

# Activate | Week 4

## Romans 14:1–12

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If you had to complete the statement “no good Christian would \_\_\_\_\_” with the following options, are there any that you would mark as “true”?

No good Christian would...

- Drink a beer or glass of wine
- Take their kids trick or treating on Halloween
- Watch *Game of Thrones*
- Attend a church where women preach
- Refuse to attend a same-sex wedding
- Vote for a Democrat
- Vote for a Republican
- Fail to support gun control measures
- Fail to welcome refugees from another country

Each statement represents a hot-button issue being discussed in American churches today. Are there any that you would mark as true or mostly true? Any that you would believe are absolutely false? Any that offended you just by being listed?

As Christians, we center ourselves on Jesus Christ. We worship and serve him as Savior and Lord, and that is non-negotiable. There are beliefs and convictions that we must hold, but there are a host of issues over which Christians can disagree, even strongly, and still consider one another family. The question is how should we interact with Christians who differ with us? Can we live, worship, and serve alongside people who hold views that we are convinced are wrong?

For the next few weeks, we are going to be focused on Romans 14 and 15 where Paul deals with these very questions.

## Day 1

So far in Romans, Paul has gloried in the amazing plan of God that has provided a way for lost sinners to become adopted children of the Father through the Son and by the Spirit. Paul has insisted that both Jews and Gentiles are declared right before God by their faith in Jesus. He

has assured Jewish Christians that God is faithful to his promises to Israel and has given them a better understanding of the role of the Torah. He has cast a vision of Christlike love and service as he's encouraged the Roman believers to live by the Spirit.

Now that we've arrived at Romans 14, we can begin to see the major dispute that has shaped his message. While Romans helps us understand the implications of the gospel at all times and for all people, it was written to a divided church experiencing real conflict.

As you read through the passage for the week, look for the major issue that was dividing Christians in Rome. What were they arguing over? How does Paul label the two sides? How were they treating one another?

## Read the Word

### Romans 14:1–12 (NIV)

*<sup>1</sup> Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. <sup>2</sup> One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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.*

*<sup>5</sup> 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.*

*<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.*

*<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> It is written:*

*“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,  
‘every knee will bow before me;  
every tongue will acknowledge God.’”*

*<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.*

- What labels does Paul use for the two sides of the conflict?
- What issue divides them?
- What words does Paul use to describe their treatment of one another?

## Reflect

Over and over Paul reminds the Roman Christians that in Christ, they are brothers and sisters. This sibling bond cannot be broken, even by serious disagreement. Yet, Paul doesn't minimize the conflict that the Roman believers had with one another. He doesn't act as if their dispute is insignificant. But he gives the Roman church a bigger, more compelling reason to find unity.

As we work through Romans 14–15, we can learn much from these first century believers to apply to our 21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts. The church today has no less reason to find unity as we seek to love one another and share Christ's love with the world.

- What are some modern church conflicts that concern you most? Does it affect how you view other Christians? For the next few weeks, are you willing to let the Spirit shape your view of those who believe differently than you do?
- Let's pray that as a church our conversations around these issues will be full of grace and bring greater understanding and unity.

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, you are a God of peace, grace, and love. You have called us to love one another as siblings. Teach me how to find unity with my brothers and sisters even when we have strong disagreements.*

## Day 2

How should we treat fellow believers who have different convictions than we do on secondary matters? Assuming that we agree on the fundamentals of the faith, how can we find unity in the body of Christ when there is genuine disagreement over beliefs and practices that are important, but non-essential?

This week, we're focused on the first part of Paul's argument in Romans 14:1–12 where he gives the Roman believers several compelling reasons to accept one another in the Lord.

## Read the Word

**Romans 14:1–3**

*<sup>1</sup> Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. <sup>2</sup> One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> 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.*

## Reflect

In this section of Romans, Paul addresses two groups, “the strong” and “the weak.” Before we consider his reasons for why they should accept one another, it’s helpful to think about who made up these two groups.

One group “whose faith is weak” was following kosher food laws and observing certain holy days. (For clarity’s sake, we’ll call this group the Weak.) These are likely Jewish believers and “God-fearing” Gentiles who came to faith with the help of Jewish believers. In trying to navigate life under the Roman Empire, Jews were frequently concerned with “boundary markers” because that is what had always made them unique as the people of God. Food laws and holy day observances were bound up with their identity. To abandon them may have felt like a compromise with or even capitulation to the dominant culture.

The other group’s faith “allows them to eat anything” and “considers everyday alike.” (We’ll call this group the Strong.) These were likely Gentile believers, perhaps including those who either came to faith or were maturing in their faith during the time that the Jewish Christians were absent from Rome. Also among this group were some Jewish Christians, who, like Paul had a more complete understanding of the gospel’s implications.

So while there were likely Jews and Gentiles in each camp, the division tended to break along ethnic lines. Nevertheless, Paul likely didn’t want to exacerbate tensions between Jews and Gentiles, so he used different labels to address the two groups.<sup>1</sup> It’s impossible to know for sure if these labels originated with Paul or were names that the Strong were already using. Regardless, Paul was ready to combat any posture that is causing division in the body of Christ.

In Romans 14:1–4, Paul indicts the Strong for being contemptuous of the Weak and accuses the Weak of judging the Strong. Both groups have played a part in this conflict. Yet, he starts with a command for the Strong to accept the Weak.

Jewish believers may have been among the poorest of the city. Their customs and way of life often prevented them from achieving status in the Roman world, even if they had financial means.<sup>2</sup> Therefore it was likely the Strong who had the power to exclude the Weak. They had more social clout and status, and may have been using it to manipulate, intimidate, or even exclude the Weak from fellowship.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, 631.

<sup>2</sup> Lancaster, 230.

Eating together was a sign of mutual acceptance in first century life and Paul wants all believers to come together and sit around the same table. If foods were being served that violated the consciences of weak believers, then that fellowship was broken.

Yet the Weak were likely using intimidation tactics of their own. They may have been insisting that believers who failed to follow the Torah's regulations were not full members of God's covenant community. Paul reminds them that they were not the judge of whether someone was accepted into the family. In fact, "God had already accepted them" (14:3).

What's important for us to remember is that regardless of the social and cultural factors that played into this conflict, each of these groups believed that they were the ones being faithful to God's will. Paul doesn't question their motives. It's their treatment of one another that Paul is taking issue with. Paul had just told these believers that "love is the fulfillment of the law." It's impossible to show love to someone you are judging as unacceptable or holding in contempt.

- As we go through these two chapters, let's think deeply about the issues that divide the modern church. Let's consider whether we have our own versions of the Strong and the Weak and how we can stop judging and despising one another.

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father open my eyes to any ways that I am judging my fellow believers or holding them in contempt. I need discernment and wisdom because I want to stand firm in your truth while showing your grace and love.*

## Day 3

For the next few weeks we are wading through a difficult topic. How can the body of Christ function together when people have genuine disagreements? While there are some beliefs and practices that are central to the faith — such as the deity of Christ, the resurrection, the need to seek forgiveness when wrong — there are others that are important, but more peripheral. Finding unity in the midst of conflict is difficult.

In the verses we are looking at this week, Paul shows us that the right perspective is key.

## Read the Word

**Romans 14:4–9**

*<sup>4</sup> 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.*

*<sup>5</sup> 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.*

*<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.*

## Reflect

Yesterday we discussed who Paul was likely referring to when he talked about the Strong and the Weak and considered some of the cultural context surrounding their debate. In the verses we're looking at today, we'll find some compelling reasons that Paul gives us for accepting one another in the Lord.

In order to judge or show contempt, you must put yourself above another person. Both judgment and contempt come from a feeling of superiority. You've decided that you are right, and they are wrong, and that is that. The first thing Paul does to combat this posture is remind everyone who is in charge.

God is the authority. He is the Lord and we are his servants, and who are we to judge another's servant? (14:4). God is the one whose judgment ultimately matters, because he is the only one powerful and wise enough to see all things clearly. Our fellow servants are his responsibility, not ours. Ultimately, we belong to the Lord and he sustains us. He holds our lives in his hand (14:7) and is the Lord over all humanity, living and dead (14:9).

Paul reminds these believers to whom they are ultimately accountable, but interestingly, he doesn't settle their debate for them. Paul leaves room for both views but insists that "each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind" and give thanks to God either way. In his eyes, both sides were acting out of what they thought it meant to be faithful to God.

Though Paul doesn't directly take sides, he does seem to encourage the viewpoint of the strong (we'll see that more in Romans 14:13–18). To be "weak in faith" may mean that these believers are failing to trust God completely and without qualification.<sup>3</sup> They were still relying somewhat on following the Torah to maintain their relationship with God. Thus, Paul would likely want to see the Weak accepting the convictions of the Strong, but he does not command this. Instead, he allows room for personal conviction.

Paul is exceedingly gentle with the Weak. So much of Jewish identity was bound up in the visible signs of Torah observance. It would have been a very difficult thing to give up. Paul has spent considerable time in his letter making sure that Jewish believers understand that their

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<sup>3</sup> Dunn, 798.

salvation came through faith in Jesus alone and the same is true of the Gentiles. As long as they understand that observing food laws and holy days doesn't make them acceptable to God and welcome their Gentile siblings into the covenant family, Paul seems content to let their diet and holy day observances be a matter of conscience. If Paul approached "disputable matters" in this way, so should we.

Paul's insistence that "whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" is a beautiful assurance. It is a tremendous comfort to believe that is true. We are the Lord's people in this life and the next. And so are the believers with whom we disagree.

- Do you have strong personal convictions on non-essential issues? Which ones? Are you living for the Lord in this conviction? Are you thankful to him?
- Are you gentle in your treatment of those with whom you disagree? If not, why do you find it challenging?

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, I want to live for you. I know that all my blessings come from you. I belong to you, and you are my Lord. I want my life to reflect your love, grace, and truth. Show me the way.*

## Day 4

I have a love/hate relationship with Twitter. While I use Facebook to connect with people I know in real life, I follow all kinds of people on Twitter. I don't post much, but I follow authors, pastors, journalists, academics, and influencers from a variety of Christian perspectives. It's helped me find common ground with people with whom I might not otherwise come into contact. I don't agree with everyone I follow, but I'm learning to appreciate where they are coming from. At least until a fight breaks out.

Every once in a while, a Twitter feud will erupt over a hot-button issue and it's so disheartening to see the insults and accusations fly, especially between Christian brothers and sisters. This is the downside of social media.

From behind a keyboard, we can neglect our connections as the flesh and blood people of God. Separated from the warmth and breath of an embodied person, we can treat them like an enemy. We forget there is a real person on the other side of the screen. We forget the lessons of Romans 14–15.

## Read the Word

## Romans 14:10–12

<sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> It is written: " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.' "

<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

- According to Paul, to whom are we accountable?

## Reflect

In his attempt to bring peace to the quarreling house churches in Rome, Paul has directed their attention to God. He doesn't take sides and argue for one position over another. He is much more focused on how the Strong and the Weak are treating one another. His primary concern seems to be the health of the body, so he points them to the head.

He has already reminded the Roman believers of a couple of key points: every believer has been accepted by God and belongs to him, and God doesn't need our assistance in judging his servants. God alone knows the heart of a person.

As we read verse 10, it's easy to get a mental picture of Paul in our minds. Like a mom who is disciplining two children after a fight has broken out, we can imagine Paul shifting his attention from one child to the other with a finger wag and a disapproving look on his face. He asks the Weak, "who are you to judge your brother or sister?" Then he turns to the Strong, "why do you treat them with contempt?"

The Weak believed that they had the Bible on their side. The word translated in verse 10 as "judge" is the Greek term *krino* and means to sit in judgment on someone or something. It has the sense of playing the part of God. Paul wants them to consider how preposterous it is that they would assume the role of divine judge and look down on the Strong. Paul reminds them that there is only one judge, and we will all stand before him. Religious rule-following won't make you right before God.

The Strong's language is also fierce. The word translated "contempt" is the Greek term *exoutheneo* which means to disdain, to treat someone as having no status or merit or worth, and to perceive someone as beneath one's consideration.<sup>4</sup> The Strong also need to be reminded that only the Lord determines a person's standing before him. Wordly status and influence won't make you right before God either.

Ultimately, everyone will bow before the Lord and give an account of their lives before God. Paul's reminder has a dual effect. On the one hand, as Paul has emphasized earlier (14: 4, 10),

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<sup>4</sup> McKnight.

it shows why it is wrong for a Christian to stand in judgment over another. He's saying in effect, "Do not put yourself in God's place and judge your sibling." But it also reminds believers that they will have to answer for their own behavior: "If you sin by judging your sibling, *you* will answer to God."<sup>5</sup>

Religion without Jesus is worthless on judgment day. Status and the high opinion of others can't help you either. It is on the righteousness of Christ alone that we stand before God. Therefore, what right do we have to judge others?

- When you are tempted to judge others, how will a reminder we are all ultimately accountable to God help?

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, you are a just and holy God. I know that I will stand before you and give an account for my life. Thank you that I stand on Christ's righteousness and not my own. Remind me of this when I am tempted to judge others.*

## Day 5

It's Friday! I hope you look forward to the end of the week when you can take some time to spend with your Father, digest all that you studied, and invite the Spirit to transform your heart and life.

## Reflect on what you've learned

Look again over Romans 14:1–12. Flip back and look again at the end of Romans 13. Are you sensing a flow in Paul's flow of thought? How does his assertion that "love is the fulfillment of the law" lead into his discussion of the Strong and the Weak? What connections do you see?

## Make Connections

I don't know about you, but I see a lot of similarities between the Roman Christians and us. Although the non-essential, "disputable matters" that we fight about are different, our tendency to judge and look down on one another is just as strong. We are quick to dismiss those with whom we disagree with our own labels such as, "liberal," "fake," or "backwards."

Even though the argument is not over a central tenet of the faith, we will still call the other side "wolves in sheep's clothing" and denounce them as "false teachers." We can arrogantly act

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<sup>5</sup> Moo, 848.

as though we're the only ones who are truly committed to following Jesus and among the few who take the Bible seriously. Yet Paul's instructions to the Roman church tell us that these conflicts will happen, even when all sides are faithfully trying to follow the Lord. This doesn't mean that one side isn't wrong in God's eyes, it just means that the wrong side could be ours.

So, what Paul advises is that every believer should be convinced in their own mind. They're not just going along with the crowd. They aren't just piling on the other side because it's more comfortable to stand with their tribe than to consider the issues carefully for themselves. To be fully convinced in one's own mind takes deliberate study, intense prayer, and a willingness to understand the other side's position. It requires grace and generosity, integrity and discernment, and faithfulness and humility. Whatever position someone comes to on the other side of such a process, and whatever conviction the Spirit brings, arrogance and contempt for others won't be an option.

Genuine, sincere love is what should characterize the relationship that believers have with one another (Romans 12:9). Paul has summed up the law by reminding believers to love their neighbors as themselves (Romans 13:9). As we consider how to deal with other Christians even in the midst of conflict, love should ultimately guide us.

## **Pray and consider your next steps**

It's not always easy to see the line between a matter of conscience and an essential teaching of the Christian faith. Can you think of some criteria that we might use to find that line? Discuss this question with other believers or your Life Group and see what you come up with.

Think about some of the non-essential debates that rage in the church today — the place of women in ministry, the treatment of gay people, “social justice” issues, media consumption, environmental issues, and so on. Which ones have a direct impact on your life? Which ones do you feel strongly about? Have you taken the time to become “fully convinced in your own mind” of your belief and practice? Or are you assuming the position of those around you?

This series is all about “activating” our faith. How can the way we view and treat others demonstrate our faith in action?

Many of these “disputable matters” are important and complex. How can we discuss them in the church in a gracious and loving way? Without judgment or contempt?