

# Romans 14

## Romans 14:1–12

Paul begins the chapter with a clear command for us to accept those who are weak in faith, but he adds an interesting caveat: We are to accept these weaker believers without quarreling over opinions. Why did Paul think it important to include this warning? Those who are called to accept a weaker brother or sister are, by implication, stronger in regard to their faith. In 14:2 Paul provides a practical example of the stronger having faith to eat anything (including meat sacrificed to idols) without raising issues of conscience, whereas the weaker (perhaps still wary of the law) eats only vegetables. In 14:3 he provides the rationale for his caveat. People have a tendency to look down on—literally, “despise”—those who behave differently than they do, whether eating or refraining from eating.

The picture Paul paints is not one of people who are unwilling to accept others into fellowship, but one where the stronger believer judges or despises the weaker based on the restrictions of their conscience. The “quarreling about opinions” that Paul mentions in verse 1 suggests that the stronger believer has ulterior motives for accepting the weaker—like changing their view on a matter. If the stronger ones are convinced their position is more godly and righteous, they might think it reasonable to correct the weaker ones, to offer proper guidance on the matter in order to help them be strong too. Think of the effect such behavior would have on a church fellowship—or perhaps you have already experienced it.

# Debating the Debatable

Romans 14:1–4



16:9

**Debating the Debatable:** Paul's exhortation to accept those who are weak in faith comes with a caveat: "but not for the sake of quarreling about opinions." It is not enough to accept someone conditionally, with the view to changing them. If this is the motive for acceptance, then the acceptance is not genuine.

*So why should we accept weaker believers without quarreling over their opinions—even if we think their faith should be stronger like ours? Paul tells us in the last part of verse 3 that we should accept them because God accepts them—He accepts the weak and the strong. Paul poses a rhetorical question in verse 4, essentially asking "Who are you to judge?" The principle he offers is that each person is accountable to their master. In this case, our master happens to be the creator of the universe. No human being—living or dead—has or can fulfill this role. Only God can judge, and everyone will*

stand or fall on the basis of His judgment alone.



**Debating the Debatable:** Why is it that we should accept those who are weaker in faith, without disputing with them over debatable matters? Because God has accepted them. There may be issues that need to be addressed, but our acceptance of fellow believers must not be based on the level of one's faith.

*As a new believer in my 20s, I came into the church with a fair amount of baggage—lingering sin issues that needed to be addressed. I was doing my best to spend time with God daily, to get involved in ministry, and to share my newfound faith with others, but I still had rough edges that needed smoothing out. Not surprisingly, the folks at church figured this out as well, and it was interesting to see the differences in how various people addressed*

