

There's nothing that destroys a group faster, Christians, than fighting and disunity. It could happen any number of ways. There could be some who are fighting with each other. They're constantly bickering and picking at one another. They can never quite seem to get along. There might be some who refuse to talk to each other. As long as I ignore them, they'll ignore me, and we'll get along just fine. Or there might be some who divide themselves into different groups, both of them condemning the other and looking down on the other. Why can't they just see things my way? However the division comes, Christians, it tears the group apart. And it also tears the Church apart. Is this how we are called to live as Christians? Is this what it means to be united in the body of Christ? That's the question that Paul asks us today as we consider our epistle reading.

Because Romans chapter 15 is actually the very end of a section that begins in chapter 14. And Paul begins by saying this, chapter 14, verse 1: "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." So Paul shows us that there were two groups in the church at Rome, one that he calls the "weak," the weak in faith, and those who he calls the "strong," the strong in faith. If there's "weak," it implies that there's a "strong." And these two groups were fighting with one another. They were bickering and arguing with one another.

Over what? we might say. Why are they fighting? Because Christians, there had always been two groups in the church at Rome. On the one hand, you had those who were Jews by birth, and on the other hand, you had those who were Gentiles. And these two came to be Christians in very different ways. Because the Jews in Rome came to believe in Jesus because of what they heard at Pentecost. We hear in Acts chapter 2 that there were visitors from Rome who heard Peter preaching. And when they heard what he had to say, they believed in Jesus. They saw that he was the promised one, the one that always was supposed to come. And so they went home to Rome and told everybody about what they had heard. And because of their preaching, some of the Gentiles, some of the pagans also came to believe in the Lord. And so they were all together in one church.

But because they had come to Jesus in different ways, they also had different ideas about what it meant to be a Christian. One of these issues we see in verse 2. Paul says: "One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables." So the Jewish Christians were the ones who were only eating vegetables. They didn't eat meat. And the reason they did that was because in the Old Testament, there were all kinds of rules about eating meat. Some kinds of meat were unclean. They were forbidden. You couldn't eat them at all. And some ways of preparing meat, some ways of cooking it were also forbidden. You were not supposed to eat it in that way. And so these Jews figured, "Well, it'd just be easier for us if we didn't eat meat at all. There's no question that way. There's nothing to worry about. Better safe than sorry." And so they just chose to not eat it at all.

But the reason why this was weak, Christians, the reason why this was a problem was because they knew as Christians that Jesus had done away with all of this. Jesus had declared all foods clean. There was no reason to hold onto these things any longer. But the Jewish Christians had grown up this way. That's what they always remember doing. And when Jesus came along and set them free, they found it hard to just stop. And so they kept doing it, because, frankly, old habits die hard. But the Gentiles, on the other hand, didn't have this problem. They didn't grow

up knowing the Old Testament. They didn't grow up knowing God. And so they said, "There's no sin here. We can eat this meat if we feel like eating it." But that caused tension between the two groups. Both of them saying to the other, "You're wrong!" The Jewish Christians saying, "You're wrong! You can't do that!" And the Gentile Christians saying, "You're wrong! You can't tell me what to do." And so because they were fighting with one another in this way, it was tearing the church apart.

And it wasn't the only issue. There was another one. We hear in verse 5: "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike." The Jewish Christians had grown up observing special holidays, special observances throughout the year. And even though they knew Jesus brought those to an end too, they couldn't quite give them up. They held onto them, because old habits die hard. But the Gentiles didn't want to do it. "We're not going to keep that observance, and we don't have to." And so the bickering and the fighting continued. How are they going to solve this problem? How would they get through this issue?

Paul shows them the way. Verse 13: "Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother." He says to them: "Christians, let us not despise each other. Let us not condemn one another. Let us not look down on each other. But rather let us be patient. Let us seek unity. And let us be built up together in the Lord." That's what Paul wanted them to do, so that they wouldn't insist on their own way, but would seek the benefit of the entire church.

Now, I do want to be very clear here, Christians. We should not misunderstand what Paul is saying. Paul does not mean that they should just "agree to disagree." And Paul also does not mean that they're both right, as if they're both equally valid. That's how we usually solve issues in our world today. We'll say, "Well, you're both right, so stop fighting about it." No, Paul very clearly tells us one side is right, and the other side is wrong. As we hear in verse 14, where he says: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean." So the Gentiles were right. The strong Christians were right here. There is no sin in eating meat. They could do these things if they so choose.

But the weak struggled with that. They still saw it as a sin. And because they saw it as a sin, it didn't matter if it was a sin or not. But because they saw it as a sin, if they did it, they would be hurting their own faith. That's what Paul means when he says in verse 23: "Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." So even if it wasn't actually a sin--and it wasn't. God didn't say that it was a sin--but even if it wasn't a sin, they thought it was a sin. And for that reason, they would fall into unbelief if they persisted in what they believed to be a sin. That's how dangerous that is, Christians. That's how seriously we have to take these things. Someone could be led to deny Christ even over something that isn't actually a sin at all.

So Paul wants us, then, to bear with the weak. As he says in chapter 15, verse 1: "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." We can be patient with them. We can seek the truth together. And we can be patient for as long as it takes, because the goal is to build them up. As he says in verse 2: "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." So it's not just bearing with it forever and you just have

to deal with it. The goal is to lead them together to be unified in the Lord. That's what Paul wants the Romans to do, and it is what he also calls us to do. To show the right way, to show the truth by example, and not by bickering or fighting or condemning one another.

But I also want to make one more point clear here too. This doesn't apply to everything in the Church. Paul is not saying that we should bear with false teaching, that we should bear with something that is clearly sin. We must rebuke sin. If God says it's a sin, you can't be weak about it. You have to stop doing it right now. We have to call them to repentance. There's no room for patience there. What Paul is talking about are the things that people only think are sins. That's where we can afford to be patient.

And Paul is also not saying that doctrine is therefore a matter of opinion, that we can just choose or reject whatever we want out of God's Word. No, God's Word is the truth. And we have to reject all false teaching, because it is a sin. And being a sin, it will destroy our faith. Why else would Paul write this letter in the first place? He wants to correct error. He wants to rebuke false teaching.

So the point that Paul is making here is that we can bear with the weak in their failings, in their hang-ups, in those things that they think are sins, but actually are not. And we can lead them patiently to a knowledge of the truth.

And Christians, this is also true for all of you. God calls you to seek unity in the truth. And we need to be patient with each other as we do so. If someone thinks that drinking alcohol is a sin, for example--they think that you can't drink it all or otherwise you're going to be condemned--the answer to that is not to drink a beer right in front of them or to go on Facebook and post a picture of yourself drinking alcohol, because you know that they're going to see it. How does that help our brother? Rather, the answer is to set the beer aside, and to go to them, and say, "Friend, come. Let's study what God's Word has to say about this." And we can be as patient as we need to be, even if it takes years, because the goal is to build them up in the truth.

Or if I personally give up something, because I know that I can't do it without falling into temptation--I stop going somewhere or I stop doing something, because I know my own heart--I shouldn't think that other people are wrong if they choose to do it for themselves. Nor should I think that I'm somehow better than they are. Rather, I should recognize my own weakness, and in prayer and in the study of the Word seek to be built up in the truth, so that the whole Church is built up along with me.

And if you are caught in a fight, Christians, and you can't quite seem to get along--something happened that hurt some feelings--the answer is not to point fingers and figure out who's right at the expense of someone else. Rather, what we should do is ask, "What does God have to say?" And then work to be reconciled with our brother. Because that's the goal: that we would both be built up in the truth, so that we would be united in Jesus Christ.

But we might ask why? Why should I have to do this? Why should I be patient with someone else? Why should I seek to build them up? Because God has made you one, Christians. God has brought you together. And Jesus himself bore your weakness to the cross. And Paul shows this

truth to us by pointing to the Romans themselves in our reading for today. Some of them were once Jews. Some of them were once Gentiles. But the two have been brought together as Christians in the Lord. And if God has brought them together, why are they fighting among one another?

And Paul proves this point by quoting the Old Testament, showing that it was always God's intention to make Jews and Gentiles as one as Christians. The Gentiles would come to worship the God of Israel. And in that way, Jew and Gentile alike with one voice as Christians would worship the Lord. And so, because God had brought them together, Paul says, verse 7: "Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." Welcome one another as brothers in the same Lord, because that is who God has called you to be.

And Christians, God has also made you one. Jesus died to forgive you your sins. The Holy Spirit has called you to faith. You are here because of what God has done for you. And God has been very patient with you, far more patient than you might even think. Because while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we still hated God, Jesus was patient with us so that we would come to a knowledge of the truth. So if Jesus has been so patient, Christians, why can we not be patient also with one another?

So Christians, let us be like him and bear with one another. Let us not destroy the work of God over something like eating meat, because God has brought us together in Jesus Christ. And let us together as one with one voice come to worship the Lord, because God has made you one in his Son, Jesus Christ. So let us walk together as one in him.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have brought us together in the body of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to be patient as he was patient, and help us to bear with one another as he has first borne with us, so that together with one voice we may praise you forever. In his name we pray. Amen.