

LESSON 10

Bearing with the Weak

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.

— Romans 15:1-2

Introduction

The church is a living spiritual organism, composed of men and women, young and old, educated and uneducated, and mature and immature. Bible understanding varies greatly from member to member, and often we don't really have a good grasp of the depth of one another's biblical, emotional, and spiritual soundness. We talk about "weaker" and "stronger" Christians, but often aren't quite sure how to define this and what to do about it. To further complicate things, most everyone in the congregation can be "weaker" or "stronger" in different ways at the same time. Too often we become somewhat prideful as we gather scriptural knowledge, feeling we have a right or even an obligation to force our will on others "for the good of the congregation." Unless it's a matter of primary importance (remember our previous discussion about the 'three tiers' of doctrine), that's not appropriate. That's like driving your neighbor's car before first asking permission, knowing "they'll be OK with it." That would be arrogant and rude, as would forcing an opinion on others that might even violate their conscience!

When dealing with generally weaker members, or those with a specific weakness, we must avoid acting in ways that cause them to stumble or sin. We must show grace, patience, and love to each other, focusing on building up and not judging or injuring our brethren. Those who are more mature must sometimes limit personal freedoms to avoid causing others to stumble in their faith. On the other hand, the "weaker" member must also avoid imposing their restricted or more extreme positions on the congregation as a whole. Scripture encourages **all of us** to honor every brother's or sister's conscience and encourage growth without condemnation. Everyone must have this attitude, so the strong do not denigrate the weak and the weak don't impose their scruples on everyone else

Who Really is the Weaker Brother?

In the apostle Paul's writings, weakness usually refers to various **conscience matters** among members and is not a matter concerning overt sin. These matters involve **personal feelings which might lead to a violation of one's conscience**. This aspect of "weakness" is really more about the tension between strength and comfort in Christian freedom, versus the lack thereof. The primary discussions in Scripture regarding strength or weakness in convictions are found in **Romans 14** and also **1 Corinthians 8**. The Apostle Paul wrote these passages to address how mature Christians should interact with believers whose consciences are more sensitive or restricted.

Paul illustrates this using a common cultural and spiritual debate of his time: eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Those with "strong" faith understood that idols weren't real gods, meaning the meat was perfectly fine to eat. Those "weak" in faith or tender consciences believed eating this meat was a sin. In this setting, the "weaker" brother or sister was typically defined as the believer with a sensitive conscience regarding nonessential or "disputable" matters (e.g., specific diets, holidays, or cultural practices). They lacked the spiritual confidence to participate without feeling they were sinning. Rather than flaunting their freedom, Paul instructed the strong to yield to the weak. This principle extends beyond diet, encouraging believers to prioritize congregational unity and love over the exercise of individual liberties. This was a serious problem in the first-century church, but many forms of weakness of conscience still remain today.

Key Points in Paul's Writing

- **1 Corinthians 8:9:** "But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."
- **1 Corinthians 8:12:** "Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ."
- **1 Corinthians 8:13:** "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."
- **Romans 14:1:** "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions."
- **Romans 14:15:** "For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died."
- **Romans 14:21:** "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble."

What Else?

Scripture also discusses strength and weakness in the church in *other* aspects of our faith. It's very important to be clear about how we define "weakness". A "weaker brother" can mean one who is morally immature or prone to lapses into sinful behavior. This definition may relate to several people in a congregation and is more in line with a propensity for poor spiritual decision-making or even habitual sinful behavior. However, "weaker" can also describe several other aspects of a person spiritually: age in Christ, biblical knowledge, struggles with spiritual apathy/ inactivity, physical or mental disabilities, past spiritual injuries, prejudices, fears, emotional scars, or a limited spiritual background. Sometimes, difficult life experiences may injure a Christian, making them more vulnerable to offense or more tender-hearted. Perhaps their experiences have reduced their tolerance for certain behaviors in others. Past tendencies for sin may also weaken a person's ability to withstand some temptations. Conversely, sometimes an older or more knowledgeable brother might even have spiritual deficiencies that make

him or her the weaker Christian in certain situations or aspects of their faith. A surprising number of people have one or more spiritual “blind spots” that create sticking points in relationships. Usually, a weakness is unintentional and not meant to harm others. Unfortunately, sometimes these are completely intentional and used to prevent others’ freedom. Things can become very contentious...and sometimes very ugly.

We also tend to equate “weakness” with a lower level of faith, knowledge, conviction in God, or confidence in salvation. Just because a church member does not feel a compulsion to restrict his or her conscience in debatable matters does not mean he is automatically more spiritual or somehow “holier” ... or even more knowledgeable. As mentioned above, a “weaker” brother may have a sound reason for restricting behavior – something that could even be instructive for other Christians.

One might think these issues don’t arise very often, but that’s just not the case. It would also be nice if such complicated situations were temporary, but often these restrictions or “weaknesses” linger or remain permanently. Some people refuse to change just out of stubbornness, and some might be mentally unable to grow beyond their current level – unable to grasp how their behavior affects others. It’s hard to remain patient with brothers and sisters who seem to persist at a limited maturity level, especially if it is abrasive or hinders the spiritual progress in the congregation. Obviously, comparison between various members is a delicate business, and we must avoid placing labels on others at all cost. We can’t be loving and judgmental at the same time. We must accept that there are *many possible reasons* a person may be at a spiritual disadvantage to another and thus be considered a “weaker” brother or sister in the congregation.

Our goal is not to make everyone in the congregation perfect or level our thinking so that we all believe exactly alike. We must simply do the best we can with what God has given us to work. We can still grow and please God, no matter the people or the situation in which we find ourselves in the church.

Key Scriptures

Key Scriptures:

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” – Galatians 6:1-2

“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:14

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.” – 1 Peter 4:10

“Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others.” – Philippians 2:4

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” – Hebrews 10:24-25

“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.” – Colossians 3:12-14

Carefully reading these scriptures reveals that they are not just limited to conscience matters but also apply to *all situations* of spiritual “inequality.” As we already said, congregations are living spiritual organisms composed of people of many ages and many degrees of mental and spiritual maturity. It would be silly to think that everyone is on the same level and equally capable of handling disputes. We need guidelines.

Core Principles Regarding the Weaker Brother

1. **Accept them and don’t judge** - Welcome weaker believers as fellow servants of Christ; avoid being critical, arrogant, or passing judgment on their convictions. Stronger believers should not look down on or mock those with more restrictive views (Romans 14:1-4). God has already accepted them, so you cannot be their judge.
2. **Help Build Them Up**: Your actions should aim to edify and strengthen them, not tear them down or lead them into sin (1 Thessalonians 5:14). If they’re aware of their issues, offer to help them overcome these; if not aware, consider a series of gentle conversations to help strengthen their knowledge and maturity
3. **Be Supportive and Patient**: *“Admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, and help the weak with patience”* (1 Thessalonians 5:14); we must remember they are as much a part of the body as we are
4. **Honor Their Conscience**: Even if their understanding is limited, respect their sincere beliefs, even if you disagree (Romans 14:1-2) – that is, as long as this does not restrict congregational freedom and teaching, or cause dissention or disunity
5. **Don’t Be a Stumbling Block/ “bait stick”**: Mature believers should refrain from exercising freedoms (like eating certain foods) if it causes a weaker brother to violate their conscience, as sinning against conscience is still sin (Romans 14:13, 23). If you have the faith to enjoy certain liberties, it is often better to keep those convictions between yourself and God rather than flaunting them in front of those who are sensitive.
6. **Pray for Them**: Ask God to strengthen their faith and understanding, and bring godly people into their lives (as He can work in ways you cannot – see 1 Thessalonians 5:14).
7. **Love Your Neighbor**: Follow Christ’s example by pleasing your neighbor for their good, not just pleasing yourself (even if you are *right* or *better informed* – remember Romans 15:2.)
8. **Avoid Diverting Toward Legalism**: accommodation is *not* capitulation - don’t let the weak dictate universal church practices, or stifle discussion and growth; strong believers must still stand firm in gospel truth (Galatians 2). Let weaker members know they are loved and important, free of criticism and ostracism. The congregation should be equitable to all: opposing

efforts by the mature to force opinions, and preventing efforts by the weak to turn their personal convictions into mandatory requirements for all believers.

9. **Encourage communication:** create an environment where different levels of understanding can coexist; this does NOT mean that differences should be ignored or never discussed! Remember that biblical understanding is a two-way street – never harbor hard feelings because you are afraid to talk about differences. If a person's weakness always leads to constant confrontation in your conversations, it's appropriate to warmly greet them and show love while remaining firm about not engaging in divisive debates. Everyone should be willing to place restrictions or boundaries on their speech and behavior for the good of the body.

Christ died for all of us – we all have great value to God and so we must show the same regard and respect to all members, regardless of their current spiritual maturity. It may be very hard at times, but God said we're all worth it. Even those with a limited understanding or restricted conscience can have great potential use in the congregation and can be a source of strength and encouragement.

Conclusion

To summarize what we have discussed:

1. **Welcome** the weaker brother, whatever that may mean (Romans 14:1) – accept them fully into the community without debate, regardless of any differences
2. **Don't judge** (Romans 14:3-4) – recognize they are God's servants, *not yours*; God can make them stand
3. **Prioritize love** (Romans 14:15) – if your convictions or freedoms hurt someone else, you are not acting in love. Period.
4. **Build them up** (I Thes. 5:14) – always be encouraging
5. **Communicate** (Colossians 4:6) – always be willing to listen and discuss matters
6. **Be patient** (I Thess. 5:14) – “help the weak, be *patient* with them all”

Scripture encourages all of us to honor our brother's conscience and encourage growth without condemnation. Everyone must have this attitude, so the strong do not denigrate the weak and the weak don't impose their scruples on everyone else. When there are differences, honest discussions should occur – often these differences or misunderstandings can be resolved. This is always a good thing, especially when an “unevenness” in beliefs causes an imbalance or tension in the body.

Maturity in Christ presents in many forms and is not limited just to age or background or spiritual knowledge. Our interactions in the congregation should always be governed and directed by love, not expediency. Each one of us should always be looking to do whatever is most helpful and beneficial for the spiritual family, regardless of the effort or inconvenience. Love means going beyond, not just doing good when it suits us or if it avoids personal sacrifice. If our goal is to bring each other with us when we leave for heaven, we must start acting as God would act...and we know how much He sacrificed. Here's

a thought: if we stopped worrying all the time about who is ‘weak’ and who is ‘strong’ and whose turn it is to defer, perhaps we would always think and act the best we can toward all our brothers and sisters.

Memory Verse

“And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.”

– 1 Thessalonians 5:14

For Discussion

1. We frequently talk about the “stronger” member showing deference to the “weaker” member – what are ways the “weaker” member can show deference to the “stronger” brother?
2. Can this situation of one deferring to another ever *change*, or *improve*, or even *resolve*? Should that even be a *goal* of our spiritual relationships?
3. Discuss particular situations where deference would not be in the best interest of the congregation. For individuals, discuss where this might not be in the best interest of either the stronger or weaker member.
4. Is *compromise* ever a valid consideration in deciding such issues in the church or between individuals?
5. Why do we seem to struggle so much with these principles in the church?

6. Is it really that important to always show others we're in the right?