




PURSUING PEACE

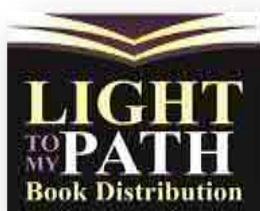
What Romans 14:1-15:7
Teaches about Living
with Diversity in the
Church



F. Wayne MacLeod

Pursuing Peace

*What Romans 14:1-15:7 Teaches about
Living with Diversity in the Church*



F. Wayne MacLeod

Light To My Path Book Distribution
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Preface

The body of Christ in our day is quite diverse. I have travelled enough to know that there are different traditions and customs unique to each country, denomination, or local church. Sincere believers, even in the same church, do not always agree on the interpretation of Bible passages. What one believer practices freely, another may find offensive.

These differences are not new. We find this diversity even in the church of the first century. The struggles in the church of Corinth were not the same as those in Ephesus. The Christian church of Rome was comprised of converts from pagan Gentile religions and converts from Judaism. These believers came from radically different backgrounds. Some converts from Judaism observed Jewish food laws and celebrated Jewish holy days. Gentile converts, who had never practiced Old Testament laws, had no such compulsion. They freely ate food considered unclean by their Jewish brothers and sisters.

The apostle recognized the differences among these new converts in the Roman church. In Romans 14 and 15, Paul showed the church how to live with these differences and advance the cause of Christ. The principles Paul develops in these verses still apply today. In the course of this meditation, we will examine Paul's teaching and its application to the church of our day. The apostle desired that the church of Rome pursue peace with each other. I would dare to say that his advice in this passage of Scripture is as applicable today as when Paul wrote it.

F. Wayne MacLeod

Chapter 1 - Welcome the Weak One

1 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

Not all believers are at the same level of maturity. Even mature believers differ in opinion over minor doctrines and practices. Those differences do not need to cause division. Notice that as the apostle begins his challenge in Romans 14, he encouraged the Roman church to welcome those who were weak in faith. Let's take a moment first to consider the weakness Paul addresses in this verse.

There are various kinds of weaknesses in the church of our day. First, we have a moral weakness. This was the case in the church of Corinth:

1 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. (1 Corinthians 5)

This kind of weakness is an inability or an unwillingness to address moral sin in our lives. While immorality is a serious weakness in the church, this is not what Paul is referring to in Romans 14:1. Notice what he told the Corinthians about the man who had his father's wife:

2 And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. 3 For though

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absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. (1 Corinthians 5)

In Romans 14, the apostle encouraged the church to welcome the weak. In 1 Corinthians 5, he told the Corinthians to remove those who were immoral from their midst. The New Testament challenges the church to address and remove sinfulness. The Christian church was not to embrace those who lived in sin, nor were they to walk in their paths (see Psalm 1:1). Paul encouraged all believers to flee sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18), idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14), and youthful lusts (2 Timothy 2:22). Consider his advice to Corinthians believers about associating with those trapped in sexual immorality, idolatry, and greed:

9 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— 10 not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. (1 Corinthians 5)

The weakness to which Paul refers in Romans 14:1 is not a moral weakness that leads to a sinful lifestyle. The church of Jesus Christ must maintain its purity. Paul told the Corinthians not to eat with a believer who lived in immorality (1 Corinthians 5:11). The weak brother to whom Paul referred is not a believer living in moral sin.

There is a second form of weakness in the church today. This weakness relates to a distortion of the truth of God's Word. There

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were false teachers in the church of Paul's day. These false teachers led the people of God astray. The apostle Jude spoke of these people in his epistle when he said:

3 Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. 4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 1)

The apostle speaks here about individuals who crept into the church of Jesus Christ unnoticed. The implication is that they were not welcomed into the church but came in deceitfully. Once inside the church, they began to teach error and false doctrine. Jude makes it clear that God's condemnation is on these false teachers. The apostle has little tolerance for these individuals. Notice how he describes them in his epistle.

12 These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; 13 wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever. (Jude 1)

According to Jude, these individuals who crept into the church were "hidden reefs" ready to sink the ship, shepherds who fed themselves but did not care for the sheep, waterless clouds that offered no rain, fruitless trees that bore no fruit, and wild waves of

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the sea casting up the foam of shame. He told his readers that these individuals were like falling stars whose light would go out and be cast into utter darkness. There is no question that these individuals who called themselves believers were not welcome in the church. The apostle John confirms this when he said:

10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, 11 for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. (2 John)

When Paul told the church of Rome to welcome the weak, he was not referring to those who believed and taught false doctrines. These individuals were not welcome in the church.

The weakness Paul refers to here is what he calls a "weakness of faith." To understand what Paul is speaking about, we need to see it in its context. The weakness was of such a nature that it would not inhibit welcoming a brother or sister into the assembly. The word welcome in the Greek language has a sense of taking someone to oneself and offering friendship. The Roman believers were to embrace these weaker brothers and sisters and treat them as members of the body of Christ. The church was not to distance these individuals or look down on them because of their weakness.

Another factor in understanding the weakness to which Paul refers is in the phrase "*but not to quarrel over opinions.*" The word "opinion" is significant in this context and shows us that the weakness relates to different perspectives held by sincere Christians.

As we examine the remainder of the chapter, we discover that Paul focuses on Jewish food laws and holy days. When Paul wrote this letter, Jews were coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ and

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converting to Christianity. As they came to faith in Christ, they brought their Jewish traditions and customs into their Christian faith. As faithful Jews, they had abstained from foods declared unclean by God. The law of Moses commanded the observation of specific days in remembrance of God and His work in the Jewish nation. These converted Jews felt obliged to celebrate these days by not working or by bringing an offering to God. While these practices were not sinful, neither were they required under Christ.

Paul called the Jewish converts, who still followed their old ways, weaker brothers and sisters. Their weakness was not the result of living in sin or promoting false teaching and practices. It was that they failed to understand the implication of the cross and the grace of God in Christ. Jewish food laws were no longer necessary. The celebration of Jewish holy days was not required under the gospel. Christ fulfilled these laws and established a new priesthood.

We should expect a diversity of opinion and practice in the New Testament church. Not all believers will see things that same way, but this should never keep us from accepting each other. I would venture to say that those who have differed from me have often strengthened me in my faith. They have challenged me to ask why I do things the way I do or believe what I believe. Sometimes they have caused me to loosen my grip on things I held too tightly to. At other times they have caused me to hold onto my convictions more strongly.

Not all believers will worship in the same way, nor will they have the same lifestyle. God has chosen to save men and women of all classes in society. Some believers are wealthy, and some are poor. There are differences over what Christians feel is acceptable

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behaviour. Doctrinal differences also exist between godly men and women of faith. We cannot expect that all believers will worship, believe, and live the way we do.

By encouraging believers to welcome the weaker brother or sister, Paul told the church that there would be differences, but those differences of opinion did not need to cause division. Our unity in Christ does not come because we all believe the same things and do things the same way. Our agreement is not in our beliefs and practices, but the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The line separating a weaker brother from the brother or sister who will harm the church can sometimes be unclear. Remember, however, that the weaker brother is not willfully and rebelliously continuing to walk in sin. Nor is the weaker brother deliberately seeking to promote error and falsehood. The weaker brother is one whose commitment to Christ is evident. He longs to walk with the Lord Jesus but needs to grow in faith and learn to rest more fully in God's purpose. If there is one place these sincere but weak brothers and sisters need to be, it would be with those who can love and nurture them to greater maturity in Christ. Those who understand that maturity takes time.

For Prayer

Father, we are reminded in this verse that we are to welcome those who are not at the same place spiritually as us. We pray that you would give us patience with those who have not come to the same conclusions as we have in our faith and spiritual walk. Help us to see beyond the differences to our common bond in Jesus Christ.

Welcome the Weak One

We also pray for the discernment to know the difference between an unrepentant sinner who needs discipline and the weaker brother we need to welcome. Teach us to be compassionate and understanding with differences of opinion, but bold and unwavering with sin and false teaching.

Chapter 2 - A Warning Against Despising and Judging

2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

As we move to Romans 14:2-3, the apostle speaks directly to the Romans about the difference of opinion among them over Jewish food laws. Paul addressed first those who believed that Christians were no longer under obligation to these regulations:

2 One person believes he may eat anything (Romans 14)

The word "believes" in this phrase is not just an intellectual understanding but a heart conviction. The Greek word used in verse 2 comes from the same root word used to speak of "faith." The New International Version of the Bible captures this when it translates using the word "faith":

2 "One man's faith allows him to eat everything" (Romans 14, NIV)

Those who act with this faith believe that they are obeying the Lord and walking in His purpose. Believers who felt they could eat anything looked to the work of Jesus on the cross and understood that they were no longer under the Old Testament dietary laws because the cross of Jesus had set them free.

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Note here that many of those who came to the Lord were Gentiles, who never practiced the Old Testament food laws. These individuals did not feel the need to place themselves under Jewish religious laws to become Christians. Others believed that to return to the Old Testament law was to deny Christ and His work. If they attempted to gain favour with God through what they ate, did they not depreciate the grace of Christ that accepted them as they were? Were they not trying to gain acceptance by their works of righteousness rather than trusting the work of Christ alone?

Under the law of Moses, God declared particular objects to be unclean. If believers touched or ate those prohibited items, they broke fellowship with God and were unclean. An unclean person needed to sacrifice an animal and go through a ceremonial cleansing to be restored to a right relationship again.

The believer whose faith allowed him to eat everything felt that the cross of Christ changed all this. The work of Jesus on the cross meant that they were clean before the Lord God, and no food they ate could change that. If what they ate could break their relationship with God, then the work of Jesus was in vain. The cross of Jesus guaranteed their salvation and relationship with the Father forever.

Paul goes on in verse 2 to speak to the "weak person" who ate only vegetables:

2 the weak person eats only vegetables (Romans 14)

We should not see from this that these individuals were vegetarians. Eating meat was permitted under the dietary laws of the Old Testament. Jews concerned about maintaining their purity before God would often refuse to eat meat if they were unsure of

A Warning Against Despising and Judging

its origin. They would not risk becoming unclean and chose to eat vegetables only. Commenting on this, Adam Clarke said:

Certain Jews, lately converted to the Christian faith, and having as yet little knowledge of its doctrines, believe the Mosaic law relative to clean and unclean meats to be still in force; and therefore, when they are in a Gentile country, for fear of being defiled, avoid flesh entirely and live on vegetables. And a Jew when in a heathen country acts thus, because he cannot tell whether the flesh which is sold in the market may be of a clean or unclean beast; whether it may not have been offered to an idol; or whether the blood may have been taken properly from it. – (Commentary on the Bible by Adam Clarke Marion, IA: Laridian, Inc., 2015. Electronic edition copyright © 2015 by Laridian, Inc., Marion, Iowa. All rights reserved.)

For these believers, the God of the Jew was also the God of the Christians. If He declared an animal unclean and unfit for eating, they wanted to respect that decision. They did not want anything to hinder their relationship with God. Even as believers in Jesus Christ, these Jewish converts did not want to eat anything unclean. They tried to maintain their purity before God out of respect for Him. They did this because they believed it was the right thing to do. They, too, acted from their faith convictions.

Two groups existed in the church of Rome. Each group was convinced before God that they were following His purpose for their lives. What was the church to do so that these differences did not clash and cause division? Paul does not attempt to change the opinion of either party. Instead, he has a challenge for both sides in verse 3

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Addressing those who had the freedom to eat everything, the apostle said:

3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains (Romans 14)

The one who had the freedom to eat anything was not to despise the one who abstained. The word "despise" means to ignore, diminish, reject, or show contempt. The temptation of those who had the liberty to eat anything was to look down on those who did not have this same freedom. This "despising," however, was not just toward the individual but also his or her actions. The one who had the freedom to eat everything could fail to see how abstaining from particular food could be of any value before God.

The temptation was to mock those who did not have the freedom to eat anything and depreciate their abstinence. In doing so, these individuals ridiculed the conviction of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

3 Let not the one who abstains pass judgement on the one who eats (Romans 14)

While those who had the freedom to eat everything often despised those who differed, the temptation of those who abstained from certain foods was to judge. These individuals could point their brothers and sisters to the Old Testament laws. They could remind them that the Lord God they served had declared certain foods to be unclean. They could remind them that the God of both the Christians and the Jews was the same. It would be easy for these believers to feel that their brothers and sisters were taking their relationship with God for granted and disrespecting God by eating food He had declared "unclean."

