

Activate | Week 5

Romans 14:13–23

We are in the middle of our Romans 12–16 series, “Activate” where we are focusing on living out our faith in Jesus Christ in our everyday life. Paul is challenging us to live as Spirit-led, embodied sacrifices to God instead of being shaped and molded by the world. He has encouraged us to demonstrate sincere Christlike love, both to those inside and outside of the body of Christ. As his followers, we want to more and more resemble Jesus, sharing his love with those who don’t know him and finding unity with those who do.

Finding that unity can be challenging in practice. Even in the body of Christ, we can sometimes clash with one another over a host of issues. While we try to center ourselves around core issues of belief and practice, we can differ in our convictions about peripheral issues where the Bible leaves room for interpretation. Knowing how to work out those conflicts while responding to one another with love is not easy. This week, we’ll consider Paul’s prescription for unity even when there are disagreements.

Day 1

Last week we arrived at Romans 14 where Paul begins to speak directly to the conflict that is dividing the Roman church. One group of believers, “the weak,” was following the Torah’s kosher food laws and observing certain holy days. They believed that these practices were necessary for believers. The other group, “the strong,” rejects this idea.

Because eating together was a significant sign of unity in the early church, this disagreement was disrupting fellowship. The gathered church could not join with one another around the same table. Out of this disagreement came further conflict because the Weak were sitting in judgment on the Strong and the Strong were despising the Weak. It was an ugly situation!

Last week, in Romans 14:1–12 we saw Paul reminding both the Strong and the Weak that God is the ultimate judge, so they should not judge one another. While Paul agrees with the position of the Strong, he doesn’t force the Weak to comply. Instead he leaves room for personal conviction because ultimately everyone must answer to God.

If we stop at Romans 14:12, it might seem like Paul is offering the advice to simply “agree to disagree.” But in Romans 14:13–23 he goes a step further. Paul wants these believers to go beyond merely tolerating one another to demonstrating genuine, sacrificial love. As you read our passage for the weak, consider who Paul is instructing and what he is asking them to do.

Read the Word

Romans 14:13–23 (NIV)

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

²² 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. ²³ 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.

- What instruction is Paul giving the Weak? What is he telling the Strong? Who gets more instruction?

Reflect

Unity won't be possible between believers if we don't follow the way of Jesus. We must be willing to lay down our rights for the sake of our brothers and sisters. This can be hard to do. It takes supernatural wisdom and love. Let's pray for a strong dose of both this week as we seek to understand what Paul is teaching and think about how to apply it to our 21st century context.

Pray

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

Father, you are the God of love. You call your children to be unified as the body of Christ so we can live out your will in this world. Show us how to love one another as you love us. Give us humble hearts and wise discernment so we know

how to deal with disagreements between believers, especially when we are all sincerely trying to be faithful to you.

Day 2

This week we are working through Romans 14:13–18 and considering how believers can still demonstrate genuine love even when they disagree. For the Christians in Rome, the contention was over food. Many of the Jewish Christians were still following the Kosher laws set forth in the Torah. Paul knew that they had freedom in Christ to thankfully receive and eat any food, but he also recognized that pushing these believers to do something that was contrary to their conscience could be detrimental to their faith.

For Paul, when freedom meets love, love must win.

Read the Word

Romans 14:13–18 (NIV)

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

- According to this passage, what does it look like to act in love?

Reflect

In his discussion of this passage, N.T. Wright uses a helpful illustration. He imagines neighbors, who are living side by side in two townhomes, having to deal with a heavy snowfall. One neighbor goes out and dutifully shovels his front walk so his wife can get to her car without trudging through the snow. He attacks the piles of snow with his shovel and soon it is flying. When he's finished, he feels very proud of the job he's done until he hears a voice calling to him from behind the wall of snow he's created. It's his next-door neighbor who is now unable to get down his path because of all the extra snow that's just been deposited on his walk.

As Wright says, "Paul's supreme concern in this passage is the danger of so clearing your own path that you end up making it impossible for your neighbors to walk down theirs. It is all too

easy, in sorting out our own lives and finding our own way forward as Christians, to make things harder, not easier, for those around us.”¹ As Paul expresses it, we can inadvertently put stumbling blocks in the path of our brothers and sisters.

Recall that all Jews, including Jewish Christians had been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius but were allowed to return in AD 54. During that time, we can imagine Gentile Christians developing their own way of doing things during their worship gatherings, including serving non-Kosher food. Also recall that Gentile believers were likely better off socially and economically. Jews were definitely in the minority in Rome. It’s not hard to imagine Jewish Christians feeling like outsiders in the very place they should have felt most at home. They were being despised by their Gentile siblings for following a conviction that they believed was central to who they were. Their faith was being challenged by the behavior of those who had more privilege and power.

Paul is determined to see the divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians mended. But notice that he tells the Strong that they are the ones who must bend. To return to our snow-shoveling analogy, they are charged with clearing their neighbor’s path. He doesn’t force the “weak” to change their convictions, even if he disagrees with them. Paul has taken great pains in the first half of Romans to explain how the followers of Jesus should see the law. Perhaps he hopes that his message will sink in and the Jewish Christians will abandon their need to follow these observances. If this change happens, it can’t be as a result of Gentile coercion. The Strong need to deal gently with the Weak in love. They need to humble themselves and lay down their rights for the good of their spiritual siblings.

Paul’s point is that love must be our guide in how we interact with others. Yes, we have freedom in Christ, but if exercising that freedom could harm another believer, then it’s not worth it. We don’t clear our path by putting an obstacle in someone else’s.

- Think about issues in the church today. What are some areas of Christian freedom that are debated? Have you witnessed Christians trying to shame or coerce others into abandoning their convictions? What was the result?

Pray

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

Father, I don’t want to put an obstacle in front of another believer. I want all my brothers and sisters to grow in faith and holiness. Open my eyes and give me discernment to know if my actions are negatively affecting another’s faith.

¹ Tom Wright, [*Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 2: Chapters 9-16*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 106.

Day 3

To live out the mission of Jesus, we need a healthy, strong body of Christ. We need believers who are diverse in their gifting, unified in purpose, and bonded in love. As the church, we should be building each other up.

Read the Word

Romans 14:19–21

¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

Reflect

Paul’s warning here is serious, “Do not destroy the work of God.” Our beliefs and behaviors can have a detrimental effect on others. None of us live in a vacuum. We were created to form bonds with other people. The only thing that God said was “not good” in the Garden of Eden was the man’s solitude, so he created woman. Humanity is meant to live in community.

As much as people in our culture talk about “becoming your authentic self,” the truth is that our identity is not formed in isolation but in and through relationships with others. Newborns imitate the facial expressions of others within an hour of their birth, even though they cannot see their own faces.² Beginning with our parents, siblings and grandparents, and then our friends, co-workers, and church family, we are heavily influenced by the people surrounding us. We can encourage the best in one another or bring out the worst. Paul wants to see the family of God building each other up.

Paul’s advice is simple in theory but can be challenging in practice. He wants Jesus’ followers to imitate their Lord and do what is good for the other person, even if it costs you something. If by your choices you are making it hard for another to stand firm in their spiritual convictions, change what you’re doing. If the other person believes that they are being faithful to God, it would be sinful to cause them break with their conscience and stumble. Hold your brothers and sisters up; don’t allow them to fall.

Paul wants believers to try and live in peace, wholeness and harmony. For Paul, the creation of the Christian church was a miracle. The coming together of Jews and Gentiles into an eternal, spiritual family that was not defined by ethnicity, geography, or lineage was astounding. The

² Susan Eastman, *Paul and the Person*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017).

idea that the Roman believers might let their community be destroyed over food and wine must have frustrated Paul to no end.

Love means doing what is best for others as individuals, and what is best for the faith community. While we might not find our Christian communities threatened over serving pork at a gathering, there are spiritual convictions that might differ between believers. Let's all consider how we can encourage peace and mutual edifications in our church.

- As we think about how we might apply these ideas to our context, what kinds of things come to mind? Drinking alcohol is one that often comes up, but are there others you've encountered?
- Are there behaviors you might need to alter for the good of another believer, or the good of the community as a whole?
- What could you do to help build up another believer or your community of believers?

Pray

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

Father, thank you for the other believers in my life. Give me wisdom to know how to build another up. Teach me how to love others and pursue their good, even when it costs me something. Give me a tender heart toward others. Let me see them how you see them, with love, compassion, and hope.

Day 4

There is an old game where a group of children walking along a path would try to avoid all the cracks in the pavement. Sometimes they would sing-song, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." Now let's suppose that one of the children really, really believed that if she stepped on a crack, something awful would happen to her mother and she couldn't be convinced otherwise. Nudging her so that she accidentally stepped on a crack would be a cruel thing to do.

Obviously, this analogy isn't perfect and shouldn't be taken too far, but the overall point remains. There were believers in Rome who believed that eating non-Kosher foods would be a violation of their commitment to God. Paul agrees, not because the food was actually unclean, but because it would violate their conscience to eat it. Coercing them into eating foods that violated their consciences would be wrong. Paul wants the Strong to accommodate the Weak.

Read the Word

Romans 14:22–23

²² 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. ²³ 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.

Reflect

As we've learned, there was a group within the Roman church who feels obligated to follow the Torah. Paul seems to agree that this makes them "weak in faith" (14:1), but still wants them to act in accordance with that faith (14:23). If they are convinced that eating non-Kosher food is a sinful act before God, then it is. If they believe that eating pork and other foods forbidden in the Torah violates their commitment to God and disrupts their relationship with him, then they shouldn't eat them. It's that simple.

As for the Strong, Paul wants believers to know that there is freedom in Christ, but it is not a freedom to be self-indulgent, but a freedom to be led by the Spirit. This is one of the main points that Paul makes in Romans 7–8. So, Paul enlists the help of the Strong to facilitate peace. They are called to lay down their rights for the sake of the others and avoid non-Kosher foods, especially at church gatherings.

This does not mean that the Strong can't make their own convictions known. That's not the message of verse 23. But they need to be careful not to bully the Weak into agreeing with them. "As the context suggests, the silence that Paul requires is related to the need to avoid putting a stumbling block in the way of the 'weak.' This will mean that the 'strong' are not to brag about their convictions before the 'weak' and, especially, that they are not to propagandize the 'weak.'"³

Paul's instructions to the Romans is fairly straightforward. The Weak shouldn't violate their consciences and the Strong should respect that. The question for us is how do we apply these instructions to situations today? We know that Paul favored the position of the Strong. But in our modern debates, everyone thinks their position is the strong one! Those who drink alcohol might assume that they are exercising Christian freedom and those who don't have succumbed to legalism. Those who don't drink may think that those who do are bowing to cultural pressure or psychological weakness, and that there is more freedom in *not* drinking.

We could sketch out the positions in any number of current controversies along those lines. Who's the Strong and who's the Weak when it comes to homeschooling, drinking alcohol, having a tattoo, wearing a bikini, having a woman preacher, playing violent video games, watching rated R movies, owning a gun, having an expensive house or car, and on and on? We can have very strong convictions on these issues. It can be difficult to understand that two Christians who truly love Jesus and want to honor him can come to different conclusions. Yet, it happens all the time.

³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 862.

So, let's take Paul's instruction for the Weak and make sure we are fully convinced in our own mind and stand firm in our convictions. We need to think about these issues, discuss them, pray over them, and seek the Spirit's wisdom and guidance.

We also need to take Paul's instruction for the Strong and not hinder another's faith by putting an obstacle in their path and remember that we should honor others above ourselves (Romans 12:10). We need to be willing to lay down our rights for the good of another.

Above all, we need to stop judging one another. When it comes to "disputable matters," we must be humble and gracious, and treat each other with Christlike love.

- How do you need to take Paul's instructions for both the Weak and the Strong as you think about interacting with other believers over "disputable matters"?

Pray

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

Father, I pray for a humble, teachable, and compassionate heart. Help me to love my spiritual siblings with a Christlike love. Bring unity to our small groups and to our church as a whole. We want to love and serve you and help others find and follow Christ. Protect us from the Evil One who would distract us and cause division with these issues.

Day 5

There's a lot to think about when it comes to Romans 14. Spend some time reflecting on what these verses teach and think about how you'd apply it to our day. Pray and ask the Spirit for guidance.

Reflect on what you've learned

Read through all of Romans 14. Write out a brief summary of Paul's main points. What stands out most to you?

Make Connections

Can the instructions of Romans 14 really take hold in our modern American churches? Sometimes I wonder. Our culture bombards us with messages of individualism and consumerism that in our flesh we want to believe. "You have the right to do whatever makes you happy." "You deserve to live how you want." "You have to follow your heart. People owe it

to you to accommodate you.” Surrounded and by these ideas, can we really lay down our pride and self-interest? Are we willing to try?

We have to try. As the family of God, we have to yield to the Spirit, invite him to transform us, and seek peace, unity, and love.

I know too many people in the body of Christ who are under the weight of incredible suffering. Parents sitting by the bed of a terminally ill child. A woman fleeing the home of her abusive husband. A husband weeping at the grave of his young bride. People suffering from debilitating illnesses, both physical and mental.

At the bedside or the graveside, we need the body of Christ around us. When you're on the phone at three A.M. with a hurting brother or sister, it matters not one bit if one of you would attend a same-sex wedding and the other wouldn't. It doesn't matter who anyone voted for in the last election or whether one of you owns a handgun and the other would like to see all of them banned. What matters is that you're family.

Paul's point in Romans 14 and 15 is that the sibling bond stitched together by the love of the Father, the sacrifice of the Son, and the power of the Spirit supersedes everything else. What matters to Paul is love and unity. Because without it the body of Christ will be unable to come together, bear one another's burdens, and live out Jesus' mission in this world.

Pray and consider your next step

Where is your head after this discussion of “disputable matters”? Are there some things you need to work out with the Lord in prayer? Issues you need to research?

How can you contribute to greater unity in your small group or serve team? How can you show Christlike love and acceptance?

Take some time to pray for those with whom you disagree. Whatever the peripheral issue is that most concerns you, pray for those on the opposing side. Pray for people by name if possible. Ask the Spirit to give you insight into their position, and greater love for them as a person.