

MUTUAL EDIFICATION

Romans 14:1-23

Key Verse: 14:19

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”

In the last passage we learned how to live a victorious life in this real world. It is to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. We are weak, but Jesus is strong. Jesus enables us to humble ourselves, until we can submit to the governing authorities. Jesus enables us to grow in love until we can love others sacrificially, revealing God's love for the world. May God help us clothe ourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ!

In today's passage Paul teaches how to form a Christian community to carry out God's world mission purpose. The church at Rome was composed of all kinds of people from many different backgrounds and cultures. God wanted them to form a strong spiritual vessel for his world mission purpose. How was it possible? Paul teaches how to practice mutual edification that leads to true spiritual unity.

First, accept one another (1-4).

Look at verses 1-2. “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.” Spiritual unity begins when Christians accept one another in the love of Christ. The person with strong faith must accept him whose faith is weak. In verses 1-2, we learn that a person of strong faith is one who can eat anything, while a person who eats only vegetables has weak faith. In a real sense, this is true. Food represents culture. In France there are hundreds of types of cheeses. Originally, each type of cheese was uniquely produced by a specific family as a trademark product. In the same way, nations are associated with their own kinds of foods. When we think of Russia, we may think of borscht. When we think of Korea, we may think of kimchee. When we think of Japan, we may think of sushi. When we think of Mexico, we may think of tacos. When we think of Chicago, we may think of deep-dish pizza. All human beings grow up in cultures with unique eating habits and lifestyles. But when we accept the gospel of Jesus Christ, we become citizens of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is universal. We are liberated from a specific culture to love and serve many kinds of people in the grace and truth of Jesus. We can say that the gospel makes us international. A true missionary is one who has an international stomach. He or she eats anything to make friends with different kinds of people.

When God wanted to raise Apostle Peter as a shepherd for the Gentiles he gave him one kind of training: to eat the crawling animals and insects that had been forbidden him as a Jew (Ac 10:13). This was not at all easy for Peter. The Lord had to repeat the teaching three times before Peter finally accepted it. Then Peter became a shepherd for Gentiles. After coming to America, Dr. Samuel Lee enjoyed eating Korean food at home. Then one day, an American shepherd visited his house, was overwhelmed by the smell of kimchee, and left suddenly. After that, Dr. Lee decided to eat American food. He ate one Big Mac and drank one can of sprite for lunch every day for eight years. Gradually he enjoyed American food. Then American young people became comfortable with him and opened their hearts to his message.

On the other hand, we can say that weak Christians are those who are still bound to the cultural norms they grew up with. They have not grown in the spiritual freedom that the gospel brings. Their faith is not on the international level. They are indeed Christians, but they are not mature. Those who dwell only in their native culture are weak in faith.

How can those who are strong in faith and weak in faith get along with each other? Both must do their best to do so. The strong must not look down on the weak and despise them. Instead, they must accept those who are weak in faith without passing judgment on disputable matters. Here, the word “accept” is not grudgingly passive, like the word “tolerance.” Rather, to “accept” another means to acknowledge their membership in the body of Christ with affectionate approval. It is to welcome them into the family of God. To develop spiritual unity in the body of Christ we must accept others with a generous heart and not pass judgment on others regarding disputable matters.

In Christian faith there are disputable matters and non-disputable matters. Non-disputable matters are the basic truths of Christian faith. These are summarized in the Apostles' Creed. For example, Christians believe that Jesus

Christ is the Son of God who came in the flesh, died on the cross for sinners, rose again from the dead, and will come again in power and glory to judge the living and the dead. Without believing this one cannot be a Christian. Again, the Ten Commandments are not a disputable matter. Sin is not disputable. However, there are disputable matters about which two genuine Christians can hold differing opinions and still be Christians. In this passage Paul mentions eating meat, observing special days, and drinking wine as disputable matters. In modern times, we can say that clothing preferences, music style, the method of baptism, or shepherding philosophies can be disputable matters. Strong Christians should not insist that their own opinions are absolutely right, demanding weaker Christians to comply. Not at all! In fact, stronger Christians must not even look down on weaker Christians in regard to disputable matters. They must accept weaker Christians as fellow members in the body of Christ, worthy of respect and affection.

