

**How Can Christians Relate to One Another in Love
While Disagreeing About Non-essentials?**

Romans 14:1-12

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When I was 19, just after World War 1, I went on a summer mission to Israel. Teenagers from all over North America would come together to make up missions teams. The first 2 weeks of the summer required everyone to go to Boot Camp in Central Florida. During this time, teams bonded and faced the challenges of boot camp together. The Mission wanted to create the harshest conditions any team would face to prepare us for the upcoming summer. Included in this training was a nightly rally under the Big Top. About 800 teenagers would gather to sing and hear messages of inspiration.

Well one night, the founder of this mission was the main speaker. His text was Proverbs 23:29-31 which says this – “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaining? Who has redness of eyes? Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly.”

Then he went on to preach a very powerful, forceful message about the evils of wine and drinking alcohol of any kind. I remember him saying and “we are not even to look upon wine of any kind.” You know how teenagers can get. They love shouting and hollering which he encouraged. After he made the “don’t even look at wine statement” the entire tent stood clapping and yelling. I think I stood with them and probably clapped too. It was an intense emotional environment.

But later I thought about this talk and it’s message that drinking wine of any kind was sinful for the Christian. I thought back to my Mom telling me stories of how her parents made chokecherry wine out of the berries that grew around their farm. I thought about the occasional glass of wine my Mom and Dad would have at celebrations. I thought about Jesus changing water into wine. How did that fit with what this speaker said? Who was right? Were my parents and grandparents sinning by drinking wine?

A young man and his wife talked with a church about him possibly becoming their pastor. It got to the point where they invited him to come for the weekend and preach on Sunday. So he delivered his message which was very well received. He and his wife talked with people after the service for a while. Then they were expected to be back at the church for 3 pm to meet with the search committee. Everything looked so positive. But when they arrived back at the

church, the entire committee's faces looked glum and even angry. The young man and his wife couldn't figure out what happened. So they asked "what's wrong?"

"Someone from the church saw you eating in a restaurant for lunch!"

The young man and his wife looked at each other. "What's wrong with that" they asked?

"Don't you know that eating at a restaurant on Sunday is breaking the Sabbath? No one in our congregation goes out to eat on Sunday or spends money on Sunday. You're just making other people work and participating in this violation of God's Word!"

The young man and his wife came from another denomination of churches. They regularly went out to eat on Sundays after church. But this denomination had a firm conviction the other way. Who was right?

You may have experienced other situations in your life where Christians disagreed on appropriate behavior or participation in certain activities. Should Christian high school students go to a high school party? Some say "definitely no. You must stay away from such environments." Others say "yes if you go with an intention to represent Christ there." Should Christians drink alcohol? Some like this Mission's founder said "definitely not." Others would say "yes you can drink in moderation and in certain situations." How should a Christian act in a pre-marital dating relationship? Is it okay to kiss? Is it okay to hold hands? How far is too far? What about movies, video games, concerts, music or TV Shows. Some Christians say no to any movie or only go to G movies. Others make different conclusions. You can probably think of other examples or experiences.

Christian disagree on certain issues or practices or beliefs about what's appropriate and what's not. So how can we as Christians respond to this reality? How can we relate well to others we disagree with on some issue?

Well we first need to recognize the difference between essentials and non-essentials in Christianity. The ESV study Bible has a simple diagram that helps us see this. It actually has four categories – Absolutes; Convictions; Opinions and Questions.

Absolutes are core Christian beliefs that distinguish Christians from any other faith. These are beliefs like Jesus being both God and man. There's only one way to heaven through Jesus Christ. Christ lived, died and was resurrected. God is the Creator of the world. We are reconciled to God only through Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross when we receive it by faith. God is one but 3 in person Father, Son & Spirit. Those are essentials or Absolutes.

Then come convictions. These would show up as differences between Christian churches. So every church (except the Salvation Army) practices baptism and the Lord's Supper. But each church has their convictions about what those sacraments or ordinances, as we call them, mean. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are extremely important. But they fall into this category of convictions because we can still fellowship with other Christians who may practice something different than we do in Baptism or Communion. Other items in the conviction category might include things like a form of Church Government; Belief about spiritual gifts; Women in ministry; Worship order and preferences.

But then comes the third category – Opinions. This is where we might put drinking, movies, TV shows, music, maybe going out to eat on Sunday or not. These are less clear issues than some of the major ones in the absolute category. But the serious Christian carefully considers how they will glorify God in whatever decision they take in this area. Finally, there are "Questions area" which are unsettled issues that are not essential. So you've got the essentials which go in the absolute area and the non-essentials which go in the other 3 areas. But what makes things more complicated and challenging is that Christians don't agree on what's essential and non-essential. We can err in either direction.

