**GOD’S KINGDOM MANIFEST THROUGH CHRISTIAN LOVE  
Romans 14:1–15:13**

***“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking,   
but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (14:17)***

In last week’s chapter, Paul taught that we should love our neighbors as ourselves, for obeying that one command fulfills the whole law. This may sound easy in theory, but practically, we face challenges to loving one another from disputable matters and human weaknesses and failings. In today’s passage, Paul gives practical advice and admonition what we should and should not do in order to love our neighbors in the church to manifest and experience the Kingdom of God. While giving practical teaching on how to handle disputable matters and weaknesses in others, Paul gives three main reasons why we should treat each other with love: each of us belongs to Christ, God is at work to build his kingdom among us, and Christ showed us an example of selfless love.

1. **The Lordship of Christ (14:1–12)**

Paul begins this section with an exhortation to acceptance. Look at verse 1: “***Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.***” Our basic attitude toward our fellow Christians should be loving acceptance, even regarding disputable matters. So, what is a disputable matter? Just because people dispute about a matter doesn’t make it disputable, biblically speaking, for there has historically been contention over many issues ranging from the foundational doctrine of the deity of Christ to the absurd question of how many angels fit on the head of a pin. So a disputable matter can be defined as an issue that the Bible doesn’t speak clearly about. Some disputable matters today are young earth vs old earth creationism, immersion baptism vs sprinkling, how often to celebrate communion, alcohol use, and politics. In contrast, some indisputable matters are that God is the Creator, Christians should be baptized and celebrate communion, we should not become drunk, and we should not be sexually immoral. Another indisputable matter is that we should not quarrel over disputable matters.

Paul uses the example of food. Look at verse 2: “***One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.***” Those with strong faith recognized their Christian liberty regarding the Old Testament law, which is fulfilled in Christ. On the other hand, those with weak faith associated certain behaviors with sin and abstained. Such differing opinions have the potential to produce conflict, so Paul admonishes in verse 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.***” There is a temptation to judge those who interpret the Bible less strictly or to ridicule those who interpret the Bible more strictly.

For example, some Christians apply Romans 12:2, “*Do not conform to the pattern of this world…*” by abstaining from indulging in “fairs, parades, circuses, moving picture shows, theaters, drama, public bathing resorts, organized contesting ball teams, dancing, card parties, races, … scavenger hunts, mystery suppers, hayrides and such like.” If this list of prohibited activities seems ridiculous to you, your list of permissible activities probably seems scandalous to them. In Christ, they have the right to set standards for themselves and their families in pursuit of holiness and obedience to Scripture, and each of us has the right to set different standards regarding such disputable matters. What we do *not* have the right to do is judge other believers or treat them with contempt concerning such things.

So is the answer just never to think about disputable matters? Paul says in verse 5b, “***Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.***” We are encouraged develop personal convictions about these things by studying the Scriptures and applying godly principles. Just because a matter is disputable doesn’t mean there is no right answer; rather, there is a right answer for each person, which may even change with time and contexts. When Paul was ministering to Jews, he “*became like one under the law… to win those under the law*” even though he himself was no longer under the law. But when Paul was ministering to the Gentiles, he “*became like one not having the law… to win those not having the law*” (1Co 9:20–21). Paul used his Christian liberty to maximize his impact for God’s kingdom.

So the first reason that Paul gives for accepting one another regardless of differing opinions is that we are all part of God’s kingdom, that is, under the rule of King Jesus. Look at verse 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.***” We do not have the right to judge other believers; we don’t have the option of rejecting those whom Christ has accepted. Jesus paid a high price to accept each of us. Verse 9 says, “***For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.***” Christ gave his life to purchase us as his own; his death and resurrection establish his eternal kingship.

Christ’s kingship over our fellow Christians means that we cannot judge or condemn his other servants about matters concerning which he hasn’t ruled clearly, for doing so usurps his authority as Judge (14:10). However, on matters which the Bible does teach clearly, we are to discern and to follow the guidance of the Bible. For example, 1 Corinthians 5:11 says, “*…you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.*” We should not accept as fellow believers those who live in open and unrepentant rebellion against God’s clear commands, or those who deny core doctrines or compromise the gospel message.

Christ’s kingship has strong implications over our own lives as well. Because Jesus purchased us, now we must live for him. Verse 8 says, “***If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.***” Paul clearly teaches a Christ-centered focus. We belong to the Lord, and every area of our life is accountable to him. Our life direction and purpose are to the Lord and for the Lord. When we apply this Christ-centeredness to disputable matters, it becomes clear that our motivation is Christ regardless of which side we take. Whether we choose to partake or abstain, we do so not for ourselves, but for the name of Jesus and giving thanks to God (6).

