

1. **Introduction:** In chapters 12 and 13, Paul emphasized the critical importance of love for enemies (12:9, 14, 17ff) and love for neighbors (13:8ff). Last lesson we considered the first 4 verses of chapter 14. In chapter 14 through 15:13, Paul presents a picture of what it means for a believer to “walk in love.” The first four verses we considered deal with how to love believers who are “weak in faith.”
2. **Review of Romans 14:1-4:** *“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. <sup>2</sup> One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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.”*
  - Paul isn’t referring to weakness of character or will power.
  - The weakness he has in mind is a weakness in assurance, a lack of confidence in what is permitted and forbidden.
  - The people he referred to were likely converted Jews. all their lives they had kept the Sabbath, obeyed dietary laws, and celebrated Jewish festival days.
  - As Christians, worship was on Sunday. Jewish dietary laws and festival days were considered unnecessary. It was difficult to simply eliminate those things
3. **Romans 14:5-12:** *“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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. <sup>10</sup> 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; <sup>11</sup> for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” <sup>12</sup> So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”*

- Paul assumes both “strong” and “weak” in faith are morally strong believers.
- The weak fail to fully understand the freedom Christ has provided through justification by faith alone. Believers do not become believers because of anything they do – special days and diets have nothing to do with salvation.
- The strong recognize that salvation is through faith alone and act accordingly.
- If weak and strong were each obedient to their understanding of what is required but didn’t demand everyone be like them, no problem would exist.
- But neither side is content to do that. While typically, no Biblical moral principle is in contention, there are doctrinal issues.
- Paul’s comments, particularly in Chapter 15 seem to indicate that the “strong” are doctrinally correct and he agrees with them (he says “we who are strong”).
- The weak see the strong eating meat and failing to celebrate festival days. They conclude the “strong” are not sufficiently spiritual and tell them so.
- On the other hand, the strong see the weak denying themselves meat and celebrating all festival days. They conclude such people are weak, ineffective believers and tell them so.
- Each thinks the other is wrong. Neither likes to hear opposing comments. Controversy seems inevitable.
- The under lying problem is the tendency of people to focus on nonessentials. The issues that divide are not often those critical to salvation.
- Both weak and strong need to control themselves, neither condemning or despising the other.
- Both the weak and strong need to understand and attend to essentials and stop trying to convert those believers who disagree with them.
- Paul’s purpose in this passage is to preserve peace between people who are in agreement about essentials but are disagreeing about nonessentials. He wants all the believers at Rome to live and worship together in harmony.

- The quote we mentioned earlier is pertinent. *“Unity in essentials. Liberty in nonessentials. Charity in all things.”*
- To make peace between believers who disagree over nonessentials, one must begin with what is essential and why.
- That has been Paul’s message throughout the letter. Most essential is that doctrinal issues and pious activities be wrapped in and subject to Christian love. Everyone is to be subject to and work for the Lord.
- Love knits together the ravels that occur when disagreements happen.
- Love does no harm. Love is careful to consider others as better than self. Love keeps no record of angry comments.
- Love enables the “weak” and the “strong” to function together as brothers and sisters in Christ, working and worshipping as Christ has called us to do.
- Believers should not pass judgment on brothers and sisters in Christ. All belong to Christ and will be judged by Christ. He is the Judge for all believers.
- Each believer will be required to give an account before Christ.
- All believers are to be obedient to their current understanding of what Christ requires of them, while they continue to study Scripture seeking better understanding.
- Believers are responsible to do all they can to encourage and enable other believers to be and to do what Christ requires of them.

4. **What is Essential, What is Nonessential, and Who Decides:** “Essential to what,” “nonessential to what,” and “who decides” are key questions. The answer given to these questions makes a huge difference.

- First consider the question of who decides. Above all, it is God who decides.
- God’s answer to what is essential is given in Scripture. But people interpret Scripture seeking their answer to what is essential.
- Human interpretations of God’s Word differ and therein lies the problem.
- Denomination and individual churches each have a version of essentials interpreted from Scripture and agreed upon by their leadership.
- That said, believers are individually responsible to God for what He requires of them and must strive to understand and be able to make their own decision.

