

Do Not Judge One Another

Lesson Text: Romans 14:1-13; 15:5,6 **Devotional Reading:** James 4:7-12

Background Scripture: Romans 14:1-13; 15:5,6

Time: A.D. 56 **Place:** from Corinth

Romans 14:1-13

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

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ It is written: " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.' " ¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. 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.

Romans 15:5, 6

⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶ so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, a student should be able to:

- Summarize Paul's teaching about the need for Christians not to judge each other.
- Discuss the importance of Christians being united by their relationship with Jesus Christ, even when they hold differing opinions on some issues.
- Suggest a specific issue that divides believers in his or her church, and suggest a means of coming to unity.

INTRODUCTION

There are certain fundamental doctrines that must be accepted by all true believers. These include such essentials as the inspiration of the Bible, the virgin birth, Christ's atonement, His bodily resurrection, and the Second Coming.

In the area of nonessentials, though, there is room for various opinions and interpretations. This does not mean that we should not seek to discover the original intentions of the biblical writers; however, we should not allow opinions concerning issues of church government, music and worship preferences, youth programming, or evangelistic strategies to divide God's people.

Obviously, these matters differ from church to church; even within a single local congregation there may be a variety of opinions held. Too often, though, such things become divisive issues that hinder us from the church's primary mission, namely, to win the lost.

Accept the Weak (Rom. 14:1-4)

When we became Christians, we were "*babes in Christ*" (1 Cor. 3:1). Just as humans grow and mature, so it is in the Christian life. Sadly, some believers never get beyond the infantile stage of spiritual growth. Just like human babies, these spiritual infants may whine a lot and demand their own way. In fact, Christians who cannot get along with each other reveal that they are not growing spiritually and are carnal in their thinking (c.f. 1 Cor. 3:3).

Even though a person may be growing spiritually in one area of his Christian walk, he may be stumbling in another. This may be due to his background or to other issues that he may be facing at the time. The fact remains, however, that some believers are more mature than others and that spiritual growth does not occur at the same rate for all people. Some are "*weak in the faith*" (Rom. 14:1) and are overly concerned about "*doubtful disputations*," that is, disputable or debatable matters. Yet mature believers must not judge those who are weak.

1. How should mature believers treat the spiritually weak (Romans 14:1)?

One issue that caused controversy in the early church was the eating of meat that had been offered to idols (cf. 1 Cor. 8). This may have been the matter Paul was addressing here.

This issue revolved around the common practice of purchasing meat in the market that had previously been offered in sacrifice to a false god. There were two approaches to this issue in the early church. Some would not eat this meat because they could not dissociate it from the practices of paganism. Others, however, recognized that false gods did not exist and that there was no actual participation in pagan worship when one ate such meats.

Another possibility is that Paul was addressing the issue of Jewish dietary laws, which some Jewish believers insisted on keeping. In this case the vegetarian diet might have been an attempt to avoid the meat of animals that had not been properly slaughtered according to the Mosaic law.

Whatever the exact issue was in Rome, Paul recognized that those who did not eat meat for fear of spiritual contamination were actually spiritually weak. They were not yet mature enough to understand that food was of no consequence spiritually. As such, their opinion and practice differed from that of those who felt free to eat meat. This caused some tension in the church at Rome

2. What issues might have been involved in the eating of certain foods (v. 2)?

When Paul uses "*strong*" and "*weak*" in some of his letters, he pictures the weak Christian as one who is more vulnerable to sin in a particular situation. The strong Christian is not guided by some of the scruples and restrictions that are still important in the thinking of the weak Christian. We may think that "strength" and "weakness" would be determined by how long an individual has been a Christian. But that may not necessarily be the case. In fact, a Christian could be considered "strong" in one area of conduct and "weak" in another. Christlike attitudes must be allowed to govern each situation. As Paul says, let no one "*put a stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister*." (Romans 14:13).

3. How can we tell if we are the "strong" Christian or the "weak" one? How do our responsibilities toward each other differ depending on which type of Christian we are?

Paul advised the Roman saints to accept one another instead of judging one another. To allow the Christian life to revolve around a single issue is to miss the point of what it means to follow Christ (v. 17).

