

## Love and Liberty Romans 14.1-15:4

14:1-15:13 is one long discussion (one of the longest in Romans) on **love, liberty and unity, under the Lordship of Christ**.

- Paul spends so much time on it because unity in Christ is so important.
- Not uniformity, but a unity with rich diversity centered on Jesus.
- This whole argument is moving toward this vision of Jew and *Gentile* (that is, the “nations,” the “*enthnes*”) united in giving praise to God through Christ (cf., 15:6).
- That’s God’s beautiful design for the world.
- **This is quite a contrast from the rally’s in VA** -- where evil, wicked, shameful racism was on display. What turned into a national tragedy.
- We have already spoken out against white supremacy groups, and we will continue to do so. We renounce all forms of active and passive racism.
- Racism is satanism.
- It is anti-gospel, anti-kingdom, anti-*imago dei*, anti-Bible.
- We want to be a people that live differently -- let us seek out and love those who may be experiencing fear/anger/discouragement; let us bear their burdens with them.
- May God help us grow in this area of ethnic diversity for the glory of God.
- May God fill our eyes afresh with a passion to see every tribe, tongue, come to know and love the Lord Jesus -- and that the church would give a compelling witness to the world of the kingdom of God -- a kingdom of diverse people united in Jesus’ grace.
- **[Pray]**

Essential oils. They’re a big deal to people today. I confess, I love them. I use them in my beard; we use the diffuser; I rub it on my neck at night (Victoria told me I smelled like Misquito repellent last night! I thought it was glorious).

But are they really *essential*?

Can you *not* live without them? That’s a lofty claim!

Maybe “helpful oils.” “Special oils.” Or “Not quite essential, but still wonderful oils.”

Scripture shows us what’s **essential** -- that which we cannot live without -- **the gospel!**

At times churches can lose sight of what is essential, and begin majoring on the minors.

- A gospel-centered church makes the major thing the main thing in all things.
- You might think of the church as a “gospel oil” diffuser – filling the world with the aroma of Christ.

This text teaches us how to stay united in the gospel,  
and to give freedom to one another in non-essentials.

“**In essential things, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.**”

- (often attributed to Augustine no one really knows, and even the context of it is debated). That’s a **concise summary** for this lengthy portion of Romans.

Remember **Romans 12:16**: “Live in harmony with one another.” Prayer in 15:5-6.

- Here's the challenge: live in harmony with fellow believers that practice non-essentials differently than you.
- **Don't major on the minors.**
- Don't make a big deal out of non-essentials (in this case, **diets** and **days**), that would disrupt the unity of the faith.
- But **major on the Lord Jesus Christ**, and give freedom to each other, when it comes to cultural and social practices.
- Our pursuit must not be “external conformity” but Christ-centered unity.
- And in all things, let the church be known for charity, for love.

It's easy to fall into the trap of **criticizing** and **rejecting** fellow believers because they don't take on your cultural practices.

A mark of God's love is that we welcome and build up other believers -- despite their differences of opinions on non-essentials.

### Outline

14:1-2 – Big Idea: Accept [Welcome/Receive/Fellowship with] the person weak in faith.

14:3-12 – Neither Criticize nor Condemn One Another

14:13-23 – Neither Distress nor Destroy One Another

15:1-4 – Don't live to please yourself, but follow the unselfish example of Jesus.

15:5-13 – (Next week). A celebration of the unity of Jew/Gentile in the worship of God

So the community is divided into two groups:

**Weak and Strong**

### The “Weaker Brother/Sister”

Both the weak and strong trusted in Jesus for salvation. They are Christians.

