



St. Paul's Lutheran Church
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The Epistle of Romans

The Justification of the Ungodly

Romans 14:13-23

In the first part of Romans chapter 14, Paul tells the church not to judge or despise one another. Perhaps we could say that Paul is seeking peace among the Christians in Rome by telling them what 'not to do.' However, in verses 13 through 23, the flow of thought is framed positively. That is to say; Paul calls the Christians in Rome to edify and build each other up.

It is worth noting that Paul is speaking about divisions in the church, not concerning articles of faith but in the area of what is called *adiaphora* (*things that are neither commanded nor forbidden from Scripture*). Furthermore, Paul is not addressing legalistic nitpicks, but Christians who are weak in the faith. And so, the whole section of chapter 14 is really about how the church should function with respect to one another – when there is conflict over issues that are not related to articles of faith.

For this study, though, it is crucial to understand what the Apostle Paul is driving at with respect to edifying and building up. Again, Paul stated the negative that the church should not judge and despise – tear down. But rather, peace and harmony can be accomplished when the

church is built up. What this means is that the strong, who are bold and happy, must take it upon themselves – in Christian love – to help the weak. For example, those who are strong in the Christian faith function in this life with a relatively clean conscience with respect to various local customs, encounters, habits, and traditions. The strong in the faith are the least likely to get hung up on issues of *adiaphora*. They are anchored in the key articles of faith, knowing that various *adiaphora* customs, habits, and traditions are not on the same level as the key articles of faith pertaining to Christ.

And so, what this looks like is that the strong lay down knowledge and freedom to help better the weak. They become all things to all the weak to edify and build up the weak. (See 1 Corinthians 9:19-ff) But keep in mind this does not mean denying the truth. All Christians are called to speak the truth but to do so in love. And so a strong Christian never uses their knowledge, freedom, and assurance as tools to tear down a weaker Christian, but always use these gifts to uplift and equip those who are weak. How tragic it is to see so-called strong

Christians demolishing weak Christians over issues of adiaphora. How tragic it is to see so-called strong Christians cowering in fear – failing to stand up to wolves in the church over essential articles of faith. Yet, this is how it typically works itself out in the church. So-called strong Christians will blow up a voters assembly over the color of new carpet in the fellowship hall. Still, they will rarely speak against a heretical Bible study being conducted in a small group in the church. Alas, it is easier for a pastor to be run out of a church for changing the times of a church service than for him to preach false doctrine. The point being; those who are strong in the faith should not disdain those who are weak. Those who are strong in the faith should lay down their freedoms, knowledge, and personal preferences to be gracious and loving to those who are weak. (Again see 1 Corinthians 9:19-ff) Also, those who are strong in the faith should be quick to confront – in love – when articles of faith are threatened.

So, within the church concerning adiaphora, love has the last word, not freedom. However, with respect to articles of faith, truth - spoken in love - must have the last word. And this is how the church can function in peace and harmony. The strong are gracious with the weak; the weak are continually edified and equipped so that they may not fall back into the spirit of fear, and the life lived with an unnecessarily burdened conscience.

Martin Luther speaks quite graciously about the weak in faith, saying that they are not to be blamed for their weakness, for it is often the fault of their pastors. The weak in faith is a product of bad teaching and a failure of pastors to edify and equip them. This makes sense with Scripture as well, as often the harshest judgments are made against false and bad shepherds.

In summary, Romans 14 is captured in 1 Corinthians 9:19-ff. Keep in mind that the verses in 1 Corinthians are not about missions – as many Christians mistakenly believe – but about strong Christians laying down their rights, tastes, interests, and preferences for others. Furthermore, Paul never becomes a slave to people’s sin and lawlessness but quite consistently becomes a slave to their weakness for the sake of the Gospel. And finally, nowhere does Paul suggest changing the Gospel, but rather, the strong are always to be flexible to accommodate to weak people for the sake of building them up and edifying them in the Gospel.

