

## Loving in Disagreement - Part 2

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, brothers and sisters, we are on part two, as the title says this Sunday, on loving in disagreement. And if you were here last week, you may remember the gist of part one, but I'll recap anyway if you weren't.

Now remember, Paul began in verse one by saying, accept the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters. And so I posed two questions from it, which is on the slide. First, what is a disputable matter? And then second, who is the person whose faith is weak? And here I said a disputable matter is something for which there can be a different application on a matter.

Even if the Bible is clear, the conscience of some may mean they are unable to exercise the freedoms they have in Christ. God, however, accepts them, and so neither position, whether you're doing it or you're not doing it, is sinning.

When that occurs, Paul asks those with the freedom not to stumble others by their actions, except the one whose faith is weak. And instead, make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

[ 1 : 1 6 ] Don't stumble, but instead everyone should strive to build up each other by faith. And well, tonight in part two, Paul begins with a very similar instruction.

Verse one, it says, We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good to build them up.

So the idea of building up others is the same here again. Neighbors, I think, still refer primarily to those in the church, even though it could extend outside.

But there's also a shift here in the reference to the strong and the weak. Now certainly, Paul still has in mind people in chapter 14 when he talks about the weak.

But I think it's wider than that now, that those whose faith is weak and the strong aren't just those who can eat or drink freely. You see, Paul puts it like this in the verse, The strong are to bear with the failings of the weak.

[ 2 : 1 9 ] That's what he says. Other translations put it as the weaknesses of those without strength. And so in other words, it's not just about those who are weak in the faith, as in chapter 14, but all those without power or strength.

Strength then could relate to physical strength or to authority or influence or numerical superiority. It also includes those in chapter 14, of course, but it's just not limited to them.

And I think this is further confirmed when Paul now then turns to Jesus, who he uses as the example in verse 3. There he says, Paul wants the strong to recognize Christ's own strength, which is not limited, is it, to the definition of the strong in chapter 14.

Instead, Jesus is the divine Son of God. He's strong in every way. His power, authority, moral perfection. And yet Paul's point is this.

God or Christ did not use his strength to please himself, but others. Pleasing not in the sense of simply doing what other people want of him, but pleasing in the sense of doing what's ultimately good for them.

[ 3 : 5 6 ] Ultimately, that meant taking our sins to the cross and bearing the insults of our sin. Incidentally, that's the same sense that I think Paul has when he asked the strong to bear with the weak, back in verse 1.

It's not simply about just putting up with the weaknesses of others, but carrying them, lightening the burden of those who are weak.

Paul's saying, do this even when it costs you to do so, because Christ's example in Scripture encourages us to do that. And if God vindicated Jesus, then Paul's saying that it gives us hope that

God too will reward us when we bear the burdens of the weak.

So now Paul adds in verse 5, May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Here Paul adds the motivation to follow Jesus' example so that we may be united in glorifying God. And that is, we're not to be split up into cliques, are we?

[ 5 : 16 ] The strong banding together and the weak in another group, but rather one body altogether united in Christ and praising God, doing it with one mind and with one voice.

Unity then is the big idea in the rest of the passage. And so Paul continues in verse 7, Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

And here again, Paul appeals to Christ's example, but the idea of praise, I think, brings us all the way back to chapter 11 of Romans, where we saw in God's mercy that Jews and Gentiles are united in salvation, prompting Paul to praise God for his marvelous plan.

You see, Christ is the one that makes this possible. He accepted the Jews and opened the door for the Gentiles, so that together both Jews and Gentiles can praise God with one mind and with one voice.

Now, doubtless for the Christians in Rome, this whole idea of the strong and the weak are most likely divided between Jewish and Gentile lines.

[ 6 : 36 ] The Gentiles had greater freedoms with their food and with the festivals, while some Jewish Christians still felt constrained by the traditions of Judaism.

But even though that's the situation in Rome, Paul speaks more generally and applies it more generally to us, so that we don't think just along ethnic or theological or traditional lines.

