evil spirits would try to invade human beings by attaching themselves to food before it was eaten (don't think this is not relevant today. Some groups still believe these things), and that the spirits could be removed only by the food's being sacrificed to a god. The sacrifice was meant not only to gain favor with the god, but also to cleanse the meat from demonic contamination. Such decontaminated meat was offered to the gods as a sacrifice. That which was not burned on the altar was served at wicked pagan feasts. What was left was sold in the market. After conversion, believers resented eating such food bought out of idol markets, because it reminded them of their previous pagan lives. The Jews who became believers in Christ were not bothered by such food. They knew that these other gods did not exist and that evil spirits did not contaminate the food. But this difference of opinion was causing problems.

Paul give another for instance about differences causing division in Romans 14:5  
Some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike.

One obvious example of this would be the Jews wanting to keep the traditional Sabbath day and worship on Saturday, while the Gentiles wanting to remember the Resurrection of Jesus worshipped on Sunday. These kind of things were causing debates, and disagreements, believers judging and condemning each other.

On the Alpha course we have heard Nicky Gumbel tells this story, he says:

I heard about a man who was standing in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge, admiring the view, when another tourist walked up alongside him to do the same.

I heard him say quietly as he took in the beauty of the view: 'What an awesome God!' I turned to him and I said, 'Oh, are you a Christian?' He said, 'Yes, I am a Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we shook hands.

I said, 'Are you a liberal or a fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we smiled and nodded to each other.

I said, 'Are you a covenant or dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we slapped one another on the back.

I said, 'Are you an early Acts, mid Acts, or late Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we agreed to exchange Christmas cards each year.

I said, 'Are you an Acts 9 or 13 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm an Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we hugged one another right there on the bridge.

I said, 'Are you a pre-Trib or post-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'So am I,' and we agreed to exchange our kids for the summer.

I said, 'Are you a twelve-in or twelve-out pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian?' He said, 'I'm a twelve-in pre-Trib Acts 9 mid Acts dispensational fundamental Christian.' I said, 'You heretic!' and I pushed him off the bridge.

Isn't this how we are with other Christians? We make our theology the standard for all believers. We say don't tell me God agrees with you, or worse we won't fellowship or associate with those who's beliefs are different. For example some believe in Eternal Security, while others believe in free will. Or one group is more liberal and another conservative. So we build our walls. We say this is my fort and you must agree with me to get in. If you are going to join us you must look like our fort. You know what I say? I say that anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ is my brother and sister.

You know what I say? I say if no one gets on your nerves here at our church, your just not involved enough here. And that is true of every church. Christians may agree that Scripture is truth but they don't agree on how to the apply truth of Scripture.

This section of scripture was not about good Christians and bad Christians but about different Christians and how they get along. This section of Scripture is about Christian freedom and Christian responsibility. It is about unity - aim for harmony.

*In things necessary unity; in things not necessary liberty; in all things grace.*  
— *Peter Meiderlen*

There are certain things that all true Christians believe [Nicene Creed #14 – This creed has defined the Christian faith around the world for over 1600 years]. "In things necessary unity." When we are with other Christians we should focus on these these essentials that unite us. Yes there are other beliefs that are distinctive of each denomination. When it comes to these beliefs must practice the law of liberty and in all things the practice the law of love.

Many years ago I owned my own business. I had some customers who were Pentecostal. I debated them, disagreed with them and ashamed to say judged them. One morning one of these Christian brothers came in and I tried not talking to him much at all. The rest of the day was pretty stressful as I had to deal with complaining, hard to

please customers. I remember praying, "Lord, please send in a Christian customer someone I can relate to." And the Lord said, "I sent you one this morning and you ignored him." After that I made it a point that whenever one of my Pentecostal brothers or sisters came into my shop I was going to take advantage of sharing what we had in common.

There are Christian who don't agree with us, they are sincere and we don't need to make them like us, or agree with us, but we are to accept them as they are. Here is what we should do:

1. **Accept one another because God has accepted you in Christ - Accept not change, accept.** They are believers in Jesus, followers of Christ, brothers and sisters.

**Romans 14:3-4**

Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let him judge whether they are right or wrong. And with the Lord's help, they will do what is right and will receive his approval. [who are you to condemn one of the Lord's servants? Don't condemn because they believe differently, accept them. How?]

