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Romans 14:1-4

Welcome the Weak

Intro: Back in Romans today. A new chapter. 14. But not a surprising subject. If we fully *understand* the gospel (chapters 1–5) and *experience* the gospel (chapters 6–8), the result will be a grateful, spirit-filled, joyful life marked by humility & love (12–16).

Paul has some testing ground for us here. Ready? Turn to 14:1-4.

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.Rom 14:1–4.

SLIDE: Are Essential Oils really *essential*? Or just *helpful & Smelly*

In this letter, we read about something we cannot live without: *God's righteousness*. Given to us freely in Christ. That's the gospel. It is not an overstatement to say that it is *truly essential*. But at times churches can lose sight of what is essential and begin *majoring on the minors*. Beliefs and practices are both effected.

Paul wants to help us with that. In fact, he'll spend an entire chapter and into the next on this. Why? Because unity is important to God and majoring on the minors is a threat to our unity. Romans 12:16 "Live in harmony with one another" Is that a one-another we ignore? It's a big one. Not just a bumper sticker. Harmony/Humility.

BIG IDEA: What do you do when you realize not everyone believes like you do? Not people out THERE in the world, not unbelievers. We already know they don't believe like us. I'm talking about people IN the church. People in here. People in your community group. Other believers. What do you do then…?

Let's back up for a second. We are living in a unique cultural moment. Today, disagreeing with someone without vilifying them is an increasingly lost art. Rare to see is loving disagreement bathed in humility and ending in a deeper understanding of our own position and a new appreciation of the other. We don't have to vilify, like angry tribes. I'll END YOU. I HATE YOU. A better way!

Verse 1 sets the table. The charge is to welcome the weak in faith. How do we welcome him? The ESV says not to "quarrel over **opinions**" the NIV says not to **disputable matters.** I prefer that.

Now there are **undisputable matters** that we don't budge on. Consider Paul's description of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15: "For I delivered to you as of ***first importance*** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, **4** that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures **—1 Cor 15:3–4**. That's essential. First importance.

The undisputables are those non-negotiables of the faith that all *Christians* of all time have agreed on. But that's not what Paul is talking about here. He's already covered that in chapters 1-5.

One way to think about these issues is OPEN-HANDED vs. CLOSED-HANDED. Our beliefs on closed handed issues is what determines whether or not we are in the kingdom and in fellowship with other believers and one-another.

The open-handed issues, though, not so much. We hold them loosely. We may agree. We may disagree. But they do not keep us from becoming brothers and sisters in Christ. Doctrinal issues like:

- Spiritual gifts.
- Mode of Baptism.
- When & How of the Lord's Return.

Closed hand = Jesus is coming back
When and how = open hand

- How should we take communion.
- What Bible translation should we use? KJV *only*?
- How do we best make disciples of Jesus?

We make disciples of Jesus = closed hand.
How? = Open hand.

But beyond the doctrinal issues. What about practical things? Educational models? Tattoos and piercings? What about alcohol or marijuana if it's legalized? It will be probably. Wearing hats in church? Political party Affiliations Yoga? Pagan or just stretching? Yoga PANTS…? Those are just a handful of issues.

Many of us have strong opinions & passionate positions on those. But those are **disputable matters**. Does not mean they don't matter. They do. These are not unimportant issues. But they can tear a church body to pieces. And they have.

But here's the question: How do you respond when another brother or sister in Christ differs with you?

I feel like that could really be a common theme here at GLC. So let's pay particularly close attention to what God is saying to us

Paul helps us by giving an example. Cultural & religious context.

This text teaches us how people from different religious and cultural backgrounds can **stay united in Christ through the Spirit**. It is not hard to follow Paul's argument, but it is hard to practice. It requires believers to walk in love toward those who have different cultural practices, preferences, and customs.

The title today is **Welcome the Weak**. This is an introduction really to this subject and to this entire chapter. And I only have 3 take-aways for us. I'll give them upfront. Ready…?