For what Christ has achieved on the cross unites everyone, all of us. His gift of unity transcends every boundary and every line.

We may think that this matter or that matter is deeply important to us, but ultimately is trumped by the unity of Christ, bought by his bride.

And so Paul continues in verse 8, For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs may be confirmed, and moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.

[ 7 : 43 ] As it is written, Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, I will sing the praises of your name, and again it says, Rejoice you Gentiles with his people, and again, Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, let all the peoples extol him.

And again, Isaiah says, The root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations. In him the Gentiles will hope. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now here, Paul quotes numerous, a number of Old Testament passages, but the common thread is that of praise to God by the Gentiles. And the Gentiles are doing it together with Israel, God's people.

This idea of the Jews and the Gentiles uniting in praise then is very much an Old Testament idea, Paul says. Jewish Christians then need to realize that yes, God sent Jesus to serve them first, to fulfill his promise to the patriarchs, but it's also then to open the way for the Gentiles to join them in praise as God's people.

And then on likewise, on the other hand, the Gentiles need to realize that unless Israel was first restored, then there would not be a people for them to join in order to praise God.

[ 9 : 12 ] Hence, we find at the end the reference to the root of Jesse. That was our Old Testament reading in Isaiah 11, where God reduced Israel in their disobedience to a stump.

Israel, in other words, was as good as dead. But from it, Christ is the shoot that bears fruit. On him the Spirit rests, giving wisdom, might, and knowledge.

In other words, look at his strength and how he uses it to rule with peace and justice and uniting people. So the result is the vision that we get from verse 6, which is on the other slide.

The wolf will live with the lamb. Imagine that. The leopard with the goat, calf and lion. And then verse 8, the infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand in the viper's nest.

But no harm comes to any of them. And then finally, Paul quotes verse 10, the root of Jesse will spring up to rule over the nations and gather the Gentiles.

[10:21] But for the Gentiles, their hope lies only in the restoration of Israel through Christ, who is the root of Jesse. It's like any tree that you see, isn't it?

It can't flourish if the roots are rotting, can it? And so likewise, Gentiles, the branches that are grafted in, can only prosper when the original root and the shoots of Israel flourish.

Christ's whole body then needs to flourish together. Jews and Gentiles, weak and strong, rich and poor. There's no dividing line anymore.

Christ has broken it down. Christ has broken it down. This is key to God's plan of salvation, which Paul has revealed here in Romans. And so, if we desire to belong to Christ, then we don't have a choice to exclude those we don't like, or that's not like us, or that we disagree with, or who are weaker than us.

God is the only one that decides who He is excluded on the basis of their faith in Jesus. But those who are His are part of the one and same body, where Christ is the only head.

[11:42] And so, the implication is, we need to accept one another. We need to live not to please ourselves, but others in the body. And specifically, in Romans 15, we are called the strong to bear with the weak.

And that's the challenge, isn't it? Because as humans, as sinful humans, we tend to use our strength to suit ourselves. As a society, that's how it works.

The majority use their strength in numbers to get what they want. Majority wins, as they always say. So, governments use their majority in parliament to push their agenda.

And the bigger their majority, the less they listen to minority voices. Similarly, the dominant voices in media, social media, public media, they use their strength to drown out opposing but minority voices, don't they?

But that's not the way it is with Christ and His church. It shouldn't be. For we who are strong, ought to bear with those without strength. And whatever the definition of strength is, it could be about the freedom in conscience or numerical superiority or a dominant culture or race within the church or people with more authority or money or influence.

[13:08] Whatever the strength is, the strong ought to be using to bear with the weaknesses of the weak. And we do it because Christ united us together.

And He wants us to be united so that we can then bring glory to God. All right. I've got to the end of the passage rather quickly.

And this is sort of where the explanation of the text ends. But what I haven't done tonight yet is to apply this in practice. And last week, I asked for you to send me some examples.

