

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Romans 14: 13-17

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank God, it's time to read the Bible again. Let's continue to read Romans Chapter 14. We will read verses 13-17 today.

The most important and fundamental reason we receive the saints is that God has already received them. Upon this fundamental reason, Paul particularly points out several principles that need to be paid attention to and must be practiced in church life. First, receive those who are weak in faith; second, receiving people does not mean receiving their teachings; third, regarding ourselves, we must receive in the light of the judgment seat, because when Christ returns we will all give account before Christ's judgment seat, lest we suffer loss. Today we will look at the fourth: receiving in the principle of love.

Verse 13: "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way."

"Therefore" sums up the previous principles of receiving: we must no longer judge one another. Toward saints who have different views on truth, we must first receive them, seeing them as God's children and brothers and sisters in the Lord. On this foundation we can have open fellowship and discuss differing views on truth, so that we may reach oneness in the truth with all the saints. Judging is first pronouncing judgment and condemning others as wrong; in this way we no longer have the standing to fellowship and discuss peacefully with others. Therefore, not judging one another is the prerequisite for the oneness of the church.

Now Paul goes further: not only must we not judge one another, but we should rather resolve not to put a stumbling block or a cause of falling in our brother's way. Judging is criticism that arises after something has happened; we need to go further and resolve beforehand not to place a stumbling block before a brother. That is, if we know a certain brother has deviated on a certain point of truth, we should not deliberately bring up that matter and cause him to stumble; or even further, we should help remove things that would cause him to fall. In other words, our heart of loving the brothers must be higher than our attachment to truth. If we love a brother and receive him, there is still an opportunity to help that brother have a more complete knowledge of the truth; but if for the sake of truth we cause a brother to stumble, there will no longer be an opportunity to help him.

Of course, the truth spoken of here refers to general truth, not fundamental truth. In church history there have been many discussions concerning fundamental truth, and certain conclusions were even reached, yet they were based on the most popular theological schools of the time and ultimately could not stand the test of time. Therefore, I define fundamental truth as the Apostles' Creed, which is almost the earliest universally recognized truth acknowledged by all Christians.

The Apostles' Creed has different versions; I only use a more common one: I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended into hell; on the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the everlasting life. Amen.

I believe that truly saved saints are all united on these fundamental truths. Of course, different theological schools and different church groups can build different theological systems upon these fundamental truths. As long as we learn to receive

one another, we can have frank fellowship and open discussion, so that all may gradually reach oneness in truth.

Personally, I believe the true oneness will come when Christ returns. Every saint will pass through the fire before Christ's judgment seat; wood, hay, and stubble—everything that is of man—will be burned away. At that time all the saints will naturally be brought into oneness. But before that day, we must learn to love the brothers more than the truth we know.

Verse 14: "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Paul directly gives us an example of how to love the brothers more than the truth we know. For Paul, the most practical example is eating. Before he was saved by grace, he was extremely zealous for the law, not only keeping the regulations himself but also forcing others to keep them—he was a complete Pharisee. Yet after being saved by grace, his theological concepts underwent a tremendous reversal; I believe this came from God's special revelation. Especially after he was saved, he went alone into the wilderness of Arabia and spent three years there. He reread the Old Testament and rethought the rabbis' teachings; he saw his former narrowness and recognized his former self-righteousness.

In God's grace and revelation he gained a completely new understanding regarding the regulations about clean and unclean foods. Therefore he says, "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself." I somewhat believe that after he realized Jesus is the Son of God, he rethought Jesus' living and actions while ministering on earth: Jesus and His disciples did not keep the Sabbath regulations and declared that He is Lord of the Sabbath; Jesus accepted Matthew's invitation and ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners, to the point that the Pharisees condemned Him as a glutton and a winebibber. Now, after being saved, Paul was certain that Jesus' living on earth was the God-ordained living man should have; therefore he cast off his former narrow religious concepts. With full

assurance he declares that all things are created by God and are originally not unclean at all; only if a person considers something unclean, to him it is unclean.

This is a great discovery: food itself is not unclean; rather, a person's heart determines whether food is clean or unclean. For example, in the Old Testament dietary regulations, the pig is unclean. If your faith is strong enough to believe all things are edible, you may eat pork—because whatever is received with thanksgiving in faith is clean. But if in your heart you still feel the pig is unclean, do not eat it. If you force yourself to eat it, your heart will not be at peace, and you will need to confess and pray to remove the feeling of unrest before fellowship with God can be restored.

Paul's discovery shifted uncleanness from the physical object to our conscience: whatever food makes your conscience feel uneasy, do not eat it. We can also extend "food" to anything: whatever makes your conscience feel uneasy, do not do it. Because the conscience is man's most important protection and the channel between spirit and soul; when the conscience is accused, we lose fellowship with God. Therefore we must never go against the conscience but always keep it clean. Of course, each person's conscience feels differently, and the conscience can also be enlarged and strengthened as life grows, transcending the material level and reaching the spiritual level.

Verse 15: "Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died."

Paul continues with the example of food: if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. If your faith is strong and you feel all foods are permissible—even blood—you go out to eat with a brother who believes the Jerusalem council's conclusion in Acts 15, where James said in Acts 15:29, "that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell." This brother believes blood still may not be eaten. If you eat duck-blood soup right in front of him, he will think you have sinned and will grieve for you. In this way you

are no longer walking according to love. You have placed a stumbling block before your brother and caused him to fall because of you; you do not love the brother and have caused him to stumble.

Love seeks another's profit in all things. To forgo duck-blood soup for a brother's sake—what is that? Love actively perfects others and is willing to sacrifice oneself. Jesus shed His blood and died on the cross for our sins so that the Father, seeing Jesus' blood, could declare us righteous. This brother also was purchased by Jesus shedding His precious blood; Christ has died for him—how can you destroy him with your food?

Dear brothers and sisters, may we all have Paul's vision to see every brother and sister beside us: every single one was purchased by Christ at a great price; every one is the apple of the Father's eye—how can we, just to satisfy our own desires, destroy the treasure the Father cherishes?

Sometimes with saints around us we still maintain a polite distance and will not offend; but with our own spouse or our children at home, we are too familiar and forget that they too are the Father's treasures. Sometimes in the name of loving them we indulge our flesh—making excessive demands or disciplining too harshly; these are merely excuses for our fleshly lusts to vent. May God grant us spiritual vision: every little one was purchased by Christ at a great price and is the Father's treasure; we must not, because of food or any other thing, cause them to be destroyed.

Verse 16: "Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil;"

Do not let your good—that is, the truth you know—be spoken of as evil. As the previous verse says, you know all foods are permissible, yet regardless of other brothers' feelings you openly eat what they consider unclean, causing them to think you are wrong. As a result, because you have not walked according to love, they speak evil of you and sin; thus you destroy the saints around you.

Here Paul raises harmony in church life to another level: according to truth we are all free, for the truth shall make you free. Yet Paul reminds us that before we enjoy this freedom we must first consider love, lest our freedom become a stumbling block to others.

Here I especially want to remind saints in the church who have strong, distinctive personalities: they dare to love and dare to hate, often going their own way and becoming the focus of everyone's attention. To mature saints they are not a problem, but to younger saints in the church whose life is still immature and whose truth is not yet complete, they are frequently stumbled by such persons' words and deeds. In the future, when we give account before Christ's judgment seat, these shortcomings will all be exposed one by one. Believing in Jesus Christ is not only to obtain eternal life; it is also that during our lifetime, this eternal life should transform us and reshape our character. On the day of judgment we will no longer be able to say, "I was born this way." The Lord will ask: Then after so many years since we were saved, where is our transformation?

Verse 17: "for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

This verse is the most important verse in this chapter. Paul connects our church life today with the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the sphere under God's ruling authority. Since all things were created by God, the entire universe is naturally God's kingdom. Yet because of man's fall, Satan came in and usurped God's creation and became the ruler of this world, so that God's authority could not operate freely. Jesus' plan of redemption is to produce the new creation, and in the new creation God's authority can operate unhindered. Therefore today's church should have the reality of God's kingdom: Christ is the Head, and the Holy Spirit has absolute sovereignty.

When Paul speaks of church life, ultimately he connects it to kingdom life. For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking: eating and drinking are the most important things for survival on earth—they sustain our life; but God’s kingdom is not about what we eat or drink, so we must not divide God’s kingdom over matters of eating and drinking. Eating and drinking can also be extended to all the various things we depend on for survival on earth—such things as race, region, and culture produce different eating and drinking; social status, educational background, power, and wealth also produce different eating and drinking. None of these things belong to God’s kingdom and must not enter into church life. God’s kingdom consists only of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

According to the original, “in the Holy Spirit” is a modifier placed at the end of the sentence, so we may also translate it as “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Righteousness, peace, and joy all come from the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit dwells in our spirit. As long as our conscience is clean and without offense, we can naturally receive the Spirit’s supply and know what righteousness, peace, and joy from God are.

These three have a certain order: righteousness is toward God—God is righteous, righteousness is God’s attribute; if our relationship with God is proper, we are fully in tune with God’s righteousness. When we are in tune with God’s righteousness, we can naturally have peace with people; the prerequisite of peace is righteousness—peace that is not according to righteousness cannot endure. God’s kingdom is eternal, and the peace in God’s kingdom is also eternal. One who is righteous toward God can naturally be at peace with men. Peace is toward people, and joy is toward oneself. A person who is righteous toward God and at peace with men must be a joyful person, and this joy comes from the Holy Spirit.

Eating and drinking merely satisfy the lusts of the senses; this kind of pleasure cannot last. True joy comes from the Holy Spirit. On one hand it satisfies the requirement of God’s righteousness, and on the other hand it establishes peaceful relationships with people—only then can we have satisfying joy. Joy should be the mark of every saint; a healthy church life should be a joyful life. The saints should

always have smiling faces, full of receiving and inclusiveness toward others, so that the saints are always in harmony and help one another.

Righteousness is the foundation of church life; this righteousness does not come from man but from all being under the covering of Christ's blood, being justified by God, and Christ's virtues being manifested in church life. Micah 6:8 (NKJV) says, "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?" To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. If church life is filled with these excellent things, when unbelievers come among us they will say, "God is certainly among you!" Righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit are precisely the three most important things for church life to transition into kingdom life.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You. Through Paul's teaching we must receive one another in love—not only must we not judge others, but in our heart of loving the brothers and sisters we must not leave anything that causes stumbling, and we must learn to help remove hindrances for others. May church life be filled with righteousness toward God, peace toward people, and ourselves being full of joy that comes from the Holy Spirit—this is the truly attractive church life. Bless the church where I am, that it may manifest God's righteousness, be full of peace with the surrounding community, and every saint be filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit. May the church truly become a beautiful testimony, able to attract people to come into church life and together enjoy God's rich supply. Bless the church where I am and the church life. I pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ.