

Fruit of the Gospel - Love One Another

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[0 : 0 0] Please keep your Bibles open at Romans chapter 13 and 14. Well, I wonder if you've ever wished that the Bible was clearer.

Well, maybe you're a bit too embarrassed to admit it. I was thinking I might get people to stick their hands up. But let me assure you that you wouldn't be alone.

I can't tell you the number of times, not just when I'm preparing a sermon, that I've wished the Bible had more to say on a particular topic or that this apostle or that didn't use such strange grammar or words that we're not quite sure what they fully mean in English.

Or I wish that Jesus would have explained every single parable just like he did with the parable of the soils. I thought, oh, maybe God could have put an appendix in the back of the Bible for those who want to look up the right answers but still giving the keen beans an opportunity to give it a go for themselves first, you know, like a maths textbook or, you know, a magazine quiz or something.

Or maybe instead of the NIV study Bible or the spirit-filled life Bible, there could be God's answer to every question and rule for every situation study life Bible.

[1 : 2 6] You could buy it from Coorong. And God would mysteriously update it every year as new issues came and new technologies were developed that Christians needed to respond to.

And it would probably be expensive and Zondervan would probably own the rights to it, but it would be worth it, I reckon, because it would solve so many problems.

And not the least of those would be the problem of church unity. How many of us have experienced or at least heard of a church that has split over an issue that has seemed unclear, sometimes big, sometimes seemingly trivial, and the people on one side are adamant that they know God's mind on the issue and those on the other side think the same way.

Sometimes the stuff that Christians have split over seems so weird or trivial that it's funny, like, you know, should we play instruments in church?

Should we play cards? Not in church, especially not during the sermon, but should Christians play cards? Can women wear make-up? But the resulting hurt and division, even from what we might consider to be trivial issues, is not funny at all.

[2 : 5 9] It's very, very sad. And some of you sitting here may still be feeling the effects of a church split or needing to leave a church because your conscience just couldn't agree with the direction in which that church was going.

Some of you may know people who've never stepped back inside the door of a church because of splits like that. So why didn't God make the Bible clearer to prevent this kind of mess?

Why didn't he make sure that the Apostle Paul wrote even longer letters and that I could do even longer sermons and that all those books that the Apostle, the Gospel writer John said could have been written, recording all that Jesus said and did and fill many rooms.

Well, how come they weren't written? And why doesn't the Bible include a massive list of black and white rules to obey and exactly how Christians ought to think and live?

The final word, please. Well, the simple answer is this. Because God wants us to love each other.

[4 : 26] God wants us to love each other. Romans 13.8 says, Oh, no one anything except to love one another.

For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Love for God and love for neighbour is the fruit of the Gospel that Paul spent so many chapters expounding.

It's the goal of human life. It's the truest obedience to God. And whatever rules there are, and Paul names a few for us in verse 9 there, they're summed up by one rule, one word.

Love your neighbour as yourself. Never mind taxes, says Paul. He's just been talking about taxes and the government. The one real debt we have, which can never be fully paid, is to love others.

You can never claim, says Paul, that you've loved enough, that you've fulfilled your obligation to love, you've paid that debt. No, there's always more love to give.

[5 : 40] God wants Christians to love each other. It's how we'll be recognised as Christians, says Jesus. And the Bible says we're to increase, to abound, to grow in love more and more.

But growth in love only comes when it is exercised. And love is exercised most fully when we love in the midst of difference and difficulty.

Think about it. If the one true Christian response to every situation was legislated in scripture and the conscience of every Christian was shaped in the same way by the spirit and the personality and the experiences of every Christian were completely compatible with every other Christian, what opportunities would there be to exercise true, sacrificial, patient, and the spirit of God.

Persevering love in the body of Christ. We'd all be on the same page. We'd all be agreeing. We'd never be challenged. We'd never be stretched.

And we would never be growing in true love because we would never have to exercise it when it was really tested. And we'd never have the opportunity of showing to the world a unified love in the midst of human difference and mess, which is what the world wants, isn't it?

[7 : 22] But instead, all we'd end up showing would be a unity based on legalism, lack of individuality. We wouldn't have an attractive, gospel-shaped, God-honoring, light-on-a-hill community.

I think we'd have a scary, loveless cult. God wants Christians to love each other in every situation and especially where there is disagreement.