And so thank you to those who did. And I'm just going to use a couple to think through application. But let me say to begin with that I find that actually with these chapters application is tricky.

A lot of times we like the standard answers. Just a quick answer. Give me the right answer. But by its very nature, disagreements are often tricky and complex, aren't they?

[14:12] That's why we keep disagreeing. And so application is challenging. And a lot of times it's very much dependent on context. What may work for one church may not be the right answer for another church.

And so I think it's always important to work through these as a church. Prayerfully, humbly, listening to one another carefully, especially to those who are weak and don't have a voice.

And most of all, to do it calmly and not let our emotions escalate and for us to start judging and being competitive and argumentative with each other.

and so on the next slide, I put down a few questions that arise from the two passages over the last two weeks. And essentially, it's what we've been talking about. Romans chapter 14, verse 1 and Romans chapter 15, verse 1.

And so first, from Romans 14, the question is, whenever we meet a disagreement or an issue, is this a disputable matter? What does the Bible say? Is it so clear that it's beyond dispute?

[15:17] Or might there be a genuine difference in application? Now, in thinking about what examples to use today, I had to be really considering what would be most appropriate.

And at first, I thought it would be tempting just to use a simple example, which I did find was, even that was hard to find. But then I thought, if I don't want to really gloss over the application of this passage, then what we really need to do is sort of tackle a real challenge in the church where trying to find a solution may be hard.

Because it's really that it really brings home the call, doesn't it, to bear with others' weaknesses. And it really challenges us how to maintain this unity that Christ has brought for us. And so, with a bit of trepidation, I'm going to pick a real but challenging example. And as I go through it, I'm not going to be giving answers so much as guiding us as to how we should consider some of these issues.

I mean, I have to say, I don't have the answers all to myself anyway. But my desire is that we start to think and talk through these things using Romans 14 and 15 in a way that brings glory to God, in a way that builds one another up.

[16:39] So, the first example I'm thinking of is women in leadership. And within Christian circles, we conveniently divide people into egalitarians, those who consider that the roles can be filled by men and women without distinction, and complementarians, those who see men and women as equal before God, but assign roles, different roles that complement each other.

Now, just by using these labels, we've already oversimplified things, haven't we? Which is not really helpful. Because there are really many facets to this issue, isn't there?

For example, are the roles between men and women just pertaining to marriage, or the church, or to society more generally? And what are these roles? Are we talking about the pastor, the preacher, the elder?

And when it comes to women, as some see in the Bible, not having authority over men, are we talking about all men, that is all males, including teenagers, or are we just talking about adult males?

Now, the point of me raising is not to sort of answer any of these questions, but to begin to show you just how complex, isn't it, this whole issue is. And it's also fair to say that this is a highly emotive topic, because we're all invested in it somehow, aren't we?

[18:04] Whether we're male or female, we can't be impartial or objective in one sense, can we? And so complex is that I think we can't even agree sometimes whether it's a disputable matter or not.

Suffice to say that I think those who hold the strongest views, whichever side you may be on, tend to, I think, think that this is not a disputable matter, that it's not up for debate.

Well, if that's the case then, then actually chapter 14 actually doesn't apply, because that only relates to disputable matters. But let's for a moment assume that it is a disputable matter, as some do, and then the question begins, the question becomes, as we go back to the slide, who then is the person who is weak, whose faith is weak?

And I think that that would be the one whose conscience is constrained, isn't it, in Romans 14? And so in this issue, I think they're the complementarians, aren't they? But I think, just saying that, I think it's going to be hard for egalitarians to accept that, isn't it?

Because it almost seems unfair that men who have traditionally been considered the stronger party and the one in authority, are now considered the ones to be weak, weak, and therefore have to be accommodated.

[19:28] But I want you to remember here that we're simply applying chapter 14 as a disputable matter, the one that concerns conscience and faith. And it may be that even though they're treated as weak in chapter 14, by the time we get to chapter 15, these same people are considered strong.

