

The Weak and the Strong

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is taken from Romans chapter 14 verses 1 to 12, that's page 1140 in the Pew Bibles, 1140.

Except the one whose faith is weak without quarrelling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.

The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

One person considers one day more sacred than another. Another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

[1 : 08] Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God. Whoever abstains does so to the Lord, and gives thanks to God.

For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord.

So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life, so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

You then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

It is written, As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow before me, and every tongue will acknowledge God. So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

[2 : 18] This is the word of the Lord. Good morning, St Silas. My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the senior minister here at St Silas. Many of us were here for a great day of celebration yesterday as Rebecca and Alex got married here.

It's great to have Susie here. It was great, wasn't it, to hear about that remarkable work in Brazil and be praying for that. I hope you can join us for lunch as well. And we're in Romans 14, as Ruth just read for us.

So it would be a big help to me if you could turn back there in, well, whatever you're using. But if you're using the church Bibles, it's page 1140, as we look at that together.

Let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father and gracious Lord, open our eyes, we pray, that we might see wonderful things in your law.

Where we're foolish, give us wisdom. Where we're grieving, give us comfort. Where we've gone astray, would you give us contrite hearts.

[3 : 24] That we might know you better as we hear your voice and be ready to live for you. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, a few years ago, the Guardian newspaper reported that the most popular Christian joke was the one about the two men on a bridge.

You might have heard it before. You've probably heard it before. I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge about to jump off. So I ran over and said, stop, don't do it.

Why shouldn't I, he said. I said, well, there's so much to live for. He said, like what? I said, well, are you religious or atheist? He said, religious.

I said, me too. Are you Christian or Buddhist? He said, Christian. I said, me too. Are you Catholic or Protestant? He said, Protestant. I said, me too.

Are you Episcopalian or Baptist? He said, Baptist. I said, wow, me too. Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord? He said, Baptist Church of God.

[4 : 29] I said, me too. Are you original Baptist Church of God or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God? He said, Reformed Baptist Church of God. I said, me too.

Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879 or Reform Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915? He said, Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915.

I said, die heretic. And I pushed him off the bridge. so it shows us something about how important we all think unity is we grieve don't we the lack of unity among churches but it shouldn't be a surprise to us that we see churches in disunity because we find there is division and disagreement within any local church certainly any growing local church we celebrate don't we that we're people from very different backgrounds we're diverse as a people we're brought together by Jesus but that brings challenges for us and the apostle Paul is turning his attention to those challenges here in chapters 14 and 15 of Romans so we're going to we're going to look at them today and then next week as the argument continues and this morning the importance of accepting each other then we're going to look at the limits of accepting each other thirdly the barriers to accepting each other the foundation for accepting each other and then the way ahead the way forward so first of all the importance of accepting each other we get the command in verse 1 if you just have a look there with me verse 1 of chapter 14 accept the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters that's the theme of these two chapters Paul describes two groups of people in the church in Rome there's the strong and there's the weak and they're divided and fellowship is being affected so Paul spends two chapters of this letter to this church in Rome looking at this theme and if you flick forward to chapter 15 verse 6 we see this what what the purpose is for the church as the people of God chapter 15 verse 6 he says so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ he's got a prayer there to sort of finish off his argument for the next two weeks asking God will help them so that with one mind and one voice they'll glorify God now the glory of God is a bit like the brilliance of God it's what what what is brilliant about God and we glorify God by displaying that brilliance to each other and to the world so that's that great calling on us that we as a church would glorify God by our lives and our words we'd make his brilliance known how do we do that as a church how do we glorify God we might think that we we glorify God supremely when we come together and we sing when we worship God in song or maybe we'd say well no we glorify God best when our Bible teaching is really as hot as it could be it's faithful it's sound and that displays how brilliant God is or maybe we'd say no we glorify God by agreeing with each other so that we'd we'd seek that a church of doctrinal purity in our own eyes where every single person at the church I found the church where everyone agrees with me so they must be right and that's going to glorify God we're all in one place about everything with God Jesus and the Bible maybe that's how we glorify God but Paul's big idea here in Romans 14 and 15 is that actually we glorify God when we as naturally completely incompatible people are willing to accept each other that we get united as a family and we work hard to tolerate different views and opinions among us so that's our first point the importance of accepting each other secondly we're just going to think about the limits of accepting each other see verse 1 of chapter 14 frames the whole discussion of these two chapters by saying we accept each other when it comes to what Paul describes as disputable matters verse 1 disputable matters

if the heart of the Christian faith the gospel about who Jesus is and what Jesus did is in jeopardy because of what somebody else is thinking and saying and living out Paul the apostle fights tooth and nail to protect the gospel that's why he writes Romans so we can't accept differences of views about how you get right with God that it's by faith alone in Christ alone that's why we had a reformation 500 years ago in Scotland and across Europe in Acts chapter 15 we see Paul behaving like that there's people arrive at his church where he's doing mission saying that they're adding customs and traditions and saying to these new believers you've got to do these things if you're going to be made right with God and saved

