

Romans 14:1-15:4 - Four ways to respond to differences in conscience

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Date: 07 June 2026

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. We'll be reading from Romans chapter 14 and a bit of chapter 15 today. Verse 15.

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festivals. And that tension between the weak and the strong was, as you might imagine, a potential for upset in the church. Now, in many ways, as we found from time to time in the book of Romans, some of the issues that are directly addressed are not necessarily issues that we face.

[10 : 31] There are still some, but not many, Christians in the West who teach that we should live by parts of the Jewish ceremonial law. But on the most part, we recognize that we are not obliged to keep the ceremonial law. We keep the moral law, which is binding on us, but not the ceremonial law.

And Paul is really clear that that view is correct, right? He says, doesn't he, verse 14, all foods are clean. It's unequivocal. He describes the weak as being failures or failing, sorry, in chapter 15, verse 1. But despite us no longer having the same struggles as they have in Romans 14, still Romans 14 has things to teach us because we still don't have the same conscience, do we, on how we should live the Christian life? You know, we all agree in Jesus Christ. We agree that it is only through faith in him that any one of us is saved. We know, don't we, that we are sinners, that we are fallen, that we need Christ's forgiveness, and none of us have any hope in ourselves.

But still, we find it easy to disagree over the exact application of the scriptures to particular areas of our lives. Now, before we think about some of those, it's worth saying that not every disagreement is in that category, right? You notice Romans 14 isn't saying that the weak don't like some parts of the Bible or the strong don't like some parts of the Bible, and so they kind of argue about it like that. Romans 14 is not saying that you can pick and choose which bits of the Bible you want. It's not arguing for sort of anything goes kind of Christianity. Rather, it's about our consciences, that's what it's about, on matters of behavior that the Bible is not specific on, especially how we're to respond to the Old Testament teaching in our lives today.

Let me just be really clear, right? Romans 14 is not saying, for example, because I think this is sometimes said by churches, so let me clear it up. Romans 14 is not saying that it's you're free to believe whatever you want to believe over marriage, for example. Nowhere in God's word, nowhere in church history has marriage been anything other than the union of one man with one woman. So when mainline denominations frame the discussion as being the weak versus the strong in that, they are both misquoting marriage, but also misquoting Romans 14. Nor is Paul saying that the distinction between a man and a woman is a matter of conscience.

[12 : 52] Maybe there's specifics on how that works out, but not over the idea that there's a difference. The same goes for things like the authority of the Bible, or the sufficiency of the Bible, or the deity of Christ. Those are not disputable matters, just because some people who carry a badge called Christian claim to think something differently on those things. Now, Paul is not talking about doctrine, he's talking about how we apply matters of the law to our consciences in Christian behavior.

But with that in place, it's still worth noticing that there are lots of debates which are similar to Romans 14. Our Christian consciences are not exactly the same on every issue affecting the Christian life. We don't all vote for the same political party, even though our choices in those things are informed by what we believe in the Bible. We don't all come to the same conclusion on what we should or shouldn't do on a Sunday. Christians don't all agree on the style of music that should be played at church. Christians don't all agree on how you should run church membership, or how you should go about appointing church leaders. Christians don't all agree on what time children should go to bed, how they should be weaned, or even at what age they should be expected to listen to a sermon.

Some Christians are happy to drink alcohol, others are not, and not just out of preference, but because they believe the Bible implies they shouldn't. Some Christians happily smoke, others consider it to be foolish behavior that the Bible doesn't approve of. Some Christians will tattoo their bodies, others think it to be a violation of the instructions of the Old Testament. Some Christians insist on smart dress for a Sunday as a sign of respect for the Lord. Others think respect is internal, so it's okay to come to church wearing whatever you would wear in the week. Some Christians think that turning up to church on time is an indication of how seriously you take worshipping God. Not many of them come here, don't worry.

Others think it's a family gathering, where it doesn't really matter what time you turn up, because we're all just family together. Some Christians think that the Bible permits the baptism of infants who are children of Christian families. Others think that baptism is only for the believer themselves. Now, I could go on, but I'm not sure that a sermon listing the ways that we disagree with one another would be that helpful. So let me show you instead four responses, four responses from Romans 14 and 15 as we think about these issues. The first one is this, do not judge others. Do not judge others. Really, do not judge, I think, is the headline of the whole thing.

