
ROMANS

PART 9: THE GOSPEL IN EVERYDAY LIFE, PART 2

ROMANS 14:1-15:33

ROMANS OVERVIEW

PROLOGUE (ROMANS 1:1-17)

1. "THE WRATH OF GOD" (ROMANS 1:18-3:20)
2. "THE GRACE OF GOD" (ROMANS 3:21-4:25)
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CLOSING (ROMANS 16:1-27)

PART 9 OVERVIEW

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TENSION AND ITS REASONS: AN INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS 14:1-15:13

INTRODUCTION

- As a reminder, we get the impression that one of the primary reasons why Paul wrote the book of Romans is because of tension between two groups of people in the Roman church: tension between Christians who came from a Jewish background and Christians who came from a Gentile background.
- Though we can't say for certain, it seems as though the *primary* source of this tension comes especially from Christians from a Jewish background: they were having a hard time accepting their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ.
- Before we are too hard on the Jewish Christians, however, we need to understand what a shock it was to all of the sudden to embrace these former “pagans.”
- To help us understand how difficult this would have been, here's a fictional letter written by a Jewish Christian about what it was probably like to accept Gentile Christians into their life.

Dearest Mama,

I am half-joyful, half-heartsick and turn to you for help in this time of upheaval and hope. At first I feared this conflict stemmed from my own sinful pride—that I, a Jewish wife and mother, have always kept a clean, kosher home. Now, because our Messiah Jesus has come, I am expected to let little Sarah play and study with Dianna (our pagan neighbor child!) because she too has Jesus—although it seems to be in her own way. It is more than pride . . . it is conscience. We have struggled for centuries to keep the Law, to be pure, to please God, and here this little child simply believes and is accepted into God's Kingdom! Nothing in her is Jewish . . . except her Messiah.

Knowing the resurrected Christ Jesus as my Messiah, having the joy of His Spirit within me has given such peace yet excitement that I can hardly contain it! I hurry to share this Good News with the butcher, the milkman and anyone who will listen—why then, is it almost painful to open my heart and doors, and release my child to the goyim? To let her play with their pagan toys and eat their snacks? I am truly happy that the Holy Scriptures have been fulfilled not just for us, but for them as well . . . but here's the rub, that is so much “spiritual talk” while it is on the practical level that I ache. We have been taught not to so much as enter into a Gentile's home, and now it feels that I am breaking vows and a way of life that defined who I was, letting it all go to become who I am in Christ my Messiah. I can hardly bear it.

Can you help me?

Your loving daughter

- Jeannine K. Brown, *Matthew*

INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS 14:1-15:13

THE SPECIFIC PROBLEM IN ROME

- In many ways, Romans 14:1-15:33 is the focal point of the book of Romans; all of Romans has been leading up to this section: here Paul talks about the specific issue facing the Roman church and causing division.

- Paul frames this battle as a battle between the “weak” and the “strong.”

*We who are **strong** ought to bear with the failings of the **weak** and not to please ourselves.* – ROMANS 15:1 NIV

- As we read through Romans 14:1-15:33, there are a few things he says about each.

The “Weak”	The “Strong”
Believe it is wrong to eat meat and so they only eat vegetables (14:2)	Believe that every food is “clean” and able to be eaten (14:2, 14)
Believe that certain days are “special” and needed to be celebrated and treated as such (14:5)	Believe that every day is the same (14:5)
Believe that a Christian needs to abstain from wine (?) (14:21)	Believe that wine is acceptable for a Christian to drink (14:21)

- The practice of the “weak” looks very similar to the commitments Daniel and his friends made while serving in Nebuchadnezzar’s court in Babylon (see Daniel 1).

- Thus, the debate seems to be centered on **the extent to which the Old Testament laws and traditions should still be practiced by Christians today as a means to please God, and to maintain purity and separation from the pagan world.**

- The “weak” believed that Christians should still follow parts of the Old Testament to please God and maintain separation from the pagan world. **The “weak” therefore are most likely Christians from a Jewish background.**
- The “strong” however, do not believe that Christians have any responsibility or obligation to follow the Old Testament practices. **The “strong” therefore are most likely Christians from a Jewish background.** (Though it is to be noted that Paul puts himself in the category of the “strong” – 15:1; notice the “we.”)

