ROMANS 14:1-15:13 - LOVE THAT JUDGES NO ONE

Did you know that there is an object in this church that was once considered to be a tool of the devil? It's in this room right now. We use it every Sunday. It's the piano.

When the piano was first invented in the 18th century, it was often used in pubs and gambling rooms. It became so associated with drinking and gambling that many Christians felt that it was corrupt. Some churches refused point blank to use it. In churches that did accept it, many people left because of it. I hope no one's offended by the piano this evening!

This story might seem hard to believe, but division over this sort of thing is everywhere in churches today. Happily, Westlake is pretty good at avoiding major divisions of this kind, but we'd be wrong if we think that this sort of division only exists "out there". For example, imagine you have a friend from church round to watch a movie. The movie you plan to watch only has a PG rating. But your friend feels uncomfortable because it has magic in it and says he doesn't want to get entertainment from occultism. What do you do?

We've seen throughout Romans that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of *everyone* who believes. *Everyone*, whatever their background. And since chapter 12 we've been thinking about what it looks like to live out lives of total dedication to God in view of his extraordinary mercy to us. And now we arrive at the final passage of this practical part of the book, where Paul addresses a particular problem within the Roman church. And Paul has saved the biggest punch until the end. No other practical application in the book gets so much air time.

We might call this problem "the Axe Syndrome". When you chop down a tree, you swing the axe continually at the same crack. Each stroke is small in itself, but slowly you widen the crack until the whole tree comes crashing down. The church in Rome had a weak spot. Paul has spent most of the book describing the gospel that is the power of God for salvation to all who believe. But the Axe Syndrome is in danger of chopping it all down. Like them, each of us is in danger of setting an axe to the crack. Setting an axe to our peace and joy. Setting an axe to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Setting an axe to the very roots of the gospel itself. Each swing of the axe seems insignificant, but sooner or later the tree will come crashing down. What is the Axe Syndrome? It's quite simply *judging other Christians at different stages of faith*.

So we have only one big point tonight:

DON'T JUDGE CHRISTIANS AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF FAITH…

As we read, see if you can spot how he clearly states this point several times, in slightly different wording, throughout the passage. They'll appear in red on the screen.

Read Romans 14:1-15:13

Did you notice Paul tells us straight off exactly what point he wants us to take home? Verse 1: *"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions."* The first verse is like a newspaper headline. It summarises the issue straight away and tells us exactly what we're supposed to do about it.

We first need to understand what Paul means when he says that some people in the church are "weak in faith". He gives two examples in this passage that help us understand. In verse 2, some people in the church - probably Jews - feel it is wrong to eat meat, while others are fine with it. This example runs throughout the passage. And in verse 5, some people in the church - again, probably Jews - feel they need to observe certain special days, while others don't.

Let's be clear: these are not just disputes about personal preferences, like what colour carpet to have in church. Both groups feel their position is more honouring to God. But neither are we talking about major heresies or major sins. These are issues where the Bible *does* have something to say, but people could have different views without committing a major heresy or a major sin.

Also, Paul is not saying that both positions are equally valid. He doesn't hesitate to refer to the stricter group as the *"weak in faith"*. You might be thinking, "that sounds a bit harsh!" But he clearly sides with the strong group's opinion. He affirms that it is no longer necessary to observe many religious practices. Indeed, the New Testament affirms that Jesus died to free us from such things so that we can concentrate on honouring God from the heart rather than through external practices. So the stricter group are weaker in faith because they are not as far on in living out the freedom Jesus has won for them in their daily walk with God.

At this time of year, many people suffer from allergies. An allergen is different to a virus. A virus is harmful to the body. An allergen is not harmful. The problem is that the immune system thinks it is and overreacts. So the suffering is "unnecessary", but still real. A weak conscience is a bit like having an allergy. Eating meat is not the same as idolatry. Idolatry will harm your relationship with God. Eating meat will not. But some people have a sensitive conscience, and feel bad about eating meat. Their sacrifice is unnecessary, but still real.

Now we understand what Paul means by the "weak" and the "strong", let's return to our main point. You see, Paul's primary purpose in this passage is not to give the "weak" a ticking off for being weak. It's almost the opposite. Did you see what he wants in verse 1? *"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions."* So the strong in faith are not to come down heavily on the weak group, even if their opinion is wrong. And did you notice how he repeated a very similar point five or six times throughout the passage? Paul really wants us to get this! His main aim is to make sure that Christians at different stages of faith do not swing an axe at one another. Weak, don't criticise the strong as if they are too liberal. Strong, don't criticise the weak as if they are too legalistic.

But you may be wondering something like: "OK, so we shouldn't be too harsh with one another, but what if some people are too liberal, or too legalistic? Shouldn't we tell them?" That's why Paul takes his time over explaining his reasoning. He really wants to show us *why* the Axe Syndrome is so wrong and so dangerous. We're going to have a go at boiling down his argument to three ideas.