1. **God’s Work to Build His Kingdom (14:13–23)**

Jesus’ kingship completely changes our approach toward others. Look at verse 13: “***Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.***” When Jesus is our focus, how we regard others shifts from criticism to care. A stumbling block has potential to cause others to sin, while an obstacle hinders their spiritual growth. Certain behaviors, even ones that the Bible legitimately permits, can at times become stumbling blocks or obstacles to other believers. So when evaluating our own actions, the question we ask is not, “Am I allowed to do this?” but, “Could this action harm a fellow Christian?”

One controversial issue that the church faced in Paul’s day was about food sacrificed to idols, which seems to be the meat and wine Paul is talking about in this chapter. There were good arguments on both sides of the issue. One the one hand, we know that there is only one God, and the pagan deities don’t exist and so can’t make food unclean. On the other hand, recent converts from pagan religions associate the food offered to idols with idol worship, which is clearly forbidden. Instead of coming down on one side of the argument, Paul regards both views as valid, saying in verse 14, “***I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.***” It is wrong for someone to violate his conscience regarding a disputable matter. Moreover, it is wrong to distress another believer by doing something they believe to be sinful. Verse 15 says, “***If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.***” Though the eating itself may not be sinful, failing to act in love is sinful, for the command to love one another is indisputable.

This chapter was very influential to me in forming my personal belief regarding alcohol use. I grew up in a Christian family where alcohol was occasionally served with meals, so I would sometimes have a glass of wine with my parents’ permission. I knew that I must obey the law regarding alcohol use, and that I must not get drunk, but other than that, I was free to enjoy with moderation and thanksgiving. However, one believer at my church had been an alcoholic before he came to Christ, after which he completely renounced drinking. I realized that my drinking distressed him. Also, I realized that my example could encourage others to drink, and even though I was never tempted to overindulge with alcohol, approximately one third of the population is susceptible to alcohol abuse, so my drinking could lead others into sin. So I resolved never to drink alcohol again based on 14:20b, “***All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.***” Since alcohol is a dangerous stumbling block for many people today, for me it is wrong—not due to legalism, but due to love. Neither food nor drink, nor any other earthly thing, is worth destroying a soul whom Christ died to save.

Having taught how Christians must not treat one another, Paul affirms positively what the kingdom of God is about. Let’s read 14:17 together: “***For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit***”. God’s kingdom is so much bigger than the peripheral matters we may hold differing opinions on. Rather, it is all about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let’s think about why Paul chose these three traits as characterizing God’s kingdom.

First, righteousness. As we have learned already in Romans, the righteousness of God is the state of legal innocence which Christ purchased for us by paying the penalty for our sin. Whoever renounces their old, self-centered way of life and trusts in Jesus as their Lord and Savior is washed clean from sin and guilt by Jesus’ blood. Because Jesus has justified us apart from our works, we pursue righteousness through seeking to know and serve Jesus, doing what pleases him.

Second, peace. Jesus’ death on the cross also purchased our peace—reconciliation of our broken relationship with God as well as with other people. Because Christ purchased our peace at such a high price, we also pursue peace in all our relationships, doing our best to live at peace with everyone, especially fellow believers.

Third, joy. When we live according to the righteousness and peace Christ bought for us, serving him and others, the result is joy—joyful fellowship with Christ and with other Christians. This joy is a taste of the kingdom of God, a piece of heaven even on earth.

So as citizens of God’s kingdom, we should seek God’s kingdom and his righteousness, doing his kingdom work. Look at verses 19–20a: “***Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.***” Paul calls peace and mutual edification the work of God, which is so much more important than food and drink. “***Make every effort***” is a strong exhortation to do this with all our strength, by any means possible.

So what leads to peace? Paul writes in Ephesians 4:2, “*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*” Humility, gentleness, and patience toward others promotes peace. Also, renouncing our own rights for the good of others can avert conflict. It is better not to get my own way or to miss out on something good than to break the peace in God’s church.

What leads to mutual edification? God’s word is the primary instrument of building up the church. Yet it must be used with love. 2 Timothy 4:2 says, “*Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.*” Wielding Scripture in impatience or anger can cause more harm than good, but loving, patient instruction can encourage and strengthen others. We should do all we can to facilitate each person’s spiritual growth.

