

## ROMANS 14:1-12

### THE SPIRIT OF UNITY: ACCEPTING

Are you like me in this?

I don't like to be the one who cuts the cake or the pie.

It is before me, and I am poised over it with my knife, and I know that when I make that first cut, I will have committed myself to a path that will result in a piece that is far too big, or far too small, or horribly misshapen.

I want to make the cut in just the right place, but far too often, I make that cut in the wrong place, and I have soon mangled or even ruined something that should have been delightful.

A generation ago, Christian writer Francis Schaeffer wrote that often Christians "make the cut" in the wrong place. We will divide ourselves from other Christians, when the real divide is between Christians and nonbelievers.

If you know Francis Schaeffer, you know he was not telling Christians to isolate themselves from non-Christians, but he was reminding us that in Jesus Christ, we are united with each other, while in very real ways, we are divided from everyone else.

When we do this...when we "make the cut" in the wrong place, we mangle or even ruin something that could have been delightful.

In the final chapters of Romans, Paul is answering the question, "If the gospel is true, how do we live?" We have discovered that we are to offer ourselves to Jesus, because of his mercy in offering himself for us.

Two weeks ago, Dale described how Paul's words are summed up in this word "love" - the continuing debt we owe to each other.

Now, through this chapter and into the next chapter, Paul directs our love in a certain way. He writes to Christians who may make the "cut" in the wrong place, and mangle or even ruin the delight of living together in the church.

Paul's heart for the Romans, and for us, is captured in these words from chapter 15:

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

How do we have this spirit of unity? How do we keep from cutting, where we should not?

It begins with the first word in our translation: "accept." But before we get to that word, we must understand why this is so hard for us.

**WHY THE STRUGGLE?** Why do we have this struggle for unity?

There is a struggle within us, which leads to a struggle between us.

**What is THE STRUGGLE WITHIN US?**

In verse 1, Paul writes of "disputable matters." What "matters" is he writing about, that lead to the struggle within us?

Let me start with what it is not.

This is not personal preference. Paul is not writing about that.

We all have likes and dislikes.

I prefer a ranch-style house. You prefer a two-story house.

You're a woman, and you prefer wearing a dress to church. You're a woman, and you prefer wearing pants to church.

You prefer a sanctuary with dim lighting. I prefer a sanctuary with lots of light.

This is not what Paul is writing about. I think if Paul knew about some of the personal preferences we fuss about, he would tell us to quit being so silly.

The struggle is not personal preference.

This is also not biblical mandate. Paul is not writing about that.

God has clearly revealed his commands on many issues. If he has spoken, we are called to obey. We should challenge each other on issues where there is a biblical mandate.

We do not accept bitterness and hatred.

We do not accept sexual immorality.

We do not accept thievery.

That is not what Paul is writing about. I think if Paul knew we were failing to deal with clear sin in our body, he would tell us what he told the church in Corinth: confront the one who is in sin, so that he may turn from his sin and return to Jesus.

The struggle within us is not a struggle of personal preference, or of biblical mandate. The struggle within, relates to cases of conscience.

Let's discover what this means, by looking at some cues in the text.

\* In verse 1, Paul writes of a person whose "faith is weak."

This does not mean the person is not a Christian. This means, as one writer explains, that some people

“have a lack of insight into some of the implications of their faith in Christ.” They know they believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord, but they struggle with what that means in their lives.

\* In verse 2, Paul writes of a person whose faith allows him to do something, while others, with weak faith, cannot do the same thing.

In other words, in that person’s conscience, as he walks before Jesus, he believes that for him to participate in a certain practice, would be wrong. His struggle is a case of conscience.

But now you want some examples of “cases of conscience”!

For Paul...

\* One example is the eating of certain foods. Some Christians were very concerned about foods that had been used in ceremonies involving sacrifice to false gods. Others were concerned about following Old Testament laws about what to eat, and about how to prepare what was eaten.