A Warning Against Despising and Judging

It would have been challenging for those who abstained from certain foods to watch their brothers and sisters eat something unclean. They did not want to take the grace of God for granted by living a careless lifestyle. How easy it would be for them to say: "Show some respect."

Paul does not take sides in these verses. Instead, he encouraged believers of differing opinions to learn how to live with each other. More than this, however, notice how he concludes in verse 3:

3 for God has welcomed him (verse 3)

The apostle challenged the church in Rome not to despise a brother's abstinence because God had accepted him and his choice. He also told them not to judge another believer's refusal to abstain from certain foods because God had welcomed him also. God receives the weaker brother, who cannot eat unclean meat. He recognizes their abstinence as an act of worship from a sincere heart. God will not judge the man who eats unclean meat, for, under Christ, he is free from the dietary laws of the old covenant.

If God accepts both groups and their faith convictions, how can we judge or despise them? Can we belittle a service that God receives from our brother or sister?

Have you ever watched parents receive a piece of art from their young child? The scribbles on the paper do not make sense. Imagine that as this young child offers his artwork to this mom and dad, his older brother begins to criticize – "That doesn't look like ...," "That's not how you draw..." Mother and father, however, recognize the heart behind the offering and accept it with joy. What the older brother does not see is the motive behind the

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scribbles. God sees what we do not see. He knows our heart's attitude, whether we abstain from certain foods or not.

Commenting on Romans 14, Matthew Henry says:

Differences of opinion prevailed even among the immediate followers of Christ and their disciples. Nor did St. Paul attempt to end them. Compelled assent to any doctrine, or conformity to outward observances without being convinced, would be hypocritical and of no avail. Attempts for producing absolute oneness of mind among Christians would be useless. Let not Christian fellowship be disturbed with strifes of words. It will be good for us to ask ourselves, when tempted to disdain and blame our brethren; Has not God owned them? and if he has, dare I disown them? Let not the Christian who uses his liberty, despise his weak brother as ignorant and superstitious. Let not the scrupulous believer find fault with his brother, for God accepted him, without regarding the distinctions of meats. We usurp the place of God, when we take upon us thus to judge the thoughts and intentions of others, which are out of our view. – (Henry, Matthew. "Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible." Marion, IA: Laridian, Inc., 2020. Electronic edition copyright © 2001 Laridian, Inc. All rights reserved.)

Believers will have differences of opinion. Paul told the Romans that they were not to quarrel over these opinions. In these verses, he gives us an example from the church of Rome. Paul reminded the Romans that God accepted the faith conviction of both sides. While the apostle had his opinion on this matter, he was willing to worship and fellowship with those who held a different view.

A Warning Against Despising and Judging

What was important for Paul was to understand what God welcomed. This is where we often fail as believers. We confuse what we welcome with what God accepts. If we are not comfortable with a particular music style, we assume that God could never receive it. If we feel strongly about a specific practice, we cannot understand how anyone could be right with God if they do not do what we expect. I have travelled to enough countries to know that worship and practice vary among godly believers. God is not limited to only one type of church. We find God working in strongly legalistic churches. We see His presence in charismatic works as well. I have also seen him working in churches that have not faithfully preached the Gospel. God moves in strange places. He uses people we would never consider. He shows up in places we would never expect. We must not limit God. He loved those who still practiced the Jewish dietary laws and accepted their abstinence as an act of worship. He also loved those who broke free from the law of Moses and ate whatever their heart desired.

For Prayer:

Father God, you show us through these words of Paul that we ought to expect differences of opinion in the church of our day. I ask that you help us listen to Paul's teaching here. Help us not to despise or belittle believers who worship differently. Help us not to judge when we do not know their hearts' intentions and motivations. Teach us the difference between what You accept and what we accept. Give us the grace to respect what you welcome. May we demonstrate compassion toward those who differ from us. Help us to hold lightly to our opinions and preferences and embrace what You embrace, even when we are

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not entirely comfortable with it. Thank you for brothers and sisters who differ from us. Help us to respect them, even though we do not wholly agree with them.

Chapter 3 - Passing Judgement

4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

In verse three, the apostle warned those who abstained from certain foods, according to the Jewish food laws, about passing judgement on those who were free to eat everything.

3 let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. (Romans 14)

He goes on in verse 4 to develop this more fully in verse 4 when he says:

*4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?
(Romans 14)*

There are several details we need to see from this phrase. Notice first how Paul reminded his readers that they were judging someone else's servants. Servants, in Bible times, belonged to their master. Imagine that you own a car, but your neighbour comes over to use it whenever he wanted without asking permission. He gets upset when you don't take care of it as he feels you should. He tells you that he is ashamed to drive the car in town because it is dirty, and when he used it the other day, you didn't leave enough gas in the tank for him. At what point would you be tempted to say: "Brother, this is not your car. You cannot treat it as your own. I bought this car with my own money. I can do what I please with it." Paul's first point in verse four is that we belong to the Lord

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Jesus. He alone is our master, and He alone can determine the course He wants our life to take.

Paul's second point in verse four is in the phrase, "who are you to pass judgement." What are the implications of these words? Let me suggest three possibilities.

First, the words "who are you to judge" tell us that we are not qualified to make a judgement about someone else. Someone once said that when we point our finger at another person, three fingers point back at us and our thumb points directly to God. In other words, those who judge another need to remember that they also are accountable to God. Listen to the warning of Paul in Romans 2:3:

3 Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? (Romans 2)

Anyone who understands human nature will be slow to judge their brother or sister. Knowing that God will one day judge us should keep us from condemning others too quickly. Listen to what the Lord Jesus had to say about this in Matthew 7:

1 "Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. 3 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? 5 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

(Matthew 7)

Passing Judgement

To look down in judgement on someone else when we are not perfect ourselves is hypocritical. Who are we to judge someone else when we fall short ourselves? In John 8, we have the story of the woman caught in adultery. The religious leaders came to Jesus for His judgement. These men had already judged the woman in their hearts. Before those present that day, however, Jesus said to those leaders:

7 "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8)

"If you do not deserve what she deserves," Jesus said, "then I give you the authority to take her life." The reality of the matter, however, was that each of those leaders deserved to die because of their own sin. They were hypocrites seeking to kill Jesus by using this woman to trick Him into saying or doing something they could use against Him. She was guilty of adultery, but they were guilty of attempting to murder the Son of God. They had no right to judge her when their hearts were so full of evil.

Second, the phrase "who are you to judge" implies that we have no authority to make a final judgement. The apostle James reminds us:

12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor? (James 4)

There are indeed times when we need to make judgements for the church's good. What we need to understand, however, is that there is only one person who is the final judge of all things. Every one of us is accountable to Him. He has the final say in all matters. At times, we may act on His behalf, but our only authority for

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judgement is from Him. He alone is worthy of passing sentence because He alone is perfect and above sin and error.

Finally, the phrase "who are you to judge" reminds us that we are incapable of knowing all the facts and details. I used to do all my writing in coffee shops. On those occasions, I would see the regulars come in for their coffee. One of these individuals was an older man who came in with his wife. On one occasion, however, I noticed that he started to come in with a younger woman, but his wife was not with him. Seeing this pattern, I began to think that he had found another woman. One day as he and this woman sat together drinking coffee, another man came into the shop and said, "I see you are having coffee with your daughter." When I heard this, I realized the great mistake I had made in my mind. This man was not cheating on his wife; he was building a relationship with his daughter.

I realized that day that I cannot judge what I see. I do not know what God knows. Imagine that you were travelling down the road one day, and a car passes you going way beyond the speed limit. You recognize that this is a brother from your church. As you reflect on this, you become a bit judgemental. As a believer, he should be setting an example. Why was he disobeying the speed limit? You are ready to confront him with his sin at church on Sunday when you discover that his wife had experienced a medical crisis that day, and he was rushing her to the hospital to save her life. How does that change your understanding of his actions? Will you judge him for doing everything possible to save his wife, even if it meant breaking the speed limit?

As human beings, we do not know the facts and intentions of the heart. We could be so wrong when we think we are so right. Only

Passing Judgement

God knows the details. Only He is qualified to judge. Who are we to judge another man's servant?

Paul continues in verse 4 to remind us that my brother or sister stands or falls before his or her own master.

4 It is before his own master that he stands or falls. (Romans 14)

To understand what Paul means by standing and falling, consider what the psalmist said in Psalm 1:5

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous (Psalm 1)

Psalm 1 connects standing with judgement. The opposite of standing in judgement is falling under the condemnation of God. To fall under judgement is to receive a guilty sentence. To stand in this context is to be declared innocent. Consider this standing and falling in the context of a battle. When people fall in battle, they suffer defeat. When the battle is over, those left standing have overcome.

Paul told the Romans that every servant stands or falls before his own master. In other words, it is his master who will judge him. No one else has this authority.

As a servant of God, other people may criticize my actions, but their judgement is not what matters. The religious leaders of His day judged the Lord Jesus. They crucified Him on a cross. While found guilty in a human court, the Judge of All declared Him innocent of all charges. Only the judgement of His Father mattered. This understanding motivated many saints in the Bible. They did not care what others thought of them. They only cared

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about doing the will of the Father and hearing Him say, "well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21). As Peter and the apostle said: "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29).

Writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul declared:

3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4)

The apostle considered it a "small thing" to be judged in a human court. He left all judgement to God. He would not live his life to please human beings. He lived to please his Heavenly Master alone. Any judgement we make about another person matters little. What matters is what God says.

Paul concludes verse 4 with the following statement:

And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

The words translated "upheld" and "stand" in this phrase are the same Greek words. What Paul is saying is this, "he will stand for the Lord will make him stand." God's power and authority would enable this man to rise in victory.

I have been in Christian ministry long enough to see the difference between a work of God and a work for God. I have been in a place where I believed that everything depended on me. As a pastor, I know the responsibility God has given me for His people's well-

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being. I have also learned that my work for God's people is not as important as God's work in His people. Paul's words remind us that God is working in the lives of His servants. He will uphold them and make them stand. I may be the instrument God uses, but it is not my power and wisdom that will enable a brother or sister to live a victorious Christian life. Only the power of God can do this. I need to know how to step aside to let God do His work.

When we judge someone else, the assumption is that we have the truth and if everyone would follow our example, they could be right with God. Can any of us genuinely set ourselves up as the standard to follow? Can one beggar help another to riches? Can one imperfect human being help another to be perfect? Can one who does not know all things train another to face the one who does? Our best efforts are tainted with sin and ignorance. Only one person can prepare us to stand before our Judge. The Lord Jesus alone, through the work of His Holy Spirit in us, can make us stand before the Father.

God is working in the lives of those who trust Him. He is preparing them to stand before the Father. We dare not elevate our human efforts above His. Have you ever had someone stand beside you when you were working, judging what you were doing? Maybe they criticize you because they would not do things in the same way. How careful we need to be about judging the work God is doing in another person. Sometimes what seems to be a tragedy to us is God's path for deliverance.

The apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, went to Damascus one day to deal with the problem of Christianity. If I were a Christian in those days, I would have wanted to do anything I could to keep him from arriving in Damascus. What I would not have understood,

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however, is that the Lord Jesus would meet Paul on that road, and his life would never be the same. The path to persecution became the path of conversion. How could I have even known that?

I cannot understand the ways of God. What I do know, however, is what Paul tells me here. God has a concern for my brother and sister. He is working in their lives. He will make them stand and give them victory in His way. How easy it would be for me to judge my brother and take on the task of showing him my understanding of faith and Christian practice. I could shape him into my image, but that would fall far short of God's intention.

Let those tempted to judge their brother or sister realize that they are unfit to pass sentence, for they too have fallen short of God's standard. Let them understand that they take the place of God by judging what they do not fully understand. Let them have the faith to trust that God is working in their brother's life in ways that do not make sense to them now. We are instruments in the hands of God to encourage and bless our brothers and sisters, but we must do so, recognizing our limitations. As our brother and sister, we, too, are on a path of discovery and growth. Not one of us has arrived at our final destination. Not one of us is living in perfect obedience. Not one of us has a complete understanding. God is at work in us all, transforming us into His image. Until we are in His presence, we will need each other, but more importantly, we will need His work in us to give us the grace to stand before the judgement seat of Christ.

