

Paul's Letter to the Romans:



THE PINNACLE OF
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Quit Condemning Each Other...

Romans 14:1-12

Romans 14:1-12 reads:

^{NAS} **Romans 14:1**...Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. ² One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. ³ Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. ⁴ Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵ One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. ¹⁰ But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹² So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

From chapter 12 to this point, Paul has been discussing how we, as Christian, having been justified (from chapters 1 to 11), now should conduct ourselves as living sacrifices (12:1). We have seen that being **"living sacrifices"** involves:

Our relationship to the Body of Christ first by having a consecrated life, second by the use of our spiritual gifts, and third by our love for one another.

Being a **“living sacrifice”** also involves our relationship with the governing authorities, our relationship with our neighbor and the love we demonstrate there, and also our awareness and hope in the return of Christ in these last days (as we heard last week - we are to lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light).

Now we come to the place where Paul will teach us to actually embrace, in unity and love, the differences of fellow believers and the Christian liberties that we either practice or refrain from practicing.

Now, what I would like for you to do is imagine that you are at the home of a fellow believer in Christ. With you there is the host family, and several other Christians. You are all together to simply spend time in fellowship, there has been a meal prepared, and you have spent the last half hour or so discussing various things about the past week, etc. As everyone sits down to eat, you see the host bring in several bottles of wine and place them on the table. You are well aware that the wine is the intended drink with the meal for that evening.

At this point what I would like for to do is ask yourself several questions:

First, would you drink the wine? If so, why? Is it simply because you like wine? Is it perhaps there was not another drink offered and you do not want to be rude? Or, would you refuse the wine and ask for something else? And do you refuse because you simply do not like wine, or do you refuse because you think

it is wrong to drink wine? If you think it is wrong to drink the wine, why do you think it is wrong? Moreover, do you think it was wrong for the host to have brought out wine in the first place? Take a few seconds a think to yourself about these questions?

What's going on here?

Here in chapter 14, Paul is dealing with these various questions which surfaced time and again in the first century, especially during his ministry from place to place. Most scholars agree that Romans was written around 56 or 57 AD. Moreover, scholars assume that Paul probably wrote his letters to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians, from Rome. Therefore, Paul would have already established Churches in these places, and would have ministered the Gospel to these people prior to his reaching Rome. And it is probably the case for the Church in Corinth, and the Church in Thessalonica, that Paul had written his letters to them before actually reaching Rome. Now, I labor the time frame issue for several reasons:

The issues in Romans 14 (Christian liberties) are a familiar topic to Paul since he has dealt with them in other settings among other believers (see 1 Corinthians 8-10).

Many scholars believe that perhaps there were similar issues going on in Rome and Paul knew about these issues and took this lime in his writing to the Romans to address them.

Now whether Paul actually knew that something like this was going on at the Church in Rome before he wrote the letter, we will never really know. All we do

know is that Paul does address these issues in his letter to the church at Rome. So they must have played an important part in what he wanted the Church at Rome to understand about Christian living. That being the case, let's take the time provided to us this morning to take a much closer look at Romans 14:1-12.

Looking at verse 1 we see that it reads: **"Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions."** This passage seems to invoke certain questions after one has read it - What does it mean to be **"weak in faith?"** and **"Who are these people who are 'weak in faith?'"** First, we all know that there are several essential doctrines of the Christian faith which all believers must be in agreement about. These doctrines include the Virgin Birth of Christ, the deity of Christ, the physical resurrection, Justification, etc.

Now, are the **"weak"** those who perhaps struggle with these issues? No, I firmly believe that Paul is not referring to the **"weak"** as those who are struggling to embrace the essential issues of the Christian faith.

Well, then we might ask, is **"weak in faith"** referring to one who is a vulnerable Christian, one who is easily overcome by temptation? Well, no I do not believe that is the type of person Paul is referring to here either. So then what does **"weak in faith mean?"**

There are two biblical commentators who I believe have done an excellent job in articulating who they think Paul is referring to in this first verse. The first of these is John Stott. Stott declares in his commentary on Romans,

“It is important to be clear at the outset that Paul is referring to a weakness neither of will nor character, but of ‘faith.’ It is a ‘weakness in assurance that one’s faith permits one to do certain things.’¹

The second of these two commentators is Kent Hughes. Hughes declares that the weak in verse one is **“not weak in basic Christian faith, but is weak in assurance that his faith permits him to do certain things, such as eating meat.”²**

So, we can conclude that those who are **“weak in faith”** are in fact weak in the **“doing of certain things.”** However, notice that in the latter half of verse one Paul clearly declares that those who are **“weak in faith”** are to be accepted, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on their opinions.