- But their **conscience** was **easily pricked or offended** (Bird).
  - 1 Cor 8:8ff
- In this text, the weaker Christians are **trying to enforce rules that God doesn't require of Christians.**
- It had to do with **Torah observance primarily.**
- The weaker Christians kept the **OT food laws** and observed the **Sabbath strictly, and probably other Jewish holidays.**
  - They don't **eat meat or drink wine.**
  - **V. 2** – “**only vegetables**,” to avoid unclean foods (not for health reasons).
    - The best way to avoid eating something unclean was avoid meat *all together*.
    - See Deut 14; Lev 11
    - **Pork Chops, Scallops, Shrimp (Getting hungry?)**
  - **V. 5** – Days. They treat a particular day/days differently than others.
  - They did this to honor the Lord (v. 6).
  - They weren't legalists; they didn't think you were saved by abstaining.
- **Probably most of these folks were Jewish Christians [who relocated back to Rome following Claudius' edict].**

- But there were probably non-Jews who also held to some of these traditions – like the **Gentiles** who had been first converted to Judaism before becoming Christians.
- Further, there were some Jewish Christians (like Paul) who were not in the weaker brother category, but **stronger** brother category. (15:1)

Now, the weak did **not** believe that by abstaining from certain foods and by observing the Sabbath, that one would obtain **salvation**.

- But that **you'd be a better, more dynamic Christian**.
- **If they had believed a different gospel**, then Paul would have **not** been so accepting!
- Just read **Galatians!**

### The Strong

- The strong are the dominant/larger group in the church.
- They celebrated **freedom**.
- V. 2 – you can eat anything!
- Every day was equally important (v. 5)

A “stronger conscious” doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want, in the name of “I have a stronger conscious.”

- It means an “**informed conscious**.”
- It is a conscious informed by the Scriptures.
- The problem with the weaker brother was the inability to **accept certain new covenant teachings**.
- Their conscious needed strengthened -- and **undoubtedly, some would grow in understanding and application of the Scriptures**.
  - o Remember Peter in **Acts 10**? “**Rise, kill, and eat.**” He says “**No way!**” He knew Jesus’ teaching, but he struggled to accept it.
  - o There are certain things that take a while for one to embrace.
  - o We must be patient and charitable.
  - o The Jews had been taught to **view their calendars in certain ways, and abstain from certain foods, for centuries!** These habits/attitudes were hard to change.

So the strong did **not** think you were a more dynamic, faithful Christian by abstaining from meat or wine, and they did not think you were more faithful by holding to the Jewish calendar.

Both strong and weak believed in **moral norms – stealing is a sin, sexual immorality is sin, murder, adultery, etc.**

- They disagreed on certain cultural and social practices.

### Paul

- Paul thinks **both groups should be tolerated**, but he is **not** neutral.
- **He is a “stronger” brother** (see 15:1).

- He clearly thinks the stronger brother is **the correct position**, but there's **liberty** and **charity** here for the weaker brother, giving time for growth.
- He doesn't hold to the food laws (See **verse 14** and **Verse 20**). "Everything is clean."
  - The OT regulations on foods are no longer binding on us.
- Paul has an informed conscious.
- At the end of the day, **Paul thinks the weak are wrong**. (Gal 4:10; Col 2:16-17)
- **Requiring things that the Bible doesn't require, having greater strictness in non-essential matters, doesn't show that a person is a stronger Christian, but a weaker one.**
- Paul is subtle about this critique. But he says it.
- Why is he subtle?
- Because he's mainly concerned about **the strong's lack of love**, not the weak's position.
- He doesn't kick the weak to the curb. He's practicing what he's preaching!
- He says, "I'm right, but it's not a big deal" – because these are non-essential matters.

### **Big Idea: Receive and Welcome One Another (14:1-2)**

This is the main point.

He's speaking to *believers*.

- We welcome unbelievers into worship services too, of course, but Paul's not talking about that - He's speaking of Christian fellowship.
- This big idea is repeated beautifully in **Romans 15:7**.

**"weak in faith"** does *not* refer to the authenticity of one's faith.

- The weak have faith in Jesus Christ and **are** believers.
- It refers to **one's convictions about what one's faith allows him or her to do.**
- The weak do not think their faith allows them to practice certain things.
- This person does not understand the conduct that follows faith.
- Or as Paul says in **Gal 2:14**, "conduct that is in step with the truth of the gospel."
- Morris: "He does not understand that when the meaning of justification by faith is grasped questions like the use of meat and wine and special days become irrelevant."

