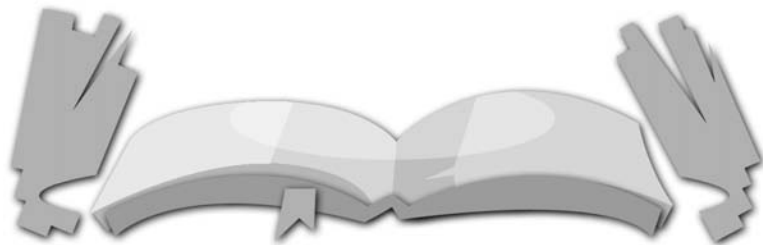


All the Rest Is Commentary



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Romans 14–16.*

Memory Text: “Why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (*Romans 14:10*).

Someone approached a famous rabbi of antiquity and asked him to explain the whole meaning of the Torah while standing on one leg. “Do not do to another,” the rabbi said on one leg, “what seems to you to be hurtful; that is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary.”

Whether or not one agrees with the rabbi's statement, he does have a point. Some aspects of our faith are foundational and others mere “commentary.” This week's lesson looks at some of that “commentary.” What this means is that all that came before focused very much on the foundational principles of salvation. What is the role of the law—be it the whole Old Testament system or just the Ten Commandments—in the area of salvation? Paul needed to define clearly what are the grounds upon which God accepts a person. Perhaps the whole thing could be summarized by the pagan jailer's question, “What must I do to be saved?” (*Acts 16:30*).

With that explained, Paul now engages in some “commentary.” Though very strong on some points, Paul takes a much freer attitude regarding other things. That's because these things are nonessentials, “commentary,” as it were. Yet, at the same time, though the issues themselves might not have been crucial, the attitude the Christians had toward each other in dealing with these issues was.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 25.*

The Weak Brother

In Romans 14:1–3, the question was the eating of meats that may have been sacrificed to idols. The Jerusalem council (*Acts 15*) ruled that Gentile converts should refrain from using such foods in their diet. But there was always the question as to whether meats sold in public markets had come from animals sacrificed to idols (*see 1 Cor. 10:25*). Some Christians didn't care about that at all; others, if there were the slightest doubt, chose to eat vegetables instead. The issue had nothing to do with the question of vegetarianism and healthful living. Nor is Paul implying in this passage that the distinction between clean and unclean meats has been abolished. This is not the subject under consideration. If the words “he may eat all things” (*Rom. 14:2*) were taken to mean that now any animal, clean or otherwise, could be eaten, they would be misapplied. Comparison with other New Testament passages would rule against such an application.

Meanwhile, to “receive” one weak in the faith meant to accord him or her full membership and social status. The person was not to be argued with but given the right to his or her opinion.

What principle should we take, then, from Romans 14:1–3?

It's important, too, to realize that Paul in verse 3 does not speak negatively of the one “weak in the faith.” Nor does he give this person advice as to how to become strong. So far as God is concerned, the overscrupulous Christian (judged overscrupulous, apparently, not by God but by his or her fellow Christians) is accepted. “God hath received him.”

How does Romans 14:4 amplify what we've just looked at?

Though we need to keep in mind the principles seen in today's lesson, are there not times and places where we need to step in and judge, if not a person's heart, at least the actions? Are we to step back and say and do nothing in every situation? Isaiah 56:10 describes watchmen as “dumb dogs, they cannot bark.” How can we know when to speak and when to keep silent? How do we strike the right balance here?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 15:5*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Explain the importance of letting each person follow God's will as best as he or she knows how, while at the same time being sensitive to how our actions affect others around us.

Feel: Value unity in Christ as a principle that informs both our independence and interdependence.

Do: Do whatever it takes to contribute to peace and the building up of Christ's body.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Unified in Diversity

A While we each may have a different understanding of what God is asking us to do, why must we accept and encourage one another in the following of our individual consciences and be willing to learn from one another?

