

¹Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.
²One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. ⁴Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.
⁵One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.
¹⁹Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.

Dear Friends in Christ,

GOD'S FORGIVENESS MAKES US GRACIOUS PEOPLE

Up in the Colorado mountains we were enjoying a meal with a view, Lisa and I, and Sam and Sarah. Sam and Sarah were, I'd guess, in their late 60's. They were from Pennsylvania, and from what I remember, members of the Christian Brotherhood. Like Mennonite and Amish groups, their denomination prefers to keep technology at arm's length. At our dinner one topic of conversation was Sarah's bonnet. For her entire life, since she had been a schoolgirl, Sarah had never been seen in public without her bonnet. Modesty required it. For many years now, she had realized that wearing her bonnet or not wearing her bonnet was not a commandment of God. It was a custom, a good custom she felt, but not a commandment. Yet in her conscience, it was more than a custom. She just couldn't bring herself to hang up her bonnet. Only in the last few months had she finally been able to go out in public without her bonnet and with a clear conscience.

So what do you think? Good or bad? Some would say, "Good. I'm glad she finally has her freedom." Others would go further and champion her smashing perceived hierarchies and oppression. Others would call her bonnet a man-made law getting in the way of God's will. Others would mourn the passing of the old ways. Who was right?

This is just the sort of question God's word puts before us in Romans 14. Not a question about people dressed in 18th century clothing, but questions about church music and building projects and finances. About Sarah's bonnet and a whole bunch of other things, God's wisdom to us today is summed up in the first verse: "**Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.**" [Repeat.]

A. Disputable Matters

First, we must establish what "**disputable matters**" means. Not every disagreement is a "**disputable matter.**" "**Disputable matters**" are things that are not commanded or forbidden in God's Word. Lying is not a disputable matter because God's Word clearly labels lying as a sin. Honoring authority is not a disputable matter because God's Word clearly commands it. Neither are "**disputable matters**" are not mere preferences like "I like chocolate ice cream, but my sister likes cookies-n-cream." "**Disputable matters**" are things that our consciences feel to be very important, but which are

not morally right or wrong in themselves. Sarah's bonnet was a good example of a disputable matter.

A bonnet is not morally good or bad in and of itself. It may be cute or unsightly, depending on your tastes, but it is not good or evil. Sarah had been brought up in a society where all decent girls and women wore a bonnet. In its time and place, her bonnet embodied quite a bit of her faith about how a Christian who has been redeemed by the blood of Christ should act. And so while the bonnet was not right or wrong in itself, her life situation had legitimately required it. But things had changed, and it was now neither right nor wrong in society. But her own conscience had required it for quite a while.

B. Who Are the "Weak"

Now in Romans 14, when it mentions "*disputable matters*," it mentions weak and strong people. I think that the easiest way for us to understand this is to look at each separately. Let's talk about the "weak" first.

The church in Rome was mostly made up of non-Jews with a Jewish minority sprinkled in. The Jewish minority were the "*weak*" believers of Romans 14, but not because they were a minority. The Jews had long believed in the God of Abraham. They had followed all the rules of the Law of Moses in those first five books of the Bible. For them it was a short hop from Judaism to Christianity, because Jews had been waiting for the Messiah and Jesus was that Messiah.

That part was easy. The tough part was separating themselves from the laws of Moses that had been part and parcel of their religion for generations. Those laws of Moses said they could only eat food that had been butchered in a certain way. Additionally, most of the meat in the marketplace had been slaughtered in a pagan temple: another no-no in Moses' book. Their conscience would not let them eat the meat that was available, and since they could find no other, at least some apparently ate vegetables.

That's what verse two means when it says, "*One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables*" (2). It wasn't that the Jews wanted to be vegans or protest the slaughter of animals. These Jews are called the "weak" believers because their consciences would not let them eat something they were free to eat.

Apparently, these Jews did not make an issue of it. They would not eat the meat, but they didn't make a stink about other people eating that meat. When the weak Christian feels a certain way about a "*disputable matter*," they must not force others to follow. Sarah did not insist that other Christian women dress as she did. She knew that it was neither commanded nor forbidden.

Another example: A man I know fairly well grew up in a church where alcohol was completely forbidden as evil. He now realizes that it is not. He would not even object to me having a beer at a meal with him. And yet for himself, he cannot take a drink. His conscience will not allow it.

But here is the temptation for the "weak" Christian. Christians who are conscientious objectors to one thing or another can begin to look at their "*strong*" fellow Christians, who don't share those doubts or worries about a certain important issue to them, and they might judge the "strong" Christian as uncommitted in their faith.