Passing Judgement

For Prayer:

Lord God, we recognize that we have a more elevated view of ourselves than is merited. Our understanding of Scripture and your purpose is incomplete. We are quick to judge people based on our understanding of Scripture and fail to give them the privilege of an alternative view. We have pushed our ways on others and judged them because they did not conform to our understanding. Give us the humility to accept that we are on a path of growth ourselves. We recognize Father that we will have to answer to you alone. As human beings, we do not make good judges, for we are sinful and lack a full understanding of Your purpose. Teach us to stimulate each other to grow with a humility that recognizes our own shortcomings and failures. Thank you that you do not leave our spiritual growth up to our pastors and leaders alone, but you work personally in us to enable us to stand. Thank you that our spiritual lives are in Your skillful hands.

Chapter 4 - Being Fully Convinced

5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Can two people who differ in a matter be right? Is it possible that what we judge to be wrong is simply a different way to honour God? In verses five and six, the apostle Paul addresses this question. He begins verse 5 with an example.

5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.

The example Paul gives here was a real-world example in the church of Rome. Converted Jews and Gentiles gathered to worship. These believers came from different backgrounds. The Law of Moses required the celebration of certain days in remembrance of God and His work in their nation. Gentile believers did not celebrate these days. Some Jewish converts to Christianity felt compelled to bring these Jewish celebrations into their Christian faith. Other believers in the church had no such compulsion.

To esteem has the sense of judging something to be of special value. In this case, the judgement is based on a personal conviction

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and understanding of God's purpose. It is interesting to note that the word translated "alike" in this verse is not in the original Greek text but is supplied for clarity. In other words, the verse could be translated, "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days."

What Paul is describing here are two opinions in the church of Rome. The first group held that believers should see Jewish holy days as sacred and be careful about what they did on those days. These individuals saw one day as more holy than another and believed they needed to honour God, especially on those days.

The second group in the church, "esteemed all days." In other words, they placed the same value on every day of the year. Every day was holy to the Lord, and no day was more sacred than another. Believers were not to honour God only on certain days of the year—they were to treat every day as holy and live to the utmost for God every moment of their lives.

Which group was right? Is there anything wrong with setting certain days aside to remember God and His blessings? Is it wrong to treat every day of my life as holy to the Lord? There was no sin in observing special days. Neither was it sinful to keep every day as sacred to the Lord. Paul's advice to the church is simply this:

5 Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14)

Paul's advice is quite interesting and needs to be examined more carefully. Paul did not take sides in this debate. He told the believers to make up their minds about what they should do.

Remember that Paul is speaking about a very particular situation – whether or not to celebrate Jewish holidays or set apart certain

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days as holy. We need to be careful about not applying Paul's advice in this situation to every decision we make in life. I have met Christians who have convinced themselves that a particular sinful behaviour was acceptable. Just because you are convinced of something in your mind does not make it right. Over the years, we have seen how the thinking of this world has changed. What used to be sinful now is an accepted part of life. The world in which we live no longer sees the Bible as the source of moral truth. Instead, the opinion of society has become the authority. How easy it is for the church to fall into this way of thinking. Our society can convince us that certain lifestyles and behaviours are acceptable. God, however, will hold us accountable to the standards of His Word.

Paul's advice to the Romans does not mean that we can do whatever we want as long as we are personally convinced it is okay. As believers, our opinion in every matter must be held in subjection to the purpose of God, whether we fully understand or agree with that purpose or not.

Paul speaks about a very particular situation in Romans 14:5. He offers the freedom to believers to observe a special day to God's honour. He also gives them the option to live every day as holy.

The apostle goes on in verse 6 to remind believers of the importance of their motivation in the choice they made:

6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

The individual who chose to observe a special day was to do so to honour the Lord. Such believers might also choose to abstain from

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certain foods to express their respect for God. On the other hand, a believer who ate food declared unclean by the Jewish law, giving thanks to God with all his heart, also honoured God by their thankful heart.

Paul would write later in this chapter:

14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. (Romans 14)

We will examine this verse in more detail later. Suffice it to say that Paul believed that nothing was unclean because of the work of the Lord Jesus. In other words, the Christian was no longer under the obligation to practice the Old Testament dietary laws.

Consider also the words of Jesus in Matthew 15:

10 And he called the people to him and said to them, "Hear and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." (Matthew 15)

Jesus taught His disciples that food did not defile a person. If eating food did not defile a person, then abstaining from food would not defile them either. In this matter, the individual Christian had freedom. If you eat, do so with a thankful heart. If you refuse to eat, do so to honour the Lord.

In these verses, we see that we must allow for different expressions and understanding in the Christian life. Not all believers see things the same way. We are not speaking here about what the Bible clearly defines as sinful behaviour—we must always correct this. When I see my brother or sister raising their hands in

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a jubilant expression of praise, while my expressions are more subdued, what should be my response? Can I accept and value a brother or sister from another church who does not interpret specific Scripture verses as I do?

The apostle Paul challenged the believers in Rome to accept differences in Christian expression. They were not to belittle a sincere believer who sought to honour God in a way that differed from them.

Does the Lord accept the sincere worship offered by our brothers and sisters? If He does, we dare not reject or belittle them and their expression. We will not always express our worship in the same way. Nor will we all interpret passages of the Bible in the same way. Throughout our Christian lives, we will change as we grow in our understanding. There have been many changes in my life over the years. I am thankful, however, that the Lord understood and accepted me and my sincere worship even when my understanding was not what it is today. I am also grateful to Him for understanding and loving me in my current shortcomings.

For Prayer:

Father, I thank you that you accept me as I am. I do not have to be perfect to worship or honour you. You receive the worship of imperfect Christians. Thank you that You understand the attitude of a heart that seeks to honour you. Teach me not to judge others based on what I am comfortable with or my interpretation of specific passages of Scripture. Help me to be more compassionate and patient with brothers and sisters who do not see things as I do. Help me realize that I need to grow in my understanding of your

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Word. Thank you that you accept me even when I have not come to a complete sense of your purpose for my life.

Chapter 5 - Living and Dying for the Lord

7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

The apostle Paul has just spoken to the Romans about how not all believers agree in matters of practice. Some saw all days as equal, while others elevated one day above another. Some chose to eat all things while others abstained from certain foods. Paul encouraged the believers in Rome to understand that people on each side believed they were honouring God in what they did. This is the context for understanding what the apostle will say in verses 7 and 8.

As Paul begins verse 7, notice that he uses the word "us." This word shows us that he is speaking about a select group of people. He develops this idea when he says that these individuals do not live or die for themselves. This is further clarified in verse 8 when he explains that they live and die for the Lord. There is little doubt that the apostle is speaking about Christians when he uses the word "us."

Paul begins this verse by telling the Romans that true believers in Jesus Christ do not live to themselves.

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7 For none of us lives to himself,

The apostle began Romans 14 by stating that all Christians were servants of the Lord Jesus (Romans 14:4). One of the most fundamental truths of the Christian faith is that we have been bought with a price and no longer belong to ourselves.

19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6)

The Christian is one who belongs to the Lord Jesus and has given complete control of his or her life to Him. This being the case, we no longer live for ourselves and our ambitions. We surrender to Christ and dedicate our lives to live for and serve Him. I am not saying that every believer lives this way, but this is how it ought to be. The only way you can live the Christian life is to die to yourself and commit yourself to walk in the purpose of Christ. You cannot live for yourself and Christ. The true Christian is one who had made up his or her mind to no longer live for themselves but Christ.

Part of living for Christ involves caring for and loving His children. Writing to the Galatians, the apostle said:

2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6)

Notice that Paul told the Galatians that bearing one another's burdens was the law of Christ. In other words, it is the purpose of Christ that we support one another. Writing to the Philippians, the apostle said:

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3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

(Philippians 2)

Notice in this passage how Paul challenges all believers to imitate Christ in how they care for one another. He reminds them of how Jesus came to serve. He humbled Himself to the point of dying a horrific death on a cross for those who rejected and despised Him.

Jesus, Himself said: "The greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 23:11). To be great in the kingdom of God, we must become faithful servants—we cannot live for ourselves, our preferences, and our agendas. To be a follower of Jesus, we must die to ourselves, consider others as more important than ourselves, and joyfully serve.

The apostle goes on in verse 7 to say that not only do true believers not live for themselves, but they also do not die to or for themselves

7 and none of us dies to himself. (Romans 14)

How easy it is for us to think that while we must live for Christ and be His servant on this earth when we die, it will all be about us. This is not the case. When a believer dies, his or her obligation to Christ does not cease. We enter the presence of our Lord and

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Saviour, but we will not be sitting back, letting Him serve us throughout eternity. Instead, we will continue to worship and serve Him as our Lord. Our great burden and passion in heaven will not be for ourselves, our pleasures, and ambitions—it will be about Christ and how to honour Him. Heaven will not be just about us but about serving and honouring Christ. This reality will not diminish the blessings we will experience personally, but those blessings will not be a priority for us.

Paul is telling the Romans in verse 7 that their death will bring them into the presence of their heavenly Master, whom they will serve in an even greater capacity. This will be their greatest delight and passion in heaven. Paul clarified this in verse 8 when he said:

8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.

Whether we live or die, we do so for the Lord. Our goal is to serve and honour the Lord Jesus Christ in life. In death, our goal will be the same. We will bow before Him in humble submission with new hearts that desire more than ever to serve and honour His name.

As believers, according to Paul, we belong to the Lord in life and death:

8 So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Romans 14)

We will never again belong to ourselves. Living on this earth, we have one great ambition and purpose –to serve our Lord and Master. In death and eternal life, that goal will not change. We belong to Christ in this life and the next.

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Paul concludes this section by pointing the Romans to the work of the Lord Jesus that redeemed us and made us His servants:

9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Romans 14)

Notice the phrase "for to this end" in verse 9. These words relate to what the apostle has just said—that in life and death, we belong to the Lord. We belong to the Lord Jesus, according to verse 9, because "Christ died and lived again." The Lord Jesus came to this earth to die for our sins. He rose again, victorious over sin and death. Because of His death and resurrection, we have life and hope of eternal glory in His presence. Our sins are forgiven, and we are restored to a relationship with God.

Christ Jesus rescued us from sin and its eternal consequences. We were servants of sin, but He purchased us with His life. We now belong to Him. He proved by His victory over sin and death that He is worthy to be our Lord.

Paul told the Romans that Jesus was Lord both of the dead and the living. He overcame death, and it no longer has any power over Him or those who belong to Him. He gives life to the dead, and death is submissive to His purpose. He is also Lord over the living. He sustains life and gives breath. He is Lord over those who have died and those who still live. We are subject to Him in both this life and the next.

While it is relatively easy to understand what Paul is saying in these verses, we need to ask ourselves: What is the connection of Paul's teaching here to the context of dealing with differences among believers? Paul will make this clear in the following verses. For the moment, however, let me make a few points that I trust will tie

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what Paul is saying in verses seven to nine to the context of the chapter.

We Are Servants of the Lord Jesus

Paul makes it clear from this passage that we are not to live for ourselves. The Lord Jesus purchased us with His blood, and we belong to Him. Our goal in life is to follow His example and walk in obedience to Him and His purpose.

While on this earth, Jesus associated with sinners. He often condemned the Pharisees for their harsh and critical attitude. He spent time with the woman at the well, even though she lived an immoral lifestyle. He forgave the woman caught in adultery when the religious leaders wanted to stone her to death. He ate with tax-collectors as the religious leaders stood outside and condemned Him for his association with them. He worked with Judas, who would betray Him. He washed Peter's feet, knowing that he would deny Him three times.

Our great ambition in life is to follow our Lord Jesus's example. His example is one of patience and acceptance. When Mary brought her perfume and anointed His feet, Judas condemned her act, saying that it would have been better for it to be sold and the poor's money. Jesus defended her against this criticism.

As servants of the Lord Jesus, we must demonstrate the same patience He did. Are we any better than the religious leaders who brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus? Will we condemn someone Jesus is willing to forgive? Will we take His place as

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master and judge? We must leave judgement to Him. It is for us to follow His example in compassion, forgiveness, and humility.

Each of Us is Accountable to God

Listen to the words of Jesus in Luke 6:41-42:

41 Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? 42 How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.
(Luke 6)

Jesus warned those who judged another person that they would be held accountable for their own sin. It is all too easy for us to see a brother or sister's sins and overlook our sin. Paul reminded the Romans that Jesus Christ was their Lord and Master. Each believer is accountable to Christ for their own lives.