Paul leaves the church and heads to Jerusalem and he calls all the apostles together and they have a council to defend the gospel to clarify the gospel in this letter in chapter 16 of Romans Paul will say in two chapters time he urges us to keep away from people who put obstacles in our way that are contrary to the teaching of the apostles and Jesus Christ in Ephesus in Acts 20 he warns the elders there to watch out for savage wolves from within the congregation who will lead them away from the truth so one of the battles we have is the discernment it takes the wisdom it takes when we have a particular disagreement with somebody to think well is this a disputable matter where Romans 14 and 15 kick in and I am to accept this person and they're to accept me or is this a

different kind of issue is it a gospel issue where actually I have to treat it differently and I can't tolerate that disagreement or we can't as a church

[11:10] I take it that where there is a moral issue that the Bible is clear about where the Bible gives us a clear command to do something or not to do something it's no longer a disputable matter because there's clarity from God about his will but then there are plenty of issues where it's wrong to divide over each other just because we disagree where we need to safely say I strongly disagree with that person I'm thoroughly convinced that I'm right and they're wrong but it's actually not very important I've got to accept what they think for the sake of church unity and for the sake of their faith so that they're not discouraged as Christians so we'll think a bit later about some examples so we've thought about the importance of accepting each other the limits of accepting each other where there's a clear command in scripture or the matter we're disagreeing on affects the gospel itself that would be the limits so now thirdly let's think about the barriers to accepting each other why is it difficult?

chapter 14 verse 1 accept him whose faith is weak accept the one whose faith is weak so there are two groups within the church there are the weak and the strong as Paul writes to them there are two groups and they've got grumbles against each other and it's really important to see that when Paul uses the terms the strong and the weak here in Romans 14 and 15 he's using them in a very particular specific way he doesn't mean that the weak in faith are kind of really unsure about what they believe and about Jesus and they're very uncertain about being a Christian and the strong are very adamant and convinced and go out there telling everybody it doesn't mean that it's not that kind of idea what he means is that the weak in faith have not fully grasped the freedom that we have as Christians on a particular issue that's what makes them weak they think that the way to honour God in an area of their life requires them to be more restrictive than in fact they need to be and the strong in faith are the people who on that issue understand that because of Jesus we're free in how we live on that issue those are the groups so what are the gripes between the groups what are the disputable matters

Paul gives two examples in chapter 14 diets and diaries if you look at verse 2 diets are the first one verse 2 one person's faith allows them to eat anything but another whose faith is weak eats only vegetables that's the diets then in verse 5 he mentions another he says one person considers one day more sacred than another another considers every day alike so what's made these issues so divisive for the church in Rome now we don't know specifically what happened there we're not told it may just be that these issues became significant organically as the church in Rome grew and people from different nations the Gentiles the non-Jews became Christians and there was this division about what you eat and what you drink and what days are special and what days are not special so it might have just developed organically but just there was an issue that may have caused this in Rome so just imagine with me for a moment that you're a Jewish background believer you start life as a Jew you're Jewish you live in Rome in the first century you go to synagogue and then a visiting church planter with this new message about Jesus arrives in Rome and he reasons with you from the scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah you've been waiting for and with great joy you join this new group this Christian group and you put your trust in Jesus of Nazareth and lots of your

Jewish friends join you and you stop meeting in the synagogue and you start your own church and you celebrate that Jesus is the Messiah gradually you're being joined by people from different nations who have come to see that Jesus died and rose again and they should follow him and be saved by him but then the emperor Claudius orders all the Jews to leave Rome so suddenly you're a refugee you've got to leave everything and it's the same for all your Jewish friends and Jewish background Christians as well you're expelled it's mentioned in Acts chapter 18 it happened about 48 AD so you spend seven years away from Rome away from your home city but under the new emperor Nero in AD 55 there's a new edict and the Jews are welcomed back to Rome so you go back and you go back to your old neighborhood and you go back to your old church and your old friends are back there too people like Priscilla and Aquila who were mentioned in Romans in the letter but when you get to the church it's completely changed in the last seven years because it's grown and there are all these new people there and none of them are Jewish they're all Gentiles and so you're suddenly in the minority and lots of your