SLIDE: Recognize the Weak. Extend the Welcome. Avoid the War.

Some Context: Jewish and Gentile…The church in Rome.

Roman Emperor Claudius made an edict that Jews had to leave Rome. But just before this letter to the church in Rome was written, Claudius died (54 AD). So the Roman Jews returned, but they probably found the church much different than they left it.

They come back into a situation in which their religious and cultural traditions were dismissed by the Gentile believers. Of course, the Gentiles shrug it off. Maybe their sentiment was this:

"All you Jewish believers, why do you think you've got to do all that stuff? Get with the program. It's almost 60 AD for crying out loud. You don't need to hold those diet & calendar convictions now… But the Jewish Christians believed they were the truly devout people. Maybe their sentiment was "But we are the righteous remnant. We are trying to follow God's will whereas you Gentile Christians are defiling yourselves, and harming your faith."

How should we handle this situation. Let's walk through it together.

Pt. #1 Recognize the WEAK: vs 1 Paul is clearly wanting this church to know there are both weak and strong faith Christians. *Note Not until 15:1 does Paul use "strong" and include himself in that category. "We who are strong…"

If we're to welcome these "weak" believers, then we best know who they are, and maybe we'll discover we're amongst them

Weak = In Gk. *In need. Feeble. Sick. Powerless*.

The weaker believer has trusted Jesus for salvation. But he/she is overly conscientious about issues not addressed specifically in Scripture. The weaker brother is more easily offended than the stronger Christian. The stronger Christian feels more freedom regarding certain cultural practices like dietary laws and holy days.

Even though the Torah (OT Law) did not command vegetarianism, these Jewish Christians concluded that a vegetarian diet was the ***safest*** because it was so difficult to be sure the meat was *kosher.*

It's not hard to find a similar situation in churches around the world. Those who convert to Christianity from Islam or Hinduism or another religion with a history of strict dietary practices.

I wonder what definitions you'd give for a strong believer and a weak believer?

Someone I know sits on the board of trustees of a Christian institution, and as a member of that board, he is not allowed to drink wine. The organization has elevated a preference into a rule. They have legislated where God has given freedom. He explained to me that the board was concerned that its members stand out

from the culture at large, and I replied, "Do you realize that Jesus and the apostles could not serve on the board of your organization?" We can appreciate their concern to keep the institution unspotted from the world, but their position is one of weakness." **—Sproul**

The issue was not this is what made a person a Christian. Paul would have shut that down so fast. Read Galatians. He confronted their misunderstand and distortion of the Gospel. "Fools! Curse you!" No, this was about who was more spiritual. Who was better.

I think the strong group was probably the ***largest***.
I think the weak group was probably the ***loudest***.

Can we live in harmony with fellow believers who practice nonessentials differently from us?

The Jews had been taught to view their calendars in certain ways, and abstain from certain foods—for *centuries*. These habits and attitudes were hard to change. Not all needed to change…

Diet and calendar days were very important to Jewish people.

SLIDE: An involved list (some in Torah) was passed down that was quite extensive. If you want to know how hard it was for a Jew to overcome that, read **Acts 10/11** when Jesus had to personally confront Pete in a dream 3X to teach him no foods were unclean for those who follow him. He argued with Jesus. "Not so, Lord!"

Even IF you got the right meat, it had to be killed, cut, and cooked in the proper kosher way. In a city like Rome, maybe there could have been cross-contamination with other kinds of forbidden meats. Kind of like peanut oil and gluten in USA today. Then meats offered to idols. Lots could go wrong for a Jew still adhering to the customs and rituals of Judaism trying to eat meat in Rome.

So…what did they do? They said. "Easy fix. Hard decision. I'm done with meat. I'll only eat vegetables." That decision caused problems. 2 kinds. Condemnation on meat-eating Gentiles and despising the Jews for their weakness.