- “Essential to what?” This question becomes clearer when one considers the distinction between things “essential to salvation” and things “essential to membership in a particular church.”
- God did incredible, awesome things to make salvation possible. Yet, Scripture clearly says there is one and only one way a person can be saved. Acts 16:31, ***“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”*** God takes care of other necessities beginning with regeneration and justification.
- On the other hand, becoming a member of a church involves a process determined by leaders of that church and may involve many additional issues.
- To be admitted into heaven is one thing, but requirements for membership in an earthly church can differ significantly from one denomination to another.
- People are physically born in a state of active spiritual rebellion toward God. Establishing peace with Him is possible only through His intervention.
- God did choose to intervene on our behalf and did so through Jesus’ incarnation and sacrificial death, satisfying the dictates of the Law and making possible restoration through being “born again” through spiritual rebirth.
- Make no mistake, the possibility of salvation and the possibility for restoration of fellowship with God both originated with God, were paid for by Jesus, and are freely offered by God to all who will believe in the Lord Jesus.
- Church leadership determines the criteria for membership based on what is required by *their accepted interpretation of Scripture*.
- Well-known differences in interpretation include whether or not all people are born with a “fallen nature,” whether or not predestination is real, baptism by immersion or not, and requirements for participating in Communion.
- Criteria for membership may be written and well defined or verbal and loose.
- Most churches (but not all) require evidence demonstrating belief in Jesus of the gospel. Other requirements reflecting leadership’s understanding of Scripture and its application in the lives of members are common.
- For example, use of alcohol or not, musical instruments in the sanctuary or not, celebrate Christmas or not, participate in modern society or not, worship on Sunday or Sabbath, salute the flag of your country or not.

- There are wide differences in the doctrines considered important by different denominations. For example, reformed churches consider the 5 points of Calvinism to be important and affirmed by Scripture.
- Armenian churches typically deny all 5 points as not affirmed by Scripture.
- The 5 points are (1) *Total Depravity*, (2) *Unconditional Election*, (3) *Limited Atonement*, (4) *Irresistible Grace*, and (5) *Perseverance of the Saints*.
- **Reformed people should ask (1.) Are all or any of the 5 points essential for salvation? (2.) If not, what is their importance? (3.) Will there be people in heaven who do not believe the 5 points?**
- Reformed churches usually accept the 5 points to be important truths correctly drawn from Scripture which describe reality, by establishing understanding of self, other people, and relationship to God.
- The 5 points are a good reminder of the great blessing of God that enables people to hear His gospel and believe. The 5 points offer comfort through God's assurance of perseverance in the faith.
- Reformed believers consider the 5 points to be both correct and useful in practice. **But, though important, the 5 points are not essential to salvation.**
- Armenian denominations accept 5 remonstrances which are basically opposite to the 5 points of Calvinism. Both Armenians and Calvinists cannot be right, though both believe their position is determined from Scripture.
- With these dramatic differences, is it possible both Armenians and Calvinists will be in heaven? Absolutely! Entrance to heaven is through believing the gospel. Belief in the 5 points of Calvinism or 5 remonstrances is not required.
- God says, through Paul in Romans 8, that whom He justifies (that is all who believe) He will also glorify (make totally holy, free from sin in every respect). The glorified will live eternally in God's presence.
- God is saving a holy people to dwell with Him – made up of the people who believe the gospel, have been justified, and will be glorified.
- In summary, to think accurately about essentials and non-essentials, we must understand **“essential to what; non-essential to what, determined by whom, and based on what Scripture.”**

- Faulty understanding of these points can cause road-blocks for people who truly believe the gospel and are saved, but whose beliefs differ from others.

5. **Romans 14:13-23**: *“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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup> So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> 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.”*

- Many people fail to grasp both the extent of the liberty believers have in Christ and how they should relate to their fellow believers’ liberty.
- In this passage, Paul focuses on the importance of the conscience, especially the danger of violating one’s conscience.
- If you are convinced that doing a certain thing is acceptable in the liberty Christ brings believers, but another believer is convinced doing that very thing is wrong, Paul says don’t exercise your liberty in front of the “weak.”
- Why? “The weak” may follow your example even though it violates their conscience and by that action be hindered in their progress in holiness.
- Further, it is best to avoid judging a “weak” believer either by words or through actions that might offend their conscience.

