

## Dealing With Our Differences

### Gospel Culture, # 13

Romans 14:1-12

David Sunday

April 29, 2018

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How thankful we are for the truth that the Lord is our Keeper. If you're visiting with us today, we welcome you. It's now my joy and honor to proclaim God's Word to us. If you would open your Bible to Romans 14, we'll be looking today at Romans 14:1-12:

*<sup>1</sup> As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. <sup>2</sup> One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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.*

*<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> The 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. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.*

*<sup>10</sup> Why 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; <sup>11</sup> for it is written,*

*"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."*

*<sup>12</sup> So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

I remember visiting a church in Nashville where a seminary professor of mine is now pastoring. He gave the welcome in the church with these words: "To all who are weary and need

rest, to all who mourn and long for comfort, to all who feel worthless and wonder if God cares, to all who fail and desire strength, to all who sin and need a Savior—this church opens wide her doors with a welcome from Jesus Christ, the Friend of sinners.”

When he said that, my heart was opened wide to worship a God like this. My heart was warmed with affection for my fellow believers. Since then you’ve heard me use that greeting many times in our own church. It’s a wonderful word of welcome. In view of God’s mercies to us, how are we doing as a church in embodying that kind of welcome to one another at New Covenant? Is our church a place of acceptance or rejection? Is our church a community of trust or suspicion? Are we a people who honor one another or who despise one another? Are we a people of grace or judgment?

Just look at this picture. We’re people whose destiny is to live in a kingdom like this. The prophet Isaiah says, *“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and the little child shall lead them”* (Isaiah 11:6)



That’s the picture of the Kingdom to which we are destined, the Kingdom to which we already belong, if we are in Jesus Christ. Are we starting to reflect the culture of that Kingdom here below? Can the weak and the strong live together in harmony in our church? These are the kinds of questions that this section in Romans is challenging us to consider.

Let’s remember the context of Romans 14 which starts way back in chapter 12 and begins with a call to offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice—our bodies, all we are and all we have. We’re to do that in view of God’s mercies. We are never to lose sight of how kind and merciful our God has been to us, because we are a people who have been bathed in the kindness of God. Our church should be a culture that’s shaped by grace.

We heard things in Romans 12 like, “Live in sincere brotherly love toward one another. Live in harmony with each other.” Last week in Romans 13 we heard that every time we wake up in the morning we’re to remember that we have a debt of love to our brothers and sisters in Christ—a debt we will never fully liquidate. It’s a debt we have to pay every day. So in light of that, the Apostle Paul told us in Romans 13:13 to avoid dissension and jealousy, clothing

ourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ and embodying His attitude in our dealings with one another. That's the context that precedes these verses.

In light of all of that, how does God want us to deal with our differences in the church? The principle that undergirds this whole section is stated up front in verse one: "*As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.*" The key word here is "welcome." That word means more than just put up with one another, tolerate one another. It means to embrace one another as family, welcome each other to the thanksgiving meal, saying, "You've got a seat at the table here." It's to treat one another as dearly loved, totally accepted, warmly embraced. That's what Paul is talking about.

Now, it's important for us to understand that Paul is not talking about unconditional acceptance here. He's not talking about being "open and affirming" in the secular sense of that phrase. He's not talking about an "anything goes" kind of culture. He's not saying that anyone and everyone can become a member of a church with no questions asked, no conditions laid down. That's not what Paul is talking about.

He's talking about welcoming those who have turned from a life of sin to trusting in Jesus Christ, welcoming those who have repented and believed in the work that Jesus has done for us in dying for our sins, rising from the dead and giving us eternal life. Paul is saying our hearts should be inclined toward our fellow believers in Jesus.

We should have a bias toward welcoming one another, embracing one another, accepting one another—not quarreling over opinions, not looking for faults, not seeking to rank who is better, who is stronger, who is more spiritual, not nit-picking at one another's behavior. The attitude we should have toward one another should be welcoming, not with a check list of a bunch of disputable points. "Okay, we'll let you in, as long as we know what you believe about this, this, this and that."

So issues in the church in Rome that were threatening this kind of warm welcome and embrace could be divided into three "Ds": diet, days and drink.

First, diet. Look at verse two: "*One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.*" Now, if you came from a Jewish background, you would have grown up believing that some foods were clean and others were unclean. You would have known how many Jewish people had been tortured and killed under Antiochus Epiphanes during the time of the Maccabees just a couple centuries earlier, because they refused to eat unclean meats or drink the blood of animals. You would remember, as a Jewish person, the story of Daniel, that when he was abducted and put in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar, he only ate a diet of vegetables lest he would be defiled by the king's food.

So some dear believers in Jesus who came from a Jewish background struggled greatly with the idea of eating meat in this Roman culture. They wondered, “Can we trust that this meat is really kosher? Will we be defiled if we eat this meat?”

Now that Jesus had died and rose again, they had been taught by the apostles that all foods were clean and they really were free to eat any kind of meat. Even so, their consciences still had some scruples about food. If you came to the church potluck and said, “Here, have a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich,” they would have had trouble with the B. They might have struggled to accept you if you offered them a BLT .

Then there was the issue of days. Verse five: “*One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.*” Festivals like Passover, for example, carried great spiritual significance if you were coming from a Jewish background. But maybe not so much if you were a Gentile, a non-Jew. And keeping the Sabbath day was one of the Ten Commandments. But Gentile Christians, and the apostles, interpreted the Sabbath in light of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. So they worshipped on the first day of the week, saying, “Christ has become our Sabbath rest. So now the application of the Sabbath is to rest in Him alone, rest from our labors and trust in Him.”

Every Christian would have agreed that it’s important for us to gather with other believers and worship regularly. They did it on the first day of the week, because that was the day Jesus rose. But many Christians thought and believed—along with the apostles—that now no day was more holy than another day. Some believers would have been just fine going shopping after church on the Lord’s Day. Other believers’ consciences would have been offended by this.

Then there was the third issue of drink. Paul adds this in verse 17: “*The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*” So it’s not a matter of what you eat or what you drink—it’s a matter of being filled with the Holy Spirit and experiencing righteousness, peace and joy. I’m really looking forward to Romans 14:17 next week. But verse 21 makes it clear that the consciences of some Christians were offended by drinking wine. Therefore, we must be careful not to cause our brothers and sisters to stumble.

Now, when we look at these issues in Romans 14—diet, days and drink—and the divisions that were happening in the church over these issues, there’s one thing that’s really important for us to understand. We are talking about real Christians here. Both groups loved the Lord Jesus Christ. Both groups were trusting in Christ for their salvation. So in this passage, don’t think of the “weak” as people who were not really Christians.

The letter to the Galatians talks about the Judaizers, people who were saying the work Jesus did on the cross was not enough for our salvation and that we had to add works to the law in order to be fully secure and fully saved. Don't think of those people when you read Romans 14. Paul is not talking about people here who don't believe the gospel. For the Judaizers in Galatians, he had very severe words. You can't add works to grace and still be a Christian. But these people in Rome are true Christians. They are true believers who differ over how to live out their faith.

What are the implications of the gospel? How should our faith shape our conduct? What's the right way to behave as Christians when it comes to disputable issues—areas on which the Bible hasn't given us a clear commandment? We've got to think through how to live out our faith in Christ in light of these issues. One commentator describes the weak and the strong like this, and I think this is a helpful distinction:

It is important to realize that the 'strong' are not necessarily stronger in their relationship to God. The 'weak' are not necessarily weak in their strength of faith, nor do they always lack strength of conviction. The weakness of 'the weak' refers to their sensitive conscience: they are unable to do something God allows without their conscience afflicting them, and they find it difficult to fellowship with anyone who does.

(David Secombe)

Just think about that last sentence one more time: "They are unable to do something God allows without their conscience afflicting them, and they find it difficult to fellowship with anyone who does." In Romans 15:1, the Apostle Paul makes it clear where he sees himself: he sees himself as part of the "strong." His conscience is free regarding these disputable matters. Do you see yourself as strong or weak? I suppose if we were to poll the congregation we might have more hands going up for the strong category. Usually it takes a lot of self-awareness to recognize, "Maybe I'm in the weak section on this matter. Maybe my conscience is over-sensitive, so I'm unable to do something God allows without my conscience afflicting me."

We're going to talk more next week from the second half of this chapter about this very, very important matter of the conscience. But I want to point out that it's very possible that you could be both strong and weak. Maybe on some points your conscience is strong; on other points, it's weak. It's not a matter of whether or not you're trusting Christ for your salvation. It's a matter of how you respond to disputable matters, areas that aren't central to the gospel of Jesus. Some things are indifferent and a Christian could legitimately go either way.

So here's the temptation. If you're in the strong category, the temptation is to despise and to look down on the one whose conscience is weak and think, "How could they be so scrupulous?"

How could they be so legalistic? Don't they know we're free in Christ?" If you're in that category, Paul's word to you in this passage is don't pride yourself on being superior to other believers. Don't think, "Oh, I'm more mature. I'm advanced. I'm wise. I'm sophisticated. Those other ones—they're simple and narrow-minded." Don't be dismissive of your weaker brothers and sisters and say in your heart, "That's their problem," when they struggle with something you believe you have freedom in Christ to practice. That's Paul's word to the strong.

But for those whose consciences are more sensitive, your temptation will be to pass judgment on fellow believers who are exercising their liberty in Christ and to think things like this: "How could they be so unspiritual, so worldly, so unclean? Don't they know that God still cares about holiness?" Your temptation will be to condemn those whose consciences may be stronger than yours and to get bent out of shape and start denouncing your fellow Christians as if they're an affront to God.

Paul's point in this passage is that whenever we look down on one another or dismiss one another or judge one another or condemn one another, we are forgetting the gospel of Jesus. Whenever we reject one another instead of accepting one another with warm-hearted love, whenever we are suspicious of one another, instead of giving one another the benefit of the doubt and wanting to trust one another, we are forgetting the gospel of Jesus.

As Christians, our unity is focused on Christ and what He has done for us. Historically, some churches have defined Christian unity like this:

- In essentials, unity.
- In non-essentials, liberty.
- In all things, charity.

In other words, it's very important that we agree on the essential truths of Scripture and of the gospel. Then there's the whole realm of non-essentials. They may be relatively important, but they're not essential. On those issues, we need to exercise liberty, trusting the Holy Spirit to be guiding our fellow believer. In all things, there should be charity. There should be an attitude of love. I think that's a good model. But we still struggle at times, don't we, to define what is essential and what is non-essential.

So this week I was thinking about all the differences of opinion that I know exist within our church. I'm not going to share anyone's secrets, but I hear enough as a pastor to know there are a lot of differences of opinion in our church. And unity does not mean uniformity. There is plenty of diversity within our congregation. Let me just name a few areas where the person sitting next to you, or behind you, or in front of you, might disagree with you. So don't be too vocal when you register your opinions about these things.

- Whether or not it's right for Christians to go to movie theaters.
- Which movies it would be appropriate to watch.
- Who to vote for in a political election. This one was very pronounced in our church in 2016—maybe more than you realize. Don't assume everyone in this congregation thinks uniformly about this one.
- Whether it's acceptable to drink alcohol in moderation.
- Whether it's acceptable to smoke a cigar. Someone asked Spurgeon once, "What does it mean to exercise moderation in smoking a cigar?" He said, "I never smoke more than two at once." That was in the 1800s, before the Surgeon General's warnings. But it was Spurgeon.
- How we should educate our children—public school, private school, home school?
- Who, how and when should people be baptized? We have differences of opinion on the issue of baptism, as has the church for 2,000 years.
- Pacifism versus the duty to take up arms
- How to interpret the "days" of Genesis 1 and 2. Not, "Did God create the world out of nothing." But how did God create the world out of nothing and the timing of it all. Our statement of faith makes that very clear. We agree on that essential truth. There are differences amongst real believers in our church.
- The timeline of what will happen around Christ's return. Lots of differences of opinion on that.
- How should pastors dress. Is it okay to wear jeans?
- How should people dress in the church?
- How freely should we express our emotions in public worship? Should we be expressive or should we be restrained?
- Bible translations – NIV, ESV, King James
- Halloween. What's the appropriate way to respond?
- And then whether it could ever be right for a Christian to support the Green Bay Packers over the Chicago Bears.

There are a number of other issues and we'll come back next week to issues of conscience. I don't want you to hear me saying that none of these issues are important or that we shouldn't be able to talk about these things in the church. But what I do want to focus on today is what Paul is doing in these first 12 verses. I want us to focus on the kind of attitude we should have toward

one another as we deal with our differences. How can we bring glory to God by living as a diverse but unified family under the Lordship of Jesus Christ? The way we do that is by welcoming one another and accepting one another warmly. There are three reasons in this section why we should welcome one another warmly.

## **1. Because God has already made that call (14:3)**

We should welcome one another warmly because God has already made that decision. Verse three instructs us to not despise our brother or sister, whether they abstain from meat or eat meat. *“Let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats,”* why? *“For God has welcomed him.”* God has welcomed your brother and sister in Christ. He’s made them a part of His family. It’s not your call to decide who belongs and who doesn’t belong in the family of God. God has already made that decision. Just like you didn’t get to choose who your brothers and sisters were in your nuclear family, you don’t get to choose who belongs to God’s family. God is the One Who chooses His family and our job is to show one another the same kind of welcome that God has shown us.

So your status in the body of believers isn’t based on how you dress or how much money you have or whether or not you behave according to certain social conventions within the church. If you belong to God through faith in Jesus Christ, you belong to us. You’re part of the family. My status in the church is not based on how well I preach or how I perform my duties as your pastor. I stand before you first and foremost as a child of God and as your brother in Christ. You welcome me on that basis. You might pay me on the basis of other factors, but you welcome me as part of the family, as a brother in Christ, as a child of God.

You wouldn’t dare reject someone whom God has accepted, would you? We are to accept one another as God in Christ has accepted us. That’s the first reason—God has already made the call.

## **2. Because Jesus is the Master of us all (14:4-9)**

Let’s look at verses four through. Notice the word that is repeated most frequently.

<sup>4</sup> *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.*

<sup>5</sup> *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. <sup>6</sup> The 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. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.*

Did you hear which word is repeated over and over again? Lord is used eight times, plus the word "Master" is used once. The idea Paul is getting across here is very important for us to grasp. You are not the boss of your fellow Christian. You are not his master and she is not your servant. We all belong to the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. So when you look at another Christian, remember that he or she does not belong to you in the sense that you can say, "This is how you're to live your life." You can't look down on them in judgment. They're the servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you judge them or start trying to rule their lives, you're taking the prerogative that belongs to Christ alone.

Remember that Christ is a gracious Master. He is a gracious Lord. When we become one another's lords and masters, it becomes tyranny. We rule one another harshly. We nit-pick and become dismissive of one another. We trip one another up. But not our Lord Jesus. I love what it says of Him in verse four: He "*is able to make us stand.*" He's able to uphold us. He will hold us fast. He won't let anything separate us from His love. It's not my job to make another Christian stand. The Lord will take care of that. You don't need to put extra rules in place to make sure your fellow Christians don't go off the deep end. The Lord is able to make them stand. If their faith in Jesus is real, He will uphold them. He will keep them. If their faith in Jesus is not real, no rules that we add are going to keep them in an unauthentic faith.

I love how Christopher Ash puts it: "What your fellow Christian needs is your prayers, not your petty anxieties." We need to pray for one another. What you need to concern yourself with is not the behavior of other Christians, but your own behavior before the Lord. Every one of us is responsible to think about our lives and our behavior before the Lord Jesus Christ. So on all of these disputable issues, none of us can just think, "No, it doesn't matter. I'm going to do whatever I want."

No! Verse five tells us we need to remember that each of us needs to be fully convinced in our own mind. We need to think through the implications of the gospel and how it relates to our daily behavior: what we eat, what we drink, what movies we watch, how we dress and a hundred other things. We need to think through the implications of our faith. We will be responsible before the Lord alone in how we think these things through.

That's what Paul is saying in verses six through either. Every believer needs to live as before the face of God, aiming to please Him. Too many Christians are content just to conform with the social conventions of the church, to fit in with the unwritten rules and expectations of our fellow believers. We don't think enough about what the Lord wants, what pleases Him. If we fit in with the church, we feel okay. Paul is saying, "Don't think so much about how you fit in with other believers. Think about what will honor the Lord. If you observe a day or eat meat or abstain—whatever you do—make sure you're doing it as unto the Lord. Because whether we live or whether we die, we belong to Him. He owns us. He redeemed us by His blood."

Sometimes we can be more concerned about what our fellow Christians think about us than we are about what Jesus thinks about us. We can be desperately concerned about our image in the eyes of people. But Paul is reminding us in this passage that God has already made the determination about what He thinks of His children: He loves us. He accepts us. He is working in us. He is able to make us stand.

Jesus is our Lord and Master; He alone died for us. So we live to bring honor to Him, not to ourselves. Friend, you didn't die for your fellow Christians. You didn't go to the cross for them. You didn't rise from the dead for them. Jesus did that. So He's the only One Who has the right to rule our lives. We can't do that to one another. No one in the church owes you worship and obedience. We all owe everything to Jesus, because He gave everything for us.

Sometimes we get this wrong in the church, then people end up getting bullied in the church. People end up getting ostracized in the church and rejected by the church. I hope that will never be the experience of anyone here. I hope you'll never feel that from God's people here. If it happens, shame on us. Remember this, though. If you trust in Jesus as your Savior, you are His servant and He is your Master. You don't have to prove anything to your fellow Christians. You are loved and accepted by God. Jesus died for you.

If you've been despised and rejected by the church, the church has sinned against you—and we are sorry for that. Jesus will never despise or forsake His own. He will never leave you. He will never reject you. Regardless of how you live or what you observe, the point is to examine your life before Him and endeavor to do what will be pleasing to Him.

Here are some questions you can ask concerning your behaviors:

- Would I do this if Jesus was in the room?
- Can I do this without having to turn my back on Him or turn my gaze away from Him?
- Is this something I can do in Jesus' name, giving thanks to Him for it?

These are good questions to ask of our behavior. If I believe that something is wrong and it would dishonor Jesus if I did it, I'd have to turn my back on Jesus. I could not do that in His name. But if I go ahead and do it because I feel pressured by another Christian, then I would be dishonoring the Lord. I would be rebelling against Him. Even if objectively that other Christian is right and there really is freedom to do it, if I believe in my heart that it's wrong, I shouldn't do it.

Likewise, if you believe something is right and that there's freedom in Christ, but you try to pressure another Christian to go against their conscience, you are causing that Christian to stumble. That's what Paul is going to be talking about in the passage next week. This week he just wants us to remember: Jesus is our Lord and Master. The most important thing is to do what pleases Him.

### **3. Because each of us is directly accountable to God (14:10-12)**

Paul repeats this twice: "*We will all stand before the judgment seat of God...*" (verse 10) and "*Each of us will give an account of himself to God...*" (verse 12). That's his point. Then in between these verses he quotes Isaiah 45:

*<sup>22</sup> Turn to me and be saved,  
all the ends of the earth!  
For I am God, and there is no other.  
<sup>23</sup> By myself I have sworn;  
from my mouth has gone out in righteousness  
a word that shall never return:  
"To me every knee shall bow,  
every tongue shall swear allegiance."  
<sup>24</sup> Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me,  
are righteousness and strength.*

In other words, I can't stand at the judgment seat of God for you and you can't stand there for me. Each of us is going to stand there by ourselves, giving an account before God. Did we live the way we did because we were fully convinced in our minds that this way was pleasing to the Lord Jesus, Who died and Who rose again for us? I've got enough to be concerned about with my own life. I can't get distracted trying to nit-pick yours. And you've got enough to be concerned about for yourself as you stand before God.

So let's not stand in judgment over one another. Instead, let's welcome one another as God has welcomed us. Let's pray for one another and encourage one another to live in a way that gives honor and praise to the Lord Jesus. Remember how disciples are made. They are made

when God's people patiently persevere in praying for one another and in presenting the Word of God to one another, just continually pointing one another to Jesus. This way we will grow step by step by step into conformity to the One Who loved us and Who gave Himself for us. *"For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living"* (Romans 14:9).

We are here to help one another take another step toward Him and grow in Him. If we take our eyes off Jesus, stop praying for one another, stop persevering in sharing God's Word with one another, and if we start focusing on all our differences, we're in trouble. We've got enough disagreements in this church to blow it up by the end of the summer if we start focusing on all the areas where we disagree. If I start being your judge and you start being mine, and we all start focusing on what's wrong with each other, we'll make a mess of things in no time.

Friends, only in the Lord are righteousness and strength. Only in Him can our differences blend together in beautiful harmony. It brings such glory to Him when diverse people can blend together in harmony and unity, loving one another and welcoming one another. So let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2). He will hold us fast. He will keep us close. He will bind us together. Like the song says, "Together we will feast in His house when He comes again." So let's sing of our hope, of His return and what we're going to enjoy in His presence.

Lord, thank You for the unity of Your body which is centered on You. We don't become one by focusing on one another. We become one—we are one—through You, and we stay one by focusing on You. Lord, we look forward to the day when we will see eye to eye, and we will look face to face upon You, the One Who loved us and gave Yourself for us. You're worthy of all our praise and adoration. No one has ever done for us what You have done, Jesus. We give You praise and we look forward to Your return. We look forward to being with You forever, in Your presence. Amen.

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*All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.*

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