

Pastor Mark Hardy
January 19, 2014

**Relationships between “Strong” and “Weak” Believers
(Part 1)
Stop Criticizing One Another!
Romans 14:1-12**

Introduction:

In his book *Great Church Fights*, **Leslie Flynn** writes: “Wide disagreements exist today in our churches over certain practices. A Christian from the **South** may be repelled by a swimming party for both men and women, then offend his **Northern** brother by lighting up a cigarette. At an international conclave for missionaries, a woman from the **Orient** could not wear sandals with a clear conscience. A Christian from **western Canada** thought it worldly for a Christian acquaintance to wear a wedding ring, and a woman from **Europe** thought it almost immoral for a wife to not to wear a ring that signaled her status. A man from **Denmark** was pained to even watch **British** Bible school students play football, while the **British** students shrank from his pipe smoking.”

Many churches throughout the years have been **ripped apart** by even **smaller disagreements**. As Christ’s church we are to have **unity** within **diversity** of so many things: age, education, maturity, personalities, spiritual gifts, cultural and religious backgrounds, beliefs, and opinions. It is our **diversity** that often puts **strain** on us all. How do we truly “...**preserve** the **unity** of the Spirit in the **bond** of **peace**” (Eph. 4:3)? Paul addresses this very issue in the passage we will be looking at this morning.

As we continue on in our study of Romans, we now come to **14:1-15:13**, which can be **divided** into **four sections**: (14:1-12; 14:13-23; 15:1-6; 15:7-13). **Today**, we will be look at only the **first**. Turn in your Bible to **Romans 14**.

In Romans 14:1-12 we see three aspects of the specific problem in the church at Rome that was between the “strong” and the “weak” believers.

The ***first aspect*** is:

I. The Introduction to the Problem

- A. Look at **v. 1**: Now **accept** the one who is **weak in faith**, but not for the **purpose** of **passing judgment** on his **opinions**.
 1. Although Paul doesn't use the term “**strong**” believers until **15:1**, this is who he is **exhorting** here to “accept the one who is **weak in faith**.” The word “**accept**” (proslambanesthe) literally means “to take alongside oneself.”
 2. It refers to **warmly receiving** them into the church family with **no reservations** and **treating** them as dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for **Christian love** demands no less. The **present tense** of the word indicates a **continuing** attitude of acceptance.
 3. Now **who exactly** are these “**strong**” and “**weak**” believers in the church? Although there are **numerous views**, it is probably **best** to say that the “**weak in faith**” consisted primarily of Jewish Christians and also included some Gentile Christians.
 4. And the “**strong**” consisted primarily of Gentile Christians and also included some Jewish Christians. They made up the **majority** in the church at Rome.

5. Now to be “**weak in faith**” is not an **inadequate trust** in Jesus Christ as one’s Savior and Lord, nor is it being **easily overcome** by temptation. It refers to a believer’s **lack of understanding** into some of the **implications** of their faith in Christ.
Weakness of faith and **inadequate biblical understanding** go together.
6. **C.E.B. Cranfield** is correct when he says that it is a “...**weakness in assurance** that one’s faith **permits** one to do certain things.” (pg. 700).
7. The “**weak**” are **immature** and **uninstructed** believers who are not **strong enough** in their faith to enable them to **appreciate** and **exercise** their **freedom** in Christ. They are still carrying along some kind of **legalistic** baggage, which does not **nullify** the **authenticity** of their faith but does indicate a certain **deficiency** in it.
8. Therefore, the pejorative phrase “**weak in faith**” shows that Paul would hope that a **growth in Christ** and His **Word** would help those who were “**weak**” become “**strong**.”
9. On the contrary, the “**strong**” here are **mature** in the faith, have a **greater biblical knowledge**, and understand and enjoy their **liberty** in Christ, which **frees** them from the rules and regulations of **legalism** and **ceremonialism**. Although they may willingly **lay aside** their **liberty** in a particular area, possibly for the sake of not causing a **weaker brother** to **stumble**, they fully understand their **freedom** in Christ.
10. Now **doctrinally**, it is clear that Paul believes the **position** of the “**strong**” is **correct** (14:14a, 20), and whom he identifies

himself with in **15:1**. But Paul is concerned with the **unity** of the church here not merely who is **right** in regards to their Christian freedom.