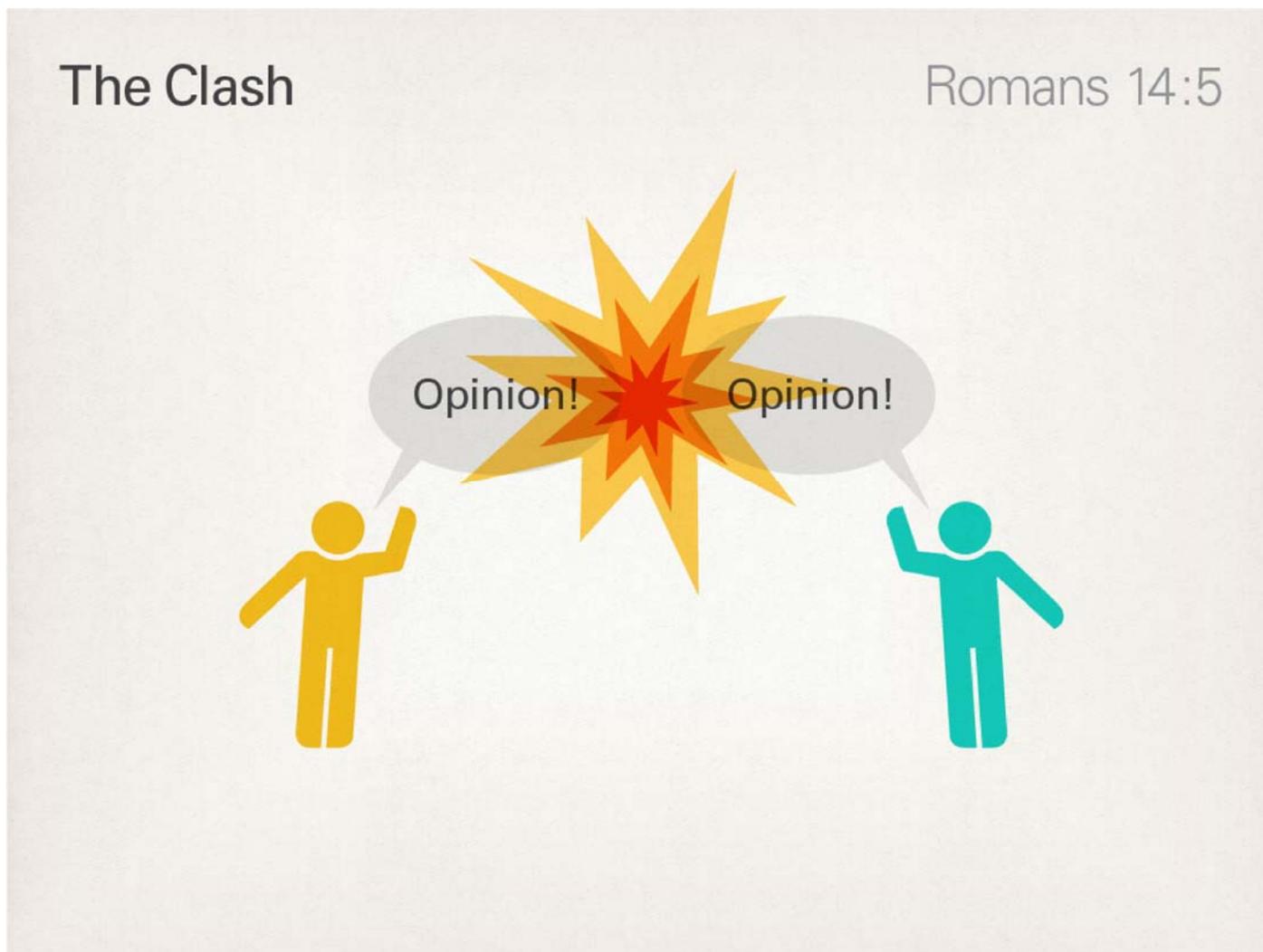
my “weaknesses.” Some boldly pointed out the areas they believed I needed to change. Others brought me under their wings, invited me into their homes, and spent time with me. The first group told me about their faith and what they thought of mine, whereas the second modeled their faith by sharing their lives with me. Over time, issue after issue, God continued the process He had begun the day I confessed my sin and accepted Jesus as my savior. And you can guess which group of folks proved most helpful as I sorted through these issues.

Paul believes this matter of not judging others to be so significant that he moves beyond food to another issue by which weaker believers might be judged: the sanctity of days of the week. In contrast to eating, he makes no judgment about which view represents the weaker or stronger, nor does he judge the legitimacy of such distinctions. He says the merit of any distinction should be based on each person’s conscience in regard to the Lord, not on some exterior criteria. Maintaining distinctions should also be based on thankfulness to God rather than some other motivation like showing the superiority of your faith.

But, to apply these principles, even if I make some distinction that I feel compelled by God to obey, and even if it is derived from my thankfulness to God, I have no right to require this distinction of others or to judge them for not adopting my practice. Remember, God has accepted the other person and that is reason enough for me to do the same (14:3). Still, Paul provides another reason in verse 7: who we belong to in life or death. As redeemed followers of Christ, our lives are no longer driven by our interests or desires, but by the Lord’s, whether in life or death (14:8a). Paul shifts back to a main exhortation in 14:8b, outlining the principle that is to govern our decisions in such matters. We are the Lord’s, and we answer to Him. The same holds true for

every believer, weak or strong.

Therefore when we have differences of opinion about matters of faith, we must filter our views through the criteria Paul provides for us here. If Paul could point to some objective metric like the dietary laws or feast calendar that would provide a “correct” answer to such questions, it seems reasonable that he would have done so. Instead of laws, he says a person’s conscience before God is the basis for weighing such matters.



16:9

**The Clash:** What happens when two believers disagree over a debatable matter when each is firmly convinced of their own opinion? They should accept each other without judgment or efforts to change each other.

In 14:10 Paul returns to the matter of judging a brother or sister. **God is**

*the judge, and He alone will judge us for how we receive other believers. Just as Paul directs believers to God's sovereignty in his discussion of election in [9:19-21](#), he appeals in [14:11](#) to God's role as final judge and arbiter: Each of us will give an accounting for our behavior ([14:12](#)). Paul seems more focused here on being judged for judging others rather than being judged for a matter of conscience.*

*When new believers come into our lives—whether new in the faith or new to us—Paul's command and caveat in [14:1](#) provide clear direction against receiving them with ulterior motives. If God has accepted that person, then that should be good enough for us. Yes, Scripture gives clear warnings, like those Paul gives in [Acts 20:28-29](#), to be wary of false believers who will deceive the flock; we need to exercise prudence and discernment. Yet we also need to leave judgment to God and His Spirit. We are not forbidden from judging, but we are warned that the same measure we use on others will be used on us ([Luke 6:37-38](#)).*

## **Romans 14:13-23**

*Paul's big idea of the preceding section is receiving those who were weak—without judging or despising them. In this section, he shifts his focus from receiving to judging. He also shifts from the specific matter of judging a weaker believer to a more general focus on judging one another without taking faith into consideration. In [14:13](#) Paul provides a negative and a positive*

exhortation. This pairing gives us insight into his specific concerns.

His negative prohibition is the same as in 14:3, exhorting believers not to judge others. Paul repeats the same Greek root word used in this part about not judging others in a second exhortation in 14:13. However, the parallelism is lost in translation, since the object in the first exhortation is a person, whereas the object in the second is a thing that we purpose or decide to do. In the second exhortation, Paul also includes a rhetorical device, a forward-pointing reference to draw attention to this new idea even though he uses the same verb in both. **At the end of verse 13, he uses "this" to point ahead to something we are not to do: We are not to be or to place a stumbling block or temptation before a fellow believer.**

In the first part of the chapter, Paul portrays judging as a hindrance to fully receiving believers into fellowship. Here the repercussions are much more severe. Paul uses the same term Jesus uses in Luke 17:1-2 as a dire warning to those who are a stumbling block or trap for others. The Lord declares it would be better to have a millstone tied on one's neck and be thrown into the sea than to cause another to stumble. Thus, Paul moves beyond the call to leave judgment to God and points to the direct condemnation of this behavior.



16:9

**Stumbling over Opinions:** When we hold different opinions, we can easily place more value on our own ideas than on those held by the person with whom we disagree. Instead of judging or despising those with whom we differ, we need be wary not to cause them to stumble and keep in mind that we will all give an accounting before God for our actions.

*Paul lays down a principle in 14:14 as if it represents conventional wisdom with which all of his readers should be familiar and that all would accept. Paul structures his argument as an untrue statement, until you reach the caveat at the end. Some things are unclean in and of themselves, but the basis for this determination is not some external, objective criteria. Instead the basis is an individual's conscience before God. This principle restricts my personal rights and freedoms and links the exercise of my freedom in Christ to its impact on believers around me.*

Although I may have the faith to do something in clear conscience, there is another factor I must take into consideration. In Christ there is nothing unclean in and of itself. However, if a member of our fellowship believes his or her conscience forbids eating this or drinking that, everyone in our fellowship is called to place a higher value on not negatively impacting that brother or sister than on exercising our own freedom.

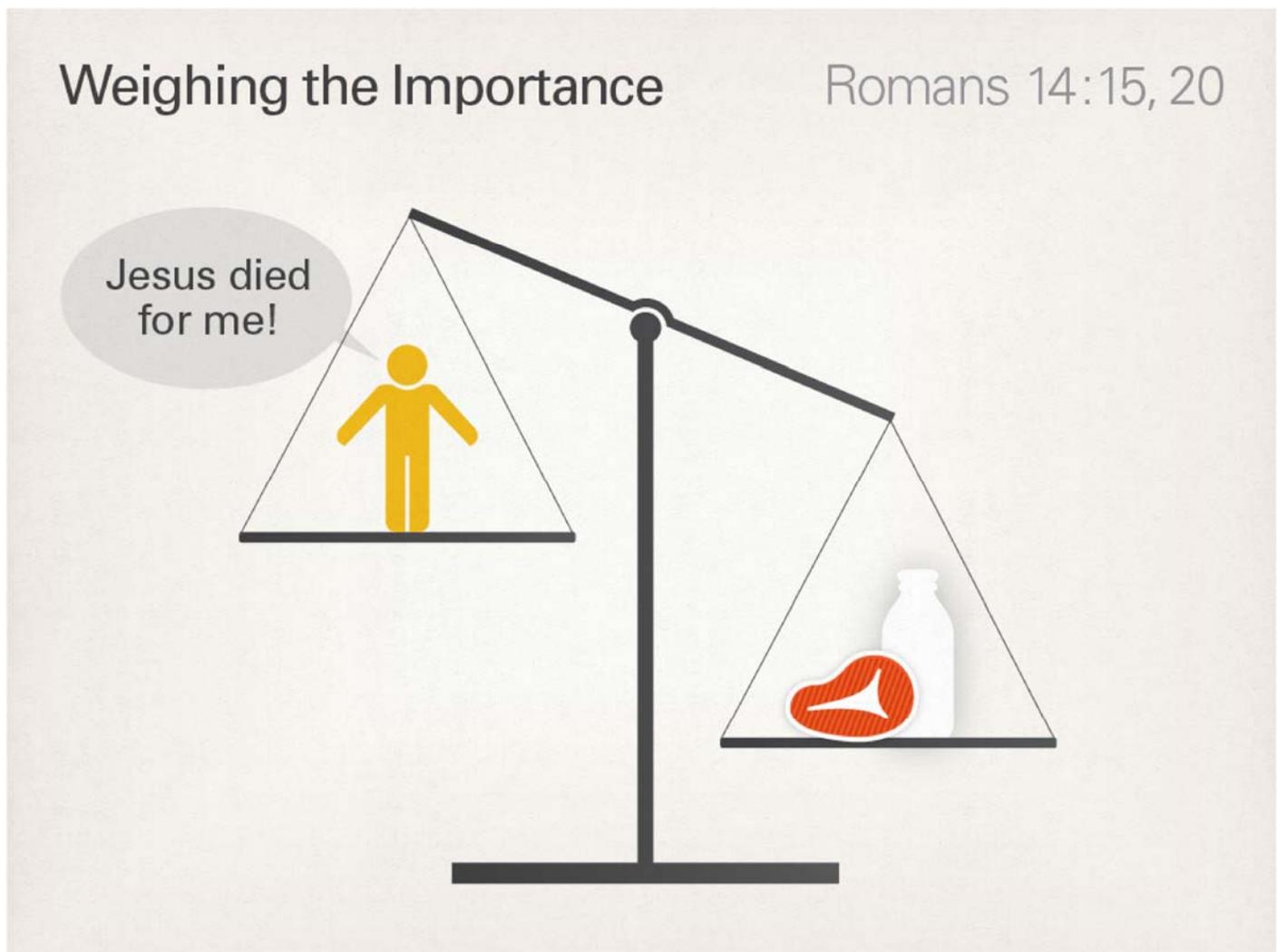


**A Clean Perspective:** In Christ nothing is considered unclean in and of itself. However, this does not mean that everything is considered clean by all believers. If someone's conscience leads them to consider something unclean, then it is unclean for them. In such cases, we need to be careful that our exercise of freedom does not grieve or cause believers to stumble.

Paul reminds us in verse 15 what the Christian life is really about. We have

*been set free from bondage to sin so we are able to love others as God has always intended, based on His Spirit's work in our lives. But if we place a higher value on our eating and drinking than on our love for others, what kind of faith is that? How strong is my faith if I put my own interests first?*

*Jesus had already declared that nothing is inherently unclean (Mark 7:14-23). The Spirit impressed the same lesson on Peter in Acts 10:9-33, in anticipation of Gentile believers receiving the Holy Spirit in the same manner as the apostles—without the laying on of hands. These passages outline one-half of the equation—that there is no person or food that can somehow harm our standing with God. But Paul provides a balancing principle in Romans 14 that restricts the extent to which this freedom can be enjoyed.*



**Weighing the Importance:** While it is true that we have freedom in Christ, that freedom was given to enable us to fully serve God, not our appetites. If we love exercising our freedom more than we love our fellow believer, then what is the point?

Paul frames the issue to highlight what our decisions say about our priorities. In 14:15, he poignantly highlights the issues at stake. Do we really place a higher priority on the food we eat than on how our eating habits may affect fellow believers? If so, then Paul says we are choosing to destroy a person—a person for whom Christ died—for the sake of exercising our freedom. In 14:17 he introduces things that should tilt the scales in favor of strong faith: righteousness, peace, and joy.



**Weighing the Importance:** Although all things are clean, nothing is important enough to cause another believer to stumble. If we place greater value on food than on people, then we are no longer living in according to love.

*Freedom from dietary restrictions for the sake of religious purity opens the door for us to enjoy most anything God has created. Furthermore, our country's laws also guarantee certain rights and freedoms. Nevertheless, believers face a higher calling: placing the needs of others before their own. If we focus on our freedoms at the expense of others, Paul says in verse 16 that we run the risk of undermining any positive testimony of our faith. He counters this negative picture with a positive one in verse 18. Honoring others serves Christ, which wins God's pleasure and people's approval. No food or freedom is worth these.*

*In the final paragraph of the chapter, Paul introduces closing exhortations that are logical consequences of his earlier remarks. The exhortation to pursue behavior that brings peace and edification provides a positive corollary to the prohibitions against judging and despising fellow believers for their stand on debatable matters (14:19). Paul supports this corollary in verse 20, where he reiterates that the pursuit of Christian freedom at another believer's expense destroys the work of God for the sake of food.*

*So although there is freedom in Christ, its effect on others becomes a very practical limit on that freedom. In 14:21 Paul shows us what this looks like in practice: Since it is better to abstain from what is permitted than to offend, weaken, or cause another to stumble, having the stronger faith cuts both ways. Although it might enable me to eat or drink things others could not, it also obligates me to willingly opt out of partaking in what is permissible for me. In 1 Corinthians 6:12-13, Paul describes the same principle in a slightly different way. All things may be permissible, but they may also be unprofitable based on how my actions affect others. This principle now overrides specific rules and laws for judgments about Christian liberty. Unfortunately, principles are hazier than rules, and they can vary from context to context. These factors demand us to be both vigilant and considerate.*

The final verse is one that has caused me trouble over the years. This is a natural consequence of it being a principle instead of a rule. **When I was a new believer, I knew there were things I should abstain from based on the negative impact they had on me before. But over time, as I gained more self-control and maturity, I began reconsidering whether it was really necessary to give up those things. I saw other believers doing them, and most of them had been following Jesus for a lot longer than I had. If all things are lawful and permissible, why shouldn't I enjoy the same kind of freedom as the others? Here is where conscience comes in. It is not a matter of needing more faith to do something less advisable; it is a matter of how God has wired each of us. Some are able to do something without any twinge of conscience, without any doubt about its permissibility. Others, like me, know the doubts and questions in my heart that will condemn me. So if I choose to partake in something on the basis of seeing others do so, then for me it is not an exercise of faith, but an exercise in sin.** And having been set free from bondage to sin, I have no desire to reclaim it in the name of "freedom."