Jewish customs are ignored now by these people so you go along to the church bring and share lunch after the service and one of your home group leaders comes and sits down right next to you

with a bacon sandwich and the butter's dripping down out of it and they waft it under your nose and they say isn't it such a great thing that Jesus declared food like this clean what would we do without it come on and tuck in come on red or brown sauce and then they start making plans to go on their next social and it's a trip to the beach to play Danish long ball and it's on a Saturday it's on the Sabbath but your for your whole life the Sabbath day has been a day of rest your ancestors they were jobs they couldn't have because they wouldn't work on a Saturday so how do you feel where suddenly you're feeling mocked and looked down on by the Christians made to look miserable and also you feel disgusted by them you feel that they've disregarded these principles that made you look so different from society so it's understandable isn't it that this tension arises in the church in Rome as they are called to live out the implications of all that Jesus has given them the freedom he's given them if you're a strong person who realizes that the diet laws and the special days of the Old Testament are now fulfilled in the coming of Jesus how are you going to treat a weak person well of course you look down on them you patronize them why can't they just wake up out of their traditions and enjoy the freedom that we have in Jesus and if you're a weak person who still feels bound by the extra rules and the customs then you judge the strong person you think am I the only one around here who still takes

[18:09] God seriously who still cares about being holy and Paul is commanding both sides not to do that don't look down and don't judge if you look at verse 3 that's what he says verse 3 the one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does for God has accepted them so 2,000 years on we don't have that kind of situation going on precisely in the church today but we need to think what causes divisions and disagreements among us as a church and among Bible believing Christians what causes those divisions and then we have to think which of those things are disputable disputable matters so maybe you can think about two characters we've got weak William and we've got strong Sally sorry if you called William or Sally but we've got weak William and strong Sally now the problem okay I'm going to give some examples here right and I do it with a bit of trepidation because the problem is it's extremely difficult to acknowledge that you're a weak Christian on an issue okay you don't think you're being weak you think you're being godly and that the strong person is showing a disregard for ways that you could wisely live and be a mature Christian so I might mention an issue in the next few minutes where I think that

I'm being strong and I've got it worked out and that you're being weak and I might be right and you might be weak on the issue or I might be wrong and it might not be a disputable matter and you might need to come and tell me no Martin the Bible is clear about that we should actually be doing that we shouldn't be doing that and I realise that and we just need to talk it over maybe we'll talk over coffee about disputable matters maybe we can talk in growth groups about it but we have to keep working these issues out together with the word of God and we also need to recognise that the place and time we live in affect what's what's an issue what's disputable so a hundred years ago in this church if we were having this discussion whether or not we read fiction novels would be a big issue people would there'd be weaker brothers and sisters saying you shouldn't read novels it's a distraction fifty years ago it would probably have been going to the cinema where weaker brothers and sisters would be saying you shouldn't go to the cinema at all it's a distraction it's not helpful so maybe today we might disagree about whether we should go to nightclubs go clubbing on a night weak William thinks you should stay away from nightclubs the very nature of them is sinful who's your money going to when you pay to go in they're a worldly distraction stay at home and pray strong Sally thinks nightclubs are exactly where we should be as Christians because that's where people are going and we're called to be in the world and not of the world that's where the people are we should be there so she's annoyed with weak William that he won't go we might think about how we observe religious festivals so weak William gives things up for Lent as a time of prayer and repentance but he turns up at church and strong Sally has got the flowers out in church in Lent and after the service she starts offering round bits of Easter egg chocolate she says it's half price if you get it early enough weak William is discouraged because he hears that his friends at church are planning to go away up to the Isle of Skye on Easter weekend it's a chance to have a break they're off work and he thinks well shouldn't we be with our church family on Easter Sunday as we celebrate the risen Jesus isn't that one of the most important days to be together other examples strong Sally organises an evangelistic night to bring her friends to it's a wine tasting evening or she organises an evangelistic poker playing evening where people

put in a bit of money and they play poker together and then there's a talk about how you can bet your life on Jesus she gets tattoos with Bible verses on or maybe not even Bible verses she invites friends over to watch the boxing weak William has gone vegan as part of his view that we should be protecting the environment shouldn't all Christians be thinking a bit more about the impact our meat eating is having on the world that God's given us we should think about worship styles the notorious worship wars in a church weak William thinks it's wrong that we've got drums at church thinks they've got pagan roots or he thinks it's disobedient if we have a service and we don't sing at least one psalm but strong Sally she won't even turn up at the service unless she's assured there'll be a half an hour of continuous band led worship that's what she needs on a Sunday and there are some issues that are more controversial in Scotland than elsewhere so I made contact with a local Presbyterian minister to try and meet up for fellowship and he said he's not willing to meet me unless I accept that Presbyterian church government is the only way to govern a church which is an issue for me as an Anglican okay but maybe you're from that kind of background where you think that actually the Bible is more prescriptive about church government and that's an issue for you whereas lots of us would think the Bible gives a lot of freedom about church government another issue where we have disagreement among us as a church family is about how strictly we observe the Lord's Day as a Sabbath day on a Sunday so some of us think that you should be at church twice on a Sunday and that there's lots that you shouldn't do on a Sunday as you focus on the Lord others of us feel free on that completely free on that is that an area of the strong and the weak personally I'm not sure it might be that the Bible is clearer on that on the Sabbath being the Lord's Day it's difficult but I think it's quite a natural way to read verse 5 of chapter 14 that one of the days Paul's talking about is the Sabbath and he's saying there is freedom now in Christ from observing a set day there might be wisdom in it but there is freedom so is that a disputable matter for us where we need to accept one another so these are the kinds of areas of disagreement you probably think of more and the command is look don't leave your church because there's people who disagree with you on that and don't hope the people who disagree with you will leave about that instead work hard to welcome each other don't look down on the weak don't judge the strong now we find that hard so how do we do it well Paul gives us some foundations that's our fourth point the foundation for accepting each other Paul connects how we treat each other when we disagree with the cosmic realities of what God is doing in the world through the church first he says there's only one God and thankfully it's not you if you look at verse 3 he says the one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does for