It is of utmost importance that we support and love each other. Jesus set this example for us in His life on earth. All who are servants of Christ must bear each other's burdens, fulfilling the command of Christ. Our role is not to be our brother's judge. It is to humbly point him to the path of righteousness, recognizing that we, too, are still learning how to walk on that same path.

The Jewish religious leaders condemned Jesus for His miracles while they misled the people of their day into error. They were blind to their sin. What a surprise they would get when God exposed their blindness and revealed the truth.

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Every servant of Christ is to be sure that they are first walking in obedience to Him. Every Christian must understand that they will stand before their Lord and Master to give an account of their own lives. If we truly understand this, we will be less likely to judge our brother or sister and more likely to examine ourselves.

The Preciousness of Each Child of God

Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:

5 "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18)

Notice what the Lord Jesus says about His children in this passage. There is a close connection between the child of God and his or her creator. To receive one of His children is to receive Christ. Notice also that to cause His child to fall is a serious offence against his or her Lord. Jesus told His listeners that it would be better for the offender to have a millstone fastened to their neck and drowned in the sea than to offend one of His children. Jesus loves His children. As their master, he cares very deeply for them. He takes seriously the words spoken against them. He knows what it is like to be criticized and judged by people. He defended Mary, who offered her perfume against the accusations of Judas. He defended another Mary against the accusations of her sister, who judged her for sitting at Jesus' feet when there was so much work to be done.

The writer of the book of Proverbs says this about the poor:

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5 Whoever mocks the poor insults his Maker; he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished. (Proverbs 17)

Notice the connection between the poor and his or her Maker. When we mock or insult one of God's children, we insult God. When we harshly judge one of God's servants, we will answer to God.

The prophet Zechariah said:

8 For thus said the LORD of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye: (Zechariah 2)

Zechariah's words are significant. God spoke these words about Israel, His servant. If there is one thing we know about Israel, God often spoke to her about her sin. She struggled to follow the Lord her God and often fell short of His standard. Despite this, God loved her and warned any enemy that when they touched her or did evil to her, they hurt someone very precious to Him.

When we understand how precious every servant is to the heavenly Master, we will hesitate to be harsh and critical out of respect for their Lord.

Paul reminds the Romans that we are all servants of Christ who bought us with His blood on the cross. Whether we live or die, we belong to Him. We do not live for ourselves. We all live for Christ, follow His example and walk in His purpose alone. Each of us who is a servant of Christ is important and must answer Him for our sins. Understanding these truths will help us to be more understanding of our brother or sister in Christ.

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For Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I want to confess that were it not for your work on the Cross of Calvary, I would be a lost sinner separated eternally from you and Your blessings. I acknowledge that it is easy for me to forget this fact. I am quick to see my brother's sin and overlook my own. I ask that you help me as Your servant, to live as you lived, to demonstrate Your patience and love to Your children. Teach me how to see people as You see them. Give me the grace to accept those You accept. Give me the humility to see my own need before You. Thank you that You loved and died for us when we were unworthy of that attention. Help me to have this same attitude toward my brothers and sisters who differ from me.

Chapter 6 -The Judgement Seat of God

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; 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 will give an account of himself to God.
(Romans 14)

Paul has been reminding the Romans that Jesus Christ is Lord of the living and the dead. Understanding this fact, he goes on to ask two questions in verse 10:

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? (Romans 14)

These two questions go back to verse three, where the apostle said:

3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. (Romans 14)

The tendency for the person who ate anything was to look down on those who felt the need to abstain from certain foods. The temptation for those who abstained from certain foods was to judge those who did not do so. Paul addresses both sides of the debate here in verse 10.

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The apostle goes on to remind the Romans that they would all stand before the judgment seat of God:

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (Romans 14)

Those who judged others would themselves be condemned. Those who despised their brothers or sisters would stand before the Lord God to give an account of their attitude.

Notice the phrase "the judgement seat of God." These words tell us that the seat of judgement belongs to God. God alone has the authority to sit on that seat. He alone can determine the attitude of the heart. No one else is worthy of passing judgement.

The question Paul asked the Romans in verse 10 is this: "Why do you pass judgement on your brother?" In other words, why do you sit in the seat of judgement? That seat belongs to God alone. Will you take His place and pronounce a sentence on your brother or sister? Do you have the wisdom and understanding of God to be able to sit in His seat? By doing this, will you not seal your own judgement?

In verse 11, the apostle points his readers to the words of the prophet Isaiah, as recorded in Isaiah 45:23:

11 for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."

In this prophetic word, Isaiah predicted that the day would come when every knee would bow and confess to God. There are two details I would like to underline in this verse.

Notice first the words, "confess to God." These words indicate that a day is coming when every person will stand before God and

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confess their sin and shortcomings. Rich and poor, believers and unbelievers will all stand before the Lord God to give an account of their lives. Isaiah prophesied that God would sit on His seat of judgement, and all creation would stand before Him.

Notice second in Isaiah's prophecy that every knee will bow to the God of Israel. There is a connection between bowing and confessing. The one who judges must be beyond reproach. He must be greater than the one he judges. Creation bows before their Judge because they recognize His worth and holy character.

Writing to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul said:

3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4)

Paul considered the judgement of fellow believers to be a "very small thing" (1 Corinthians 4:3). Human judges knew very little. Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 4:4 that while he was not aware of any sin in his life, he was not necessarily innocent. He did not see what God saw. When the Lord judged, hidden sin might very well be exposed. On the day of judgement, God would reveal the hidden purposes of the heart.

How often have we deceived ourselves into thinking that we are serving God when, in reality, we please ourselves? The fact of the matter is that we do not even know ourselves. How can we judge

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someone else's intentions when we don't even always recognize our own?

Paul considered the judgements of fellow human beings but knew their observations were made from a position of weakness. The judgement of God, however, was very different. Paul bowed the knee to Him. He knew that God saw and understood every thought and intention of his heart. His judgement was accurate and final. He submitted to His decision.

The apostle concludes this section by saying:

*12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.
(Romans 14)*

To whom are we to give an accounting? Verse 12 tells us that we are to account to God. He is our Judge. Who are we to judge when that task belongs to God? Shall we take on His role? Will we make our fellow believers give an account to us instead? Will we sit on the judgement seat of Christ and pronounce the sentence in His place? Can we "*bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and disclose the purposes of the heart*" (1 Corinthians 4:5)? To God alone, we will bow and receive our judgement.

In telling us that God is our judge, the apostle does not say that we cannot warn another believer about the dangerous path they tread. While we must do this with humility, we must encourage and rescue our fellow believers from sinful ways. Jesus gave us this example in the parable of the lost sheep found in Luke 15. God calls us to pursue those who wander and rescue them from the grip of temptation.

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While we must rescue each other from sinful ways, we must also recognize that we will not all agree on matters of practice. Christians will differ in preferences. Sincere believers will not always interpret Bible passages in the same way. I often fellowship with believers whose theology is different from mine. I have worshipped with believers whose preferred worship style is different from mine. I do not question their salvation and desire to walk with the Lord in all sincerity. I do not feel, however, the need to agree with these believers on every point. I can accept them as my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Paul tells us here that we must all live with the reality that we will stand before God's judgment seat. As I bow before God on that day, I will understand as I have never understood who I am. I will see more than ever my need for His grace and mercy. Not one of us will say to our brother or sister on that day: "See, I was right, I told you so." Every one of us will be humbled at the mercy of a holy God to accept us as we are. The differences I see as being so critical now will fade into insignificance when I bow before my Judge on that day. I will not be patting myself on the back and boasting that I got it right when my brother or sister didn't. All I will see is the wonderful grace of God in accepting me with all my failures and shortcomings. My eyes will be on the cross that made my salvation possible. Bowing before the judgement seat of God will change everything.

For Prayer:

Father God, I recognize that all judgement belongs to You. You alone can judge the hidden intentions of the heart. I stand before

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you today confessing that I do not even know the full extent of sin in my own heart. I ask that you reveal my hidden intentions and thoughts. I confess that when I bow before you on that final day of judgement, my heart will not be on whether I was right or wrong, but on Your grace and forgiveness. I understand that I am not worthy of your salvation. I know that I am imperfect in many ways. My salvation is a gift of Your grace in Jesus Christ. Without Him, there would be no forgiveness. Help me see that the grace of Jesus Christ covers my theological misunderstandings. Thank you that your grace covers the differences between believers in matters of preference and practice. Thank you that your mercy is greater than my misunderstandings and imperfections. Teach me to understand this when it comes to my brother and sister in Christ. Help me to realize that they just like me, if they know your Son as their Saviour, when they stand before Your throne, the grace of Jesus will cover their misunderstandings as well, and like me, they will enter Your presence to dwell with you forever.

Chapter 7 - Unclean to Me

13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. 15 For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. (Romans 14)

Verses 13-15 seem to be the key to understanding Romans 14. The apostle Paul begins in verse 13 by saying:

13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Let's consider the first part of verse 13 here. Paul told the Romans that they were not to pass judgement but instead decide never to put a stumbling block in a brother's way. The Greek word translated "judgement" is κρίνω. It is the same word as the word translated "decide" in this verse. The word κρίνω could be interpreted by the phrase "make a determination." In other words, Paul is telling the Romans that instead of *making a determination* on their brother's actions, they were to *make a determination* never to put a hindrance in his way.

Notice also in verse 13, the words "any longer." The Romans were not to pass judgement on one another "any longer." The idea here

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is that this was happening in the church, and Paul is telling them that it was to stop.

Paul encouraged the Romans to "decide" never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister. The word "decide" placed the church under the obligation of choice. Paul is calling for a decision. He challenges the church to stop judging each other's actions and make it their commitment never to hinder a brother or sister in their walk with the Lord. Each believer was to commit to this personally.

In some cases, this decision would require confessing their sin to each other. In other cases, believers would have to wrestle with God in prayer for victory over a judgemental spirit. In all cases, it would require that Christians learn to love one another despite their differences

Notice what Paul told the Romans in the last part of verse 13:

*13 but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance
in the way of a brother. (Romans 14)*

Paul speaks here of a stumbling block and a hindrance. A stumbling block is an obstacle on a pathway that will cause someone to trip and fall. This stumbling block may be placed on the path either intentionally or unintentionally.

The second word Paul uses in verse 13 is "hindrance." The Greek term σκάνδαλον (skan'-dal-on) refers to a snare or trap. In this case, it can refer to trapping an individual in a situation that would cause them to act against their principles or fall into sin.

What do these stumbling blocks and hindrances (snares) look like? They can take various forms. I spoke once to an individual, who

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upon arriving at church, overheard individuals in another room mocking his conservative evangelical view of Scripture. Sometimes these differences of opinion can become bitter. Angry and divisive words spoken toward each other can discourage and divide.

Sometimes these stumbling blocks can come in the form of acts that do not respect the background or belief of another believer. One Christian may have the freedom to have a glass of wine at a meal, but if he does so while eating with a believer who is overcoming alcoholism, he may place a stumbling block before him.

Stumbling blocks are words or actions that can cause a brother or sister grief or tempt them to fall. They bring division and may result in a lifelong bitterness between brothers and sisters. It may also mean that those who are offended by them turn from their faith. I have met believers who have left the church with no intention of ever returning because they have been hurt or offended by the insensitivity of another believer.

The temptation for us all is to think that we have the truth. We cannot imagine how anyone could see things differently. This brings us to verse 14. Here for the first time in the chapter, the apostle Paul shares his belief about the place of Jewish food laws in the Christian life.

14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, (Romans 14)

Paul believed that nothing was unclean in itself. Before moving on, however, let's take a moment to consider the words Paul uses in this verse.

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Paul begins by saying, "I know." In other words, Paul had specific knowledge about this matter. Paul then uses the term "persuaded." In other words, he had full confidence in the knowledge he had. Finally, notice that Paul goes on to say that his confidence in this matter was "in the Lord Jesus." Paul had knowledge and confidence from the Lord about this matter of clean and unclean food. Paul not only knew what he was speaking about here, but he had his information from God Himself.

Paul was convinced in the Lord that the Old Testament food laws no longer applied to the Christian. The believer was free to eat anything they wanted without defiling themselves. They would not break their fellowship with God by what they ate. The blood of Christ and His work on the cross covered all sin and uncleanness.

Having said this so confidently, Paul now moves on in verse 14 to declare:

but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. (Romans 14)

These words are shocking. How can something that Christ has declared clean now be unclean just because an individual thinks it is unclean? Can my personal beliefs on this matter overrule the declaration of Christ? Our understanding of what Paul says here is key to understanding Romans 14.

Let's begin our explanation of Paul's words with the Old Testament practice of the Nazirite vow. Under the Law of Moses, a Jewish believer could make a special vow to the Lord. Anyone who made this vow was forbidden to drink wine. Wine was not forbidden to the Jewish believer. While it was acceptable for the Jew to drink wine, the Nazirite sinned against God if he drank it. What was clean became unclean for the Nazirite because of his vow. In other

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words, drinking wine for one person was acceptable but not for another.

Imagine that you were a Jewish convert to Christianity, who believed that you sinned against God by eating certain foods. Your heart tells you that you disrespect God and His purpose if you eat these foods. In this situation, if you ate these foods, have you not decided to dishonour God in your heart? Sin begins in the heart with a willingness to disregard what we believe to be God's command and leading.

Jesus taught that a man could be guilty of adultery if he did so in his heart. He did not need to have a physical relationship with another man's wife to be guilty. God does not just look at our outward actions. He also examines the attitude of our hearts. He sees the seed of sin in our hearts and finds us guilty because we entertain these thoughts and attitudes against His will.

If I believe that God does not want me to eat a particular food, and I disregard this, I have entertained rebellion against God. An action may be right, but if my heart's attitude is one of rebellion, I will be held accountable to God.

Speaking to the people of His day, the prophet Isaiah said:

13 And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, 14 therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden." (Isaiah 29)

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Do you see what Isaiah told the people of his day? He told them that they could do all the right things, but if their heart's attitude was not in tune with God, their actions meant nothing. God would punish them for good deeds done with a sinful spirit. God looks at the heart more than the outward actions.

When God sent Samuel to find the next king of Israel, the prophet went to Jesse's home. Jesse sent for his sons to stand one by one before Samuel. When Eliab stood before him, Samuel thought, surely this must be the one God has chosen. God rebuked Samuel, however, and said:

7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1Samuel 16)

We have such a tendency as human beings to look at outward appearance. We judge according to what we see. God does not look at people in the same way. He looks at the attitude of the heart.

In Mark 12, Jesus sat down in the temple and watched people putting money into the offering box. Mark describes this event as follows:

41 And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. 43 And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. 44 For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she

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out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” (Mark 12)

While we would be overjoyed with the large sums of money being put in the offering box, notice what touched Jesus. He was moved when he saw the attitude of the poor widow who gave with a sacrificial heart. She gave everything she had with a heart of worship.

When a brother or sister abstains from eating a particular food to honour the Lord, will we mock their actions? Will we pull out our theological guns and start shooting them with our Bible verses? If a believer declares his or her confidence in the cross of Christ by refraining from doing something we feel compelled to do, should we judge them for their declaration of freedom in Christ? The best we can do is judge what we see. God, however, judges the attitude of the heart.

If we can accept that our brother or sister is sincere in their practice and that they truly seek to honour God by their actions, this should change our attitude toward them. If I understand this, then I will be careful about how I respond. Listen to how Paul concludes this section of Romans 14:

15 For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. (Romans 14)

There are countries around the world where police officers enter churches, guns in hand, and disrupt worship services in the name of the law. Is this not what we do when we take it upon ourselves to judge and sentence a fellow believer who seeks to worship and honour the Lord in a way that we are not comfortable with? Paul

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challenges the Romans to be sensitive to their fellow believers. The apostle had his understanding from the Lord about the Old Testament's food laws. At the same time, however, he determined in his heart that he would never grieve a brother or sister who chose from the heart to worship God by abstaining from certain foods and practices.

Paul does not enforce his understanding on the “weaker brother” here in verse 15. He allowed them to practice what they believed was unnecessary. He was willing to go the second mile for them not to grieve or hinder their worship of God.

It would be easy for us to damage our brother’s faith by our judgemental attitude. My bitterness and legalism could drive my brother away from the church. The frustration he feels with his unloving, impatient, and disrespectful brothers and sisters may cause him to lose his first love.

God accepts what He sees coming from a sincere heart. That may not look like we expect. That act of worship may be only two pennies in value, but the Lord sees it and rejoices. It may be in feasting, abstinence, the celebration of certain days or in making every day a celebration. God looks beyond the externals and sees the heart. May we never be guilty of judging and condemning what God has accepted.

For Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you that you accept my praise and adoration. Thank you that You understand my heart's attitude even though my outward expressions may not always be what they

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should be. Thank you that though I may not express my faith in the same way as a brother or sister, you understand and accept me as I am. Help me to respect the diversity of expression in the Christian life. Give me greater tolerance for a brother or sister whose sincere worship differs from mine. Remind me that only you can judge because I do not see or understand my brother or sister's heart.

Chapter 8 - Righteousness, Peace and Joy in the Holy Spirit

16 So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. (Romans 14)

In verses 16-18, Paul takes a moment to give some perspective on the differences between brothers and sisters in the church. As believers, it is all too easy for us to focus on our differences and fail to understand the bigger picture. In verses 16-18, Paul reminds the Roman believers of God's greater purpose.

He begins in verse 16 with the following statement:

16 So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.

There are several elements to this verse we need to examine. First, notice that Paul speaks about what an individual regards as good. The phrase, "what you regard as good," leaves us somewhat perplexed. We are so used to thinking in black and white. Either something is good or bad. The apostle leaves the door open here, however, for one person to see something as good and another to see it as bad.

Consider this in the context of Romans 14. Paul speaks here about believers who came from a Jewish tradition and continued to practice the Old Testament dietary laws. These Jewish converts

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believed it was good to maintain these food laws out of respect for God.

Gentile believers, on the other hand, ate "all things." They felt no guilt for eating what was forbidden by the Law of Moses. They rejoiced in the Lord and ate whatever was put before them. For them, this was also good.

We have two different opinions here about what was good for the believer. Paul does not attempt to correct this. Instead, he recognized that both parties were doing what they regarded as good and believed that the Lord accepted their decision.

There will be differences of opinion between sincere believers. This, however, does not mean that one practice is good and the other bad. It merely means that we worship and honour God in different ways. The concern is not primarily about who is right but rather about whether my brother or sister honours God in what they do?

Paul moves from this statement about what an individual regarded as good to a command. This command is found in the words "do not let." The implication is that the Romans had an obligation before God concerning what they considered an acceptable practice. What is that obligation? Paul explains that it is the responsibility of every believer to be sure that the good they do is not spoken of as evil. Let's take a moment to consider what the apostle is telling the Romans here.

I have been to many weddings in my lifetime. It is the custom in my country, after the wedding, to invite guests to a meal to celebrate the new life of the bride and groom. Often at this meal, wine is served to toast the happy couple. As a Christian leader, I

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recognize that not all believers drink wine, and there are different opinions among believers about this. As a result, I have chosen to refrain from drinking any wine at these celebrations. I refrain because I don't want to offend a brother or sister or cause them to stumble. I don't want freedom I may or may not have to be spoken of as evil.

We may have our idea of right and acceptable behaviour, but if we do not show patience, kindness, and gentleness, we can discourage our brother or sister in the Lord. Paul challenged the Romans not to let what they saw as good and respectable behaviour for a Christian become a tool for evil in Satan's hands.

Some time ago, I was doing a Bible study in a neighbourhood about an hour from where I lived. I would pick up a young man and bring him with me to the study. We often had good conversations in the car as we travelled. This young man was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. I remember one conversation with him. In that conversation, he told me about believers who were reprimanding him for smoking cigarettes. He said, "Wayne, they get after me because I am still smoking, but they don't recognize my victories. I have overcome my alcohol and drug addiction and am making progress, but all they can see is what I haven't achieved. It's like they don't see my victories at all."

How discouraged this young man was by believers. They expected him to be perfect. They failed to see the growth and victories the Lord was giving him –all they could see was his failures. Here was a young man willing to travel an hour to get to a Bible study, but all they could see was that he smoked cigarettes. He was excited about God's work in his life, but Christians around him seemed only to discourage his progress.

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Paul moves from this opening statement to show the Romans God's heart for those who belonged to His kingdom:

17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Notice that the apostle starts verse 17 with the word "for." This word links verse 17 and verse 16. We are not to let our idea of what is good become a tool in the enemy's hands because the kingdom of God is not about what we eat and drink.

What is the kingdom of God? A kingdom requires a King. The fact that Paul speaks about this kingdom as the Kingdom of God identifies the King. God is the King of this kingdom.

A kingdom also requires citizens. The citizens of a kingdom agree to live in submission to their King. The kingdom of God is not restricted to geographical boundaries, but a reign of God in hearts and lives. As the leader of this kingdom, the Lord Jesus did not wage war for a country or land but for hearts and minds.

The apostle told the Romans that the Kingdom of God, to which they were subject, had three priorities –righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let's break this down.

Righteousness

Paul begins by telling the Romans that God's kingdom was about righteousness. Righteousness refers to having a right standing before God. Writing earlier in this letter to the Romans, the apostle said:

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10 as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3)

The righteousness Paul speaks about here is not the result of our personal efforts. The apostle told the Romans that no one was righteous in themselves. You can do all the right things in life, but you will perish without God if you do not address this matter of sin. Because of our sin, not one of us has a right standing with God. Sin separates us from a holy God.

The only way that we can have this right standing with God is through the forgiveness of our sin. This is why we need the Lord Jesus. Only His work can bring the pardon we need. Our righteousness results from the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

It is essential to say here that the righteousness Paul speaks about does not mean that we no longer sin. While we are still far from perfect, the work of Jesus on the cross covers not only our past sins but our present and future as well. We stand before God with all our sins covered by the work of Christ on our behalf.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the door through which each person must enter the kingdom of God. Without this cross, there would be no citizens in the kingdom. Every subject has obtained his or her right to this kingdom because Jesus Christ purchased their citizenship on the cross of Calvary. A right relationship with God through the work of Jesus Christ is the priority of the kingdom of God.

Our status as citizens of the kingdom of God has nothing to do with us or what we eat or drink. It has everything to do with the transaction that took place on the cross of Christ and the

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forgiveness that was offered personally to me. Remember also that I came to Christ with all my blemishes and failures when I became a believer. I obtained this right standing with Christ, but I was far from perfect. God continues to work on me to transform me into the image of His Son. Righteousness is not about being perfect in all my actions and thoughts but about forgiveness through the work of Jesus for sins past, present and future. When I understand righteousness, I am less likely to judge those whom Christ has accepted and forgiven.

Peace

The next priority of the Kingdom of God, according to Paul, is peace. In our day, we see peace as the absence of struggle. The Biblical definition is much deeper than this.

The peace Paul speaks about relates first to our peace with God. This assures that we are in a right relationship with him through the work of the Lord Jesus.

This peace with God also assures us that He stands with us no matter what we face in life. When life deals its hardest blows, we can still rest in the assurance that God is in control and watches out for us in our trials. We are blessed by His presence in the struggles of life.

The peace Paul speaks about here also refers to the wellbeing of our body, soul, and spirit. That is to say; I have contentment with what the Lord God has given. I am at peace with God regarding my lot in life. I am happy to live as He has purposed for me and find great strength and joy in it. This does not mean that I am rich or in

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perfect health, but I am at peace because I know the reality of God's presence in whatever circumstance has touched my body, soul, or spirit.

Peace also relates to my relationship with other people. Paul expressed this in Romans 12 when he said:

*18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
(Romans 12)*

Jesus taught that our love for one another revealed to the world that we are His disciples.

35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13)

According to Paul, peace with God and our fellow man is a second great priority of the Kingdom of God. This implies trusting God in every situation. It also means respecting and caring for our brothers and sisters in Christ and treating them as He has treated us. If we accept that peace with God and our fellow believer is a priority of the kingdom of God, then we will be less likely to cause trouble and division among believers. We will be more compassionate and understanding with each other.

Joy in the Holy Spirit

Finally, Paul tells us that the third priority of God's Kingdom is joy in the Holy Spirit. Notice that this joy is in the Holy Spirit. In other words, it is not a joy in material possessions or worldly pleasures. The source of the joy Paul speaks about is the Holy Spirit. The

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apostle told the Galatians that both peace and joy were fruits of the Spirit:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5)

As the Holy Spirit works in us, we begin to experience the joy Paul speaks about in Romans 14. The Holy Spirit's joy expresses itself in worship and praise to God for His blessings. It produces within us a heart of gratitude and thanksgiving. It is a heart that delights in God and His purpose for my life. This joy was in the face of Stephen, the first martyr of the early church. As the religious leaders stoned him to death, they could not help but notice his face:

15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6)

As his life was draining from him and the pain of broken flesh and bones raced through his body, Stephen's face glowed with the joy of the Holy Spirit as He looked heavenward and saw the Lord Jesus seated on His throne welcoming Him to his eternal home.