- Every believer should do as they think the Lord requires them to do.
- This concept is closely related to the attitude of “hating the sin” but “loving the sinner.” We should by all means encourage all believers, both weak and strong, to grow and mature in the Lord.
- There are degrees of knowledge, of understanding, wisdom and right behavior in the Lord. Each believers’ goal is to grow in all these things.
- Think of Paul. He was born a Pharisee, the narrowest, most strict sect in Israel. He lived by Pharisee rules and dictates. The rules were detailed and extensive. For example, rules for what he wore and how he wore it.
- Rules for what and how he ate and drank. Everything that went into his mouth had to be ceremonially clean. Ceremonial washings were more important than deeds of kindness and love.
- But Paul’s encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus changed all that.
- Saved “in Christ,” he became absolutely convinced that nothing is of itself unclean and most ceremonial rules are no longer necessary.
- Things can be abused and used for evil purposes, but that is a different issue. Regulations about food and drink, observances of days and times, and similar matters have no fundamental importance.
- In this passage, Paul is concerned that confrontation between “weak” and “strong” believers will perhaps separate them.
- Donald Grey Barnhouse in his commentary on Romans provides (1) a list of things that tend to cause disunity and trouble among believers and (2) a list of things that promote peace and mutual building up. All the items on the lists and more are found in Scripture.
- Things tending to cause disunity and trouble include: An unforgiving spirit. Self-seeking. A legalistic spirit. Hypocrisy. Evil speaking. Failing to appreciate the gifts of others. Lack of patience. Suspecting the motives of others. Assuming, without grounds, that others are at fault. A domineering spirit. A rebellious spirit. Snobbery. Being a busybody. Greediness. Bitterness. Instability. Spite. Lying and slander. Jealousy. Thinking too highly of oneself. Laziness. Failing to do assigned tasks.

- Things tending to promote peace and mutual building up in Christ include willingness to be in subjection one to another. Considering others better than oneself. An understanding spirit. Not insisting on our rights. Willingness to admit it when wrong. Sincerity A generous spirit. A sympathetic spirit. Trusting others. Joyfulness. Prayer. Discretion. A critical spirit toward oneself. A gentle and quiet spirit. Humility. Using our gifts for one another. Remembering our own mistakes. Christ-centeredness. Love for one another in word and deed. Fair dealing. Integrity. A forgiving spirit. Doing things decently and in order. Conscientiousness. Faithfulness. Being diligent and responsible to carry out the tasks assigned to us. Not misusing our authority over others.
  - These two lists are powerful reminders of what to do and what to not do as we deal with other believers.
  - Paul has provided three distinct lessons in this chapter. First for the strong – do not despise the weaker believer.
  - Second, for the weak – in matters nonessential to the faith, don't judge a believer who exercises more liberty than you.
  - Third, for both the weak and strong – don't ignore the voice of conscience or encourage anyone to violate their conscience. It may be that it is your conscience that needs correcting by the Word of God.
  - Train your conscience to be consistent with God's Word. Don't go against your conscience until you understand why it gives wrong inputs.
  - To do so is dangerous and increases the likelihood you will violate your conscience again. We are to live in the light of the Lordship of Christ.
6. **Romans 15:1-7**: *“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup> Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. <sup>3</sup> For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> May the God of endurance and*

*encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”*

- As chapter 15 begins, Paul completes his comments on Christian liberty.
- He reminds believers that if exercise of their Christian liberty will cause harm to brothers and sisters who have weaker consciences, then they must refrain from their rightful exercise of that liberty.
- Those with consciences “strong” in the faith are obligated to bear with anyone whose conscience in the faith is weak.
- All believers have liberty in things that are non-essential to the faith but not all believers are ready to exercise that liberty.
- All believers must stand firm in things that are essential to the faith but not all believers are strong enough to do so.
- Each believer needs to constantly use Scripture to “educate” their conscience. Believers come from different backgrounds and are at different stages of understanding and practicing the faith.
- Those consciences are strong in the faith should deal with everyone with gentleness in Christian love.
- They should encourage those whose consciences are weak in the faith so that they may be built up to enjoy the liberty Christ intends.
- Those strong in the liberty of faith should encourage a more complete understanding of what is permitted, what is mandatory, and what is condemned as we each faithfully follow Christ.
- It is Christ we must please, not ourselves. The goal for everyone in the faith is to live in harmony, all with one voice glorifying and thanking God.
- Christ did not strive to please Himself. He allowed reproaches and punishment due others to fall on Him.
- He took upon Himself our sins and bore the punishment due those sins even to death on the cross.

- Scripture, though written for the immediate benefit of the people to whom it was given, continues to provide us benefit and instruction.
- Through the encouragement of Scripture supported by perseverance, believers have hope in Christ.
- Every believer should accept and welcome all other believers, including those whose consciences are weak in the faith, because Christ has accepted and welcomed each of us, all to the glory of God.

7. **What is Next:** Romans 15:8-13.