

Accepting

Believers should accept and encourage other believers to facilitate unity.

Romans 14:1-12



When have you seen a breakdown in one area create another problem in a different area of your body? How might that same type of cause and effect happen in a church?

The human body is an amazing creation. A series of systems—such as the circulatory system, the digestive system, the skeletal system, and the nervous system—all work together to keep things moving and growing. Any problem in one system can create problems in another. The body of Christ works the same way. To keep the body healthy and effective, believers must live in unity.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

Starting in Romans 12, Paul began focusing on how we live out our faith. We are called to living sacrifices, to use our gifts to bring Him glory, and to build up the church (Rom. 12:1-8). We no longer exist only to please ourselves. Instead, we live in relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ (12:9-21). We also demonstrate the reality of the gospel by our attitudes toward authority—including government officials with whom we may disagree (13:1-7). While we may need to choose between God's laws and human laws in the most extreme cases, those officials deserve our respect. In fact, rebelling against our laws and leaders is tantamount to rebelling against the God who put them in place.

Returning to the theme of relationships between believers, Paul called on the Romans to demonstrate unity within the church body. Instead of judging others, Christians should protect one another. When disagreements arise, they should use the law of liberty and the law of love as guides for their attitudes and behavior (14:1-23). Christians have a responsibility to encourage others, even if it means putting their own desires on the back burner. This honors God and points the watching world toward Christ (15:1-13).

ROMANS 14:1-12

1 Accept anyone who is **weak in faith** **A**, but don't argue about **disputed matters** **B**. **2** One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. **3** One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him. **4 Who are you to judge** **C** another's household servant? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And he will stand, because the Lord is able to make him stand. **5** One person judges one day to be more important than another day. Someone else judges every day to be the same. Let each one be **fully convinced in his own mind** **D**. **6** Whoever observes the day, observes it for the honor of the Lord. Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and he gives thanks to God. **7** For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. **8** If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. **9** Christ died and returned to life for this: that he might be Lord over both the dead and the living. **10** But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. **11** For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God. **12** So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Passage Outline

Stop Judging
(Rom. 14:1-4)

Honor God
(Rom. 14:5-8)

Remove Obstacles
(Rom. 14:9-12)

Keywords

- A. This phrase describes immature believers who still conformed to Old Testament law rather than expressing their freedom in Christ.
- B. The issue in this case concerned food and observing special holy days. Paul dealt with the issue of convictions about food (1 Cor. 8) and special holy days (Gal. 4:8-11; Col. 2:16-17).
- C. The only opinion that really counts is God's. He is the One we strive to please. "It is the Lord who judges" (1 Cor. 4:3-5).
- D. A good litmus test would be to ask the following questions: (1) What will glorify God? (2) What will edify others? and (3) What will sanctify myself? Paul gave "careful thought to do what is right, not only before the Lord but also before people" (2 Cor. 8:21).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged His listeners to avoid judging others (Matt. 7:1-2). Paul applied Jesus' teachings to the life of the church by encouraging the Romans to *accept anyone who is weak in faith*. The apostle understood that we have a tendency to elevate our personal preferences to the level of non-negotiable doctrines. Instead, he encouraged believers to avoid arguments over *disputed matters*. Certainly, there are non-negotiable doctrines of the faith. The key to reconciling differences surrounding the negotiables requires a commitment to unity and grace.

BIBLE SKILL: Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a major doctrine. – Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and 10:25-33. What problem was Paul addressing in these verses? How is the problem Paul addressed in Romans 14 similar to the problem in Corinth? How is it different? What insights about the problem in Corinth apply to the situation in Rome?

What are some issues that stir debates in the church today? How do these compare to the issues pointed to by Paul?

In addition to questions about food, there were also divisions in Rome over holy days. Again, Paul called both groups to carefully examine their motives and convictions. The question of which days was not the point. Not everyone had to believe the same thing on this matter, but everyone had a responsibility to honor God with a clear conscience. The foundation of Paul's logic boiled down to one principle: ownership. No one who has accepted Jesus as Savior and claims to be a child of God *lives for himself, and no one dies for himself*. Once we surrender our lives to Him, we give up control.

How should viewing God as owner change a person's perspective on worship practices? How should it impact how believers treat one another?

KEY DOCTRINE: The Church – Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes, with each member being responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord (Col. 1:18).

For emphasis, Paul asked two rhetorical questions. First, he asked why a “weaker” believer would *judge your brother or sister*. Second, he asked why a “stronger” Christian would *despise your brother or sister*. In truth, neither judgment nor contempt is appropriate in the body of Christ. Both groups were in the wrong. More importantly, Paul reminded them that one day each of them would *stand before the judgment seat of God*. This will not be a judgment of salvation but of works—an evaluation of how we used the life God has given us.

Which action is more divisive: judging others or looking down on others? Explain.

APPLY THE TEXT

- Christians are to avoid being judgmental toward other believers' spiritual understanding and religious practices.
- Believers are to honor God regardless of what doing so may require.
- Believers are to express understanding toward other believers and their God-honoring practices.

Are you more likely to judge others or look down on others? Give an example. What adjustments do you need to make based on today's study?

