

How to Welcome a Weak Brother

by John Piper

John Piper emphasizes the importance of welcoming and accepting weak believers in faith while maintaining unity and love within the church community.

Duration: 41:59

Scripture: Romans 14:1-6, Romans 14:22, Romans 15:1-2, Romans 15:5-7, Romans 15:13

Topics: "Church Harmony", "Christian Love"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Romans 14 and the issue of how a church can maintain harmony despite differences in beliefs and practices. The main theme is love for one another, and the speaker emphasizes the importance of not passing judgment on fellow believers. The speaker addresses both the weak and the strong in the church, reminding them that they have one master and judge, who is not any individual within the church. The sermon encourages Christians to focus on their own accountability to God rather than trying to judge others.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at www.DesiringGod.org. The scripture text for tonight is found in the book of Romans, chapter 14, verses 1 through 6. And if you have your Bibles, I would invite you to open there. It's Romans, chapter 14, verses 1 through 6. As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 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. 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.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Let's pray together before we open the word. Father, we as a church love your word. Oh, how many benefits it brings into our lives.

It is our life. It is our wisdom. It is the empowerment of everything good that you enable us to do.

It is the agency of your word that your Spirit uses to direct our attention to Christ, who transforms us and becomes our all in all. Oh, how we love your word. It is no accident that it holds such a prominent place in our services of exaltation, because we are here now to exalt over your word together, not just to study it and explain it, but to see Christ in it, to see beauty in it, to be changed by it, to let it catapult us into praises and obedience and sacrifices.

Oh, how we love your word. So come and enable us to see the beauties in it. Enable it, oh God, to have its appointed effect on our church, North Campus, downtown.

Grant, oh God, I pray that this text would come true at Bethlehem. In Jesus' name I ask it. Amen.

So here we are now entering the third chapter of application after the eleven chapters of doctrine. And you know that division is artificial, that there is plenty of doctrine in chapters twelve to sixteen, and lots of application in chapters one to eleven. But in general, there is a weighty unpacking of justification by faith and a weighty application of it in chapters twelve following.

So twelve, thirteen, now we begin the third application, chapter fourteen, and the theme has not changed. Love your neighbor as you love yourself could be written over chapter twelve, could be written over chapter thirteen, certainly could be written over the one we are about to read and study together. The theme of love is dominant.

And the specific issue now in chapter fourteen is, how does a church get along with each other when it is made up of what Paul calls the strong and the weak, who have differences in the way they assess things and the way they decide to act in relationship to things. How can they get along? How can the unity of the church be preserved in view of this reality called weak faith and strong faith? You see the issue of strong and weak in verse one. As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, receive him, accept him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

And then you see it again in chapter fifteen, verse one. We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak. And then you see what the aim is at the beginning of chapter fourteen in verse one.

Welcome them, receive them. And then you see that in chapter fifteen, verse seven. Fifteen-seven.

Therefore, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. The reason I point out the beginning of fourteen and all the way up to fifteen-seven, really it's going to go to fifteen-thirteen, is that that's one unit. And it's all about welcoming one another in spite of these problems that we have with one another.

That's what this is about. So all of chapter fourteen into chapter fifteen up to verse thirteen, there's one main issue. There are strong and weak and they collide in the way they assess and do things in the church.

And this is a chapter to help us as a church hang together and love each other in spite of those differences. So that's where we're going for the next weeks. The most important thing, therefore, to see at the beginning is the meaning of strong and weak.

And it isn't probably what you think it is. At least I was surprised by what Paul means by weak and strong in this chapter. So let's try for the first step to unpack the meaning of what it is to be a person of weak faith and strong faith.

And then we'll look at the behavior we're to have to each other. And thirdly, we'll look at the foundation under it. And that will deal with four verses in this chapter.

Then we'll come back to it two weeks from now because next Sunday is the special Sunday where the topic will be. Where is God in an age of terror? If I were you, I would invite some unbelievers to come with me next weekend. But here we are back at chapter 14 and trying to understand the meaning of weak.

