

XXXI. The Strong and the Weak

March 14/15/16, 2017

Romans 14:1-12

Aim: To seek unity between Christians with differences of opinion on matters of conscience and liberty, recognizing that we all serve the same Lord.

This whole section is part of an extended commentary on the command of Jesus to love one another, and this has been the subject since Paul began the practical section of this letter. In chapter 12 we saw that the nature of love is to serve. In chapter 13 we discovered that love must be submissive. Now in chapter 14 we are learning that love must be patient and tolerant of other people's views.

Romans chapter 14 addresses the issue of Christian liberty with respect to the weaker brother. The chapter cannot be considered in isolation apart from what went before it; this is a continuation of Paul's exposition of love of neighbor, what it means to have fellowship marked by *agape*, spiritual love.

A. Ascertaining the Objects of this Passage

1. Moo

Paul wraps up his exhortations with a lengthy plea for mutual acceptance (14:1-15:13). The command to 'receive' fellow believers begins the section (14:1) and is repeated again at its climax (15:7). These exhortations to mutual acceptance and concern are directed specifically to two groups of Christians: those who are 'weak in faith' (14:1; cp. 15:1) and those who are 'strong in faith' (15:1). Two, and probably three, issues divide these two groups: 1) the 'strong' eat all kinds of food while the 'weak' eat only vegetables (14:2); 2) the 'strong' make no distinction among days while the 'weak' value some days more than others (14:5); and 3) the 'strong' drink wine while the 'weak' abstain (14:21; cp. 14:17).

Two general issues must be cleared up before the details of Paul's exhortation can be understood: 1) the reason why Paul includes this exhortation in his letter to the Roman Christians; and 2) the underlying basis for the differences in practice between the two groups. With respect to the first issue, the most natural explanation for this extended plea for mutual acceptance is that Paul knew of a division between 'strong' and 'weak' in the Roman church and writes what he does to heal that division.

Identifying the religious practices of the 'weak' that Paul notes is admittedly not easy. Explanations of the root issue in Romans 14:1-15:13 fall into six major categories. 1) The 'weak' were mainly Gentile Christians who abstained from meat (and perhaps wine), particularly on certain 'fast' days, under the influence of certain pagan religions. 2) The 'weak' were Christians, perhaps both Jewish and Gentile, who practiced an ascetic lifestyle for reasons we cannot determine. 3) The 'weak' were mainly Jewish Christians who observed certain practices derived from the Mosaic Law out of a concern to establish righteousness before God. 4) The 'weak' were mainly Jewish Christians who followed a sectarian ascetic program as a means of expressing their piety. This program may have been the product of syncretistic tendencies. 5) The 'weak' were mainly Jewish Christians who, like some of the Corinthians, believed that it was wrong to eat meat that was sold in marketplace and was probably tainted by idolatry. 6) The

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‘weak’ were mainly Jewish Christians who refrained from certain kinds of food and observed certain days out of continuing loyalty to the Mosaic Law.

Four considerations make the sixth alternative the most likely. First, there is abundant evidence that the dispute between the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ was rooted in differences between Jews and Gentiles. The relationship between these two groups has been a leitmotif of Romans since chapter 1; and the conclusion of this section, in which Paul emphasizes the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in the one new people of God (15:8-13), brings this motif into Paul’s plea for reconciliation between the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak.’ Confirmation of a basically Jewish origin for the position of the weak comes from Paul’s use of the term *koinos*, ‘common,’ ‘unclean,’ to describe (implicitly) the ‘weak’ Christians’ attitude toward food (14:14). For this term had become a semi-technical way of describing food prohibited under the Mosaic Law (see Mark 7:2, 5; Acts 10:14). Moreover, the NT provides abundant evidence that the OT food laws constituted a prime issue in the early Christian communities. This consideration rules out alternatives 1 and 2 and it also creates difficulties for alternative 4.

Second, Paul’s plea for understanding and acceptance of the ‘weak’ within the community make clear that they were not propagating a view antithetical to the gospel. This makes it impossible to view them as Jews who believed that observance of the law was necessary for salvation. It also makes it unlikely that the ‘weak’ were sectarian Jews who adopted an ascetic regime under the influence of other philosophical and/or religious tendencies. This consideration rules out alternative 3 and creates difficulties for alternative 4.

Third, Paul’s failure to mention ‘food sacrificed to idols’ (*eidōlthyta*; cp. 1 Cor. 8:1) and his reference to the observance of special days and abstention from wine make it unlikely that the dispute in Romans can be confined to the issue of food offered to idols. Fourth, positively, the practices Paul attributed to the ‘weak’ can be explained as a result of concerns to observe certain requirements of the Mosaic Law. Abstention from meat and wine is, of course, not required by the Mosaic Law. But scrupulous Jews would sometimes avoid all meat in environments where they could not be sure that the meat had been prepared in a ‘kosher’ manner. Similarly, Jews would sometimes abstain from wine out of concern that it had been tainted by the pagan practice of offering the wine as a libation to the gods. Finally, of course, the Mosaic Law stipulates the observance of many special religious days: the weekly Sabbath and the major religious festivals. And many first-century Jews also observed weekly fasting and prayer days.

These considerations suggest that the ‘weak’ were Jewish Christians who believed that they were still bound by certain ‘ritual’ requirements of the Mosaic Law. Paul’s exhortation in 14:1 to the Roman community to ‘receive’ these who are ‘weak in the faith’ makes clear that this group was in the minority. And, typical of such scrupulous minorities, these ‘weak’ Christians were ‘condemning’ those other Christians who did not follow their rules (14:3). This other group, who perhaps called themselves ‘the strong,’ was probably composed mainly of Gentile Christians, along with some more ‘liberated’ Jewish Christians, such as Paul himself (cp. 15:1). They believed that the coming of Christ had brought an end to the ritual requirements of the Mosaic Law; and, like many such ‘enlightened’ majorities, they tended to ‘despise’ and look down on the ‘weak’ (14:3). It is possible that the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak’ occupied rival congregations and that Paul’s purpose in this section is to unify the two groups into one congregation. But the degree of mutual recrimination and the real power of the ‘strong’ to harm the ‘weak’ suggest rather that Paul writes to bring unity to an existing congregation, or, more likely, to a number of ‘house’ congregations.

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Paul agrees in principle with the ‘strong’ (14:14a; cp. also 14:20; 15:1). But he spends no time developing this point. His concern is not so much with ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ of this particular issue but with the ‘peace’ and ‘mutual edification’ of the body of Christ (cp. 14:19). And he makes clear that those who pride themselves on being the ‘strong’ have a special responsibility toward this end. It is they, those who truly sense their liberty on these matters, who are to put their exercise of that liberty in perspective and to subordinate it to the far more important ‘good’ of their fellow believers’ edification and salvation (14:15-21).

This paragraph divides into three sections: vv. 1-3, 4-9, and 10-12. The divisions between the sections are marked with similar rhetoric questions, each using the second person singular (vv. 4a, 10a). It is evident, then that Paul has arranged the three sections in a classic ‘ring composition.’ The first (vv. 1-3) and the third (vv. 10-12) state in almost identical language the main point of the paragraph: the ‘strong’ are not to ‘despise’ the ‘weak’; the ‘weak’ are not to ‘judge’ the ‘strong’ (cp. vv. 3a and 10a). In the central section, vv. 4-9, Paul provides the theological foundation for these commands: every Christian is a servant of the Lord; and it is to that ‘master,’ and not to any other fellow servant, that the believer must answer.

2. Hughes

The Christian Jews in Rome were not like the heretical Judaizers in Galatia who thought they could put God under obligation by obeying the Law—they knew it was all by grace. However, thought they understood this, they did not entirely escape the thought that observing the Law was pleasing to Christ. They felt this was an appropriate response to God’s grace. Their position was understandable, but not Biblical.

Some had become vegetarians. Though the Old Testament Law did not command vegetarianism, these Jewish Christians came to the conclusion that a vegetarian diet was the safest because it was so difficult to be sure the meat was *kosher* in Rome [DSB: Consider Geert Geertsema, who became a practical vegetarian while living in India when he saw how meat was handled!]. So they formed an anti-meat-eating, Law-observing segment in the Church of Rome. Still the great majority in the church were meat-eaters.

As Paul writes to Rome, these two parties have been given labels. The Law-observing Jewish Christians are called ‘weak,’ and the liberated Gentile Christians are called ‘strong.’ Naturally the tension between the two groups was very intense at times. The ‘easy’ solution to this problem would have been to form two churches: ‘The Church of the Carnivores’ and ‘The First Church of the Vegetarians.’ Paul’ fortunately, was committed to the nobler, though far more difficult, solution. In the first twelve verses of Romans 14, Paul tells us *what we need to know if we are to maintain unity amidst the diversity of the church*. There is no doubt about the relevance of this theme. Judging one another is one of the favorite indoor sports of Christians today.

3. Barnett

Two groups of people are in Paul’s mind, the ‘weak’ and (by inference) the ‘strong’ (see 15:1). Who are these? Clearly they are Christian believers; Paul refers to them as ‘brothers.’ Their respective attitude to food and ‘days’ identified them as Jews and Gentiles. Almost certainly, then, the ‘weak’ are Jewish Christians and the ‘strong’ are Gentile believers. Both belong to the scattered house-based churches in Rome.

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But why does Paul call them ‘weak’ and ‘strong’? Two reasons are suggested. First, Paul did not want to intensify existing ethnic differences, so he used other identifying terms. Thus he called Jewish Christians ‘weak’ because they felt bound to observe practices related to ‘meat’ (things one can and cannot eat) and ‘days’ (setting aside special calendar observances). The ‘strong’ felt no religious obligation regarding ‘meat’ or ‘days.’ Perhaps, too, Paul used the ‘weak’/‘strong’ terminology to underscore the obligation of the ‘strong’ to ‘welcome’ the ‘weak,’ in line with Jesus’ well-known teachings.

The observance or non-observance of ‘meat’ and ‘days’ was and remains deeply divisive. Paul’s Spirit-inspired genius was to encourage mutual respect and to urge each to recognize a loyalty higher than to food and time, thus making fellowship possible. That higher loyalty is to Christ who is Lord and judge to each person, regardless of whether ‘weak’ or ‘strong.’ Paul teaches that the important thing is not whether one is ‘weak’ or ‘strong.’ The fundamental truth is that each is the ‘servant of another,’ that is, the risen Lord Jesus. Yet the burden of the passage is not addressed to the ‘weak’ but to the ‘strong.’ The ‘strong’ are to ‘welcome’ the ‘weak,’ not causing offense to the ‘weak.’ Let the ‘strong’ be prepared to make considerable cultural concessions to the ‘weak’ for the sake of incorporating them into the ‘one body in Christ.’

4. Sproul

Legalism is the most destructive distortion of Christianity. There are two major distortions that block our sanctification, flip sides of the same coin. One is the spirit of antinomianism, which abuses Christian freedom by willfully sinning in light of grace. The other is legalism, which binds the freedom grace gives. Legalism makes minor matters the test of true spirituality. We have all encountered Christians who say the essence of spirituality is to refrain from dancing and lipstick and going to movies. The creed becomes ‘touch not, taste not, handle not’ (cp. Col. 2:20-23, especially v. 21). People substitute minor matters for the fruit of the Spirit and use adherence to those minor matters as the test of righteousness. Either distortion can be very destructive to the Christian life.

We find in Scripture things about which God has said yes or no, but in between those matters of law there is a host of things that the New Testament describes as *adiaphorous*, morally neutral. In the early Christian church some developed scruples about eating meat, which is *adiaphorous*.

We read in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians about a scandal that emerged among the Christians there that concerned the issue of eating meat that had been used in pagan idol worship. Some of the Corinthian Christians wanted to distance themselves in every conceivable way from every act of idolatry. As a matter of conscience they determined they would never purchase such meat, and they began to look down on their brothers who did purchase it and consume it freely. Those who ate it believed that nothing was inherently wrong with consuming the meat. They ate it without any pangs of conscience. A rift developed in the church between the divided parties, and Paul had to mediate the dispute. Something similar was going on in the Roman community, so in this epistle Paul wants to teach the people a lesson about how to use their Christian liberty.

5. MacArthur

Outright sin is not the only danger to a church’s spiritual health and unity. Although they are not sin in themselves, certain attitudes and behavior can destroy fellowship and fruitfulness and have crippled the work, the witness, and the unity of countless congregations throughout church history. These problems are caused by differences between Christians over matters that are

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neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. They are matters of personal preference and historic tradition, which, when imposed on others, inevitably cause confusion, strife, ill will, abused consciences, and disharmony.

The particular danger to unity that Paul addresses in Romans 14:1-15:13 is the conflict that easily arises between those to whom he refers as strong and weak believers, those who are mature in the faith and those who are immature, those who understand and enjoy freedom in Christ and those who still feel either shackled or threatened by certain religious and cultural taboos and practices that were deeply ingrained parts of their lives before coming to Christ.

In the early church, many Jews who came to faith in Christ could not bring themselves to discard the ceremonial laws and practices in which they had been steeped since early childhood, especially the rites and prohibitions the Lord Himself had instituted under the Old Covenant. They still felt compelled, for example, to comply with Mosaic dietary laws, to strictly observe the Sabbath, and even to offer sacrifices in the Temple because they were given by the true God.

On the other hand, many converted Gentiles had been just as strongly steeped in pagan rituals and customs from false gods, and they felt repulsed by anything remotely connected with such evils. Many Gentiles, for example, could not bring themselves to eat meat that had been offered to a pagan deity and then was sold in the marketplace.

Other believers, both Jewish and Gentile understood and exercised their freedom in Christ. Mature Jewish believers realized that, under the New Covenant in Christ, the ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic law were no longer valid. Mature believing Gentiles understood that idolatry was a spiritual evil and had no effect on anything physical, such as meat, that may have been used in idolatrous worship.

Those who were still strongly influenced, favorably or unfavorably, by their former religious beliefs and practices were weak in the faith because they did not understand their freedom in Christ. In the present passage (14:1-12), the apostle speaks to both types of believers and both attitudes, but his counsel is directed to strong believers, for the very reason that they are stronger in the faith. Of the two groups, they are the better equipped both to understand and to be understanding.

B. Accepting One Another (Romans 14:1-4)

1. The Strong Are to Welcome the Weak (14:1)

a) *Weak (14:1a)*

¹*As for the one who is weak in faith...*

Paul begins by urging that the community ‘receive the one who is weak with respect to faith.’ By making the ‘weak’ in faith the object of this command, which appears to be directed to the community as a whole, Paul implies that the ‘strong’ were the dominant element in the Roman church. This fits with the identification of the ‘strong’ as mainly Gentile Christians since Paul treats the church in Rome as predominantly Gentile.

The ‘weak’ are identified as Jews, that is, those who are by upbringing and culture unable to conduct their lives apart from religious observances connected with *food* and special periods of *time*. For them, ‘holiness’ and ‘purity’ meant abstaining from food that defiled and from

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working on the Sabbath. They are, however, ‘weak in *the* faith,’ that is, in the fundamental *doctrines* of the Christian faith. Most likely, Paul is referring to their shaky grasp on faith in Christ as the means of ‘righteousness’ in the sight of God on account of which the greater part of this letter has been addressed (ch. 2-7, 9-11).

‘Is weak’ translates a Greek present participle, suggesting a temporary condition. The Greek text also has the definite article (*the*) before ‘faith,’ indicating that Paul was not speaking of spiritual trust or faithfulness but of understanding the full truth of the gospel message. A better rendering, therefore, might be: ‘one who is weak in *the* faith.’ Paul was not speaking of doctrinal or moral compromise. He was not speaking, for example, about Judaizers, Jews who infiltrated the church and then insisted that a Gentile could not come to Christ without being circumcised and that both Jewish and Gentile believers had to observe the Mosaic law (see Acts 15:5). He was speaking of believers, Jew or Gentile, who are ‘weak in’ their understanding of and living out their truth ‘faith’ in Jesus Christ.

Paul’s description of those who are to be received, ‘the weak with respect to faith,’ obviously carries a pejorative connotation: it is certainly better to be ‘strong’ than to be ‘weak’! It was probably the ‘strong’ in Rome who described those with whom they disagreed in this way. Yet the phrase is not as negative as it may seem at first sight. Crucial here is the meaning of the word ‘faith’ in this description. Paul uses the language of faith to describe the dispute between the two groups at both the beginning (vv. 1, 2) and end (vv. 22, 23) of chapter 14. Paul is not simply criticizing these people for having a ‘weak’ or inadequate trust in Christ as their Savior and Lord. Rather, he is criticizing them for lack of insight into some of the implications of their faith in Christ. These are Christians who are not able to accept for themselves the truth that their faith in Christ implies liberation from certain OT/Jewish ritual requirements. Paul’s decision to use the pejorative phrase ‘weak in faith’ makes clear where his sympathies lie. We cannot avoid the impressive (though his pastoral concerns lead him to keep it implicit) that Paul would hope that a growth in Christ would help those who were ‘weak’ become ‘strong.’

b) Welcome (14:1b)

...welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

How are ‘strong’ (Gentile) Christians to do this? Each is to ‘welcome’ the one who is ‘weak’ in the faith. Paul’s word ‘welcome’ (*proslambanō*) means not merely ‘receive,’ but ‘thoroughly receive,’ ‘warmly welcome’ (cp. Acts 28:2). Paul is appealing to Gentile believers to extend the hand of friendship and to embrace the Jewish believers into the common fellowship (see vv. 5-6). Such a ‘welcome’ must be the universal hallmark of genuinely Christian congregations. Church members need to look out for the outsider, the newcomer, and the visitor, in order to extend a warm welcome to such.

Proslambanō (‘accept’) is a compound verb, the prefix *pros* being a preposition that intensifies the basic verb, making it a command. In other words, Paul was not simply suggesting, but commanding, that strong believers ‘accept’ weak believers. In the New Testament, *proslambanō* is always used in the Greek middle voice, which gives it the connotation of personal and willing acceptance of another person (cp. Acts 28:2; Rom. 15:7). Such believers are to be fully and lovingly accepted by those who are spiritually mature. It is not that the believer’s freedom in Christ should never be discussed with Christians who are still under bondage to some type of religious compulsion or restraint, but that such discussion should never be ‘for the purpose of passing judgment on’ undeveloped but sincere ‘opinions.’

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To ‘receive’ the ‘weak’ is not simply to accord them official recognition as church members. The verb means ‘receive or accept into one’s society, home, circle of acquaintance’, and implies that the Roman Christians were not only to tolerate the ‘weak’ but that they were to treat them as brothers and sisters in the intimate fellowship typical of the people of God.

These ‘weak’ are to be wholeheartedly accepted—they are not to be accepted with the ulterior motive of straightening them out. There is to be no phony condescension on the part of the strong, no hidden agenda, but rather simple, unqualified acceptance.

In the meantime, however, Paul is concerned with the unity of the church. This is why he not only urges the ‘strong’ to ‘receive’ the ‘weak’ but to receive them with the right motivation and in the right spirit. Don’t, Paul says, welcome the ‘weak’ simply ‘for the purpose of quarrels (*διακρίσεις, diakriseis*) over disputed matters (*διαλογισμῶν, dialogismōn*).’ The ‘disputed matters’ are those differences of opinion respecting the eating of meat, the observance of days, and the drinking of wine that Paul mentions later in the chapter (vv. 2, 5, 21). Paul wants the ‘strong’ to receive the ‘weak’ into full and intimate fellowship, something that could not happen if the ‘strong,’ the majority group, persist in advancing their views on these issues, sparking quarrels and mutual recrimination.

However, the Gentile must not ‘welcome’ the Jew in order to engage in ‘quarrels about opinions’ (*diakriseis dialogismōn*). This ‘welcome’ is not with the intention of debate and dispute.

2. What the Strong and the Weak Believe (14:2)

²*One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.*

The ‘one man’ who ‘has faith that he may eat all things’ obviously refers to the stronger, more mature Christian who appreciates and exercises his freedom in Christ. The first example of freedom is that of the Christian’s right to ‘eat all things.’ Some Gentile believers, like some Jews, were troubled by the eating of certain foods, but for different reasons. Because of the idolatry and immorality related to their former religions, they could not bring themselves to eat meat or any other food that had been used as an offering to a pagan deity. Consequently, some Christian Jews and Gentiles would eat ‘vegetables only,’ taking no chance of eating meat they considered to be defiled by idols.

Some in the early church were convinced that vegetarianism was the right road to follow. They believed that the spiritual measure was not only whether someone refrained from eating meat offered to idols but refrained from meat altogether. The vegetarians thought that exercising such restraints moved them to a higher level of spirituality. Those vegetarians were the ones Paul describes as weaker brothers. They did not understand the fullness of the biblical concept of Christian liberty. They were held captive to elemental principles of ‘taste not, touch not, handle not.’ They thought they were being devout when, in fact, they were being infantile and immature in their reasoning.

Paul now cites one of the ‘disputed matters.’ In light of v. 21 (‘it is good not to eat meat’) ‘eat vegetables’ must mean ‘eats *only* vegetables,’ that is, is a ‘vegetarian,’ a person who eats no meat. The ‘weak in faith’ probably decided to avoid meat altogether out of a concern to main OT laws of purity in a pagan context where ‘kosher’ meat was not easily obtained. Other believers, however, did not share this concern to maintain purity, no doubt because they were convinced that, as New Covenant Christians, they were no longer obligated to the OT laws involved. When Paul therefore says that these Christians ‘believe to eat all things’ (a literal

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translation), he is using ‘believe’ in an unusual way. It may mean simply ‘have confidence,’ but the probable connection with the word ‘faith’ in v. 1 (cp. also vv. 22-23) suggests that we should not eliminate all connotations of specifically Christian believing.

Philo, a Jew contemporary with Paul, wrote: ‘It was not necessary that man the creature most akin to wisdom should be impelled to feast upon [various kinds of fishes, birds, and land animals] and so change himself into the savagery of wild beasts. And therefore, to this day, those who have thought for self-restraint abstain from every one of them and take green *vegetables* and the fruits of trees as a relish to their bread’ (*On Providence* 2.69-70).

Paul was uniquely equipped to deal with this issue. Raised in a strictly Jewish family in Tarsus and educated in Jerusalem, he knew well the lengths to which fellow-Israelites went in fulfilling the ‘works of the Law’ in dietary matters. On the other hand, however, through his new calling he now understood what happened at meal tables in Gentile homes. Few knew as Paul did how deeply entrenched eating habits were with both Jews and Gentiles and, therefore, how deep a source division it was between them. For a practical unity to occur among Christians in Rome this issue must be resolved.

Although Paul mentions only eating in verses 2-3 and 6, his comments in verses 17 and 21 suggest that some believers had similar concerns about drinking. If so, the reference probably applied primarily to Gentiles who had participated in or were familiar with pagan festivals such as the Roman bacchanalia, which were characterized by sexual orgies and drunkenness..

3. The Strong and the Weak Are Welcomed by God (14:3)

³*Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.*

Paul has begun by urging the ‘strong’ to accept the ‘weak’ (v. 1). But he is well aware that both groups are at fault. He therefore rebukes each side in the dispute, continuing to use the generic singular as a way of particularizing his concern. ‘The one who eats’ (that is, ‘the one who eats all things’ = the ‘strong’) is not to ‘despise’ the one who does not (the ‘weak’). And the ‘one who does not eat’ (the ‘weak’) is not to ‘judge’ the one who does (the ‘strong’). Paul’s choice of verbs to describe the attitudes of each group is no doubt deliberate. ‘Despise’ connotes a disdainful, condescending judgment, an attitude that we can well imagine the ‘strong’ majority, who prided themselves on their enlightened, ‘liberal,’ perspective, taking toward those whom they considered to be foolishly ‘hung up’ on the trivia of a bygone era. The ‘weak,’ Paul suggests, responded in kind, considering themselves to be the ‘righteous remnant’ who alone upheld true standards of piety and righteousness and who were ‘standing in judgment’ over those who fell beneath those standards. Paul calls on each side to stop criticizing the other.

This call to mutual acceptance lays bare the psychology behind the rejection of the strong or the weak. The strong, Paul says, ‘despise’ those who do not eat, or *treat as nothing* those who do not eat. The idea here is disdain. The human tendency is always to despise whatever or whoever we consider weak. To despise the Christian who has a narrower morality as a mental midget or a cultural dinosaur—such an attitude is not Christian. On the other hand, because the weak are inclined toward judgmentalism, they are told not to ‘pass judgment’ on meat-eater. The weak tend to be censorious, to pigeonhole believers according to the checklists. ‘That man cannot be a good Christian because he _____!’

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The first reason all believers should receive all other believers is that God receives them. In verse 3, Paul gives a double injunction, first to the strong. *Exoutheneō* ('regard with contempt') is a strong term that carries the idea of looking on someone as totally worthless, as being nothing or less than nothing. It does not connote simply dislike or disrespect, but utter disdain and abhorrence. Paul's next injunction is to the weak. Like 'regard with contempt,' the term 'judge' translates a strong Greek verb (*krinō*), which has the basic meaning of separating and isolating. In a legal sense it referred to finding an accused person guilty of a crime. In this verse, 'regard with contempt' and 'judge' are essentially synonymous. In both cases, one type of person disdains the other, and both are wrong. The strong member contemptibly considers the weak member to be legalistic and self-righteous, and the weak member judges the strong member to be irresponsible at best and profligate at worst.

At that time Gentiles did despise Jews. Tacitus reflects this hostility in his reference to the Jews. They 'regard the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies. They sit apart at meals' (*History* 5.5). For their part, Jews were notoriously censorious, judging and condemning 'Gentile sinners' (Gal. 2:15; cp. Acts 10:28). Paul, however, calls upon the 'strong' not to 'despise the weak' and the 'weak' not to 'condemn the strong.' To the 'strong' Paul gives this reason: 'for God has welcomed him.' God's 'welcome' of the 'weak'/the Jew (in Christ – cp. 15:7) is the basis for the 'strong' welcoming the 'weak.'

According to Paul, we are not to avoid one another when we differ on matters of *adiaphora*. Paul is not saying that we should be cavalier about heinous sin; he is referring to issues of indifference. The weaker brother has a misinformed understanding of what God allows or forbids, but the weaker one is still our brother and has been received by God. Since he has been welcomed into the family of God, the dispute is a family matter. As God receives us by grace, we must receive one another by grace. Love covers a multitude of sins as well as a multitude of misunderstandings and weak theology. One who is weak ought not to despise one who manifests liberty, and one who manifests liberty ought not to despise one with a scrupulous conscience.

At the end of the verse Paul states the ultimate reason why such mutual criticism is out of place: 'God has received him.' Here we find Paul's theological 'bottom line' in this whole issue, one that he elaborates in vv. 4-9 and restates again at the climax of his argument (15:7). Christians have no right to reject from their fellowship those whom God Himself has accepted. They must 'receive' those whom God has 'received.' In 15:7, Paul uses this principle to urge both the 'weak' and the 'strong' to 'receive one another.' Here, however, he uses the principle specifically to undergird his command that the 'weak' stop standing in judgment over the 'strong.'

Although the phrase 'God has accepted him' directly follows 'him who eats' (the strong), the context makes clear that divine acceptance applies both to the strong and to the weak, to the one who eats freely and to the one who does not. Paul's point is that, if God Himself does not make an issue of such things, what right does one of His children have to do so? If the strong and the weak have equal acceptance by and fellowship with the Lord, it is sinful arrogance for those two kinds of believers not to accept each other.

4. The Strong and the Weak Are Upheld by the Lord (15:4)

⁴*Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*

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The second reason every Christian should accept every other Christian is that the Lord sustains them all. A believer who is ‘strong’ about matters that are not doctrinal or moral, and that are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture, is just as much in need of God’s strength as the one who is ‘weak.’ We are *all* weak in the sense that everything good and righteous we possess is a gift of God, never the product of our own wisdom or efforts.

Being well aware of each group’s tendencies, Paul confronts both with the stinging rhetorical question, ‘Who are you to judge the servant of another?’ What right do any of you, the mature or immature, well taught or poorly taught, have ‘to judge the servant of another,’ especially a fellow servant of Jesus Christ? A believer’s personal assessment of other believers does not in the least affect their standing before the Lord.

The ‘you’ whom Paul directly addresses in diatribe style in v. 4a may represent both ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ believers. But the description of this person as ‘the one who judges’ picks up the language Paul used to rebuke the ‘weak’ believer in v. 3. Moreover, the beginning of v. 4 sounds a great deal like Paul’s rebuke of the self-satisfied Jew in 2:1. This makes it likely that Paul in v. 4a is addressing the Jewish-oriented ‘weak’ believer, whose attitude toward Christians who do not follow the law’s ritual guidelines is similar to that of many Jews toward ‘law-less’ Gentiles.

Paul’s question suggests that each group was ‘judging’ and ‘condemning’ the other. But men do not judge men; the risen Lord will be the judge of all. ‘It is,’ he says, ‘before his *own* Lord that he stands or falls.’ I do not judge you and you do not judge me; the Lord judges me (see vv. 12-13, 22).

The very wording of the opening of the rhetorical question reveals the heart of Paul’s concern. No one has the right to judge a fellow believer because each believer is a ‘household slave’ (*οικετης, oiketēs*), one who belongs to ‘another’ (*αλλοτριον, allotrion*). The slavery imagery makes clear that *kyrios* has its normal secular meaning of ‘master.’ But Paul undoubtedly expects his Christian readers to see also an allusion to their ultimate Lord (see Rom. 10:9). This title, indeed, is central to the theological argument of vv. 4-9. The use of ‘stand’ and ‘fall’ metaphorically elsewhere and the application of the terms here to the relationship of slave to master suggest that they refer to approval/disapproval; we may compare the English ‘stand in favor with’/‘fall out of favor with.’ It is the Lord, not the fellow Christian, whom the believer must please and who will ultimately determine the acceptability of the believer and his or her conduct.

Paul is using a marketplace analogy, but the point is that we are all servants of Christ, so who are we to despise another of Christ’s servants? If a servant is acceptable to Jesus, how can he not be acceptable to us? The analogy is simple. The weak brother has his scruple unto the Lord; the strong brother has his freedom unto the Lord.

In the last clause of v. 4, the ‘secular’ meaning of *kyrios* gives way to its theological use: the believer whose behavior is being judged ‘will stand, for *the* Lord is able to cause him to stand.’ Paul here expresses confidence that the ‘strong’ believer will persist in the Lord’s favor. Perhaps Paul’s intention is to suggest to the ‘weak’ believer that the Lord’s approval is attained not by following rules pertaining to food but by the Lord’s own sustaining power: ‘is able’ points both to the possibility and the power of grace.

It is ‘to his own master,’ namely, Jesus Christ, that each believer ‘stands or falls.’ And as far as matters of religious tradition and preference are concerned, *every* believer, strong and weak, will

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pass divine judgment, because the Lord does not take such things into account. ‘Stand he will,’ Paul says of every believer, because ‘the Lord is able,’ and obviously willing, ‘to make him stand.’

Paul then adds, to the great encouragement of his readers then and now, ‘and he shall be made to stand for the Lord is able (*dunatai* – ‘he is powerful’) to make him stand.’ The Lord Jesus, who has saved us by His death and resurrection, is powerful in enabling us to stand before Him with our salvation intact on the last day.

C. Acting on Behalf of the Lord (Romans 15:5-9)

1. Food and Days (15:5-6)

a) *What the Strong and the Weak Believe (15:5)*

⁵*One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.*

Paul interrupts his theological argument to cite another point on which the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’ disagree: the evaluation of ‘days.’ Paul does not explicitly relate this dispute over days to the ‘strong’ and ‘weak.’ But we may be relatively certain that the ‘weak’ believer was the one who was ‘judging’ ‘one day to be more important than another day,’ while the ‘strong’ believer was ‘judging each day to be the same.’ Pinning down the exact nature of this disagreement over ‘days’ is difficult since Paul does not elaborate. But we have good reason to trace the root issue between the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak’ to Jewish concerns about the law. And the observance of days was, of course, important in the OT and in Judaism. Whether the specific point at issue was the observance of the great Jewish festivals, regular days of fasting, or the Sabbath is difficult to say. It is typical of Paul’s approach to the dispute in Rome that he does not commend, or command, one practice or the other, but exhorts each believer to be ‘thoroughly convinced in his own mind’ (*πληροφορεισθω, plērophoreisthō*).

This controversy over days probably involved Sabbath observance. The Christian Jews’ conscience demanded that they observe it. The Christian Gentiles’ conscience argued that every day is equally devoted to the service of God. Paul’s advice to both is simply, ‘Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.’ Each believer is to use his or her powers of reasoning that have at least begun to be renewed by the gospel under the authority of God’s Word and act accordingly. The same is to be true of eating or abstaining from meat.

Paul is not writing about the Sabbath but about certain holy days that Jews observed. Some of the converted Jews had clung to their Jewish traditions and observations. Even though those traditions were no longer enjoined upon the Christian community, some of them, as a matter of conscience, continued those practices. Here Paul gives them the freedom to do so.

For Jews, the Sabbath referred not only to the seventh day of the week, the day of rest and worship, but to a number of other days and periods that were venerated and specially observed. Some pagan religions also venerated certain days or seasons. As with the eating of certain foods, the weak Jewish Christian remained strongly attached to the special days of Judaism and felt compelled to observe them. The weak Gentile, on the other hand, wanted to separate himself as far as possible from the special days of his former paganism because of their idolatrous and immoral character. As far as our present earthly life is concerned, Paul insists that ‘each man be

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fully convinced in his own mind' about observing or not observing the Sabbath or any other day. In this context, 'mind' obviously includes the heart and conscience, our deepest convictions and motives. Before God, it is not a matter of observance or non-observance but of intent.

To our surprise Paul does not come down on one side or the other. What is important, ultimately, is neither the 'day' observed or ignored nor the food eaten or uneaten, but the individual's subjection to the risen Lord Jesus exercised in a spirit of thankfulness.

b) The Strong and the Weak Honor God (15:6)

⁶The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Paul now uses this dispute about days to launch back into the theological rationale for his rebuke of judgmental attitudes. Verse 1, where Paul began this rationale, came in a context where Paul was criticizing the 'weak' believers. Now, however, by citing examples of the behavior of both the 'weak' and the 'strong,' Paul makes clear that his argument applies equally to both. The word *phroneō* here means 'to be concerned about,' 'observe,' suggesting that the first reference will be to the 'weak' believer. Paul then returns to the issue with which he began, referring first to the 'strong' believer — 'the one who eats' — and then to the 'weak' again — 'the one who does not eat.' In each of these instances, Paul notes, the believer — whether 'strong' or 'weak' — does what he or she does 'to the Lord,' that is, 'in the interest of,' 'for the benefit of,' the Lord. The believer who sets aside certain days for fasting, or who observes the Sabbath, does so because he or she sincerely believes this honors the Lord. Similarly, both the believer who eats anything without discrimination and the believer who refuses to eat certain things 'give thanks' to God at their mealtimes and are motivated in their respective practices by a desire to glorify the Lord.

The third reason every Christian should accept every other Christian is that the Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign to each believer. Whether strong or weak, a sincere believer feels free or not free to do certain things out of the same motive: to please his Lord. Neither one is more or less spiritual or faithful because of his convictions about such practices. Being 'strong' in this sense is not synonymous with being spiritual, and being 'weak' is not synonymous with being carnal. The problem in the church at Rome, as in many churches since that day, was that some believers of both persuasions thought themselves to be more spiritual and the others to be more carnal.

The evidence that both the 'weak' and the 'strong' have right hearts is that they both give 'thanks' to God. That is, both do what they do with the intention of serving the Lord. Paul's indisputable point here is: people with opposing viewpoints on non-essentials can both be perfectly right with God. Two people can disagree and both be in the will of God. There is a reverse truth implicit here also, which is: If the Lord convicts you that something is wrong in your life, you had better not do it, even if other Christians are doing it!

So long as the focus is on 'meat' or 'days,' there will be no possibility of true unity between Jews and Gentiles. But when the believer's eye is directed to the Lord and he acts out of thanksgiving to God, the Gentile will 'welcome' the Jew and together they will with one voice glorify God (15:6). Otherwise, their very coming together will be an occasion for 'quarrels about opinions' on these matters (v. 1). Paul is not merely calling for the spirit of toleration that is much-loved in 'politically correct' societies. Rather, he encourages each party to discern their

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truest priority, which must not be an item of food or a unit of time, but the Lord Jesus Himself. This is the only basis for unity between these culturally disparate groups.

The big issues of human existence are ‘living’ and ‘dying’; the matters relating to food and time are negligible in comparison. Christ came to give ‘life’ to the ‘dying’ and to deliver from its bondage those who regard ‘meat’ and ‘days’ as the meaning of life. Even in the churches, there are many for whom the peripheral are central (e.g., the special ‘robes’ ministers wear) for whom Christ and the gospel is peripheral. But this is to make central the peripheral and to bring the peripheral to the center.

In matters that are not specifically commanded or forbidden in Scripture, it is always wrong to go against conscience, because our conscience represents what we actually believe to be right. To go against our conscience, therefore, is to do that which we believe is wrong. And although an act or practice in itself may not be sinful, it is treated as sinful for those who are convinced in their own minds that it is wrong, and produces guilt. It is also sinful, however, to try to impose our personal convictions on others, because, in doing so, we are tempting them to go against their own consciences. Paul is therefore giving a two-fold command: Do not compromise your own conscience in order to conform to the conscience of another believer and do not attempt to lead another believer to compromise his conscience to conform to yours.

2. Life and Death (15:7-9)

In v. 4 Paul compared the Christian to the slave who is dedicated ‘to his or her own master (or lord).’ He then applies this comparison to specific activities of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ Christians in v. 6 — observing days ‘to the Lord’; eating and abstaining ‘to the Lord.’ Now, in vv. 7-9, Paul gives a general theological explanation for this comparison. Christ’s death and resurrection have established Him as Lord over all believers; and believers must therefore recognize that all their activities are done ‘for the benefit of’ that Lord — and not for the benefit of any other Christian who may presume to judge us or any of our actions. These verses are therefore the heart of Paul’s rebuke of the Roman Christians for their judgmental attitudes (vv. 1-12).

a) *The Strong and the Weak Live and Die to the Lord (15:7-8)*

⁷*For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.*

Paul begins with a negative point: ‘For no one of us lives to himself and no one dies to himself.’ Paul probably uses both ‘live’ and ‘die’ to make the point as comprehensive as possible: nothing at all that a Christian does is done ‘with reference to himself alone’ or ‘for his own benefit.’ The implicit comparison is not with other human beings. Rather, as the context makes clear,, the comparison is with the Lord.

In all of Scripture, there is no greater call for holy living and for submission to the sovereign and unconditional lordship of Jesus Christ. Neither the strong nor the weak ‘lives for himself’ or ‘dies for himself,’ and for the same reason—both of them ‘live for the Lord’ and both of them ‘die for the Lord.’ What we do for other believers, we do not only for their sakes but for our Lord’s sake, because, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.’ Christ is our mutual Lord, our mutual sovereign; and therefore everything we do, even in our dying, should be to please and to glorify our sovereign Savior and Lord.

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We can easily understand how Christians ‘live to the Lord’: all parts of believers’ lives — their thoughts, actions, ambitions, decisions — are to be carried out with a view to what pleases and glorifies the Lord. But what does it mean to ‘die to the Lord’? Paul probably has in mind the fact that the circumstances of the believer’s death, as of his life, are determined not by his will or in consideration of his own interests, but are wholly in the hands of the Lord, who sets the time for death in accordance with his own interests and purposes. The last sentence of the verse summarizes and broadens the idea: not only does the believer live and die ‘in the Lord’s interests’; in both life and death he or she also belongs to the Lord. The union with the Lord Jesus Christ, with all its benefits, that the believer enjoys in this life will continue after death with, indeed, an even fuller measure of blessing (cp. 8:18, 31-39).

Paul is saying that for the believer the focus of existence is the Lord Jesus Christ, both in ‘life’ and ‘death.’ That is because at the very heart of Christ’s intentions was His concern for the ‘life’ and ‘death’ of those who by their faith in Him belong to Him.

b) Christ Died and Lives for the Strong and the Weak (15:9)

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

Paul is reminding the Roman Christians of a well-known truth (see 2 Cor. 5:15). Christ’s death and resurrection stimulate Christians to live ‘for the Lord’ rather than ‘for themselves.’ But Paul tailors the tradition for its particular function at this point in Romans. For one thing, he departs from the more customary ‘Christ died and was raised’ (cp. 1 Th. 4:14; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; Rom. 8:34) to use a formula unique in the NT: ‘Christ died and came to life.’ Presumably Paul does this in order to forge the closest possible link between Christ’s redemptive acts — His death and ‘coming to life’ — and the two most basic parts of Christian experience — life and death. The same purpose explains the unusual word order ‘the dead and the living’ at the end of the verse: Paul simply maintains the order that he used in depicting Christ’s work on behalf of Christians (v. 9a). It is Christ’s death and resurrection *together* that establish His lordship over all people, including especially here Christians, whether they are living or dead.

‘We are the Lord’s’ in the fullest possible sense, and ‘to this end Christ died and lived again,’ Paul declares unequivocally, ‘that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.’ To deny the lordship of Jesus Christ in the life of *any* believer is to subvert the full work, power, and purpose of His crucifixion and resurrection. It seems inconceivable that genuine believers who love and serve the Lord and are well taught in His Word can maintain, as some do, that it is possible for a person to receive Jesus Christ as Savior but not as Lord. He died not only to save us but to own us, not only to free us from sin but to enslave us to Himself.

D. Accounting Ourselves before God (Romans 14:10-12)

1. The Strong and the Weak Will Stand before God (14:10)

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;

The fourth reason Paul gives for every Christian’s accepting every other Christian is that the Lord alone will judge the believer. It is a terrible thing for men ‘to play God,’ as it is often phrased. It is particularly inexcusable for God’s own people to intimate that presumption by judging and despising each other. The work of Christians is to serve the Lord, not to usurp His

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lordship by self-righteously judging fellow believers. Our concern, rather, should be for being judged ourselves by the Lord, ‘For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.’

With the emphatic return to the second person singular diatribe style — ‘*you*’ — Paul signals his return to exhortation after the theological rationale of vv. 7-9. He first rebukes the representative ‘weak’ Christian in the same terms he used in v. 4a (and cp. also v. 3b). He then adds, for the first time, a direct rebuke of the ‘strong’ Christian, again duplicating the language he used to describe the ‘strong’ Christian’s attitude in v. 3. Paul’s direct and lively style creates the picture of the apostle shifting his gaze from the ‘weak’ to the ‘strong’ as he publicly chastises these representative Christians from the Roman community. Each, Paul suggests by using the term ‘brother’ (which becomes central to the argument of vv. 13-23), is guilty of casting doubt on the status of a fellow member of the spiritual family. No believer has such a right.

Based on the centrality of Christ as regards ‘life’ and ‘death’ matters, Paul now admonishes the Romans, both Jews and Gentiles. He peppers each in turn with questions along the lines of their respective and characteristic failing, the Jew in ‘judging’ and the Gentile in ‘despising.’ But the striking thing here is that Paul calls on each to regard the other as ‘brother.’

Paul twice uses the term ‘brother’ to emphasize the unity that ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ Christians have. He is saying, in effect, ‘Stop trying to be God to one another. You “weak,” why do you pass judgment on your brother? You “strong,” why do you look down with contempt on your brother? Remember, all of us are going to stand before the *Bema*, the judgment-seat of Christ. There your works as believers will be judged. There God will judge your motives’ (cp. 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 3:13-15).

Paul is not appealing to the ‘toleration’ demanded in pluralistic societies according to the canons of political correctness. No. The apostle is pointing to ultimate reality, that is, each and every person must face *God* as judge, as Paul goes on to state in verses 10c-12. Here Paul is borrowing the language of Roman courts. ‘Stand’ was a technical term for ‘stand *accused*.’ A ‘judgment seat’ (*bema*) was a ‘bench’ on which a Roman magistrate sat to decide the guilt or innocence of an accused person.

For, in an extension of the central theological argument of vv. 7-9, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that ‘we all must appear before the judgment seat of God.’ In light of vv. 7-9, it is most likely that he is reminding them that it is God, and not other Christians, to whom each believer is answerable. In ‘judging’ and ‘despising’ others, therefore, they are arrogating to themselves a prerogative that is God’s only. He will pronounce His judgment over every believer’s status and actions.

2. The Strong and the Weak Submit to the Lord (14:11)

¹¹*for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’*

In confirmation that God, and God alone, will judge all people and their actions on the last day, Paul cites Is. 45:23. The appropriateness of the application of this text to the matter discussed in 14:1-12 is enhanced when we note that it is surrounded by statements of the Lord’s unique sovereignty (Is. 45:22b, 24a). Paul introduces the quotation with his usual formula, ‘it is written,’ and reproduces the LXX fairly closely. However, there is an exception: the opening words of Paul’s quotation, ‘As I live, says the Lord,’ do not occur in Is. 45:23. These words are, however, found in a number of OT texts, including Is. 49:18. Why does Paul add them here?

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Paul may introduce these words inadvertently because of a slip in memory; or he may have deliberately added them to accentuate the words that follow.

To support his assertion (in v. 10c), Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23 along with some other texts.

3. The Strong and The Weak Testify before God (14:12)

¹²*So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

Paul summarizes vv. 10c-11. ‘Each of us’ carries on the universalistic emphasis of the previous verses: ‘we must *all* appear before the judgment seat of God’ (v. 10c); ‘*every* knee will bow’; ‘*every* tongue will confess’ (v. 11). But, as the first person plural (‘we’) of v. 10c and the ‘us’ here indicate, Paul is especially concerned to remind Christians that they will be among those who must ‘give an account’ of their behavior before the sovereign and all-knowing judge of history. This reminder, with which Paul concludes this part of his exhortation, is two-pronged. On the one hand, as Paul has emphasized earlier (vv. 4, 10), it shows why it is wrong for a Christian to stand in judgment over another. But the fact of judgment to come also reminds believers that they will have to answer before the Lord for their own behavior.

The mind-focusing reality of life is that at death we all stand before God our judge and each of us will make our answer about how we have lived. What are peripheral matters next to this? How carefully, if at all, should we ‘judge’ another fellow-human? If God is my judge, how dare I judge another person? Paul concludes in v. 13a: ‘Therefore, let us not judge one another.’ Of course, Paul’s words are directed to the Roman Christians, the Jews in particular. But they are relevant for all people at all times. As members of the human race, we judge one another repeatedly, often in ignorance of the circumstances. The fact is that we are children of Adam who must face God as our judge. We are only able to stand ‘righteous’ in His presence on account of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So we should think hard before we judge others or pass on our judgments about them to other people.

E. Applying the Object Lesson to Ourselves

How Paul’s insights cut us to the quick. Too often you and I are guilty of both these errors. Whether we are ‘weak’ or ‘strong’ believers, there is to be mutual, whole-hearted acceptance of one another.

But how are we to apply this to ourselves? After all, meat-eating is not an issue in the church today. No, but I can think of at least eleven issues on which Christians are divided today. Moreover, none of these items are listed as taboo or sinful in Scripture (although the Scriptures give guidelines in relations to each item. These issues are: 1) Theater; 2) Cosmetics; 3) Alcohol; 4) Tobacco; 5) Card Playing; 6) Dancing; 7) Fashion; 8) Bible Translation; 9) Sports; 10) Music; 11) Material Wealth.

[DSB: I would add several more, including: schooling choice (public/private/home); courtship/dating; and politics. I’ve seen people leave the church over the way young ladies dressed, and am familiar with churches/denominations which are so closed on the issues of homeschooling and courtship that those are essentially elevated to cardinal doctrines required for membership. These and other areas are and should always be a matter of Christian liberty and conscience.]

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According to Romans 14, wherever you stand on these issues, you must accept your Christian brother and sister who differs. If you are an abstainer, you must not judge the participator. If you are a participator, you must not disdain the abstainer.

The classical understanding of Christian liberty is this: we are not to try to force somebody with a scruple against something, as uninformed as that scruple may be, to violate his conscience. The basic principle that unfolds here is one of loving sensitivity. If my brother believes that drinking a glass of wine is a sin, I ought not to try to coax him into drinking a glass of wine. That would be an attempt to entice him to violate his conscience. The violation one's conscience, even if it is a misinformed conscience, is a serious matter. That does not mean we should stand back and allow our weaker brother to make his scruple the law of the church. Paul makes clear in his teaching that though we are to be sensitive, loving, and kind to the weaker brother, we ought never to allow him to exercise tyranny over the church.

We walk a very thin line. The weaker brother is not to destroy the freedom of all in the church. At the same time, we can forego our freedom for a time out of consideration for our weaker brother. Paul is opposing a spirit of arrogance that leads us to insist on our rights to do whatever we please no matter what. That is the wrong approach. The strong brother has to be willing to forego his strength for the sake of the weaker brother, yet the church must never allow the weaker one to establish his weakness as law for the Christian community.

Simple human kindness and consideration have to go both ways. Again, the application is to things that have no inherent goodness or evil. No one can use this principle to participate in adultery or other sins. These precepts have to do with eating meat, drinking wine, observing certain days that have no direct bearing on the kingdom of God. The great danger is to allow these *adiaphorous* matters to become requirements for spirituality and, even worse, the test for what is spiritual and righteous. Unfortunately, that is what happens again and again. Our brother ought not to judge us, and we ought not to judge our brother.

Believe as I believe,
No more, no less;
That I am right,
And no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel,
Think only as I think;
Eat what I eat,
And drink but what I drink;
Look as I look
Do always as I do;
Then, and only then,
Will I fellowship with you.

Rupertus Meldenius wrote: '*In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas,*' which means, 'In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.' Some things just don't matter. May we allow God to give us the wisdom to see what is essential and what is not.

For next time: Read Romans 14:13-23.