

## Lesson 34: Living With True Acceptance in Disagreement About Issues of Conscience

### Romans 14:1-12

<sup>1</sup> Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but* not for *the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions.

<sup>1a</sup> <sup>2</sup> One person has faith that he may eat all things,

<sup>2a</sup> but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*.

<sup>1b</sup> <sup>3</sup> The one who eats is not to regard with **contempt** the one who does not eat,

<sup>2b</sup> and the one who does not eat is not to **judge** the one who eats,  
for God has accepted him.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>1c</sup> <sup>5</sup> One person regards one day above another,

<sup>2c</sup> another regards every day *alike*.

**Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.**

<sup>2d</sup> <sup>6</sup> 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;

<sup>1d</sup> and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat,  
and gives thanks to God.

<sup>7</sup> For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

<sup>8</sup> **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.

<sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

<sup>2e</sup> <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> For it is written, "AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME,  
AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD."

<sup>12</sup> So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God

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### Introduction

In Romans chapter 14 we come to the longest and final scenario of Paul's application section. It covers 36 verses from 14:1-15:13. So, we will take three lessons to cover the whole section.

Paul's big idea exhortation is to accept one another. We get that command at the beginning in 14:1 and towards the end in 15:7. The command to accept is given to the strong and the weak. There is a disagreement going on here. And before we get into the text, I'll go ahead and tell you what I think the problem is all about.

*How specific is this issue to the Romans?*

Some interpreters argue that we should not think that Paul was aware of any issue going on in the Roman church. They see Paul's argument of the gospel in 1-11 and the other application issues in 12-13 as applying to any church in general. What we have here, then, is another issue that might apply generally to churches Paul experienced in his missionary work. They would put accepting one another in the same category as exhortation to live as members of a body and to submit to governing authorities. I do not think that is correct. I believe that Paul has shifted here to a specific issue affecting the Romans. As we will see, the issue fits a church that started with strong Jewish leadership but then transitioned to Gentile leadership. And also, Paul had plenty of friends in Rome like his co-workers Priscilla and Aquilla who may have given him a heads up about a particular challenge they faced in their house-churches.

Other interpreters go in the complete opposite direction, seeing this passage as the primary reason Paul wrote the letter in the first place. They notice Paul mentioning Jew and Gentiles directly in

about six passages and they notice the emphasis given to Gentile inclusion in chapters 9-11. And they argue that the whole gospel presentation in all of those chapters was written as a basis for addressing the practical problem of acceptance raised here in chapter 14. Now, the positive about this view is the correct recognition of Jew and Gentile inclusion as a consistent motif through Romans. And the correct recognition that it is related to the issue in chapter 14. The problem with the view is that it makes too much out of this issue. Consider the much more problematic issues addressed in churches like Galatia and 1 Corinthians. It is hard to believe that Paul spent 13 chapters here in Romans just to set up a base for addressing this problem in chapter 14. We also need to take care not to oversimplify Romans, just because we recognize this motif that is going on. In our second lesson of this series, we recognized that Paul's got multiple purposes for writing. He was writing Romans to introduce himself to that church, he was writing with a missional purpose, with an apologetic purpose, with a pastoral purpose. And as we think about it, each of these purposes is served theologically as Paul develops the theme of Jew and Gentile inclusion in the gospel. So, it is way oversimplifying to suggest that the only reason Paul wrote about all of this was so that he could address this problem that was going on. They are related, but it is more complicated than that.

This issue is not the main motive for Romans. That is going too far. But it is right to recognize that that a struggle to accept one another over issues relating to Jewish and Gentile experience of the gospel was causing real problems in Rome. And they are not problems that ended in the first century. The challenge to accept fellow Christians over similar issues continues in our communities.

So, we need to clarify exactly what was going on.

*Clarifying the issue (as observance of Mosaic ceremonial laws)*

In the passage, Paul is going to give us three examples of disagreements that the strong and the weak have with one another. First, he mentions disagreement over what a person should eat. Then he mentions the observance of certain days. And then he adds on drinking wine. Scholars have come up with a variety of possibilities of what issues these examples reflect. Are these ascetic Romans who forbid lavish eating and drinking? Are they the Stoics? Are they days that are connected to Pagan customs? Is Paul worried about people attending pagan celebrations of eating and drinking? What is going on?

Well, the text points strongly and clearly, I think, to the practice of certain Roman Christians, maybe mostly Jewish, who believe that Old Covenant ceremonial laws still apply to how a believer should ought to live out the Christian life. That understanding fits best with the motif that has run through the whole letter, regarding the inclusion of Jew and Gentile in the gospel of Jesus Christ and with recognizing that Paul is teaching that there is an end to the Mosaic covenant.