1. …DON'T CHOP DOWN THOSE WHO STAND UP BEFORE GOD (14:3-12)

Paul's first argument against the Axe Syndrome is all to do with how we relate to God. Why should the strong and the weak not judge one another? Verse 3: Because *"God has*

welcomed him". That is, *every* Christian, whatever stage of faith they're at, from the newest convert to the most mature, godly believer, is equally precious in God's sight. There's no such thing as a second-rate Christian. In verse 4, Paul repeats what he said back in chapter 6: we are all servants, welcomed in by a new Master. *Beloved* servants, each one a sinner bought with Jesus' own blood. *Honoured* servants, each one given the beautiful task of living to please our Master. *Secure* servants, each one progressing slowly in the Christian life, messing up many times, but standing confidently before God, knowing we are his forgiven children, and that the Holy Spirit will keep us persevering.

What matters, says Paul, is that each servant acts *"in honour of the Lord"*. *"Fully convinced in his own mind",* he says in verse 5. The stronger Christian honours the Master by enjoying the freedom that Christ has bought him with thankfulness in his heart. But if the weaker Christian still honestly believes that it would honour God to refrain from eating pork and to observe the Sabbath, he will bring more honour to God by doing so. Yes, so perhaps these are areas where we are supposed to be living out the new life of freedom won for us by Jesus' resurrection, as Paul says in verses 7 to 9. But if some Christians are trying to die to themselves in these areas in order to follow the King who died to save them, then that is still a very beautiful act of service to the Master.

And in verses 10 to 12 Paul reminds us that we will all one day stand before our Judge and Master. Not a Judge who condemns, since all Christians will stand secure in the righteousness of Christ. But a Judge who asks his beloved servants to give an account of how they have lived. As we kneel before the Judge, side by side, each giving an account of our progress and our failures, we will see how ridiculous it was that we judged one another as Christians.

Think of a Christian who you feel critical towards. It is not the place of servants to judge their fellow servants. We are not their Master. How can we refuse to welcome those whom our Master has welcomed? How can we condemn those who are no longer under his condemnation? How can we criticise those who are battling to honour the Master, just like we are? How can we chop down those who stand up securely before the Master?

2. …DON'T CHOP DOWN THOSE WHO NEED BUILDING UP FOR GOD (14:13-23)

We all know what it feels like to trip over. My 14-month old son Nathan is constantly dashing around the house, not watching where he is going, tripping over his toys and landing flat on his face! Fortunately, he's made of rubber so he just gets up and does it all over again.

In his second argument, Paul focuses on the damage that we can do to one another with our axes. Paul says in verse 13 that when the strong criticise the weak, it's like they place an obstacle right in their path that trips them up in their walk with God.

"Look," he says to the strong in verse 14, "I know as well as you do that there's no such thing as unclean food anymore." But the problem is, he continues, if a Jewish Christian *believes* meat is unclean, and then eats meat, he has sinned against God in his heart. If the strong group carry on eating meat in front of their weaker brothers, they will probably offend them, or worse, encourage them to go against their consciences and join in. Verse 22: It may well be a blessing to enjoy God's creation without fear of condemnation. But the weak should never go ahead unless they are sure it is OK. Verse 23: better that he acts out of his weak faith, than out of no faith at all.

We can imagine the strong group objecting: “why should we give up our freedom just because someone has an oversensitive conscience?” But Paul says, *“do not destroy the one for whom Christ died”*, and *“do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God”*. Our weaker brother may well have an oversensitive conscience, but it would be a very serious thing indeed to cause him to sin. Will we chop down someone for whom Jesus died just so we can bite into our nice tasty steak, or - and guys, I know this is difficult, OK! - but will we dish up the salad when we eat together and seek to build them up in their faith, even if we think they are a bit confused? As Paul says in verse 17: *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”*. When the strong get hung up on protecting their rights, they end up making exactly the same mistake as the weak: they are turning the Christian life into a matter of external things. Christ bought us freedom precisely so that we could live in righteousness, peace and joy, and seek to build others up in these things too. Those who are free are free to restrict their freedom for the sake of love. Don’t chop down those who need building up for God.

Let’s think about how this might work out in real disputes. Often it will be related to our culture, upbringing or experiences. So obviously, we need to proceed sensitively here.

To give a real example, I have a friend who is a lovely mature Christian, but whose conscience won’t allow her to eat halal meat because of its association with Muslim rituals. I believe we are free to eat halal meat if we receive it with thanksgiving, but I’ll certainly never take my friend to a halal kebab shop!

Or imagine you go out for dinner with a Christian friend. The waiter brings the wine list, but your friend says “sorry, I don’t drink, I think alcohol is an offence to God”. You believe that the Bible is pretty clear that it’s not wrong to drink alcoholic drinks. Do you laugh and say, “there’s nothing wrong with alcohol!” and order a glass of wine anyway? You risk offending your friend or even encouraging them to drink against their conscience. You lead them into sin. Or are you willing to put aside your freedom and order a lemonade because you love your friend and are more concerned about building them up in their faith?