Now, regarding the question of who the weak are, commentators are varied. However, most commentators agree that it is one of four groups of people:

It may be that the weak in these verses may in fact be *ex pagan idolaters*. That is they people who had been involved in pagan groups who had practiced sacrificing animals to pagan gods. This could possibly be the case since Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 are similar in certain regards. Both refer to what you can eat and what you cannot eat. While Paul is much more broad and general in Romans 14, it is clear that he is discussing what is eaten or not (see verse 2). However, in Corinthians Paul is much more specific and detailed about the issue of food, and rightly so. You see, in Corinth there was a large pagan temple where pagans would make sacrifices to their pagan gods, and once the sacrifice was made, the meat would be taken to a certain part of the market and sold.

Let me try and explain it this way, in more modern terms. When I was in seminary Kasha and I were dead dog poor. All of our money was going to pay for my education. In fact, not only were we dead dog poor, but we were in debt due to school loans as well, so that made it twice as bad while I was in school. This being the case, we knew every grocery store and every price that grocery store had on the items we would buy each week. We had this down to an art form. We knew that we could buy certain items from one place that were much less expensive than at another place. And, most of all, we knew the cheapest place to buy meat (when we had that luxury). The situation in Corinth would be like Kasha and I going to the market to look for meat, and there it is lined up - Prime Rib, Sirloin, Ground Round, and meat sacrificed to an idol, it of course being the less expensive meat, not because it was a low quality meat, but simply for the fact that it was sacrificed to an idol.

This was the situation in Corinth, there was a certain place in the market where people could buy cheap meat that was cheap only because it was sacrificed to an idol. However, this caused great dissension in the Church at Corinth due to the fact that there were ex-pagan idolaters who knew that that meat was sacrificed to an idol and to eat such meat meant that first, you were helping to support that cult because the money for the meat went to the cult, and two this was meat that was sacrificed to a demon, a false god. So in Corinth this was a more specific type of situation which may have not been the case in Romans.

The second suggestion as to who the weak are in Romans 14 is that they were *ascetics* - those people who practiced asceticism. Ascetic groups existed in just about every religion of the day, even in Judaism. The practice of asceticism involved the suppressing or buffeting of the body in order to grow in spirituality.

In other words, asceticism contains a lot of do's and don't with reference to what will make one more spiritual - often times this is merely the act of isolation from civilization (the Gnostic Essenes who wrote the Gnostic gospels were an ascetic group). So you can see several commentators believed that perhaps Paul was talking about ascetics.

The third suggestion as to who the weak are in Romans 14 is that they were *legalists*. Many of us today have actually come out of this type of environment. This is a group that would put strict stipulations on what someone in the group can or cannot do, and these restrictions are usually applied to being right before God. This idea is suggested for the weak in Romans because of the time and attention Paul spent on the issue of justification (from chapters 1 to 11). I personally think that legalism could be applied to all four of the groups, in one sense or another. But it is not who Paul is talking about in these passages.

The fourth and final suggestion for who the weak are is that they are *Jewish converts*. They are Jewish converts whose weakness is in their past practices with reference to the Jewish regulations pertaining to food, holy days, and the like. In the Old Testament we read about the dietary laws and restrictions with regard to holy days. I think that the Jews were given such restrictions by God in order to distinguish them from the rest of the known world. No other civilization had the same type of restrictions that the Jewish nation did in the ancient world and that made them distinct. This in fact, set them apart unto God.

If you will look back at the text, at verse 5 and 6 we see that Paul refers to observing certain days.

^{NAS} **Romans 14:5**...One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

So here we have Paul discussing certain days which are either not practiced or are practiced, and in verse 2 we have Paul discussing certain foods which are eaten or not eaten. This is why I think that the fourth option is the correct option. Paul is addressing Jewish converts in these passages. This seems to be the most likely option due to the content of the text and to the fact that the Churches were primarily made up of both Jews and Gentiles. The twelve disciples and Paul himself were Jewish converts. But I am in good company with this opinion about the text referring to Jewish converts, Calvin also believed that Paul is addressing Jewish converts, in fact, Calvin details in his commentary on this passage that not only was Paul addressing Jewish converts, but that it was probably typical for a Jewish convert, who was accustomed to the rites of the Mosaic law, to have brought that baggage with him to Christianity. This would certainly be the case for a Jew, who had been raised a Jew, was accustomed only to the Jewish customs and then converted to Christianity.

This is the environment from which Paul himself would have been converted. However, is Paul one of the weak or one of the strong? Look at Romans 15:1. **“Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.”** Notice the first part of the verse, *“We who are strong.”* This is a clear indication that Paul is one of the strong. In fact, in 1 Corinthians Paul indicates that a person is allowed to eat anything in the meat market, and this would seem to include meat sacrificed to idols. Let’s look at 1

Corinthians 10:23-25.

^{NAS} **1 Corinthians 10:23**...All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. ²⁴ Let no one seek his own *good*, but that of his neighbor. ²⁵ Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience ' sake;

We can clearly see that Paul has no scruples or weakness of conscience about foods, and the like. I love what F.F. Bruce, in his commentary, says about Paul and his view on Christian liberty. Bruce writes, **“Paul enjoyed his Christian liberty to the full. Never was there a Christian more thoroughly emancipated from un-Christian inhibitions and taboos. So completely emancipated was he from spiritual bondage that he was not even in bondage to his emancipation.”**

³I just love that. Bruce continues by declaring, **“He [Paul] conformed to the Jewish way of life when he was in Jewish society as cheerfully as he accommodated himself to Gentile ways when he was living with Gentiles.”**

Paul clearly knew the importance of not regarding any fellow brother with contempt because they thought it wrong to eat certain foods, nor did he think a weaker brother should judge a stronger brother because they had a clear conscience and could eat without remorse or guilt the same kinds of food that would be taboo for that weaker brother. We can clearly see this in Romans **14:3**.

So why? Why was Paul so content to conform to certain Gentile practices when he was with Gentiles as he was to conform to certain Jewish practices when he was with Jews?

The strong and weak are both accepted by Christ

The reason Paul could do this is because he knew, and he taught that both the weak brother as well as the strong brother were both accepted by Christ. Look at 14:4.

^{NAS} **Romans 14:4**...Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

What does Paul mean by judging the servant of another? The servant is obviously the believer, and the one served is Christ. So, Paul is asking who are we, weak or strong, to pass judgment on another with reference to these scruples. We are to see each other as beloved of God. We were bought by Christ, not by each other, In fact he says so right here in the verse - **“To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will for the Lord is able to make him stand.”**

What this means is that I must bear with great patience and kindness my wife's love for country music. God bless her precious soul. This what Paul means when he writes in Chapter 12, verse 3, **“For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think.”** Who are we to think we are better because we refrain from doing a certain thing, or that we think we are better because we can clearly practice certain liberties that other's cannot?

We must never elevate non-essentials to the level of essential and then cast judgment on one another based on these non-essentials, as if by doing them we were lost from the saving grace of Christ.

Paul clearly says in this text that the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking

(14:17), but righteousness and peace. This is why in verse one Paul uses the term *dialogismo!* –“**doubtful points**” or “**disputable matters of opinion.**” The reformers called them *adiaphora* which means “matters of indifference”. These are non-essentials. But apparently some are acting as if they are essential or *Paul* would not have to address them.

So Paul’s main point here is that both the weak and the strong are accepted by Christ - so stop judging one another. Now this is not just in matters of food. Look at verses 5 and 6. Read the passage

So these matters also pertain to certain days as well. We are not to hold in contempt or judge anyone according to a certain day that that person may consider holy or not. This is simply an issue that Paul declares we must work out in our own conscience. But the pivotal verses in this chapter, I believe, are verses 7 - 8.

^{NAS} **Romans 14:7**...For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

Brothers and sisters let me say at this point that if we are in fact doing what Paul declares we ought to be doing in verse 7 and 8, then these matters of indifference will and should fall neatly into place. The reason I say this is because when we are busying ourselves living for the Lord, and dying for the Lord, we will not be busying ourselves trying to make others conform to our own consciences or ways of thinking about peripheral issues.

The Strong and the Weak are serving Christ, and we be evaluated by the true

judge in the future.

This is what Paul is communicating in the latter verses of this section of the chapter. Look at Verses 10 through 12.

^{NAS} **Romans 14:10**...But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "**As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God.**" ¹² So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

In verse 10, Paul simply repeats what he said from verses 3 and 4. However, notice in verse 3 that Paul is using general language like "**him,**" "**his own.**" However, in verse 10 Paul says "**You,**" and "**Your brother.**" I think he switches the verbiage to bring home his point, especially in a more personal way. Moreover, notice that in both verse 4 and verse 10 that Paul is drawing a sharp distinction between our judgment and God's. There is a strong link between our not judging our brother and our having to stand before the judgment seat of God. Now does Paul mean that we are not to judge at all here? The concept of judgment could be taken out of context here and applied other areas where it does not belong. For instance, 30 years ago, many of you will remember that the most popular verse in the Bible was John 3:16. Today, that has changed. The most popular verse in the Bible is Matthew 7:1. Without looking can anybody tell me what that verse says? "**Do not Judge lest you be judge.**"

Now, of course Paul is not eliminating all kinds of judgment here, there are times when we are to judge our fellow brothers, especially if they have fallen into grievous error by their actions or their doctrinal beliefs. However, Paul is quite

clear here that we are not to judge another in matters of indifference because then we are playing the role of God in an area where we have no business doing that.

In closing I want to point out that in reading Paul here, we could easily fall into the trap of focusing our attention on all the situations that we could think of that would apply to what Paul is talking about in these passages. In other words, we could get lost in focusing on eating and drinking type situations and lose sight of the underlining message of Paul, which is unity. Paul is clearly teaching in these passages that:

Weak and strong believers are to fore bear with one another because both are accepted by Christ, both are serving Christ, and both will be evaluated by the true Judge in the future.

One of the commentaries that I read to prepare for this lesson made this comment, **“It has been said that those who are weak in faith live by conscience, those who are strong in faith by knowledge, but the more mature by love.”**

Let me illustrate what I believe this commentator is trying to say.

I went to a seminary that had several professors who were very well known all over the country. On one occasion I had the opportunity to go out and eat with one of these professors. I will not give his name because some of you will have heard of him. He invited me to eat at one of the best Italian food restaurants in Charlotte, N.C. Now my wife will attest to the fact that when I go to eat Italian food invariably I will order a glass of red wine. In fact, I cannot think of a better

beverage to have with Italian food than red wine. However, I knew that this professor was adamantly opposed to drinking any form of alcoholic beverage. This was due to the fact that he was raised by an alcoholic father who was also abusive. Now this professor had probably forgotten more theology and doctrine that I could ever learn in one lifetime. I would consider him a strong Christian by virtue of his knowledge. So I was left in this situation with one of two choices. I could have practiced my Christian liberty and ordered a glass of wine. And I firmly believe that would have been within my right to do so. Or, I could have refrained because I knew that here is a fellow brother in Christ who would have certainly been offended and could have possibly thought less of me had I ordered the wine. Now this is actually going on in my mind as we are looking at the menus. When the time came to order, I did not order the wine. And I decided not to for the sole fact that I knew that this brother in Christ had a pretty severe past with an alcoholic father, and I knew that this was the reason that he was opposed to alcohol of any kind. You see I believe the right use of liberty is important. And I believe that in the Christian gospel we are perfectly free from the externals of the Law of Moses. However, I also believe that the same gospel which grants liberty may also require the believer to sacrifice his liberty for the sake of another. I simply had too much respect for this professor to cause potential dissension between us over one glass of wine. And this, I believe is what Paul is teaching us in these passages. Brothers and sisters we should all strive for unity in the body of Christ, and we should do so in love, even if we have to, at times, sacrifice our liberty for the sake of another.

Let's pray.

¹ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News For the World*, (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 355. Stott himself quotes Cranfield. See C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans: Volume 2, Commentary on Romans 9-16* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975; reprint, 1992), 700.

² R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*. (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossways Books, 1991), 260.

³ F.F. Bruce, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963), 243.