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Romans 14: The Relationship with "weaker" Christians

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Chapter 14 The Relationship with a “Weaker” Christian

Romans 13 taught us how to relate to governments and civil authorities, how to demonstrate the moral value of Christian submission to the standards of the Ten Commandments and the general exhortation to live godly lives both in private and public lives. Now Paul addresses the principles to govern how Christians are to relate to one another. Harmonious and peaceful relationships are only possible when everyone agrees to follow basic principles.

I. Peaceful relationship must avoid judging each other (14:1-12)

Christians develop to maturity through a multiple of stages and patterns. Different cultures and their sense of morality will affect the perspective of the conscience of believers in different ways. The renewing of the mind (Rom 12:2) takes time. Eventually the principles of God’s Word will bring a united perspective, but in the meantime judging each other must be avoided.

A. Weaker Brother (14:1-4)

^{NET} **Rom 14:1** Now receive the one who is **weak** in the faith, and do not have **disputes** over differing **opinions**.

² One person believes in eating everything, but the **weak person** eats only vegetables.

³ The **one who eats everything** must **not despise** the one who does not, and the one who **abstains** must not **judge** the one who eats everything, for God has accepted him.

⁴ Who are you to **pass judgment** on another's servant? Before his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

14:1 Who is the “weak” in the faith? “Weak” is from the verb *astheneo*, “sick, powerless, needy, feeble”), which is in the emphatic position in the original. The command is to “receive” him (*proslambano*, in the present imperative, i.e. “keep on...,” means “to take as one’s companion, to receive into one’s home”). See 15:7 for a similar command. However, there is a limit: the “weak” brother, especially a Jewish or moralist convert, can be easily offended by the actions of Christians who do not have a background of legalistic traditions. This reception is not to generate “disputes” (*diakrisis*, “discriminate, arguing, judging”) about “opinions” (*dialogismos*, “thought, motive, reasoning of those who think themselves to be wise” THAYER). Weaker brothers who cannot accept anyone who is not like them, who is constantly arguing about their opinions of what is right and what is wrong. The same word is used in the following prohibitions:

Phil 2:14

1 Tim 2:8

14:2-3 Illustration of a weak brother’s damaging attitude: The first example is the “weak person” who only eats vegetables because he believes it to be more spiritual or holy. Vegetarianism is not the problem, nor is the eating of only “clean” foods (under the Jewish law some foods were prohibited: Deut 14:19-20), but rather the problem is the “despising” of each other (*ekoutheneo*, “reject, treat with contempt, look down on, count as nothing” BARCLAY). See 14:10 for how bad it had gotten in the church.

What is the reason given that neither the weak should judge the strong, nor the strong despise the weak in vs. 3?

- According to 1 Cor 10:25-27 what is the perspective of the “strong” brother?

14:4 Everyone is accountable to the Lord, not ultimately to each other. The use of the present tense participle, “the continually judging one,” suggests that the Christians at Rome were very critical of each other. One should not judge another man’s “servant” (*oiketen*, “domestic or household slave”). The only “right” or “wrong” is before his master, not his critics. Why are not forbidden to judge one another in these verses?

Matt 7:1

1 Cor 4:3

Note: the Lord is not choosing sides! He is helping both sides of the issue to stand true to Him – why should we choose sides in non-essential issues?

B. Differences in convictions (14:5-6)

^{NET} **Rom 14:5** One person **regards** one day holier than other days, and another regards them all alike. Each must be fully **convinced** in his own mind.

⁶ The one who **observes** the day does it for the Lord. The one who eats, eats for the Lord because he gives thanks to God, and the one who **abstains** from eating abstains for the Lord, and he gives thanks to God.

14:5 A second example of violating this principle is the continued legalism in the early Christians: One “regards” (*phroneo*, “thinks, has an opinion”) special days held special spiritual significance (ritualism) or observing these days made one more spiritual (legalism). The weak wanted to have many holy days. Paul taught that every day was alike, a holy day to serve the King. However, the issue here is not which one is right or wrong. The problem here is how the disagreement has caused a judging and despising spirit among them. Each are to be “fully convinced” (*plerophoreo*, present passive imperative, i.e. “keep on...”, “to make full, cause a thing to be shown to the full,”) of their position. Why do you think the “weaker” brethren wanted holy days?

Note: the Jewish Christians wanted the Sabbath Day (Saturday) to be a sacred day as it was in Judaism. In addition, there were numerous special Sabbath days to honor Jewish historical events.

14:6 The issue was the OT command to “honor the Sabbath Day and keep it holy” (Ex 20:8). Jewish Christians wanted all Gentiles to become Jewish, at least somewhat. Such Jewish Christians may have felt unfaithful or empty for not celebrating these days. They may have been fearful of being criticized by other Jews or Jewish Christians. Paul did not make an issue on the observation of these days, if a believer is convinced he needs to do it to the Lord. According to Col 2:16-17, what is the issue here?

- After a thorough investigation of the biblical evidence (“fully convinced”) and in a commitment to follow one’s personal convictions to honor the Lord in the sincerity of one’s mind and conscience, a decision is made: “I feel I must do this to honor the Lord.” It appears that God is not as interested in what we do to honor Him, as He is

in our disposition to honor Him in what we do! Another example: some may want to lift up their hands in worship and some may not (or not all the time). The point is: don't be critical of others.

C. Ultimate accountability for life (14:7-9)

^{NET} **Rom 14:7** For **none** of us lives for himself and none dies for himself.

⁸ If we live, we **live for** the Lord; if we die, we **die for** the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

14:7-8 Everything we do affects others for good or bad; therefore, we are responsible for other believers. If we demand our rights to choose freely whatever we want to do to honor God and are uncaring, offending or hurtful to other believers, then we do damage to the Body of Christ. Ultimately we live or die for Christ alone, but Christ is not alone. How does what we do to others affect Christ in these verses?

1 Cor 12:12

Eph 4:25

Matt 25:40

- **Whatever we do to other believers we directly affect Jesus**, whether it be good or bad, positive or negative, helpful or harmful. Our task is to build up one another. What is the application of the Paul's principles in 1 Cor 10:23 to this issue?
- What were the different opinions in 1 Tim 4:3-5?

D. Reason for not judging (14:9-12)

^{NET} **Rom 14:9** For this reason Christ died and returned to life, so that he may be the **Lord of both** the dead and the living.

¹⁰ But you who eat vegetables only— **why do you judge** your brother or sister? And you who eat everything— **why do you despise** your brother or sister? For we will all stand before **the judgment seat of God**.

¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, **every knee** will bow to me, and **every tongue** will give praise to God."

¹² Therefore, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

14:9 Christ took the judgment of all our sins on the cross and rose again to prove that it was fully paid and never to be judged again by God or man. He is our Judge. To Him alone we must give account of our motives, thoughts and actions. What right does any believer have to judge or criticize another believer for what he wants to do or not do in order to honor his Savior?

14:10 Some believers were "judging" one another (*krino*, present tense: i.e., "habitually or continually," "to separate, prefer, pronounce a sentence or opinion of right or wrong") and others were "despising" one another (*exoutheneo*, present tense: "habitually or continually" "to treat with contempt, look down on or reject") as in v.3. It appears as the main reasons some wanted to be judgmental now was that either they

were not willing to trust the sufficiency of the Judgment Seat of God to right every wrong or were not willing to wait for the validation of their moral position. No one will be judged by the opinions of others, but rather, only for one's own decisions. How serious is this Judgment in these verses?

Matt 12:36

Note in 2 Cor 5:10, whose Judgment Seat is it? Whose is it in 14:10?

14:11 Paul quotes Isa 45:23 to confirm both to Jews and Gentiles the inevitability of a personal accountability to the Lord. Paul was writing to Christians (1:7) and included himself in this judgment seat experience (v. 10, "we must...")

14:12 Every believer has sufficient problems to face in our personal accountability to the Lord. No one is going to be judged according to what anyone else did or did not do, rather how did our lives count for the benefit of our Lord and His kingdom.

- How is God going to judge in John 5:22, 27?
- Why does Paul warn against judging each other prematurely in 1 Cor 4:5?
- Is the believer's eternal destiny at risk in this judgment according to Rom 8:1?
- According to 1 Cor 3:12-15 what is the purpose of this judgment? (See the conclusion of 1 Cor 4:5 also)
- Another main reason we are not to judge one another is our inability to see the real motives in the heart and mind of another person. In Matt 6:1-7 there are three acts of worship that God judges, which might receive a reward if the motives were correct. What are the religious acts and what is the right and wrong motive that only God can see?

II. Peaceful relationships require avoidance of becoming a stumbling block to others (14:13-23)

Not only must we avoid judging each other because of our personal convictions, now we must make sure that the "strong" believers do not offend the weaker brethren with their liberties in Christ. The judgmental attitude was either from the weaker brother with too many scruples or legalistic attitudes (especially Jewish converts) judging Christians without their level of personal convictions or traditions, or the "stronger" brothers (like Gentile converts) blatantly flaunting their biblical liberties or anti-traditionalism while making light of their "weaker" brother's prohibitions, thus giving him an excuse to violate his sensitive conscience in areas of his personal convictions (i.e. avoiding certain foods or

drinks or holding certain days as sacred). Either situation destroyed the unity of the Church.

A. Avoid becoming a “stumbling-block” (14:13-18)

^{NET} **Romans 14:13** Therefore **we must not pass judgment** on one another, but rather determine never **to place an obstacle or a trap** before a brother or sister.

¹⁴ I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that there is **nothing unclean** in itself; still, it is **unclean to the one who considers it unclean**.

¹⁵ For if your brother or sister is **distressed** because of what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not **destroy** by your food someone for whom Christ died.

¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you consider good **be spoken of as evil**.

¹⁷ For the **kingdom of God** does not consist of food and drink, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ For the one who serves Christ in this way is **pleasing to God** and **approved by people**.

14:13 Paul concludes his previous section with the command “we must not pass judgment” (*krinomen*, hortatory subjunctive, “no longer let us keep on passing judgment or being critical or condemning one another”). On the contrary, every Christian should “judge” (*krinate*, imperative aorist, “make a distinction, decide”) that his lifestyle does not become a “stumbling block” (*proskomma*, “a stone that causes people to stumble,” as a metaphor, “an excuse to violate one’s conscience”) or a “trap” (*skandalon*, “a snare that one trips over” or as a metaphor, “anything that leads another to sin”). This was a reoccurring problem in other churches. How did Paul exhort the Corinthians in 1 Cor 8:9?

14:14 A declaration of the “strong” Christian is that “nothing is ‘unclean’ of itself”

(*koinos*, “common, ordinary; by the Jews it refers to profane, or Levitically unclean”).

Notice: Jesus “persuaded” Paul of this truth (*peitho*, perfect passive, “induce one by words to believe”). Here Paul is returning to the subject of offensive foods (14:2-3,6). In Acts 10:15 God declared to Peter that whatever God has made clean, no one should consider unclean; however, not everyone has incorporated this new understanding (thus were weaker brethren). What insights to this understanding are gained by these two verses?

Rom 14:20

1 Cor 8:8

Note: Acts 10 occurred about ten years after Pentecost. For a decade the Jewish believers could not get over their traditional guilt of having any contact with Gentiles. In Acts 11:19 they still only witnessed to other Jews. It would be another nine years (till AD 49) before the Jewish Christians even approved the evangelization of Gentiles! Can you see how these early Jewish believers had a hard time overcoming their emotionally taught traditional values?

- Even though their diet, however strict, would not make them more spiritual or closer to God, not every Jewish Christian in Paul’s day was free from the guilt of eating unclean foods. In this case, God evaluates the conscience and understanding of each individual as to their understanding of the truth and their response to it. If there is no clear command, then God can judge a person by his conscience and understanding of

biblical principles. Are we living by the light that we understand? If some “considers” (*logizomai*, present tense, “reckon, calculate, take into account”) something to be unclean, God still holds him accountable to his understanding. The word is used in 1 Cor 13:11 to describe a transition from child to adult according to what one understands. Should “children” or the “weak” brethren be treated differently just because their understanding is immature? How patient are we with children?

14:15-18 Principles for how to respond to Christians who feel guilty about doing certain things. If love is defined as a commitment to benefit, encourage, or build up others, then to love a “weaker” brother is to yield or restrict one’s liberty (from our understanding of truth) in Christ in order to not be a temptation to violate a spiritual brother’s conscience. Using the illustration of eating food thought to be “sinful,” though biblically permitted, can “distress” him (*lupeo*, “to hurt, make sorrowful, or cause grief”). Causing such distress is symptomatic of the strong believer not walking in love, rather, he is walking in selfish interest. This action could “destroy” a weaker brother (*apollue*, “put an end to, put out of the way, render useless,” also is used of being destroyed eternally). The conscience of a believer, even an unenlightened weaker brother, must be protected and honored until biblical knowledge of the value and efficacy of Christ’s redeeming death can grant freedom to change traditional legalistic values. Can you explain the application of this principle as illustrated in 1 Cor 8:10?

- Once the conscience is wounded and ignored, a chain reaction can begin that leads a person into sin and error. There is not a safety valve to warn of false teaching. What is given as the main cause of the departure from the faith in 1 Tim 4:1-2?
- Paul was willing to yield to a new or weaker believer’s conscience, at least to a degree. What does it mean “commending ourselves to every man’s conscience” in 2 Cor 4:2? (Compare with 1 Cor 10:29, 32)

Note: The weaker brother should not take advantage of this principle to be critical of those who differ with their personal preferences. Should men wear ties on Sunday or women wear dresses? What about sandals or blue jeans in church, etc.? Are we more concerned about what God thinks or what other critical visiting legalistic Christians might think of us for going to such a “liberal” church?

- **14:16 In this context, how could your “good” be “evil spoken of”** (*blasphemeo*, “to speak reproachfully, speak against someone so as to harm his reputation, defame”)? How could either side of this issue be guilty of violating this principle?
- **14:17 What we eat or drink has nothing to do with our relationship to Christ.** Legalism is the belief that certain dietary restrictions or spiritual actions will bring us closer to God. Rather than externalities, the focus should be on “righteousness, peace

(Rom 12:18) and joy (Rom 15:13) in the Holy Spirit.” What does 1 Cor 8:8 teach concerning such legalistic beliefs?

- **14:18 What do you think Paul meant** by “...serves Christ in *this way*...?” What is the antecedent to “this?” Your answer is very important because it is what “pleases God” and is “approved” by men (*dokimos*, “qualification that results from trial and examination”).

B. Sacrifice for peaceful relations (14:19-21)

^{NET} **Rom 14:19** So then, let us **pursue** what makes for **peace** and for **building up** one another.

²⁰ Do not **destroy** the work of God for the sake of food. For although all things are clean, it is wrong to cause anyone to stumble by what you eat.

²¹ It is **good** not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

14:19 Positively we are to “pursue” (*dioko*, “run swiftly to catch a thing, press on, earnestly endeavor to acquire”) things that result in “peace” (in the emphatic position, thus, “the peace pursue after”). How does the command in Col 3:15 relate to this verse? (Note: In Colossians “your hearts” is plural, referring to the whole church).

- Paul repeated the command to “edify” (*oikodome*, “build up”). As a building grows block by block, so “edification” refers to giving the pieces or elements of knowledge, insight, wisdom and understanding to help the weaker believer become a strong believer, having liberty in Christ without abusing it or violating other NT commands. Notice the command in Rom 15:2 with Paul’s example in 2 Cor 12:19.

14:20 Similar to Esau giving up his birthright for a bowl of stew, a strong believer can destroy what God is working in a weak believer just because he wants to eat a controversial meal. In neither case does the person care about the consequences. Paul declares that all “things” (“food” in the context) are clean (ceremonially, a Jewish concept), but such a meal becomes “evil” (*kakos*, “wrong, bad”) if it causes someone, a “weaker” brother, to stumble or take offense. It is not that they don’t like what you are eating, but if it causes them to disregard their conscience, then observing your liberty can do damage to their conscience.

14:21 It is always good to abstain. Regardless of whether it is eating meat, drinking wine, or any controversial behavior, it is “good” (*kalos*, “beautiful, excellent, useful, admirable”) to be willing to cease to behave in an offensive manner to another believer. This does not mean to yield to every scruple that another may hold to, but rather if observing your liberty he is highly tempted to violate his conscience thus stumble in a behavior that he believes to be sinful (not just personal preferences), then the strong believer must yield his rights to his biblical liberty and not become a source of temptation. Especially if your liberties make a brother “weak” (*astheneo*, “without strength or powerless”) to resist the temptation of ignoring his conscience, it is better

to abstain from that behavior. How does John define the true believer who loves his fellow Christian in 1 John 2:10?

C. Keep personal convictions personal and private (14:22-23)

^{NET} **Rom 14:22** The faith you have, **keep to yourself** before God. Blessed is the one who does **not judge himself by what he approves**.

²³ But the man who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not do so from faith, and **whatever is not from faith is sin**.

14:22 Faith is built on the understanding of the Word of God and trusting fully in what it says. A Christian is not to strive to change the convictions of the “weaker” brother. Keep your belief about your freedoms to yourself. The one who is truly free does not “judge” himself (*krino*, with negative, “condemn, punish”). He is “blessed” or happy because he approves for his life what pleases God and men (14:18), and he knows he is only motivated to benefit or edify others. How does Matt 5:9 compare to this principle?

14:23 On the other hand, one who “doubts” (*diakrino*, “to make a judgment on the basis of detailed information; to be at variance with oneself, hesitate, doubt”) is “condemned” if he eats. Doing something by “faith” means to understand what the Scriptures say and put your trust and obedience in it. The general principle concludes the chapter: “if you do what you believe is not right, you are sinning.” We should never encourage someone to do what he does not believe or even doubts if is right. How does this verse compare with 14:20?