

Welcoming the Weak

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much for your very warm welcome. I look forward in the next little while to renewing some friendships with old friends, something I caught on the plane coming over and making some new friends as well. Very glad to see that Canucks won time before last.

I was here they won so I think perhaps I'd better stay in Vancouver. Romans chapter 14, page 948 is all about unity and it's appropriate that we're thinking about this on Pentecost Sunday for unity is a great gift of the Holy Spirit. We think of God for us, the Father, we think of God in us, the Son and we think of, I beg your pardon, God with us, the Son and God in us, the Holy Spirit.

Well the Apostle Paul was a great leader and political leaders have what he had, great ones that is. Military leaders have it, business leaders have it, I'm speaking about great ones and that is vision. That is the ability to see things that aren't blocked by trivia, where the way forward is not stopped by obstacles.

The great leader knows the difference between essentials and non-essentials, which brings to mind the famous saying that I'm sure many of us know, in all things, in things essential, unity, in things non-essential, liberty, in all things charity.

[1 : 52] Nobody knows for sure who composed those famous words, but in things essential, we are reminded of what we heard about in Romans chapter 14.

Let me read some of those words again, page 948, I believe is the page number. None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself.

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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living.

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God, as 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.

So the truly essential thing is to have that relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ, to be looking to him as our Saviour, to be looking to him as our Lord, in the awareness that we live our lives accountable to him.

[3 : 03] So that relationship with Jesus is the essential, the really, really, really essential thing to be right with God. But it's also fundamental to the theme of Romans chapter 14, which is unity.

There were problems among the Christians in Rome. I couldn't say the church in Rome, because at the time Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, there was no single church in Rome.

The letter to the Romans is not addressed to the church in Rome, but rather to a group of semi-connected house meetings. And one of the purposes of the letter to the Romans is to unite these disparate groups in faith and in love, so that they would become a church of God in Jesus Christ.

What were the problems in Rome? Well, interestingly, they were partly political. In the year AD 49, the Emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Italy, and many of those were Christian Jews. So they had to just vacate their homes and their places of work, their networks of friends and scatter throughout the empire.

[4 : 26] And many of them, as I say, were Jewish Christians. In AD 54, Claudius died, and he was replaced by the young Nero, who had a bad track record later on, but wasn't too bad a ruler at the beginning.

And Claudius' expulsion of the Jews became a dead letter, and so Jewish people were able to come back to the city of Rome and to other cities in Italy, including the Christian Jews.

But we can imagine that coming back in those circumstances meant that they were at a significant disadvantage in church life, because in the meantime the gaps had been filled up by Christians who were not Jews, Gentile Christians.

And so they come back to a situation where they are probably in a minority, and as it were, at significant social disadvantage. Can you imagine the situation?

The other problem amongst the Christians in Rome was basically the ancient hostility there was between Jews and Gentiles in the ancient world.

[5 : 44] Jews basically despised Gentiles because of their promiscuous behaviour and their idolatry. On the other hand, Gentiles despised Jews.

Jews. They were lazy. They didn't work on the Sabbath. They were stupid. They wouldn't eat the choicest of meats from pigs.

They were atheists. They worshipped the open sky instead of gods made with hands, and so on. So there are these big problems of relationship.

They're also regarded as elitist. They wouldn't have a meal with the Gentile. They wouldn't enter the house of a Gentile. They wouldn't sit down with a Gentile. They were standoffish.

Now, when a Jew became a Christian, do you think that they left their Jewishness behind? Their attitudes, their prejudices?

[6 : 42] Not easy. Do you think when a Gentile became a Christian, they left their prejudices against Jews behind? Not easy.

Just like we, when we become Christians, we bring a certain amount of baggage from the past into the Christian life, that basically we spend the rest of our lives dealing with and getting over.

So it was with these sort of opposite ethnic and religious groups coming into a single community.

And really, if we can imagine this situation, this is what these latter chapters of the letter to the Romans is all about. Now, Paul addresses these two groups by a rather unusual way of reference. He doesn't address them as Jews and Gentiles as we might expect he would, but rather he addresses them, and this is not all that easy to understand, as no doubt he has his good reasons for doing so, as the strong and the weak.

[7 : 48] The strong are the Gentiles who really don't have a point of view about what they can and can't eat. They don't have a point of view about Sabbaths or non-Sabbaths.

