

Hallmarks of the Transformed Life Loving our Brethren When We Differ

Intro: In our last lesson we noted that the transformed disciple loves everyone with a sense of obligation, with insight into God's purpose, with a sense of urgency, with moral purity, and with an eye on Jesus. Perhaps Paul could have ended his discussion of the transformed life there; but instead he continues in Romans 14-15 with one last application of the principle of love; and it is an important one!

What do Christians do when they have conscientious disagreements? What if they hold different positions of faith about a matter they think is important to God? What would love cause them to do?

In every age, Christians who have been serious about doing God's will have been confronted with the problem of conscientious differences; and it was no different for the first Christians. For the Roman Christians those differences originated in the diverse backgrounds of the Jews and Gentiles who had been joined together as a church of Christ in Rome.

The Diverse Cultural Background

Part of that diversity is the result of the ancient Jew-Gentile distinction.

For centuries the two groups had had little association with one another. In fact, God's law had made it that way by legislating Jewish customs in a way that would have isolated them from the Gentile people. He had given them laws that distinguished between clean and unclean foods; He had given festivals to observe and the Sabbath day which made them culturally unique. The Jews, knowing that these Laws had come from God considered in them an implied condemnation of the Gentiles and the Gentile people reciprocated with ridicule and mockery of the Jewish customs, considering them unnecessary. Some Gentiles thought that the Jews observed the Sabbath because they were just plain lazy and wanted an excuse not to work. And as for the food laws, what could possibly be wrong with enjoying good seafood, pork, and the other delicacies of the Roman palate?

Part of that diversity may have also been the result of the idolatrous background of the Roman culture.

Dotting the Roman landscape were temples made in honor of the Roman pantheon and daily, people gathered at those temples to beseech the favor of the gods, to offer a little incense, and to share a meal taken from the sacrifices offered to the gods. Some of those who left this idolatry could hardly have been able to re-enter those temples without thinking of the god they had once worshipped. And some might have even had trouble buying some of the leftover meat at the local meat market knowing that shortly before it had been on the pagan

altar and had been sold to the market to sell to the public. They may have just decided to stay away from meat altogether lest they participate in what was offered to the gods! Among the Gentiles there were also diverse food customs, and philosophical schools sometimes had their own laws about such things. In addition, almost every society had its customary national and ethnic festivals and celebrations.

How would these things affect the two when they were brought together into one group where they not only shared a spiritual life but also a social life together?

Paul shows us that these differences continued in those who became disciples.

One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. (Romans 14:2)

One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. (Romans 14:5a)

The problem was not that there were differences of opinion about such things; but that each thought others needed to embrace his viewpoint or be condemned.

Would it be hard to imagine that many of the Jews who became Christians thought that their food distinctions were still valid and thus would condemn Gentiles who ate non-kosher food? And would it be hard to imagine that Gentiles might have reciprocated in kind, viewing their Jewish brethren with contempt for their “hang ups” on foods and days? Would it hard to imagine tension and mounting pressure to conform among these believers?

Truly such issues had the potential for splitting up the Roman church almost immediately from its establishment. How long would it before there were angry debates, hard feelings, isolated cliques developing over these things? Such were the possibilities for the Roman Christians. The Holy Spirit guided Paul in offering a solution to this complex problem.

Paul’s solution to the problem!

Paul urged the Romans to accept one another in spite of their differences!

Paul book-ends the discussion of conscientious differences by urging the Romans to “accept” one another.

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. (Romans 14:1)

Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (Romans 15:7)

Here the idea would be to “accept” or to take as a partner in the Lord’s work, receive into spiritual fellowship.

Paul urged the Romans not to let their differences become a basis for doubtful disputes.

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. (Romans 14:1)

It would be tempting for the brother who knew his liberty in Christ to seek to coerce the weaker brother into conformity to his views.

Paul urged the Romans to allow each person to practice their own personal faith without being forced to conform to the views of others.

Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. (Romans 14:5b)

In the disputed areas of faith, each person was instructed to do what his conscience told him was the “right” thing to do.

Paul urged the Romans not to let their differences become the grounds of judging or condemning one another.

Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. (Romans 14:3)

It is interesting here because the “weak” brother is urged not to judge the strong, even in an area where he thinks his practice is wrong! And the strong is urged not to judge the weak, even in an area where he knows the weak brother’s knowledge is inadequate.

What was the basis for Paul’s solution?

They should accept one another because Christ had already accepted them!

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Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (Romans 15:7)

All the Romans, in spite of their differences, had each been accepted by Jesus Christ when they put faith in his sacrifice and obeyed the gospel. Now would the Romans reject those whom the Lord had accepted?

They should allow each to be fully persuaded in his own mind because Christ had made the principle of faith the basis of their salvation.

Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, (Romans 5:1)

Now would the faith that had saved the Romans, now condemn them? By continuing in faith they would continue in God’s grace and grow into spiritual maturity.

They should refrain from judging because Christ would eventually judge them!

But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore... (Romans 14:10-13)

We need to remember that every other believer is the Lord's slave, not ours.

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (Romans 14:4)

Paul had faith that Christ had the power to make the "weak" brother "strong". And in that "strength" he would at last "stand" before Christ approved.

An Objection to Paul's solution: "But won't this lead to people practicing all kinds of "sinful" things?"

No! Is it conceivable that the Romans would have taken Paul's words to be permission to turn back to the ungodly life they had left? Not at all! What Paul describes are people who do what they do out of "faith", not out of "fleshly desire". They do it out of conviction based on what God says.

He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. (Romans 14:6)

Paul would have been surprised to hear anyone use his words here to justify the practice of sins like those mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:12 (sins like fornication, covetousness, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, or swindling). In those cases, he urged the church to "judge" their brothers! Here he tells them to "not judge their brother"!

No! It was designed to keep people from practicing all kinds of "sinful" things! When a person is forced to act contrary to their own faith "sin" is the result!

But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin. (Romans 14:23)

Conclusion: The transformed disciple shows love for his brethren by receiving them, allowing them practice their faith conscientiously, giving them time to grow and refraining from judging them. When we show this love, we prepare the way for the "weak" to become "strong" and for the whole body "to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6).