

Differences of Opinions  
Romans 14:1-15:13  
ABC 3/19/17

As we've seen in Rom 1-11 Paul has explained the gospel; we are justified in God's sight by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Therefore, while we're still sinful, we are completely righteous & perfect in God's sight. If we understand (Rom 1-5) & experience the gospel (Rom 6-8), the result will be life of grateful, joyous love. Starting in Rom 12, Paul begins to describe this life of love, which transforms our relationships with other Christians & the world, both friends & enemies. Now in chpt 14, Paul takes the opportunity to apply all he's been saying to a very specific case. It's as if he says, *Let me show you how all this applies to a problem you're having in your church.* What was the problem? Differing opinions over things the Bible doesn't speak to. In Scripture we find things about which God has said *yes* or *no*. But in between those things are many that are morally neutral. They're matters of opinion or preference. What do we do when we disagree over things the Bible neither condemns nor condones? I know it's hard to believe but Christians have come up with some strange rules over the years that didn't come from the Bible. For example at some time & in some place ...

You could wear buttons on your coat but not a zipper.  
You could sleep on Sunday afternoon but not knit.  
You could drink root beer but not Coke.  
You could eat like a glutton, but not smoke a cigarette.  
You could smoke a cigar but not go without a tie on Sunday.  
You could go to a doctor if you had a cold but not if you were giving birth to a baby.<sup>1</sup>

As brothers & sisters in Christ's body, how do we handle people who have different convictions or preferences than we do? For example, what music style do you enjoy? What entertainment choices do you make? Where do exercise & sports fit into your life? What about dancing or mixed martial arts or even serving in the military versus pacifism? What schooling choice have you made for your kids? Are some things acceptable to do on Sundays & others not acceptable? What about holidays? Are Christmas celebrations evil? How about Halloween? What role does Facebook play in your life? Do you look upon those who don't use it as Luddites? Do you look down on those who do use it as shallow, time-wasting people? Do you eat organic? Do you prefer

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Nystrom, *The Book of Romans*, p 107

alternative medicine or are you a traditional medicine person? How do you feel about chiropractors? What about hospice, have an opinion? Do you welcome or avoid medications or vaccines? What's your view of birth control? What about alcoholic drinks? Do you totally abstain or do you only guard against drunkenness? What about tobacco? Is it ever OK to take medicines or drugs that alter behavior? How about caffeine? What about the way you dress? What's worldly & what's not? How do you evaluate style & makeup & jewelry? What about your Bible translation, is that an issue? How about your ministry interests? When you plan an event, how do you view those who don't attend? Or how do you view those who are devoted to ministries or causes that don't float your boat? How do you relate to each other? How do you respond to people who are far more serious than you & don't laugh or show affection like you do? What if they show too much affection or joke too much? What if they talk non-stop or are way more expressive than you? Or what if you're that way & others aren't? What if you believe the piano & organ are the only instruments to be used in church? What's your view on drums? Guitars? Banjos? What if they love kids & you love older folks & shut-ins? What if they want to try new things & you love old things or you love new things & wonder why anyone loves the old? & how did you get here this morning & what do you drive & why do you prefer the city or the country or the boonies? & where do you shop & do you participate in boycotts? What about where you work? Do you have convictions about what industries you'll work for or not work for? How much do you work & how much is too much? What about government assistance programs? What's the proper tax rate? Is it wrong to retire? If so, when's it ok & what should you do with your time? What's your view on unbelieving children & does that change when they're adults & what does that mean for church offices? What's your view of divorce & remarriage & what if your view on that is different from those sitting around you? How should we handle counseling & discipleship & how much freedom or room to grow should we provide people? Should we pounce on everyone immediately on every issue we see? How do we handle weaknesses & immaturity? How do we handle disputes & disagreements & diversity? Should we uphold the traditions in our culture defined by skin color or ethnic traditions or music styles or preaching styles or wardrobe styles or other non-

essentials? How do we handle all the messy or stuffy, strange or stressful, uncomfortable or oppressive differences that people bring? Or to phrase it as I did to the youth years ago, *Can Christians wear purple sweat-socks?* These are the kinds of things this passage addresses. Unfortunately, Christians are known for fighting over deeply-held beliefs that aren't forbidden or commanded in Scripture. In other words, we often fight over things that don't matter.