Paul wants the strong to welcome them into fellowship, and the weak to welcome the strong, and not disrupt the unity of the church over disputable matters.

**Some Christians love to argue.**

- It's good to be passionate about *the truth*.
- But we must beware.
- We can begin to think that everything is equally important.
- We can then end up being divisive, cranky, and argumentative.

Paul says: "Don't divide" (1b)

- Don't break fellowship over debatable, non-essentials.

## **Bird's three levels of importance:**

- i. Matters **essential** for salvation.
- ii. Matters that are **important** to the faith and **the church**, but **not** essential for salvation.
- iii. Matters of **indifference** – debatable, non-essentials, preferences.

**Verse 2** is an example of a debatable issue.

- (Verse 2 is Nate's favorite verse, and now Joshua's – "Is that real?" Green Vegetables, now proof text)
- The weak are concerned about eating "unclean things," the strong are not.
- In Rome, the vast majority of meat available would have been pork (Bird).
- Meat was often associated w ritual meals & pagan idolatry.

Christians today debate over a lot of non-essentials, a lot of matters of indifference

- Clothing – there have been big debates over what pastors/ministers wear
- Music
- Church Buildings
- Politics
- Drinking in moderation
- Greens at Christmas time – or not having them
- Halloween
- Public school vs. home school vs. private school.
- Sports
- Watching Movies

You can have your views, but for the sake of the unity of the body, we must allow for liberty in non-essentials.

- If you were raised in a fundamentalist church culture, you were probably raised in a setting where non-essentials were raised to the level of essential.
- If you were raised in a liberal church culture, then you probably didn't hear that which is essential very much -- that is, the gospel.

This text confronts both groups.

- It makes us focus on what's most essential and important, and allow for liberty on non-essentials.
- We are not united by any of the types of things I mentioned.
- We are united by the gospel.

## **#1: Neither Criticize Nor Condemn One Another (14:3-12)**

### *A. The Temptations of the Strong and Weak (3)*

- i. The strong are tempted to **despise** ("look down [on]," CSB; **criticize; be condescending**) the weak for being so conservative (3, 10)
  - They say, "Why are you requiring rules not in the Bible?"

- “Come on you fundies! You are no fun! Lighten up!”
- ii. The weak are tempted **to condemn** the strong for their more flexible consciences.
- “You guys are too worldly” or probably worse here, “you’re not a Christian.”
  - The word “condemning” (Krino) means to pronounce doom on a person; to deny someone the right to salvation” (Moo).
  - But Paul will argue **that God alone has that right.**
  - In **verse 3**, he says God has accepted the stronger brother.
  - He/She is a Christian.
  - How **can you not fellowship with someone that God is in fellowship with?**
  - **By not welcoming the other, you’re implying that God’s acceptance of him/her is misguided!**
- **Stronger brothers, don’t criticize the person whose conscience is easily offended.**
  - **Weaker brothers, don’t condemn the person with the more informed conscience.**

### *B. Lordship and Fellowship (4-12)*

In order to bring home his point about uniting, not dividing, Paul focuses our attention on the Lord.

- By emphasizing Lordship, we view debatable matters properly.
- i. **The Lord is the final judge (4).**
- “Who do you think you are?” (speaking mainly to the weaker brother), basically claiming to be the strong’s master?
  - The Christian has only one master: the Lord Jesus.
  - The Lord is the final judge of one’s salvation.

It isn’t wrong to be concerned **about the well-being of a brother or sister who has fallen into grievous sin.**

- We are called to see them restored – **Galatians 6:1.**
- That’s not judging a fellow Christian, that’s being a brother or sister to them.

This is something different.

