

Sermon: Who Is the Strongest?

Text: Romans 14

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Introduction: It is not always easy to understand what is meant by strong and weak especially in spiritual terms.

I Timothy 4:8 (NIV) ⁸For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

II Corinthians 12:7-10 (NIV) ⁷To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I hope some day we can all understand what it is to be really strong (in the Lord).

Growing up I remember times of conflict and testing to see who was the strongest. There was arm wrestling. There were games like slugging each other’s arm until one person cried “uncle” (i.e., I give up).

1. King of the mountain/hill
2. Grade school fights and trying to establish alliances with the tough guys.
3. John Northwood’s story

As a person grows older and hopefully wiser he/she quickly comes to understand that *real* power and strength is found in the mind (spiritual realm) and in love, the kind of love God teaches. This love produces godly encouragement and strength.

Since chapter 12 in Romans, Paul, the Apostle, has been providing application for all the heavy theology we had to work through in chapters 1-11. Now we are dealing with the SO WHAT?!

We are entering the world of ethical behavior, i.e., the practical side of faith. Just facts and figures rarely have an impact on anyone, but if that information is the Gospel - you see that can transform your life (if believed).

Relationships require responsibility. In chapter 14 there is: the responsibility of the strong for the weak, the weak for the strong, and every Christian's responsibility to God.

Romans 14:1-13 (NIV) 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. ⁹For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" ¹²So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

Contextually, we must understand the conflict of consciences going on in the early Church.

- 1. Many Christians were converted Jews who had very strict dietary laws.**
 - what they could eat**
 - how food was prepared (Kosher, this is not a pickle)**
 - when a Jew could eat (fast days and feast days)**

Many of the Jews had been very legalistic about their practices. One definition of a legalist is: a person who lives in mortal terror someone, somewhere, is enjoying himself.

2. Many things were associated with pagan culture.

- eating food sacrificed to idols (many times the best meat available)**
- drinking alcoholic beverages (sometimes connected to orgies)**
- pagan holidays**

You say, “well that was then and how does this apply to me today?” “I am glad you asked,” he said. This same kind of problem of culture vs. Christianity exists now.

- instrumental music vs. a cappella singing**

In this controversy we have two members of the Restoration movement. It became a divisive issue that split the movement.

The initial reason for most churches including denominational churches in the 1800’s for not having instrumental music was not so much theological, but one of appearances and practicality. Pianos especially were associated with the saloons and honky-tonks. It also was an expense that could not always be funded in pioneer days.

Some more current examples:

I was never allowed to go to dances growing up. My parents believed that Christians did not do that. But hayrides were OK.

Smoking was wrong in the church building, but as soon as your foot touched the threshold at the door, you could flick your BIC or Zippo except in the basement of the UCC in Covington, Ohio where we would enjoy a pastry, coffee, and a cigarette between worship and Sunday School.

Appearances of where a Christian should be found. “Good” Christians never patronized restaurants or grocery stores that sold alcoholic drinks. A number of years ago now, my parents had a wedding reception for my brother in a bowling alley and we had to walk right through the bar to get to the reception room. And what about movies (Dr. Henderson’s view)?

Activities on Sunday - No one worked usually. You would never mow your lawn on Sunday and certainly not in shorts.

Dress codes (in the 60’s during the mini-skirt rage) at LCC required women students to get “special” written permission to wear slacks. Slacks were considered unladylike and certainly never would you wear such shameful apparel to church.

Let's look at one of our relational models in the text.

I. The Strong Person's Responsibility to the Weak

Look at the Romans 14 text:

verses 2-3a - (we are told) Do not look down on (literally “push out or ostracize) a brother who has different habits

verse 5 - Our own mind is to be the testing ground for personal beliefs and opinions. This, however, is not the beginnings of the “Do Your Own Thing” philosophy. Orthodoxy still is required. Truth cannot be defined solely in the mind. What we believe to be true does not change the Truth, nor does how we feel about it.

I might think or feel I can fly, but if I jump off a 10-story building I will die independent of what I think or feel.

verse 7 - We have responsibility for each other. We do not live in a vacuum.

verse 13 - Stop judging we are told. Build each other up.

verse 20 - Do not be a stumbling block (scandal, trap).

verse 21 - Do not cause a brother to fall. We should not judge a brother.