The joy of the Holy Spirit lifts our hearts and minds in thanksgiving and praise, even in the most challenging moments of life. It causes us to delight and rejoice in the Lord our God and His purpose. It brings praise and thanksgiving to our lips in times of deepest despair. It is this joy that enables us to see the beauty of our Lord even when the waves of turmoil crash around us. God delights in those who delight in Him.

Having reminded the Romans of the three priorities of the Kingdom of God, Paul concludes with the words:

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18 Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

If you want to serve the Lord Jesus, then you need to do so with righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you do not have a right standing with God through the work of Jesus, you cannot serve the Lord Jesus, for you do not even belong to Him. If you have not come to peace with God and your brother or sister, you will not honour Him in your service. If you do not serve with joy and delight, you bring Him no praise.

These three kingdom principles are not only essential if we are to serve Christ, but they are also vital if we want to be "approved by men." Writing to the Galatians, the apostle would say:

10 For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1)

Should we seek the approval of men or not? Romans 14:18 seems to say that if we live in righteousness, peace, and joy, we will be approved by men. Paul tells us in Galatians 1:10 that he was not looking for the approval of men but of God.

Some live their lives to please people. This desire to be a "people pleaser" often keeps them from serving God. They want to please people and uphold their reputation more than they want to follow God. Paul warned the Galatians about this attitude.

While we are not to be "people pleasers" to the point where God takes second place, we are to live our lives in such a way that blesses and honours those around us. If we have experienced the righteousness of Christ, we will want to live as He lived. He cared

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for people, ministered to their needs, and willingly laid down His life for them. If we make it our ambition to live at peace with our fellow human beings, this will be accepted and admired by those around us. If the joy of the Spirit flows from us in whatever situation we find ourselves, what a testimony that brings. If that joy of the Spirit fills us with delight in serving others, will this not have an impact on the lives of those with whom I come in contact? The world can have nothing evil to say to those living in righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit.

As we conclude our reflection on this chapter, let me tie it in with the theme of Romans 14. Paul speaks about respecting the differences between believers in the church. As we take time to evaluate our actions and behaviours in this regard, we would do well to ask ourselves three questions:

- 1) Are my actions, thoughts and attitudes toward my brother and sister in Christ the fruit and evidence of a right standing with God?
- 2) Does my way of living promote peace with God and my fellow believer?
- 3) Is the Holy Spirit's joy the source of my actions, thoughts, and attitudes, and do they result in praise and thankfulness to God?

The three kingdom principles of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ought to influence how we live and deal with each other in the church. By adhering to these standards, we will serve Jesus Christ with dignity and win our fellow human beings' approval.

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For Prayer:

Father, thank you for Paul's teaching about the principles of the Kingdom of God. Teach us to live by these principles. Help us to understand that right standing with you is not based on what we eat or drink but on the work of Jesus Christ. Help us to show grace to our brothers and sisters in the church. Teach us to act and speak with the goal of striving for peace. Fill us with the joy of Your Spirit that motivates us to praise and thanksgiving. May the delight of knowing you fill our hearts and minds in whatever circumstance we find ourselves in today. May righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit be the motivation and source for all my actions, thoughts, and attitudes in the body of Christ.

Chapter 9 - Pursuing Peace

19 So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. 20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. 21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. (Romans 14)

In the last section, the apostle Paul shared with his readers three priorities of the kingdom of God. As he begins verse 19, his focus is on one of those priorities. He speaks here about the importance of peace.

19 So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

In this verse, the apostle encourages the Romans to pursue what makes for peace. The word pursue is an active word. Consider, for example, hunters pursuing their prey. All their senses are heightened as they watch for every sign and listen for any sound. By using this word, Paul tells the Romans to look for every opportunity to seek peace with others. They were to heighten every sense and take advantage of any chance to increase peaceful relations.

The peace that Paul speaks about here does not just happen. It is the result of conscious effort. We must pursue peace. We must

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actively seek out ways to build each other up. Human nature is naturally self-centred and wants things its way. We focus on our needs and desires to the exclusion of others. If we are going to pursue peace and opportunities to build each other up, we will have to put their interests above our own. We will need to learn patience and be willing to allow for differences. There is a cost to pursuing peace and building up a brother or sister. It will mean that we can't have things our way all the time. We will need to compromise. You cannot pursue peace if you are unwilling to consider your brother's interests.

Listen to the words of the apostle Paul to the Philippians:

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2)

As we pursue peace, our example is to be the Lord Jesus, who took on the form of a servant and humbled Himself by dying on a cross. He washed the feet of His disciples. He did without a home or fine thing to minister to and care for those he encountered daily. Pursuing peace, for Jesus meant laying down his life to die the cruel death of the cross so that we could be one with the Father.

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Jesus taught that if we come to the altar with a gift and remember that our brother has something against us, we are to leave our gift there and first be reconciled with that brother. God will not accept our worship if we are not right with our brother or sister (see Matthew 5:23-24). Jesus reminds us also that to offend even the least of His children is to offend Him (see Matthew 25:40).

If we do not pursue peace, we cannot worship God, and our prayers will be hindered. We understand then that seeking peace is not just a nice thing to do; it is a requirement for every believer. Our fellowship with God is dependent on our pursuing peace with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Notice in verse 19 that the apostle also challenged the Romans to pursue what makes for mutual upbuilding. The word "upbuilding" implies that we will encourage and support each other in times of need.

It is relatively easy to assume that I live in peace with a brother or sister. I can look at my relationship with people in my church and say, "I don't have any bitterness toward anyone. I can get along with everyone in my church." What Paul is saying here, however, is much deeper than this. He told the Romans that they were also to pursue building up each other. This means that when my brother or sister is in need, I must care for them. Listen to the words of the apostle James:

*15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,
16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and
filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what
good is that? (James 2)*

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Paul told the Romans that they were to pursue ways of building up a brother or sister. The sacrifice of time and effort would be required for that to take place.

The context of Paul's statement here is the differences of opinion over secondary matters found in the church of Rome. How easy it would be in our selfishness and pride to assume that people need to think like us for peace to take place. We can seek to build up a brother or sister, so they see things like us.

If our goal is to make people like us, we fall short of God's standard. As we pursue peace and "mutual upbuilding," we must have enough humility to realize that we are not perfect. Our goal should never be to make people like ourselves, but like Christ. If I strive to make people like me, my goal is to make them imperfect. Christ must be our example. This brings us to the final point I want to make. Notice the words "mutual upbuilding." It is easy to overlook the term "mutual" here. It is easy for us to believe that we have the answers, and we need to build everyone else up to our level.

The words "mutual upbuilding," however, show us that the building up is not one-sided. A weaker brother builds up the stronger, and the stronger brother builds up the weaker. A teacher that cannot learn will soon have nothing of value to share with his or her students. I was speaking to a church leader once who told me that there was nothing the pastor of his church could teach him because he already knew it. His attitude would certainly have kept him from ever learning anything from this pastor. Pride will keep us from allowing someone else the privilege of building us up. No matter how mature we think we are, not one of us is perfect. We still have a long way to go to be like Jesus. If we want to grow, we must learn from each other. We must never let our pride keep us

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from listening to a "weaker brother or sister." Even though they may not have been believers for as long as we have, they still have much to teach us.

The apostle goes on in verse 20 to say:

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.

Paul brings us back to the example of the Old Testament dietary laws and the various opinions held by believers in Rome. By allowing opinions about this practice to divide the church, Paul told the Romans that they were "destroying the work of God." This accusation was serious.

Paul seems to be telling the Romans here that they could hinder God's work in the life of another believer. We don't have to look too far to see the reality of this statement. In my ministry, I have had to deal with many cases of believers discouraging other believers. I have met individuals who left the church because of church members' attitudes and actions toward them. Some never return to the church and live their lives wounded and bitter toward God and the church. They will die, having wasted their lives and spiritual gifts, and face their Creator. Not only will these individuals have to account for their wasted lives, but God will also call those who discouraged them into account as well.

Notice the words "for the sake of food." For the sake of food, the work of God has been destroyed. A brother or sister in Christ felt the need to be right and took issue with another believer over Jewish dietary laws in the Christian life. Their opinion was so important that they were willing to alienate their brother or sister to prove their point.

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Notice what Paul goes on to say in verse 20:

Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.

Paul knew what he believed in this matter of the Jewish food laws. To Paul, nothing was unclean. The believer was free to eat whatever they wanted and had no obligation to obey the Old Testament food laws. Eating an unclean animal would not separate a believer from Christ or hinder their fellowship with him if they did so with thanksgiving and praise. Even though Paul was convinced of this, he preferred not to eat anything that would cause a brother or sister to stumble in their walk with God. Paul weighed what was more important –to prove his point or to discourage a believer in their faith. He chose to build up the believer and sacrifice his freedom.

Consider Paul's advice to fathers in the training of their children:

21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged. Col 3:21

Consider a father who had no patience with his child for any shortcoming. Every time the child fell short, the father punishes them. The child comes home from school with a 90% mark on his or her exam, but the father becomes angry because they did not make 100%. The child grows up, feeling that they can never be good enough. Ultimately, they are discouraged because they know they can never please the father. The temptation is to give up altogether. Are there not times when it is better to leave a matter rather than provoke a brother or sister to anger or discouragement?

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Believers must learn to function in environments where things are not entirely what they think they should be. To pursue peace, we must learn to put up with imperfections. We must adjust to doing things in ways we are not entirely comfortable with personally.

Paul concludes these verses with the words:

21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. (Romans 14)

Paul tells the Romans that it is good to sacrifice our preferences and freedoms for a brother or sister. How easy it is for us to assert our rights and liberties. Like Paul, we believe that nothing is unclean. We wonder why we should have to give up what is right simply because a brother or sister doesn't understand our freedom in Christ. Paul told the Romans, however, that they were to be willing to sacrifice their freedom when necessary for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ.

Respect for a brother or sister and the work of the kingdom of God must take priority over our liberties. Every decision we make must be evaluated in its context. It may be right for me to eat meat or drink wine in one situation but not another. There is a time for me to enjoy my freedom and a time for me to sacrifice it. My opinion or liberty in a given matter is not the priority—the kingdom of God and its advancement is a greater priority. I must be willing to sacrifice my freedom so that it will never be the cause of any believer becoming discouraged and God's work in them destroyed.

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For Prayer:

Father, thank you for the freedom you give us in the Lord Jesus. Help us, however, to realize that there are times when you call us to sacrifice that freedom for the sake of the kingdom of God. Help me actively pursue peace and opportunities to build up a brother or sister in Christ. Give me the attitude of Jesus, who washed the disciples' feet and willingly laid down His life for those who were His enemies. Father, I ask that I be humble enough to understand that I need to be built up. Help me to accept the correction of a "weaker brother." Help me realize that if my goal is to make others like me, I aim at imperfection. Teach me to look to your sacrifice and humility as my example. May all I do be for the upbuilding of your church. Show me if there is anything in my life that discourages others in their spiritual growth.

Chapter 10 - Keep Your Faith Between You and God

*22 The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.
Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself
for what he approves. (Romans 14)*

Paul has been reminding the Romans that they were to pursue peace and mutual upbuilding. While there are many ways to do this, the apostle provides us with a very simple means here in this verse. He begins verse 22 with the following words:

22 The faith that you have,

The use of the word faith is significant in this context. Using this word, the apostle describes something more than just an opinion or preference. It is even more than an intellectual understanding or interpretation of Scripture. These aspects are certainly part of faith, but the word goes further. Faith, in this context, speaks about a conviction before God. The person who has this type of faith acts out of gratitude, reverence, and joy in the Lord. The apostle spoke of this in verse 6 when he said:

*6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord.
The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks
to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord
and gives thanks to God. (Romans 14)*

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Notice how Paul told the Romans that the one who observed a particular day as special did so to honour the Lord. The one who ate all things did so, giving thanks to the Lord. Another person abstained from these same foods also giving thanks. Keep in mind here that the goal of each of these individuals is the same –they want to honour God and give Him thanks.