Sometimes it is not at all easy for a strong Christian to accept a weak Christian. Instead of accepting him, the strong Christian may want to fix him up through direct education and immediate transformation. Granted, the strong Christian knows what is right and best. Still, he must not pass judgment on his weaker brother. Instead, he must first of all accept him with the love of God and the grace of Christ. Mother Barry has been a good example in this. There was a young American man who was full of passion. But before knowing Jesus he was a heavy metal maniac, indulging in human freedom. One day he came to our Sunday worship service in heavy metal attire, with long hair. Some felt like casting him out, even before knowing his name. But Mother Barry said to him, "I like your hairstyle. It is like Jesus' hairstyle." She accepted him from her heart. He was moved by the shepherd's affection of Mother Barry. The small seed of faith growing in his heart could take deeper root. He began to study the Bible avidly. Gradually he became strong in faith. Now he is a fellowship leader with precious young souls under his care. When strong Christians accept those who are weak with the shepherd heart of our Lord Jesus Christ, they can make a good spiritual environment. Then the weak will become strong in faith.

Our Lord Jesus accepted all kinds of people. Jesus accepted a wayward Samaritan woman whom her own people despised because of her immoral life. Jesus accepted Levi the tax collector, whom all Jews despised as a public sinner and a quisling. Jesus accepted a man with leprosy who came to him for healing. Jesus even accepted a man condemned for robbery, possibly murder, while he was hanging on the cross. We must accept others as our Lord Jesus did. One young shepherd thought of himself as a strong Christian after ten years of living by faith. One day he was asked to encourage a young girl student who had many weaknesses. He tried because he was asked. But without being aware of it, he looked down on her, regarding her as weak and inferior. Then John 1:14a came into his heart. It says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." He tasted the humbleness of Jesus who came down from heaven to save all kinds of sinners, even one like himself. From that time, he stopped looking down on the girl student and began to teach the Bible to her with genuine compassion. She responded with a new commitment to study the word of God. Paul urges us, "Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgment on disputable matters."

Then what about the weaker Christians? Their problem is that they tend to condemn the strong as those with no standard. Paul says, "...and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him" (3b). The real issue in Christian fellowship is not whether other Christians live up to our standard—not at all. The real issue is whether God has accepted him. If God has accepted him, we must respect him as God's servant. God has hope in him. God is able to make him stand (4).

Second, recognize Jesus as Lord and Judge (5-12).

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." As we have thought about, there are disputable matters in the context of Christian faith. Paul identifies the strong and the weak in eating meat. However, he makes no such distinction in the observance of special days. Forming the Christian fellowship goes beyond the strong accepting the weak, or the weak respecting the strong. Some issues have nothing to do with being strong or weak; they arise simply because all human beings are different. Genesis teaches that God likes variety. He made all kinds of trees and all kinds of animals. Likewise, he made all kinds of human beings. Some are artistic. Some are athletic. Some are intellectual. Some are adventurous. Some are meditative. Some are outgoing. Some are clever. We are all different. This allows for a marvelous diversity in the Christian church. One who expects others to be like himself in everything needs to learn a basic truth: we are all different and that is the way God made us. Furthermore, each of us has a responsibility in this diversity of people. It is to arrive at convictions of faith. We should not ignore disputable

matters. Rather, we must struggle to arrive at convictions before the Lord. By making decisions about disputable matters, our own personal faith develops. We become the kind of people God really wants us to be as we struggle to grow in our personal faith.

In verses 6-8, the words “to the Lord” or “to God” are repeated eight times (6,6,6,6,6,8,8,8). This virtually means “for the glory of God.” The most important consideration for us in resolving disputable matters is to seek to glorify God. Let’s read verse 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.” We live and die for the glory of God. How much more should we glorify God in resolving disputable matters. One American shepherd always looks at other people to find out what he should believe. He needs to take a stand on his own convictions of faith. To do this, he must study the Bible deeply until he understands how to please God. But he does not study hard, hoping that someone else will tell him what to believe. Laziness in Bible study is one of the most serious sins because it leaves us ignorant of the truth of God. We must study the Bible deeply and personally and make clear decisions of faith about disputable matters. In this way, we can glorify God through our personal lives of faith.