- Paul makes it clear that this issue has the potential to tear this church apart; Paul himself says that there is danger that the “work of God” may be “destroyed” because of this issue (14:15).

- How does Paul suggest this church handle the issue? The answer may surprise us!

WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE:

ROMANS 14:1-15:13

- Paul's argument in Romans 14:1-15:13 is long and, at times, circles back on itself several times: Paul makes the same point over and over again in several places.
- As we study all that Paul says, however, we see five broad points that Paul makes. They are:
 1. There *are* "disputable matters" (i.e. "grey areas") in the Christian faith.
 2. On these "disputable matters," our primary focus is to maintain church unity, not necessarily to change opinion
 3. On a "disputable matter," we should never go against our own conscience; this is a sin.
 4. On a "disputable matter," we should never force someone else to go against their own conscience; this also is a sin.
 5. At all times, we are to be willing to limit our freedoms to preserve other people's faith and conscience before God. This is following the example of Christ.
- We'll take a look at each of these in turn.

1. There are "disputable" matters (i.e. "grey areas") in the Christian faith.
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- Paul begins this section by stating the following:

*Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over **disputable matters**.* – ROMANS 14:1 NIV

- The phrase "disputable matters" introduces a concept into the Christian faith that theologians call "adiaphora" or "secondary matters":

adiaphora: literally, "indifferent things"; "things neither prohibited nor required by the Christian faith"¹

- "Adiaphora" are issues that **are not central to the Christian faith** on which **well-meaning, God-honoring, and Bible-believing Christians disagree.**

- It is clear from Paul's letters that there are some issues in the Christian faith that are so important that if Christians are wrong on these issues, their very salvation is at stake. In these situations, Paul has no problem correcting error and making sure people believe the truth.

¹ Douglas Moo, *Encountering Romans*

WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE: ROMANS 14:1-15:13

6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! – GALATIANS 1:6-9 NIV

- Here we see how strongly Paul comes out against those teaching false doctrine in the Galatian church; the issue going on in this church is a matter central to salvation and so Paul makes it clear that this church cannot tolerate those who are teaching different things.
- There are other issues, however, that are not central to the faith or to salvation for which there can exist disagreement, and Christians need to learn to tolerate and embrace other Christians even if they believe differently from us.
- Determining what these “adiaphora” or “secondary” issues are is not always easy and requires discernment; Christians might even differ as to what is “adiaphora” and what is not.

not “adiaphora”: salvation by grace alone through faith alone; the necessity of Jesus for salvation; the divinity of Jesus; the existence of the Trinity; the inspiration and authoritative nature of the Bible; the crucifixion of Jesus; the bodily resurrection of Jesus; the future return of Christ, etc.

“adiaphora”: the timing and sequence of the events at the end of time; specific beliefs about baptism; specific beliefs about communion; eternal security; etc.

- The debate that exists in the Romans church is clearly a matter of “adiaphora” by Paul. The Jewish Christians are *not* teaching that following parts of Old Testament law is necessary for salvation (as was going on in the Galatian church); instead, they believed that obeying certain parts of the Old Testament law was a more God-honoring way to live.
- So what do we do when we face these issues in the church? We deal with that next.

2. On these “disputable matters,” our primary focus is to maintain church unity, not necessarily to change opinion.
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- It is very clear as we read Romans 14-15 that Paul holds a certain belief about the issue facing the Romans and (unsurprisingly), he believes his opinion is right:

I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself... – ROMANS 14:14A

WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE: ROMANS 14:1-15:13

- Despite this, however, Paul’s burden in Romans 14-15 is not to convince the “weak” that it’s OK to eat anything. Because Paul views this as a “secondary matter” and not essential to the faith, Paul’s burden is for the church to be unified and for each “side” in this argument to embrace the other:

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. (14:1 NIV)

The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt 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. (14:3)

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore... (14:13a)

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. (14:19)

¹ We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ² Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. (15:1-2)

- We see in this one of Paul’s primary desires that we have come back to time and time again: unity in God’s church. It is a tragic thing when a church cannot stay unified over (ultimately) trivial matters.
- One of the reasons why Paul doesn’t enforce his view on those who believe differently than him is because of our next point.