What are some practical ways you and the members of your Bible study group can demonstrate God's ownership of your lives? How can you honor Him by honoring someone who is different?

Examine your life for areas in which you need to be more understanding toward other believers and their worship practices. How can you demonstrate greater understanding and grace toward them?

Prayer Requests



DAILY EXPLORATION

Day 1: We only answer to God.

Read Romans 14:1-4, identifying what Paul's illustration was really about.

To illustrate his point, Paul provided what was likely a real-life example in the Roman congregation. Christians from a Gentile background had embraced their spiritual liberty and were able to eat anything with a clear conscience. But *weak* believers, likely those from a Jewish heritage, struggled with their new freedom. Because they still worried about consuming food the law considered unclean, they would eat *only vegetables*. The problem in Rome was not so much their food preferences but their attitudes. The “weaker” Christians sometimes felt superior and would judge those who ate anything. Likewise, those who ate freely tended to *look down* on those who abstained. Neither position was correct. Christians have a responsibility to love each other, not belittle or judge one another over matters of conscience.

Paul noted that every believer is a *servant* of God. Each servant stands or falls based on his or her master's standard—not some standard created by fellow servants. Ultimately, everyone will give an account for their actions. But we won't be answering to one another. We will answer to the Lord for what we have done—or haven't done. We need to focus on being transformed into His likeness and spend less time trying to mold everyone else into our likeness.

What are some issues that stir debates in your church? How do these compare to the issues pointed to by Paul?

Day 2: God's glory should be our primary motivation.

Read Romans 14:5-8, considering how the Lord calls us to treat other believers.

Paul did not condemn those who observed certain days as holy days, as long as they did so as an act of worship. Likewise, he refused to chastise anyone over food preferences if they were seeking to honor God. God's church is big enough to include people who differ on negotiable practices. For Paul, God's glory was the primary motivation for the Christian life. He challenged the Corinthians to filter their actions through the test of God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31).

Paul had already explained to the Romans that all people are born into sin and have no ability to please God in their own strength. Thankfully, Christ paid a price that we could not pay. But His death also demands that we live to honor God. One way to do that is to recognize the sincere efforts of others who are also striving to please God. We can enjoy freedom to serve God as He leads us, but we also must allow others the same privilege.

How does viewing God as owner change your perspective on how you treat other believers?

Day 3: Jesus' death and resurrection unifies believers.

Read Romans 14:9-10, underlining why Christ died and returned to life.

Whether the Roman Christians were “weak” or “strong,” they all shared one thing in common. They claimed Jesus as their Lord and Savior. What they shared was infinitely more significant than any differences that might separate them.

Jesus' death and resurrection unifies believers. He lived a perfect life, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and has authority over all things—both dead and living. His authority has no boundaries. Because He is Lord of all, He is also Judge of all. We are not. What's more, Jesus died to free people from judgment and contempt. So, it is wrong for any believer to attempt to put a brother or sister in Christ back under any form of bondage.

Why did Paul warn against believers criticizing each other? What's the danger in criticizing others?

Day 4: We are called to nurture unity in the church.

Read Romans 14:11, taking time to think about the unity we are called to.

To drive home his point, Paul rooted his argument in the Old Testament. Quoting Isaiah 45:23, he reminded his readers that God said *every knee will bow* before Him eventually. And *every tongue will give praise to God*. This was a reminder to believers that He is Lord—and ultimate Judge—over everyone and everything.

In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote that Jesus humbled Himself on the cross, God raised Him above all else, every knee would bow before Him, and every mouth would confess His authority (Phil. 2:5-11). The Philippians had also been struggling with a lack of unity and judgmental attitudes (Phil. 2:1-4). For them, the answer was the same as what Paul gave the Romans—and gives us today. We are called to nurture unity in the church, not to create division in the church. While we should stand for the unchangeable doctrines of the faith, those conversations should be rooted in love and truth, not judgment or contempt.

How are you fostering unity in your church and group? If there are members that you find yourself judging, what can you change about your attitude in the way you approach them?

Day 5: We will all give an account.

Read Romans 14:12, noting the requirement to give an account.

Again, Paul stated that our appearance before Jesus was not just about praising Him. It will also include being judged by Him. The idea behind the phrase *give an account* is a financial term. First-century stewards—what we might call “asset managers”—were responsible for overseeing their employer’s property. Their job was to handle those resources for the benefit of the owner. To make sure this was happening, stewards were regularly called to account for what was under their care.

Each of us will be called before God to give an account of ourselves. No one will be exempt. We will each answer to God for our actions and decisions. The Lord will serve as our Judge. Because of this, we should be managing our own lives for His glory. Let us also be supporting and encouraging other believers in their desire to live for His glory.

Which action do you consider to be more divisive: judging others or looking down on others? Explain.

TALK IT OUT

Reflect on the truths found in Romans 14, sharing with other members of your Bible study group.

How should believers handle the differences of opinion regarding religious practices?

How does realizing we belong to God help us better focus on honoring Him? How can we seek to honor God with our words, attitudes, and actions?

How do we honor God when we accept fellow believers without criticism?



For additional context, read “The Kingdom of God: Paul’s Understanding” in the Spring 2020 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.