Now…their abstaining from meat to avoid—in their mind—displeasing God…that's not a small or insignificant effort. It's a noble thing to do. But notice how Paul summarizes that approach. He calls them what? WEAK. Not strong. Because they were unable to accept what Jesus had said about all foods being clean.

They were unable to enjoy the liberty that Jesus had offered them. Problem comes when they don't want you to enjoy it either. Or here's another problem. When you despise them for not enjoying.

We've probably all encountered this or experienced it ourself:

We're not saved in a vacuum. We are saved out of a culture and context—sometimes that context and culture are religious. And not everything falls into place overnight. The religious culture you grew up in or the pagan culture you grew up in wasn't washed off in the baptism waters. And for that matter, not all of them needed to be.

When you get converted, you bring with you hurts, habits, and hang-ups. Sometimes you need focused help on overcoming some of those things like legalism and bad teaching.

In thinking about a weak Christian in this context, don't envisage a vulnerable Christian easily overcome by temptation, but a sensitive Christian full of indecision and scruples. What the weak lack is not strength of self-control but liberty of conscience. Hear that? This is not contending over the gospel and abandoning justification by faith alone. These two groups get grace and faith.

Now again, to help us here. Remember: there are indisputable matters worth fighting over. Many people have died over them.

God is a trinity. Father, Son. Holy Spirit. Jesus is fully God and fully man. The Bible is True. God created the heavens and the earth. Humans are sinful by nature, deserve God's judgment. Jesus died in our place and for our sins and rose from the grave. We are saved by Grace through faith. Heaven and Hell are real and everyone will spend eternity somewhere. Jesus is alive and coming back to judge the living and the dead. That's not an exhaustive list. But it is closed handed, I'll go to the mat on those doctrines. They are clear. They are biblical. They are important. They are essential. They are non-disputable.

In theology, just as in battle, some hills are worth dying on. But how do we know which ones? Theological Triage…When should doctrine divide, and when should unity prevail?

Some say everything is disputable. Can't be certain of anything. Some say nothing is disputable. Everything is black/white, down to the only acceptable Bible Translation to use.

Pastoral issues. Wear a suit and tie? Use power point? Pulpit or round table? 20 minute sermons or 45 minute sermons? Topical or expositional messages? Hymns or contemporary? All disputable.

St. Augustine had a great formula for this kind of issue for Xians.

In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.

So what do we do after recognizing the weak? How do we respond when our most sincerely held and cherished convictions on faith are not shared or even appreciated by other believers? Or maybe not even by our leaders? What are the options?

You could form two churches?
1st church of meat
2nd church of veggies

Or…you could do the harder thing, the thing that required humility. The most beautiful and powerful thing. You could walk in love and in unity. Shame the devil. Honor King Jesus. Cultivate diversity. And welcome those who are weak.

Paul never turns to the weak in faith and says, stop being weak in faith. Rather, his concern is for mutual acceptance and unity.

Pt. #2 Extend the WELCOME: vs 1 Welcome them. With no inner reservations. Embrace them. Receive them. Acceptance w/out Agenda. Not trying to change them. You're loving them.

Acceptance is a word we like—in *principle*, but we'd rather not act on it. Acceptance is powerful. But we'd prefer "tolerance" or "hospitality." Acceptance to us reeks of compromise. But it's not.

Why is acceptance of different people important? Because… welcoming one another is a Gospel issue.

God in Christ has accepted them. What else do you need? A friend of Jesus is a friend of ours.

Remember the apostles confession to Jesus of not embracing a sect of people who were not "with them"?

John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." **50** But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him, for the one who is not against you is for you." **—Lk 9:49–50**

Jesus was saying essentially: "Not with you? But they're with me. You should rethink your position. Are YOU with me…?"

The weak are not to be made to feel that they are barely tolerated and seen as second-class members. They are to be received with warmth and true fellowship.

Proslambanō means to 'accept' people, but more deeply than our English would say. It means to welcome into one's fellowship and into one's heart. Not just to tolerate or put up with. It implies the warmth and kindness of genuine love.

This is Paul's whole argument. He sums it up later in 15:7.

Pt. #3 Avoid the WAR: vs 1-4 UNITY. Paul tells them not only to accept them, but not to argue or dispute or quarrel. Just embrace.

The weak judge the strong. How can you eat that or drink that or enjoy that or practice that or believe that or read/watch that!

The strong despise the weak. You legalist! You're creating rules!

The strong just want to be left alone. "Stop judging me!" The weak want to toe the line. Want their list to be seen, appreciated, and practiced. For them, it's not an open handed issue. It's close handed. It's fact. It's the way things should be in their opinion.

One shows contempt. The other judges. Paul says they are both wrong. Why? Because God has accepted them both.

NOW…here's the kicker. If God has accepted them (BOTH of them) why do we think it's okay to reject them? Not have fellowship with them and worship with them and do life with them and be around them?

Do we have a higher or lower standard than God does? Do we have more authority than God does? Do we think, "God may be okay hanging out with losers like that. But not me. I'm above it!"

We do judge for matters in the close-hand. We're called to. Bear one another's burdens. Exhort one another. Confess your sins to one another. Forgive one another. We're called to help one another fight! Preach the gospel over one another and spur one another on to love and good works. That's not in dispute here. Where Scripture clearly speaks, we clearly speak. Where Scripture is silent, we are content to be Spirit-led and walk in wisdom and love.

Paul is saying here. When it comes to disputable matters, THEY DON'T ANSWER TO YOU! You are not their master. Jesus is. And He's okay with this. So you must be too.

I have no doubt, we'll all say "Oops I missed that one!" in some area or another one day. I have certainly said that about my overly scrupulous convictions as a younger Christian in the past.

Thank God that's not what justifies us and makes us right before God. Jesus is our righteousness. HE will make us stand. Not our preferences on whether to eat or drink and later which days to observe. Thank God that's not held over our head.

I hope this gives you a deeper appreciation of grace, my friends. It does me. Let's put amazing back in grace as Michael Horton said.

How dare we reject a person whom God has accepted? **Indeed, the best way to determine what our attitude to other people should be is to determine what God's attitude to them is.** This principle is better even than the golden rule. It is safe to treat

others as we would like them to treat us, but it is safer still to treat them as God does.

The human tendency is always to despise whatever or whoever we consider weak. The boy who can run faster, jump higher, or lift more despises the one who cannot. To despise the Christian who has a narrower field of liberty. The strong tend to despise. But the weak tend to judge.

Good, God-fearing, Jesus-loving, Bible-believing, Spirit-filled, church-attending, Christians sometimes disagree on things. Life.

Can you imagine going into Lowes or your favorite restaurant and to begin instructing the employees or waitresses in how they need to do their job? Pretty soon, the owner or manager might cover over and say, "*Excuse* me? Who are YOU?" You don't sign their paycheck. You didn't hire them on. You don't have that authority or jurisdiction. Stay in your lane. You can shop here. You can eat here. But please leave the employees alone. Lave them to me.

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? We have no business to come between a fellow Christian and Christ, or to usurp Christ's position. *To his own master he stands or falls*.

That's right. They will stand. They'll be FINE. With or without your approval. Consent. Affirmation. Some additional take-aways when you encounter a disagreement with another believer.

DETERMINE is this a closed handed issue or open handed issue? Are we talking about the roles of men and women in the home, or whether or not Romans chapter 8 belongs in the Bible?

If it's open handed, have a peaceful, enriching, maybe enlightening conversation without quarreling and grow!

You don't have to convince them you are right or prove they are wrong. Just have a conversation. We've lost that art haven't we?

Remember, they answer to God, not to you. They don't answer to you. They are not your servant. They have a master. You are not him or her. Let's pray…