B What are some of the differences that arise when church members follow their consciences in obeying God?

C How can these differences lead to division, and how can they lead to growth?

II. Feel: Valuing One Another

A Though it is important to follow our individual consciences, why must we also be sensitive to how the things we do influence others?

B How should we relate to church members who express concern over our lifestyle or actions or over differences with us in spiritual matters?

III. Do: Building Up the Body

A What are some of the ways we can foster a spirit of unity among a body of believers who are different in many ways?

► **Summary:** Though we all may have differences in how we understand our duty to God, as we foster acceptance and respect and learn from one another we will grow closer as a result.

With What Measure You Mete

Read Romans 14:10. What reason does Paul give here for us to be careful about how we judge others?

We tend to judge others harshly at times, and often for the same things that we ourselves do. How often, though, what we do doesn't seem as bad to us as when others do the same thing. We might fool ourselves by our hypocrisy, but not God, who warned us: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?" (*Matt. 7:1-4*).

Of what significance is the statement from the Old Testament that Paul introduced here? *Rom. 14:11*.

The citation from Isaiah 45:23 supports the thought that *all* must appear for judgment. "Every knee" and "every tongue" individualizes the summons. The implication is that each one will have to answer for his or her own life and deeds (*vs. 12*). No one can answer for another. In this important sense, we are *not* our brother's keeper.

Keeping the context in mind, how do you understand what Paul is saying in Romans 14:14?

The subject is still foods sacrificed to idols. The issue is, clearly, not the distinction between the foods deemed clean and unclean. Paul is saying that there is nothing wrong per se in eating foods that might have been offered to idols. After all, what is an idol anyway? It is nothing (*see 1 Cor. 8:4*), so who cares if some pagan offered the food to a statue of a frog or a bull?

A person should not be made to violate his or her conscience, even if the conscience is overly sensitive. This fact the "strong" brethren apparently did not understand. They despised the scrupulosity of the "weak" brethren and put stumbling blocks in their way.

Might you, in your zeal for the Lord, be in danger of what Paul is warning about here? Why must we be careful not to seek to be the conscience of others, no matter how good our intentions?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Believers may agree on the principles of Scripture but disagree on the methods of living out those principles. In such cases, grace and understanding should take precedence over judgment and condemnation.

Because Rome was a cultural melting pot, it is not surprising that the believers' various backgrounds led to divergent understandings about living the Christian life. While Jewish and Gentile Christians alike were committed to Jesus as their Savior, their cultural upbringing induced a certain amount of tension as the two groups tried to live out their commitment. The Jerusalem council (*Acts 15*) was an attempt to resolve the disputes between the two groups; but the fact that the book of Romans was written several years after the council testifies to the difficulty of resolving these differences.

If the early church, nearest in historical time to the advent of Christ, had these difficulties, should we be surprised that churches today struggle for harmony? Does your church include various ethnic groups? How has the church blended those various strengths? Has variety produced disharmony?

Age is another factor that often divides churches. Social scientists even speak of youth culture as if it were a separate entity, encapsulating unique values, social patterns, and language. Does harmonious interaction between various age groups exist in your church? Do cultural battles erupt over musical preferences, Sabbath observance, and evangelistic methodology? When Christians disagree, how are differences resolved—split churches, acrimonious exchanges, judgmental rhetoric? Perhaps understanding, open-mindedness, compassionate listening, and flexibility characterize your church. Blessed indeed are those who have experienced the latter rather than the former!

Having established a common theological foundation, Paul now addresses the cultural disagreements in practice that threatened to fracture the church.

Activity: Bring a large transparent glass container for filling. First, fill the container with large rocks. Ask, Is the container full? The expected response is “full.” Next bring out your hidden sack of sand, pouring sand into the container. Ask if the container is now full. Expect an affirmative answer, though some may hesitate because they were proven wrong before. Next bring out your hidden water bottle and fill the container again.