**Once upon a time** a man took a walk & came to a bridge. When he got to the middle of the bridge, he saw a man standing on the rail, obviously about to jump. The man was distraught & said, *Don't jump. I can help you.*

*How can you help me?* asked the man on the rail.

The 1<sup>st</sup> man replied with a question of his own: *Are you a Christian?*

*Yes, I am,* said the jumper.

*That's wonderful. So am I. Are you Catholic or Protestant?*

*I'm Protestant.*

*That's great. So am I. What sort of Protestant are you? Are you Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or something else?*

*I'm a lifetime Baptist,* said the man on the rail.

*Praise the Lord,* came the reply. *So am I. Let me ask you this. Are you Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?*

*I'm Northern Baptist.*

*Are you Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?*

*I'm Northern Conservative Baptist.*

*This is amazing. So am I. Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Fundamental or Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed?*

The man on the rail thought for a moment & then declared, *My father raised me as a Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed.*

*It's a miracle,* said the other man, *so am I.*

Then he asked, *Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region or Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Plains Region?*

The man on the rail said, *That's easy. My family has always been Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region.*

*This is a miracle of miracles. I don't often meet a brother who shares my own heritage. One final question: Are you Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region Council of 1855 or Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region Council of 1872?*

The man on the rail replied instantly, *Since the days of my great-grandfather, we have always been Northern Conservative Baptist Reformed Great Lakes Region Council of 1872.*

This statement was followed by an awkward pause. Looking up, the 1<sup>st</sup> man cried, *Die, heretic!* & pushed him off the bridge.<sup>2</sup>

We laugh because it's so true! If 2 Christians agree on 99/100 things, they'll often focus on the one thing they disagree on. & the smaller that point, the more likely they are to argue about it.

This morning we're going over a section of Scripture I preached through 6 years ago. If it sounds familiar, consider it a reminder. Open your Bibles to Rom 14. I want us to think about the tendency we all have to criticize those who don't do or say things the way we think they ought to be said or done. I want us to think about the things that can happen when we're too quick to offer personal judgments on others who don't meet our personal standards. This problem is neither isolated nor new. Churches have struggled with this issue for 2,000 years. Paul addresses this here in Rom 14-15. **Rom 14** PRAY

*All roads lead to Rome* was a true statement in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Rome was a melting pot where people from many different cultures mingled together. It was a complex mix of people & ideas. When the gospel came to Rome it crossed all cultural & racial lines. As a result, the church in Rome reflected the makeup of the city itself. That background helps us understand Paul's words here. He's writing to a growing church with a variety of people in the congregation. Human nature being what it is, it's not surprising the various groups within the church had trouble getting along. The meat-eaters didn't trust the vegetarians & the vegetarians thought the meat-eaters were compromisers. The converted Jews kept kosher, but the converted Gentiles thought that was a waste of time. The wine-drinkers felt that was permissible so long as they didn't get drunk. In short, the church at Rome was anything but one big happy family. Paul understood the conflict. After all, he'd been raised in orthodox Judaism. He knew all about keeping kosher & living under the law. No doubt he'd struggled with many of these issues in the years following his

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Pritchard, [www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2002-11-03-overcoming-a-judgmental-spirit/](http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/2002-11-03-overcoming-a-judgmental-spirit/)

salvation. So he writes to help others, including us, who often wrestle with these same type issues. This morning we'll do a preview & then get into it next week. Paul wraps up his exhortation on living the life of love with a plea for mutual acceptance. The command to **accept** other believers begins this section (14:1) & is repeated again toward the end (15:7). In between he gives 3 other **one anothers**. Do not **judge one another** (14:13), **14:19** & **15:5**

These commands to love one another by accepting each other are given to 2 groups of Christians: **weak** (14:1) & **strong** (15:1). It appears there are 3 issues which were dividing this church. 1) The strong eat all kinds of food while the weak eat only vegetables (14:2). 2) The strong make no distinction among days while the weak value some days over others (14:5). 3) The strong drink wine while the weak abstain (14:21). It appears the weak were condemning those who didn't follow their rules (14:3) & the strong were despising & looking down on their weaker brothers. Paul's concern wasn't so much with who was right & who was wrong but with the peace & mutual edification of the body of Christ (14:19). He makes clear that those who pride themselves on being the strong have a special responsibility toward peace & building up one another. It's those who know their liberty on these matters who are to put their use of that liberty in perspective & give priority to the good of their brothers' edification & salvation (14:15-21). In this they're to imitate Jesus, who submitted to His Father's will for the sake of those He came to redeem (15:3, 8-12). This whole passage falls into 4 sections:<sup>3</sup>

1) 14:1-12—Both **strong** & **weak** Christians need to stop condemning each other because it is the Lord, & He alone, who has the right to assess the believer's standing & conduct.

