

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 6 of 13)

When Christians Disagree

Romans 14:1-12

Mark Vroegop

"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 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. 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. 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. 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. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. 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; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God." (Romans 14:1–12, ESV)

It has been two months since we have been in the book of Romans, so I want to remind you that the theme of this glorious book is **righteousness**. Paul's aim is to show us how a righteous God gives righteousness to unrighteous sinners through faith in Jesus Christ. Romans shows us the contrast between God's righteousness and ours, the beauty of righteousness through justification by faith, and how that righteousness actually works.

During the month of June we began looking at Romans 12-13, and we began to see what it looks like to be living sacrifices. I suggested to you that there is a mindset that is to guide how we live out the grace of God in our lives. It involved three key statements: 1) "I'm Yours," 2) "Change Me," and 3) "Lead Me." That is how we are to think about ourselves.

However, this mindset is also meant to affect how we treat other people. That is why Paul says, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." (Rom. 13:8). Paul moves from theology to how we treat one another. Justification by faith changes my relationship with God, how I view myself, and how I treat other people. He moves from righteousness by faith to righteousness through love.

Romans 14-15: Live in Gospel-centered Harmony

Paul's aim in Romans 14-15 is to help the church in Rome understand how to live out the gospel especially in their relationships in the context of a church that is filled with people who have different

opinions. He wanted to help them see that the gospel not only affects their standing with God, but that it also directly impacts how they handle disagreements.

The key verse, and Paul's target, is found in Romans 15:5-7.

"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." (Romans 15:5-7, ESV)

The biblical vision of the church is a place of "graced" people who treat one another with grace. That is why one of our Core Values at College Park is extravagant grace. We want the flavor, the tone, and the culture of our church to be marked with a convictional commitment to the gospel AND with a convictional commitment to be full of grace towards one another. When this works, the church is an amazing place – a vivid picture of what the gospel can do and what heaven is like.

To help us, Paul addresses three key themes in these two chapters:

- Differences do not need to create divisions (14:1-12)
- Differences can be worked out through love for one another (14:13-23)
- Christlikeness creates unity in diversity (15:1-13)

Romans 14-15 are very helpful chapters because within our church we have a wide variety of views on a number of subjects. With the help of my preaching application team, we developed a list of things on which people disagree at College Park. Here's our incomplete list: politics, dating, education, alcohol use, worship style, clothing choices, smoking, movies, dancing, tattoos, divorce and remarriage, moms working outside the home, gambling, fertility and contraception.

What is interesting to me is that the things that I've just listed are far more likely to create divisions and sinful responses than some major doctrinal issue. From a practical standpoint, I would suggest to you that far more sin is created in our church from how we discuss these issues (privately and publically) than from anything else. So I think that these chapters could be very helpful.

There are principles and a way of thinking in these chapters that will really help you navigate these difficult subjects. As long as the church is filled with people, and as long as those people come from different backgrounds, experiences, and histories, there will be disagreements. And yet the gathering of God's people as they worship Him with one voice is worth fighting for. Gospel-centered harmony, while challenging and messy, is worth it. If Christ has welcomed us, we should welcome one another for the glory of God (Rom. 15:7).

So, how do we do that?

The Principle: Welcome one another despite disagreements

Verse one serves not only as the beginning of Paul's argument but also as the central theme for all of Romans 14-15. Notice how the theme of "welcoming" appears in 14:1 and in 15:7.

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.” (Romans 14:1, ESV)
“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Romans 15:7, ESV)

The word “welcome” means something more than just friendliness, acceptance, or toleration. It denotes a relationship where a person is welcomed into one’s fellowship and into one’s heart; it implies a warmth and kindness associated with genuine, heart-felt love.¹ To welcome is to lovingly embrace. Jesus uses the same word in John 14:3.

*“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and **will take you to myself**, that where I am you may be also.” (John 14:3, ESV)*

So this term “welcome” means something special. It is the outward expression of love for another person, the kind of love that you would have for a family member or life-long friend. What makes those relationships unique? It is the fact that there is something more foundational than circumstances, location, inconveniences, idiosyncrasies, and differences. All of the things that could pull you apart are seen in light of the greater reality that you are family or life-long friends. There is a unique and special bond that binds you to one another.