The issues reflect core issues to Jewish observance of the Mosaic Law which proscribes what foods may be eaten and what days are to be kept as holy Sabbaths. And Paul's strong language in 14:14 of clean versus unclean picks up the Jewish way of understanding these food and drink rules. Food and drink could be unclean either as a direct prohibition of the Mosaic code, no eating shrimp and no drinking blood. Those things are always unclean. Or food and drink could be unclean through an incorrect process of preparation. Clean kosher food requires attention to both content, what is the food actually made of, and how is it prepared.

There is no prohibition on wine in the Old Testament, but there may have been concern among Jews not to drink wine prepared by unclean hands with unclean implements or there may have been partially poured out in libation to the gods. If a Jew did not know the source of the meat or the wine, even if it was not a forbidden food or drink, the Jew might not eat or drink. Daniel made that very decision when he was taken to Babylon. Rather than risking eating something unclean, he ate only vegetables, and he just drank water. And in Daniel's case, as one clearly still under the Mosaic covenant, that was an upright and good decision. The question facing the Christians of Rome was whether any of these requirements still applied to them. Should they abstain like Daniel did?

*Clarifying the issue further (as a 2<sup>nd</sup> question rather than 1<sup>st</sup> question issue)*

Now, we need to define the issue even more specifically. If we have the promotion of Mosaic law from Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians, then we have to ask, "What were they saying about the importance of keeping those laws? Is it an issue of salvation or is it an issue of living out salvation? Is it a first question issue or is it a second question issue?" For comparison, we should consider Paul's words about such issues to the Galatians. When Peter stopped eating with Gentiles in Galatia, Paul confronted him publicly. Paul used very strong language in that letter over seemingly similar issues. The difference is that in Galatia Paul was dealing with a first question problem, and in Romans he is dealing with a second question problem. That is to say that in Galatians certain Jews had come preaching a legalistic emphasis on keeping the law which was perverting the gospel of grace. So, Paul says there, "Even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed," or "let him be damned." Paul does not mince words when someone threatens the answer to the first question of covenant, "What makes someone acceptable in the eyes of God?" The answer is 100% grace received by faith. Any attempt to mix in some law or some moral requirement will be met by Paul with extremely strong language.

Yet, here in Romans we see very calm and understanding language. And it is not a change made by an older Paul over against the words of a more intense younger Paul. The change is not in Paul. The issue is different. And to find middle ground between Galatians and Romans, we could also go to 1 Corinthians 9-10 and Colossians 2. The language addressing similar issues in those two letters is stronger than Romans and not as strong as Galatians. And this leads me to believe that we are solidly into a second question issue with the Romans. They are not asking about first question, "What makes me acceptable?" They are asking about, "Being accepted, how ought I live? How do I please God with my life as a response to grace?" The issue here in Romans is not a legalistic push for salvation by law but a belief that keeping these laws honors God. It is the belief that it is morally and spiritually right to do these things in our attempt to present ourselves to God as an acceptable offering and sacrifice. Paul validates this attempt to live for God, but he also urges further renewing of the mind to come to an even better understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

*Clarifying the issue even further (as an issue of conscience, not an opinion issue or sin issue)*

We can still get even a little more precise about the issues under consideration in these scenarios. We have said they are issues of conscience that have to do with keeping Jewish ceremonial laws. And we have said that they are not a first question issue but a second question issue. We are not saying I need to live out the law to gain salvation. But I want to obey these ceremonial laws as a way of giving honor to God, observing God's word. So, to get a little more precise we need to think about what is not going on here.

There is conflict among the strong and the weak, but it is more than a disagreement of opinion. I mentioned, for example, in our passage about spiritual gifts that conflict sometimes arises out of our positive motivations and passions for service. As the Holy Spirit is working in us, then we see things that need to be done. These are disagreements about the use of our resources and the strategic direction of our community. Should we spend more time and money on discipleship or more on caring for those in need? Do we need to hire a new music minister or a youth pastor? Are we contributing enough to international missions or should we think more about local evangelism? There is often not an obvious right or wrong decision connected to these disagreements. We have limited resources, limited people, limited time, limited money, that we have to figure out how are we going to use them.