- The weak are **not** judging the strong because of grievous **sin**, but **because they don’t take Saturday off from work, and they like bacon!**
- And **they don’t think they are real Christians because of it!**
- But these aren’t sins!
- So Paul says, “how dare you?”
- That person stands or falls *before God*.
  - That’s salvific language.
  - The Lord will keep the strong – the Lord will enable them to stand.
  - This is a great text for preservations of the saints – the Lord will keep us.

### ii. **Christ died and rose to be Lord of us all (5-9)**

**5:** Paul brings up another disputable matter: days. This probably refers to the Sabbath, but may also include certain Jewish holy days.

- Whatever position one takes, Paul says we should be “fully convinced in our own mind,” that is obey your conscious.

**6:** Whatever position you take on debatable issues the concern should be the same for both: **honor the Lord.**

- If both are seeking to honor God, then they should not be criticizing or condemning one another. Recognize the sincerity of one another.
- **Live in such a way that everyone knows the Lordship of Jesus has preeminence over your choices.** That’s key.

**7-9:** Paul elaborates on what it means to live under Christ’s Lordship: **It means that you should not live for your own self-interests, but for the interests of Christ,** the one who died, and rose that He may be Lord of all.

- Whether in life or death, **Christ owns us.**
- Therefore, the Lord **expects our conduct to please him.**

**V 7:** what we do, we do before God.

**8:** The *New City Chatechism* opens with them in Q1.

- Don't focus on self, but the Lord.
- Trust in God, for you are His!
- Death cannot separate us from his love.
- Giving yourself wholly to God is the sensible response of one who has been saved by grace alone.
- Keller: **A woman once said to me, “If I knew I was saved because of what I did, if I contributed to my salvation, then God couldn’t ask anything of me because I’d made a contribution. But if I’m saved by grace, sheer grace, then there’s nothing he cannot ask of me.” And that’s right. You’re not your own. You were bought with a price.**

The Romans were trying to dictate to one another how one should treat these debatable matters, but Paul calls for liberty, and for both groups to live under the Lordship of Jesus and allow the Lord alone to judge.

**iii. All of us will stand before God’s judgment seat (10-12)**

**10a:** A rebuke to both groups: the one who criticizes the other, and the one who condemns the other.

**10b:** We are ultimately accountable to God, **not one another’s faulty bar of judgment.**

**11:** He quotes Isaiah 45:23 to highlight the judgment of God at the end of history.

**12:** It **is before the sovereign Lord that we will give an account.**

- So when you choose a position on a debatable issue, do so with the sovereign Lord in mind.
- God will judge. So live your life accordingly.
- This section shows us that you can't view horizontal relationships rightly without maintaining a proper vertical relationship with God.

Bird (summarizes):

Paul is bent on stressing that Jesus is Lord of the weak (e.g., teetotaling Sabbatarian vegan Jews) and the strong (e.g., wine-sipping, Saturday-shopping, bacon munching Gentiles). If God has justified them, they cannot condemn each other. If God has raised them up, they cannot put each other down. If they belong to the Lord, they belong to each other. If everyone calls him “Lord,” they must call each other “brothers and sisters.” If God has accepted them, they must accept each other.

## #2: Neither Distress Nor Destroy One Another (14:13-23)

**13** – This verse is directed at both the weak and the strong, but the strong are primarily in view in the verses follow.

**13b:** After repeating his exhortation to the weak, he says to the strong, “Don’t cause them to stumble or put a hindrance in their way”

- “**stumbling block**” - OT imagery (Isa 8:14) it refers to “**a trap.**” (cf., Matt 13:41; 18:7).
- Don’t do something that will be a snare to them – that will impede progress.
- Don’t do something that will bring spiritual harm; that will negatively affect their faith; that is, something that will seriously damage their Christian discipleship.

**14** – Paul tells the strong that they are actually right about food.

- “No food is unclean” (cf., Mark 7:2, 19; Acts 10:14).
  - Saying all food is “kosher” follows Jesus’ teaching.
  - These laws have been fulfilled. You can eat anything.
  - Of course, You don’t have to eat any food! Some of you don’t like shellfish - that’s fine; that’s more for the rest of us.
  - (Health Panel: No Kale, No Green Tea! Bummer!)
- But while the strong are correct, he tells them to consider the unity of the fellowship, and to consider the consciences of others.
- Give the weak room; respect their opinion.
- Don’t flaunt your freedom, but seek to build up everyone.