But before we can edify others, we should have a strong personal relationship with God. Paul teaches this in verse 22a: “***So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.***” When there is a strong relationship between yourself and God, his word and his Spirit will give you discretion how to handle disputable matters with love for others and to build up God’s kingdom.

So the first reason to accept one another rather than judging or treating with contempt is the lordship of Christ over each of us, and the second reason is for the sake of God’s kingdom, which he is working to build. The final reason Paul gives is the example of the Lord Jesus.

1. **Christ’s Example to Build the Kingdom (15:1–13)**

Disputable matters are not the only things that threaten Christian unity; there are also human weaknesses that cause offense and inconvenience to one another. Paul teaches us how to respond to such, imitating Christ regarding the failings of the weak in 15:1: “***We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.***” To bear with the failings of the weak means that when people let us down or inconvenience or disrespect us, we just let it go, treating them with not only patient forgiveness, but also grace. 15:2 says, “***Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up.***” We serve each other in love, seeking to do what is best for the other, rather than considering what is pleasing for ourselves.

This is the example that Jesus himself showed according to verse 3: “***For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’***” Far from seeking what was pleasant for himself, Christ bore our moral failures for our good. Every sin that we commit is an insult to God. The guilt and punishment of our insulting sins fell upon Christ. But “*‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed’*” (1Pe 2:24). Paul quoted from Psalm 69, a messianic prophecy teaching us about Christ. He affirms that Scripture is full of such beneficial teaching in verse 4: “***For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.***” We can learn Christ’s attitude through studying the Scriptures, relying on the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to see Christ therein. From the hope of God’s kingdom revealed in the Bible, we can be draw encouragement to endure any hardships.

Bearing with the failings of the weak is very important for a healthy church. I know because many times my weaknesses and failings have required bearing with from others, from forgetting that I was supposed to meet my Bible teacher to locking myself out of the house early in the morning. Once, when I was supposed to be presiding, my alarm didn’t go off, and so I slept through worship service. When I realized what time it was, I hurried to church, but when I arrived I had missed the service and it was time for lunch. I heard that they had sung extra hymns while waiting for me to show up. Yet they treated me with grace and never even brought it up again. When I remember how my Christian family bore with my weak failings, I can bear with others.

More than that, I can bear with anyone’s weakness when I remember how patiently Jesus has borne with my weaknesses so far and continues to bear with me with love and grace. I can forgive anyone’s sin against me when I remember my sin which Jesus forgave.

Paul shares his prayer and hope for God’s people in verses 5–6: “***May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.***” A Christ-like attitude is not something we can muster through human effort, but something God gives us as we pursue Christ and seek his kingdom. When we grow individually to have toward each other the attitude of mind that Christ has toward us, the result is that we may glorify God with one mind and one voice. This beautiful state is a manifestation of the kingdom of God in his church and a foretaste of heaven. Revelation 7 gives us a picture of this: “*9 After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb… 10 And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.’*”

Based on this in God’s kingdom, we should accept one another, for accepting one another just as Christ accepted us brings praise to God (15:7). Paul illustrates how Christ brought glory to God in verses 8–9a: “***For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed 9 and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy…***” Christ’s earthly ministry was almost entirely to Jews, whom he served on behalf of God’s truth by teaching and preaching to them and raising disciples from among them. Even though many of the Jews rejected Jesus, Paul taught in Romans 9–11 about God’s plan to bring mercy to the Gentiles through the disobedience of the Jews, and then to show mercy to the Jews as a result of his mercy toward the Gentiles (11:30–31). So Jesus’ ministry to the Jews resulted in the Gentiles glorifying God for his mercy. In this way, Jesus accepted both Jews and Gentiles.

Paul demonstrates that God had been planning even from the Old Testament to gain glory through the Gentiles praising him by quoting four Scriptures about the Gentiles praising the Lord along with his people and hoping in the Messiah as their Ruler as well. Based on these promises, Paul prays in verse 13, “***May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.***”

We as God’s people belong to Christ, and so our greatest purpose and potential is to glorify God. One way we can glorify God is through manifesting his kingdom, experiencing joy in the Holy Spirit as we live according to the righteousness and peace Christ purchased for us. So when disputable matters arise or others fail in weakness, we can accept our brothers and sister without judgment based on Christ’s kingship over us all, God’s work to build his kingdom among us, and the example of Christ who accepted us. May we learn Christ’s mindset to build one another up, serve one another on behalf of God’s truth, and glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice.