

Romans

Bible Study

Weaker Christians

Romans 14:1–9

Romans chapters 1–11 contain the knowledge we need to live the Grace-Life. Chapters 12–16 give practical application of that knowledge. Israel lived according to the Mosaic Law. They needed to learn to live the Law-Life. We, however, are not under Law but are under Grace (Romans 6:14). We therefore need to learn to live the Grace-Life. It's easy to confuse the general application of God's grace to all men in all dispensations with today's special Dispensation of Grace (Ephesians 3:2). God is always showing grace when dealing with mankind, beginning with Adam in the Garden of Eden. If God were not a gracious God, mankind would have been wiped out long ago. Grace is God giving mankind something undeserved. Adam's sin resulted in death for mankind, but instead God offered life.

This special Dispensation of Grace was a mystery hidden until it was revealed through the Apostle Paul (Ephesians 3:1–5; Romans 16:25; Colossians 1:26). This dispensation stands separate from God's general distribution of His grace throughout past generations. There are many who say this dispensation began with the death of Christ, but they are ignoring Paul's clear teaching that it was revealed through him (Ephesians 3:1–5; 1 Timothy 1:16; Acts 15; Galatians 2).

Their confusion is understandable because Peter writes of the prophets who spoke of the grace that would come (1 Peter 1:10), giving credence to the thought that the Dispensation of Grace began with Christ. However, the grace Peter is speaking of is no mystery since it was revealed in prophecy. God's grace is manifested in all generations and dispensations. This can be seen when Peter says that they were to hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:13). The grace that Peter is speaking of is Jesus Christ at the Second Coming. This should not be confused with us living in the special Dispensation of Grace. Peter ministered to Israel (Galatians 2:7–9) but Paul ministered to the Church, the Body of Christ (Romans 15:16–18).

The Dispensation of Grace is characterized by an exceedingly abundant display of God's grace (2 Corinthians 4:15; 9:8; Romans 5:15, 20; Ephesians 1:7–8; 1 Timothy 1:13–14). His grace is not only displayed to us right now, but will also be shown to us in the ages to come as we come to understand His kindness toward us through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:7). How amazing is it that His grace is so rich and abundant that it will take an eternity to understand!

Living the Grace-Life requires us to love others, just as Christ loved us and demonstrated that love through His death (Ephesians 5:1–2). We are to show love to all people whether believers or unbelievers. We are to edify, nurture and lift up those who are believers (Ephesians 4:15–16; 1 Thessalonians 5:11), and we are to bring the message of reconciliation to unbelievers (2 Corinthians 5:18–20).

Weaker Christians

Paul has previously written about how we are to interact with believers, with unbelievers, and with the government. Now he turns his attention to a special group of believers, the weaker brothers. Weaker brothers do not fully understand the liberty that we have in Christ. They set up their own rules and regulations that they think will please the Lord. They are often legalistic, putting themselves, and others, under laws that really don't apply in this Dispensation of Grace. Many of these laws are rewritten from the Mosaic Law such as not shopping on Sunday (keeping the Sabbath), or not eating certain foods. Legalism demands external rules and regulations to control behavior, while grace is God working internally to change a believer using His word and the Holy Spirit. Those who are weaker in the faith often embrace the Mosaic Law as necessary for us to live properly. The informed believer understands that we have been given a great amount of latitude in what we are permitted to do, and that our actions do not affect our position in Christ.

The weaker brother is one who is weak in his or her faith, specifically lacking understanding of Pauline doctrine. Weaker brothers are still struggling with understanding God's will. They think that God is pleased when they give up certain things; they are not accepting the Bible as the source of all we need for life; they think the Law is necessary to live properly; and they confuse Israel's prophetic program and the Church's mystery program. Those who do not understand how to live the Grace-life, as laid out by the Apostle Paul, are weak in the faith. Knowing what your weaknesses are is the first step to grow up in the faith. Studying Scripture, rightly divided, is the key to knowing where you are weak. Weakness is caused by not having a firm grasp of correct doctrine.

Judging

Many people confuse judging people with being judgmental. When we judge people, we hold up a standard to their actions to see if they are living properly. We are allowed to judge people's actions against the Bible, rightly divided. The Bible says that adultery is wrong so we are able to judge that a person is sinning if, for instance, he were caught in adultery. The Bible says that causing division is wrong, so if someone is causing division within the Body of Christ, that person can be judged accordingly. We are fully capable of judging external actions, but not the intents of the heart. On the other hand, those who are judgmental are making moral judgments based on what they feel is wrong instead of upon Scripture. People who are judgmental are often attempting to bring themselves up while putting someone else down.

Our response to those who are weak

Before going into how we are to respond to those who are weaker, it is important to understand that every believer has weakness in some area and therefore needs to grow in faith in that area of weakness. We learn what our weakness is by studying the Scripture which is specifically written for the Church, the Body of Christ: Paul's 13 books. The Holy Spirit then works within us to understand God's word and gives us the power to put His word into action. As we pray and meditate on Scripture, we will find ourselves growing in faith and therefore becoming stronger believers.

When we interact with believers, we will come across those who are stronger than us in certain areas, and we will find those who are weaker than us in other areas. Paul addresses how the individual believer is to treat a weaker believer in Romans 14 and the first part of chapter 15. Here, the weaker brother is lacking a proper understanding about our freedom in the Dispensation of Grace.

The examples given include the believer who restricts what he eats and one who feels obligated to observe special days such as the Sabbath and other feast days. These restrictions are found in the Mosaic Law, but have no bearing upon the believer today. However, many believers put themselves under the Law thinking that is the way to please God. Those who embrace Covenant theology are especially molded by the constraints of the Law because they do not see any dispensational distinction between Israel and the Body of Christ.

In conformity with Paul's teaching about the members of the Body of Christ getting along with each other, he tells the stronger brother not to condemn the weaker brother because he has put himself under a form of the Law. Likewise, the weaker brother is not to condemn the stronger brother for doing things he feels is not proper, like eating meat or not observing special religious days. Instead of condemning outward actions of others, we are to focus on Christ and the building up of the Body. How can we edify each other if we are fighting over minor details that don't have any eternal significance? If the focus is upon serving the Lord, then there is no room for criticism. If those who restrict what they eat do it with best intentions in service to God, then allow them to do that. As they grow and mature in understanding the Grace-life, then unnecessary activities will pass away.

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