2) 14:13-23—The **strong** Christians must be careful not to cause the **weak** to suffer spiritual harm by their insistence on exercising their liberty on disputed matters. Doing this does not show love & concern for one another.

3) 15:1-6—The **strong** Christians should willingly tolerate the tender consciences of the **weak** Christians, seeking to foster unified praise of God in the community. Christians should exhibit such concern for others because of the example set for them by Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Moo, p 833

4) 15:7-13—Both **strong** & **weak** Christians should receive each other as full & respected members of the Christian community, for God Himself has shown, in fulfillment of Scripture, that He accepts both Jews & Gentiles as His people.

The particular danger to unity that Paul addresses is the conflict that easily arises between those to whom he refers as **strong** & **weak** believers, those who are mature in the faith & those who are immature, those who understand & enjoy freedom in Christ & those who feel either shackled or threatened by certain religious & cultural beliefs that were parts of their lives before coming to Christ. In the early church, many Jews who came to faith in Christ couldn't bring themselves to discard the ceremonial laws & practices in which they'd been raised. They still felt compelled to obey the dietary laws & to observe the Sabbath. On the other hand, many converted Gentiles had been just as strongly rooted in pagan rituals & customs, & they felt repulsed by anything remotely connected with such evils. Many Gentiles, for example, couldn't bring themselves to eat meat that had been offered to an idol & then was sold in the marketplace. Other believers, both Jewish & Gentile, understood & exercised their freedom in Christ. Mature Jewish believers realized that, under the New Covenant in Christ, they were no longer under the law. Mature believing Gentiles understood that idolatry was a spiritual evil & had no effect on anything physical, such as meat that may have been used in pagan worship. Those who were still strongly influenced, favorably or unfavorably, by their former religious beliefs & practices were **weak** in the faith because they didn't understand their freedom in Christ.

With that as background, let me share some important principles related to the teaching of this passage. In the coming weeks, we'll get into the nitty-gritty of this.

**1. Christians Can Disagree With One Other.** As we wade into the waters of Rom 14, I want you to see we should expect differences of opinion within the church. The Roman church had differences & were looking down on one another because of it. There was contempt toward each other for different convictions of conscience. They were also judging those who didn't share their convictions. This problem wasn't unique to the Roman church. The problems at Corinth were

different, but 1 Cor 8-9 rank with Rom 14-15 as central for studying the NT teaching on Christian liberty.

Sometimes people come into the church thinking it's paradise on earth, where everyone always agrees & we're happy all the time. It doesn't take long for that balloon to burst, does it? Sometimes we as Christians can be contrary, contentious, & cantankerous. We're just normal people with a wide range of opinions joined by our common allegiance to Jesus. We disagree about lots of things. Here's a short (& very incomplete) list of some things we have opinions on:

- Movies
- TV
- Social media
- Politics
- Bible versions
- Tattoos
- Piercings
- Activities on Sunday
- Divorce & remarriage
- Secular music
- Worship music
- Pipe organs
- Drums in church
- Krispy Kreme or Dunkin' Donuts
- Dutch Brothers or Human Bean
- Frequency of Communion
- Facial hair
- Calling Resurrection Sunday *Easter*
- Raising children
- Dating or courting
- Playing cards
- Timing of the Rapture
- Hair length of males
- Skirt length of females
- Sacramento Kings

Some of these appear silly to you but are serious to others. If I asked you to split this list into *silly* & *serious* categories, no 2 lists would be the same. How can we ever hope to get along? There are so many backgrounds, so many histories, so many cultures, so many personalities, so many levels of maturity. How do we make it together? Too often we have the attitude this poem promotes:

*Believe as I believe,  
No more, no less;  
That I am right,  
And no one else, confess;*

*Feel as I feel,  
Think only as I think;  
Eat what I eat,  
And drink but what I drink;  
Look as I look,  
Do always as I do;  
Then, & only then,  
Will I fellowship with you.<sup>4</sup>*

We are not all the same & we don't have to all agree on issues the Bible doesn't speak to.

**2. Disagreement Isn't Always Wrong or Sinful.** Many of us have a hard time with this, especially when we feel passionately about some issue. If you have strong feelings about the proper way to raise kids, you may have a hard time accepting those who disagree with you. Disagreement often reflects cultural differences & the way you were raised more than biblical principles. You need to understand that your standards may tell more about your upbringing than about what God approves or disapproves of. We mustn't automatically assume the worst about those who disagree with us. Don't look down on those whom God has accepted. **1a & 4a**

You aren't better than others nor are they better than you. We're all God's servants. We're responsible to Him because He is our Master.

**3. We Must Distinguish Between Primary & Secondary Issues.** I define a primary issue as one that deals with a central doctrine of the Christian faith which is clearly stated in the Bible. This would include, but isn't exhaustive, the deity of Jesus, including His virgin birth, miracles, death, bodily resurrection, ascension into heaven, & the reality of His future return to the earth. Other primary issues involve salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the doctrine of the Trinity, the importance of the church as the body of Christ, the truth of eternal life with Christ, the resurrection from the dead, & the reality of heaven & hell. These things are primary because they describe central, defining truths of the Christian faith that are clearly given in Scripture. To deny these things is to put yourself outside the realm of orthodox Christianity. When we discuss these issues, there can be no compromise. You either believe in the virgin birth or you don't. If you don't, you've denied a clear teaching of the NT, which involves your whole view of the Bible

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<sup>4</sup> Author unknown, <http://barefootpreachr.org/2011/05/the-bigots-creed/>



as God's Word & ultimately calls into question your belief in Jesus as the Son of God. Primary truths must be insisted upon, even if others find us ungracious or intolerant in doing so. While our manner must always be kind, our convictions on these things must be firm. In the end, there can be no Christian fellowship with those who deny these things. In the words of Adrian Rogers, *It is better to divide over truth than to unite around error.*<sup>5</sup> Having said that, it must be admitted that many of our debates have nothing to do with primary issues. By definition, evangelical Christians already believe these things. Our debates generally center on secondary issues, which I would define as issues about which the Bible doesn't clearly speak. For instance, the Bible says nothing about playing games on Sunday. There's no Scripture that addresses this. Whatever you believe about that will have to be decided by inferences drawn from biblical principles or your personal preference. The same is true for educating your kids. While the Bible has much to say about education in general, & while it clearly lays the burden of teaching children upon the parents, it doesn't tell us precisely how that responsibility must be fulfilled. Is it wrong to send children to a school, either public or private? Since there were no 1<sup>st</sup>-century equivalents of either public schools or Christian schools, we can't emphatically answer those questions. Or take the issue of contemporary versus traditional worship. The NT gives us a few general guidelines for worship, but they're very broad. If Paul were alive today, would he prefer Charles Wesley's hymns over Hillsong choruses? No one knows. Since every Christian hymn we have had yet to be written in 50 AD, I think it's safe to say Paul would be mystified by most forms of Christian worship today. The same analysis may be made for each debatable each of our lists. Either the Bible says nothing at all or what it says is difficult to interpret. In such cases, we're free to have our own convictions, but we must hold them lightly lest we blur the line between primary & secondary issues & end up elevating the eating of veggies to a level equal with the resurrection of Jesus.

**4. Our Convictions Don't Define What's Right or Wrong, God's Word Does.** Biblical revelation isn't a matter of personal discretion. It isn't a personal conviction to believe murder is evil or loving our

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<sup>5</sup> [www.goodreads.com/quotes/826463-it-is-better-to-be-divided-by-truth-than-to](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/826463-it-is-better-to-be-divided-by-truth-than-to)

enemy is good. The Bible clearly says that. Convictions take up where biblical revelation leaves off. Convictions determine what my conduct should be in those areas not specifically given in Scripture. My convictions draw the line between what I will do & what I won't do as an exercise of my Christian liberty. Convictions reach the conclusions of *should* & *should not*. The question is not so much, *Can I do this or that?* But, *Should I do this or that?* We should have convictions on non-essential practices. Our convictions draw the line between what we will & what we won't do as an exercise of Christian liberty. (Charles Swindoll's book *Grace Awakening* is a good one to read if you struggle with this.)