Discuss: How does the activity visibly illustrate the importance of being open-minded and creative in our approach to God's work? Why should

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Giving No Offense

Read Romans 14:15–23 (see also 1 Cor. 8:12, 13). Summarize on the lines below the gist of what Paul is saying. What principle can we take from this passage that we can apply in all areas of our lives?

In verses 17–20 Paul is putting various aspects of Christianity into proper perspective. Although diet is important, Christians ought not to quarrel over the choice on the part of some to eat vegetables instead of flesh meats that might have been sacrificed to idols. Instead, they ought to focus on righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. How might we apply this idea to questions of diet today in our church? However much the health message, and especially the teachings on diet, can be a blessing to us, not everyone sees this subject the same way, and we need to respect those differences.

In verse 22, amid all this talk about leaving people to their own conscience, Paul adds a very interesting caveat: “Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves” (NIV). What warning is Paul giving here? How does this balance out the rest of what he is saying in this context?

Have you heard someone say, “It is none of anyone’s business what I eat or what I wear or what kind of entertainment I engage in”? Is it really? None of us lives in a vacuum. Our actions, words, deeds, and even diet can affect others, either for good or for bad. It’s not hard to see how. If someone who looks up to you sees you doing something “wrong,” he or she could be influenced by your example to do that same thing. We fool ourselves if we think otherwise. To argue that, well, you didn’t force the person is beside the point. As Christians, we have a responsibility to one another, and if our example can lead someone astray, we are culpable.

What kind of example do you present? Would you feel comfortable with having others, particularly young people or new believers, following your example in all areas? What does your answer say about you?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

there always be *space available* for newer ideas and methodologies alongside older concepts?

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Intellectual theorists oftentimes propose grandiose schemes that disintegrate into grander failures when tested by real-world conditions. Can Paul’s theology endure the real-world “heat” of cultural crossfire? This battleground is a minefield waiting to explode! How should church leaders facilitate healing and reconciliation when disagreements erupt among the faithful?

Bible Commentary

I. The Weak Brother (Review Romans 14:1–4 with the class.)

Multitudes of decisions regarding a variety of lifestyle choices are made every day. Christians believe that no decision is unimportant, because their total existence belongs under the lordship of Christ. Christians also live in community; therefore, an isolationist position is impossible.

What happens when different standards and disagreements regarding Christian practices emerge among the faithful? Unfortunately, one unacceptable option surfaces too frequently—belittling those more scrupulous. Paul’s contemporaries wrestled over foods sacrificed to idols and the observance of ceremonial sabbaths. Seventh-day Adventists today debate similar matters—dietary regimen, acceptable fashion, appropriate Sabbath observance, interracial marriage, and musical preferences. Divine mandates and guidelines are sometimes variously interpreted, but oftentimes the debate surrounds issues that are not addressed specifically in Scripture. These cases are not unimportant, and believers extrapolate principles from Scripture to guide their decision making regarding emerging technologies and freshly encountered cultural differences.

Certainly caution must be exercised to avoid ditches on either side. The first ditch is imagining that Scripture *directly* addresses every cultural situation. The second is naively believing that Scripture has *nothing* to say about those situations. Prayerful study of scriptural principles, under divine guidance, has delivered the church from disintegration throughout Christian history. Should scrupulous believers, however, suffer belittling by fellow

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Observance of Days

In this discussion about not judging others who might view some things differently than we do, and not being a stumbling block to others who might be offended by our actions, Paul brings up the issue of special days that some want to observe and others don't.

Read Romans 14:4–10. How are we to understand what Paul is saying here? Does this say anything about the fourth commandment? If not, why not?