11. Since the “**strong**” are better equipped to **understand** what he is saying, this is why Paul addresses them **first**.

B. Notice again that the “**strong**” are commanded to **accept** the “**weak**,” but Paul says at the end of **v. 1** “...but **not** for the **purpose** of **passing judgment** on his (i.e. the weak’s) **opinions**.”

1. It is not that the believer’s **freedom in Christ** should never be discussed with Christians who are still under **bondage** to some type of religious tradition, but here Paul tells the “**strong**” that they are to genuinely accept the “**weak**” without the **ulterior motive** of trying to **straightening** them out.

2. They are not to **challenge** the “**weak**” to a debate and quarrel over their differing “**opinions**” or **scruples**. This only makes them feel **inferior, unwanted, and second-class members** who are merely **tolerated**.

3. Now by telling the “**strong**” how to **relate** to the “**weak**” Paul is giving us a **glimpse** and **introducing** to us the **specific problem** that was going on in the Roman church. The issue here was not **moral compromise** or a **false gospel**, which Paul **fiercely resisted** with the **Galatians** (1:8; 4:9-10).

4. It had to do with **secondary, non-essential personal preferences** regarding **amoral** or **non-moral** things that are not directly **commanded** or **forbidden** by Scripture. This is why Paul calls for **mutual acceptance** between the “**strong**” and the “**weak**” (15:7).

5. Believers are not to **pass judgment** or **quarrel** over **matters of opinion** and give them **equal standing** with the Word of God! Instead, these **differences** are to be **accepted** and handled with **love**.
6. But they **weren't**, and that's the **problem!** An unknown author once wrote:

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

7. That's a **good description** of the **attitude problem** that was **prevalent** among the Roman believers. Our **fellowship** as believers is not to be **broken** over non-essential issues.
8. Paul goes on to say how we as believers can “**Agree to disagree in a loving way**” on such non-essentials issues and still maintain **unity** in the church (14:19).
9. The **second aspect** of the specific problem in the church at Rome is this:

II. Two Examples underlying the Problem

- A. In **vv. 2-6** Paul gives **two examples** of the differing opinions between the “**strong**” and the “**weak.**” The **first example** pertained to **dietary issues**, in particular the **eating of meat**.

Look at v. 2: One person (i.e. the **strong**) has **faith** that he may **eat all things**, but he who is **weak** eats **vegetables only**.

1. Although **Romans 14-15** is similar to **1 Corinthians 8-10** the situations are very different, in that, here we are not told that the **meat** was **sacrificed** to **idols**, which was the case in **Corinth**. Therefore, we don't know **exactly** what Paul is referring to.
 2. However, whatever was going on we are told that the "**faith**" of the "**strong**" enabled them to **appreciate** and **exercise** their **freedom** in Christ to "**eat all things**" (v. 14; Mk. 7:18-19; Acts 10:15-16; 1 Tim. 4:3-4; 5:23).
 3. And yet, the "**weak eats vegetables only**." Notice that there is no mention of "**faith**" with them because they were "**weak in faith**," in their **assurance** and **confidence** of what their faith **permits** them to do.
 4. Paul doesn't give the **reason** for the "**weak**" being a **vegetarian**. Possibly it was out of concern to **maintain** Old Testament laws of **purity** thinking that in doing so they would **better please** God.
 5. Although Paul does not make an issue out of this area of personal preference, he does see that both the "**strong**" and the "**weak**" are **wrong** in how they **relate** to each other over this. He therefore **rebukes** each side.
- B. Look at v. 3: The one who **eats** (i.e. the **strong**) is not to **regard with contempt** the one who **does not eat** (i.e. the **weak**), and the one who **does not eat** (i.e. the **weak**) is not to **judge** the one who **eats** (i.e. the **strong**), for **God** has **accepted him**.

1. Paul's **choice of words** to describe the **attitudes** of each group is very **deliberate**. The word "**contempt**" (exoutheneito) refers to a disdainful, condescending attitude that the "**strong**" often have toward the "**weak**."
2. It's very easy for the "**liberated**" to look down on and ridicule the **sensitivities** of those they consider to be "**legalistic**" and self-righteous.
3. The word "**judge**" (krineto) refers to an attitude of **judgmentalism** that the "**weak**" often have toward the "**strong**." It's very easy for the "weak" who believe themselves to be the "**truly committed**" and alone **uphold the true standards** of purity to perceive the "**strong**" as being **irresponsible at best and liberal, unspiritual, and even sinful at worst**.
4. Although the **eating or not eating** of certain foods is not in itself a **moral issue** but a matter of **personal preference**, it can become a **moral issue** when not handled properly. And that's **exactly** what happened in the Roman church.
5. The **attitudes** of both groups are **wrong!** Therefore, Paul calls them to **stop criticizing** one another!
6. Notice why Paul says the "**weak**" are not to **judge** the "**strong**" at the end of **v. 3**, "...for **God** has **accepted him**" (i.e. the strong believer).
7. Since God Himself has **accepted** the "**strong**," it is absolutely **inappropriate** for the "**weak**" to **judge** them in the realm of **personal preferences!** **John MacArthur** said it like this, "**Paul's point** is that, if God Himself does not make an issue of

such things, what **right** does one of His children have to do so? If the **strong** and the **weak** have **equal acceptance by** and **fellowship with** the Lord, it is **sinful arrogance** for those two kinds of believers not to **accept** each other.” (pg. 279)

8. **Beloved**, God alone is the one who decides the requirements for Christian fellowship in the church as outlined in His Word, not us.
- C. Paul then **drives home** the **point** why the “**weak**” are not to **judge** the “**strong**” in v. 4: **Who are you** to **judge** the **servant** of another? To his **own master** he **stands** or **falls**; and he will **stand**, for the **Lord** is able to make him stand.
1. The word “**servant**” (oiketen) here refers to a **household slave** living in the house of his master. Since the “**strong**” believer is the Lord’s servant, like the “weak,” he “**stands** or **falls**”—is **accepted** or **unaccepted**—by his **own Master** alone.
 2. The **principle** is this: No one has any **right** to criticize another man’s servant, for the servant is **answerable** to his Master alone. Therefore, for the “**weak**” to **judge** the “**strong**” is to try to **play God**, which is **none** of our business!
 3. Paul then says, “...and he (i.e. the strong) **will stand**, for the Lord is **able** to **make** him **stand**.” Regardless of what other Christians may **say** or **do** to us it is the Lord Jesus who provides us the **strength** to **stand**.
 4. God **promises** that those whom He has **called** to **salvation** will **persevere** to the end since the Lord will **complete** what He has started in us (1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6).

D. Paul now gives the **second example** of differing opinions between the “**strong**” and the “**weak**.” This one pertains to **day issues**, the observance of particular **days**. Look at **v. 5**: One person (i.e. the **weak**) regards **one day** above another, another (i.e. the **strong**) regards **every day** alike. Each person must be **fully convinced** in his own mind.

1. Still **influenced** in his conscience by some kind of legalistic teaching, the “**weak**” **regards** or **esteems** one day to be **holier** or **more important** than another day. Again, we don’t know whether this had to do with the observance of the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday), one of the great Jewish festivals, or regular days of fasting.
2. However, the “**strong**” “**regards** every day alike.” To them every day is an opportunity to be filled with the Spirit, and to live it to the glory of God.
3. Notice that Paul’s advice to both groups at the end of **v. 5** is simply: **Each person** must be **fully convinced** in his **own mind**.” To be “**fully convinced**” requires that you **think** things through, **pray**, and **study** yourself into the **convictions** that you believe is **right for you**.
4. And we must **allow others** to do the **same thing** for themselves. In matters that are not specifically commanded or forbidden in Scripture, our **actions** should always be **dictated** by **personal conviction** and **conscience** not simply because other people do them.
5. Since our **conscience** represents what we **actually believe** to be **right**, to go **against** it is to do that which we **believe** is

wrong. Although an act **in itself** may not be **sinful**, it is **sin** for those who are **convinced** in their own minds that it is **wrong**.

6. Therefore, the **principle** here is this: No one is to do what is **contrary** to the **dictates** of his own **conscience** as informed by the Word of God.
7. This is why even though to regarding one day over another is a **weakness**, since it didn't involve the **perverting** of the gospel (Gal. 4:10-11) but was merely a **personal preference** (Col. 2:14, 16-17), Paul could say that **both perspectives** were **acceptable** to God!

E. He **explains why** in v. 6: He (i.e. the weak) who **observes** the **day**, observes it **for the Lord**, and he (i.e. the **strong**) who **eats**, does so **for the Lord**, for he **gives thanks** to God; and he (i.e. the **weak**) who **eats not, for the Lord** he does not eat, and **gives thanks** to God.

1. Notice **three times** in this verse that both groups of believers—the “**weak**” and the “**strong**”—are doing what they do “**for the Lord.**” **Never forget** that being “**weak in faith**” is not **inconsistent** with **sincere devotion** to Christ.
2. Both groups **believe** that they are **truly serving Christ** and desire to **glorify** Him, as **evidenced** by the fact that they both “**give thanks** to God” for what they eat.
3. Although their **actions** were **different**, their **motive** was the **same**.
4. The **third aspect** of the specific problem in the church at Rome is this:

III. Corrective Insights for the Problem

- A. Paul now **explains** what it means for believers to **live** and **die** “**for the Lord**” in vv. 7-9: For not one of us **lives** for himself, and not one **dies** for himself; for if we **live**, we **live for the Lord**, or if we **die**, we **die for the Lord**; therefore whether we **live** or **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**.
1. **First** we see, that Paul gives **corrective insights** based on the fact that Christ is the **universal Lord**.
 2. The **two** most **basic parts** of our Christian experience is **life** and **death**. Both **life** and **death** are not under **our control** but are in the hands of the Lord, who is **sovereign** over both.
 3. Whether we as believers are “**weak**” or “**strong**,” we **live** or **die** “**for the Lord**.” In all of **life** and even at the hour of **death**, we are the Lord’s; we **belong** to Him.
 4. For **1 Corinthians 6:19-20** says, “...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that **you are not your own**? For you have been **bought** with a **price**: therefore **glorify** God in your body.”
 5. And **2 Corinthians 5:15** states, “And He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.”
 6. It was for this **very reason** that Christ **died** and **rose again**. Paul says in v. 9: For to **this end** Christ **died** and **lived again**, that He might be **Lord** both of the **dead** and of the **living**.
 7. **Douglas Moo** accurately states, “Christ’s **death** and **resurrection** have **established** him as **Lord** over **all believers**; and believers must therefore **recognize** that **all** their

activities are done ‘**for the benefit of**’ that **Lord**—and not **for the benefit** of any other Christian who may presume to **judge** us or any of our actions. These verses are therefore the **heart** of Paul’s **rebuke** of the Roman Christians for their judgmental attitudes (vv. 1-12).” (pg. 844)

8. As believers, “**weak**” and “**strong**” alike, we all have the **same Lord Jesus Christ** and we live and die under His Lordship. Therefore, we are not in any sense one another’s **lords** who have the **right** to **criticize** one another!

B. **Second** we see that Paul gives **corrective insights** based on the fact that Christ is the **universal Judge**. Look at **v. 10**: But you, **why do you judge your brother?** Or you again, **why do you regard your brother with contempt?** (Stop there)

1. Here Paul asks **two piercing questions**. The **first** is addressed to the “**weak**:” But **you, why do you judge your brother?**
2. The **second** is addressed to the “**strong**:” Or **you** again, **why do you regard your brother with contempt?** Both questions are **rebukes** and **reiterate** the commands he gave to each group in **v. 3**.
3. Notice that **twice** Paul uses the term “**brother**” (adelphon) to emphasize the God-given **unity** that “**weak**” and “**strong**” believers already have in being part of the **one family of God**.
4. Therefore, in asking these questions Paul in effect is saying, “Because of who you are as **brothers** in Christ, stop trying to **play God** by **judging** one another.”

5. When Jesus said in **Matthew 7:1**, “Do not **judge** so that you will not be judged,” He was referring to **judging** in the sense of **passing judgment** on others and **condemning** them.
 6. He was not forbidding making **discerning evaluations** of others concerning **sin** and **false teaching**. For he went on to tell us we must **first** take the **log** out of our own eye before we can take the **speck** out of our brother’s eye (vv. 3-5). And to “Beware of the false prophets” (v. 15).
- C. Paul tells us the **reason** we are not to **judge** one another **wrongly** at the end of **v. 10: For** we will **all stand** before the **judgment seat of God**.
1. There is **no problem** that here it says “the **judgment seat of God**” and in **2 Corinthians 5:10** it says “the **judgment seat of Christ**.” This is because not only will **God the Father** judge everyone through the agency of **Christ** (John 5:22-23, 27, 29; Acts 17:31), but also because **Christ Himself is God**.
 2. Both are talking about the **same judgment**—the **Bema Seat** where the Lord Jesus Christ will judge **only believers**, as opposed to the **Great White Throne Judgment** where **unbelievers** will be judged (Rev. 20:11-15).
 3. The **Lord Jesus Christ** is the universal **Judge**. It is to **Him alone** and no other Christians that every believer will one day **stand** and “...each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).
 4. The issue of the believer’s **eternal destiny** will not be at stake there (Jn. 3:18; 5:24), for that has already been settled by saving

faith in Christ (8:1). But it is there that all of our **service** and **motives** will be under review (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 4:4-5).

- D. Paul then **proves his point** that God alone is Judge by quoting **Isaiah 49:18** and **45:23** for his own purposes in **v. 11**: For it is written, “AS I LIVE, SAYS THE **LORD, EVERY KNEE WILL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.**
1. This is **similar** to what Paul said in **Philippians 2:9-11**.
 2. **Bowing** of the **knee** and the **praising** of the **tongue** indicate our **absolute submission** to **Jesus Christ** who is the **sovereign Lord** and **Judge** of the universe.
- E. Paul finally **concludes** with a statement whereby every word is emphatic in **v. 12**: So then **each one** of us will **give an account** of **himself** to God.
1. Each and every one of us as believers are going personally “**give an account**” or **reckoning** of ourselves before the **all-knowing Judge** of the universe. **No believer is exempt!**
 2. Therefore, since it is to **Christ alone** that every believer will one day stand this leaves **no room** for us to be **criticizing** and **judging** one another.

Conclusion:

In closing, what a **challenge** to not **criticize** and **judge** our Christian brothers and sisters in the things of **personal preference**, which the Bible does not directly **command** or **forbid!** In these **differing matters of opinion** we are called to **accept** one another as

God has **accepted** us. **Biblical “agape” love**, which we saw in **chapters 12-13**, is to be the **umpire** in all of these areas of **disagreement**.

Perhaps **Augustine** said it **best**: In **essentials, unity**; in **non-essentials, liberty, in all things, charity**,” which is **love**.