On the other hand, we are also not talking about immorality in this passage. Paul is not recommending here that we accept the lifestyle of the sexually immoral or defend someone who acts hatefully or dismiss drunkenness. Those are all issues addressed in our previous section about how we ought to live in society, and that all those things belong to behaviors of the night but that we have awoken to the day. And we are not to live like that. That is not what we are talking about here. The weak are not the sinful in this scenario. And we are not begin told here how to handle

immorality in our communities. That is a different case. So, the way that Paul applies acceptance here would not apply in the same way if we were talking about immorality or sin.

What we are talking about here are issues of conscience, particularly in relation to ceremonial observance. Some brothers and sisters in the community believed that God wants Christians to keep the Mosaic food laws and to observe certain Mosaic holy days. They felt that it would be a sin to not do this. And others disagreed. They believed that the establishment of a new covenant in Jesus Christ has freed Christians from the ceremonial observances of the Mosaic code.

Now, we in our day, we experience these kinds of disagreements when we move from one denomination to another or from one generation to another or from one culture to another. Should we dress up to go to church? How important is that? Should we keep Sunday as the Sabbath? Should we raise our hands in worship? Is it permissible to clap? Should children be kept silent during worship? Should we attend evening service on Sunday? How important is it to go to prayer on Wednesday? How important is it to have a quiet time every single morning?

I've encountered a lot of these issues as a Southern American Protestant serving God in Croatia. Think about this. In Split we attended a brethren church that encourages head covering and uses real wine drunk out of one common communion cup during the Lord's supper. We met in a community center that had a photo of the current Pope on the wall. And one evening we invited our Cru students to join church members at the community center in watching a World Cup soccer game. So, a new student brought to our brethren church, which has a photo of the Pope on the wall, a keg of beer to share with everybody. And as I am just taking this all in, one of our church elders walks into the room. What is his first response? What's your response just hearing that story? Is there anything in there that strikes you as interesting or as odd or as out of place?

I remember forgetting to tell the members of a visiting American church team who came to our church that we drank wine, not grape juice, for the Lord's supper. And one of the women on the team had committed to never drinking alcohol. She had never put alcohol in her mouth. And she just assumed it was grape juice. How do you think she felt when she drank?

We have certain rules that we live by. They may come from our interpretation of the Bible or from our culture or from our church up-bringing or from a reaction against our church up-bringing. But whatever the rules are, we do not agree on all the same rules.

So, how do we respond to that kind of disagreement within the Christian community? Disagreement that is not clearly sin, but is also not simply disagreement over strategy or resources? These are issues that some have a strong conviction about and others do not.

Paul is going to help us think about how to approach such issues. The main thing is to accept one another. But it is not that simple, so we need to look closely at what he says and consider how to apply Paul's principles to our communities. We will consider now 14:1-12, and then we will pick up the rest in a later lesson. So, let's read the text, Romans 14:1-12.

### **[Romans 14:1-12]**

The pattern to these twelve verses is called a ring pattern. In the beginning, Paul addresses the problem with an exhortation, that's verses 1-3. Paul then comes back to restate the problem again at the end in verses 10-12. It's in verses 4-9 that he develops the problem. And that's where we are going to pick up our two principles to live by.

Let's consider the initial exhortation and statement of the problem. So, this will be 14:1-3.

#### **I. The Exhortation to Accept amidst disagreement of spiritual practice (14:1-3)**

It starts off, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but not for the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions." Paul addresses his exhortation to those who consider themselves strong. He tells them, "Accept the weak." So, we cannot get around the fact that Paul considers certain Christians weak in faith. Paul's making a distinction. As we go through the text, we will see that Paul does not

mean that they are weak in their faith in Jesus Christ. He is using faith here in a broader sense. Their faith is what they believe. It is the gospel. They are weak in some aspect of their understanding of the implications of the gospel. They have not figured out how to apply the gospel correctly to certain aspects of life.

And Paul expects the strong to accept the weak. The Greek word literally means to welcome. So, to accept is to receive, to welcome. The strong are not supposed to do this for the purpose of passing judgment on the opinions of the weak. They are not to treat the weak as weak or as second-class citizens. They are not to invite them in and then look down on them. The acceptance is a wholehearted welcome into fellowship. And it should come from the heart. The next two verses give us more insight into the problem. Paul says,

- 1<sup>a</sup> 2 One person has faith that he may eat all things,  
2<sup>a</sup> but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*.  
1<sup>b</sup> 3 The one who eats is not to regard with **contempt** the one who does not eat,  
2<sup>b</sup> and the one who does not eat is not to **judge** the one who eats,  
for God has accepted him.

