

## **Christian Liberty: An Invitation to Accept One Another (Romans 14:1-12)**

When cultures intersect within the context of the church—the people of God gathered together around the common gospel of Jesus Christ—it’s both understandable and expectable for cultural expressions to collide. While Christianity has room for a vast array of cultural backgrounds, Christians must still be intentional about respecting and accepting one another. The early church experienced the joining of Jews and Gentiles in a single body of believers. People from these two diverse backgrounds brought their own cultural expressions, including the food they ate and the holy days they observed. Paul warned the church at Rome to avoid judgmental attitudes regarding such debatable issues. Christian liberty allows God’s people freedom regarding neutral cultural expressions. Of course, this doesn’t mean that every practice is acceptable. But those practices that don’t violate God’s revealed standard of holiness are acceptable for God’s people. We tend to raise our neutral cultural practices and preferences to a level of binding authority. By contrast, Paul describes stronger believers as those who embrace freedom in these matters. Even then, stronger believers should never look down on weaker believers, nor should weaker believers cast judgment on stronger believers. All believers should work toward unity. In Romans 14:1—15:13 Paul presents an extended emphasis on Christian unity. Romans 14:1-12 focuses on accepting one another. We’re to accept one another because God Himself has accepted us.

**Because we’ve been accepted by God,  
we shouldn’t judge others regarding debatable practices (14:1-4).**

Our acceptance by God through faith in Jesus Christ compels us to accept one another. Therefore, it doesn’t make sense to judge others when it comes to personal preferences or debatable practices.

***Stronger Christians should accept weaker Christians without engaging in unnecessary disputes (14:1).***

Paul exhorts us to “accept the one who is weak in the faith.” To accept someone means to welcome that person into a meaningful relationship, an act of open reception rather than mere tolerance. Paul sets up a contrast between those who are “weak” in the faith and those who are “strong” (compare Romans 15:1). Weakness in the faith refers to a less desirable, immature understanding of our spiritual freedom in Jesus Christ. Those who are strong, by contrast, have arrived at a mature understanding of Christian freedom. They’re not bound by artificial, legalistic measures of spirituality. But even those who are mature have a tendency to cast aspersions on the weak. Paul warns us not to engage in “passing judgment on disputable

matters” or to “quarrel about doubtful issues.” Those who are weak need gentle nurture over time rather than debates and diatribes. Those who are mature can more readily refrain from engaging in unnecessary disputes, allowing those who are weak the opportunity to grow stronger in their faith.

***Weaker Christians should refrain from passing judgment on stronger Christians who engage in morally neutral practices (14:2-3).***

An example of the contrast between those who are spiritually weak and those who are strong involved, in the first century church, matters of food. Here we likely see a conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the church at Rome. Jews were known for, among other things, their strict adherence to kosher food laws. Gentiles weren't concerned about such restrictions. Jews and Gentiles who became Christians brought their cultural perspectives into the church. Some would eat any kind of food. These people would have included Gentile Christians as well as Jewish Christians who had come to appreciate Christian liberty. However, the weak Christians ate “only vegetables,” probably as an act of extreme caution against eating any non-kosher meat (compare Daniel 1:12). We must bear in mind that even some Gentile Christians held concerns about food, as was evident in the church at Corinth regarding the issue of eating meat that had been offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8:1-8). So, legalistic regulations about food set weaker Christians apart from those who understood Christian liberty in these matters.

The primary issue in Paul's mind, however, was how the weak and strong Christians got along in the body of Christ. He warned those who welcomed their freedom and ate all kinds of food not to despise those who were weak in this matter. They weren't to look down on their brothers and sisters in a condescending manner. Likewise, Paul warned those who refrained from eating certain foods not to judge those who ate all kinds of food. In their legalistic confidence it was too easy for the weak to condemn their stronger brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul states unequivocally that God had “accepted” them. God had accepted the stronger Christian who felt free to eat various foods. God had also accepted the weaker Christian who felt that the kosher food regulations were still spiritually binding. Because God has accepted us all through faith in Jesus Christ, we must accept one another.

***All Christians are essentially servants who are ultimately responsible to the Lord for their actions (14:4).***

We're to accept one another because God has accepted us. In addition, because we've been accepted by God we are, in effect, His servants—accountable to Him. Paul here uses a word for a household, or domestic, servant. We belong to God's household. Therefore, we should refrain from judging others because in doing so we're usurping God's role. Just as it would be inappropriate for one servant to order another servant around, so we shouldn't impose ourselves over other believers as if we held such authority. A household servant “stands” or

“falls,” that is, earns approval or disapproval, in relationship to the master (“lord”) of the house. Those who have Jesus as their Lord will in fact “stand” in approval with God because the Lord makes us stand. The Lord Jesus Christ (many ancient manuscripts indicate that this is a work of God the Father) secures our approval through His death and resurrection. We stand in Jesus Christ, secure in our position with God, responsible to our Lord for our conduct. Because we’re responsible to our Lord, as fellow servants we must refrain from judging one another when it comes to disputable practices.