And so Romans 14 shows us a situation where we can really pay into that debt of love, where love can really be exercised and grow.

Christians in the body of Christ are disagreeing. But, Paul says, in this disagreement, they have the opportunity to choose to walk in love, as verse 15 of chapter 14 says, and where they can keep putting gospel things first for their own sake and the sake of their mission in the world.

Righteousness, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit, which it says in verse 17. And I think that God meant the Roman church to be this way because if they were going to, as Paul says in chapter 13, verse 14, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires, then they were going to need, and we are going to need, lots of opportunities to put our money where our mouth is and love when it's hardest to do so.

[9 : 13] So let's take a closer look at what was happening in Rome. Paul begins the chapter, chapter 14, in this way. Welcome those who are weak in faith.

And in so doing, he introduces to us one of the groups of these two groups in Romans that are competing, fighting, disagreeing.

And then he goes on in the rest of the chapter to explain those two groups, the weak and their opposite, the strong. Now, he never actually identifies one group with a clear ethnic or religious background.

So he doesn't exactly say weak equals Jews, strong equals Gentiles. He doesn't exactly say that and you'll see in his description of the groups that there could be some overlap.

So let's have a look at the groups and he describes them in five different ways. Firstly, those who are weak in faith don't eat meat and don't drink wine, but the strong do.

[10 : 25] Verse 2 says, one person believes he may eat anything, the strong, while the weak person eats only vegetables. The issue in this verse is meat, but then in verse 21, wine is added to that as well.

It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that causes your brother to stumble. So it seems the weak were avoiding meat and wine and the strong felt free to eat and drink whatever they liked.

We can easily imagine that some Jewish Christians would fall into the category of the weak here, couldn't we? not feeling free to eat non-kosher meat, meat of certain unclean animals as they had done all their life.

And it's possible too that there was an issue about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. If you've read 1 Corinthians, you'll know that that was the situation there.

But if that was the case, then it could have either been Jews or Gentiles who were having scruples about eating meat sacrificed to idols. It could have been that there were Gentiles who in their previous life of paganism had fully associated the eating of meat sacrificed to idols with that idol temple worship and that whole lifestyle.

[11 : 52] And for them to eat any meat now as a Christian that had been sacrificed to an idol just smacked too much of their old way of life and they could not do so in faith.

And so here the weak could be Jews and Gentile Christians or perhaps some, especially with the issue of alcohol, either Jews or Gentiles who had decided that Christianity was best lived out with an ascetic ideal, giving up things, showing their sacrifice especially to abstain from the drunkenness and debauchery that Paul has listed at the end of Romans 13 to show that they were holy.

So it could be either here. Secondly, it says in verse 5 that the weak in faith judge one day to be better than another while others judge all days to be alike.

I think it's much more clearly here Jewish Christians who are judging the Sabbath and other festivals as days which need to be held and observed with importance still as a Christian and the strong saying, no, every day is alike.

God's blessed every day. Now, I don't think it's necessarily saying that the strong were against the Lord's Day or setting aside a Sabbath because that seems to be a reasonably consistent thing across the early church but certainly there was a difference in the kind of religious celebration observance of the weak and the strong.

[13 : 38] Thirdly, and this is quite fascinating, neither group in their choice of eating or drinking, observing days or not, are said to be sinning.

Neither group. The first evidence of this is that in verse 1 it says that the weak are acting in weak faith but not in no faith.

The practices of the weak are still faith-driven practices and Paul says in verse 23 whatever does not proceed from faith is sin but he doesn't accuse the weak of sinning.

They're acting from faith. A weak faith, yes, but a faith that is God-centered and God-honoring. And he goes on to say that in fact both the weak and the strong are acting in this way.

So if you have a look at verse 6, the one who observes the day, whatever special religious day it might be or the Sabbath, observes it in honor of the Lord.

[14 : 46] The one who eats eats 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.

Both these types of believers are honoring God, living out their convictions with thankfulness to him. The fourth thing to say about the weak brother or sister's abstinence from meat and wine is that it doesn't come from legalism.

That is, these people don't seem to be doing these things because they believe that this behavior is the way they get justified, saved, or the way they secure their acceptance with God.

We can only assume this, of course, it doesn't exactly say that in the text but we know that whenever this type of legalistic attitude has come up in other places, Paul has just jumped on it so quickly.