\* Another example is the observance of certain days. The Jews had all sorts of special feast days. Some were careful about keeping the Sabbath.

For some, and for Paul, foods and days were not an issue. All foods were okay to eat. No one was required to celebrate a feast day, or to observe all kinds of rules about the Sabbath. But for others, foods and days were cases of conscience.

But what about for us?

Here is where it gets tricky. It can be hard to see how the principles in the book of Romans, relate to our day.

So with some hesitancy, I offer a few issues that we deal with, that I believe would fall into the category of “cases of conscience.”

\* Schooling: Christian school? Public school? Home school?

\* Alcohol: is it wise to “drink”?

\* Movies: does anything go? Should you never go? This one? That one?

\* The Lord’s Day, or the Sabbath: What should we do, and not do?

\* Financial matters: what about debt? What about the stock market?

As well, “cases of conscience” may extend to biblical issues where the teaching is in dispute. For example: infant baptism. Some believers easily practice it. Other believers are conscience-bound, that they should not.

Let me encourage you to not get too caught up in what is on the list, and what is not on the list. The most important issue is this: we have to discover how to deal with each other, in those areas where our love for Jesus leads us to live differently than others.

Which leads us from the struggle within us, to THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN US. What happens between us, when we see other believers living differently than us with these so-called “cases of conscience”?

First, the strong look down.

The “strong” are those whose consciences allow them to do, what others do not feel free to do.

Paul writes in verse 3, “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not...”

When I look down on you, I am regarding you with contempt, because you are not as “free” as I am. I am fully convinced that my practice is fine, and I don’t understand why you are so bothered.

When am I looking down? Maybe when I think or say something like...

\* “What’s her problem? She needs to lighten up.”

\* “Why does he think he’s so much holier than me?”

\* “You’re being legalistic.”

The strong look down. The weak condemn.

The “weak” are those whose consciences will not allow them to do, what others are free to do.

Back to verse 3: “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.”

When I “condemn” you, I am judging you. The word here is used for lots of different situations, so we can’t be sure exactly what is happening here in this “condemning.” I could be just saying that you are sinning, or I could even be saying that I think you’re not a believer at all, because you do something.

When am I condemning? Maybe when I think or say something like...

\* “How can you call yourself a Christian and do that?”

\* “If only he was as godly as me, he would know not to do that.”

\* “I will pray for you to mature in this.”

Again: this is not personal preference, and this is not biblical mandate. This is the time when the Bible is not completely clear, and one conscience permits something, while another conscience does not.

The strong look down. The weak condemn. The result is that the church becomes divided. The cake or pie is cut in the wrong place.

Maybe it is open. Maybe it is quiet. Either way, the spirit of unity that should be ours, is cut. The church is mangled, or even ruined.

Why the struggle? The struggle within, with cases of conscience, leads to struggle between, with the strong looking down, and the weak condemning.

So: WHERE IS UNITY? Where is unity that sees us through the struggle, and allows us to have a spirit of unity among ourselves?

Paul writes in verse 1, "Accept..." Unity begins with acceptance.

But how? The start of this, and the heart of this, is this: GOD HAS ACCEPTED US.

Sometimes when you're watching a football game, you will see a play end, and someone gets bashed or crushed or otherwise brutalized, long after the whistle has blown. You can tell the victim is not pleased by this development, but then he looks and learns that the guy who bashed, crushed, or brutalized him was his own teammate, who had accidentally fallen on him, or into him.

They're on the same team. It's okay.

God has accepted us. We're on the same team. It's okay.

God saves.

Back to verse 3: "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him."

God has accepted that brother or sister. God has done this, not because that brother or sister has done anything to deserve it, but because Jesus has given his body and blood, for that undeserving person.

In our sin, God does not accept us. He is holy and just, and a holy and just God will not accept an unholy person. But Jesus has taken every bit of our unholiness upon himself on the cross. So now, through our faith in Jesus, God accepts us.

