**Lesson 39: How to Remain Unified Despite Our Differences**

Text: Romans 14:13-23

**Introduction**

In the first section of chapter 14, Paul exhorted the “strong” and “weak” of the church to accept one another for the sake of church unity. These two groups were divided over matters of diet and the observance of holy days. The “strong” believed they were no longer subject to the dietary laws and holy days of the Old Testament. The “weak” were not yet convinced that they are free from these obligations. Paul exhorted the “strong” and “weak” to accept one another on the basis of God’s acceptance and submission to His authority. While we do not deal with differences of opinion regarding dietary laws and holy days, we do have other issues that tend to divide us rather than unite us. On those matters, we must have a God-honoring attitude. In this final section of chapter 14, Paul demonstrated that the “strong” should avoid putting pressure on the “weak” to conform to their convictions on these matters. His explanations and applications are very insightful for us today regarding how we might best protect the unity of our church despite differences that exist between members.

1. **They were to protect the unity of the church by making decisions based on edification rather than personal satisfaction. (v. 13-18)** 
   1. The strong and the weak should cease judging each other. Instead, they each were to judge themselves to make sure that their actions edified those about them. (v. 13a)
   2. By insisting that the weak should eat meat and disregard holy days the “strong” were putting a stumblingblock and occasion to fall in the way of the “weak” believers. (v. 13b)
      1. A *stumblingblock* refers to an “obstacle or hindrance.” (Gingrich)
      2. An *occasion to fall* refers to a “temptation to sin or enticement.” (Gingrich)
      3. You should not live in a way that is detrimental to the spiritual well-being of others.
   3. Paul did not believe that the meat was inappropriate to eat, but did recognize that others had not yet come to the same conclusion. (v. 14)
      1. Jesus taught that it was not that which a man ate that defiled the man. Rather, it was that which was in the heart of man that defiled him. (Mark 7:1-23)
      2. The word *esteem* in this verse means to “think, believe or be of the opinion.” (Gingrich) Although there is nothing wrong with eating meat, it would be wrong for those who *believed* they were violating God’s will to do so.
      3. They would experience guilt because they gave into the temptation of the “strong” believers.
   4. Therefore, the exercise of freedom on the part of the “strong” needed to be limited by love. (v. 15)
      1. If the insistence of the “strong” to eat meat offended their brother in Christ, they were not conducting their relationship according to love. This would prove to be devastating to their fellow believer. It could lead to their spiritual downfall.
      2. Paul exhorted the “strong” to remember that Christ died for the “weak” believers as well. He made the ultimate sacrifice for them. It was not too much to ask the “strong” to set aside their liberty to eat meat!
   5. Failure to limit freedom with love would lead to wrong conclusions. (v. 16) Freedom from the dietary law was a “good” thing. However, if it is pushed on those who have not come to this understanding, they may speak against it. They may point to the eating of meat as that which led to their spiritual downfall. Thus, they would speak against that which was good.
   6. The “strong” placed too much attention on their freedom from the dietary law. In the next two verses, Paul reminds the “strong” that the kingdom of God is focused on weightier matters. (v. 17-18)
      1. The Pharisees placed too much attention on the restrictions of the dietary law and missed the point of the law. Ironically, the “strong” missed the same point by emphasizing their liberty.
      2. God’s kingdom is focused on righteousness. In this context, righteousness refers to being right with God and others.
      3. His kingdom is also centered on peaceful relationships with others.
      4. A right standing with God and man that is peaceful will produce joy in the Holy Ghost.
      5. Righteousness, peace and joy ought to receive more attention than dietary laws.
   7. Believers who live in this way are both pleasing to God and respected by man. (v. 18) “By following Christ in love and putting righteousness, peace and joy ahead of eating and drinking, the strong rather than being blasphemed by the weak will be esteemed by them” (Douglas Moo).
2. **In this final section of Romans 14, Paul provided application to the Roman believers. (v. 19-23)** 
   1. Based on the truths presented in verse 17-18, they should pursue peaceful relationships with others for the sake of mutual edification. (v. 19) The believer who pushes his or her own personal agenda will do more harm than good to a church family.
   2. The verb in verse 20 is imperative. Don’t destroy God’s work by insisting to eat meat! “Destroy” is the opposite of “edify.” Even though there is nothing sinful about eating meat, it is harmful to push your persuasions on another believer when they simply need time and space to grow.
   3. Paul returned to his main point. (v. 21) It is best to limit your liberty if it helps others in their walk with Christ. He applied this principle to eating and drinking. He also broadened the application to anything that might cause a brother or sister to stumble. “The believer who seeks the peace and edification of the church should gladly refrain from activities that might cause a fellow believer to suffer spiritual harm.” (Douglas Moo)
   4. Paul admonished those who had the type of faith that allowed them to eat meat to do so privately. (v. 22) This does not mean that the “strong” should never discuss these matters with the “weak.” It does drive home Paul’s point that they should not put a stumbling block before them. They could give reasons for their practice without looking down on those who disagreed with their position.
   5. The “weak” could not go against their conscience and remain right with God. (v. 23)
3. **Central Idea: The believers in the church in Rome could remain unified despite their differences by allowing love to set the boundaries of their liberties.**
4. **Application: We can remain unified despite our differences if we will allow love to determine the boundaries of our liberties.** 
   1. There will be differences between members of the same church body. Some will believe it is okay to watch movies and others will not. None should endorse profanity and vulgarity. Some will be persuaded it is okay to eat out on Sundays others will not. Some will have Christmas trees others will not.
   2. You need to demonstrate love to your brothers and sisters in Christ despite your differences.
   3. It is better to do without something than to allow your liberty to cause someone to fall. If in doubt leave it out!

**Conclusion**

We should take heed to Paul’s exhortation to the Romans because our differences could divide us. If we are divided, it adversely affects the church. Walk charitably even when you don’t see eye to eye.