Notice Paul's conclusion in verse 13 when he says, therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. But it's also where he starts in verse 1, accepting the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters, is what he says, chapter 14, verse 1. The word there for accept is the same as the word for welcome. And so the Christian is encouraged to welcome or embrace or reach out to those that they disagree with. And why are they to do that? Well, because, verse 3, God has accepted or welcomed them. Now, notice what Paul is saying. He's not sort of in some kind of deconstructivist postmodern way saying, oh, you know, truth is just what you make it. You know, one truth for you, another truth for me. No, like we said, he's really clear that the weak are wrong here. The ceremonial law has been done away with. Rather, Paul's point is that you're not to assume that another person's, even their error on matters of the law is an indication of the reality of their Christian life.

[16:24] real Christians, says Paul, come to different conclusions. And even if you're sure that those conclusions are wrong that someone else has come to, still God has accepted them. And so you must accept them too. Notice just how Paul has reframed the discussion here. No longer are we talking about what individuals think about issues. That's not what Paul is talking about anymore, is it? Instead, we've moved on from thinking about what individuals think about issues to thinking about what God thinks about individuals. So God welcomes individuals, verse three, calls them his servants, verse four, and is enabling them to stand. And if that's how God thinks about the individual, then so should you think like that about them. And besides, the reality is, says Paul, that God will have the final word, verse 11, not you. So stop judging, keep your mouth shut about your fellow Christian.

Leave it to the Lord to sort out the right from the wrong. That's his job, not yours. And notice this instruction goes both ways, right? It's not just that the strong should not judge the weak, you might expect that, but also that the weak should not judge the strong.

Christian A is convinced that the Bible's teaching on self-control means that they should not, under any circumstances, drink any alcohol. And as they're walking down the street, they pass the Kilburn Arms one morning and they see Christian B enjoying a pint of beer. And they look in the pub and they assume that Christian B stands for beer, clearly doesn't believe in the Bible's authority. They're not really taking the Bible seriously, are they? They're drinking in the pub. And so they keep walking down the high road and they turn into the corner shop and they buy their lottery ticket for the week. And as they do that, Christian C walks past them on his way to have a drink with Christian B in the pub and sees Christian A buying a lottery ticket and goes, oh my goodness, they

can't be a serious Christian. What terrible stewardship. What a terrible understanding of God's providence. I can't believe they're doing that. And so Christian B and Christian C are in the pub enjoying a second pint of beer now, really judging and going down on Christian A. saying, I can't believe they're a terrible Christian. How awful. Christian A walks home to Christian D. They both light a cigar and say, you won't believe who I've seen in the pub. Well, perhaps it's a bit far-fetched, but maybe not that much. That's exactly how churches ruin one another, isn't it? And so Paul's message here is don't do that. Don't speak like that about one another.

[19 : 19] And if you find yourself doing it, or if you find someone speaking to you like that about somebody else, ask them to stop talking. Don't judge. Welcome as God welcomes. Secondly then, think for yourself. Think for yourself. Now what's interesting here is that this not judging others does not mean stop thinking about these matters. I think that's often how we try and solve this. Oh, well, this is all a bit complicated. This is all a bit tricky, isn't it? I just want to be a simple Christian. I just want to say sorry to Jesus for my sins, love Jesus, and just not really think about these things. And we say that, and that sounds really spiritual, doesn't it? And Paul says, that's not spiritual, that's lazy, and that's thoughtless.

So look at the second part of verse 5. What does he say? Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. That's what Paul says. And he's taken that instruction for himself. Look at verse 14. And you'll see there that he himself is convinced and fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is in clean in itself. He then returns to the idea in verses 22 and 23. Look down at those verses. 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 has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith, and everything that does not come from faith is sin. Here's the point then.