**Romans 15:7**

Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. [How did Christ accept you? Just as you are. He didn't say, get your theology right first. He did say follow these rules first. He accepted you. Do the same. Why? So that God will be given glory.]

2. **Do not judge one another because Christ is our judge.** Don't you know that each one of us have to give an account of our life – we all will stand before the judgment seat of God. We are saved by faith alone but we will be judged by how we treated others especially believers.

**Romans 14:10-13**

So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For the Scriptures say,

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'every knee will bend to me,  
and every tongue will confess and give praise to God."

Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.

Be careful how you treat one another because God is our Father and Jesus is our brother. Stop judging others according to your opinion and life style

### 3. Love is more important than personal freedom.

#### Romans 14:14-23

I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. [Mark 7:18-19 "Can't you see that the food you put into your body cannot defile you? Food doesn't go into your heart, but only passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer." (By saying this, he declared that every kind of food is acceptable in God's eyes.)]

But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. And if another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. [do you understand what Paul is saying here? You may not think something is wrong, but another Christian may think it is wrong. When you are with that other Christian don't do it, even though you don't believe it to be wrong, because if you do it you may cause them to go against their conscience. You are not acting in love if you do that.]

Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another believer to stumble. You may believe there's nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don't feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right. But if you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.

I heard a story one time of a person who was going to be given a brand new Ford Thunderbird. But he refused it because he knew that the name thunderbird came from a legendary creature in certain Native American cultures and is considered a supernatural bird of power and strength. And so for this reason he would not accept it. You know what I would have said if I were there? Give that Thunderbird to me, I have no problem with the legend.

We have freedom in Christ. I am free, I am so free I'll scare you. But while free I have to be careful. There are things you may feel you can do, but for others that very same thing is sin for them. Don't do anything that is going to possibly cause someone else to go against their conscience. Love replaces what I can with what I ought.

God works in everyone differently, and we are at all different places in our spiritual journey and growth. Follow the example of Christ and lay down your rights for others.

Some people wrongly think that the more they don't do the closer they are to God. They have rules, but there are also motives, and only Jesus knows the motive of the heart.

The Jewish Christians of Paul's day were coming from a life of legalism and the Gentile Christians of his day were coming from a life of paganism. Believers should accept other believers rather than change them. We should live by our knowledge of Scripture rather than our love of tradition. It is easier to have rules than to lay down your life for another. But here is THE rule: love others as you love yourself, love others as Jesus did. Give the Holy Spirit time to work maturity even if maturity in others is not the same as maturity in you. God's Word and the Holy Spirit will change people, not our rules.

Some believe that food or certain days and habits make us acceptable or unacceptable to God. To Jesus all food was clean. Remember when Peter had that vision on the roof top, he saw a sheet filled with all kinds of animals and a voice said to eat them.

Acts 10:14-15

"No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean."

But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean."

This was all in preparation for Peter to do another thing Jews didn't do, enter the house of a Gentile, breaking another rule, to preach the good news of Jesus.

I heard a story from Chuck Smith. He went home to the Lord recently. He built his church back in the 70's with hippies and surfers in Southern California. They would come barefoot to church. The church had just put in new carpet. Some of the leaders said that these young people were coming in to the church with their dirty feet and they didn't like it because they were going to ruin the brand new carpet. You know what these leaders were saying? They were saying to hell with these young people, let them go to hell our carpet is more important. Listen, these leaders were good people, Christians, saved by faith. They are in heaven today. But they were making their rules more important, they were putting carpet before souls. By the way, do you know what Chuck Smith's comment was when they told him these young people are ruining the carpet? Chuck said, "well, then rip up the carpet!"

We must guard against thinking that we are superior Christians because of our traditions. All churches have traditions, and rules, and belief. We have to be careful and it is so hard because of what we have come to believe, but we have to be careful because we read the scriptures to prove ourselves right rather than hear the truth. It so hard not to.

You believe what you believe and it is so hard to really hear what God is saying rather than to read to confirm what you believe. You make Jesus look bad because you think you are so spiritual. You can become judgmental because of the traditions you grew up with or have come to believe. You are so committed to how you do Christianity that if others are not like you, then you don't love them.

I'm not talking about bad people, just Christians who do life differently. Love them, aim for harmony. Thank the Lord that you are a part of a worldwide family that is international, intercultural, interracial, intergenerational, interdenominational, and includes all genuine believers. May God help us to love everyone in the big family of which He has made us a part.

May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory.