

# Romans: Chapter Fourteen

## **Romans 12.1-15.13: SERVICE (Righteousness Reproduced)**

Twice in recent chapters Paul has emphasised **love** as the principle which controls the believer's conduct (12.9-10, 13.8-10). Romans 14 is a return to the same (cf. v.15). On this occasion he is seeking to address a particular issue which was affecting the fellowship of the saints in Rome. Paul divides the believers into two groups; there were those 'weak in faith' (v.1) and others who were 'strong' (15.1). What exactly was the problem? Although the evidence is scant, it seems the 'strong' were *mainly* Gentile believers and the 'weak' were *mainly* Jewish believers. The Jewish brethren were still keen on observing dietary laws (not eating meat, v.2) and certain 'days' (v.5). This, of course, was not as a *means* of salvation, but a *way* of life. They could not bring themselves to abandon some of the requirements of the law they had observed their whole lives. Obviously the Gentile believers had no such scruples! **Moo:** *The Mosaic law did not, of course, demand abstinence from meat. But scrupulous Jews often avoided eating meat if they could not be sure it had been prepared in a kosher manner.* These Jews were surrounded by pagans in Rome. Perhaps they had decided to adopt similar practices to that of Daniel in Babylon to maintain their purity before the Lord (Daniel 1.8). Whilst Paul knew and was persuaded that such a stance was not required (v.14) he encouraged an atmosphere of toleration, understanding and self-sacrifice so as not to offend or cause spiritual damage to a brother. After the death of Emperor Claudius (AD 54), many Jewish brethren who had been exiled from Rome returned, no doubt exacerbating the tension Paul describes.

The teaching of Romans 14 is most applicable today in relation to matters God neither *commands* nor *forbids*. Although the issues of food, drink and observance of certain days are not so pertinent, there are many Christians who hold strong opinions in relation to: dress, Bible translations, hymn books, musical instruments, language in prayer, wedding rings, jewellery, cosmetics, television, smoking<sup>1</sup> and more. These are matters of indifference and opinion on which Scripture does not clearly pronounce. It is not a matter of morality or doctrine but culture and personal choice. Sadly, such issues can cause strong conflict amongst believers and thus the principles Paul expounds are timely wisdom.

### The Principle of Accountability (14.1-4)

**v.1:** Paul begins by exhorting the 'strong' to *receive* the brother who is 'weak in the faith'. This believer has a sensitive conscience in relation to food and observance of certain days which restrains his actions and behaviour. He has failed to apprehend his liberty in Christ. Such a believer must be 'received'. This has nothing to do with assembly fellowship, but rather being warmly welcomed and accepted into one's company and circle of friendship. They must not be treated as inferior or odd, but received unreservedly, and not for the purpose of debating or arguing about their scruples (doubtful disputations). **v.2:** The basic issue was that the strong believed all foods were clean to eat, whereas the weak abstained from meat, eating only vegetables. **v.3:** Both groups were to change their attitudes. Those who had no scruples about food (the strong) were not to 'despise' (look down on someone as being of little value, contempt) those who only ate vegetables (weak). Likewise, the vegetarians (weak) were to stop *condemning* and *criticising* the omnivores (strong). The simple reason given is that God has accepted this 'strong' believer. How could the weak therefore reject from their fellowship one that God has received? They should be treated as God treats them. **v.4:** Indeed, who were they to make such judgments on another's servant? The strong are **God's** servants and therefore answerable to Him for their beliefs and practices (cf. 1 Corinthians 4.3-5). It is before Him they will either 'stand approved' (commended) or 'disapproved' (censured). **Morris:** *If a servant is acceptable to his master, it does not matter what his fellow servants think.* That the Lord has received and approved such a believer will be ultimately declared in a future day. However, such a standing is only through the sustaining grace and power of God.

### The Principle of Lordship (14.5-9)

**v.5:** Paul introduces another matter over which there was disagreement amongst the saints in Rome – 'days'. The weak believers 'valued' some specific days more than others, probably involving observance of the Sabbath and various feast days (Colossians 2.16). The strong did not share these scruples and counted every day as equally valuable in the service of God. In such matters and after careful reflection, every believer should be 'fully convinced' (persuaded) before the Lord that their course of action is pleasing to Him. Our practice should not simply be determined by another person's opinion. **v.6:** But, whether a believer values one day above another, eats meat or vegetables only, their actions are performed out of a sincere desire to please the Lord. This must be recognised and respected. **Harrison:** *The recurring phrase is 'to the Lord'. Whether one be thought of as 'weak' or 'strong', the important thing is that he conduct his life in the consciousness of God's presence, because God's approval is more significant than the approval or disapproval of fellow Christians.* **v.7:** No Christian lives to serve himself. Whether in life or in death, our purpose is to please the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Apparently, **CH Spurgeon** saw nothing wrong with smoking for years. He could do it in all good conscience – until he found out that a tobacco firm was advertising 'the brand that Spurgeon smokes!' He had given a wrong impression about the Christian life, and from that day gave up the habit.

**v.8: Moo:** All parts of believers' lives—their thoughts, actions, ambitions, decisions—are to be carried out with a view to what pleases and glorifies the Lord. Even in and beyond death, a believer rests in the will of the Lord and aspires to bring glory and honour to Him. In every sphere, whether earthly or heavenly, physical or spiritual, death or life, we are each the Lord's prized and precious possession. **v.9:** Christ has 'died' and 'revived' (returned to life) thus establishing His lordship over the 'dead' and 'living' (saints are especially in view) by right of redemption. In a coming day He will be universally acknowledged by all as sovereign Lord (Philippians 2.11).

#### The Principle of Judgment (14.10-13)

**v.10:** How could these *brothers* in Christ (members of the same family) be *condemning* and *despising* one another? Christ is Lord and Judge – not them! Our place is not upon, but to stand before the *bema*<sup>2</sup> of Christ. Not only will the Judgment Seat review our *responsibilities* in the local church (labour, 1 Corinthians 3) and *reveal* our true character (life, 2 Corinthians 5), but also assess our *relationships* with other Christians (love, Romans 14). Some manuscripts read 'judgment seat of God' as Christ is the one who will sit as God's representative in judgment (cp. v.9, cf. Acts 17.31; 2 Corinthians 5.10). **v.11:** In quoting from Isaiah 45.23, Paul is establishing that universal judgment (of which the judgment seat of Christ is a part) is as certain as the fact that God lives. *Every knee will bow and every tongue confess*, but not at the same time. At the judgment seat, following the rapture, every **Christian** will confess the Lordship of Christ (not sins) and bow in recognition of His authority (Philippians 2.11). **v.12:** Indeed, every believer will 'give account of Himself to God'. The Greek for 'give account' was a common way of reporting one's financial situation, including all assets and liabilities, profit and loss (cf. Luke 19.13). In the context, the emphasis falls on the fact that account will be given of ourselves to God. We are not giving account for our brethren, or to our brethren! **v.13:** We should therefore not criticise one another, but rather *determine* to live in such a way that does not cause a brother to stumble spiritually.

#### The Principle of Love (14.14-15)

**v.14:** Paul was fully convinced before Christ that the strong were right on the basic issue. There is no food that is ceremonially unclean in itself (Mark 7.15; Acts 10.14-15; 1 Timothy 4.4-5). However, there were some believers who were unable to immediately grasp this truth (cf. Peter, Acts 10), having lived their whole lives observing certain food laws. Their considered opinion was still that certain foods were wrong to eat. Consequently, 'to him it is unclean'. In other words, to eat meat would violate his conscience and cause defilement. **v.15:** If the strong believer knows that eating meat causes his weaker brother 'pain' and 'distress', and continues to do so – he is not acting in **love**. In fact, to encourage (by our actions) a brother to do something which is against his conscience could 'destroy' him, i.e. cause spiritual ruin or seriously retard his spiritual growth. Measure Christ's love for this brother! It took Him to Calvary. Do we love him more than our own selfish desires? Are we willing to sacrifice for our brother?

#### The Principle of Peace (14.16-19)

**v.16:** The strong brother who has greater liberty (according to his conscience) to eat, must not allow this attitude to bring *reproach* or *slander* by acting in an unloving way towards his weaker brother. **v.17:** The strong needed reminding of spiritual priorities. God's kingdom (sphere of rule) will be manifested on earth during the millennium, but its moral character is practical righteousness, peace and joy – qualities which are produced by the Holy Spirit and should be evident in believers today. **v.18:** In service for Christ, this is the kind of character which is well-pleasing to God and respected by men. **v.19:** So, instead of arguing over trivialities, believers must *strive* after maintaining peace and harmony amongst the saints. Rather than knocking down, *eagerly seek* the 'building up' of one another in love.

#### The Principle of Conscience (14.20-23)

**v.20:** In the closing verses of the chapter, Paul re-states in simple terms his salient teaching. He commands the believers not to 'ruin' or 'tear down' the work of God in their lives for the sake of trivial arguments over food. Yes, all kinds of food are ceremonially clean, but it is wrong to eat that which causes a weaker brother to stumble. **v.21:** Very simply, believers should avoid doing anything that brings spiritual harm to another believer, especially in these matters of eating certain foods and drinking wine (from which many Jews abstained fearing it had been tainted with pagan idolatrous practices). **v.22:** Paul's conclusion for the strong is that their conviction ('faith') before God in the dispute over food is kept private (in terms of its practice). This liberty does not need to be paraded before, or imposed upon others. Acting in this way will bring God's blessing and favour, rather than condemnation for offending others. **v.23:** Paul's conclusion for the weak is that they should follow the dictates of their conscience. If they are sincerely convicted before God that eating meat is contrary to His will, then they should abstain – otherwise it is sin. To put it another way, 'whatever is done without the conviction that God has approved it is by definition sin' (Mounce). **FF Bruce:** *The implication of this statement appears to be that an action performed against the voice of conscience can never be right.*

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<sup>2</sup> **NET:** The judgment seat (*βῆμα*, *bēma*) was a raised platform mounted by steps and sometimes furnished with a seat, used by officials in addressing an assembly or making pronouncements, often on judicial matters. The judgment seat was a familiar item in Greco-Roman culture, often located in the agora, the public square or marketplace in the centre of a city.