Even today we should not allow an opinion or a preference to disrupt fellowship between believers. Well-intentioned people sometimes elevate their own opinions to the level of divine revelation. While it may be permissible to hold opinions, it is not right to divide the body of Christ over them.

Whether a believer ate meats or abstained from them, Paul said that *"God has accepted them"* (v. 3). If God accepts someone, we have no choice but to accept him as well rather than offer contemptible and unloving criticism.

To condemn a brother or sister in Christ is to judge *"someone else's servant"* (v. 4). Since we are all servants of the Lord, we stand or fall before Him. It is not our prerogative to determine who will stand or fall, though. To do so is to usurp God's authority.

4. Who does a servant ultimately have to answer to (vs. 3,4)?

The Lord's Day (Rom. 14:5, 6)

The fact that there seems to have been some conflict over the day of worship in the church at Rome seems to imply a Jewish-Gentile controversy. Since Paul did not give any details concerning this controversy, we are not certain of the issue being debated.

We know that some Jewish believers continued to participate in various Jewish rituals (cf. Acts 21:21-26). Though this was a part of their national heritage, it was never to be made binding on Gentile converts (Acts 15:1, 19-21; Gal. 6:15).

Another possibility is that a controversy had arisen concerning whether the Lord's Day was a special day or each day should be considered holy. As you can imagine, good arguments could be presented on either side. Since Paul did not give us many details concerning the controversy, we should not be too dogmatic with regard to the issue in question. Even so, Paul laid down an important principle: *"Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind."* (Rom. 14:5).

If one person had a certain view about the days of the week, the important thing was that he *"does so to the Lord"* (v. 6). Similarly, if a person gave thanks to God for his food-whatever it was or was not-this was the most important issue.

5. What was the probable issue relating to certain days (vs. 5,6)?

The Lord's Way (Rom. 14:7-9)

When Paul wrote that *"none of us lives for ourselves alone"* he was stating both a truth and an ideal. We know that there are many people who in fact do live for themselves and are totally unconcerned about others. Paul's point was that believers must recognize their impact on other people. That is why Paul later stated that we should not do anything that would cause a brother to stumble or otherwise make him weak in the faith (v. 21).

"Paul meant here that whatever a man does, or however he lives, it is his relationship to the Lord that determines all. Not merely such things as eating, not eating, observing days, or not observing days, but life itself is sustained in a holy sense of belonging, not to one's self, but to the Lord" (Coffman, Romans, Firm Foundation).

Paul had already written that *"neither death, nor life"* (8:38) can separate us from the Father's love. Romans 14:8 has the same thought, though the words are different. We belong to the Lord, whether in life or in death. Even though many of us may not give daily contemplation to the possibility of leaving this world at any moment, death was on Paul's mind daily. Considering all the near-death experiences he had during his ministry (2 Cor. 11:24-28).

Christ is "*Lord both of the dead and living*" (Rom. 14:9). By virtue of His death, He is Lord of the dead; by virtue of His resurrection, He is Lord of the living (cf. Rev. 1:18).

Recognizing that Christ is the Head of the church and that we are "*members one of another*" (Rom. 12:5) should encourage us to support rather than criticize one another over various opinions. A good principle to follow is in essentials, unity; in opinions, liberty; in all things, love.

6. Who are we to live for? Why is this crucial with regard to Christian liberty (vs. 7-9)?

Await the Judgment (Rom. 14:10-13)

To set ourselves up as judges is to usurp a divine prerogative. That is to say, because of what Jesus has done (as described in the previous verse), only He has the right to serve as Judge. No one else has the right to judge a brother. That we are not to judge does not mean that we should make no attempt to discern good from evil. In the context of Romans, Paul was dealing with passing judgment on fellow believers with regard to various matters of Christian liberty. He was not dealing with the fundamentals of the faith. To deny basic truths of Scripture or to disregard clear moral teachings is to place oneself under God's judgment. That is why we are told to "*try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world*" (1 John 4:1).

To "*judge your brother or sister*" (Rom. 14:10) means to look down on a fellow Christian. If we consider our personal standards equivalent to the revealed will of God, we will look down on those who do not measure up to our supposed wisdom. Paul rejected such arrogance.