The Bible scholar might examine the actions of a weaker brother and say, "he doesn't understand what the Lord Jesus has done and how the cross has set us free from such practices." While this scholar might be theologically correct, the weaker brother's heart is filled with gratitude and praise as he abstains from a particular food. His heart is devoted to pleasing the Lord through a practice that may or may not be necessary. As God looks down at the heart of this weaker brother, does He not rejoice in his actions? Does He not accept his gift offered in faith?

It is quite possible to be theologically correct but not act in faith. I have been in churches where correct theology is more important than God. The God of these individuals is a God found only in a book. They can tell you all there is to know about this God, but their experience of Him in real life is severely lacking. They speak about God, but they do not demonstrate the fruit of His Spirit in their lives. There is a difference between an intellectual understanding of God and true faith in Him.

Faith is what connects our actions and understanding to God. It is our heart's response to what we understand is His purpose. It moves us beyond intellectual understanding to gratitude and praise. It is a heart cry of love and devotion to God.

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If a Roman believer felt convicted in his or her heart observe a Jewish holy day as sacred to the Lord, even though this was not necessary, were they sinning? Can we condemn the faith in someone who desires to honour God and give thanks to Him?

How my brother or sister worships God may differ. How we demonstrate our love for God may vary. Paul recognized this in the words, "the faith that you have." This makes my response to God very personal and intimate. My faith, informed by Scripture and led by God's Spirit, expresses itself in a unique way to God.

The apostle goes on in verse 22 to remind the Romans of this very personal expression of faith when he says:

22 keep between yourself and God. (Romans 14)

There are times when our faith is to be held between God and us. This phrase deserves some careful consideration.

To understand what Paul is telling the Romans, we need to see this phrase in its context. He is speaking here about a very particular issue. The apostle has been challenging the Romans about their understanding of the place of the Jewish laws in Christian life. He reminded them that not all Christians agreed on this point. The faith of some allowed them to eat all things, while the faith of others caused them to abstain from certain foods.

Scripture is quite clear that all believers must let their light shine (see Matthew 5:16). The apostle Peter challenged the believers of his day to be always ready to give a defence for the hope that was in them (see 1 Peter 3:15). There is a time when we must broadcast our faith to all who are ready to hear. Paul is telling us in Romans

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14:22, however, that there is also a time to keep the faith we have between ourselves and God.

One of those times is when our faith belief in a particular matter could be a stumbling block or discouragement to another believer. I do not help my brother or sister by imposing my personal view and practice on them. Suppose a brother or sister expresses their heartfelt devotion to God by celebrating a particular day. Would it not be best to give them this privilege, rather than argue with them about the theological correctness of this expression?

The idea of keeping our belief about certain practices between God and us can be problematic for some believers. They see this as hypocritical. What we need to understand, however, is that there is a difference between being sensitive to another believer and being hypocritical. I may refrain from drinking wine at a wedding out of respect for those who feel strongly about abstaining. I am more than willing to sacrifice my freedom for another believer and feel no obligation to confront my brother or sister about their faith in this matter. I respect that they have a different opinion and think no less of them for it. This is not hypocrisy. This is a sensitivity to the various views held by sincere Christians and a desire to honour them and their position.

The other problem people have with keeping their faith in a specific matter between themselves and God has to do with defending the truth. Sometimes our belief about a particular issue is so strong we feel the need to make sure everyone complies. We cannot see how anyone could ever interpret a specific passage in any other way. We take it on ourselves to be the defender of the truth.

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What we need to understand here is that the work of convicting is not ours. This is the work of God's Spirit. Second, our insistence on people interpreting Scripture as we do can become divisive. Instead of helping the church grow, we hinder growth by causing division among sincere believers. This is what happened in the church of Corinth. Paul addressed this when he wrote to the Corinthians:

11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. 12 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1)

Notice here that people followed Paul, Apollos, and Peter (Cephas). All of these men were godly men who preached the truth of God's word. The church was not divided due to heresy or false teaching but method, style, and interpretation. The apostle's challenge to the church of Corinth was to get their eyes off these dividing points and unite under Christ and their common salvation in Him.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul would further rebuke the Corinthians because of this division when he said:

5 I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, 6 but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? 7 To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? (1 Corinthians 6)

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The division among believers in Corinth was so strong that believers took other believers to court. Paul not only rebuked them for this but challenged them to accept being wronged and defrauded rather than damage the testimony of the church through division.

There is undoubtedly a time for defending the truth, but we must carefully pick our fights. These fights may cause serious damage and have often resulted in church splits and divisions. Churches have lost their first love because some have chosen to defend their faith rather than keep it to themselves and God. As we create an environment of support and mutual upbuilding, the Spirit of God is free to do His work, and genuine change will be the result.

Paul concludes this section with the words:

22 Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. (Romans 14)

The New Living Translation puts it this way:

22 Blessed are those who do not condemn themselves by doing something they know is all right. (Romans 14)

What the apostle Paul is telling us is that we can be guilty while doing something right. My brother may look at me and say: "My, you are ugly." While that may be true, it is not necessary to say, and by saying it, I might seriously hurt my brother and damage my relationship with him. Some truth should not be spoken.

There are implications to what I say and do. This is what the apostle told the Romans in verses fifteen and sixteen:

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15 For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. 16 So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. (Romans 14)

Notice the phrase, "do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil." In other words, I might be right in doing something, but if I do it in the wrong context, I can become guilty of hurting a brother or causing him to fall. Imagine a soldier telling military secrets to the enemy in a time of war. The words he or she spoke were true. This soldier, however, by telling the truth, may have given the enemy victory. We cannot afford to give Satan the upper hand by telling the truth to the wrong person at the wrong time. We cannot provide the enemy with an advantage by pushing what we believe to be right when, by doing so, we sow seeds of discord and disunity. Our desire to be right can destroy the work of God in the body.

All of this requires great wisdom. There is a time to stand up and tell the truth. At the right time in the right place, the truth will set us free. There is also a time to correct harmful doctrines and behaviours in the church. We cannot continue to allow sin to ravage the strength of our members. We must, however, speak the truth in love:

15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (Ephesians 4)

Paul reminds us, however, that we must never allow what we see as right to become a tool for the enemy to destroy the work of God in the church. This demands great wisdom.

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For Prayer:

Father God, I know that my worship is imperfect. I understand that I fall short of Your standard even at the best of times. Thank you that you accept me as I am in Christ. I realize that my faith is personal and that my response of gratitude will not always look like another's. Help me to accept these differences.

Teach me how to love and respect those who differ in the interpretation of Scripture in secondary matters. Help me to realize that the work of convicting men and women is the work of Your Spirit. I ask that you teach me to be sensitive to your leading as I speak to those who differ.

Help me to understand that the truth can be a powerful weapon not only for good but when improperly used, also for evil. I ask that I be wise to handle the sword of truth, lest, by my improper use of it, I harm myself and those around me.

Chapter 11 - Doubts

23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Romans 14)

In verse 23, Paul has one more point to make about faith and Christian practice. Notice how he begins the verse:

23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats (Romans 14)

Let's consider this verse in its context. Imagine that you are a Jew who has converted to Christianity. All around you, you see Christians eating food forbidden by the law of Moses. You wonder if you should do what they do, but you have always abstained from these foods, and you are just not convinced in your heart that you should eat them. What do you do in this situation? Paul answers this question in verse 23 when he says: "Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats." In other words, if you don't have complete freedom to eat, then you sin if you do. If you have doubts but go ahead anyway, you are guilty before God.

Paul's statement can be confusing to those who want things to be black and white. How can some Christians eat all foods without sinning, but others sin if they do? Let's take a moment to break down what Paul is saying.

Imagine that you were a Jewish believer who grew up thinking that you would offend God if you ate a particular food. You convert to Christianity, but those beliefs are still in your heart. A brother or sister in Christ invites you to their home and serves a food

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forbidden by the Law of Moses. As you look at the food on your plate, you have a decision to make. You can do what you believe will offend God, or you can politely abstain from eating what is set before you.

While the act of eating this food may not technically be a sin, what is sin is choosing to do what you believe in your heart to be an offence to God. Are you willing to risk offending God in your heart and mind? Your brother or sister may have the freedom to eat whatever is placed before them without these doubts, but this is not the case for you. According to Paul, if you question whether what you do will offend your Saviour, you sin if you do it anyway. The heart of the believer is to be so desirous of pleasing God in all things that even the thought of offending Him would be repulsive. The attitude that says, I might be sinning, but I am going to do it anyway is one that condemns us before God.

Paul goes on to say that when we act contrary to the faith we have, we are guilty of sin:

because the eating is not from faith.

When a brother or sister eats something they feel might offend God, they do not act in faith. Whatever I do must be from a conviction before God that it is right. The implication here is that everything we do must be for the glory of God. If I contemplate an action that might not honour God, I am not acting in faith. The faith Paul speaks about here is an assurance that what I do will please God and honour His purpose for my life. It is the confidence that I will have nothing to be ashamed of before my Saviour. This confidence is not only in the external action but also about the heart's attitude. Paul concludes the verse by saying:

Doubts

For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

If I cannot do something with the assurance that it pleases God, then acting on it anyway will cause me to sin. The sin here is the heart's willingness to do something that might dishonour God. This attitude disrespects our Creator.

There is an important application to this teaching of Paul. Imagine that a Jewish convert is at a meal where the host served food forbidden by Moses's Law. As he examines his plate, his heart fills with doubt about whether he should eat this food or not. He asks the question: "Will I disrespect my Saviour but eating this?"

Noticing his hesitation, the other believers around the table begin to speak. They tell him that under Christ, he is free from the dietary laws of the Jews. They take a few mouthfuls of the forbidden food and tell him to eat it without any concern. In his heart, however, his conscience still bothers him. He is still not convinced that he should eat this meat. To please his brothers and sisters at the table, however, he delicately puts his fork to the plate and eats what he is unsure he should.

Consider this also from the perspective of this Jewish convert's friends at the table. These believers were not sensitive to the doubts of his heart. They encouraged him to act against his conscience and belief. They encouraged him to ignore what He believed was the purpose of God for his life. They were guilty of causing him to sin in his heart by acting in a way that was not from faith. They would have to answer to God for their sin.

By reminding us of the importance of faith in what we do, Paul shows us that we can sin by doing what is right if we don't have faith to believe that it is in God's purpose for our lives. This means

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that my attempt to convince someone of my opinion on a particular practice can encourage them to go against their faith convictions. If they do this, they are guilty of sin, and we have led them to this point. We need great wisdom and sensitivity as we seek to encourage one another in faith. While we must teach and live according to what we believe to be accurate, we must do so with great sensitivity and respect for our brother's and sister's faith. We must not cause them to sin by acting against their faith.

All too often, we attempt to take on the Holy Spirit's role. It is the role of God's Spirit to convict and convince of sin. He will open our eyes to the truth of the Word. The Holy Spirit will use us to teach and encourage, but His role is to bring every believer to a place of conviction and faith. All too many people practice and believe what their human teachers tell them, but this is not the same as having a conviction from God's Spirit about truth or practice. We must always leave room for the Spirit of God to work and bring faith in the hearts of those we disciple and teach. Only what He gives us will truly be ours. We can only act in true faith if He assures us.

For Prayer:

Father God, we understand from Paul that you call us to act in faith in all that we do. This faith is the work of Your Spirit in our lives. In other words, You are asking us to act only in accordance with the teaching of Your Word as the Holy Spirit convinces us. Teach us to walk in these convictions, with the assurance that everything we do is pleasing to you.

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Help us also to see that right actions from a sinful heart are offensive to You. Teach us to act from a heart that is grateful to you and desirous of pleasing you in every thought and action.

Teach us to respect the faith of our brothers and sisters. Forgive us for trying to take on the role of Your Holy Spirit. We are instruments in His hand, but He must bring conviction and belief to those we instruct or counsel. Give me the patience to wait on You to bring that conviction and maturity. Until you do, give me the grace to love and respect my brother, whose ways and thoughts differ from mine.

Chapter 12 - Pleasing our Neighbour

1 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." (Romans 15)

In the first part of Romans 15, the apostle Paul continues his reflection on what it means to pursue peace with brothers and sisters in Christ. He begins by speaking to those he calls strong.

1 We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, (Romans 15)

The apostle speaks about the weaker brother in Romans 14:2 when he says:

2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. (Romans 14)

According to Paul, the weaker brother was the one who felt an obligation to the Law of Moses, its dietary laws, and celebrations. This brother had not completely understood his liberty in Christ and his freedom from the Mosaic law.