And so we have to balance and consider both aspects, don't we? Further, it's also important to realize on this issue that women are complementarians too, not just men.

And having spoken to some of them, they've been the ones whose consciences have weighed on them most strongly. And these women that I've spoken to are not immature Christians, but strong and capable female leaders.

And now are we trying to, therefore, we're not just trying to placate paternalistic men, are we, who don't affirm women in ministry. Complementarians come in many shapes and forms.

Now, of course, these paternalistic men exist, but I don't think we should allow their poor attitude to negate the sincere and thoughtful views of complementarian women.

[20:41] Now, whether you think it's disputable or not, the wider dynamics of strength and weaknesses in chapter 15, also come into play now as well, don't we?

So let's move on to that. Because aside from the theological issue, there are other issues that determine who are strong and who are weak. And of course, traditionally, in society, men have been the ones who are considered strong, given their authority in a patriarchal society.

But times have moved on, and I have to say quite quickly. And so we have to really consider the power dynamics as they stand now. Just as an example of how power changes so quickly, just consider the issue of same-sex marriage.

It's almost, the plebiscite on it in Australia almost changed the power dynamics immediately, didn't it? Once the law came in with the stroke of the pen, those who advocate for same-sex marriage went from being the weaker position to one being in the strong position.

likewise, that can happen in our church as well on issues such as this. So in the church, your position, your theological position may not change, but whether you're in a position of strength or not can depend on your context.

[ 22 : 06 ] What do I mean by that? Well, let me try and flesh this out. If, for example, you are an egalitarian in a complementarian church, then you have a relatively weaker position.

So this is not about the conscience in chapter 14 anymore. This is just about your position of strength in the church. But if, on the other hand, this complementarian church that you belong to is part of a denomination which is strongly egalitarian, then the church is relatively weak in that denomination, isn't it?

And so, again, the relative position of this individual changes again. can you see how dynamic and how complex then this whole idea of strength is?

It depends on the layers of relationships, doesn't it? And the authority and autonomy that's available at each level. And so it's more than just a matter of freedom of conscience, but it's also a recognition of where you are within the church, the influence you have, the restrictions you have about the ministry you can practice, and also where that church is within the larger denomination. So I'm hoping that you can begin to see some of these distinctions that I'm trying to work out here between how to work out who is the strong and who is the weak in this situation.

[ 23 : 28 ] And we need to think carefully, isn't it? We can't just apply sort of just generalizations and say, oh, he had male, so therefore have to be weak, or female, therefore they have to be weak, nor complementary and therefore they have to be weak.

We need to just consider each context, don't we, individually and carefully. And that's before we even start to think, how do we then work out how we ought to live together, what the rules ought to be.

It's not easy, is it? But as we do that, it's about how those who are in a position of strength, ought to be thinking, even as some people may not agree with me, how can I nevertheless use my position of strength to build up those who are weaker, or to build up everyone for that matter?

It may not be possible to convince others to adopt our position, but are we able to allow them still to belong within the church and not impose on them more than is required, particularly when their conscience is involved, so that together as a church, we can function together in unity, cohesively. So it's not about saying all the time that we just have to accommodate the minority as well, because sometimes you can't, and on this particular issue, I don't think you can, but it's about trying to work things through peaceably, with respect and grace, and having a sense of wanting to maintain unity within the church.

[ 25 : 09 ] It's not easy, and I can tell you on this issue it's not been easy, and sometimes not even possible, but we ought to try as much as we can to apply chapter 14 and 15, not only working out the solution, but in the attitude of our hearts in how we approach working out those solutions, because otherwise our human tendency is just to use our strength to silence and ostracize others, and to just set things up to please the dominant group.

But that's not the way Christ does things, is it? And so as his body, that's not the way we should do things. Alright, I probably stirred up enough controversy for tonight, for one night, but I do want to just raise another example.

