

When We Don't Agree: Accept One Another

Romans 14:1 – 15:7

Turn to Romans 14:1. Paul's Letter to Rome teaches us why Jews and Gentiles can be at peace with each other in the same church. Jews and Gentiles in the church isn't a problem anymore, but it was a big challenge in the NT churches. And being at peace with each other is no easier now, as far as that goes.

The only part of Romans where we can tell there was actually tension in the church is in Romans 14, and the beginning of 15. Paul never mentions Jews and Gentiles in this section, although as soon as it's over, beginning in 15:8, he writes about Jews and Gentiles praising God together.

But there's no doubt that the difficulties come from how the OT taught Israelites to live, and the problem is particularly about food. The OT has strict food laws for God's people. Remember Peter, when God gave him the vision of the unclean animals, and told him to kill and eat. Peter said, "Lord, surely not, I've never eaten anything unclean!"

That was true, and common for devout Jews in Rome, too. We know from the NT that the early Christians ate together often, normally every week. God made clear in Acts that devout Jews were no longer bound by his OT food laws, but not every devout Jew heard about that.

The church in Rome was started very early, but not by apostles. It probably began with Jews who were at Pentecost, but did not hear about what happened to Peter, so they didn't know all food was okay now. Now there were Gentiles in the church, and it was a problem.

So this Scripture is about disagreements in the church that are not about something God has been clear about. God has been clear that we don't lie, we don't steal, we don't commit adultery, we don't covet, and things like that. Romans 14 are about less important matters.

That does not mean God has no opinion. But it does mean there are things where devout believers disagree, where it is not so easy to sort out what God wants.

Accept One Another, Don't Despise, and Don't Condemn

*Romans 14:1-4 Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not despise the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.*

Accept the one whose faith is weak. In our current debates about covid and government regulations, we all think the other side has weak faith. Let's go with that, then. Assume your faith is strong. God calls the strong to accept the weak. Accept the one who differs, and not to quarrel or argue. Just accept them. God has accepted them. Remember that. God accepts them.

In Rome the one with strict food rules was weak, and the one without food rules was strong. Do not despise the one you are sure is stricter than they need to be. Do not condemn the one you are sure is careless about God's will. Don't despise, don't condemn. Instead welcome them.

*14:5-6 One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.*

People on both sides of these debates are doing what they do because they want to honour the Lord. People on both sides take what God has given, and thank him for it. Do not condemn what they do, or despise them for it, when they do it genuinely before the Lord.

Leave the Judging to the Lord

*14:6-13:a - For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God." So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.*

You and I are not the judges. We all have a judge. That job is already taken. The Lord himself will be our judge. "We will all stand before God's judgement seat... Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God." 2 Cor 5:10: *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

We don't talk about this much, that's too bad. Our oversimplified gospel ignores this. But Jesus says it, and Paul says it, and it is in Revelation. *We will all stand before God's judgement seat... Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*

This is an individual matter, each one of us will face Christ. Our Judge is our Redeemer, it is true, but is also true that our Redeemer will be our Judge. Everyone is appointed once to die, and then the judgement. So, let's leave the judging to the Lord.

What's Best for my Brother and Sister?

14:13b – 19 *Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and building each other up.*

I remember my home church pastor preaching on Romans 14, the same kind of sermon I'm doing now. He said he was surprised and puzzled that Romans 14 seems to say that the one with less rules had stronger faith. It sure seemed to him to say that, although he could hardly believe it was true. But in the debate of Romans 14, that is true.

Where we disagree, my brothers and sisters, that does not mean God has no opinion. He does. If Paul were here he would tell us which take on the covid controversy showed stronger faith in the Lord. But Paul's not here, so we will leave that alone.

We do know is that the kingdom of God is righteousness, joy, and peace. Righteousness here means be completely humble and gentle, bearing with one another in love. That's righteousness.

In our Scripture today, being right counts for very little. What counts is that we accept and receive one another rather than arguing, condemning, despising, and judging. In that sense, the will of God here is unmistakable.

What does it Mean to Offend a Brother or Sister?

14:20-21 – *Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.*

Did you notice the word “destroy” here? *Do not **destroy** the work of God for the sake of food.* It's also in v15 – *do not by your freedom **destroy** someone for whom Christ died.* And don't *cause your brother or sister to **fall**.* We're not talking here about what makes someone else grumpy, we're talking about what causes someone to lose their faith.

We work very hard to pursue peace and to be good for each other. This Scripture can be used like a club, “what you are doing offends me so Romans 14 says you have to stop.” It's not quite that simple, the offense is something that could end their faith. We are sometimes displeased with each other in matters that do not threaten anyone's faith.

This is not about that, except that we all pursue righteousness, peace, and joy, and what's good for our brother or sister.

### Respect your Conscience

*14:22-23 - So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever is double-minded is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.*

There's a place to educate our conscience. Things we thought were okay are not okay, God calls us away from that. And sometimes we learn that things we thought offended God don't, we're free to do that. That needs to happen in both directions. Don't naively follow your conscience. Take it seriously, but also evaluate it, because our consciences are *not* always right.

But don't do what you're uncomfortable with just because someone else says it's okay. If you're not convinced that God accepts something others say is okay, then leave it alone.

### Don't Just Please Yourself, Instead Make Yourself More Acceptable.

*15:1-4 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.*

There are people around you who do not see the true teaching of God as clearly as you do. Bear with them. You don't need to please yourself. Bear with them. Be like Christ toward them. Just because you are right does not mean this needs to go your way. God accepts them as they are.

In the 70s it was cool for young men to have long hair and beards. Most churches had some people who did not like this. I know a young Christian man in those days had long hair and a beard. He was strongly convinced that God did not care. But he also wanted to serve the church.

So he cut his hair, and shaved his face, so he could serve the church. He was certain that God did not care about his hair length, he did not change his mind about that. But he wanted to serve, so he submitted. Those people loved him, and he loved them. He was a good minister. He had his freedom to himself before God. He had the biggest freedom: he was free to submit.

There's a story like this in Acts. Acts 15 is the story of a big church conference in Jerusalem. They are deciding if uncircumcised men need to be circumcised for God to accept them completely into his people.

Do Gentiles need to keep the Law of Moses, in particular, do the men need to be circumcised. Paul and Barnabas were there, and Peter, and James the Lord's brother, many leaders. And they listened to the stories of how God accepted uncircumcised people and gave them the Holy Spirit.

They decided together that no, uncircumcised believers do not need to be circumcised to be fully received by God. That's Acts 15. Right at the beginning of the next chapter, Acts 16, Paul and Silas meet Timothy, a godly young man, and they decide to take Timothy along with them.

But Timothy was not circumcised. His mother was Jewish, but his father was a Gentile, and Timothy was not circumcised. So Paul had him circumcised, no fuss or debate at all, of course Timothy has to be circumcised. And he was. Why? Did God care? No. But they would meet with lots of conservative Jews, and that was the only way to make those people comfortable.

Was Paul not compromising his principles? Not at all. Paul's first principle was to be like Christ. Think like Christ, Paul said. Christ emptied himself, and became a slave. Christ humbled himself, and became obedient to death.

We like freedom. Freedom in North America is not like freedom in the Bible, it is the opposite of submitting. In the Bible, the only freedom that really counts is freedom to submit to the common good. That's the freedom that the Spirit brings, joyful submission to the common good.

Circumcision was painful, made you ill, and could cause infection. Inconvenient. Pleasing others will be inconvenient for us, to bear with them and not please ourselves. But Christ did what was inconvenient so he could have us. He did not please himself, so he could be good to us.

What we Need from God: Endurance and Encouragement

*15:5-6 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

We all need God to give us endurance and encouragement for us to see the weak who fail as Christ sees them. O God, give us endurance and encourage us, so we can accept one another, so that with one mind and voice we can bring glory and praise to you.

Last Call: Accept One Another

*15:7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*  
Rom 14: 1 began, *accept one another*, and the section ends the same way, *accept one another*.

Let's bring glory to God. Look at your weak and failing brothers and sisters. Think about how Christ accepts you. We'll treat one another as Christ treats us, and then we can praise God with one mind and voice, and bring glory to God. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, give us endurance, and encourage us, so we can accept one another as Christ accepted us. So can please others and not please ourselves, so we can praise you with one mind and one voice. It would be a great mercy and kindness from you, to lead us to this. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.