Romans 14:4 (NIV) 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.

- We are the Lord's servants and responsible to Him. The Lord will cause all who follow Him to stand.

- God reads the heart. I don't know what you are thinking.

- Christ alone has the right to judge. We are technically brothers and sisters to each other, not servants.

There is another reason why we should not judge those who are in Christ. Some newer Christians understand this freedom in Jesus more slowly than others. “Babes in Christ” must crawl before they are able to walk. This patterning is important even in the physical realm (babies **MUST** learn to crawl *before* they walk).

Illus. Is there anyone here who is afraid of heights? Have you ever roofed a house? I ruined a number of pair of pants trying to do that and my inexperience was also a contributing factor.

II. The Weaker Person in Christ Has a Responsibility to the Stronger Brother.

Responsibility in relationships should always go both ways!

verses 3b-4 is addressed to the weaker brother also!

Romans 14:3b-4 (NIV) ³_b 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.

Romans 14:6 (NIV) 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.

verse 6b - We have all seen bad examples of the stronger and weaker brothers. In the Church we have all been witness to abuse and distortion of this teaching. How it usually works is that all questions of conscience are settled on the basis of the most narrow and most prejudiced person in the congregation.

Illus. A visitor came to Sunday School class and commented about the unChristian music I was playing (enjoying) before class began. No one else objected to the music. I turned the music off in deference to the person. Who was the weaker Christian? Who was the stronger Christian? Who do you think the complainer thought was the weaker Christian?

Here is the “real” question that must be asked:

Is what I am doing (playing objectionable music) going to cause that person to fall into sin or fall away from Christ?

A weaker brother should never insist on depriving a stronger brother of a particular freedom. His position should be one of non-participation NOT OUT OF PROTEST, but out of respect for his brother and also as not to violate his own conscience.

Many times there are people who have insisted on being the conscience for not only the Church, but the world. HOWEVER, it is not our position to judge on matters of non-salvation issues.

The last relationship of importance is our relationship to God.

III. All Christians Have a Responsibility to God.

Our relationship with God determines how we will view our weaker? brother. The weaker brother is really hard to identify because to do so involves judging (i.e., thinking of oneself as better than another person.)

Does God break fellowship with us because of our weakness in relationship to Him? Of course not!

And in some ways what does it matter who really is the weaker or stronger brother. We are all saved by grace not our performance.

Romans 14:17-18 (NIV) ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

The Kingdom of God is more than rules and regulations. It is peace and joy in the Spirit. And peace and joy are never developed from circumstances. In the book of Philippians, joy is a key word, even though its author (Paul) is in prison and knows he is about to die as a result of his faith.

Romans 14:10-12 (NIV) ¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God." ¹²So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

God will hold us accountable. God will judge us through Jesus Christ on what we have done as well as what we have avoided doing.

I believe just as in the Parable of the Talents that the Master is more upset with the lack of doing anything or inactivity rather than our failure to do as well as others. I cannot be your standard nor vice versa.

Conclusion: So weak or strong, we will stand in front of our Lord at Judgment. The point of this 14th chapter is that we have no right to reject a brother or sister because of opinion or preference; nor should we intentionally do things that could cause him or her to stumble and fall.

God causes men to stumble the Scriptures say: Romans 9:33 (NIV) ³³As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

Jesus was a scandal because He was not what people thought He should be. He did not act the way they thought was appropriate.

BUT we dare not cause a person to stumble because we do not have the same redemptive power as God to lift him back up.

People who put themselves in God's place as Judge only seek to harden/hinder, not to liberate.

The Gospel is not negotiable, BUT opinion and differences in taste or preferences must never be pressed so as to be divisive or destructive to relationships. The problem arises when some confuse gospel with opinion and tradition.

We are not justified by being right - that's backwards.

We are righteous because we have been justified AND only Jesus can help us there.

Ethical/moral lives are only of real value *within* the Kingdom of God. BEING GOOD WILL NOT SAVE YOU. Jesus, alone, saves!