The body of Christ is to be characterized by a unique love for one another because of our common relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of our experience of the gospel and our shared allegiance to Christ, we are brothers and sisters in the family of God. There is something greater than our differences: the gospel.

Differences can lead to disagreements and these can lead to divisiveness. A lack of love can lead to people no longer welcoming one another, and when that happens, the gospel message suffers. So these chapters are more than just how to help people get along. These chapters are about the beauty and credibility of the gospel.

Keep that in mind the next time there is a conflict between you and a fellow believer. Keep that in mind the next time you are tempted to be critical, defensive, or judgmental. Remember that underneath all the differences is the gospel and a love for one another. Remember that how you treat people in disagreement and differences says something about the gospel. “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you . . .” (Rom. 15:7).

The Problem: Sinfully responding to weak brothers and opinions

Welcoming one another is the goal, but the problem relates to three issues: 1) A person who is weak in faith, 2) quarreling over opinions, and 3) the sinful responses on both parties.

What does it mean to be “weak in faith”? This is a really important question to answer because Paul will recommend some very specific and somewhat radical solutions in verses 13-23. Without understanding this issue, someone could use the “stumbling block” argument to overly restrict the legitimate freedoms of some Christians in issues that Paul would have never intended it to be applied.

¹ John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: 1994), 359.

Let me give you some thoughts on what was happening in this Roman Church:

- According to verse 2 and 5, the issue surfaced as it related to dietary restrictions and the observance of certain days or festivals.
- Some people in the church had chosen not to eat meat or drink wine, and others saw no problem with eating meat or drinking wine.
- Paul calls the non-meat eaters and non-wine drinkers “weak,” and he calls those who have no issue with meat or wine the “strong.”
- These issues are classified by Paul as “opinions” and not an essential issue since both groups are said to honor the Lord in their actions (v. 6). So this is not a clear sin issue. It could be sinful (see v. 23), but festivals, meat, and wine were not necessarily wrong. The motives of both groups are equally commended.
- Given Paul’s tone as it relates to both sides, it is clear that we are not talking about a problem of legalism like he addressed in Galatians 1:6-9 and 5:1-3. This issue was not an outright distortion of the gospel itself, and Paul’s language in Galatians was very direct and non-accommodating.
- The issue is slightly different than what Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, where the church was wrestling with meat offered to pagan idols. Paul uses the same principles as he does in Romans 14-15, but the issue is different. Take note of this principle-application because it will be helpful as we make application in our setting and context at College Park.

If we put all of this together, it seems that the weaker brother was likely a Jewish Christian who still chose to avoid certain foods and who observed certain holidays out of some sense of loyalty to the Mosaic law and his religious heritage.² The weaker brother is “weak in faith.” There is something related to his faith that still needs to develop. He seems to have thought that righteousness was still somehow connected to clean or unclean foods. The weaker brother is having a hard time thinking about obedience through a gospel lens, and it is serious and emotional enough that there are some who are “grieved” and even “destroyed” over these issues (Rom. 14:15). The weak person seems to be placing too much emphasis on foods and festivals.

Paul compassionately and gently wants the weaker brother to know “it’s just food.” He wants him to not make a bigger deal about this than what he should. But we will see next week that he says the same thing to the strong, although for different reasons. He cautions the strong about being inconsiderate in their freedom, reminding them “it’s just food.”

In this text and others, Paul is modeling a very critical aspect of wise, gospel living. He is engaging in theological triage, helping people to see that not all issues are of equal importance. In fact, loving your brother is more important than your freedom. Your brother’s soul is more valuable than meat, wine, or festivals. And he is gently dealing with the weak brother, honoring him and affirming him while giving him time to grow stronger in his faith.

Biblical wisdom is more than just knowing truth; it is getting truth in the right order of importance. A church family is going to have differing views on a variety of topics, and we have to understand how to

² Douglas Moo, *Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 834.

think about those issues. We have to balance both the purity and the unity of the church. Over the years, I have found it helpful to think about this in three categories.



