

Romans 14:13-15:13

Unity of the Gospel

Preached on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2025

An American Pastor Kent Hughes tells this story of two congregations that were located only a few blocks from each other. They were both struggling, and the leadership believed that it might be better if the two would merge.

So they had great many meetings, but in the end, they couldn't pull it off.

Why?

They could not agree on how they would recite the Lord's Prayer.

One group preferred, 'forgive us our trespasses,' while the other group demanded, 'forgive us our debts.'

The local newspaper reported the story with the headline, "One church went back to its trespasses while the other returned to its debts."

We live in a divided world.

Many churches are divided over trivial matters!

Last week Paul outlined how we ought to approach conflicts.

Overlook matters of opinion, welcome those who disagree with you, and know that the Lord will judge each of us.

**This week**, he continues to instruct.

He tells us:

1. Each must follow their conscience

2. The strong must act in love
3. And we ought to pursue the unity of Jesus.

## 1. Each Must Follow Their Conscience

**I don't think** anyone here would believe me, but I once had been pretty strong.

Maybe briefly for a year or so in my twenties.

But Paul, when he talks about the strong and the weak, he's not meaning physical strength.

He's not even meaning spiritual strength.

The strong here aren't those who are able to resist temptations; and the weak aren't those who give into them easily.

No, here the strong and the weak refer to the differing convictions about Christian freedom concerning Old Testament laws.

The weak believed that Christians still were bound to keep the Jewish laws, especially the laws around food and Jewish festivals.

So they refrained from eating unclean foods like pork, rabbit meat, shellfish, sharks, eels...

Some just stopped eating meat altogether!

The strong knew that there was freedom here.

**Jesus told the Pharisees**, "Nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them...". He in this passage declared all food clean! (Mark 7:18-20).

It's our sin that makes us unclean, not shellfish!

Paul himself wrote earlier that we were freed from the tutelage of the Jewish law; we have died to the law and are now alive in Christ.

And we are now given something much better than the law – the Holy Spirit, the living God inside us!

But many Jewish Christians couldn't abandon the old practices.

This is actually a live matter.

For example, the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist brothers and **sisters practice dietary** practices similar to Jewish kosher laws, avoiding 'unclean' foods.

They also believe that we ought to practice Sabbath from on Saturday morning, rather than on Sunday.

They still feel bound to the Old Testament law.

Keeping the Old Testament Law might be a problem for you.

But on matters where the Bible does not directly speak on... we often do divide...

Some have strong sense of Christian freedom.

Others feel that we are to take a stricter positions.

Some here have sensitive conscience about drinking, smoking, movies with adult contents, gambling, lottery, or even mahjong.

The problem is the Bible doesn't actually speak directly about most of these matters.

So should we be free to do them?

Or should we take a stricter position?

So what are we to do when Christians disagree?

Paul told us last week that we shouldn't argue over them.

This week, he adds that **each must follow their conscience!**

v.14 – Paul is convinced that nothing is unclean in itself. But “if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.”

Or take a look at verse 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.”

You see, if you think it is wrong to eat certain things, it *is* wrong to eat it.

Our conscience can be wrong, but it is always wrong to go against our conscience.

Why?

Because an act against one's own conscience cannot be done from the faith; it cannot be done to honor God.

You can't think something is wrong and still do it for God's glory.

So when you're unsure, do not go against your conscience.

As staff, we discussed whether it's always wrong to participate in the **Ching Ming Festival**, the Tomb Sweeping Day.

On this day, millions of Chinese go to visit the grave of their ancestors to clean the tombstones, pray to the

departed, and perhaps burn paper effigies of houses, food, money and even smartphones to them.

Is it okay to accompany your family?

Is it okay to eat there?

Is it okay to bow to the grave?

Is it okay to burn a paper iphone?

I suspect the line is there somewhere in the middle.

But, different Christians draw the line differently.

But if you believe that it is wrong to do *any* of these things, then it is wrong!

So if your conscience says it is wrong, then do not bow because of the peer pressure, to please your parents, or not to stand out.

But while we are at it, I should also say that we should be educating our conscience with God's word.

We should try to find out what the Bible teaches about Jewish food laws, alcohol, food sacrificed to idols...

What God's word says perhaps indirectly gambling, smoking, and even about politics.

We ought to be growing in our understanding of God and God's world so that our conscience can be calibrated correctly!

If it is sensitive, it is sensitive about the right things!

But as we go, each must follow their own conscience!

## 2. The Strong Must Act in Love

And as we go along, the strong must bend in love.

Paul put this in the strongest terms in 15:1, “We who are strong *ought* to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.”

The strong have an obligation to bend for those who have a sensitive conscience, even if they are ‘right’ on the issue!

There are many reasons why the responsibility falls on the strong.

**The first is just** that the weak don’t have a choice.

If one thinks it’s wrong to eat unclean food, it is unclean for them, v.14.

*They* can’t go ahead and do it.

But the strong have a choice.

So if anyone is going to bend, it has to be the one who has a choice about it.

And this of course is the way of love.

If, v.15, you deliberately do something you know would cause distress and grief in your brother or sister, then, you’ve done something that is unloving.

And the unloving act can destroy the work of God that is in that person.