That is sinful. As verse 3 says, "*The man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.*"

B. Who the "Strong" Are

On the other hand you have the "*strong*." The "*strong*" in the Roman congregation were non-Jews, Gentiles. They had been pagans. They had not been waiting for a Messiah or anything like Jesus. But when they were told the good news of Jesus, their Savior from sin, the Holy Spirit worked faith in their hearts. For them, it had been a long jump from their pagan unbelief to Christianity. But it also meant they did not come with all the baggage the Jews came in with.

The Gentile Christians had always been used to this meat with the blood in it, or having been offered in a pagan temple, and they had no problem. That was fine because in the New Testament, all Moses' prohibitions about food and meat passed away. So the Gentiles swam very comfortably in the waters of the Christian faith. They are called "**strong**" because they could eat the meat or not eat it. It didn't matter to them. The Jews were the "**weak**" because their consciences would only allow them one option.

This is where our English language does us a disservice. When we talk about "weak" and "strong", our language thinks of "strong" as good and "weak" as bad. In fact, I sat there a few minutes in my study trying to think of an example where it is good to be weak—and I couldn't think of a single one. So when Paul talks about "weak" Christians, our minds, I think, naturally think, "weak Christians" = "bad Christians."

And that isn't Paul's point at all. Don't think of "**weak**" Christians as wrong people who need to be lectured or thrown out of the church. The very first words of this entire reading began, "**Accept him whose faith is weak.**" Many translations say, "**Welcome him.**" Don't just tolerate him, give him a hug, tell him to have a seat! He is your brother in faith!

Where the temptation comes for the "**strong**" is that a "**strong**" Christian might find it easy to look down on the weak Christian. The Christian who has never worn a bonnet finds it easy to look down on the bonnet wearer and her inhibitions, "Would you get over the bonnet thing already?!" But to her it is an issue of conscience. The Gentile who has never worried about eating meat with blood in it finds it easy to hold the vegetarian in contempt. "You need to learn to enjoy *real* food!" That kind of thinking, too, is sinful. Again, verse 3 says, "**The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not... for God has accepted him.**"

C. The Weak and Strong In Real Life

Back in 2004, I heard a sermon on this same reading. In most respects, it was a very good sermon. That I can remember it 13 years after hearing it, is a testimony to that. The pastor was not a Lutheran pastor. We were in a place where there was no Lutheran church, so we went to a nearby church. The pastor started his sermon by recounting a life experience of his own. He was growing up in the 1960's, a time of great change across society. About twenty years old, he showed up at church one day as young people of that day dressed: long unkempt hair, jeans and a t-shirt. In the 60's, that was not how church goes dressed. An elder of the church in a three-piece suit scowled at him as he walked in the door and had words for him after the service. It really put him off—being judged like that. In fact, he didn't go back to church for quite a while. In his sermon on the weak and the strong, the pastor reflected how the elder's attitude was wrong, sinful because he judged that young man's faith on a "**disputable matter.**" He had a point—as far as he went.

What stunned me was that after years of reflection on the point this pastor did not realize his own loveless actions. He, like the "**strong**" of Paul's letter, looked down his nose with contempt on the "**weakness**" of the church elder. He failed to admit that he had clearly offended the sensibilities of the elder. He also did not consider that the church elder likely was very concerned about God's glory and honor. Very likely he had supported the church through thick and thin with his time, talents and money, and that whatever happened in that church, the church elder would be there. The pastor, in his sermon, displayed a complete inability to look back on the issue through the eyes of that church elder.

What I am saying is that there was plenty of blame on the part of both in this pastor's life event. Neither acted with much concern for the others. We need to avoid those same tendencies, because these disputable matters also come up in our midst. Church music, right? Church finances, right? Where to sit, and a host of other "**disputable matters.**"

Do you remember our Gospel reading? Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant? It is much easier

to be the unmerciful servant than we might think. At times, each of us is convinced that our way is the only enlightened way of serving God. In our **“strong”** moments we are convinced that the people who can’t go along with all that we want in our church, that they must be weak believers, slow-pokes standing in the way of progress. And in our **“weak”** moments when we see people not sticking to the way things should be done (at least in our own minds) it is easy to judge them as self-centered wastrels, who only want to serve God on their own terms.

Who can deliver us from all the loveless ways we have treated and thought of our fellow believers? It is only Christ. Christ Jesus looks at each of us who alternates between judgmental and contemptuous and he forgives. Not because of anything good that we have done—we can never claim that. But merely because he is our good and gracious Savior who has freely forgiven us, and he wants us to live in that forgiveness.

That is why we sang those words a few minutes ago, “Oh, how good it is when the fam’ly of God--dwells together in spirit, in faith and unity. Where the bonds of peace, of acceptance and love are the fruits of His presence here among us.” Indeed, let strong and weak accept each other. Amen.