Whether I am weak or strong, the issue becomes now clear for me: If God has accepted him, who am I to not accept him? If the cross of Jesus Christ has truly secured his welcome into God's eternal kingdom, can I have any other choice, but to receive him into this part of the visible kingdom?

God saves. God rules.

Now look at verse 4: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand."

Who is that brother or sister's master? It is Jesus. He makes us stand secure before God's throne, even when we make decisions that other people do not like.

Then think of verses 6 to 9. Paul writes of how people regard different days, and how people deal differently with meat, but all of those people who are so different, do what they do, "to the Lord." In Jesus, we live for the Lord. Whether we live or die, we are his, because he rules.

So whether I am weak or strong, I must remember this: this person does profess faith in Jesus Christ. This person is striving to live for the Master - Jesus Christ. Yes, that person fails. So do I. But just as Jesus is my ruler, Jesus is his or her ruler. I must never forget that.

God saves. God rules. God judges.

Is it just that God doesn't care? No. He cares. But he has chosen to give his people much freedom here, with the promise that he will judge them when the right time arrives.

Notice verse 10: "But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God."

Because of the cross of Jesus, we will not receive a condemning judgment from God. He will not send us to hell.

Yet while we will not receive a condemning judgment, we will receive what we might call an "accounting judgment." As Paul writes in verse 12, "So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God."

God will add it all up. God will "evaluate" how we have served him, in his name. He will do it, and he will do it wisely and well.

You don't need to do that. You don't need to talk about it. You don't even need to think about it. If your conscience is in a different place than that of your brother or sister, you let God deal with the brother or sister. You deal with your conscience. That's enough for you to worry about!

What has Paul been writing through these chapters?

\* Live humbly. God is God, and you are not!

\* Live peacefully. God will do God's job, and you do not!

He saves. He judges. He rules.

God has accepted him. SO WE ACCEPT EACH OTHER.

Back to verse 1: "Accept him whose faith is weak..."

Paul starts here with the strong, but as we have already seen, and as we will see as we move through the rest of this section on unity, the commands go both ways. The strong accept the weak, and the weak accept the strong.

But what does it mean to accept someone?

When I accept you, I do not just tolerate you. I am not just polite with you. I do not merely avoid you.

I receive you. I welcome you. I embrace you.

A preacher named William Darney once met with a group of believers at five o'clock each Sunday

morning. He later recalled, "How did we then love each other! How glad we were to see each other! And how happy we were when we met together!"

Surely their consciences were not all the same. Surely some did, what others did not feel free to do. But they accepted each other.

What about us? How do we do this? We will continue to explore this for the next two weeks, in the rest of chapter 14, and the start of chapter 15. But for now, I offer three central ideas.

When we accept each other, we think with respect.

We are different people. We have different backgrounds. We have walked through different life experiences. We have different convictions, rooted in our common love for Jesus Christ.

Some of us were raised in conservative Presbyterian churches. Some of you were raised in fundamentalist Baptist churches. Some of you were active in the Roman Catholic Church. Some of you never entered a church building in your whole life, until you became a believer in Jesus Christ. Our stories have shaped us.

Some of us have personalities that lead us to do and try almost anything, within the bounds of right and wrong. Some of us have personalities that lead us to be more cautious about getting too close to the boundaries of what Jesus would approve. Our "wiring" has shaped us.

Will you think with respect about each other?

Even as you go from this building today, you may hear someone describing something that makes them seem too tightly wound about an issue. Or during this week, you may talk with another member of this body who is participating in something that is not blatantly wrong, but may not be the smartest idea in the world, in your opinion.

Think with respect. If he or she is a believer in Jesus, God has accepted him. Reject the arrogance that says, "My answers to life's questions are the only ones." Remember the words of the apostle. Who are you to look down on or judge your brother or sister?