We can elevate a non-essential to an essential category. So say I have a conviction that Christians should only see G rated movies. I believe this is an absolute. I see you go into a PG movie. So I conclude you're not a Christian.

Or we can go the other way where we diminish an essential to a non-essential like the definition of marriage. God ordained that marriage be between man and woman in Genesis 2 at the very beginning of the Bible. But our country has said – no; that definition of marriage is not essential. We can redefine it. Or some Christians have demoted the doctrine of Jesus' physical resurrection to a not essential. They claim it doesn't matter if Jesus actually rose physically from the dead, as long as we are inspired by Him and he lives spiritually. So we may disagree on what's essential and non-essential. So we can disagree on what's appropriate within categories and on how to classify something as essential or non-essential.

How can we find our way through this? Well first you have to connect with a community that has a basic set of essentials that you can affirm. Then we have to figure out how we related to other Christians who have different beliefs, practices and opinions in non-essential areas. That's the area our text addresses today. How can Christians with differing opinions about non-essentials still enjoy sweet fellowship with one another? This continues our summer

study on Romans. We're lead to this discussion in Romans 14. Paul has just talked about our debt to owe everyone love. I would invite you to invite the Lord to speak to you through this passage.

Romans 14:1–12 (ESV)

14 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. 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.

Now hopefully as we read through that text some questions came to your mind. Who are the weak in faith? Who are the strong? How do I know if I am weak or strong? What was the trouble between them?

Well let's start with remembering who this letter was written to. The Apostle Paul writes to the church at Rome in the year 56 or 57. So Christianity is barely 20 years old. This church is made up of Gentile Christians. They were non-Jewish and came out of a life where they believed in the Roman gods and lived according to this pagan practices. But there were also Jewish Christians in this church. Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews out of Rome in 49. After he died, they were allowed back in 52 or 53. But it had been very difficult for them. They were likely just reestablishing themselves in the capital of the empire.

Now if you have been displaced or forced to move to a foreign place you will try to find ways to give your family some stability. One way Jewish people did that was to keep practicing what distinguished them from non-Jews. So they had certain food laws of what they could and could not eat. They recognized certain days as more than sacred than other days. They received these distinct practices from God Himself in the Old Testament law. So to counter the

instability of expulsion from Rome and dealing with the trauma of trying to resettle there, they kept these laws to give them some sense of home.

But there was just one problem with that. Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament Law. Because Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice, no sacrificial system needed to continue as a form of worship. You didn't need to keep the dietary laws any longer. New Gentile Christians were not required to become Jews to be Christians. But to accept this massive change would take time in Jewish Christian thinking. Into this situation Paul writes to the weak and the strong.

Who were the weak and what did they do?

Well, we can find out several things about them from this passage. Verse 2 tells us **they did not eat meat**. Now Jews were not forbidden from eating meat. But as they lived in different cities, they noticed that a lot of the meat sold at the market had first been offered to idols as a sacrifice. So basically the pagan worshipper brought his sacrifice of meat. The priest would burn some of it. But they would sell the rest of the meat in the market to keep the temple going. Devout Jews did not want anything to do with meat that had been offered to false gods. So they decided "we're just not going to eat meat from the market." We also discover in Romans 14:21 that **they did not drink wine**. They had similar reasons. Much of the wine sold in the market had first been offered to the gods or poured out before the gods.

But we also see that the weak **regarded certain days as more sacred than others**. In verse 5 we read "one person esteems one day better than another." So most likely this talks about the Sabbath. Some Jewish Christians probably kept the Jewish feast days as well. So they regarded these days as more sacred than other days.

These practices identified the ones Paul calls weak. But notice a couple more very important facts. **The weak did not sin in doing this**. Paul does not call them sinners or condemn them. In fact he notes, they do what they do to honor the Lord. Verse 6 "the one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord." **The weak were not legalists**. They didn't believe they earned right standing before God by keeping the law. That's a different gospel. That's what Paul so harshly addresses in Galatians. But here he calls the weak "brothers" and we'll see his command to welcome them. So the weak were likely **Jewish Christians who continued to observe these practices and believe they were essential for any Christian**. (Not essential to make you a Christian – but essential in Christian life).

Why does Paul call them weak?

That's a pretty strong word to use, isn't it? How would you like it if we classified the people here into the strong and the weak? The people in this section are the strong but the people in the balcony are the weak. Well Paul makes clear that he thinks the "weak" are wrong in their conviction that these practices were essential for any Christian. In Romans 14:14 he writes "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself." He believed that meat was meat and wine was wine. It was ultimately provided by God the Creator. Though it may have been offered to these idols, Paul knew they weren't real gods and the meat did not have some sort spiritual taint on it because a pagan priest handled it. In fact, Paul will identify himself with the strong in Romans 15:1 – We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak.