So, our first specific example is about kosher food laws. The weak person avoids any possible contamination by eating only vegetables. Paul does not actually call the other side strong here. He does in 15:1. But here he only uses the word weak. I am just assuming the other side is the strong. Perhaps for now Paul does not want to overly build up the maturity of the strong or the pride of the strong. A person can be strong in understanding the freedom of the gospel and yet show great immaturity in how they apply that freedom, even to the harm of others.

In fact, I think this is quite a natural response to growing up in an overly conservative or overly legalistic Christian community. And when young believers figure out that in the gospel a lot of the rules that have been applied to them shouldn't really apply, they can throw those off so freely that they don't even think about how their actions harm other people. They are just expressing their freedom in the gospel. And that is not a bad thing. That is a first step. If they truly were being bound by rules that are not rules of Jesus, then understanding that their acceptance is by grace and not by keeping all of these expectations by other people, then that's a move forward. But it's not maturity. That kind of strong understanding of the implication of the gospel is not maturity until they realize how their behavior also may affect others. And then they are willing to allow their liberty in some cases to be subsumed by their love for other brothers and sisters. So, Paul does not call them strong here. Maybe he does not want to over do it. But he does call the weak, "Weak."

The verbs used for each side of the argument fit well, contempt from the strong and judgment from the weak. You can imagine a younger generation of Christians, having grown up in a conservative church, feeling the freedom to smoke a cigar at a guys' night or to have just one beer or to play basketball on Sunday. They know their Bible. They know the gospel. They know they are not acting immoral. And when the other side starts talking about the sin of alcohol or smoking or the need to keep the Sabbath, they ask, "Isn't the Sabbath on Saturday? And isn't the prohibition against getting drunk, not against just alcohol as a drink?" And so, they look down with contempt on those who uphold these prohibitions as though they are stuck in the by-gone era of no dancing and no card playing and no playing pool, no going with girls that do.

And those Christians look back at them with judgment. If they drink one beer, certainly they will drink more. And if they smoke one cigar, they are just tempting God. And keeping the Sabbath is one of the ten commandments. So, they judge the lack of spirituality in this new generation of liberated Christians.

Paul's exhortation is not "Argue until you win the other side over." That's not what he says. Paul says, "Accept one another." Paul understands this reality that there are always going to be Christians at different places in the process of transformation. Unity does not come from unified thought. And unity does not come from pretending that all opinions are equally valid. Paul does actually call one

position weak and the other position strong. He gives away which position he believes to line up with true gospel faith. But winning the argument over these issues does not guarantee a win for the community. Paul's exhortation to acceptance is not acceptance on the outside, but acceptance on the inside. Internally, we trust Jesus to work in our hearts to take away the pride of contempt and the pride of judgment. And we trust Jesus to replace that pride with the humility of love and the humility of acceptance. This is a win for the community when both the weak and the strong show enough maturity to accept from the heart those they disagree with over issues of conscience.

In the next section, verses 4-9, Paul gives us two principles or two perspectives that help us with this exhortation of accepting one another. He gives us the principle of the master and the principle of faith.

## II. Two Principles of Acceptance (14:4-9)

The principle of the master runs through the whole section. Let's read it. I believe the text speaks for itself. I think you are going to get this easily.

### [Read Romans 14:4-9]

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>1c</sup> <sup>5</sup> One person regards one day above another,

<sup>2c</sup> another regards every day *alike*.

**Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.**

<sup>2d</sup> <sup>6</sup> 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;

<sup>1d</sup> and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat,

and gives thanks to God.

<sup>7</sup> For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

**<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

### *The principle of the master*

Jesus Christ died and rose again to take his rightful place as Lord. He is the Messiah. He is the king of heaven. He is the head of the body. The church is his. We owe to him our life and our allegiance. Each Christian is a servant of Christ Jesus the king. Each Christian is responsible to live for Jesus. Each Christian will give an account to Jesus. This is the principle of the master. This is our perspective as we consider each of our brothers and sisters in Christ, that each one of us has a responsibility to live for Jesus as lord.

It is a freeing principle. My brother has six children. It's not unusual to hear the youngest say to another sibling, "You're not the boss of me." And that is the truth. Even though she still has something to learn about delegated authority, she does only have one mom and one dad. And each of us only has one ultimate boss in regard to issues of conscience.