We could also mention disagreements over what movies we watch, how smartly we dress in church, the style of music we play in church, how much we should tithe or give to gospel work, whether we should be vegetarians because of how animals are treated, and many other areas. There are some areas where I’m probably in the “strong” position and some where I’m probably in the “weak” position. Maybe I need to rethink my positions. But what matters is that I do not judge, but rather build up those who hold different positions, even if that means limiting my freedom.

I recognise that this raises many questions. Do come and find me afterwards if you want to talk more about this, but let’s briefly answer a couple of obvious practical questions.

Firstly, is it ever right to correct someone who is mistaken? Should I have tried to enlighten my halal meat friend? The Bible is certainly very clear that we sometimes need to correct one another. But this is mainly referring to times when someone is trapped in sin. If my friend would rather eat a salad, that’s not a sin! Especially if she is doing it to try and honour God.
That’s not to say that I couldn’t gently encourage her to look again at Scripture and change her position. But I shouldn’t overtly criticise her and I should certainly never force her to go against her conscience on something like this. After all, it would not be wrong for me to

temporarily go veggie for her sake. God knows I'd be restricting myself out of love, not legalism.

Secondly, we need to be aware that the conscience is a complicated thing. We shouldn't ignore it, but neither should we give it the same authority as the Bible. The strong group might gradually numb their consciences until they turn their liberty into a license to do anything they want. With the alcohol example, they might start to feel it's fine to get drunk. And some of the weak group might develop paranoid consciences that feel guilty about all sorts of things. They might feel guilty for even shopping in a shop that sells alcohol. In fact, most of us probably slip into both the extremes at times. I'm aware that I struggle with an oversensitive conscience that sometimes leads me away from peace and joy and into legalism. Maybe you do too. We all need to seek to recalibrate our consciences to bring them in line with Scripture, whether that means a bit more restraint or a bit more freedom.

But the amazing thing is, Paul says that when we refuse to chop one another down, we actually imitate Jesus himself, which is our final point.

3. …IMITATE THE ONE WHO WAS CHOPPED DOWN FOR US (15:1-13)

Paul reaffirms his main point again in 15 verse 1. But now he introduces one final argument. *For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.' "* That is, Jesus himself is the ultimate *example* of the strong bearing with the weak. He patiently refrained from chopping down his disciples for their many mistakes. He gave up his rights and freedom and silently accepted to be chopped down in order to lift us up. And he didn't just *bear with* our sin, he even *bore* our sin himself, willingly, freely, lovingly. What's more, says Paul in verse 4, this is central to the message of the Old Testament and is written to instruct us. So the weak group may have failings, but Scripture solemnly calls the strong group to imitate Jesus, not to selfishly fight for their freedom at all costs, but to set aside their rights, to bear with them patiently, to go out of their way to build them up in their faith, to quietly suffer for them.

Paul emphasises this even further in verses 7 to 12, by reminding us that Jesus came to serve both Jews and Gentiles. And again, this was central to the Old Testament, as Paul demonstrates by four back-to-back quotations. Scripture proclaims loud and clear: We are *all* sinners, we are *all* "weak" people whom Jesus the "strong" came to serve, we are *all* welcomed in. So how can Jews and Gentiles refuse to welcome and serve one another? Scripture solemnly calls us to imitate Jesus.

Bringing this passage to a close, Paul weaves in two mini prayers. In verse 5 to 6, he prays that we would glorify God by imitating Jesus as we live in harmony. In verse 13, he prays that we would have *"all joy and peace in believing"*, leading to increased hope. I think these two prayers help us summarise *why* it is so important to avoid the Axe Syndrome. Romans is all about how God's gospel has the power to make *all* people righteous, as they are made perfect by the blood of Christ, and as the Holy Spirit progressively changes their hearts to live for God in joy, peace and hope. And all for God's glory. What a beautiful display of the gospel's power when *all* God's people, whatever their background, whatever stage of faith they are at, are united in helping one another grow in living for God? This brings much glory to God.
And it brings us much joy, peace and hope.

But what if we look down critically on other Christians? When I told you about my halal meat friend, what was your reaction? Were you tempted to chop her down? Did you think: “oh for goodness sake, just eat your kebab!” These things might seem small, but we would actually be swinging our axe at the gospel itself, going against its whole purpose. We are chopping down the unity Christ has won for us. We are chopping down fellow servants, forgiven and welcomed by God. We are chopping them down in their attempts to live for God. We are chopping down the church’s effectiveness at gospel mission, as we’ll see in next week’s passage. We are even chopping down our own peace, joy and hope. There’s nothing that the devil would love to do more than to split the church. He knows it would bring the gospel crashing to the ground. So let’s put down our axes and live according to the gospel.