What is a weak faith Christian? I see three or four traits. Number one, the weak person, the person who's weak in faith, doesn't eat meat or drink wine. In this church, verse two, one person believes he may eat anything while the weak person eats only vegetables.

What's the issue with vegetables? It isn't because vegetables are good. It's because meat is a problem. Look at verse 21.

It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. So the brother that might stumble is the weak brother. He's avoiding meat and wine.

And the strong evidently are experiencing liberty to eat meat, drink wine, and he's calling for them to relate to each other in such a way that the weaker doesn't stumble. So the first trait that I note about the weak person is that he abstains from meat and wine. Number two, he does so in a very God-exalting way and is not sinning when he does so.

I base that first on verse one where it says that that person is weak in faith. The behavior of the weak person is not coming from unbelief. It's coming from faith.

Paul's got a name for what comes from unbelief in verse 23. What is it? Tell me. What does he call behavior that doesn't come from faith? Sin.

He does not accuse the weaker brother of sinning here. Absolutely not. So this person is not acting from unbelief.

He's acting from faith. Here's another evidence that this is a very God-exalting person and acting in a way that magnifies Jesus. Verse six.

The one who observes the day. We'll talk about days next time, not tonight. The one who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord.

The one who eats. Now we're back into eating. The one who eats in honor of the Lord since he gives thanks.

While the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks. So here we have a person who is overflowing with gratitude and is magnifying God with his abstentions. Don't think non-God-centered when you think weak in this chapter.

Don't think, oh he doesn't love Jesus much, or he doesn't want to please Jesus much, or he's not driven by the glory of God much. This is a mega commitment to the glory of God in this weak person. That's what

surprises me.

He does it to honor the Lord and he's thankful. He's not resentful. I can't have meat.

I can't have wine. He's thankful for something and Paul's praising it. In fact, I think Paul is modeling for us here how to relate to the weaker brother.

When he says later, don't despise him, Paul's doing anything but despising the weaker brother in the way he talks about him here. This is a model for how to relate, how to do verse 3. Don't despise. So that's the second trait I see.

The first trait is weak people act from faith. And the second trait is they act in a God-exalting, gratitude-overflowing way. Third observation.

They are not abstaining from meat and wine because they believe this behavior contributes to their justification. They are not Galatian Judaizers. They are not people who have become legalists.

They are not legalists. And the reason we know that is because Paul was furious with those people in Galatia. He said things you wouldn't want to repeat about those people in Galatia.

He was so angry with the way they viewed circumcision. Namely, a necessary component of justifying obedience. And he said, none of it.

We are justified by faith alone. These people believe that. And the reason I know that they do is because Paul is not mad at these people.

He's not scolding these people. He's not ripping them to shreds and about to kick them out of the church and saying they're preaching another gospel like he did in Galatia. He is not calling them legalists who are jeopardizing the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

That's not the problem with these weak believers. That's trait number 3. They are not viewing abstinence as contributing to their justification. Fourth, they evidently see eating meat and drinking wine as unclean.

Verse 14. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean or common in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean. Now, he would not have said that if it were irrelevant to this situation.

He says that because that's the problem with the weak brothers. They're looking at meat and they're looking at wine and they're saying unclean. And they mean something by that.

And it's keeping them from eating it. And Paul says they're making a good choice. To him who views something as unclean, it is unclean.

So they better not eat meat or drink wine. So, what's weak? What does weak mean? What's wrong with these folks? I mean, weak is a pejorative word. And I've just praised them because Paul's pointed out so many good things about these people.

Well, what's weak? They're God-exalting. They're acting from faith. They're expressing gratitude.

They're not legalistic. So, what's the problem? They evidently have put meat and wine in a category called unclean and regard it as off limits. For what? Not for justification.

Evidently, in their pursuit of honoring God, which is what verse 6 says they do. They're honoring God. They judge that the eating of meat and the drinking of wine will dishonor God more than if they abstain from eating meat and drinking wine.

They are a God-driven people. So, I think what unclean means mainly is there is something about either the situation or the substance that makes us convinced that we shouldn't eat that and we shouldn't drink that because it's not going to glorify God as much if we do. And they are very well-intentioned people who are motivated by wanting to glorify God.

So, what's weak? They're wrong. They're wrong. It is a wrong decision to say there's something about meat and something about wine that if I ate or drank would glorify God less.

They're wrong. It's a mistake. And they lack some knowledge.

They lack some knowledge that will fix that mistake. Now, where am I getting this? Where do I see that the lack of knowledge of something about meat and wine, the lack of knowledge is causing the weakness of their response to creation and God and behavior? Where am I getting that? I get it from 1 Corinthians 8, for starters, 6-7. It goes like this.

It's a very similar situation, but not the same. But listen to how Paul talks in 1 Corinthians 8, 6. For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ through whom are all things, and through whom we exist. However, not all possess this knowledge, but some, through former associations with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience being weak is defiled.

You see the connection? Some don't have this knowledge, so their conscience being weak is defiled. What's missing in the weak person is knowledge. There's something they don't understand about creation and about God and about the inner relationship between the two and our relationship to creation and God.

There's a dynamic there they're missing. They're not getting it. And it's constricting their faith to act really as faith, but not as freely over as many things as it could.

There's another passage. Listen to 1 Corinthians 10.25 for the same point. 1 Corinthians 10.25 Eat whatever is sold in the market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

And then here comes the crucial knowledge ground clause. What supports that freedom? Eat whatever is sold in the market without raising any question on the ground of conscience because the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. See, they just haven't gotten their arms around that God made meat.

There are implications of the doctrine of creation they haven't absorbed into their little mental system yet. The system they've got, they're acting in faith with regard to that framework. And Paul loves it.

In fact, he's going to say, Be fully convinced in your own mind. If you can't agree together, at least be fully convinced and act out of faith with regard to your convictions. He's going to say that in the end.

But he's still going to call them weak because they haven't gotten their arms around the doctrine of creation and its implications for their behavior in enabling them to trust God to fully enjoy and glorify Him in the eating of meat and the drinking of wine. Now, the strong, on the other hand, they have this fuller grasp in relationship to the world and they are freed by this truth to embrace more of God's creation in a

God-glorifying way. Now, at this point, we need a warning, right? We need a little orange flag waving.

Beware of a mistake that a carnal Christian and that's a third category, not one of these two, would make out of saying, Oh, cool, strong is free. Free to what? Glorify God more fully in more things. Verse 6 becomes all important.

All important. Second half of the verse. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord.

So a carnal Christian doesn't do that. A carnal Christian, a fleshly person, an immature Christian who is just worldly is not worshiping as he indulges in what he shouldn't be having. He's worldly in it.

He's thinking worldly thoughts. He wants approval from those around him. He likes his fleshly liberty.

He doesn't have the glory of God at the center of his framework at all like the weak Christian does and the strong. The one in regard to more things and the other in regard to fewer things. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord and he gives thanks.

Carnal people are not deeply thankful people. They're haughty people usually. They're not broken hearted thankful people.

While the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks. These are both humble, thankful people. The weak and the strong are humble.

The weak and the strong are thankful. The weak and the strong have the glory of God most foremost in their hearts. There's another kind of professing Christian called the carnal worldly Christian who tries to piggyback on these things.

That's not what Paul is talking about here. In Paul's way of thinking, the weak and the strong are radically God-centered people. They are deeply thankful people.

And their differences are in their convictions about what is unclean. That is, what is helpful in the non-essentials about giving more glory to God. The fact that I just threw in the word non-essentials, non-essentials.

It's not like we have disagreements about whether fornication is okay. Or disagreements about whether homosexuality is okay. Or disagreements about whether killing is okay.

Or disagreements about whether stealing is okay. He's talking about what? Verse 1. I'm moving on to my second question. I've just finished answering the question what is weak and what is strong.

I'm done with that. I want to ask now, in view of that, how should we relate to each other? Because that's what this text is really about. And verse 1 is the one that starts it.

And verse 3 continues it. And in the process we see this idea of non-essentials. Verse 1. As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him.

Accept him. Receive him. Not to quarrel over opinions.

I think that's a pretty good paraphrase. I think my translation would be something like, not to divisive questionings. It's almost the same, isn't it? Divisive questionings.

Quarreling over opinions. It's not an easy phrase to translate. Because the two words in the Greek are sometimes bad words, sometimes good words.

Both of them. Sometimes they can mean thought. And sometimes they can mean grumblings.

Questionings. Sometimes this can mean discernment. And sometimes it can mean divisions.

And so you're scrambling all over the usages of these words. Bringing them together and saying, well this is clearly negative. So let's take the negative parts of these two.

This would be questionings and grumblings. And this would be divisions and divisiveness. And so I slap the two together and say, welcome the weak.

But don't welcome into endless questionings about divisive, non-essential things like meat, wine, days. That's the positive statement of how we should relate. Accept.

Embrace. If you know somebody who seems to have different standards than you do on what you regard as non-essentials, you should have a wonderful disposition to this person. Just like Paul does toward the weaker brother here.

He so wonderfully disposed of this person. Saying they glorify God. Saying they're full of thanksgiving.

Saying they're acting from faith. He's just lavishing them. I affirm you.

You're my brother. We have to find ways to do that across disagreements with regard to non-essentials. Now the negative is found in verse 3. The negative way to relate.

That is the negative way to state how to relate positively. Let's read verse 3. Let not one who eats. That's the strong guy.

Let not one who eats despise the one who abstains. And then let not the one who abstains. That's the weak brother.

Let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats. I think he chooses the words carefully here. What would be a typical sinful response moving from strong to weak? And the answer is despise.

Patronizing. You don't get it. Poor you.

Putting them in a kind of second class Christian. Which is Paul laboring in verse 6 not to do. That would be despising.

And it tends to flow from the strong to the weak. And then what would be the typically sinful response of the weak to the strong? And the answer is judgment. Look at those people.

Look what they eat. Look what they drink. Look what they do.

And passing judgment on them. So he says don't do either of those. If you're in the strong category, just get rid of all despising.

And if you're in the weak category, get rid of all judging. Isn't that interesting that he doesn't mainly say, Everybody stop being weak. He's just managing the reality.

He's managing the reality. There will always be strong and weak. That is there will always be differences in the church as to how the doctrine of creation and other doctrines affect what we perceive to be unclean and unhelpful in the way we honor God.

We're just going to assess things differently. If I gave you my list of things that I regard as unhelpful in the way we eat, the way we dress, the way we do sports, you would start to think ill thoughts about me. But I don't preach on those much.

I just take a sock at television every now and then. But by and large, those are going to stay in the background and we're just going to... And now I'm moving to my third and final question. Okay.

If you're not to receive the weak into divisive questionings about non-essentials like meat and wine and days, what's the basis of the reception? What are we building this church on if it's not wine and meat and clothes and styles and habits and days? What are we building the acceptance on? And verse three at the end and verse four are big on that issue. So let's go there and end by looking at three foundations for Bethlehem or any church that wants to have a good working, loving, God exalting relationship between people who cannot see eye to eye on non-essentials, which is every church. Foundation number one at the end of verse three.

God has welcomed him. What more glorious thing could Paul say about the weak Christian than to say, you strong Christian better welcome, better embrace, better receive, better affirm, because God has welcomed him. Verse seven of chapter 15 says it again.

Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. Build this church's relationships not on views of non-essentials, but on what has transpired at the cross in the reception of all believers into God's family. The weakest believer is received by the Father.

Welcome by the Father. Woe to us if we erect barriers God has not erected. Number two, verse four at the beginning.

Who are you to pass judgment? Now he's talking to the way he's getting tough with the weak brother here. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. What's the point here? The point here is Christians, weak and strong, have one master, one judge.

And guess what? It isn't you. That's the point. Oh, how liberating it would be if we all said they will give an account, but not to me.

On these non-essentials, I will not become their judge. Let me stick in a parenthesis here because some of you may be struggling with this the way I did. You say, hmm, judge, judge, judge.