Paul declared that "*we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*" While Christians will not be judged concerning salvation, we will be judged concerning our works (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Since we will all give an account for what we have done and said (Matt. 12:36), it is very important that we be careful not to judge our fellow saints.

7. Since we will all stand or fall before the Lord Jesus, what is the point of judging one another (v. 10)?

In verse 11 Paul quoted from Isaiah 45:23 to reinforce the truth he had just stated. There will come a time when all people, believers and unbelievers alike, will bow the knee in submission to the God of creation. For God's children, this will be a joy and a privilege. For those who have rejected Christ, it will be a time of great consternation. Those who have not acknowledged the existence of God will be faced with the reality of His presence and power. This will be a great day for the re-deemed but a day of terror for the unsaved (cf. Rev. 6:13-17).

That "*every tongue shall confess to God*" (Rom. 14:11) shows that all will acknowledge the righteousness of God and His decrees. Paul expanded on these thoughts in his letter to the Philippians, where he stated, "*That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (2:10,11).

The situation in Rome was such that some in the church were judging others with regard to foods and days. These were, as Paul indicated, opinions that would not matter in light of eternity. Since "*every one of us shall give account of himself to God*" (Rom. 14:12), we should not be overly concerned about matters that do not relate to one's salvation.

Most church conflicts arise over matters of opinion, not doctrine. Churches have split over such things as the carpet color, the style of music, or the procedure used to search for a new pastor. Such mundane issues can

destroy a local congregation and divert our attention from the real purpose of the church, namely, to carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

8. From what Old Testament book did Paul quote to support the position that we will all bow before the Lord (vs. 11,12)?

Paul's final word here on this issue provides a positive alternative to the kind of negative judging that has been his primary concern thus far. Whenever we find ourselves dwelling on our differences with others and becoming frustrated and impatient with them, it may be a good time to stop and consider how we can be a help to them-to enable them to obey Christ and serve Him more fully.

We are to avoid judging not only because God alone is the Judge but also because there is a more practical issue to be considered. This has to do with putting a "*stumbling block or an occasion to fall in a brother's way.*" To elevate issues of opinion to matters of faith and doctrine is to create a problem where none should exist.

While it is true that not every issue is worthy of serious debate, we must always ask whether our choices have the possibility of disrupting Christian fellowship. Mature believers should be willing to defer to the weak in order to promote the cause of Christ. As Paul said, "*For meat destroy not the work of God*" (v. 20).

9. How can we avoid being a stumbling block (v. 13)?

Affirm One Another (Rom. 15:5,6)

God has shown extraordinary "patience" with us. Should we not try to exhibit patience with one another-for example, concerning the kind of issues Paul has addressed in this section of Romans? We would do well to reread Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant-a man who all too quickly forgot the grace with which his master had treated him (Matthew 18:21-35).

Being "likeminded" does not mean that we agree on every issue that surfaces. Paul has already stated in Romans 14 that there will be disagreements among Christians on certain subjects. To be likeminded means that we all determine to have the same attitude toward one another-an attitude that is patterned "according to Christ Jesus."

Verse 6 is a picture of what Heaven will be like-speaking with united attitudes and singing with united voices as we praise the Father and the Christ. Shouldn't we be "rehearsing" now? We will not always sing the same notes, but we will be in harmony because our minds are focused on the same goal-seeking to glorify God.

10. Why should we be "likeminded one toward another?" (Rom. 15:5,6)

CONCLUSION

The Power of Positive Judging

Don't you like the way Paul points us in the direction of positive judging? "*But judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way*" (Romans 14:13). Do I apply myself to figuring out how I can help my brother or sister to stand, and not fall?

The writer of Hebrews encourages Christians to get together and to exhort each other, to help each other hold fast to the profession of their faith. "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works" (Hebrews 10:24). That's the kind of positive judging that will make Almighty God smile, will draw His family closer together, and will give the world a taste of what they're missing when they remain outside of God's family.

PRAYER

Our Father, the God of patience and consolation, help us to be patient with one another. Help us to be judges in a positive way, not a negative one. Help us to leave ultimate judgment to You alone and to trust Your perfect righteousness, wisdom, mercy, and love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

We should not allow our differences over nonessential matters to cloud our view of the Son.