

# “Lenten Themes in Paul’s Gospel: 4) The Weak and the Strong”

a sermon by

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**Text: “We who are strong ought to put up with the weak, and not to please ourselves”  
(Romans 15:1).**

Over these Sundays of the Lenten Season, we have looked at some of the Lenten themes in Paul’s letter to the Church at Rome. In Romans 12-15, Paul lays out a series of ethical guides that follow the brunt of his argument in Romans 1-11, where he defines the Christian gospel in terms of God’s grace poured out for us in Jesus Christ.

The guiding principal of Romans 12-15 occurs at the beginning of this section: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2). In Chapter 13, Paul deals with a particularly perplexing matter for the Christian church in Rome, namely the relationship between the Christian and the State (Romans 13: 1-7). In Romans 14 and 15 Paul deals with a particular concern of the church in Rome and Corinth. It was a division between those whom Paul refers to as the “weak” and those to whom he refers as the “strong.”

The issue in both Corinth and Rome revolved around two concrete practices. The first had to do with the observance of special religious days, including the Sabbath. Some of the Jewish Christians continued to observe the Jewish Sabbath as a special and holy day, while some of the gentile Christians believed that the freedom given by Christ relieved them of the observance of this day.

There was another issue, perhaps even thornier. It had to do with meat that had been sacrificed to idols in the pagan temples of Rome. This meat was sold in the market places. Some members of the Christian community refused to eat this meat that had been sacrificed to idols. They believed that the meat had been defiled by its participation such pagan rituals. Others in the Christian community, including Paul, did not view this in the same fashion. These Christians believed that there was nothing wrong with eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. After all, they argued, it was not the meat that was pagan, but the ones sacrificing it. The issue was really that of Christian freedom.

In Romans 15, Paul distinguishes between these two groups. The ones who were opposed to eating meat sacrificed to idols Paul refers to as the “weak.” Those who believed that Christ’s death had freed them from this kind of restriction Paul refers to as the “strong.”

Now, there are two things that need to be said.

## I.

The first is that this distinction that Paul makes between the “weak” and the “strong” was not intended in a derogatory way. He did not mean it as an insult. Paul recognized that those who refused to eat meat sacrificed to idols were not “weak” in the sense that they had no faith. They did have faith. Moreover, they sought to avoid certain things. Some of them were vegetarians (14:2). Others abstained from drinking any alcohol (14:21). They observed special religious days such as the Sabbath because they believe that these observances strengthened their faith.

Paul was aware that these Christians were doing this not because they could earn God’s grace by doing so. Had that been the case, Paul would have condemned this practice as contrary to the gospel (as he did in the letter to the church at Galatia). These people were not trying to be saved and blessed by good works. Rather they wished to live by their faith alone and they found these practices helpful to them. They were afraid that apart from this kind of support, they might lapse from God’s grace.

This is very similar to what the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) refers to as “means of grace.” Our Directory of Worship reminds us of the importance of regular worship, prayer, the reading and study of Scripture, and engaging in ministries of compassion. These do not earn us God’s favor. These are ways that we experience God’s grace and we ignore them at our own peril.

As for the “strong,” Paul has a word for them. They are to receive the “weak” as people of good faith. They may not agree with them, but they are not to condemn them. They are people of faith who are not to be despised. That is the whole thrust of Paul’s command to the church at Rome.

We are called not to “judge.” To “judge” others is to exclude them. There is no place in the church for judging others, because judging involves us in despising those who God has accepted.

## II.

There is another word to be said in this discussion of the “weak” and the “strong.” This is not the only place that Paul makes this distinction. In his letter to the Church at Corinth (II Corinthians 12:1-10), Paul uses this distinction in an autobiographical section. In this passage he speaks of an exhilarating experience he once received. He calls them revelations and visions. In this experience, he was taken up into what he called the “third heaven” where he experienced paradise and heard and saw things that seem too miraculous to be described. Certainly, this was a memorable experience for Paul.

But then Paul goes on to account a very different kind of experience. He relates how God, in order to keep Paul from being too elated, gave him what Paul calls a “thorn in the flesh.”

Now, no one is exactly sure what this “thorn in the flesh” really was. Some New Testament scholars have argued that it was “poor eyesight,” perhaps malaria, or perhaps a debilitating form of psychological disability. But whatever it was, it was a hindrance to Paul’s ministry.

Paul goes on to say that he prayed to God three times that this “thorn” would be removed. And each time God refused to remove this thorn. But each time God answered Paul in another way, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Most of us, I suspect, if given the choice between being referred to as the “weak” or the “strong” would prefer the latter. Most of us don’t want to be viewed as “weak.” After all, we are for the most part an affluent congregation of professional people who know that weakness in our society is something on which people look down.

But Paul has discovered something that has eluded many of us. When we are strong we are self-sufficient. We don’t need God, or God’s grace for that matter. But when we are weak—that is another matter indeed.

In his remarkable little book *On the Meaning of Prayer*, Harry Emerson Fosdick relates an experience in his life when he discovered the meaning of prayer. He was a young seminary student at Union Seminary in New York. He was often subject to episodes of deep depression. One night, in the depth of one of these depressions, he took a razor blade and slit his wrists. He was hospitalized for almost six months. It was for him a life and death experience. During his illness he came to the conclusion that either there had to be some greater power to help him or else he knew he was lost.

He found that help in the form of God’s love in Christ, and out of that experience wrote this remarkable book on prayer.

Harry Emerson Fosdick later became the most famous preacher and minister of his generation. In spite of his great success he was never fully freed from the bouts of depression that sometimes continued to haunt him. But he did discover something that the Apostle Paul discovered as well. At the point of his greatest weakness he found the strength of God.

In Romans, chapter 8, Paul raises one of the most important questions that any of us faces. “Who can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ?” I wonder how we would answer that question: Is it the fear of failure, an illness, the death of a loved one, a divorce, financial ruin, or an addiction we cannot shake?

Paul reminds us that none of these things can separate us from God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. That is our great hope and it is the one hope that will not disappoint us.

Amen!