So you think of the Judaizers in Galatia, and when Paul's writing to them, he's absolutely furious for them insisting that circumcision was necessary for all Christians to be saved.

[16 : 10] But he doesn't give any criticism like that in this situation. So it seems that the weak aren't legalists in terms of salvation but they do think that certain actions are appropriate for discipleship which the strong do not.

the fifth thing that we see in those that abstain from meat and wine is that they regard meat and wine in some sense as unclean and to them it is even though they are actually mistaken.

Verse 14 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.

It's kind of strange for us who want a facts and figures, is it, is it not type of faith. Surely it's either clean or it's unclean.

but the situation is that here in Rome are Christians who because of their background or experiences and their conscience have decided that certain ways of living out their faith are right for them and certain ways are wrong.

[17 : 36] they do not feel comfortable in the freedom that the powerful gospel of God gives. Yet, they may well come to that point.

But if they are forced to behave in certain ways that they believe are inappropriate or partake in Christian gatherings where such things are happening, such as the eating of meat or drinking of wine, then their faith would be affected.

They would feel like they were sinning. But more than just feel, Paul says if they participated in what they felt like was sin, then they would actually be sinning.

Go back to verse 23, I've mentioned before, those who have doubts are condemned if they eat because they do not act from faith, for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

If these weaker Christians couldn't see how their actions honoured God, even if that was because they hadn't assimilated all the information that God had revealed on that subject, then they would be choosing to dishonour God in themselves if they did those things and so in fact they would be sinning in their attitude because they had to disobey what they felt was part of God's desire for them.

[19 : 17] I've been thinking about this and I think that I've had this experience in my own life where I've known in my head that God owns the human body, he designed it and whatever is good for the body, whatever is healthy is a gift from him.

And yet I've been very uncomfortable as many of you might be with certain types of exercise which have got an eastern origin. Now obviously if that type of exercise, you know yoga or whatever, has a non-Christian spiritual component then that's kind of clearly wrong to me from the scriptures.

But what if it's just yoga or tai chi movements or whatever in a gym class without any kind of cultural baggage, without any religious input, without any context of that type, is that sin to participate in that?

And there was a time for me absolutely when I felt that it was a sin. And so to go there and sometimes I did, not feeling comfortable, I actually think that was wrong for me because it would have been, it was, and if I did it often, it would have been a rebellion against what I thought God's will was in my conscience.

I didn't feel comfortable but I kind of, I went to these gym classes anyway, they weren't crazy meditation yoga classes, just, you know, at the local gym. But I wasn't convinced and so I think that it was wrong.

[21 : 01] But later on reflection and growing in faith and just assimilating those beliefs about, you know, God's goodness in charge of all creation and all of that kind of stuff, I think that I have been more convinced in my own spirit that I could do exercise like that and that it wasn't a sin and that I could do it honouring to God, thanking God for his gift of movement and health and all of that.

But for other Christians and some of you here, that is still, that would not be the case. And so I would need to make sure that I didn't force that upon you, even bringing it up tonight might be an issue.

And I wouldn't be able to disagree with your conclusion for you. And I would also need to make sure that my change of mind had not just come from capitulating with the world, you know, reading too many magazines and saying, oh, well, looks all right in the end.

But I have to be convinced in my own mind, Paul says, fully convinced in my own mind, in verse 5, I think, from the scriptures so that I can do it in faith.

faith. So we have a picture of the weak and the strong who are divided over right, appropriate behavior for Christians. Not on how one is saved, but how you live out your Christian walk.

[22 : 32] how are they to maintain their unity? Are they just to say, well, you do your thing, I'll do my thing, you know, don't sweat the small stuff, just, you know, live and let live, don't worry about it, just minimize it.

Well, no, this verse 5 that I just mentioned said, each should be fully convinced in his or her own mind. And he goes on later to say, each should have his conviction before the Lord.

So it's important that they don't just minimize this stuff and say, oh, you know, whatever, just think whatever you like. No, the weak and the strong need to have sought out God's will on this disputed matter.

Even here where it's just about food and drink, which seems silly to us, but important to them, Paul is expecting them to be thoughtful, prayerful, convinced by evidence, fully convinced in their own mind.