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In verse 1, Paul told the stronger brothers that they had an obligation toward the weaker brother. What was the nature of this obligation? Our first thought might be that they were to teach the weaker brother and correct his understanding of the grace of Christ. This, however, is not what Paul had in mind. Instead, he told the strong that their obligation was to "bear with the failings of the weak."

The word "bear" in the Greek language has several meanings. It can mean carrying, supporting, enduring, or tolerating. These words help us understand what the apostle is telling the Romans. The weaker brother will sometimes fall. Instead of reprimanding him, those who are strong need to help him up and carry him through the temptations and trials that have caused him to fall. In this sense, to bear requires a commitment of time and energy.

More than this practical support, however, the apostle shows the stronger brother that he must tolerate the weaker brother's failures. To be tolerant requires patience and gentleness. It would be easy to discourage a young believer by being overly harsh and critical. Anyone who is learning a new skill will fail. It is those failures that teach. Maturity does not come overnight. The stronger believer needs first and foremost to be compassionate with those who have not yet matured in their faith. I would venture to say that because all of us are still growing, patience and compassion need to be extended to all believers. This does not excuse sinful behaviour, but it does challenge us to be gentle in dealing with one another's shortcomings.

I have seen too many believers seriously hurt by more mature believers who were unwilling to bear with their failures. Instead of picking them up and showing tolerance toward them, these

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stronger believers became critical, judgemental, and harsh. This only drove a wedge between believers and, in some cases, was the cause of brothers and sisters leaving the church or wandering from their faith. Paul's advice to the Romans is essential to maintain peace between brothers and sisters in the faith.

Notice the second obligation Paul places on the stronger believer in verse 1:

1 and not to please ourselves. (Romans 15)

Stronger believers must not live to please themselves. The more we mature in Christ, the less focused we become on ourselves. The closer we are to Christ, the more we demonstrate His servant nature. Things become less about me and my preference and more about the kingdom of God. We understand that God's grace also extends to people who do not think as we do.

This command of Paul goes against the world's concept of strength. In the world, the weak serve the strong. Paul tells the Romans that their strength was not for themselves but to minister to the needs of the weak. Those who understand the grace of Christ are more accepting of differences in the body of Christ. The mature will not live their lives with a desire to please themselves. Instead, they will sacrifice their preferences for their brothers and sisters' good.

Instead of pleasing themselves, the apostle challenged the Romans to make it their priority instead to please their neighbour. In the original language, to please has the sense of serving or softening one's heart toward another. This means that the mature believer is one who is looking out for the needs of others. Those who are the strongest in Christ sacrifice their interests for the sake of their

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neighbours. They actively seek out ways of serving and have a heart of tenderness, generosity, and compassion toward their neighbour.

We should not limit our understanding of the word neighbour to the person who lives on either side of us. The term refers to someone near or nearby. This means that whoever we encounter in the day is our neighbour. Whoever comes into contact with us demonstrating a need is a neighbour we need to serve. God will place these people in our community, at our workplace, or wherever we go. He will put people with needs near us to minister to them in their time of struggle.

If we follow Paul's advice here, we will need to open our eyes to the people God brings near us. Mature Christians will not only see opportunities God brings to them but willingly sacrifice their time, energy, and resources to care for these needs.

Paul strengthens his argument by pointing people to the Lord Jesus and His example in the first part of verse 3:

3 For Christ did not please himself, (Romans 15)

As we examine the life of Jesus, we see a man who devoted Himself to humanity's needs. He willingly suffered to bring us to God. He lived a simple life dedicated to healing the sick and the pains of those the Father brought near him. He willingly died on a cross for our forgiveness and pardon. If we want to be like Jesus, we need to put others' needs before our own. We must be willing to sacrifice ourselves so that others may be blessed.

Paul quotes from Psalm 69 in the last part of verse 3:

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3 but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me." (Romans 15)

Listen to words Paul quotes here in their original context:

7 For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. 8 I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons. 9 For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. (Psalm 69)

In this context, the psalmist expresses his pain to God. He has "zeal" for the house of God and wants to see the name of God revered in this place. His passion for God, however, has alienated him from his brothers. People around him begin to see him as a fanatic. They distance themselves from his views and mock him for his faith. He struggles deeply with this rejection and feels isolated and lonely because of his relationship with God. The psalmist saw people criticizing, insulting, and disrespecting the Lord God's name. He stood up to proclaim the truth and correct this but ended up being insulted and mocked for his efforts.

Paul uses this example to show the Romans what happened to Jesus. He came to this earth because humankind was insulting and sinning against God's name. This resulted in their condemnation and judgement. Jesus came to address this reproach but ended up being crucified and rejected by the people who had sinned against His Father.

The crucifixion of Jesus was a horrible injustice but demonstrated the level of Jesus' servanthood. He was willing to be unjustly condemned for the sake of those He loved. He willingly suffered the insults and rebuke of those for whom He came. He suffered the

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rejection of His creation. He took on the penalty and reproach of those who mocked and sinned against the name of God.

Are we willing to be misunderstood? Are we willing to give ourselves sacrificially to a sister who has wandered from the truth? Will you give as Jesus gave to care for and minister to a weaker believer? Will you leave the fold and go out into the wilderness to find that sheep that is lost? Are we willing to stop seeking to please ourselves to follow the example of Jesus, who laid down His life out of love and devotion to those who failed in their walk with God?

For Prayer:

Father, thank you for the example of Jesus, Your Son, who willingly laid down His life for me. Teach me that those who are mature in Christ will not live to please themselves. Show me how to be compassionate and forgiving toward those who do not see things as I see them. Give me the grace to lift up a brother or sister without condemnation when they have fallen. Give me eyes to see the needs of those you bring near me and help me to be willing to minister to those needs. Forgive me for the times I have placed my comforts and preferences ahead of everything else. Give me a sacrificial and generous heart. May I willingly share with others the blessing you have given me.

Chapter 13 - Living in Harmony

4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15)

In verse three, the apostle quoted from Psalm 69:9. In that passage, the psalmist spoke of how he suffered because of his zeal for the Lord's house. Paul reminded the Romans that this is what the Lord Jesus has done for us. He laid down his life and suffered at the hands of those He created so that they could know the purpose and salvation of God. The implication is that the strong in faith must be willing to follow Christ's example and bear with the failings of the weak by supporting and sacrificing themselves.

Paul moves on in verse 4 to tell the Romans that the Scriptures are for our instruction.

4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15)

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As Paul writes these words, Psalm 69 is on his mind. In other words, Psalm 69 was written to show us that we must endure hardships as servants of righteousness. This means that not everything will go our way in life. It means that we will have to sacrifice our preferences and bear with failings and shortcomings.

Notice, however, that the Scriptures were written not only to instruct us but also to encourage us. As we read Psalm 69, we see how the psalmist struggled because the people around him were not taking their relationship with God as seriously as they should. These individuals did not share his zeal for the house of the Lord. The psalmist understood what it was like to promote righteousness in his society and only be mocked and ridiculed. When we read this and understand the heart of the psalmist, we realize that we are not alone in our desire for righteousness and purity in the house of God. We are encouraged by his heart and given strength from this to persevere in our pursuit of holiness. We are also challenged to pursue righteousness in the lives of our brothers and sisters as well

Paul moves from this statement about the Scripture and particularly Psalm 69 to the point he is trying to make:

5 May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15)

Let's begin by reflecting on the first part of verse 5. In verse 4, the apostle told the Romans that the path to a holy life was through endurance and Scripture's encouragement. Notice how Paul uses the same words in verse 5 when referring to God. God is a God of

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endurance and encouragement. Endurance is the ability to continue when things get difficult or are not going as we feel they should. The strength to endure comes not from us but the God of endurance. The encouragement we need when things are not going as we think they should comes from the God of encouragement.

Let's consider this in the context of what Paul is speaking about in this passage. Paul reminds the strong that they were to bear with the failings of the weak. Imagine that you are a believer in the church of Rome. You have a deep passion and desire that the believers in your church walk in holiness and understand the grace of Christ.

As you look around you, however, you see men and women at various stages of maturity. You see some who fall into temptation continually. Some believers seem to be influenced by a worldly way of thinking. Others feel that they need to merit God's favour by what they do. They do not seem to understand what the cross of Jesus has done for them. It is easy for you to become frustrated with what you are seeing. Sometimes you become angry and impatient. At other times it is hard to show a godly attitude toward those who seem only to brush you off when you challenge their way of life.

It is in these times that the strong need endurance and encouragement. They need the enduring strength of the Lord to continue to walk in godliness and not become impatient and bitter. They need the encouragement of God not to give up and walk away with an angry spirit. The endurance the strong need in these times is not just to keep pushing on for the cause of righteousness, but also to maintain a godly and Christ-like spirit themselves. In

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their attempt to promote holiness, they can fall into ungodly behaviour and sinful attitudes. To keep this from happening, they need the strength and comfort of the God of endurance and encouragement.

Paul desires that the God who gives endurance and encouragement bless the body of Christ with harmony. The connection between endurance, encouragement and harmony cannot go unnoticed. This harmony does not come easy. Consider a choir that sings in its individual parts. Each choir member must learn to blend their voice with the rest of the choir to obtain a perfect sound. If one person sings too loud, it will drown out the other voices. If another person is too timid, the sound they contribute will not be heard. If another sings off-key, this will affect the choir's overall sound. For the choir to be in harmony, each person must learn how to sing their part. This requires endurance, sacrifice and a willingness to work as a team.

The phrase “harmony with each other” in verse 5 reminds us that we are not alone. We must learn to work with others. If I am at odds with a brother or sister, harmony is impossible. Living in harmony is not easy when we are not at the same level of maturity and understanding of the Scriptures. Paul encourages the Romans, however, to strive for this harmony with the weaker brother or sister.

Notice also in verse 5 that this harmony is “in accord with Christ Jesus.” He is the focus of our attention. He is the one we must please. It is all too easy for us to focus on people, but this is not what the apostle tells us here. Our harmony comes only when we are all focused on the same goal. That goal is to become like Jesus and walk in fellowship with Him. Paul rebuked the Corinthians

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because they focused on different Christian personalities. Some followed Paul. Others followed Apollos. Still, others followed Cephas. There could be no harmony if they did not have the same goal—that goal is Christ.

Our unity will never come if we are followers of other people. This will only emphasize our differences. Paul told the Romans that their goal was to glorify God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, with one voice:

6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15)

Our harmony comes in the person of Jesus Christ and our desire to worship Him.

Paul concludes his reflection with this challenge to the Romans:

7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Romans 15)

The Roman church was to embrace one another just as Christ had embraced them. How did Christ receive you? When He welcomed you, were you sinless? When he accepted you, was your understanding of who He was perfect? Were you walking as He intended you to walk?

If we are honest with ourselves, Christ welcomed us when we were at our worst. He opened his heart to a sinner. He accepted us with all our sinful ways and rebellious attitudes. This, according to Paul, is what we need to do as well. We need to open our hearts to those God brings to us.

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We often attempt to create our unity around theology or traditions. We feel that if we all believe the same thing and do things in the same way, we can be one. The fact of the matter, however, is that Christ does not accept us based on our theology. Nor does He limit His blessing to only those who worship in a certain way. The body of Christ is very diverse. He accepts those who eat food forbidden by the law of Moses and those who abstain. His blessing falls on those who observe certain days as holy or observe all days as sacred. He extends his salvation to those of different theological persuasions and worship styles. He loves those who are weak in the faith as much as those who are mature. He reached out to the poor and needy and the rich and famous. This is grace.

For the glory of God, bear with those who differ from you. Welcome all those whom Christ has accepted as a brother or sister. Endure patiently with them as they seek to grow in their ability to honour and serve the Lord. Be an instrument of blessing and encouragement for them. Love them as Christ loves them. Accept them with all their warts and blemishes just as Christ accepted you.

For Prayer

Father, give us a desire to live in harmony with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We recognize that we do not always agree on theological points. We have our preferences in worship. We are all at different levels of maturity. Give us the grace to endure and bear with these differences for the glory of your name. Teach us to set you alone as our goal. Forgive us for the times we have become followers of other people more than followers of Christ. Correct

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our attitudes when they are not in line with you and your purpose. Teach us to walk patiently with our brothers and sisters. Give us your heart to welcome them as You have welcomed us with all our failures and shortcomings.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

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F. Wayne Mac Leod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

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