It doesn't matter. Every day is the same. All food is the same. They can take it or leave it. They're free. Culturally, they're free. That's their background. They're strong from that point of view.

They don't have a hang-up in their conscience about how they spend their time. As we know, a Jewish person to this day would, come the Sabbath day, for example.

So they are the strong. Also, the Apostle Paul, as a Jew who is, shall we say, liberated from the culture of Judaism, he can be all things to all men, he says.

To those under the law, he can be as one under the law. That is an observant Jew. Or to those not under the law, he can be like that as well. He has a certain robust flexibility and freedom.

[8 : 52] But that is not true of Jewish Christians generally, apparently. So the weak then are those of scrupulous conscience.

Those for whom not observing the Sabbath is a matter of profound conscientious difficulty. For what they eat or don't eat is a matter of profound conscientious difficulty.

Listen to what Paul says, for example, in verse 2. He says, One person believes he may eat anything. That's the strong. While the weak person eats only vegetables.

Or verse 5. One person esteems one day as better than another. That's the weak. While another man esteems all days alike.

That is the strong. You see the sort of problem, therefore, the Apostle Paul is dealing with. That lovely saying, in things essential, unity, in things non-essential, liberty, in all things charity, is very helpful.

[9 : 54] But it lets us down at least one point. Because for the weak person, the person of weak conscience, so-called, what he or she will or won't eat is a matter of life and death.

It is a matter of profound conscience for that person. It's so deeply ingrained, as it were, through cultural upbringing and so on.

So, how does the Apostle Paul seek to achieve unity in this extremely complex and challenging situation?

Let me suggest three things we find from these words from Paul in Romans 14. Number one, mutual respect.

The strong need to respect the weak and the weak need to respect the strong. That is, if the issues are cultural.

[10:56] That is, having to do with food and days. They're cultural. Now, Paul doesn't raise the moral issues in this part of the Bible.

He does, for example, in 1 Corinthians, chapter 5, where you have a moral issue, not just a cultural issue. The moral issue being, it's not very nice to talk about, but a father and a son having sexual relationships with the one woman.

Perhaps the man's stepmother or the mother even. That's, in Paul's mind, that is not something that you can just agree to differ about.

That is a moral issue. And the moral issue calls for some action, some disciplinary action from the Corinthians, which is not just for the sake of discipline, but for the sake of restoring the man in these circumstances.

It has a positive intention. It's not ultimately a negative intention. It's a moral issue. It's not a cultural issue. So, what we're looking at in Romans 14 is a cultural issue at this particular point.

[12:10] Cultural and personal. It means having respect for other people's scruples, for other people's conscientious point of view in matters that, shall we say, are not defined by the Ten Commandments or something like that.

Now, in church life, to be practical about this, I suppose there is a scatter of opinions about all sorts of things, political and so on. Some of us are traditionalists.

Some of us are modernists. In my country, Australia, some of us are monarchists, even royalists. Others are republicans.

Others, me, to tell you the truth, I can take it either way. I don't have a point of view particularly on the matter. But I have a close friend who's a member of our church who is a staunch monarchist, royalist even.

And it's in his DNA. He's never going to change. So, what do we do? We have a laugh about it, actually. We agree to differ. And I guess I'm trying to think of that as an example of how you sort of get on in situations where there are these cultural and personal differences that, in the end, in my opinion, don't matter all that much.

[13:33] So, that's the first thing. Mutual respect. Secondly, there is a principle whereby, in the Bible, the strong accommodate to the weak.

The strong make concessions for the weak. That is a profound biblical principle so that adults accommodate their behaviour to children, as parents do to children.

You have the principle in the Bible where the powerful are intended to care for the weak and for the vulnerable. That is a profound biblical principle.

And we see that embodied in our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich. Even the Son of Man, the greatest of the great in the Bible, came as a servant.

The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that those who believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

[14:52] So, that is a profound biblical principle. And so that it means that the strong, that those who are free in conscience, in the matters that we are meeting in this particular part of the Bible, accommodate to the weak.

And were we to read on into the rest of Romans 14 and 15, that would actually mean that when the strong are with the weak, they will eat what they eat.

In other words, they will, they will, they're with a kosher observant Jewish Christian, that's what they will eat as well. Now, I have to tell you that I breached that principle, unwittingly, but painfully.