So what do you mean judge? Is it like pass judgment on their salvation? Because you already said these folks are not legalists who say that the non-abstention is part of their justification. You already said that's not what they think. So what's this judgment that they're passing if it's not you're lost if you eat? That question troubled me.

And my answer is this. I think that a genuine weak Christian, a genuine Christian who is weak, looks at a person making what they regard as a very bad judgment about what to eat or drink or do. And they say to them things like, it's really careless to act that way, spiritually careless to act that way.

I'm worried about you. I'm concerned about you. This is what their framework has to say.

I'm concerned about you because if you keep on acting in a spiritually careless way about what you eat and drink and the days you keep, you could begin to slide and make shipwreck of your faith and prove that you were never born again. In other words, you can pass pretty serious judgments on a person without believing that their behavior is part of their justification. And he's saying, don't do that.

Don't go there. If you're one of the weak, look at that. Just reel that in even though it is part of your framework.

That looks really like they are acting spiritually carelessly to eat and drink that way and to do those things. Back that up and say, they have one judge and it isn't me. Number three.

Third foundation for a community of harmony when we have disagreements on non-essentials. Last part of verse four. And he will be upheld or he will be made to stand.

He will be upheld for the Lord is able to make him stand. Now this answers the suspicion niggling inside the weak and the strong that this other person is really not going to stand in the last judgment. They are really not a believer.

They are not going to stand. There is something wrong so profoundly in the way they are relating to God and handling the stuff of their life that they are going to make shipwreck. They are going to bail on this Christianity.

And Paul goes right at that suspicion and he says, he will be upheld. He will be made to stand. On what basis? His own reliable free will? Hardly.

Rather, the Lord is able to make him stand. What Paul wants us at Bethlehem to hear is the weakest believer you know. Believer you know has almighty God on his side working to make him stand and he will one day be vindicated in the last judgment.

Don't judge that person. So for those three foundations, let's not build a church. Let's not create a kind of welcoming atmosphere based on we all agree on the non-essentials.

Rather, let's base our welcoming, our embracing, our accepting, our affirming on these three powerful statements. God has accepted them. There is one judge that they will face and it isn't me.

And God, no matter how weak they look now, is going to preserve them and cause them to stand in the last day. That's got gutsy foundation to it. That will keep a church unified.

That will hold us together if we really believe the deep, rich, glorious things. So I think a healthy church doesn't fearfully avoid talking about non-essentials. You've got to talk about some because you've got to raise kids.

Do you hold your fork with the left hand or the right hand? Do you hold it like this or like this? Do you put your elbows on the table or not? You've got to talk about these things. But as a church, there should be a flavor about the church that this place is about the big things. This place is about God having received people.

This place is about the judgment of God alone, not people. This place is about the sovereign grace that preserves weak Christians and makes them stand in the judgment. And there should be a kind of deep, solid, rooted flavor so that when we have these little conversations about whether you put your elbows on the table or not or eat like a gorilla or human, tipping my hand, they have their proper place.

And it isn't a very big one. It is not a very big one. And the more we got out in the big, wide world and crossed about 80 cultures, the more we would realize how we better hold loosely to how you hold your fork or whether you use one.

So, conclusion, Bethlehem. Bethlehem, welcome. North, I'll be with you next weekend when they come.

When they come, let's welcome them. Some will be believers, some won't. If I were to preach a sermon on welcoming unbelievers, I'd use a different text.

But now we have tremendous incentive to embrace one another across the disagreements on non-essentials. And I encourage us as a church to that end to deal with the big issues. Let's pray.

Father in Heaven, I'm so thankful for the way you inspired the Apostle Paul to help me because I have opinions about everything under the sun and how it would best be done. And so I must constantly check myself lest I elevate too many things too highly in the order of priority. Lord, may all of us be wise and may we have such a big, full-orbed grasp of the doctrine of creation and other doctrines that we experience the measure of liberty in our faith that Paul seems to call strong.

And Lord, if we are in the weak category, and I think I am probably on a few issues, help me to be radically God-centered and humbly thankful while I'm there. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind, Paul said. So God, oh, show us the mystery of harmony and love in a church where we are often differing on non-essentials.

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, Pastor for Preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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