About what days is Paul speaking? Was there a controversy in the early church over the observance or nonobservance of certain days? Apparently so. We get a hint of such controversy in Galatians 4:9, 10, where Paul berates the Galatian Christians for observing “days, and months, and times, and years.” As we noted in lesson 2, some in the church had persuaded the Galatian Christians to be circumcised and to keep other precepts of the law of Moses. Paul feared that these ideas might harm the Roman church, as well. But perhaps in Rome it was particularly the Jewish Christians who had a hard time persuading themselves that they need no longer observe the Jewish festivals. Paul here is saying, Do as you please in this matter; the important point is not to judge those who view the matter differently from you. Some Christians, apparently, to be on the safe side, decided to observe one or more of the Jewish festivals. Paul’s counsel is, Let them do it if they are persuaded they should.

To bring the weekly Sabbath into Romans 14:5, as some argue, is unwarranted. Can one imagine Paul taking such a laid-back attitude toward the fourth commandment? As we have seen all quarter, Paul placed a heavy emphasis on obedience to the law, so he certainly wasn't going to place the Sabbath commandment in the same category as folk who are uptight about eating foods that might have been offered to idols. However commonly these texts are used as an example to show that the seventh-day Sabbath is no longer binding, they say no such thing. Their use in that manner is a prime example of what Peter warned that people were doing with Paul's writings: “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:16).

What has been your experience with the Sabbath? Has it been the blessing it was meant to be? What changes can you make in order to experience more fully what the Lord offers you in the Sabbath?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Christians for being unable to accept certain things conscientiously? “No,” says Paul. Neither should the scrupulous (“weak”) condemn those who conscientiously view things differently.

Christians are not at liberty to compromise matters clearly defined and directly addressed in Scripture. Christians must also acknowledge that most day-to-day decisions do not fall into that category. Believers should humbly and prayerfully approach God for the wisdom to know the difference.

All cultures are contaminated by sin. Believers are not compelled to accept Western materialism or islander voodoo practices because those are cultural trademarks. Defending practices on the basis of culture alone is inadequate. God expects a higher standard. However, condemning practices on the basis of culture alone is equally indefensible.

Consider This: How should conscientious Christians relate to fellow believers who practice their faith differently? What usually happens when believers direct condemnation against differently minded Christians? How do believers determine what is the irreducible foundation of the gospel and what are matters of preference? How should believers react when arrogant members belittle them?


II. With What Measure You Mete *(Review Romans 14:10 with the class.)*

Romans 14:10 may be described as Paul’s trump card. For the unconvinced reader this principle is the bottom line: judge others harshly here and divine judgment will fall on you in similar manner and extent (*see Matt. 7:1–4*). Conversely, those who humbly approach differences of opinion in debatable areas, who exercise a merciful attitude, may expect mercy on their day of accountability.

Consider This: How does Romans 14:10–12 relate to Matthew 6:14, 15? Can Christians be firm and uncompromising, as well as uncritical and nonjudgmental?

III. Giving No Offense *(Review Romans 14:15–23 with the class.)*

Human influence is our responsibility. We are accountable for our influence on others. How can a believer glibly dismiss this responsibility when it could be the difference in another person’s eternal destiny? Which should be more important—that person’s eternal salvation or exercising my Christian freedom? The principle of personal accountability does not

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Fitting Benediction

Read Romans 15:1–3. What important Christian truth is found in these texts?

In what way do these texts capture so much of what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

What other verses teach the same idea? Most important, how can you, yourself, live out this principle?

As Paul brought his letter to a close, what varied benedictions did he utter? *Rom. 15:5, 6, 13, 33.*

The God of patience means the God who helps His children to endure steadfastly. The word for “patience,” *hupomone*, means “fortitude,” “steadfast endurance.” The word for “consolation” may be translated “encouragement.” The God of encouragement is the God who encourages. The God of hope is the God who has given hope to humankind. Likewise, the God of peace is the God who gives peace and in whom one may have peace.

What a fitting benediction in a letter whose dominant theme is righteousness by faith—encouragement, hope, peace! How sorely our present world needs these.

After numerous personal greetings, how did Paul bring his letter to a close? *Rom. 16:25–27.*

Paul ends his letter in a glorious ascription of praise to God. God is the one in whom the Roman Christians, and all Christians, can safely put their trust to confirm their standing as redeemed sons and daughters of God, justified by faith and now led by the Spirit of God.

Paul is thrilled to be the herald of such glorious news. He calls this news “my gospel.” What he means is the gospel he proclaims. But what he preaches has been confirmed by the preaching of Jesus and by the messages of the prophets. It was kept secret, not because God did not want humanity to know, but because people refused light from heaven, preventing God from giving them further light. Moreover, there were some aspects of the plan that people would be unable to grasp until the Messiah came in human flesh. He gave a demonstration, not only of what God is like but also of what humanity may become by laying hold of divine power. The new kind of life would be one of “obedience of faith”; that is, obedience springing from faith in the Lord, who through grace justifies sinners by the righteousness given to all who claim it for themselves.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

prohibit us from helping scrupulous believers inform their consciences regarding Christian freedoms, but it does caution us about arrogantly ignoring their feelings.

In light of this discussion, consider the following situation. Jonathan heard that Frederick's creates the best salad in town. Although he has never imbibed alcoholic beverages, he knows that Frederick's also has a reputation throughout the metropolitan area as the *drunk's hangout*. He dines at Dominick's instead. Is eating at Frederick's *sinful*? No. Is dining at Dominick's perhaps more considerate?

Consider This: Does this principle offer more *conservative* members undue *leverage*? If we are the more "conservative conscience," how can we avoid making others feel *uptight*?

► STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Discuss the principles of Romans 14 and 15. How can believers make their world more principled and tolerant at the same time?

Thought Question:

What role should our educational system play in developing discernment, tolerance, and compassion?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Paul's passion for a church united in spreading the gospel of freedom in Christ must be replicated in our generation. Dialogue regarding matters of practice are necessary; battles are not.

Activity: Write a new song that stresses the themes of partnership, tolerance, and Christian self-sacrifice in the context of this study; or read/sing hymn 353 in *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*. Tell what you plan to do to live out the themes of either song over the next few months.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Unity and Love in the Church,” pp. 477, 478; “Love for the Erring,” pp. 604–606, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5; “Helping the Tempted,” p. 166, in *The Ministry of Healing*; p. 719, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

“I was shown the danger of the people of God in looking to Brother and Sister White and thinking that they must come to them with their burdens and seek counsel of them. This ought not so to be. They are invited by their compassionate, loving Saviour to come unto Him, when weary and heavy-laden, and He will relieve them. . . . Many come to us with the inquiry: Shall I do this? Shall I engage in that enterprise? Or, in regard to dress, Shall I wear this or that article? I answer them: You profess to be disciples of Christ. Study your Bibles. Read carefully and prayerfully the life of our dear Saviour when He dwelt among men upon the earth. Imitate His life, and you will not be found straying from the narrow path. We utterly refuse to be conscience for you. If we tell you just what to do, you will look to us to guide you, instead of going directly to Jesus for yourselves.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, pp. 118, 119.

“We are not to place the responsibility of our duty upon others, and wait for them to tell us what to do. We cannot depend for counsel upon humanity. The Lord will teach us our duty just as willingly as He will teach somebody else. . . . Those who decide to do nothing in any line that will displease God, will know, after presenting their case before Him, just what course to pursue.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 668.

“There have ever been in the church those who are constantly inclined toward individual independence. They seem unable to realize that independence of spirit is liable to lead the human agent to have too much confidence in himself and to trust in his own judgment rather than to respect the counsel and highly esteem the judgment of his brethren.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 163, 164.

Discussion Questions:

Given some of the themes of this week, how do we as Christians find the right balance in the following cases:

- ❶ Being faithful to what we believe, yet not judging others who see things differently from the way we do?
- ❷ Being true to our own conscience and not seeking to be the conscience for others, while at the same time seeking to help those whom we believe are in error? When do we speak, and when do we keep silent? When are we culpable if we do keep silent?
- ❸ Being free in the Lord and yet at the same time realizing our responsibility to be a good example for those who might look up to us?