Some years ago, I was honoured to be invited to give half a day's lectures at the Seventh Day Adventist College out of Sydney. And we had a splendid time in class and with other faculty members and so on.

A really lovely time of fellowship. They took me to lunch. Now, they're vegetarians. I should have known. But I thought, ah, these are robust brothers and sisters in Christ.

[15:59] I imagined that they would be quote unquote strong in this particular matter. So, I would have steak. Big mistake. Big mistake.

The kind of iciness came over the fellowship, over the meal. And afterwards, the principal said, Paul, that was not good.

We were offended by what you did. And what I should have done was to eat what they ate for the sake of fellowship in that particular matter.

So, the strong in conscience, those who are free, accommodate to the weak. The third great principle. First is mutual respect. The second, the strong accommodate to the weak.

The third is, the great essential, of course, is that strong and weak have that personal relationship with the Lord. That each one knows that Jesus is Saviour.

[16:57] That each one knows that Jesus is Lord. That each person lives his or her life, as it were, before the Lord. That is the really important thing.

And if both parties, both points of view, as it were, get that right, then all things can work from that. And in the end, the Seventh-day Adventists and I parted on good terms because we were both connected to the Lord in that way.

So, there was disunity among the Christians in Rome. One of the reasons he wrote the letter. But I have to tell you that you find disunity many times referred to in other parts of the New Testament. I don't know what it says about human nature. Listen to Paul's words to the Philippians. He says, What a lovely picture of genuine Christian fellowship.

Encouragement, love, affection, sympathy. But then he says, Complete my joy by being of the same mind. Having the same love. Being in full accord and of one mind.

[18:09] Why does he have to say that? Except there is division amongst the Philippians. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit. But in humility, count others better than yourself.

And then follows the wonderful hymn about the incarnation of Christ. Christ. That's the Philippians. There's division there. And then there's the Corinthians.

The good old Corinthians. They're always disagreeing with one another and with Paul. He says at the end of the second letter, Be restored to one another. Heed my appeal.

Agree with one another. Live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Why does he have to say that? Except that they are disagreeing with one another.

Or to the Galatians. He says, For the whole law is fulfilled in one word. You shall love your neighbours yourself. And then he says this. But if you bite and devour one another, Take heed that you are not consumed by one another.

[19:12] He says almost humorously. Bite and devour. That's division, isn't it? He gives a list of what he calls works of the flesh. There's 17 items in it, I believe, When I last counted them.

He mentions sexual sins. Fornication, impurity, licentiousness. Three of them. He mentions religious sins. Idolatry, sorcery.

Two of them. But then he comes to social sins. Listen to this. Enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy.

Eight. Eight items. Obviously describing breakdown of fellowship within the Galatian churches.

Then he says, Let us have no self-deceit. No provoking of one another. No envying of one another. What is it about us humans?

[20:17] What is it about conflict and division? It's across our television screens every night in the world, outside. And I have to tell you as a former serving bishop, it is far from unknown in Christian congregations.

Well, dear friends, I come nearly to the end of what I want to say. Christianity began as a mission. The mission begun by Jesus.

The mission continued by apostles. The mission continued by pastors and missionaries and rank and file Christians to this day.

Christianity has become an institution and that's okay. But if it is not also a movement and a mission, it will die.

And in the world today where Christianity is only an institution and not a movement and not a mission, it is dying. It is dying as we watch it. It will be extinct within decades, unless it returns to its basic mandate to be a movement and a mission.

[21:34] Were we to read on into Romans 16, as I'm sure we will later on in this series, we would come to face to face with 25 named people in Romans chapter 16 whom Paul asks to be greeted.

Many of them are those whom he calls workers. Workers. This is a mission that Paul is describing in Romans chapter 16.

It's not about fellow travellers. It's not about mere sympathisers. It's about workers. And a fundamental part of that work is to create unity and to avoid division.

Unity is absolutely fundamental for the mission of God in the world. Unity is fundamental for good works among Christian peoples and Christian congregations.

Unity is fundamental for the survival and growth of a Christian congregation. A divided church is a dysfunctional church. And that is the reason why the devil inspires division.

[22 : 53] Unity is a precondition for our growth and maturity. Unity here is the basis for bringing others to hear the gospel. Unity here is the basis for winning others to Christ.

Unity in truth and love. That unity is all. How do we find it? Mutual respect.

The strong caring for the weak. Above all, each of us knowing the Lord. That is the really essential thing.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.