

Be Transformed in Strength

Romans 14:1-15:13

Key Verse: 12:1, 2 & 15:7

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.”

Today is our last passage in the being transformed miniseries. Today’s topic is strength; we must be transformed in strength. What does that mean? Let’s look at how the world uses its strength. The pattern of the world is survival of the fittest. Of course they don’t come out and say it because they want to be politically correct but that is the reality. When you look behind the curtain, everything is survival of the fittest- where the strong dominate the weak. We see it in sports, politics, and even in academics. In sports, we celebrate the stronger more dominate team, you would never hear anyone say, “I love the Bears because they are so weak.” Of course not. People love the Blackhawks not because they’re weak but because they played the first 24 games of the season without losing even one. A feat no other team in history has been able to do. In politics we like the strong candidates, those that show they can be a strong leader. And in school, those who have the highest GPA and more achievements are usually selected before those that don’t. So in some schools students battle to be ranked #1. The movies are full of survival of the fittest. Take Hunger Games for example, it was controversial because it placed this theme among children. For the most part history shows that the strong have always controlled the weak. But in today’s passage we see a different principal in how God’s people should live. God’s people should not follow the pattern of the world and the strong in faith should accept the weak and bear with their failings. Let’s see what Paul is talking about.

Throughout this letter Paul mentions the unity of his fellow Christians. But how can they really be unified if there is conflict between them. In this chapter Paul reveals one aspect of their conflict had to do with how strong or weak ones faith was and how some people used it to oppress others. So Paul states that Christians must accept one another in the love of Christ. This is when unity starts and sometimes to make this happen a person that has stronger faith must accept those that have weaker faith. Take a look at verses 1-4. “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.² One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.⁴ Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.” From these verses we learn that there conflicts will come up about what Paul describes as disputable matters. This is a generic term that can include so many different things. As Christians there are some things that we should be willing to die for and then there are things that are not worth fighting over. We can group these things into two categories called core values and disputable matters.

For fun let’s try a pop quiz. I will say something and you tell me if it’s a core value or a disputable matter. 1 – God created the heaven and the earth. 2 - Jesus is the Son of God. 3- Dressing up for church. 4 – Going to church on Sunday. 5 – your hair style. 6 – Jesus died and was raised to

life. 7 – one to one Bible study. 8 – Accept Jesus as your personal savior. 9 – testimony writing. 10 – the Ten Commandments. Core values are things that we believe in that make us Christian such as: God created the heavens and the earth, Jesus is the Son of God, he was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again and ascended into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of our heavenly Father. One day he will come again to judge the living and the dead. And when we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus, we will be forgiven of our sins and when Jesus comes again our bodies will be resurrected and we will have everlasting life and live with our heavenly Father in his kingdom forever. The Ten Commandments and sin are not disputable matters. If we don't believe in these things, we're not Christian.

However, there are things about which two sincere Christians can hold differing opinions and still be Christians. In this passage Paul mentions eating meat and observing special days as disputable matters. In our time, we can say that clothing preferences (wearing a suit or tie), music style (classical orchestra or contemporary guitars), the method of baptism (sprinkling or full immersion), drinking wine, meeting styles or mentoring philosophies (group Bible study vs one to one) can be disputable matters. Should strong Christians insist that their own opinions are absolutely right, demanding weaker Christians to comply? Absolutely not! In fact, stronger Christians are supposed to be more mature and should not look down on weaker Christians in regard to disputable matters. They must accept weaker Christians as fellow members in the body of Christ, worthy of respect and affection. Since we are in the time of Lent, 40 days before Easter, our Catholic brothers and sisters do not eat meat on Fridays. Since I am not Catholic, I've never really understood why they do it. And because I've never understood it, I've usually made jokes about them. I've looked down upon them as being weak in faith and I am strong because I don't have to but I shouldn't have. The main point that Paul wants to stress is that disputable matters are not worth fighting over. They are disputable and may be good in one situation and not in another. The problem starts when we begin to fight about them. When we do so we are not acting in love.

How can the strong in faith and the weak get along? Both groups must do their best to love one another. They must accept those who are weak in faith without passing judgment on disputable matters. Here, the word "accept" doesn't mean grudgingly, like, "I will tolerate you." The strong must not look down on the weak and despise them with contempt. Rather, to "accept" another means to welcome them into the body of Christ with affection. Not only is it to welcome them into the family of God, but it is to make them feel welcome. To develop spiritual unity in the body of Christ we must accept each other with a generous heart without passing judgment on them regarding disputable matters. Yet sometimes it's not easy for a strong Christian to accept a weak Christian. Instead of accepting them, the strong Christian may want to change them or fix them up. The stronger Christian may know what is right and best, still, they must not pass judgment on their weaker brother or sister. Instead, they must accept them and love them by revealing the grace of Christ to them. When strong Christians accept those who are weaker with the loving heart of our Lord Jesus Christ, they can make a good spiritual environment where the weak will be able to become strong in faith. Our Lord Jesus accepted all kinds of people. Jesus accepted a wayward Samaritan woman whom her own people despised because of her immoral life. Jesus accepted Levi the tax collector, whom all Jews despised as a trader. Jesus accepted a man with leprosy who came to him for healing. Jesus even accepted a man condemned for robbery, possibly murder, while he was hanging on the cross. We must accept others as our Lord Jesus did.