3. On a “disputable matter,” we should never go against our own conscience; this is a sin.

- One of the surprising points that Paul makes in this passage is if **anyone disobeys their own conscience on a “disputable” matter, they have committed a sin.**
 - Even though Paul believes that all food is clean (14:14a), if someone believes that some food is *not* clean, but—perhaps out of peer pressure—eats that food, in disobeying their conscience they have actually sinned.

*I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; **but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.** – ROMANS 14:14*

But he who doubts [that something is OK to eat] is condemned if he eats [it], because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin. – ROMANS 14:23
 - Thus here Paul is **redefining sin**: “sin” is not necessarily defined by an objective set of “rights” or “wrongs.” Something may be allowed for me in the Bible, but if I am doing something for the wrong reasons and/or disobeying my conscience in doing something, that which is “technically” allowed has become for me a “sin!”
- This is because we all in this life should be trying to live for God. And if we willingly do something that we believe is against what God would want us to do, we are not putting God first—and that is a sin.

WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE: ROMANS 14:1-15:13

⁵ One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸ 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. – ROMANS 14:5-8

- Thus we are called **never to disobey our conscience before God.** Once we are “fully convinced in our own mind” (Romans 14:5) about something, we need to follow through with it—no matter how much pressure we might get from other Christians to behave differently.

4. On a “disputable matter,” we should never force someone else to go against their own conscience; this also is a sin.

- The fourth point comes naturally out of the third: if it is a sin for someone to disobey their own conscience in a “disputable matter,” then we should never force a Christian to disobey their conscience on something about which they believe differently than us.
- Paul makes this point a couple of times in this passage:

¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. ¹⁴ I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵ For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. – ROMANS 14:13-17

*¹⁹ So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. ²⁰ Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. ²¹ **It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.** – ROMANS 14:19-21*

- It is interesting to note that Paul comes down harder on the “strong” than he does the “weak”: the strong have a responsibility to not do anything that would cause another person to disobey their conscience. It is the “strong’s” responsibility to watch out for their brother and sister in Christ, keeping them “honest” before God.

5. At all times, we are to be willing to limit our freedoms to preserve other people's faith and conscience before God. This is following the example of Christ.

- Finally, as Paul often does, he roots all that he has been talking about in the example and character of Christ: since Christ accepted us despite our failings and shortcomings, we need to accept one another despite their failings and shortcomings.

³ For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.” ... ⁵ Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁷ Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. – ROMANS 15:3, 5-7

WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE: ROMANS 14:1-15:13

- We are not to judge one another, therefore; only God is to judge us.

¹⁰ But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” ¹² So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore... – ROMANS 14:10-13

- One final thing: it is important to note that Paul is addressing a real threat—not a perceived threat. Christians do not have to limit their liberties if there is not a reason to do so in a given church.
- Paul then concludes this section by quoting several Old Testament passages declaring the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in God’s Kingdom together—a fitting end to this section of Romans.

⁸ For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, ⁹ and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written,

*“Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles,
And I will sing to Your name.”*

*¹⁰ Again he says,
“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.”*

*¹¹ And again,
“Praise the Lord all you Gentiles,
And let all the peoples praise Him.”*

*¹² Again Isaiah says,
“There shall come the root of Jesse,
And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles,
In Him shall the Gentiles hope.”*

¹³ Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

– ROMANS 15:8-13

CARRYING ON JESUS' MISSION:

ROMANS 15:14-33

- Paul concludes the final section of Romans (before the epilogue in Romans 16) with a reaffirmation of his calling and commitment to the Gentiles:

14 And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. 15 But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, 16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. 17 Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. 18 For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, 19 in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. 20 And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; 21 but as it is written, "They who had no news of Him shall see, And they who have not heard shall understand."

