

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part fifty-four

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KNOWING WHAT MATTERS MOST - STRONG CONVICTIONS BALANCED WITH ENCOURAGING HEARTS

Romans 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."

This is such a useful passage because it teaches something different and frequently ignored on the matter of spiritual growth. It teaches something different about spiritual growth in this sense. We all want to grow in likeness to Christ Jesus. We all want to mature. And it's easy to picture the **areas** where we want our character shaped and developed. In other words, we all have pre-conceived ideas about our greatest areas of **need** and **weakness** that need correcting and transforming.

All of this is well and good as far as it goes. But it also creates a particular **danger** in the body of Christ. There is a most beautiful type of spiritual growth described by Paul in these verses. It isn't simply a matter of growing in one area and then another - like becoming more Biblically informed and then more sexually pure, and then controlling my temper. That type of **sequential** spiritual growth - one area, then another - leaves room for **imbalance** in **my** spiritual development (while I'm concentrating on **one** area I may well be ignoring **another**) and can foster **criticism** of **others** in whose hearts God is emphasizing something **different** from the area He's working on in **my** heart.

So Paul describes the kind of growth that not only matures **my own** walk with Jesus, but enhances **everyone else's** spiritual growth at the same time. There is a way to mature in Christ that not only increases **my own knowledge** of the truth - and this is incredibly important - but also stretches my **humility and love with others** at the same time. Hence the title of this teaching. We need to grow in **rock solid convictions** on matters of Biblical truth. And we need to grow as **loving encouragers** of other members of the church at the same time. That's what Romans chapters **fourteen** and **fifteen** are all about.

These first four verses of chapter fourteen contain great **life-framing principles** for the pursuit of a balanced, loving pursuit of holiness that is **passionately crucifying the deadening effects of sin in my own** life and yet **fostering the life of the Spirit in the discipleship of others**. This is the path we must learn to walk. And here are some of the key principles:

1) **WHILE OUR SINS ARE ERASED AT CONVERSION, WE ALL BRING OUR PAST INTO OUR NEW LIFE IN CHRIST**

I know we are "**new creations**" in Christ Jesus. But two thirds of the New Testament was written to help these "**new creations**" deal with the misconceptions and habits they formed before they were saved. We are new creations in the sense that we bring no **guilt from the past** into our walk with Jesus as Lord and Savior, and in the sense that we are **indwelt by a new life principle** - the Holy Spirit - and so have a power beyond anything we had **of our own making** to help us to grow in godliness. But we are **not** new creations in the sense that **who we were** up to the point of our regeneration has ceased to exist.

This explains Paul's words in today's text. There were "**weak**" Christians and there were "**strong**." And the context explains the difference. While scholars differ on some of the details, there were some Christians in the church at Rome who had very recently come out of Judaism. And they had lived their whole lives under the teaching of the Old Covenant that certain foods were not to be eaten. Not all meats, to be sure, but **some** were specifically called "**unclean**." And there were certain times and certain conditions under which **no** meats were to be eaten and all fermented drinks were to be avoided.

We don't think about this very much today, so we can't imagine the enormous shift in thinking that was required when Christ came and made these Old Covenant ordinances and ceremonies **obsolete**. And that's the exact word the New Testament uses to describe the Old Covenant's relationship to the New Covenant Christian - "**obsolete**" - like an 8 track tape - **Hebrews 8:13** - "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one **obsolete**. And what is becoming **obsolete** and growing old is ready to vanish away."

Even fairly mature Christians - like Peter the **apostle** - wrestled with this concept: **Acts 10:9-15** - "The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to

pray. [10] And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance [11] and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. [12] In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. [13] And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." [14] But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." [15] And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common."

O, how Jesus stirred up the waters when He pictured the change His arrival was about to usher in. He shook up all the religious leaders of the day with words like these: **Mark 7:15, 18-19** - "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."....7:18-19.... And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, [19] since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.)"

So there were fairly new Christians in the church at Rome - some understood this deeply and some didn't. They were *all* loved and received by God through Christ Jesus. There were all **Christians**. But some had just recently come out of Judaism. They had lived all their lives trying to be holy before God and knew the **rules** for being holy. Then they met with other Christians - probably many of whom were of Gentile background - who never had **any** of these commandments in their background. And they were horrified to see Christians **ignoring** the system of religious purity they had lived with all their lives.

Add to this the possibility that there may have been new **Gentile** believers who had come out of occult practices where various meats were offered to idols in sacrificial rituals. Then they would be invited to places where meat was served that may have actually been used in those sacrifices. These Gentiles, anxious to leave their old pagan traditions behind, felt defiled by partaking of those meats.

So on various fronts arguments would spring up. Paul says so in **Romans 14:1** - "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." And those who refused unclean meats were troubled and confused. Probably they reasoned that, seeing there was such turmoil and confusion over what meat could be eaten and when, the only sane approach was to avoid it all together.

And, while not necessary, this wasn't a totally unreasonable approach. After all - and this is how these verses fit into the context of the whole letter - look at what Paul had just been writing about a few verses earlier - **Romans 13:13-14** - "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. [14] But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." And they certainly didn't want to make "**provision for the flesh**," so the safest approach was just to avoid meat altogether. Better safe than sorry.

We'll look at the flaw in such thinking in a minute. The main point right now, however, is we can easily **bring our past into the way we approach the Christian life**. Our past convictions - some good and some bad - can, if we're not very, very careful, shape the way we perceive and apply Biblical truth. That's the first point.