And yet, even while telling them to be stronger in their own convictions, he's urging unity. How does he expect this to happen?

[23 : 46] Well, he expects their loving unity to happen as they base their relationships on two profound theological truths. first truth.

They are to welcome each other because God has welcomed them. Verse three. Their acceptance, or even stronger rendering might be their receiving or embracing of each other, is not to be a bland, wishy-washy unity based on political correctness or a fear of conflict.

Let's just keep it down there. It's to be based on the ultimate, strong, sacrificial act of love by God, the embracing of sinners through the death of his son.

If God has welcomed these believers, giving his only son for them, who are they? who are we to exclude, judge, despise another believer?

And flowing on from this, if they've been welcomed by God, they are in God's family, and they are actually brothers and sisters. You'll have noticed that language throughout this passage, and the NRSV sometimes smooths over a little bit of that family language in its good desire to have kind of gender inclusive stuff, but there's heaps of brother words in here.

[25 : 22] So have a look at verse 15, for example, of chapter 14. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. Christ died to welcome the weak and the strong.

They are spiritual brothers and sisters, and they would be spending eternity with each other. We ought to have the good of our Christian brothers and sisters at our heart.

We ought to be ready to do whatever it takes to help and care for them. So speaking to the strong, Paul says, don't exercise your faith in such a way that you injure these members of your family.

For the weak, it's essential that their faith is lived out in this way at the moment. If you offend them or cause them to question their beliefs or turn back into their old ways, then you might be ruining one, causing one to stumble for whom Christ died.

[26 : 38] And that is not walking in love. That is not paying that debt of love. That's not fulfilling the law. That's not acting in accordance with the faith in which you're supposed to be so strong.

You see, God will make both of you stand in his strength, by his grace, on the day of judgment. He will make you stand, both the strong and the weak.

Second big theological truth upon which the unity is to be based. They're not to judge each other because they're not masters of each other.

Verse 4, who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall. Have you ever tried to discipline children of another parent?

It's really awkward, isn't it? I mean, you just, you don't know whether they're allowed to swear and poke each other in the eye and jump on the couch and throw things at the cat at their house. So what are you going to do?

[27 : 57] That's why I'm not very good at babysitting. But it's awkward. Similarly, if you've got a position of responsibility at work, you ever tried to go into another section and told another team how to do their job?

It doesn't go down well. Servants are accountable to their own master. master. And Paul goes on to say that Jesus is that master because he died and rose again to become that very thing.

Verse 9 in chapter 14, for to this end Christ died and lived again so that he might be both, be Lord of both the dead and the living.

So yes, if the Lord Jesus died that we might be welcomed, then he rose again that we might have one true master and Lord.

And so we who believe are welcomed and belong to him. We are his servants. So Paul says in verses 7 and 8, we do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves.

[29 : 15] If we live, we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord. That all of life, everything, it's to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

We can't judge each other because the fact that Jesus rose from the dead means that we have one master, Jesus Lord and Christ and only he has the right to judge us.

And flowing on from this, we not only have a God and a master who can judge us, but we have one who will judge us. We don't have to call each other to account on these matters.

We will all give account to God. So he says in verse 10, 11 and 12, why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?

Or you, why do you despise your brother and sister? And that's probably the weak judging and the strong despising. For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

[30 : 33] For it is written, as I live, says the Lord, and a quote from Isaiah, every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall give praise to God. So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

So then, Paul concludes this second theological truth with this application, verse 13, let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or a hindrance in the way of another.

So not only has he got this negative command based on the risen lordship of Christ, don't judge, but notice now the way that Paul states the positive alternative, but rather decide, and actually the word in the Greek there is judge, never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

So he's turning the table on the idea of judging by using the word judge again in this positive way. Don't judge each other, but judge among all the possible ways of relating to each other and choose this one.

Do nothing to cause your brother or sister to stumble or be hindered on his or her way to heaven where he or she will face their judge.

[31 : 59] Simply put, love your brother and sister and do not judge them. You may have to correct him or admonish him, rebuke him, but let your brotherly affection show.

Help him or her get to heaven. Don't make it harder. Help him or her get to heaven. Don't make it harder. And whatever you do, don't destroy him or her.

Ruin them by judgment, despising, offence, exclusion. So we've got these two theological truths that lead to the same conclusion.