**5. Accepting Others Requires Humility.** Put very simply, humility is understanding that God is God & we are not. Truly humble people are free from the burden of having to play God for other people. Once you decide you can let God be God, you can relax & let Him deal with others regarding these secondary issues. That doesn't mean you can't discuss these matters openly. Open discussion is a mark of a healthy relationship. Let the meat-eaters & vegetarians challenge each other's position while sharing a pizza (½ meat lovers, ½ veggie of course!), but only if they can do it in love & with respect. Humility doesn't mean no discussion; it means no animosity, no name-calling, no superiority, & no unfair accusations. Over the years I've learned that God blesses people I disagree with. & He sometimes blesses people I wouldn't bless if I were Him. Sometimes I'm frustrated by that, especially when I see God blessing someone who seems to be wrong in some area according to my preferences. But humility forces me to admit that if God is God, He's free to bless anyone He chooses & He doesn't have to ask my permission before doing it. Here's a simple rule: *If it doesn't apply to you personally, feel free to have no opinion about it.* That's a liberating principle! Far too many of us have opinions on everything & we love to pontificate about them. Feel free to have no opinion or to not voice your opinion on these things. Be humble!

**6. Since Our Faith is in Jesus, Let Him Deal With Those We Disagree With.** This is the logical conclusion of everything I've said so far. Paul says, *Don't judge another believer* (1, 4, 10, 13). Why? Because God will judge him. If your friend who eats meat has made a bad choice, God can

show him better than you can. If he has some strange political views, God can deal with him if he needs to be dealt with. Don't get in God's way. Let Him deal with people who disagree with you & deal with you when you disagree with others. & in the meantime, don't forget to treat each other as brothers & sisters in the Lord, accepting & loving them.

**Conclusion** The next time you're tempted to criticize another Christian, before you figure out what to say, make sure you stop & pray. Pray & then say. Or maybe you'll pray & not say what you were going to say. That very well could be better for everyone. Someone once said, *Miss no opportunity to keep your mouth shut*. That's not a bad idea. Here's some more advice: *Don't say more; pray more*. The Daily Bread once had the following story, although I couldn't find confirmation of it & it appears they got their dates & spelling wrong. Anyway, *once upon a time...*

When the British & French were fighting in Canada, Admiral William Phips, commander of the British fleet, was told to anchor outside Quebec & wait for the land forces to arrive so he could support them when they attacked the city. As he waited, he got bored & became annoyed by the statues of some saints on the towers of a nearby cathedral. He commanded his men to shoot at them with the ships' cannons. When the signal was finally given to attack & support the land troops, the ship was of no help because they'd used up all their ammunition shooting at the saints.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, the same could be said about some of us. When God calls on us to do something great for Him we have nothing left to give because we've used up our energy sniping at other Christians with our looks, words, & actions. Receive & accept one another, even when you disagree or when you don't care for someone else's opinions or preferences or background or personality. Let's lose our arrogant attitudes & humbly live for the Lord alone. Think & pray about these things, the things on your list, & ask God to give you a loving & humble spirit as we relate to one another. We need His graciousness when others' styles or preferences or habits rub us the wrong way or tempt us to want to distance ourselves from them. & we need His graciousness when others' immaturity or convictions or challenges or practices make us feel judged or judgmental or condemned or condemning. Pray that we all might grow in graciousness in the coming weeks as we study through this.

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<sup>6</sup> Find the true version at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Quebec\\_\(1690\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Quebec_(1690))

If you don't know Jesus, that's where you have to start. Talk to me or someone here if God is calling you to Himself today. If you are in Christ, realize the grace He's lavished on you. & praise Him & lavish that grace on others as you love & accept them, & treasure the riches we share in common as brothers & sisters in His family. Realize the things that irritate, discourage, or tempt us to pride, criticism, or eye-rolling with a disgusted sigh are all so tiny compared with the eternal hope & joy of being in Christ together. Why would we let any petty thing disrupt the wonderful fellowship we have together of being accepted by God? How much better it is to display unity in Christ amidst our diversity. I pray that the world will know us by our love as Christ has loved us & we love one another. Pray with me to that end.