So why call their faith weak? They lacked this knowledge that it was now okay to give up these ceremonial laws. They knew God. They loved God. They trusted God but didn't understand that they could fulfill this love without keeping these laws. So he's not calling them weaklings or wimpy. **The weakness refers more to a lack of knowledge that would enable them to a stronger more mature faith.**

Who were the strong? Someone whose faith in Christ trusts Him for decisions in gray areas. Someone weak in faith did not have the faith to believe "I can do a certain thing" in this non-essential area. Strong faith means having the faith in Christ that liberates me to do it. Now we have to be really careful with these labels. Do you see the potential for pride either way? Living this out was very difficult. Human preferences & opinions can get in the way. To remain in loving fellowship with a person with a different opinion and to glorify God was tough. They struggled. **How we see this is how they were treating each other.**

In verse 1, Paul speaks to the strong. He says, "as for one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." So **the strong wanted to argue with the weak about their opinion.** Would you like that in going to a church or a small group? "We're so glad you came today. Now about you're viewpoint that we should all be abstaining from meat. We can't think of anything more stupid. When are you going to give up your childish conclusions and come to the mature side?" That's not going to be helpful. Nor will it promote harmony in relationships.

In verse 3 – "Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains." **The strong were tempted to despise the weak.** "I can't believe that family thinks Christians shouldn't drink. Don't they know that Jesus and the disciples drank wine at the Last Supper? How long are we going to have to put up with such ridiculous people?" To despise or look

down on a brother or sister in Christ for their different view on non-essentials is not okay with God. Where would we be if Jesus despised us because we weren't as enlightened as him?

Yet it's so tempting. If you are a strong person or you have a strong personality or you've never been sick or felt weakness, it is tempting to despise a weak person. You might despise younger brother or sister because they have not had the opportunity to mature your level yet.

In verse 3 we also see how the weak contributed to disunity – “And let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats.” The weak passed judgment on other Christians who ate meat and didn't recognize holy days. To pass judgment means to render a verdict on their status with God. Basically, **the weak were tempted to doubt the Christianity of anyone who didn't do what they did or believe exactly what they believed.**

So they argued about non-essentials; they despised weaker brothers or passed judgment on others who didn't agree with everything you believe. That's a grand recipe for a divided and ineffective fellowship of Christians.

So Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit provides the solution. We will look at part 1 this week and part 2 next week.

Part 1 - Instead of passing judgment on one another, welcome one another. Instead of the strong despising the weak and the weak passing judgment on the strong, they must accept one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

To the strong, Paul says in verse 1 “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him.” To the weak Paul says in verse 3 “let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats for God has welcomed him.” Paul explains why we can stop judging one another. It's not our business to judge another Christian in these non-essential areas. That's the master's job. Verse 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 stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” Christians are servants of Christ. He's our judge. So just as it would be inappropriate for an employer to come down hard on someone else's employees, it's inappropriate for us to judge someone else's servant. We can leave that to Christ because He will do it perfectly.

Then Paul takes a different angle on the judgment in verses 10-12. “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live says, the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.” He seems to be saying instead of being so concerned with judging others, be most concerned about your own judgment. We will all face God's judgment – not for our salvation if we're Christians. But we

will be held to account for what we did with the lives God gave us. So instead of spending time condemning brothers and sisters, welcome them. Don't let these create unnecessary barriers between you.

Now to find out how we can make decisions about these non-essential areas of disagreement, you'll have to come back next week. But for this week I want us to spend our closing moments thinking about what Jesus did to empower us to live this out.

Christ's sacrificial love and presence gives strong and weak Christians the opportunity to enjoy sweet relationships. By Christ's grace and power, a Christian community can enjoy sweet harmony despite differences. Jesus, who was the strongest person in the universe did not argue with us or despise us for not knowing. He humbled Himself and died a criminal's death on our behalf. He did this out of love. He commands us to figure out loving each other. This is part of it. But we can't do this apart from Him. We need all of Christ's power to live out these commands. It doesn't come naturally but it is the way of love and the way of Christ. Throughout the history of the church, Christians have been struggling to live this out – One writer came up with this simple way to remember this:

In Essentials Unity; In Non –essentials Liberty; In all things – Charity (or love). Can we become a body of believers that is more loving towards one another in non –essential areas where we disagree. As we learn to love in spirit of these differences, we bear witness to Christ's power of work among us.