

MUTUAL EDIFICATION

Romans 14:1-23

Key Verse: 14:8

"If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

The gospel of Jesus first began in the Galilean district in the soil of Israel. Now the gospel of Jesus was going to spread to the whole world. In Paul's time, there was a Christian community in Rome. There were legalistic Christian Jews and gospel-believing Jews and Gentiles. These Christians gathered in Rome from all over the Roman Empire, with a diversity of cultural backgrounds. If they could overcome their diversity of backgrounds, they could become a big Christian army force that would march out to the whole world with the gospel of Jesus. If not, they would remain as a handful of Jewish immigrants and some Gentiles in Rome just trying to survive. Paul, who received world mission purpose from Jesus Christ, gives some clear direction about how they could build up a spirit of unity in Christ.

First, accept one another. (1-12) Look at verse 1. "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters." There were two kinds of Christians in Rome. One was legalistic Christians, and the other, gospel-centered Christians. In this verse, the phrase "whose faith is weak" refers to the legalistic Christian Jews. They became Christians, but they were not free from the Jewish rules and laws and traditions, especially from the regulations about eating food. These legalistic Christian Jews did not eat animals without a split hoof, thinking that they were unclean. They also didn't eat birds such as the eagle, the vulture, the red kite, the horned owl, and bats. (Lev 11:1-19)

The gospel-centered Christians despised them, saying, "You have no gospel faith, so you are not free. Even though you believe the gospel, you have not grasped the freedom of the gospel. You only take care of your bushy beards. You slaves of religious scruples! You religious formalists! You stubborn and bigoted vegetarians!" In Paul's estimation, those who had gospel faith in Jesus and ate everything freely were the strong Christians. These strong Christians looked down on the legalistic Christians, thinking that they were still too immature to grasp the secrets and freedom of Christianity. On the other hand, the weak Christians who only ate vegetables condemned the gospel-centered Christians, saying, "You barbarians! You indecent fellows! You nasty fellows! You eat everything." The weak Christians also did not accept the strong Christians. Paul says that they cannot look down on or condemn each other, because God has accepted them. Look at verse 3. "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him." Paul tells them that exclusivism is not tolerable in the Christian world; Christians are obliged to accept one another as God has accepted us through his Son Jesus Christ.

But in reality, it is not easy for anyone to accept those whose cultural backgrounds are different. One young man was invited to a country church and delivered a message. After that he was invited to dinner. He held the bread in his right hand and ate freely. The native woman told him not to hold the bread in the right hand but in the left hand. The woman could not accept her precious guest. Rather she offended him, simply because of her

own way of eating bread. In short, she could not accept her guest because of a cultural difference. One young man came to Chicago from a country town far to the west. He had a big pot-belly. He looked absent-minded and unhappy. So his Christian friend asked him, "What's your problem?" "I have a big marriage problem," he answered. So his Christian friend asked him, "How old are you?" "I am just turning 19," he answered. Even if he had a severe marriage problem at the age of 19, his Christian friend must accept him in the hope of raising him as the most outstanding shepherd for all hillbillies in this country. Since God has accepted us, we are obliged to accept our fellow Christians. We must remember that exclusivism is against the truth of God.

The last part of verse 3 says, "for God has accepted him." God could not accept sinners because he is holy. But God accepts all sinners through his Son Jesus Christ. Therefore we Christians should not despise each other or condemn each other. We must accept each other as God has accepted us. Look at verse 4. "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." We have no right to despise those who are weak in faith. We have no right to condemn those who are strong in faith. It is because our Master is Jesus. Only Jesus can judge us. We can also stand and fall, sing and dance, before our Master. We are totally free before our Master. We are weak and we cannot but fall. But our Master Jesus is able to make us stand.

Look at verse 5. "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." In Paul's time, the day of worship was a big issue. Some considered one day as the Sabbath day. Others considered every day as the Sabbath. This problem came from the Old Testament background. To the people of Israel, there were 3 major festivals: the Feast of the Passover, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Tabernacles. (Ex 23:14-17) In addition, they had many kinds of special days of worshiping God. But since the gospel of Jesus came, the observance of many historical and traditional days of worship was largely ignored. On the other hand, Christians gradually began to meet on Sunday to worship God. This did not have any Biblical background. But since Jesus Christ rose again on Sunday, they were willing to keep the Sabbath on Sunday. Later, keeping the Sabbath on Sunday became a tradition of Christian churches. But in Paul's day, there were two kinds of people. To one kind, one day was enough to observe the Sabbath. The other kind wanted to keep all the traditional and historical days as special days of worship. Paul says to them that whether they consider one day more sacred than another or every day alike, they must be convinced of why they think so. (5) In other words, they should not blindly insist on their opinions stubbornly. Instead they must examine themselves even one time to see if they are right.

Next, Paul urges them to do everything in the Lord. The phrase "do it to the Lord" is repeated six times in verses 6-8. "Do it to the Lord" means, in this particular case, "in the Lord," or, "for his name's sake." When they claimed they were right, they had to be sure that they were doing so in Jesus, or for Jesus' name's sake. Jesus should be the focal point of their thought world. Look at verse 9. "For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living." In this verse, Paul gives them a more fundamental reason why they have to honor each other's opinions. Jesus died and rose again, and he became the Ruler of the living and the dead. Therefore, our thought world

must be fixed to say, "We must live and die for the Lord. We must belong to the Lord only." Here we learn we must advertise Jesus instead of our own stubborn ideas.