– ROMANS 15:14-21

- Paul then details his travel plans to the Roman church, which he hopes will include a trip to the church in Rome:

22 For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; 23 but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you 24 whenever I go to Spain—for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while— 25 but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. 27 Yes, they were pleased to do so, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. 28 Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. 29 I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

30 Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, 31 that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; 32 so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find refreshing rest in your company. 33 Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen.

– ROMANS 15:22-33

- Paul includes in this final section a discussion about an offering that he is raising for the church in Jerusalem. This is a repeated theme in Paul's letters (see also 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:5).
- For Paul, this collection was no small issue; it was a tangible way to exemplify unity among Jewish and Gentile Christians—one of Paul's major burdens!

APPLICATION: WORKING THROUGH DIFFERENCES

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” – ROMANS 14:19

1. One of the reasons why Paul had to so emphasize unity in his letters was because at the time of Paul’s writings, there was only one church in a city. And so if Christians disagreed with one another, they didn’t have another church to go to. Thus Christians had to fight through their differences and maintain unity.
2. This is obviously not the case today: if you don’t like what is going on at one church, it’s usually just a short drive to find another church.
3. This has caused us to adopt “consumer” mentality in the church these days, where we treat churches not unlike fast food places: there’s a church out there for every personality, every political belief, every opinion.
4. I think this is unfortunate and not how God designed the church. I also think this shortchanges a key part of our spiritual growth as Christians: it seems to me that in God’s Kingdom, learning to tolerate brothers and sisters in Christ who believe differently than us is more important than being around people who think exactly the same way that we do.
5. There are definitely some issues that are big enough that if a church doesn’t get it right, it is necessary to leave that church. But most of the issues that people leave a church over, I don’t believe, rise to that level.
6. I believe when we stand before God at the end of time, God is going to be just as (if not more) interested in how we sought to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19) as He will be in whether or not we are “right” in every situation.
7. Therefore, our question for this session:

What can you do to build up others in your church community this week—even if (especially if) you believe differently than them on something?

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Read the letter at the bottom of pg. 95. React to it. How does it help you sympathize with the situation of the Jewish Christians in Rome? Are there any analogous situations in your own life that you can relate to?²
2. Read Romans 14:1-9. How does Paul begin trying to address the conflict going on between the “weak” and the “strong” in Rome? What stands out to you about what he says?
3. Read Romans 14:10-12.
 - a. What is Paul’s point here? According to Paul, why are we not to judge one another?
 - b. Over what “disputable matters” in today’s church are we in danger of judging one another?
4. One of the points that we made in this study is that on essential matters to the Christian faith, we must be unified. But on “*adiaphora*” or “*disputable matters*” it is OK to agree.
 - a. Look at the list of things that are *adiaphora* and **not** *adiaphora* in the middle of pg. 98. Is there anything you think is in the wrong category? Is there anything you would add to either category? Explain your reasoning.
 - b. In general, how can we as believers know on which issues we can live with differences of opinion and which we cannot?
5. Read Romans 14:14 and Romans 14:23. Here we see Paul make the point that we should never go against our own conscience on an issue; if we do, this is a sin. Have you ever been tempted to go against your own conscience on a faith-related matter? How did you respond to that temptation?
6. Read Romans 15:1-6. How does this contribute to the larger argument that Paul is making in this section of Romans? According to Paul, what example did Christ set for us in this regard?
7. Read Romans 15:14-21. Here we see Paul explain the call that he believes God has put on his life. What stands out to you about what Paul says? What inspires you?
8. Read the 7 points on pg. 103 again.
 - a. How are we shortchanging our spiritual growth in the ability we have today to go to another church when we disagree with something at our present church? How would God have us try to resolve differences we have?
 - b. What can you do to build up others in your church community this week—even if (especially if) you believe differently than them on something?

² Some questions in this section adapted from N.T. Wright, *Romans (N.T. Wright Bible Studies for Everyone)*.