The way of love respects the conscience of others; it tries to build them up rather than becoming a stumbling block.

The third reason is that our gospel freedom is good, and v.16, it shouldn’t be “spoken of as evil.”

You see, the gospel freedom to be able to eat anything is good.

But if we flaunt this freedom in front of those who still believe this is evil, then, that freedom will be spoken as evil!

He makes the same point again in v.22, “Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.”

If by eating unclean food brings unnecessary division and quarrelling, then we are condemned as those who brought this unnecessary division!

So don't let your freedom in Christ do evil!

But most importantly Paul says that the strong has an obligation to limit their freedom, because the Kingdom of God isn't about food or other external things!

Jesus didn't die and rise again, so that, v.17, you can eat shellfish or pork! It's not a matter of “eating and drinking.”

No, he died and rose again so that we could have “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

We often make Christianity about our behavior – rules about alcohol, gambling, church attendance, smoking, clothes we wear, what movies we watch, songs we listen to...

Pharisees majored in the externals.

But we're all justified, not by our works, but by faith through Christ on the cross.

He give us his righteousness.

He gives us peace with him and with one another.

He gives us joy in the Holy Spirit!

These are the important things.

And we can overlook our differences on these outwardly things.

So the strong walk in the way of love.

The way of love is going by the pace of another.

**Have you seen the** video of people trying to walk on the skywalk in Tianmen Mountain, China?

It's a glass skybridge that allows you to see what's below.

It's perfectly safe, but probably terrifying.

I've seen videos of people crawling... a wife trying to drag a husband...

I know what would happen if I went there with my family.

One of our children, not the youngest one, mind you, would start crying, refusing to go further.

Maybe he would start crawling...

What would be the loving thing to do?

It certainly wouldn't be to belittle them.... You're an idiot; it's perfectly safe!

It wouldn't be to make fun of them. You're such a scaredy cat.

It wouldn't be loving to try to look down or scold.

If I did these things, it might traumatize him or embitter him.

No, if a child is crawling, it would be loving to get down on all fours and crawl with him.

That's what Paul is talking about here.



Friends, let's walk in the way of love, in the pace of love.

In many ways, it doesn't really matter whether one is 'right' on an issue or not.

What's more important is that everyone is growing in Christ-likeness, righteousness, peace, and the joy the Holy Spirit.

### 3. Pursue Christ's Unity (15:1-13)

**This is** deeply counter-cultural, not pleasing ourselves, but putting others first.

Over many centuries, the world has gotten more and more individualistic.

We talk about self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-care.

We talk about rights along – rights as an individual, a man, a woman, a consumer, a member, a citizen....

We are told to look out for number one!

If I don't look out for myself, who will?

But the way of love is to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves, v.1.

Each of us are to think of others and see what could build them up, even if it means giving up my rights (v.2).

Why? Because Christ did this for us.

The Son of God, v.3, did not please himself, but he took on the insults that we deserve (v.3); more than just insults, he took on the penalty of our sin upon himself.

He did this so that we would be one, so that we would be of one mind, one voice, and one people who would glorify God.

Think of Jesus Christ on the mount of Gethsemane, praying, Lord is there another way?

There was another way, if he were just thinking of himself.

But he thought of us, the Church, the bride of Christ.

Because he walked in the way of love..., we are all here.

**Do you see how with** verse 8 and on, Paul switches the argument from talking about the 'strong' and the 'weak' to the Jews and the Gentiles?

The rest of our reading is about how Jesus brought both the Gentiles and the Jews to himself and to one another.

At the heart of it, that was the difficulty they were having – being a community of Jews and Gentile Christians.....

When different people of differing backgrounds come together, Jews and Gentiles, there's bound to be cultural issues.

That's why marriages are difficult too!

It's two different people with two different sets of law trying to be one.

That's why although being an international church like this is an enormous blessing, it is also very difficult to be one.

But that is our vision here – to be a fellowship of Christians that reflect the end time unity.

In Shatin Church, God is bringing Koreans and Japanese, Hong Kongers and Mainlanders, English and French, PhDs and the high school dropouts, the rich and the poor, millennials and Gen Zs, pro China camp and pro America camp as one in Christ.

**Jesus is uniting** all of us as one, so that with one mind and one voice, we may glorify God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!

But in order to sing this song of God's glory in unison, each of us must be willing to bend toward another.

The American Composer Leonard Bernstein was once asked which part of the orchestra is most difficult.

Without hesitation, he answered, the 2<sup>nd</sup> fiddle.

At that level, everyone is capable. And they all want to play the 1<sup>st</sup> violin.

So he said that it's hard to find those who want to be 2<sup>nd</sup> violin and do it with great enthusiasm.

But without them, there would be no harmony.

Friends, sacrificing our rights and limiting our freedom are all incredibly difficult things to do.

Which is why Paul again and again tells us to look to the example of Jesus.

You've heard the illustration many times, I'm sure – **Marriage must be** shaped like a triangle – Jesus at the top, and the two at the bottom. And as the two are drawn closer together to Jesus, they are drawn closer to each other as well.

So it is with the church.

As we look to the example of Christ who did not please himself but gave himself up for us, may we become one – one mind and one voice, that we might glorify God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.