Look at verse 9. "For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living." Jesus is our Judge and the Lord of both the dead and the living. Therefore, we cannot condemn or look down on our brothers because one day we have to stand before God's judgment seat. Look at verse 11. "It is written: '"As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" This verse is a free quotation of Isaiah 45:23. At the time of God's last judgment, we will see God's shining glory, and all men of all languages must come and bow down on their knees before his throne to be judged according to their deeds. (2 Co 5:10) At the time of God's last judgment, those who judged and condemned others will be the most accountable for their deeds. Therefore, we should not be exclusive by judging and condemning others. We must accept our fellow Christian brothers as God has accepted us. Despising or condemning other Christians seems to be a light matter. But that is not the case. If we don't accept others, it is the evidence that we are not accepting God and his precious children. Also, we deny the universal brotherhood in Jesus.

How can we accept others who are totally different from us? It is really difficult, for us and for anybody. But if we are going to build up the body of Jesus Christ and fulfill the world mission command, we must accept our fellow Christian brothers unconditionally. We cannot teach them a lesson, but God can help them out. To accept our nasty Christian brethren is not an easy thing to do: it is a kind of spiritual battle. But if we do not accept our weak or different brothers, we are not living for Jesus' name's sake: we are not living for the glory of God, not to mention doing the will of God. From the outset, chapter 14 deals with eating problems or about setting the proper Sabbath day problem. It is boring to think about these problems. But underneath these problems there is a serious Christian ethic problem, that is, how to accept our fellow Christian brothers. When we can accept any kind of fellow Christian brother with the mind of Christ, God is pleased and we can grow as spiritual men.

Second, act in love. (13-23) 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 your brother's way." In this verse, Paul again urges not to pass judgment on one another. In this verse, "stumbling block" and "obstacle" mean bad influence. In Christian life, influence is more important than anything else. Paul gives an example to show why Christian influence is important. Look at verse 14. "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean." Paul was sure that no food is unclean in itself. We agree with Paul's statement. God made the world and everything in it. God made cows and tigers and lions and all kinds of fish in the sea for men to eat. So no food is unclean in itself. This is what Paul believed on the basis of Genesis teaching. But if anyone regards something as unclean, we must agree that it is unclean. Even if we are convinced about a certain Biblical truth, if it can make our fellow brothers stumble, we should not claim the truth we believe; we have to wait patiently until our fellow brother comes to understand the Bible truth concerning the matter of clean and unclean. We must be understanding of our fellow brother's spiritual condition. Also, we should not distress

our fellow Christian brother because of what we eat; otherwise we are no longer acting in love. (15) We are free indeed in Jesus. But our Christian freedom is greatly limited in love. (16) There are many kinds of laws. But the highest law is the law of love, because love produces good influence.

Why do we have to act in love? Why do we have to be a good influence? It is because we are citizens of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not a matter of human activities such as eating and drinking; it is revealing God's righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. So we must serve God and our fellow brothers to reveal his righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit through our daily lives, instead of insisting on our opinions. Read verses 17 and 18.

Look at verse 19. "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." This verse tells us to make every effort to act in love and to be a good influence. We thank God that there are many who make every effort to act in love and to be a good influence. Dr. Maria Albright had been a medical student. During her medical school days, she never missed Friday Bible testimony sharing. She never missed Bible study with her Bible teacher. She never gave up on fishing sheep, even though none of them remained. After graduation, she became a medical doctor. Usually American medical doctors want to show off, as if they were "somebodies." But she always looks gentle and humble. She prays that her coworker will be the best Bible speaker in the world. Sometimes we don't know whether she is there or not. But she is always there with her good influence. President Abraham Lincoln was a man of good influence because he loved the truth of God absolutely. Because of his good influence, the United States was not divided into many parts like Latin America, but remained as the United States.

As we know, Jesus spent only three years in his public ministry. But he gave us a good influence through his obedience to God's will. Plainly speaking, the church of Christ is based on Jesus' death and resurrection and on the second coming of Jesus Christ. But the life of the church of Jesus Christ is based on the influence of our Lord Jesus Christ. Still, there are many people who do not care about Christian influence. They are irresponsible people. (20)

There are many people who want to be great servants of God. But they don't care about how to act in love or be a good influence to others. So they cannot be great servants of God. On the other hand, there is a staff shepherd who has a Greek-Lebanese background and who speaks Greek-Lebanese English. But because of his good influence many students follow him day and night in spite of his picky eating habit.

How can we act in love and be a good influence? Look at verse 21. "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall." Paul encourages us not to do anything that will cause our brothers to fall, whether it is eating meat or drinking or doing something else. (Lk 17:2) To be a good influence is hard. But without being a good influence, we cannot be called the children of God. To act in love or to be a good influence is not easy. To be a good influence, sometimes we have to keep the secrets of faith between ourselves and God only, so as not to distress our weak brothers. (22) Sometimes when we act in love and try to be a good influence, we are greatly misunderstood and badly criticized by wicked people. What is worse, we fall into doubt because of others'

criticism. But this is not good. We must have faith in God that we are doing good, so that we may overcome our doubt and self-condemnation. When we act in love and try to be a good influence, we must do it with faith, because everything that does not come from faith is sin. (23) Sometimes, we do the work of God, but what we prayed and worked for does not seem to bring a good result. We wonder if we did something wrong. But if we did it by faith, we can commit it to God. So whatever we do, we must do it by faith.

In this passage we learn that we must accept those whose faith is weak and not condemn those whose faith is strong, and that we must do everything to the Lord. May God bless you to be a good influence to others. May God enable you to pass on the spiritual heritage to your children.