

INSTRUCTIONS TO BOTH WEAK AND STRONG (Romans 14:1-12)

A notable feature of Paul's letter to the Romans is the attention he gives to Jews and Gentiles as individually identifiable groups within the Christian community of Rome. Blending these two together into one harmonious group was a significant undertaking. The great common feature, of course, was their joint faith in Christ.

But outside of this all-important doctrinal base that served as the core of their unity, there continued to exist a host of cultural and ethnic differences. True, these differences were no barrier to the true spiritual unity among them, but in the matter of ordinary, day-to-day congregational life, these differences had to be addressed and dealt with. Paul does that when he gives to the strong Christian the following encouragement: "Welcome the person who is weak in the faith, but not for the purpose of getting into quarrels about opinions!" (Rom. 14:1)

Note that Paul is specifically limiting the area under discussion to "opinions." Then Paul immediately identifies such an area by giving a practical example: choice of foods.

For centuries the Jews had been living under God's Old Testament ceremonial regulations, which clearly distinguished between clean and unclean foods. Eating pork, for example, was forbidden. These Old Testament ceremonies, however, were a teaching device imposed by God on the Jewish nation only until the promised Messiah came (Colossians 2:16, 17). With the coming of the New Testament, these regulations were no longer binding. But even though Christian Jews knew and understood the full spiritual implications of the new covenant, changing their eating habits wasn't so easy, and making the change took some time.

The Gentiles had never been under the ceremonial laws. They had been eating pork all along, but for them now to do that in the presence of Jewish Christians or to put pressure on Jews to join them in a meal including "unclean" foods would have strained their congregational ties. In cases such as these, the Gentile, comfortably making full use of Christian liberty by eating anything and everything, was in a manner of speaking more mature than the Jewish Christians who still had reservations. Hence the Gentile was the strong brother who needed to be considerate of his weaker brother. The difference was one of degree of maturity, not presence or absence of saving faith. Paul summarises such a situation when he says, "One person believes he may eat anything; but another person, who is weak, eats only vegetables." (v.2)

The situation as described held the potential for either of two problems. The strong Gentile, cheerfully eating anything, could easily look down on the hesitant Jew as being something of a spiritual wimp. Paul cautions against that: "The person who eats should not despise the person who does not eat." (v.3)

The Jew, on the other hand, could look disapprovingly at the Gentile who heedlessly helps himself to everything on the menu, and complain, "He shouldn't be doing that! Eating ceremonially approved foods is more God-pleasing than partaking of those other things." Hence the Jew could easily become critical and

improperly judge the Gentile's actions. To such a weak brother Paul says, "...the person who does not eat should not criticise the person who eats! For God has accepted him." (v.3)

With his closing observation "for God has accepted him," Paul comes to the heart of the matter: God doesn't care what you eat. You may have reservations about oysters on the half shell, or snake steak, or chocolate-covered caterpillars, but God hasn't forbidden such fare. Each believer is God's "servant," and if God as "master" is satisfied, "Who are you to criticise someone else's servant? It is with reference to his own master that he succeeds or fails. He will also succeed. For the Lord can make him succeed." (v.4)

From the example of foods, Paul now moves on to another area: special sanctity of one day over another. It seems logical in the Jewish-gentile setting Paul is dealing with to think of the change in worship days from the Sabbath Day to Sunday. Here too Jews had lived for centuries under the strict regimen of the ceremonial laws, which prescribed six days of labor and the seventh, the Sabbath, as the day of rest, on which no work was to be done. All of that changed when God sent His Sabbath rest in the person of Jesus Christ. Believers in Christ were now free to choose a new day of rest and worship, as they did in moving their weekly worship service from Saturday to Sunday in recognition of the Lord's resurrection. But again, making that change took some time, and it required the adjustment of some people's thinking.

Without using the terms *weak* and *strong*, Paul alludes to differences of opinion that prevailed in the two groups when he says, "One man considers one day more sacred than another." Either choice is acceptable. The only requirement is that the advocate of that day be fully committed in his mind to doing this to the glory of God. "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind! The person who observes the day observes it to the Lord." (v. 5-6)

Just as in verse 4 where Paul indicated that the basis for the commonality between all believers is that all are God's "servants," so here he calls attention to our common status of "belong[ing] to the Lord," whether in life or in death. "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For, if we live, we live to the Lord; and, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." (v. 7-9)

The universality of death particularly suggests to the apostle yet another commonality between us and our fellow Christians. We will all individually have to give an account of ourselves to our just and holy God. In view of the great day of our own reckoning, how foolish it is to get all worked up about judging our brother! Reinforcing that sobering thought with words from Isaiah, Paul writes, "For Christ died and became alive again for this purpose: that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. 10 However, why do you criticise your fellow-Christian? Or why do you too despise your fellow-Christian? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For Scripture has said: "**As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before Me, and every tongue will make confession to God.'**" So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God." (v. 9-12).