

Romans 14

Romans Chapter 14

Comments on Romans 14

The Christian Attitude of the Weak toward the Strong and of the Strong toward the Weak (14:1-23)

As Paul approaches the end of the Roman epistle there is one very important subject upon which he has not yet touched – the relationship between the strong and the weak. The strong are those who had understood the significance of Christ's death upon daily life (eating, drinking, and observance of days). The weak had not.

Moses law contained strict dietary laws in regard to clean and unclean animals. It prohibited eating unclean animals. Even Peter had difficulty grasping this truth; it is no wonder, then, that Jewish converts to Christianity were slow to give up the distinction. While the general understanding is that the Jews were the weak and the Gentiles were the strong, this is not necessarily and certainly not always the case. Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, yet he classified himself among the strong.

Paul does not question here the sufficiency of the cross to take away the Mosaic code. However, all new believers in Christ did not reach this understanding immediately. Many, especially in Jerusalem but also in Rome, held fast to some of their past practices. As long as no saving significance was attached to such practices and those following them gave no offense, such Christians were tolerated with love and

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patience.

What the two groups – strong and weak had in common.

1. The members of each group must be regarded as genuine believers (14:1-4, 6, 10, 13).
2. Each group was critical of the other (14:3, 4, 13).
3. Each group will have to give an account of itself to God (14:11).

The points with respect to which the two groups differed.

1. The strong believed that they were permitted to eat anything (meats as well as vegetables); the weak were vegetarians (14:2).
2. The strong regarded every day as being “good.” The weak regarded one day as being better than another (14:5).

Paul’s attitude toward the two groups and his admonitions addressed to the groups and to the congregation in general.

1. In at least one important point Paul agrees with the strong, namely, in believing that nothing (no food) is unclean in itself (14:14, 20; 15:1).
2. He admonishes each group not to look down upon the other (14:3, 5,

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- 19).
3. He is especially emphatic in denouncing the attitude of some strong people toward the weak (14:14-21), and he admonishes the strong lovingly to bear with the failings of the weak (15:1).
4. He stresses the fact that the matter of eating and drinking is not nearly as important as that of being a citizen of the kingdom of God, for the essence of that kingdom is not “eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (14:17).
5. He admonishes both groups (and the entire congregation) to follow after those things that lead to peace and mutual edification (14:19; 15:2, 3).
6. He points to the example of Christ, who did not please himself, and was willing for our sake, and to the glory of God, to suffer reproach (15:3-6).
7. He summarizes his exhortations by pleading, “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, to the glory of God (15:7). He shows that, in Christ, Jews and Gentiles attain their unity. He states, “Christ has become a servant of the circumcision for the sake of God’s truth . . . but the Gentiles glorify God for the sake

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of mercy,” quoting O.T. passages to prove what he had just now said with respect to the Gentiles (15:8-12).

8. He closes this section with the beautiful prayer-wish, “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, in the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13).

Similarities and differences between Paul’s teaching with respect to these issues in Romans and other epistles.

Romans and 1 Corinthians

Paul also discusses the treatment of brethren in connection with the eating of meats in 1 Cor. 8:1-13 and 10:14-33. There, as here, he enjoins them to treat the weak with consideration and love. In Corinthians, Paul speaks of meat sacrificed to idols. While this characteristic is not mentioned in Romans, it may be implied. Paul does not mention special days in 1 Corinthians.

Romans and Galatians

In Galatians and Romans Paul deals with special days (Gal. 4:10, 11). However, the manner in which he deals with them is markedly different. In Galatians Paul mentions Sabbath days, days of the new moon, festival seasons belonging to the Jewish practice, and either the Sabbath and

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jubilee years, or the New Year (Rosh Hashana). Paul insists that observances of these days had nothing to do with salvation. Paul's problem with (at least some of) the Galatians was that they were insisting that this observance was necessary to salvation by Jesus Christ. The false teachers in Galatia also insisted on circumcision. In Gal. 5:4 Paul advises them not only that those who insist upon following the Mosaic code cannot be saved by it, but also that they have lost the salvation that is in Christ Jesus. The harsh condemnation found in Galatians is absent from Romans. Apparently in Rome the weak brethren who observed some days (in addition to the Lord's day which is not a matter of choice) were not insisting that those who failed to observe the special days could not be saved.

Romans and Colossians

In Col. 2:16-17 Paul instructs that the Colossians not let any man judge them in respect to what they eat or drink, or with respect to a festival, a new moon, or a Sabbath day. In 2:20-21 he asks them why, if they had died in Christ to the rudiments of the world, they subjected themselves to ordinances such as handle not, taste not, and touch not, all of which perish with the using and are after the doctrines of men. Paul again speaks more harshly to those who were listening to teachers who were telling them that they could not obtain full knowledge from faith in Christ. They must

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follow these teachers' rules as to certain days and practices for full salvation. This was an obvious attack upon the sufficiency of Christ in whom, Paul says, dwells as the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Col. 2:9).

While it is not within the purview of our study here, it is important to remember the difference between matters of faith and matters of opinion. Paul condemns those who dispense with matters of faith. They seek to loose where God has bound. Paul condemns those who bind matters of opinion on fellow Christians. They seek to bind where God has loosed. Where neither of these practices is followed, as in the church at Rome, Paul admonishes that brethren treat one another gently.

Paul does not, however, fall into the error of making the weakness of the weak the criterion and principle of the church. The weak ought to grow strong. The way to make them strong is not to offend them, nor to contend with them, but to show them forbearance and loving consideration. The entire section breathes the finest spirit of true Christian ethics in its application to congregational life.

ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS

1. The final arbiter is love. This is not said to suggest that "love" and "knowledge" are antagonistic. There is no New Testament love without knowledge. It

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is to suggest that there are many issues that cannot be resolved by asking "what is correct" and "what is not correct." One can worship correctly and stomp all over a brother or sister. That is not the way of love. It is not the way of love to say that the incorrect is correct. But often love will, having established what is correct, forfeit the right to act correctly in order to be a blessing to another. One had the right to eat meat. He could eat it and act on knowledge. However, love would take on the appearance of weakness and refrain for his weak brother's benefit.

2. Romans 14 is not dealing with a situation in which the truth of the gospel is being attacked. The Galatian and Colossian letters are of a different tone. Paul scathed the Gnostic-Judaistic doctrine which showed itself at Colossae and which was threatening the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ. He didn't mind acting like a Jew or a non-Jew but when it came to the matter of basic Gospel truth he wouldn't permit Titus to be circumcised. No weakness in anyone is to lead us to deny or modify the basic Gospel faith. The "weak" ones of Romans 14 thought it was wrong for them to eat meat and probably thought it was wrong for others to do so. There certainly was some "judging" of one another going on; Paul refers to it. However, there is no indication that they were making it a test of salvation. We do the same thing - practices which are going on which we

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deem to be wrong but not soul destroying.

3. Weak brothers and sisters are to be taught. We do no one a favor by leaving him or her in ignorance. We must teach the truth when the occasion arises. [We are not to become too anxious about the scruples of people that we can't wait to "straighten them out." This spirit Paul forbids in 14:1.] Paul told the brothers and sisters that it was acceptable to eat what some were saying shouldn't be eaten. But notice this, after he made that clear he still told the "strong" not to force the issue. Paul accepted the fact that even after truth is made clear (on non-fundamental issues) the confused one may still not wish to go along with that truth. He permitted them to abstain and urged the others to take into account their sensitive consciences. This is a lesson we are slow to learn.

4. We must avoid erecting boundaries to our patience or liberality of spirit on the basis of hypothetical questions. Face it, we are slow to forfeit our rights. Before we will forfeit a liberty, we must have all the facts. A brother must admit that he is the weak brother. We approach the situation with suspicion in our heart and measuring lines in our hands. We want to know how far we have to go and whether the other person will meet us half way. We're afraid of being shoved into a corner in which some crank dictates how we are to live. It doesn't matter that we could give up

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some liberties and be better off for it. It's the principle, you know. Don't decide in the abstract. Wait until the situation confronts you and deal with the situation as you see it.

5. Each person must be permitted to make his or her own decision in the area of forfeiting liberties. That which is flagrantly inexpedient is unlawful. The difference is this: "unlawful" means the thing is always wrong; "inexpedient" is unlawful under certain circumstances. It is ill advised, but that doesn't tell the whole story. Some things are utter trivia and there is nothing at stake. It is hardly worth discussing our differences. Sometimes there are attitudes entering into the situation that make the matter more serious. Sometimes there are great things at stake and the situation has risen above trivia.

Paul claimed that a person who insisted on exercising his or her rights in the face of the destruction of a brother or sister is not only doing the ill-advised but is not walking in love. This "loveless walk" isn't something we guess at. We mustn't accuse someone of so walking simply because he doesn't see the matter as we do or as seriously as we do. Unless we have clear evidence that a person's exercising of liberty is indeed loveless, let's not brand him as loveless. The right is his. God gave it to him. When that right is forfeited, let him be the one to choose to forfeit it. Promote in him the spirit of peace and submission, but in God's name, let him make the decision to

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serve Christ by submitting. Verse 15 must have in it the thought of bad-spiritedness; otherwise we have trouble reconciling it with verses 3-4.

6. Congregations must not fragment because there are views and practices within the membership with which some other members disagree. If the issue is fundamental and of basic importance (a matter of faith), we must work toward reconciling of the parties. If that can't be accomplished, withdrawal is in order. If it isn't a "faith" issue, we must agree to disagree. This is not to suggest that we cannot make our position clear; it means that we don't need to separate. Remember, the non-eaters thought it was wrong to eat meat. It was a moral issue with them. Were they told to withdraw? The opposite is true. Not only did Paul not tell them to fragment, he told them to receive one another. Even after he told the non-eaters it was a matter of indifference, he did not bind the practice on them.

Romans 14:1 But him that is weak in faith receive ye, *yet* not for decision of scruples.

v. 1 – Paul calls upon the strong not to pass judgment upon the weak. The weak were probably fearful of eating meat sacrificed to idols. It was common practice to take the meat sacrificed in pagan temples and sell it at the public market. The weak were fearful of eating it and their conscience told them that it was wrong to do so. They were not depending upon their vegetarianism to save them, nor were they

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insisting that others could not be saved while eating meat. It was a personal practice in according with their conscience. Paul instructs the strong to accept them properly – not for the purpose of debating with or censoring them.

2 One man hath faith to eat all things: but he that is weak eateth herbs.

3 Let not him that eateth set at nought him that eateth not; and let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.

4 Who art thou that judgest the servant of another? to his own lord he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be made to stand; for the Lord hath power to make him stand.

5 One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day *alike*. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind.

vv. 2-3 – The strong believes that he can eat anything. The weak has a more restricted diet. Paul teaches that the right relationship between the strong and the weak is a two-way street. Each was to accept the other because God had accepted them both.

v. 4 – The judging of the weak and the strong belongs to God whose servants they are. The weak need not account to the strong and the strong need not account to the weak. The Lord will enable them to stand. He provides the basis of salvation.

v. 5 – The day to which Paul refers is not identified. Some believe it to be the Sabbath. Others believe it refers to other days, such as fast days or festivals. It is certain that Paul was not referring to the Lord's day. He would not have been so lenient if the weak had been setting this day aside. It was not a matter of opinion that could vary from person to person. On the other hand, proper conduct on the Lord's day has been a matter of discussion. When I was in Lipscomb I preached for a congregation at Tucker's Crossroads, Tennessee. As was the custom, the preacher

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went home with members for Sunday lunch. One of the elderly sisters talked to me about how some of the young folks were desecrating the Lord's day by playing softball Sunday afternoon. They were not missing service, but according to her conscience such activity was improper. She did not bind her opinion upon them, but she felt it was inappropriate. Assuming one does not miss worship for recreation, recreation, though physically demanding, can provide good rest from normal activities. I have been known to go to the driving range or to play nine holes between services. I do believe that it would be wrong to do like one group I heard of. They worshipped with a congregation whose building was located next to a golf course. Two brethren timed their round so that they could put down their clubs, rush in for the Lord's supper, and hurry back for the next hole. That imposes on a matter of faith. The key for Paul in these matters of opinion was that each one should be convinced in his own mind.

6 He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord: and he that eateth, eateth unto the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, unto the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.

7 For none of us liveth to himself, and none dieth to himself.

8 For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; or whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we

v. 6 – The weak must not be scorned because he does not eat meats. The strong must not be scorned because he eats meat. Both do what they do to honor the Lord, and both give thanks for what they consume.

vv. 7-9 – We miss Paul's point by applying this to our having a strong influence on others. That may be true, but here Paul has in mind our master-servant

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are the Lord's.

9 For to this end Christ died and lived *again*, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 But thou, why dost thou judge thy brother? or thou again, why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment-seat of God.

11 For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, to me every knee shall bow, And every tongue shall confess to God.

12 So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

13 Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge ye this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock in his brother's way, or an occasion of falling.

relation to the Lord. Since our whole life and death look to the Lord, can we, dare we, look elsewhere in nonessentials. Christ secured the right to exercise Lordship over Christians by his atoning death and glorious resurrection. He is Lord of those who have died and those who remain.

vv. 10-12 – In verse 3 Paul had warned the strong and weak against judging one another. V. 10 suggests that the practice was actually occurring. Notice that he invokes the term “brothers” to indicate the seriousness of the sin – in judging they are looking down on brothers. Paul quotes the O.T. (Isa. 49:81 (cf. Num. 14:28; Deut. 32:40; Ezek. 33:11); Isa. 45:23 (Septuagint text)) to emphasize that every person will stand before God’s judgment. Each one will give account of himself. No one will be excepted. The account will be given to God, the Omniscient One; it will not be given to man.

v. 13 – Since God will judge each and all, we should stop judging one another. If we must make a judgment, let us judge that we not put an occasion of stumbling in our brother’s path. The injunction against judging must be confined to such matters as Paul was discussing. (cf. Mt. 7:15 – false prophets; Phil. 3:2 – beware of evil workers; Rom. 16:17-18 – withdraw from the disorderly.) The motto of the Restoration Movement well applies – in matters of faith, unity; in matters of opinion liberty; in all

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14 I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself: save that to him who accounteth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

15 For if because of meat thy brother is grieved, thou walkest no longer in love. Destroy not with thy meat him for whom Christ died.

16 Let not then your good be evil spoken of:

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

things, love.

v. 14 – Paul clearly establishes that nothing is unclean of itself. Accordingly, any impurity is not because of the food itself, but because of the conscience of the person who believes that he should abstain. This does not mean that sin is a matter of conscience for each person. Conscience cannot make right that which is wrong. Paul's point is that conscience can make wrong that which is right. Thus, Paul helps the strong by establishing that their understanding is correct. But he also helps the weak by reminding the strong that the weak are correct to reject that which they believe to be wrong.

v. 15 – This verse seems to follow v. 13 with v. 14 being a parenthetical. Paul's language impresses on each hearer the importance of love in dealing with each other. Christ loved them enough to die for them. Do you not love them enough to give up eating meat.

v. 16 – Thus, the strong brother should not let the eating of meat, for him a good thing, be the occasion of slanderous talk. The slanderous talk could be by the weak brother, but it could also be by the outsider who observes quarrels between brethren.

v. 17 – The kingdom of God is not affected by the kind of food that a person eats. To the contrary, it is evidenced by a state of

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18 For he that herein serveth Christ is well-pleasing to God, and approved of men.

19 So then let us follow after things which make for peace, and things whereby we may edify one another.

20 Overthrow not for meat's sake the work of God. All things indeed are clean; howbeit it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.

21 It is good not to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor *to do anything* whereby thy brother stumbleth.

righteousness, the possession of peace with God, and a true joy that flows forth from the knowledge of that relationship. God's kingdom is aimed at the heart, not at the belly.

v. 18 – The person who serves God in righteousness, having peace with God and the joy imparted by the Spirit is pleasing to God. Men also approve (some translations read “respected”) such a person.

v. 19 – Mutual edification is the goal. No Christian should push his opinions and personal rights to the disturbance of the church. But if the truth of God is at stake, the good soldier of Christ will contend earnestly for the faith.

v. 20 – Having encouraged building up, Paul now discourages tearing down. He reiterates that everything is clean, but since it is wrong for the one who believes it is wrong, don't press your rights to the destruction or overthrowing of the faith of one who has been saved by the work of God.

v. 21 – Paul's instruction is not limited to eating and drinking, it relates to any opinion that troubles a brother's conscience.

This passage has been used to justify social drinking because the wine was intoxicating. The argument assumes that all wine in New Testament days was

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intoxicating and that is not true. (See *The Bible, the Saint, and the Liquor Industry*, by Jim McGuiggan.) Ancient intoxicating wine did not contain the alcohol content of modern wines. Further, what most folks want to drink is not wine but distilled liquors. If ever there was something the Christian needs to avoid it is the evil imposed on society by the liquor industry.

22 The faith which thou hast, have thou to thyself before God. Happy is he that judgeth not himself in that which he approveth.

v. 22 – Liberties may be exercised when there is no one present to be hurt by them. The man who can exercise such liberty in Christ is blessed.

23 But he that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because *he eateth* not of faith; and whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

v. 23 – However, the man who believes that it is wrong and eats in spite of that belief is not approved. He is condemned because he acts contrary to his faith or conscience. This refers to his personal faith or conscience and not to matters of faith that are bound by God. He is condemned not because what he chose was prohibited by God, but because he deliberately chose something that he believed was displeasing to God. That is wrong. It discloses a spirit that is contrary to God because it deliberately rejects that which the person believes to be God's will.