Don't deal with disputable matters by not thinking about them. Rather, each of us, with our Bibles in our hands, are to think through these matters, pouring over the scriptures to try and work out what we should think. You need to know, don't you, what the Bible teaches about meat and about holy days. You need to think what you think the Bible teaches about alcohol and tattoos, about parenting, about timekeeping, about whether or not you should play the lottery, about managing your money. And notice it's not so much that you might come to the right conclusion, although that would be a good thing. It's not that that matters. Really what matters is that you do think about it. Because thoughtless Christianity is the problem. It's interesting, isn't it, that whatever does not spring from faith must spring from ignorance and laziness. And Paul describes that as sin. It's remarkable, isn't it? Paul is not condemning the weak person here for eating meat, even though the weak person is wrong. Yeah, they've come to the wrong conclusion. Even though they're wrongly oversensitive about the Old Testament food laws, Paul is not condemning them. The person he's condemning is the thoughtless person who eats the meat because they haven't even really thought about it or considered it. Don't you find that fascinating? Wouldn't you assume that Paul would say, listen, the best thing on these disputable matters is for me to tell you exactly what to do in every area of your life and you do it and you do it right? That's not how you're to think, says Paul. It is better to be wrong thoughtfully than right thoughtlessly. Because Paul effectively calls living in ignorance, thoughtless Christianity, sinful in verse 23, because it's acting out of ignorance and not faith. This is the remarkable thing in this chapter, that your faith grows, your Christian life blossoms, not as you live in ignorance, but as you live thoughtfully, as you kind of work outwards from the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ into every corner of your life, even into areas where people come to slightly different conclusions.

[22 : 56] It's remarkable, isn't it? God has so designed the Christian life that the center, that Jesus Christ at the center, becomes clearer and clearer and clearer as we think hard and apply the truth to every area of our lives. As we think about what we eat, what we drink, what we wear, how we spend our money, how we keep our time.

Jesus becomes clearer, not because we're judging others, but because what we are doing in each of those areas of our lives springs from who we believe Jesus is and what we believe he's done for us.

So let me ask you this morning, if you're a Christian, if you believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, how are you getting on with this? You know, have you thought about, have you worked out what being a Christian means for what you're going to watch on TV and what you're not going to watch on TV?

I'm going to give you a rule for that. In fact, giving you a rule for that is going to be unhelpful. The most helpful thing for you is to think about it. Have you thought about what a Christian means for how long you're going to spend at work?

Or for where you're going to rent a flat? Or for what time you're going to go to bed? Or for what time your alarm is going to go off in the morning? There's not a rule for those things. I'm not going to give you one, but you must think about it.

[24 : 10] Have you thought about what a Christian means for being, what you're going to order at the bar? Or for where you're going to go on holiday? Or what you're going to spend your money on? Have you thought about that? It really matters.

Not so that we can all come to the same conclusion and we can all wear the same outfits to church on a Sunday. That would be a terrible way to go, wouldn't it? But rather so that we are living out of faith in Jesus Christ in every corner of our lives.

That's secondly. Thirdly, do not cause stumbling. This instruction is there in the second half of verse 13. Have a look down in your passage. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

Paul's language here is really interesting, isn't it? We are not only to make up our mind on what we think about these complex issues. We are also to make up our mind on something else.

And he's told us what it is now. And that is how we treat one another in these areas. Paul's concern is that we do not cause one another to stumble.

[25 : 14] And this concern for others, says Paul, is actually at the end of the day how you really decide what you're going to do. So really it matters not so much whether you're free to eat kosher meat or not kosher meat, but whether what you do in those areas will cause a hindrance or a blessing to your Christian brother or sister.

Now, if your insistence on Christian freedom, even if that Christian freedom is right, causes a weaker brother to stumble or a weaker sister to stumble, you should not do it.

In that case, you are, verse 16, using something good, that is Christian freedom, which is a good thing, to be spoken of as evil, that is destroying a brother or sister.

So instead, what we do and don't do on these issues is driven by a desire for peace and encouragement. Verse 19, look down at it. Therefore, make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

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 do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

[26 : 31] I think it's worth thinking just how this works out in practice. The question isn't just what should I order at the bar, but really how can I make sure that what I order at the bar is good for those around me?

And this isn't given to the weak as like a kind of ace card to play so that they can manipulate everyone into doing what they want them to do. Rather, this is an instruction given to the strong about how they choose to treat others.

So it means, doesn't it, that what matters in my, say, timekeeping, for example, is not just my own personal freedom to manage my time as I like, but it is how is my time management experienced by my brothers and sisters in Christ and am I causing them to stumble?

Now, I might be biblically free to drink alcohol. I might be free to tattoo my body, to pierce my nose and my ears and even my nipples if I wanted to. But that freedom isn't the only thing that decides what I do on those issues.

What matters more than my freedom is loving others. In this, says Paul, our example is Christ Jesus. So verse 2 of chapter 15, He received, didn't he, the insults of those who have insulted you have fallen on me.

[27 : 56] Our hatred of God has fallen on Jesus. The insults that we place on the Father have been placed on the Son. He faced injustice that we might be saved justly.

If he sacrificed his rights for us like that, he faced injustice for us. Will we not choose to limit our freedom to love others in the same way?

I wonder if this is not the most radical part of all of this. You and I find ourselves, don't we, living in an age obsessed by personal rights and freedoms. We teach our children, we tell them this is a great thing, don't let anyone tell you what to do.

Obviously unless it's, you know, you as a parent or a carer or an uncle or an aunt. You know, we encourage people to express themselves. You know, you must be yourself. Now, in some ways that might not all be bad.

Freedom of expression can be a good thing and we want, you know, our children to be strong and independent. But, Christian, you do know, don't you, that you're only saved this morning because Jesus didn't think like that, right?

[29 : 05] If Christ had prioritized his personal freedom and his desire for self-expression, you and I would be going to hell. And that should change how we want to live our lives.

It should change what we think is really good. My personal freedom and my desire to express myself is not the ultimate good in the universe. I want to bless others and love others around me.

So perhaps this morning you could have a think. Where is your use of Christian freedom? Hurting someone else or cutting into them? Are the ways that you behave?

Perhaps ways that you are entirely legitimate to behave. Where are you doing that which is causing those around you to stumble? And if you think of it, change it.

Because that's a good enough reason to change. Finally, grow a culture of grace. As we finish, let's try and put all this together. See what Paul is suggesting here is that churches are to be communities unlike any others.

[30 : 08] Where on the one hand, our unity in Christ means, doesn't it, that because we're so solidly united in the Lord Jesus Christ, our disagreements with one another don't have to be buried.

You know, we are so tightly bound in Christ that it doesn't mean that we have to bury the things that we disagree over because they're not going to split us. But on the other hand, those disagreements are not dominating either.

Church is a place where you can discuss these things, but we're not obsessing over them. And we come to genuinely different conclusions on them and then forego those conclusions out of love for one another.

I don't know if you can begin to imagine such a place as this. You know, a place of grace and kindness so that you are forgiven for your mistakes and accommodated for your weakness.

Where people around you show you kindness and love as you wrestle to apply the gospel to every corner of your life. Where people come to different conclusions, but they decide out of love for you to keep that conclusion between God and themselves as you wrestle with it.

[31 : 17] Really, it's not actually that important what time you turn up or whether you all like the same kind of music. It's not concerning that we all believe the same things about alcohol or tattoos or that we all put our kids to bed at the same time or that we all make the same spending decisions.

Rather, what matters here is that God, the eternal son, did not seek his own pleasure, but sought yours and mine as he gave himself on a cross for us.

That's what matters. He put on flesh and went the way of the cross, dying for sin, not his own, but mine. And he did that for you and he did that for me if we will come to him so that we might live with that heart towards others around us, welcoming one another.

So we are to build churches of grace and kindness, aren't we? Where love is extended to one another, where actually it matters more about love and kindness than it does about conformity.

Where you expect the people around you not only to be different from you, maybe in age or stage or ethnicity or background or job or whatever it is, but you expect them to think differently than you do on areas of Christian conscience.

[32 : 33] And you love them and accommodate them in the midst of that. And as we build a church like that, we exalt Jesus Christ and we demonstrate his love to those around us.

So don't judge. Think carefully. Don't cause others to stumble. And let's build a church of grace and love for one another. Let me pray and then we'll sing together.

Amen. Let's just have a moment where you can perhaps think of one or two areas in your life where perhaps you need to change out of love for your brothers and sisters.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word to us this morning.

We thank you for this grace and love and kindness that we have heard about here. And we thank you that we've experienced it in the Lord Jesus Christ. And we pray that we would experience it in our love for one another.

[34 : 06] Pray that you would help us to put one another's needs ahead of our own and to accommodate each other. And Lord, we know that not only do we need to be like that for others, we

need others to be like that for us.

Because we're always making mistakes. We're not always applying things exactly right. We need time and space and forgiveness to work out what it means to be a Christian in every corner of our lives.

And so help us, we pray. And help us to be a church that encourages one another to think deeply, love generously, not causing one another to stumble, but encouraging each other to keep going with Christ.

In whose name we pray. Amen. Amen.