Deep Bible study must lead us to Jesus and to recognize Jesus as Lord in our personal lives, in our families, in our fellowships, in UBF ministry worldwide, and in the world. Christ died and rose again to claim Lordship over the dead and the living. Through Christ, God will judge the world. Look at verses 10b-11. “For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’” At the time of God’s judgment, it will be good for those who sincerely struggled to please God through their convictions of faith. We must realize that someday we must stand before God’s judgment seat and give an account. Then we find enough things to struggle with in our personal lives of faith. We have no time or right to pass judgment on others. They, too, must stand before God for his judgment, for Jesus is Lord of all. A healthy and united Christian community forms when Jesus Christ is honored as Lord and Judge. Jesus is Lord and Judge in our personal lives! Jesus is Lord and Judge in our fellowship! May God help each of us to recognize Jesus as Lord and Judge from our hearts.

Third, act in love (13-18).

Each of us has the privilege and divine duty to make decisions of faith to please God. However, it is not enough for us to blindly live by these convictions. We must submit our convictions to the law of love. We must be sensitive toward our fellow Christians and consider the effect that our lives of faith have on them. Look at verse 13b. “Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.” We can be a stumbling block to others by the insensitive use of our Christian liberty. So we must submit our convictions about disputable matters to the law of love. Paul gave himself as an example (14). He had struggled before God with the dietary laws. As a Jew and a former Pharisee, we can imagine how deeply rooted his practice of the dietary law had been. But after meeting Jesus, he was set free from the dietary law. He was fully convinced that no food was unclean in itself. But he did not eat whatever he wanted to eat. He paid attention to the effect that his eating had on other people. If a fellow Christian was distressed because Paul ate a certain food, Paul would stop eating that food. Paul was free, but he submitted his freedom to the law of love. Look at verse 15. “If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.” Christian faith always come back to the cross. When Jesus suffered and died on the cross, he died for my sins. He also died for each and every one of God’s children. Thus, our value to God is the same as precious Jesus. Since God loved our fellow Christians enough to sacrifice Jesus for them, we must be ready to restrain our Christian liberty so that we may not be a stumbling block to them. We must always remember that our Christian brothers and sisters are so precious to God that Christ died for them, too.

Look at verse 16. “Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.” We must not take this verse out of context. It is not urging us to dispute with others based on our strong convictions. Rather, it urges us to use restraint in exercising our Christian liberty so that we may not offend others and cause them to call evil what we have come to believe is good. Let’s read verses 17-18. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy through the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.” We Christians must not dwell in the realm of fleshly things, such as eating and drinking. Rather, we must honor the living Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts. Jesus brings the kingdom of God to our hearts. Jesus gives us the righteousness that comes from faith. Jesus gives us peace and joy. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to dwell in us. When we are full of the Holy Spirit we transcend the world of flesh. We can please God and

give a good influence to others. People like Jesus. If they see Jesus in us, they are happy. They forget about disputable matters. The best way to please God and be a good influence to others is to have Jesus in our hearts.

Fourth, make every effort toward peace and mutual edification (19-23).

Look at verse 19. “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” One mature woman of God has developed Christian convictions that please God. She has also done her best to love others in a way that builds them up. Still, misunderstandings arise. She never blames others. Instead, she examines herself in the sight of God and finds her own fault in the matter, regardless how small it may be. Then she repents before God, and next reconciles with her fellow Christian immediately. This requires much effort of prayer, thought and conversation. Sometimes it requires a change in behavior or even restitution. Her effort to live at peace with others is exemplary. We must all make this kind of effort to live at peace with each other in Christian fellowship. We must also make every effort toward mutual edification. We must build one another up in faith. When a strong Christian accepts a weak Christian, the weaker one is built up in faith through their fellowship. When the weaker one grows spiritually, this greatly encourages the stronger one. When we practice the love of Christ toward one another, we enjoy mutual edification.

Look at verse 22. “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.” Sometimes we must keep our Christian convictions as a private matter between us and God. We are truly happy when we our convictions are right before God.

Verse 23 says, “But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.” We must live by faith in Jesus. If we cannot do something by faith in the sight of God, it is sin.

In this passage we learn that we must accept the weak as Christ accepted us. We must honor Christ as Lord and Judge. We must develop personal convictions that please God, but we must submit our convictions to the law of love. Let’s make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.