

# Christianity in Action: Part 3

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## ***Strong and Weak...Working Together***

As Paul continued his teaching in the latter part of the book of Romans, he moved on to address the relationship that Christians have with one another in greater detail. In chapter 14 of Romans, Paul taught on the responsibility of Christians to work diligently to get along with one another. This dives deeper into his earlier teaching from chapter 12:10, 16-18.

As we begin chapter 14, it becomes clear that Paul acknowledged the growth process that every Christian must go through. No Christian has perfect understanding, let alone perfect application of the instructions of God. There were going to be things that arose that would cause disagreements among the brethren. How were these issues to be handled? How could the peace of the local congregation be maintained, even when these issues were present?

First, Paul addressed those who were strong in the faith. It is important to notice that Paul does not, throughout this context, leave it up to the individual's judgment to determine who is the strong brother and who is the weak. If that were the criteria, everyone (and their position) would be the "strong brother". Instead, he shows which brother is weak by the position he holds. So, as Paul begins his instructions in this section, he tells the strong brother that he has an obligation to the weaker brother. He is to "receive" him. The English Standard says that he is to "welcome him". The stronger brother is not to shun the weaker brother because he is unable to participate in certain liberties that God has allowed.

There is a limit to how far the strong brother can take the idea of "receiving" one who is weak in the faith. He is not to take it so far as to accept disputes, or quarrels over these "doubtful things." The instruction here seems to apply to both the strong and the weak brother. The strong is not to accept in the weak only to then constantly attack the practice of his weakness, and try to make him change his mind, or change his practice. The weak brother, once accepted, is not to constantly quarrel over the freedoms that the strong brethren exercise. He cannot constantly complain about the actions of his brethren, which are perfectly fine and good.

Paul did not leave his audience hanging concerning the kind of teaching that he had in mind. In verse 2, he identified one of the problems that would likely be present in a congregation of mixed ethnic background. Throughout the book of Romans, Paul has shown that he is dealing with a congregation that is made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and the problems that could (and did) arise because of this makeup of the church. The issues that he presents in chapter 14 are of this same nature. In a church made up of both Jews and Gentiles, the eating of various types of meat could become an issue. The Jews, who had been taught from the time they were little, that they could not eat certain types of meat (unclean meats) would find it difficult to suddenly be able to eat any meat that they found available. Sometimes, it would be difficult to even confirm what types of meat were being sold in the market place, and so the easiest way to avoid violating their conscience would be to abstain from meat all together. So, Paul describes the two groups: one person believes he can eat all types of meat, and another (the one who is weak) would eat only vegetables. Notice, in Paul's example there is one who is right and one who is wrong. The one who says that a Christian can eat any type of meat that they want to eat is correct! One who would teach that it was wrong,

or sinful to eat meat was wrong. But that is not what was to dictate the practice of each individual. In Christ, there was freedom. Freedom to eat whatever one wanted to eat. There was no longer a distinction between “clean” and “unclean” meats. But that freedom was not to be used as a bludgeon to abuse those who could not in good conscience exercise those freedoms.

Keep in mind that Paul’s instructions here provide greater insight into what he taught earlier in chapter 12. When there are differences and disputes over these matters of conscience, how is the Christian supposed to show love, respect and honor to his brother? How is he to act in such a way as to “live peaceably with all men”? Paul gives the perfect instruction for achieving this very goal:

*Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him (Romans 14:3).*

There is an obligation placed on both sides! For the strong brother, the one who eats what he wants, he is not to “despise him who does not eat.” The idea here is that he does not look down on his brother, and view him as contemptible because he won’t eat the meat. He does not think less of him as a Christian, and as a brother because he cannot in good conscience eat the meat that perfectly lawful to eat.

On the other hand, the one who is weak cannot judge the one who eats the meat. For this to work as Paul intends, the weak brother must intellectually understand that the scriptures taught that it was perfectly fine to eat the meat. He could not refrain from judging the brother who ate the meat if he still believed that eating the meat was sinful in some way. This is a matter of his own conscience in the matter. Despite understanding that it was appropriate to eat meat, he could not partake because his conscience restrained him. He could not join in because it pricked his conscience to do so, based on the years of teaching he had under the Old Testament covenant. There is nothing in the New Covenant that would demand that any given person must eat meat. Therefore the one who is “weak in the faith” (that is, unable to fully practice freedoms granted to him in the faith of Christ) can serve God acceptably without ever eating meat. He cannot, however, pass judgment on one who eats meat, accusing him of some sinful behavior. Paul clearly expresses that the strong brother has every right to eat the meat, and God has accepted him (vs. 3).

Christians should have been able to get along, even if they disagreed on this topic. This was one area they were to leave all judgment to God. What right did the brethren have to pass judgment on the servant of God? When it came to this matter of conscience, each was to do what conscience allowed, and leave the judgment of the matter up to God alone.

It is interesting that Paul wrote more extensively about what he would do to help his brethren in this matter when writing to the Corinthian brethren. In the context of eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul told the brethren to eat whatever meat they found in the market, but to refrain from asking questions “for conscience’ sake” (1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1). Previously, in chapter 8 of that epistle, wrote about exercising this liberty. He said that if he were going to make his brother to stumble, he would refrain from eating meat at all (1 Corinthians 8:1-13). This illustrates the very point that Paul was making in Romans 14. He was not going to do anything that would cause his brother to stumble (Romans 14:21). One who had liberty in this matter was not to use that liberty in a way that would damage the faith or conscience of his weaker brother. He could refrain from exercising his liberty when necessary to protect the faith of his brother. One who believed he could eat this meat would not invite his weaker brother to his home and then fix the meat that he knew would cause his brother to stumble. His goal should be to strengthen his brother, and protect his conscience as much as he possibly can. It is not his role, or responsibility to change his brother’s mind on the matter! That does not mean that proper teaching is to be avoided, but it does mean

that it is unnecessary to constantly work to change the mind of the weak brother, and try to force him into a practice that he is not prepared for.

By instructing the weaker brother not to judge the one who would eat meat, Paul is also establishing the point that this weaker brother cannot demand his way in the congregation. He cannot force his opinion over that of others under the guise of a violation of his conscience.

Unfortunately, both of these issues can arise when dealing with the topics that Paul addresses in this chapter. It can be difficult to realize that God has allowed certain liberties, but does not require one to participate. These issues are just that: liberties. One can choose to take part in them, or they can choose to abstain. In either case, God has accepted them! The one who refuses to eat the meat can be just as spiritually minded, just as righteous as the one who eats.

The next example that Paul used is that of celebrating days. As has been Paul's pattern throughout the book, he bounced between Jews and Gentiles on an "up and down" type of response. He first props up the Jews, and then the Gentiles. So, in the example of eating meats, Paul had brought the Jews down. They were unable to do something that they had the right, or liberty to do because of conscience sake. Next, he speaks of the celebration of days. Paul uses parallelism to establish that those who celebrate are now the stronger brethren, and those who choose not to are the weaker. The Jews were permitted to continue to observe days that had been a part of their culture for many generations. They did not have to celebrate the days, but they were permitted to do so. The Gentiles, coming from paganism, would not be able to do the same. How could they continue to celebrate days that paid homage to idols? In fact, when Paul wrote about those who would have come out of this type of environment, he condemned the idea of celebrating days:

*But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods. But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain. (Galatians 4:8-11)*

So, in this second example, Paul shows that the Jews have a liberty that the Gentiles would most likely not exercise. Why would they celebrate the Jewish feast days that had meant nothing to them? They could, as they had the same liberty as the Jews. But they would most likely have a problem doing so, as it may make them think of the Judaizing teachers who were trying to force certain aspects of the Jewish laws upon Gentile converts.

Paul's conclusion is that one who celebrates does so to the Lord. The one who eats does so to the Lord, and "gives God thanks..." The one who chooses not to celebrate, or not to eat, does that to the Lord, "and gives God thanks..." Whatever one chooses to do in the exercise of these liberties, he is to do it to the glory and honor of God. Everything that we do is supposed to be in our service to God! This idea returns us back to Romans 12:1-2, where we were told to make our bodies "living sacrifices."

Paul makes an interesting statement in Romans 14:7:

*For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. (Romans 14:7)*

In the midst of this argument about how brethren are supposed to get along with one another, even in the event of some disagreement, Paul makes the point that no one is an island unto himself. No one lives and dies all by himself. He has to interact with others. The lesson for brethren is: learn to get along with one another! Far too often, when the least little problem or difference arises, the answer that many seek is to just run away from it. Paul was telling these brethren that this was not the answer! You are going to have disagreements. There will be problems that arise. The answer is

not to split off from those who are different. When dealing with these matters of liberty, one has to learn to get along with his brethren. If he feels compelled to leave a group every time a difference of opinion arises, it will not be long until he is left completely by himself.

Paul concludes this section by showing that no matter what one decides to do in regards to these liberties, they still belong to the Lord. We do not need to judge one another in these liberties, as that judgment belongs to the Lord, and He has said that He will accept everyone, regardless of what they decide to practice. There are, in fact, more important things to be considered. We will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and give an account to God. It appears that Paul's implication is that the judgment that Christ will impose on us for being judgmental when we should not be is far more of a concern than whether our brethren exercise a liberty that we choose to abstain from!

### ***Don't Cause Others To Stumble!***

Through the first 12 verses of this chapter, Paul has presented the argument that Christians have certain liberties that they can choose to exercise or abstain from, and that no matter which side one chose to be on, he was not to judge the actions of his brother. He was to allow for his brother to exercise his conscience in the matter, and they were to get along despite possible differences on the matter. However, Paul then moves into some practical applications of the principles that he has established, including those that he had introduced in previous chapters. While it has been established that it is perfectly fine to eat meat or to celebrate certain days to the Lord, Paul showed that brethren are still supposed to take others into consideration. The principles that he had already established to put others ahead of self would have an impact on how a Christian would practice his liberty! His conclusion, from verse 13, is that while he had the right to practice the liberty without judgment, he would not put a stumbling block in his brother's way. This concept fits perfectly with his teaching from 1 Corinthians chapter 8. There, in verse 13 Paul said:

*Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (1 Corinthians 8:13)*

It is better to forgo the liberty that we have every right to exercise than to make a brother stumble because of his weak conscience! This was the practical application of principle he had spent some time establishing: put others ahead of yourself. When we choose to put the needs of others ahead of ourselves, then it is not difficult to abstain from something we know we have the right to do. In fact, Paul made it clear that if you continue to do something you have the right to do, and yet trample the conscience of your brother in the process, "you are no longer walking in love" (vs. 15). Instead, you are walking in your own selfishness! Why would a Christian ever destroy the faith of a brother over the practice of a liberty? Your good can be spoken of as evil if you do such things (vs. 16).

As Paul concludes this section, he addressed the idea of conscience. When it comes to these liberties, God does not care if you practice them, or do not practice them. However, He does expect you to make your choice in full faith. If you believe it is wrong to eat meat, and then eat meat, you have sinned! Eating meat is not sinful, but doing something you think is sinful makes it sinful. This is the violation of the conscience! When we act in matters of liberty, we must act being fully convinced that our actions are right and appropriate. God wants our full heart, not a part of it. If we are not fully convicted, then we will violate our own consciences and therefore not act in faith before Him.

Paul's practical application in this section is that we are not to act in a way that would cause our brother to sin, and that we are not ourselves to act in a way contrary to our own consciences in the matter. We cannot choose to do something that will be sinful for ourselves, and we cannot try to

influence others to do things that would be sinful for them. We must, as we consider this passage and the applications of it, remember that Paul is talking about liberties, and not commands. We cannot include doctrinal issues in the context of things that clearly are not doctrinal!

### ***Bear Others' Burdens...***

The first part of Romans 15 serves as a conclusion to all that Paul had been writing for the last several chapters. There was an expectation that the people of God would learn to get along with one another. That end would require that some would make concessions for the sake of others. Primarily, it would fall upon the strong to make concessions for the sake of their weaker brethren. Paul told the Romans that the “strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak...” Some take this to mean that those who are strong need to “put up with” the weak. But that doesn’t really seem to be what Paul is saying. The King James Version translates verse 1 in this way:

*We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves (Romans 15:1).*

The idea is not to put up with those who are just too weak to be able to enjoy what you enjoy, but rather that those who are strong have a responsibility to help the weak bear their heavy load! This conveys that the one who has been described as weak throughout chapter 14 is not doing so just to be contrary. He realizes the difficulties his weakness can cause, and thus it can cause a heavy burden for him. Paul’s instruction for the strong is to help with that burden. He is not to try and make that brother feel bad about his difficulties. He is not to condemn or mock his conscience issues. Rather, he does what he can to help to carry that burden for the one who needs it!

Notice, Paul said that the strong does not act to “please ourselves.” It seems that Paul is contrasting the ideas that you do something that is helpful to others, instead of concentrating on just doing what is the most beneficial for yourself. As he continues to give instruction, Paul made it clear that our focus is supposed to be on our “neighbor.” We are supposed to focus on what is best for him, and what we can do for his edification. If the point is not made clearly enough in verse 2, Paul introduced the example of Christ in verse 3. “Christ did not please Himself..” He was not seeking to do only that which was best for Himself, but rather He was devoted to doing what was best for others. Notice, the passage that Paul quotes is from Psalm 69:9. “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.” If we are to take the example to mean something to the point Paul was making, it is evident that he was using the figure of Christ, and what He chose to do as the example of how the strong brother should bear the load of the weak. Christ (the strong) was willing to bear the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6). He was willing to do this, even though it meant that He had to suffer and die for us. That is the same type of responsibility that is placed upon the strong brother here! It is interesting that Paul would make such a strong application, when it seems the original premise was that God did not care whether you participated in these practices or not. While that may frame the discussion in a way that makes it seem inconsequential, Paul has (through the end of chapter 14 and the beginning of chapter 15) shown that how these issues were handled were of great consequence. While the strong may think that scruples of the weak are silliness, by using the example of Christ, Paul has shown that it is quite serious. The strong is obligated to bear the burden of the weak in the same way that Christ bore the burden of sin for the world.

The main point of Paul’s instruction is summed up in verses 4-6. Paul wanted his audience, and every local body who would learn from this passage, to understand that they were supposed to be “like-minded toward one another...that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Unity in service before God was of the utmost importance! If they were bickering over things that were not of significant consequence, they could not worship God to-

gether in this type of unity! “Therefore,” Paul said, “receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” Paul’s expectation was that these brethren would receive one another, just as they had been received by Christ. Throughout the passage, it had been emphasized that God and/or Christ had accepted these brethren (14:3, 4, 15, 18, 20; 15:7). Who did they think they were to reject what God had accepted? In the end, all that they did was to be for the glory of God. It was not about themselves, but bringing glory to the Lord. The unity that would be present if they heeded Paul’s instructions here would bring that glory to God. However, if they continued to judge and fuss and bicker over these issues, they could never bring glory to God.

As a final argument for the unity that God desired, Paul wrapped up an argument that has been in the making for most of the book. He has been contrasting the Jews against the Gentiles seeking to determine which had the greater advantage. However, as he arrives at this point in the argument, he shows what the main point was: neither is greater, and neither has an advantage because of Christ. There was no reason for bickering from either side! Paul wrote that Christ came as “a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy...” The point Paul is making here is two fold. To the Gentile, he says that Christ came in the form of a Jew. This would seem to point to the Jew having an advantage. But, then, to the Jew, Paul says that Jesus came as a Jew so that He could fulfill the promise to save the Gentiles. This seems to indicate that the Gentiles had an advantage. In fact, neither had an advantage over the other, as the plan that God had in place was designed to provide salvation for all. They were all in the same boat! Paul addressed this same idea in Ephesians 2:

*Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:11–18)*

The differences and divisions that were being accepted in the local church had to stop! There was no excuse for them to allow these issues to cause divisions between them. God expected them to get along with one another, to be unified in the work that they were doing in the kingdom. While we may not have the Jew versus Gentile dynamic in local congregations today, it is quite possible to have racial and cultural difference that could present in the same way as we see in the Roman church. Our responsibility is to seek for unity by serving God together with those “for whom Christ died.” We need to be of the same mind, the same attitude that Paul presented here.

*Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God (Romans 15:7).*

Judging, and condemning in such matters of liberty brings division and discord. Accepting brings unity and peace.

*Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another (Romans 14:19).*

## **Questions...**

1. What obligation did Paul give to the one who is strong in the faith as he began Romans 14?
2. What type of issues are under consideration in chapter 14? Why is it important to understand this?
3. How does Paul tell us to deal with judging those with whom we disagree on these particular topics? Why?
4. How is the Christian supposed to alter his behavior in the midst of the disagreements that may arise over these types of issues? Why is this important?
5. What role does one's conscience play in the exercising of the practices under consideration in chapter 14?
6. How can the strong bear the burden of the weak (Romans 15:1)?
7. How does the example of Christ help us to understand the need to "receive one another"?
8. Who had the greater advantage according to Paul's extended argument throughout the book of Romans, Jews or Gentiles?