"They have chosen this option for schooling their children. I hope and trust they have been thoughtful and prayerful about it."

"She holds a different position on this sticky biblical doctrine. Maybe she believes that, because she has never heard another position."

"They don't believe in shopping at all on Sunday - ever. I can see why they would take that path."

We accept each other, when we think with respect. We accept each other, when we speak with humility.

In his writings about peacemaking, Ken Sande writes of peacebreaking, peacefaking, and peacemaking.

When you are a peacebreaker, you stir up trouble.

When you are a peacemaker, you try to bring peace.

When you are a peacefaker, you act like there is peace, when there is none. You tend to avoid conflict.

Paul is not calling us to be peacefakers. He is not telling us to stuff our consciences and act like all is perfect.

But he is also urging us against being peacebreakers, and we know from other portions of Scripture, that our peace is often broken with our words.

When our consciences collide, what do we do? A peacefaker would never say anything. A peacebreaker would cause useless fuss.

A peacemaker speaks, but with humility. I am fully convinced that for me, this is okay. Or I am fully convinced that for me, this is not okay. I can say that. And I am humble enough to hear you say that. We speak, but when we speak, we speak knowing and expressing the fact that no one of us has perfect wisdom and complete answers.

"I'm not sure about this, but it seems to me that with all the stresses in your life right now, you may want to stay away from alcohol."

"I can't prove it perfectly, but as I have studied this, I really believe this is the strongest position on the question of 'end times.'"

"I can't go to that movie and return with a pure heart. But maybe you can, and I hope you will."

When we accept each other, we think with respect, we speak with humility, and we act with sincerity.

What do I mean by this? Acceptance is far more than tolerance, or politeness, or avoidance. I receive, welcome and embrace you, and often these forms of acceptance are best expressed in sincere, loving service.

Several weeks ago, a need arose for a congregation in our Presbytery to have a moderator for a congregational meeting, early on a Sunday afternoon. Dale was teaching Sunday School, so he could not go. I was not teaching for these last few weeks, so I could go.

But why should I? Without boring you with details, I will only say that this is a congregation with whom I have had a difficult relationship. I have struggled with my attitude toward the people and the leadership there. In this case, I would describe myself as the "strong", and I have often looked down on what they believe they are "conscience-bound" to do as a church.

I had just preached on "Bless those who persecute you," and while I would be wildly overstating it to say that they have persecuted me, God's Word has an irritating habit of getting to the preacher, too, so I volunteered.

It was a wonderful experience. They were so grateful that I came to serve them.

I can't promise that there are not more bumps in the road ahead, but I learned what I should have known. The ultimate divide is not between us. I must act with sincerity toward them and serve them, not so I can make them into what I want them to be, but so I can demonstrate to them, and develop in me, the accepting, receiving, welcoming, embracing love of Jesus Christ.

What about you? Whose conscience bugs you, either because it is too strong or too weak for your taste? How can you act with sincerity toward that person, by reaching out with acts of service? What bridges might be built? What love might flourish? How might Jesus be honored?

Will you commit yourself now, to act in service toward someone like this, even in the next day or two?

Accept each other. Think with respect. Speak with humility. Act with sincerity.

English preacher John Owen once wrote that the church is like a man who goes to the forest to gather wood for his fire. He starts to collect branches, and he soon realizes he has a problem. He can't carry the branches home.

Some are thick, some are thin, some are short, some are long, some are straight, some are crooked.

So the man finds a cord - a rope - and he binds them together with that cord, so he can carry them home.

As one writer writes, "This, says Owen, is the way Christ works in his church. How can such different people possibly live together as one family? Only if they are bound together by the cord of love.

"Only as we realise that we have a common Father, a shared birth, the same Elder Brother, the same family characteristics, and therefore love one another, can our fellowship be what the Lord wants to make it."

God has accepted us - all of us who are in Jesus. So we accept each other. We are bound by cords of love, so we live in a spirit of unity.