[25 : 45] God has accepted them who are you to judge someone else's servant to their own master servant stand or fall and they will stand for the Lord is able to make them stand it's wonderful isn't it it's a wonderful truth that we only serve each other because we're serving God and thankfully he is our master and he's the best master you could hope for when we stand before him he looks on us as righteous in Christ he has accepted us in Christ it's an especially precious truth if you're someone who has felt in your life as though you're not accepted you struggle to be accepted by other people here at St Silas your church family is commanded by God to accept you and we're only commanded to do that because in the gospel God has accepted you and then Paul gives his second reason he says there's only one Lord and thankfully that's not you either verse 8 if we live we live for the Lord and if we die we die for the Lord so whether we live or die we belong to the Lord for this very reason

Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living so when we disagree with someone in our church family we need to remember this is someone Jesus Christ loved enough to die for and he died for them to make them one of his people and bring them into his family so if Jesus thinks they're precious enough to die for them and I've got a problem with them that is my problem and when we look at these reasons why we should accept each other it helps us see why it glorifies God when we live like this it reveals to the world what God is like that he is saving people from every nation to be united under Jesus forever that's how we glorify God we make that visible by accepting each other over these disputable matters and that's a remarkable thing isn't it to think about because disagreements in church are a massive headache they're a massive headache and what I might find myself longing for in our church family is that nobody would disagree with each other that we'd all be so similar to each other we could just agree on everything but actually when it comes to disputable matters

God is most glorified when we get on with the hard work of welcoming each other and accepting each other even though we disagree so that the watching world sees a kind of love that overcomes difference a unity that points to the miraculous work of Jesus in our lives so how do we then move forward together with disputable matters that's our final point a way forward on disputable matters Paul basically says make up your mind and honour the Lord we see that in verse 5 one person considers one day more sacred than another another considers every day alike each one of them should be fully convinced in their own mind in other words God's most concerned about what's going on in your heart on these issues so if you're weak in faith on an issue if your conscience is pricked and you think God's calling you to be more restrictive than other people around you seem to be then it would be wrong of you to go against that we need to just make up our own minds and go with our conscience and not feel patronised or look down on for that if you think it's wrong to clean your flat or watch sky sports on a Sunday don't worry about whether someone else is doing it just don't do it yourself keep that between you and God and honour him in what you do and don't do on a Sunday and we still need to be teachable we need to reflect continually on the scriptures so that over time our consciences are being corrected and refined by the word of God this isn't an excuse to kind of just stay static in tradition but once we've made up our mind what we think's best to do or not to do for God we just please God by doing that or not doing it for him if you look at verse 6 the one who observes the day observes it in honour of the Lord the one who eats eats in honour of the Lord since he gives thanks to God while the one who abstains abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God that's what matters above all that we get on with giving thanks to God and honouring him and as we do that we remember that God will hold us all to account for that in verse 10 you then why do you judge your brother or sister or why do you treat them with contempt for we will all stand before God's judgment seat he repeats it in verse 12 so then each of us will give an account of ourselves to God so as Christians we don't fear condemnation when we stand before God on judgment day but we recognise that he will hold us answerable for how we've lived as he calls us to live for his glory so when you see weaker brothers or sisters don't look down on them and when you see stronger brothers and sisters don't judge them

God has accepted them Jesus Christ died for them just get on with your job of living for the Lord the Lord who accepted you the Lord who died for you and the Lord to whom one day you'll give an account let's pray together Heavenly Father Lord we thank you that you are able to make us stand and that you accept us in the gospel of the Lord Jesus help us to enjoy our freedom that you've won for us at the cross help us to welcome one another help us to encourage and respect each other that we might be a community of faith and a community of love that demonstrates your love in the reality of the gospel to a watching world for your name's sake Amen Amen