You've been welcomed into one family by Christ's death and you've been given one Lord and judge by Christ's resurrection. salvation. So, strong people, don't ruin the weak by the exercise of your free faith, which is a good thing in itself, but will be spoken of as evil, Paul says in verse 16, if you do this.

But weak, don't judge the strong in your belief that they're sinning when they don't abstain as you do. but instead, both of you, all of you, focus on the values of the kingdom, not ridiculous things like food and drink.

[33 : 25] It just sounds so, look at that verse 17, the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The difference, the values of the kingdom, and if you focus on them, that Christ's righteousness is yours by faith, so live a righteous life.

That the peace of God is yours by faith, so live a peaceable life. The joy of the hope of heaven is yours in the Spirit by faith, so live a joyful life.

Then you'll be able to live out these things amongst yourselves and also show them to those who don't yet believe, weak or strong, so that they might come in.

If you focus on those things, you will subjugate your rights for the sake of the values of the kingdom, not insisting on being able to do what you are quite able to do, eat, drink, because it's right, it's fine, but you will instead walk in love, pay that debt of love and give up your rights as Christ gave up his rights to help and sustain your brothers and sisters who struggle with these things.

[35 : 03] And so then Paul describes what this is like, verse 18, 19, 20. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.

Let us then pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. Do not for the sake of food destroy the work of God.

And that word destroy is like the opposite of the upbuilding. The upbuilding, not tear down in the church. But I guess that some of us could say, well, it's a very difficult issue to know how to apply.

In the Reformation, they used to talk about things called the adiaphora, the kind of the things upon which there might be Christian liberty to disagree.

But here, it's very tricky because the weak are actually wrong. I mean, Paul doesn't agree with them. He counts himself amongst the strong, we'll see next week in chapter 15.

[36 : 21] And he knows that the weak are not living in the full truth of God's revelation. He says, all food is actually clean. And even we see in 1 Corinthians, food sacrificed to idols is okay because idols are nothing and God owns everything.

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. And yet, it's the strong who are to change their behavior for the sake of the weak, who've actually kind of got it wrong.

It's hard for us, this response. We're more likely to say well, let's be honest here, you're the one who got it wrong, all food is clean, get over it, we're having a spit roast for the annual dinner, washed down with a good pinot noir, and you can either like it or lump it.

But for Paul, the loving community of believers is the most important thing, even though some of these believers are not actually living in the fullest revelation of God's truth.

And he's saying, even if that's the case, and you know, you're all gung-ho about truth, even that's the case, the strong must be sacrificing for the weak, because that's the gospel way.

[37 : 48] And so he says in verse 20 to 22, do not for the sake of food destroy the work of God. Indeed, everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat.

It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God.

Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. That is, the strong in what they approve, make sure that you don't cause others to stumble, because that will be meaning that you need to condemn yourself.

So blessed are those who don't do anything with their approving that makes others fall that they need to be condemned for. Now, if this has left you with more questions, like, well, we don't have eating and drinking issues here.

Well, sometimes we do have drinking issues. Alcohol is still an issue in the wider Christian church. You know, would you go and eat at a Hare Christian restaurant?

[39 : 01] These things still exist for us. But if you're still thinking, oh gosh, how would I apply this? When is it a Romans 14 situation in the church?

And when is it, you know, a case where I need to actually say, nope, this is sin that needs to be opposed, or this is a truth that needs to be upheld? Like, you know, is it about drinking?

Is it, we're watching MA movies or R movies? You know, women's ordination? What Bible translation we use? This is still stuff out there that we're tossing about between brothers and sisters in Christ.

Do we apply this passage to those things? Well, I wish the Bible were clearer. And I think the answer is, yes, we do apply this.

We apply this in every situation because Paul is saying, walk in love. love. Don't destroy someone else's faith by what you approve or what you say is wrong.

[40 : 10] Don't judge. Don't despise. Walk in love. Don't make it harder for someone to get to heaven. Now, I can't tell you exactly what that will look like in every situation.

But, you know the call here. What do you do with the mercy of God expressed in his son, the gospel that's been so carefully and so powerfully expounded for us in Romans 1-8?

You apply it by loving the Christian brother and sister, doing everything that will build them up, not tear them down, even if it means sacrificing your own rights, because that's what Christ did.

Thank you.