

DIFFERENCES AND THE RULE OF JESUS CHRIST
(SUNDAY, JUNE 16, 2013)

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 45:22-25; Rom. 14:1-12

INTRODUCTION

A. Romans 14 and the first part of chapter 15 compose the longest ethical discussion on any single issue in the book of Romans.¹

1. There were serious differences of opinion among Christians in Rome.
2. There are some parallels to this passage in 1 Corinthians, but Paul is not just giving general instruction here but most likely dealing with a specific issue in Rome.²
3. One of the lessons we can see is that mature churches in terms of doctrine and understanding can still be guilty of not dealing with each other properly.
4. The command to love can seem to be so simple in theory but the practice is much more difficult.
5. The Christians in Rome as we can see from the book of Romans were given a very deep letter. They must have had some good theological understanding. But their understanding did not mean they were doing everything right. They needed rebuke and very specific instruction on how they were to deal with differences on issues related to food, drink, and the observance of days.

B. Differences can be very difficult to work out.

1. What Paul through the Holy Spirit instructed to the believers in Rome is very relevant for the church throughout time.
2. When the differences we have do not involve directly the proper understanding of the gospel or related matters like the deity of Jesus Christ or the Triune nature of God, we must make sure we do not let differences lead to us dividing, judging, and despising.
3. Further as we will see, Paul doesn't just command the believers in Rome to work things out. Rather, he gives very important instruction on the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

¹ Ben Witherington III, 327.

² Moo, 827.

4. Differences must be worked out under the Lordship of Christ knowing that God is the judge of all men.

C. Don't judge or despise! Live under the rule of Jesus Christ.

D. Text has three parts.

- 1) Introduction to the topic, vv. 1-3
- 2) Focus on the Lordship of Christ, vv. 4-9
- 3) Conclusion and reminder of the day of judgment, vv. 10-12.

I. RECEIVE THE ONE WITH WHOM YOU DISAGREE, vv. 1-3

Rom. 14:1 Receive one who is weak in the faith, *but* not to disputes over doubtful things. **2** For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats *only* vegetables. **3** Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.

A. Romans 14:1-15:13 has four main sections.³

1. The first section begins with the command to receive the one who is weak in the faith.
2. The last section starting with 15:7 also repeats the command. **Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.**
3. Paul's concern is that there be unity based on the truth of the gospel and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This unity must be shown in practical ways.

B. Romans 15:1 specifically uses two designations or descriptions – the strong and the weak.

1. In the four parts of Romans 14:1-15:13, Paul gives instruction both to the strong and the weak. Some of it is the same instruction to both groups, in other cases it is directed to either the strong or the weak.
2. There are different opinions, not surprisingly, about who are the strong and the weak.
3. Douglass Moo in his commentary discusses 6 opinions on this subject.
4. He along with a number of other commentators identifies the **weak** as mainly Jewish Christians who did not eat certain kinds of food and observed certain days out of

³ Moo, 833.

continuing loyalty to the Mosaic Law.⁴ This group might have also included some Gentile Christians who were influenced by Jewish teaching through the synagogue.⁵

5. The identification of weak does show that Paul **doesn't agree** with their views, but Paul is not simply just taking the side of the strong.

6. Weak also doesn't mean that someone's faith in Christ is deficient or that they are somehow less valued before God. But in calling them weak, Paul does identify that they have a lack of understanding of their freedom in Jesus Christ from the ceremonial aspects of the law. Paul does desire that they be strong in this respect.⁶

C. Paul's first command to the strong is that they **receive** the one who is weak in the faith.

1. It is not simply tolerate them. Jesus did not simply tolerate us, but **He welcomed us with true love and fellowship.**

2. This opening command might mean that the strong were the dominant part of the church. In the last part of this instruction, Romans 15:7 shows the weak **also** have the duty to receive the strong.

3. We see from this command that the issue causing division was not directly related to the understanding of the gospel.

a) Paul did not tell the believers in Galatia to welcome or receive those who were teaching another gospel.

b) Two times in Galatians 1, Paul states that if anyone preaches another gospel, let him be accursed.

4. The strong were to receive the weak, but not so that they could further debate and argue with them.

a) The last part of verse 1 refers to doubtful things. Other versions translate in a similar way, but it might be better translated as differing opinions.

D. The first command of this passage to you as you deal with others with whom you have disagreements over non-essentials of the faith, is that seek to still have **true fellowship and friendship despite your differences.**

⁴ Moo, 829. He states that this view has become the most popular in recent years.

⁵ Witherington, 333-334.

⁶ Moo, 836.

E. Paul in verse 2 discusses how there were those who believed they had freedom to eat all things and those who were weak and so they only ate vegetables.

1. Why did the weak eat only vegetables?

2. Ben Witherington gives a number of reasons for this.

a) Meat sold in public meat markets would likely not be slaughtered according to Jewish rules. A Jew still bound by the dietary laws would have been concerned about becoming impure.

b) Further, Jews had only 8 years earlier been expelled from Rome. They were able to return by the time Paul wrote Romans, but the supply of suitable food for Jews was likely very limited. Other related reasons might exist.

c) Jewish Christians, especially those who were not well off, would have faced a challenge in dealing with Jews and Gentiles.⁷

F. Paul gives two further commands then in verse 3 in light of the differences between the weak and the strong.

1. Those who eat meat and all food must not **despise**, look down upon, or reject the one who believes he can only eat vegetables.

2. The one who does not eat meat must at the same time not **judge** those who do as committing sin. They must not feel that they are the “righteous remnant” and the only ones concerned with obeying what God expects.

3. In other words, **stop emphasizing your differences**. If you focus on what separates you, then division will only increase.

4. Instead, keep in mind the grace of God. Look at the end of verse 3. Do not despise or judge each other; for God has received him.

5. Consider the work of God’s grace in the person you might disagree with.

6. If God has received the one with whom you have a disagreement, what should that mean about your attitude and how you handle the differences you have with that person? Do you think your opinion is more important than God’s opinion?

⁷ Witherington III, 335.

II. IT IS THE LORD JESUS CHRIST WE ULTIMATELY SERVE, vv. 4-9.

Romans 14:4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. **5** One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day *alike*. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. **6** He who observes the day, observes *it* to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe *it*. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. **7** For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. **8** For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. **9** For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

A. You can see in Romans 14 that both verses 4 and 10 begin with questions. These questions mark the beginning of new parts of the discussion here.

B. In verse 4 Paul questions those who judge. Who are you to judge another's servant or a household slave?

1. Addressing those who judge might mean that Paul is specifically dealing with the weak who are identified with judging others in verse 3.⁸

2. There is certainly application for both the weak and the strong here.

C. Consider how Paul deals with the disagreements that can so easily cause problems among believers. **Paul declares very clearly the Lordship of Jesus Christ.**

1. Another believer is not someone you have authority over. He is the servant or household slave not of you but someone else.

2. That believer with whom you disagree stands or falls not before you but before his own Master.

- a. Standing and falling have to do with approval or disapproval.

3. A true believer will stand, Paul says, because God or the Lord some versions read is able to make him stand.

⁸ Moo, 839. He states that this is the likely understanding, but I think there is application for both the weak and the strong.

4. The word of God here corrects the attitude of how we so often think of others based on our own opinion and standards and calls you to consider how God will deal with that person.

5. If God is the one who will make someone stand approved, what should your attitude be?

6. God's Word not only directs you away from judging and condemning but would exhort you to show mercy and kindness towards that one with whom you disagree. Pray for that one with whom you disagree. Pray for God's blessing. Turn away from a judgmental, prideful attitude.⁹

D. In verse 5 Paul interjects a second issue into the discussion. He brings up the issue of the celebration or keeping of days.

1. There are those who judge or esteem some days as more special or holy than others, while others esteem or judge all days as being all alike or the same.

2. Given the context, it would likely seem that Paul here is dealing with the issue of the feasts that are described and commanded in Leviticus 23 and other parts of the Old Testament.

a. Leviticus 23 gives instruction first on the weekly Sabbath and then 6 other feasts: Passover and Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Weeks (Pentecost), Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles.

3. Some believers still believed that these days and feasts needed to still be kept according to the instruction of OT Law.

4. Does Paul use the categories of weak and strong here? No, but there is likely a connection. The weak were those who believed they were still under the law in terms of the celebration of these different feasts while the strong believed that they were not under obligation to still celebrate them.

5. There are differing opinions among Christians related to whether verse 5 is specifically dealing with the Sabbath in this instruction.

a. The Reformation Study Bible for example states that Paul is likely only focused on the 6 feasts rather than the weekly Sabbath.¹⁰

b. John Calvin does not directly deal with this question in his commentary, interestingly.

⁹ John Calvin, s.v. Romans 14.

¹⁰ See comments on page 1791 in the NKJV.

6. What is critical in dealing with difficult questions is that although there must be room for disagreement, what must unite us is our determination to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. The issue is not simply doing whatever we want to do, but being focused on serving Jesus Christ and recognizing His authority.

F. F. Bruce commenting on verse 5 wrote: It need not mean that ‘another man’ treats every day as secular; it may mean that he treats every day as equally to be dedicated to the service of God, and this was certainly Paul’s attitude.¹¹

7. Look at the final part of verse 5. What does God’s Word command in terms of the keeping of days? It commands that we think seriously about these matters and be convinced as to our duty. **You must be convinced in your own mind.** And I think we can all agree that in this context this means that we are convinced by God’s Word not just our own pleasures and wants. It is the Lord Jesus Christ you must seek to please not others.

E. Observe from verses 6-9 how Paul deals with the issue of differences among us by calling you to consider how you must do all things to the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. What is the word that dominates verses 6-9? It is the word **Lord**. In the NKJV, this word appears at least 8 times.

2. In verse 6, Paul says that whether we eat or not eat, what we observe or do not observe, we do this to the Lord.

3. The language Paul uses here is descriptive which means this is how you must approach every part of life.

4. Notice how Paul includes all of life and even death. There is no area outside of the rule of King Jesus.

5. And note from verse 9, Paul states that Christ died, rose, and lived again so that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

F. The theme of the Lordship of Jesus Christ should be familiar to everyone here. Like other key doctrines, it is much harder to put into practice than it is to talk about.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 246.

1. When it concerns differences with other Christians that in large part are just differences of opinion, are your attitudes and actions to that person reflective of your own submission to Jesus Christ?
2. What are the areas in your life where you are in reality being directed by your own pleasures rather than being able to say in sincerity, I seek to live and do all things in submission to Jesus Christ.
3. There is no one who will not fail in this duty, which is why we must embrace the truth of verse 4. It is God that makes us stand, not our own efforts or obedience.

III. WE WILL ALL STAND BEFORE JESUS CHRIST AND GIVE ACCOUNT, vv. 10-12.

Rom. 14:10 But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. **11** For it is written:

“As I live, says the LORD,
Every knee shall bow to Me,
And every tongue shall confess to God.”

12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.

A. Paul again addresses the sinful responses we can easily have when we disagree – judging and despising – showing contempt.¹²

1. Both the strong and the weak are being addressed here.

B. Notice that Paul twice uses the word brother. Paul is dealing with how we treat other Christians that we should receive and enjoy real fellowship with.

C. Isn't sadly the case that the people we can treat the worst are those that we should show the greatest friendship and love?

D. What is Paul's point in reminding you that you will stand before the judgment seat of Christ?

1. I don't think Paul is simply trying to scare us by saying, God is going to judge you if you judge or show contempt.

¹² The verb used in verse 4 translated as despise is here translated as show contempt.

2. The point is that when you improperly judge a brother, you are not properly considering the fact that everyone is going to stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

3. You don't need to act as judge. You certainly should not be showing contempt. Jesus Christ will deal as the perfect judge.

4. The point could then be stated as **don't take the right of judgment which belongs to Jesus Christ.**

E. Further our attention is directed to the great day of judgment as Paul proves his point by again turning to the book of Isaiah.

1. The main text Paul uses is from Isaiah 45:23 but he includes the words, "As I live," which are found in Isaiah 49:18 and other passages.¹³

2. The words of Isaiah 45:23 are words that direct us beyond just this life to the final day.

3. John Calvin writes:

It hence appears, that this prophecy is indeed begun to be fulfilled in this life, but is far from being completed, and will not be so until the day of the last resurrection shall shine forth, when Christ's enemies shall be laid prostrate, that they may become his footstool.¹⁴

F. I have mentioned a number of times that when NT writers quote from the OT the invitation is not to just consider the direct verse they quote but the broader context.

1. As you look at the end Isaiah 45 which we read earlier you see that it is a beautiful passage which in the final verses issues a call to all the nations to find salvation in work of the Triune God. I believe this passage is significant for the Christians in Rome, both Jews and Gentiles.

2. Isaiah 45 speaks both of the day of judgment and also the only way that we will pass through that day of judgment. Only if you are trusting in Jesus Christ and boast in His righteousness is there full assurance.

G. It is good to often think about the day of judgment. Verse 12 concludes this section reminding us again **that each one of us** will give account of himself to God.

¹³ Moo, 847.

¹⁴ John Calvin, s.v. Romans 14:11.

1. Why is it good to often consider the day of judgment? I can think of two main reasons which come from Romans 14 and Isaiah 45.

- a. It should lead you to humility before the Lord and resting in His righteousness.
- b. It should be a restraint to keep you from judging others improperly and taking that which belongs rightfully to our Sovereign God.

CONCLUSION

- A. Matters that concern the gospel directly are not matters where we can afford to let things be or let differences remain unresolved.
- B. Matters that concern sinful behavior also must be handled in a way that honors the gospel and the purity of the church.
- C. Other differences must be carefully handled without a spirit of judgment or despising those who think differently.
- D. May the differences we have encourage us to pray for each other and seek to live still in true unity as we sincerely confess that we live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Closing Hymn – 456

BENEDICTION – HEBREWS 13:20-21

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.