Not because I wanted to lengthen this sermon, it's a pretty long one as it is, but it's because I think this issue, this next issue I'm about to bring up, is going to probably come upon us very soon, if not already.

And the issue I'm talking about is the whole issue about COVID vaccinations and passports. Now, at this stage, it doesn't seem like they're going to mandate it for churches, but who knows, things change constantly.

And yet, I sense that when the time comes for us again to regather, and we all would love to regather, don't we? I'm pretty sure, though, that this topic will come up. And if the whole issue around mask wearing was anything to go by, this next issue is going to be just as emotive, if not

more so.

[ 26 : 46 ] And I'm sure already some of you feel very strongly either for or against whatever the position might be. And so here's the risk for us, isn't it? because I don't think that this issue ought to divide us as a church.

It's not a gospel issue, is it? If you think about it. And so my prayer is that we don't allow this issue, which we feel strongly about, that's fine, to create a battle line for us in church.

And so sure, we can't help having these strong views, but let's not judge or show contempt for others that we disagree with. Instead, we need to be gentle and gracious in how we discuss it. By all means, let's discuss it. We can even sort of speak and feel strongly about it as we say things. But to my mind, this is a complex issue, isn't it?

After all, we don't just have Romans 14 and 15 to consider, I think we have Romans 13 as well. in relation to submission to authorities, whether it's the diocese or the government. And so for some people, they might be concerned about violating consciences, there are ethical considerations involved, there are issues around the health and safety of people who come to our church, and then there are those who are literally the physically weak, whether the very young or the very old or the very sick.

[ 28 : 16 ] But ultimately, how we decide and how we go about deciding, will testify to the gospel, doesn't it? Christ died so that all are welcome into his kingdom.

And so that has implications for how we go about deciding and then welcoming people into our church. knowledge. Now we all like to think that our position must be the right one, that we hold the high moral ground, and it may well be that your point has some validity, but we mustn't be too quick, must we, to just dismiss others, because they seem to have a different view, and start thinking that they've got wacky views on this or that or whatever.

We need to take time, don't we, to really listen to what people's objections are or concerns are or fears are, and then gathering all that, work out strong versus weak, what is the right thing for us to do as a church.

Now I've got my own views on this, and as pastors, Jeff, I, Andrew, we haven't really discussed this at HTD, so I'm going to keep my counsel for the time being and not share any of my views, but the reason why I want to raise this is really just to prepare us, because I think this is going to be a live example, so that when the time comes, we're not so concerned just to be winning arguments for and against, but that we be ready with the right mindset, that of Christ, for those of us who think we're strong, to use it to serve others instead, so that together we can remain united and bring glory to God by praising him with one mind and one voice.

Alright, I'm just going to leave you a few examples on the slide. If you think those two examples I've given you are too overwhelming, here are a few simpler ones, examples for you to talk to others over Zoom tonight.

[ 30 : 19 ] So example number one, is it okay to sing songs from a church that teaches false teaching, even if the lyrics are sound? Example number two, is it okay to watch a movie together as Christians with explicit violence or nudity?

Does where we watch it matter? How is that different from nudity at art museums? And then finally, is it okay for the church to appoint leaders who have been remarried?

Now I'm sure you can think of more examples of your own, because that's what life is like, isn't it?

We're ultimately living in a fallen world, and so these issues are complex in part because of it.

But in another sense, I think even though we live in a fallen world, these examples and these disagreements actually give us an opportunity as Christians to be like Jesus, for the strong to bear with the weak, for people who would otherwise be hopelessly divided without Christ to actually come together and transcend these lines, because we know what Jesus has done for us.

He's united us so that with one mind and one voice, we can give praise and glory to God. Let's pray. Father, help us who are strong to bear with the weaknesses of those without strength.

[ 31 : 46 ] Teach us to accept one another just as Christ accepted us. Help us to remain united as the body that Christ died to redeem, so that we may with one mind and one voice give praise to you as our God and creator.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.