**Lesson 38: The One Who Unites Us is Greater Than the Issues That Divide Us**

Text: Romans 14:1-12

**Introduction**

From the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Romans, we have noted the struggle between believing Jews and Gentiles. In Romans, Paul carefully navigates through many issues that generated strife between the two groups. As a masterful arbitrator, Paul worked on both sides of the issues facing these two parties in the church. His guidance is preserved for us in Romans 14 and 15. While we do not face the exact same issues, it is profitable for our consideration. There are issues that prevent and disrupt the unity of Southwest Baptist Church. While we should never compromise on doctrine or give license to carnality, we should not allow personal opinions to divide us. We will study these verses with the intent to apply their principles to our lives.

1. **Paul exhorted the strong and weak of the church to accept one another for the sake of church unity.** 
   1. Paul’s plea for the believers to receive each other is found as bookends in 14:1 and 15:7.
   2. There are two groups who needed to accept one another. They are described as the “weak” and the “strong.” These two groups were divided over matters of diet and the observance of holy days.
      1. The identity of the weak was most likely the saved Jews. They believed that meat should be avoided altogether. While there is no evidence in Paul’s letter that they believed the observance of dietary law was necessary for salvation, they did believe that they were still bound by this aspect of the Mosaic law.
      2. The strong believed that their new position in Christ Jesus granted liberty to eat as they pleased. This most likely refers to saved Gentiles who never held to the law or saved Jews who had come to a place of understanding that they were no longer bound to the dietary law.
      3. The weak believed that they should observe holy days. Most likely, this is a reference to Jewish holy days. The strong did not.
   3. These were divisive issues in their day. Paul hoped to unify these two groups within the church.
   4. “Paul agrees in principle with the ‘strong’….But he spends no time developing this point. His concern is not so much with the ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ of this particular issue but with the peace and mutual edification of the body of Christ.” (Douglas Moo).
2. **There were wrong attitudes that had to be forsaken for the sake of church unity. (v. 1-5)** 
   1. It is most likely that the strong were in the majority since the church would have primarily consisted of Gentile believers. They were not to despise or belittle the weak. Instead, they were to receive them.
   2. The verb *receive* means to “accept in one's society, home, or circle of acquaintances” (Gingrich). This would be challenging for the strong. They would be inclined to avoid meals with the weak because of their differences. Paul exhorted them to have time together! “The Roman Christians were not only to tolerate the weak but they were to treat them as brothers and sisters in the intimate fellowship typical of the people of God” (Douglas Moo).
   3. They were not to allow “doubtful disputations” to hinder their fellowship. This refers to a difference in “personal opinions” (Low and Nida). Paul was in no wise encouraging the believers to approve carnality. No believer has liberty to exhibit carnality. For example, while believers in the same church body may differ as to whether or not it is right to have a television in the home, there is no place for allowing inappropriate content on one’s television. The real issue is not the presence of a television in the home that makes one more or less spiritual. The issue is the need to walk in the Spirit and not to satisfy the desires of the flesh (Galatians 5:16).
   4. In verse 2, Paul begins to deal directly with the issues as hand. The strong believe they have liberty to eat meat. The weak believe it is best to restrict their diet to herbs. “The weak in faith probably decided to avoid meat altogether out of a concern to maintain Old Testament laws of purity in a pagan context where ‘kosher’ meat was not easily obtained.” (Douglas Moo).
   5. The strong are not to think less of the weak and the weak are not to be judgmental toward the strong. (v. 3) Both groups had a wrong attitude toward each other. The strong criticized the weak because they were hung up on Old Testament laws. The weak believed they were the only ones standing true to God. Paul told both groups to cease bickering. The church cannot have unity with internal strife.
   6. The reason they should not despise or judge each other is because God has received (accepted) those who have believed. Why should they refuse those God has received? Paul wanted them to give each other room to grow.
   7. Paul emphasized that all people must ultimately answer to God. (v. 4) It is most likely that Paul is addressing the weak who are critical toward the strong at this point in his letter. They were to allow the Lord to give the verdict.
   8. In verse 5, Paul switched topics to discuss the observance of holy days. The weak felt bound to observe the Jewish festivals, Sabbaths and other special days within Judaism. The strong believed they were free from the observance of these days. Paul didn’t take sides on this matter. He simply said that every believer must be persuaded in his own mind. There was room for a difference of opinion, but no room for carnality or disunity.
3. **They could dwell together in unity by submitting their lives to the Lord. (v. 6-12)** 
   1. The observance or non-observance of holy days ought to be between the believer and the Lord. The same held true regarding the eating of meat or herbs. (v. 6)
   2. Every part of your life is to be lived for the Lord. (v. 7-8)
   3. The purpose of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection was to bring us under His loving leadership. (v. 9)
   4. Based on this truth, it is inappropriate to judge and despise those who belong to the Lord. (v. 10)
   5. Every knee will bow before the Lord and every tongue will confess to God (not the strong nor the weak). (v. 11; Isaiah 45:23)
   6. Every believer will give an account of himself or herself to the Lord. (v. 12)
4. **Central Idea: Paul exhorted the strong and weak of the church to accept one another on the basis of God’s acceptance and mutual submission to His authority.**
5. **Application: We should dwell together in church unity on the basis of God’s acceptance and mutual submission to His authority.**

**Conclusion**

We do not deal with differences of opinion regarding dietary laws and holy days. We do, however, have other issues that tend to divide us rather than unite us. On those matters, we must have a God-honoring spirit. We cannot allow the basis of our fellowship to be on one of the following matters: The presence or absence of a television in the home, the type of school your children attend, the presence or absence of Christmas trees in the home, whether or not you eat in a restaurant that has a bar. These and many other issues have been known to divide church members. Every believer needs to be persuaded in his own mind about these matters. A person may have legitimate and practical reasons for their choices. The primary lesson we are to receive out of this passage is that the basis of our fellowship is Christ, not a total alignment on all issues. We will gain additional insight in the coming lessons.