**15a** – By eating what they are free to eat in front of the weak, the strong are “grieving” or “distressing” “causing pain” to the weaker brother.

**15b:** More than distressing, they may be “destroying” them.

- Peer pressure, and flaunting one’s freedom to the weak, may lead the weak to violate their consciences, or perhaps even walk away from the faith.

**15a:** What should the strong do? They should “walk in love.”

- Love has regard for weaker consciences.
- Love limits its own liberty.
- It asks, “Am I loving my brother with this action?”



So then, the strong are not wrong in thinking it's okay to eat meat (and drink wine, as he will say).

- **They are correct.**
- **But they are wrong when they enjoy this freedom in a way that it harms other Christians.**
- They need to **reorder their priorities.**
- Don't be the kind of Christian with a big head, but with a small heart.
- **Freedoms can be picked up or put down; the gospel and the unity of the church must be first priority.** (If you can't put them down, you're enslaved, not enjoying them)
- **1 Corinthians 9:**  
19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.... 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

He's free, but he's a servant to all ... he majors on **the gospel.**

Luther, an early treatise: **"A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one."**

Paul goes on now to give us more gospel-centered reasons for walking this way: Why should we avoid distressing or destroying the weaker brother?

**A. Because Christ died for them (15b-16)**

**15b:** Paul takes us to the cross. The appropriate place to talk about unity.

**Stott:** **"Did Christ love him enough to die for him, and shall we not love him enough to refrain from wounding his conscience? Did Christ sacrifice himself for his well-being, and shall we assert ourselves to his harm? Did Christ die to save him, and shall we not care if we destroy him?"**

Christ has redeemed your weaker brother, so walk in love toward him/her.

**16:** Don't allow the liberty that you enjoy to be spoken of as evil – **because you flaunt it to the detriment to the weak.**

Keep the cross in mind.

**Don't overestimate the importance of certain freedoms, and don't underestimate the importance of the cross!**

**B. Because the Kingdom of God is more important than food (17-23)**

This is the only place in Romans where the phrase, "kingdom of God" is used.

Paul says don't overestimate the importance of food and drink, and **underestimate the importance of the kingdom of God.**

**17:** The kingdom of God is about righteousness, peace, and the Holy Spirit.

- We are righteous in Christ Jesus, and thus have peace with God, and the indwelling Spirit who empowers us, and gives us a foretaste of the future.
- These things are what really matter!
- Because we are righteous in Christ, we now live righteous lives, peaceful lives, and joyful lives -- We don't live to grieve and destroy our brothers and sisters.
- This is the kingdom of God at work -- **this is the King ruling in our midst.**

**18:** Whoever seeks first the kingdom, and acknowledges that food and drink are secondary matters, pleases God and is "approved by men" (that is, he or she is **esteemed by the Christian community**).

**19-21:** A series of exhortations

*Pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding (19)*

- Prioritize building up, not tearing down a brother/sister.
- Prioritize peace and harmony, not insisting on your way.
- Christians aren't always known for peace and harmony.
- "I have to confess that this is my favorite verse in Romans and how I wish it would be read out thrice at the beginning of every .... meeting of Christians." (Bird)

*Do not destroy the work of God [the fellowship] for the sake of food (20)*

- "**the work of God**" – the Christian community
- Our responsibility is to build up the community, not tear it down by insisting on our views of non-essentials.... "do not for the sake of \_\_\_\_\_ destroy the work of God"
- Put the cross and the kingdom ahead of your liberties, preferences.