Each category is important. **Absolutes** define the essence of the Christian life. You must believe these in order to be a Christian. An example would be the deity of Jesus Christ. You cannot be a Christian if you do not believe that Jesus is God. **Convictions** are strongly-held scriptural beliefs that have a significant impact on the health and effectiveness of a church.³ Church denominations and doctrinal statements for a local church include absolutes and convictions. An example would be the believer's baptism vs. infant baptism. **Preferences** are less-clear issues that are often the application of particular passages. Some preferences are more rooted in the Scriptures than others. An example of a preference could be any number of the things I listed before.

Liberalism is taking an absolute and treating it like it's a preference, while legalism is taking a preference and treating it like it's an absolute. Most are terrible mistakes with significant consequences. And I think the issue that Paul is dealing with in Romans 14-15 is a weaker brother who is dealing with the tension of seeing a strongly-held conviction treated like a preference. He is working through the spiritual and emotional challenges of seeing something that used to define him and his community become less important. This re-ordering of categories is traumatic and painful, and it is fraught with potential sin issues.

The two most common sin issues are identified for us in verse 3. The weak and the strong have different temptations.

"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." (Romans 14:3, ESV)

The two sins issues are despising and judging one another. Both are rooted in pride. The strong brother, who is less restrictive in his actions, can be tempted to despise or look down on the one who abstains. He

³ ESV Study Bible, 2502.

can view the weaker brother as morally inferior, uninformed, and stuck in old ways. He can be viewed with contempt and disdain instead of with patience and compassion.

The weaker brother, who is more restrictive in his actions, can be equally tempted. He is more likely to be guilty of a judgmental spirit, as he could consider himself to be superior or more spiritual because of his more restrictive lifestyle. The weaker brother could be tempted to treat the stronger brother as if he is spiritually careless, needlessly unwise, or simply “worldly.” The weaker brother could use his restrictions as a self-proclaimed marker that he is more spiritual than others.

You can see how quick, devastating, and familiar this pride divide can be. How often the enemy has used these secondary and opinion issues to divide the church, destroy unity, and break the bond of love between those who have a common commitment to the gospel. Instead, Paul wanted to remind them about the centrality of the gospel and their call to love one another.

A Lutheran theologian named Rupertus Meldenius (1618-1648) summarized the heart of Romans 14-15 with the following saying:

*In essentials unity;
In non-essentials liberty;
In all things charity;⁴*

The Rationale: Five Reasons to Welcome One Another

With the goal of welcoming one another in love in view and with an understanding of the potential sin issues in play, Paul provides his rationale for why followers of Jesus should live this way. He doesn't just say, “It's only food . . . it's your brother in Christ . . . stop being sinful.” Paul actually provides some biblical and theological rationale to add weight to what he is saying here. He is going to cut through the emotion that is so prevalent in situations like this and give some strong biblical guidance that should inform our thinking and our actions.

In other words, when you are facing a disagreement, and sin is starting to emerge, remember this:

1. *Jesus is Lord, not you (v. 4)*

The first theological point is simply a reminder that the person on whom you are tempted to pass judgment is the servant of Jesus Christ. Positively, this means that the Lordship of Christ releases all of us from the need to feel like it is up to us to determine what other people do or do not do. That issue belongs to Jesus because He is Lord. Negatively, this means that we need to remember who we are and not try to grab authority that does not belong to us.

Additionally, Paul reminds the weak brothers that the strong brothers are not going to stand before them on judgment day. They will stand before Christ. So the final accountability for our actions in life is an issue for Jesus to settle and determine, and it is by the power of Jesus that they will stand before Him – “the Lord is able to make him stand.”

⁴ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/essentials-unity-non-essentials-liberty-all-things/>

2. Being fully convinced is a personal issue (v. 5)

Verse 5 identifies that two people can consider an issue very differently. *“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike”* – that’s the problem. So, who is right? The answer: It depends. The issue is bigger than just days or agreement. This issue, unlike clear moral issues and the clear teachings of the Bible, rests as a matter of conscience. In other words, obedience on some things is not just a matter of right and wrong based upon an external code of conduct. There are times when right or wrong depends on what you personally believe. And that is why Paul says, *“Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind”* (v. 5b). Being fully convinced is a personal issue.

3. Both parties can honor God (v. 6)

The reason is beautiful. Paul wants the weaker and the stronger to know that both of them are honoring the Lord. So no one is fundamentally being sinful in what they are doing by eating or not eating or by honoring a festival or not honoring it. However, how we treat one another can certainly and quickly become sinful.

The commonality between the two different positions is that both honor the Lord because both give thanks to God. This highlights an important test related to conscience issues: Can I thank God for this? Can I do this as unto the Lord? Paul will use this same test in 1 Corinthians 10:30-31.

“If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:30–31, ESV)

The key is realizing that two people can see an issue differently. Both honor God and both give thanks, yet they differ on whether they can participate and glorify God. This is helpful as you encounter things that you are questioning. Ask yourself: *“Can I give thanks to God for this? Can I glorify Him as I am doing this?”*

4. We all belong to and live for Jesus (vv. 7-9)

In verses 7-9 Paul connects how we live to the fact that believers belong to Jesus. He’s trying to help us avoid disconnecting the gospel and Christ’s victory from living in freedom every day. One of the ways that gospel-freedom can be compromised and diminished is by a sense of judgment from others. It is not hard to be more motivated by what others will think of you than by what Jesus thinks about you. And *“opinion issues”* create a situation ripe for forgetting that Jesus purchased our freedom not just for the future, but even for now.

Paul elevates how we view our daily lives. In verse 7 he says that we don’t live or die to ourselves. There is something or someone more than ourselves involved in regard to how we live. In verse 8 he says very clearly that the other *“thing”* is Jesus. We live and die to the Lord because we belong to the Lord. And then verse 9 grounds all of this in the very purpose of Christ’s death and resurrection. In other words, Christianity is not just about our future; it is also about how we live now. We belong and live for Jesus right now.

5. *God is the final judge (vv. 10-13)*

This text ends with a final warning about judging a brother when he will ultimately stand before God and give an account of his life to Him. It is interesting to note that once again Paul speaks to both the weaker and the stronger brother. He asks the weak, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother?" And he asks the strong, "Why do you despise your brother?"

Both parties are pointed toward the day of future judgment, and Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23, which emphasizes the scope of God jurisdiction – "every knee . . . every tongue." No one will be left out. Every single person will stand before God. Verse 12 affirms this by saying, "*So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.*" The responsibility for choices rests between an individual and God.

As a result of this future judgment and the other four reasons, believers can welcome one another even though they have disagreements. They can treat one another with grace and love as brothers even if they have strong and emotionally-charged opinions that are different. The beauty of the gospel is that the body of Christ is comprised of people who have experienced the grace of God, and they see everything and everyone through that lens.

Closing Pastoral Thoughts

Digging into this passage and considering the implications for us as a church has been a wonderful experience this week, and I want to leave you with a few pastoral thoughts:

First, I want to commend you for the way that you do love each other. Our church has people from all kinds of backgrounds, church experiences, histories, and perspectives. I love the way that you are living out our values of extravagant grace and unity in the midst of diversity. Let's keep welcoming one another.

Second, be careful to really understand what Paul was talking about in Romans 14-15. Too often the term "weaker brother" is used as code for someone who is just more conservative. And "stumbling block" can be used for anything questionable. We need to know what really constitutes a weaker brother and what really constitutes a stumbling block, lest we use biblical terms to hide our disdain and our judgment.

Third, the way Paul handles this in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10 is to keep the gospel and brotherly love central, while working hard to triage the other issues. That takes wisdom, time, and great discernment. But that hard work is worth it because at the end of the day, the church is most lovely when, despite all of our differences, we are able, with ONE VOICE, to glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us welcome one another since Christ has welcomed us.

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