2) **AS CHRISTIANS, WE DON'T ALL MATURE AT THE SAME PACE**

This seems obvious from the entire text, but doesn't get mentioned often in the commentaries. By using the labels "**weak**" and "**strong**" when referring to these two groups of Christians Paul makes it plain that, while all Christians are **saved**, they are not all **equal**. Some of the Christians in Rome were "**weak**" and some were "**strong**."

I take that to mean there is nothing "**magical**" in becoming a Christian. It is "**supernatural**," to be sure, but not **magic**. While regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit, the rest of the process of growth in grace isn't **magical** - isn't **automatic**. In other words, growth in the Christian isn't just something that **happens** to you, like the way a child's body just grows without the child's thinking about growing.

And something very important flows out of this point. There were "**weak**" Christians and there were "**strong**" Christians. But they were **all** Christians. I take that to mean a Christian can be **right** on the **main principle** of getting saved, yet still be wrong on the **particulars** of growing in Christ Jesus. In other words, one isn't **guaranteed** of getting the **details** of the Christian life right just because one is **saved**.

True enough, **regeneration** happens apart from our works. It comes the same way to each and every person, regardless of age, sex, education, or position. Regeneration happens **to** a person by the sheer power and grace of God. But God-given regeneration is just a **seed**. It's just the **start** of new life in Christ Jesus. From the moment of

regeneration on you and I are **involved** in the process of our growth and maturity in Christ. We can **lag** or **excel**.

The New Testament burns with the urgent, constant emphasis of our ongoing need for diligence and application of effort:

1 Corinthians 3:1-2 - “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. [2] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready....”

Paul wanted to give these Christians deeper truth than he gave them. He had some big plans to stretch their souls with deeper truths from God’s Word. But he couldn’t follow up on those plans. These Christians hadn’t **grown**. They hadn’t **developed**. Paul says they just weren’t **ready** for the teaching he had given other Christians.

Hebrews 5:11-14 - “About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. [12] For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, [13] for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. [14] But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”

Here you see the same idea. And notice the **doctrinal emphasis** here. It’s not just that the writer expected to find them feeding the poor and caring for the needy, important as that surely is. The writer expected to find Christians who were mature and ready to **teach** others. He was expecting to find Christians who could **discern right from wrong, truth from error**, with wisdom and perception.

And there was no **reason** they shouldn’t have been so. Everything they needed to grow was available to them. But these Christians couldn’t do what the writer expected. They were still immature and spiritually stunted. And the writer says the **reason** for their immaturity was their own lack of effort and discipline. They hadn’t worked at all at becoming “**skilled in the word of righteousness**”(13).

Let me urge you to leave behind a superstitious, magical view of the Christian life. It isn’t **fun**. It’s **work**. You have all the growth in Christ you really want. Paul says he came to the place - a point in understanding - when he “**put away childish things**.” He began to think like a soldier. You aren’t growing in Christ just because you gave your heart to Jesus at some point in the past. Press on to know Him with all that is in you.

But there’s another part to spiritual maturity emphasized in our Romans text. In addition to learning **truth**, learn **patience** with those who aren’t as mature as they should be in Christ. The fact that they’re cruel, or jealous, or petty, or gossipers, or get easily angered with you, doesn’t mean they aren’t Christians. It doesn’t give you the right to be easily offended with them or to write them off as not being Christians after all.

3) THERE ARE PARTICULAR DANGERS THAT ACCOMPANY EACH LEVEL OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Romans 14:1-3 - “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.”

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, Paul starts his correction by addressing the **strong** in faith. This person is strong, not because he or she knows everything there is to know about the faith. He is called strong because he understands the heart of the gospel, which is justification by **faith**, apart from works. The strong understand that the old system of laws and regulation, which pointed to the coming of Christ, the sacrificial Lamb of God, are now all obsolete. They are powerless and they are useless for earning any standing with God.

But Paul still wants to correct the strong in faith. They have a tendency toward a sin that is different from the weak. The strong tend to “**despise**” the weak (3a). While the weak tend to “**judge**” the strong (3b). So Paul comes to the strong first. Perhaps he hopes they will be more ready to be teachable. They must not, says Paul, **despise** or **look down** on the weak. They mustn’t assume the position of a **superior**. They mustn’t **mock** the weak. And, perhaps most importantly of all, they mustn’t **force** the weak brother to act against his conscience.

Then Paul addressed the weak - the one who thinks the strong are being morally careless and indifferent to holiness and purity. So Paul tells the weak not to “**judge**” the strong. As long as the matters in question are not **crucial** issues - if we can find no clear teaching in the Scriptures dealing with the issue - then the weak must remember that

“God has welcomed [or “received”] the strong - the one who freely eats the meat.

O, how important this all is! These are the issues churches fight and split over. Churches don't divide (usually) over the Trinity or the Resurrection. They squabble over **dress** and **worship styles**. How we need Paul's instruction over remembering God has **“received”** those with whom we disagree!

And God can make people stand - **Romans 14:4** - **“...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.”** Be careful here. Yes, people can fall. They can make big mistakes. And the church sometimes has the direct command from the Lord to rebuke and correct and even discipline:

1 Corinthians 5:1-5 - **“It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. [2] And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. [3] For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. [4] When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, [5] you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”**

But remember the issue here. Not everything is a Scriptural issue. Some things don't sit the same way in every heart. And in **non-essential** matters, remember the body of Christ. Remember we are all walking by grace alone. And remember that God can and will make people stand - even those with whom I may, at times, disagree.