*Don't use your liberty to harm the weak (20-21)*

- *Meat and wine should be avoided when they cause offense, but not necessarily at other times.*
- Liberties can be taken up or laid down.
- Don't do something that will harm a brother or sister.
- At times, you should relinquish freedom to avoid division.
- Paul brings "**wine**" into the discussion. Why?
- Jews did **not think it was wrong to drink wine** (they celebrated it as a gift to enjoy [Ps 104]); it was **because they feared it was tainted w/ idolatry through pagan practices.**
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**22-23:** Paul draws a distinction between belief and action, that is, between **private conviction and communal behavior**.

- There's no need to broadcast your views on disputable matters, trying to convince people that you are right.

**22:** The strong Christian is blessed because his conscience approves of his eating everything, so that he can follow his conscience without any guilt feelings.

**23:** Those who still doubt should not eat meat because it is wrong to violate conscience.

- Doing so would not be done “**from faith**,” that is with a sincere belief that it is okay to do so. He’s using faith in the sense of personal **conviction**.
- Stott: “Although, as we have seen, [conscience] is not infallible, it is nevertheless [sacred], so that to go against it (to act not from faith) is to sin. At the same time, alongside this explicit instruction not to violate our conscience, there is an implicit requirement to educate it.”

**#3: Don’t live to please yourself, but follow Christ’s unselfish example (15:1-4)**

**V. 1** – “We who are strong.” What is our responsibility?

**1a:** The strong [those that are able to eat meat, drink wine, and ignore Jewish holy days] *ought to bear with the failings* (lit ‘weaknesses’) *of the weak* (1a)

- They should modify their conduct for the good of the weak.

**1b:** The strong ought ... *not to please ourselves* (1b).

- o It is selfish to trample on the consciences of the weak.

**2:** *Each of us should seek to build up our neighbor* (2)

- This is a **positive** way to say what has been said: **Instead of causing one to stumble** (14:13, 20, 21), or **tearing down** (14:20) or **damaging a person** (14:15), **seek their good**.

Paul then gives a theological basis again for such behavior.

***Because Christ did not please himself* (3-4)**

If Jesus gave up the glory of heaven, and his own life (Phil 2), then we can give up our liberties for the good of our neighbor, when love requires it.

**3b:** Paul reminds the readers of Psalm 69, to show what kind of **attitude** the Lord Jesus had.

- It’s a Psalm that the NT writers quote to **note the suffering of Jesus** (cf., Matt 27:34; Jn 2:17; 15:25; Acts 1:20; Rom 11:9).
- Paul may have in mind the insults that the weak are hurling on the strong.
- Christ took the insults, and so should the strong.
- By drawing the strong to Christ’s example, he exposes their arrogance toward the weak -- an attitude not reflecting the humility and service of Jesus.

**4:** This is parenthetical: After citing Psalm 69, Paul digresses to discuss the nature and purpose of the OT.

- It was written for us! What a gift! (1 Cor 10:11)
- Paul says the OT gives us encouragement and endurance. How so?
  1. The example of faithful OT saints gives us this (cf., Heb 11)
  2. The faithfulness of God revealed in Scripture give us encouragement/

endurance

3. The overarching story of the Bible gives us endurance and encouragement
4. And the great Messianic hope gives us encouragement and endurance

Reading the Scriptures (both OT and NT) awakens and sustains hope!

- Through it, we are able to do Romans 5:2b, “Rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.”
- Christians “do hard things” through the encouragement of the holy Scriptures.
- Meditate on it day and night.

### Summary

Therefore, **Christ-centeredness and Christ-likeness** is how we maintain unity.

- And notice how important unity is!
- Romans is not giving us a vision of individualistic Christianity, but of Christ-centered community. ...
- A vision of a diverse, global family resting and rejoicing in the grace of Jesus.
- Contribute to the unity of your local church, and don't disrupt it.
- Don't focus on non-essentials, but focus on Jesus.
- Remember Jesus is Lord of the weak and the strong.
- Let's not major on minors.
- Let's live our lives under the Lordship of Christ, and live to love and build up our brothers and sisters, not to harm or to hurt them.
- In essentials (the gospel), unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.