You do have a role in the lives of other Christians. But you are not their master. We discuss and argue and consider together, knowing that iron sharpens iron. But when all has been said, you are not their master. You may be an elder or a pastor or a leader. You may have some delegated authority. And you may have to set the direction and policies of the community and discipline immorality and sin. But when that is all set, you are not their master over issues of conscience. And there is freedom here. You do not have to be their master. It's not your responsibility. You are free from the responsibility of having to get others to conform to your sense of propriety. We have to let each other be in process when it comes to issues of conscience. We have to recognize the principle of the master. We also need to acknowledge the principle of faith.

*The principle of faith*

This comes out in verse 5, "One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind." Remember that the issues here are not moral issues. These are not clear sin issues. Jesus is the end of the law. Christians are released from the food laws of the Mosaic code but some struggled with letting go of that code. As modern Christians, we have lived so long eating shrimp and crab and bacon and barbecue that we can hardly relate. But try to imagine that you grew up in a culture that defined religious identity over a period of 1500 years through these food laws, and through keeping the sabbath and through circumcision. The big three. It's like baptism, first communion and confirmation. There are rituals that defined for Jews, not only their religious faith, but who they were as a people. Their religious and national and ethnic identity, all rolled up into one, was expressed and felt through these ceremonies and practices. And they had the additional weight of Scripture. They are not just customs. These were proscriptions of Mosaic Law.

And now the Messiah has come. And God has given Peter a vision of a sheet descending out of heaven three times, and he says, "Eat." And then God sends Peter to the home of a Gentile to enter in and enjoy fellowship. Peter still when he gets to Galatia is going to really struggle with these things, and he is going to get confronted by Paul, the apostle Paul, the former Pharisee, who has begun to preach freedom from the covenant of Moses and a new obligation to practice the new covenant of Christ. But as a Jew who grew up with this, or as a Gentile who came under Jewish influence and Jewish leadership and began following God before you understood the gospel of Jesus Christ. It just feels so wrong. You just can't make yourself believe that it is okay for Christians, especially Jewish Christians, to give up on these practices that have been so important and are so engrained in your sense of values. You know you are saved by grace through faith, you just can't eat. You just can't give up your Sabbath practices. You just can't give up feeling that it is wrong to give them up. You understand the arguments. But it still feels wrong.

Paul gets this. And so, he writes, "Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind." That's the second principle, the principle of faith. If you believe that it is sin to eat pork and you go ahead and eat pork, then for you that is a sin. Because you have done what you believed was wrong to do. And you stand before Jesus as your master. You must act faithfully before him. In this way, Paul can say, "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." It is not that the action itself is relative, that it is both a sin, and it's not a sin. Paul would argue it is not a sin to eat pork. You can eat pork. That is why he calls that group strong. But he does argue that if you think it is a sin, then for you it would be a sin. In that sense it is relative to your understanding of what God is calling you to do. And conversely, if you obey your conscience whether to eat or not, then it is morally commendable, because you're eating or you're not eating out of your relationship for God and out of your heart your giving thanks to God. So, what you are doing, whether required or not, you are doing out of a true heart for God. It is not just a religious ceremony for you. It is a sincere attempt to live out the second question of covenant, "How then can I live to please my God?"

And if that is what we are all really striving for, then there is no place for contempt, and there is no reason to despise, and there is no cause for judgment, not when we act out of faith and we entrust each one to his master who is Jesus Christ

**III. Summary of the Exhortation not to Judge or Show Contempt (14:10-12)**

We close this passage by restating the issue in verses 10-12. And notice how Paul repeats his use of the language of judgment and contempt which opposes true acceptance. And notice his repeated call to remember that we each stand before God and must give an account. We will give an account not only on how strong or weak we were in regard to issues of conscience, but more importantly, we will give account of how sincerely we sought to accept our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ over these types of issues.

Let's close this lesson just with the reading these last three verses. Let's just read them.

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> For it is written, "AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD." <sup>12</sup> So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

### Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 14:1-12?
2. Come up with two or three examples of real, modern issues of conscience present in your Christian community or that you have experienced elsewhere.
3. Considering these examples, do you feel the verbs judge or condemn apply to how you have experienced the disagreement? Did you feel the urge to judge or condemn someone else? Do you feel like you were judged or condemned?
4. Also considering the examples that you have thought of, do any of your examples fall into the category of a sin issue that is prohibited by biblical teaching? In other words, are you really talking about an issue of conscience or a moral issue? How do you know the difference?
5. Take one or two of the issues you have come up with and ask yourself, "How would the principle of the master have helped me to accept others in this situation?" And also, "How would the principle of faith have helped me to accept my brothers or sisters in Christ?"
6. What are some of the ongoing problems or challenges with resolving disagreement over issues of conscience that do not seem to be addressed by these two principles?