**Because we’re in allegiance with God,  
we shouldn’t judge others regarding debatable practices (14:5-9).**

Our acceptance by God means that we must accept one another. In addition, if our practices reflect a true sense of commitment to God in our daily lives, then we have no business judging others regarding debatable issues.

***When making decisions about debatable practices, we must honor our informed convictions (14:5).***

Along with concerns about food, Paul introduces the perceived concerns about holy days. Some people, those weak in the faith, elevated certain days above other days in the calendar. For those coming from a Jewish background, certain feast days, fast days, and Sabbath days would seem to be essential to their expression of faith. Even Christians coming from a pagan background might have held onto certain festival events as sacred. But others, those strong in the faith, judged every day to be equal. There were no sacred days, or possibly they considered every day to be equally sacred. Which approach to the calendar is right? Paul states that each person must be fully convinced in his or her own mind regarding these matters. While Christian liberty frees us from the burdensome requirements of Sabbath regulations, we shouldn’t violate our convictions in these matters. We can, and should, educate our convictions as we grow into the freedom we have in Jesus Christ. But our informed convictions are still important in guiding our decisions about debatable practices. To violate our convictions is, in effect, to willingly disregard God (compare 1 Corinthians 8:7).

***When making decisions about debatable practices, we must be able to give thanks to God (14:6).***

Another way to determine the right path when it comes to debatable issues is to consider whether or not we can give thanks to God for what we’re doing. Those who observed special holy days did so to honor the Lord. Those who ate all kinds of food were doing so with God in mind and were able to give thanks to God for the variety of foods they consumed. Those who refrained from certain foods did so to honor God and could give thanks for those foods that were

allowable according to their consciences. We could never genuinely thank God for that which is evil, but if in good conscience we can thank God for certain things then we can carry on these practices without fear of reprisal.

***When making decisions about debatable practices, we must operate out of total commitment to the Lord (14:7-8).***

Ultimately, when making decisions about debatable practices we should be able to operate out of hearts that are fully dedicated to the Lord Jesus Christ. “No one lives unto himself, and no one dies unto himself,” Paul states. As Christians, we live for Jesus Christ and even the circumstances of our death belong to Him. We should live as those who are totally committed to Him. So, whether live or die, we do so for the Lord. We belong to Jesus Christ. Therefore, when we make decisions about debatable practices we must be sure to engage only in those practices that truly reflect our commitment to Christ.

***When making decisions about debatable practices, we must acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ (14:9).***

Life and death for the Christian are in God’s hands. Jesus Christ died to bring us into full commitment to God. He lived, that is, returned through resurrection life (many Greek manuscripts include “He rose” in this verse, indicating that the resurrection was in Paul’s thinking). Through His death and resurrection Jesus became Lord of all, the living and the dead. His Lordship over our lives guides our decisions about practices in the Christian life. Therefore, it doesn’t make sense to judge others or to despise others for their decisions about neutral debatable practices in the church. If our lives are based on loyalty to God, we’ll bring glory to Him.

**Because we’re accountable to God,  
we shouldn’t judge others regarding debatable practices (14:10-12).**

Our acceptance by God makes it necessary to accept others. Our allegiance to God makes it unwise to judge others. Furthermore, our accountability to God makes it unnecessary to judge others for their view on neutral debatable practices.

***As members of God’s family we’re all accountable to God for our actions (14:10).***

Why, Paul asks, would those who are weak judge another brother in Christ or why would those who are strong in the faith despise a weaker brother? To make these kinds of judgments is not our responsibility. It’s God’s prerogative to mete out judgment. In fact, “We will all stand

before God's judgment seat." As Christians, we're all responsible to God for our every action. His judgment seat is the place of reward for proper behavior in this life (compare "the judgment seat of Christ" in 2 Corinthians 5:10). Since we're held accountable to God, it doesn't make sense for us to condemn one another regarding debatable practices.

***As members of the human race we're all subject to the authority of God over our lives (14:11-12).***

Christians aren't alone in their accountability to God. Every person who's ever lived is subject to God's sovereign authority. Quoting Isaiah 49:18 and 45:23, Paul declares that every knee will bow before God and every tongue will confess Him. This statement carries universal implications. All humankind, those who believed during this lifetime and those who didn't, will ultimately bow to God's authority. In fact, Jesus Himself will be the object of this obeisance (compare Philippians 2:10-11). Since Christians are included in this subjection to the Lord, we know that we'll "give an account" about ourselves to God. God is our judge regarding all things, including debatable practices. Therefore, we should refrain from judging others about neutral preferences and leave all such judgment to God. Furthermore, because God has accepted us (verse 3), that day of judgment will involve only our rewards, not our eternal destination. Our position in God's eternal heaven is secure through Jesus Christ, the object of our faith. Because God has accepted us, we should accept one another.