Then what about the weaker Christians? Are they always right? No. Their problem is that they tend to condemn the strong as those with no standard. Paul says, "...and the man who does not

eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him” (3b). The real issue in Christian fellowship is not whether other Christians live up to our man made standards but if we accept them or not. For if God has accepted them, then we must accept and respect them as God’s servant because God loves them and he is able to make him stand (4).

Look at verse 5. “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” Forming Christian fellowship goes beyond the strong accepting the weak, or the weak respecting the strong. Some issues have nothing to do with being strong or weak; they simply come up because we’re all different. However, we have a responsibility in this diversity and that is to have convictions of faith. We should not ignore disputable matters instead we should view as an opportunity to define our convictions before the Lord. As 12:2 says we can have discernment for what God’s will for us is. By making decisions about disputable matters, our own personal faith develops and we can become the kind of people God really wants us to be as we struggle to grow in our own personal faith.

In verses 6-8, the “Lord” or “God” are repeated eight times. This highlights how we are to resolve disputable matters and that is to seek to glorify God through it. Take a look at verse 8. “If 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.” If we are to live and die for the glory of God, how much more should we glorify God in resolving disputable matters. Therefore we have to study the Bible deeply and personally so that we are able to make clear decisions of faith about disputable matters. In this way, we can glorify God through our personal lives of faith. For when we act with faith in God, we please God. But when we do not act in faith we are sinning before God. (v22-23) “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.”²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”

All of us have the privilege and divine duty to make decisions of faith to please God. However, it is not enough for us to live blindly by these convictions. We can’t hold on to our convictions and trample others like a bulldozer. In America we love our freedoms, people will die for their freedoms. But it’s not always about me. We should live by our convictions and at the same time submit our convictions to the law of love. Which means that we must be sensitive toward our brothers and sisters in Christ and consider what effect our lives have on them. Take a look at verse 13b. “Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.” We can be a stumbling block to others if we use of our Christian liberty insensitively. So we should submit our convictions about disputable matters to the law of love. Paul uses himself as an example (14). He had struggled before God with the dietary laws. As a Jew and a former Pharisee, we can imagine how deeply rooted his practice of those dietary laws must have been. But after meeting Jesus, he was set free from those laws. He was fully convinced that no food was unclean in itself. But when he was around others he did not eat whatever he wanted to eat. Rather he paid attention to the effect that his eating had on other people. If a fellow Christian was distressed because Paul ate a certain food, he would stop eating it. Paul was free, but he submitted his freedom to the law of love. Look at verse 15. “If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.” Our faith must always come back to the cross of Jesus. When Jesus suffered and died, not only did he die for my sins, but he died for each and every one of God’s children. Thus, our value to God is the same. Since God loved our fellow Christians enough to sacrifice Jesus for them, we must be ready to restrain our Christian liberty so that we may not be a stumbling block to them. We must always remember that our Christian brothers and sisters are so precious to God that Christ died for them, too.

Look at verse 16. “Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.” We must not take this verse out of context. This doesn’t support the idea that we should fight with others holding on to our strong convictions. Rather, it urges us to use restraint in exercising our Christian liberty so that we may not offend others so much so that they start to say what we are doing is evil even though we have come to believe that it’s good. We should not let these things divide us, or cause someone to stumble. Instead we should be full of joy, peace and righteousness. Verses 17-18 say, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy through the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.” It’s not about what we eat or drink, but about loving one another so that there is an environment of trust among believers where there is peace and joy so that the Holy Spirit can work in us and make us righteous.

How we act toward one another is important. If we judge one another we will be held accountable to God for it because all of us will have to kneel before God and confess our deeds. (v11-12) We are called to love one another, not judge each other – that’s God’s job. So what’s the point of believers coming together? Is it so that we can change others to make them look and act like us, because we know the right way? No. Take a look at verse 15:1. “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.” Strong Christians are those who have come to know the grace of Jesus and have repented of their sins and live as citizens of God’s kingdom. Weak Christians are those who believe in Jesus, but lack the power of faith to overcome the world. They fail repeatedly in their spiritual struggles. Paul tells strong Christians to bear with the failings of the weak.

To bear with the failings of the weak means that we don’t give up on them or cut them off from fellowship because they don’t do what we want. For the strong, it is tempting to cut off the weak, so as to not be burdened with them. Ultimately, this is pleasing oneself. Many Bible teachers study the Bible gladly with new students at first. But when the young ones don’t do what we want, it’s easier to cut them off and be rid of them. The Bible says we must bear with the failings of the weak. Also to bear with the failings of the weak means to build them up in faith. Look at verse 2. “Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.” Here, “please his neighbor” does not mean to merely make his neighbor happy when he is feeling down. To please one’s neighbor is to build him up in faith. Ultimately it is so that we may be one body worshiping God in one voice. (v6) This is the reason that we accept one another. Verse 7 says, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” When we accept one another, we bring praise to God.

According to the world, the strong should dominate the weak. We should use our strength to control the weak. But in Christ we are taught that the strong should use their strength to build up the weak. Our life of faith is like a long race, a marathon, but it not one where we are competing with each other. It doesn’t matter who gets to heaven first, but the fact that we ALL get there. We are to help one another as we run the race of faith, accepting and building each other along the way. We must be transformed from the inside out to accomplish this. I pray that each one of us may be transformed so that we don’t conform to the pattern of our world.