

Romans 14:1-15:13

- In this passage Paul is addressing, as he has through all of Romans, two groups. Here, one group has weak faith (14:1), and the other strong. The weak “pass judgment” on the strong and the strong “despise” the weak. We have some clues as to their identity, since those with weak faith avoid meat (14:2) and unclean foods (14:20) and observe certain religious days (14:6). What is the most likely identity of the “weak” group, and why?
 - Gentile converts who avoid meat** which, though sold at the butcher’s was purchased by the butcher from temples which had used it in sacrifice to pagan gods (so, the same group as in 1 Cor 8; but note, idols aren’t mentioned here)
 - Ascetics:** Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians who engage in supererogatory¹ activities to achieve greater spirituality through denial
 - Legalists:** Those who haven’t yet realized that we are saved through faith and thus continue to perform works they believe are necessary for salvation (so why doesn’t he condemn them as he did in Gal 1:8+?)
 - Jewish Christians** who grasp the faith just fine but want to continue with the Jewish kosher laws and holy days
- Everyone has a conscience (2:15), a sort of moral intuition. It’s influenced by our moral norms and while it isn’t necessarily right (1 Cor 8:7-12; 10:25-29), it can be guided by the Holy Spirit (9:1-2). By violating your conscience, even when it’s wrong, you can make it weak (1 Cor 8:10-11), defiled (1 Cor 8:7) and wounded (1 Cor 8:12). In context, some are choosing to treat things as unclean which Jesus and Paul made clear aren’t (14:20; Mk 7:19). So why is it better for the “weak” to follow a misaligned conscience which is telling them something is wrong? Isn’t right and wrong a matter of absolute truth, and not of being “convinced in their own minds” (14:5)?
- What does Paul specifically mean when he warns that the strong may “injure” and “ruin” (14:15-16) the weak, making them stumble (14:13)? Does Paul intend this to be a permanent solution? What does Paul mean by “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (14:23)?
- While Peter was living in Antioch he associated freely with both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Then, out of deference to the scruples of the Jews, he chose stop eating with the Gentiles (Gal 2:11-14). On the surface this appears to be an application of Paul’s rule about showing flexibility to the person of tender conscience, but Paul himself condemns Peter for it. Why?
- Shortly after Peter’s incident, the Jerusalem Council decided that Gentiles need not follow the Law of Moses but nevertheless should avoid food sacrificed to idols and food which has not been drained of blood and fornication (Acts 15:20, 29). Is *this* a valid example of Paul’s tender-conscience principle? If so, did it make sense for King Alfred the Great of England in the ninth century to include these restrictions in his legal code?
- Here, Paul instructs those who have embraced the freedom of the gospel to voluntarily limit themselves by not doing something that would make another believer feel guilty. Paul says this follows the example of Jesus, who “did not please himself” (15:3). Did Jesus ever voluntarily choose not to do something admissible for the sake of another’s weak conscience?

¹ Beyond the call of duty

7. The church is full of divisions regarding what the Reformers called *adiaphora*, disputable matters which are not specifically forbidden by Scripture. The principle given here is that the group not offended should try to accommodate the group which is. Which of the following should be treated using this principle², and which is the “weaker” party? Who should voluntarily be limited and how?
- a. Vegetarians, vegans and carnivores
 - b. Those who avoid R-rated movies, salty HBO series, etc. and those who don’t³
 - c. Alcohol at communion or church gatherings
 - d. Those who wish to treat the sanctuary as holy ground vs. those who don’t
 - e. Women who wear modest dress vs. those with socially acceptable but a bit more revealing dress
 - f. Muslims who wear a hijab head covering for modesty in the presence of males outside the family
 - g. Those who support women in leadership and those who believe it violates Scriptural mandate
 - h. Those who, despite sympathy for the poor and immigrants, ultimately votes on the basis or concern for the unborn and SCOTUS nominations
 - i. Those who approve homosexual behavior and those who don’t
 - j. Those who are offended by too much humor in discussion of Scripture
 - k. Pacifists v. just-war Christians
 - l. Those who dress up for church and those who don’t
 - m. Those who are willing to work on Sundays and those who aren’t (perhaps even 7th-Day Adventists)
 - n. Those who subscribe to weekly confession of sin and those who don’t
 - o. Sprinkling v. immersion (Stott mentions this, but is it a matter of conscience?)

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Fun Fact: In the 6th century the desert fathers John the Prophet and Barsanuphius of Gaza wrote letters, a sort of hermits’ advice column, largely addressing problems of interest to monks. Not surprisingly, the “weaker brother” problem comes up, and is addressed in the context of brothers who leave the table early so they don’t overeat (and thus annoy the others); those who look down on others who offer modest only hospitality; and those who bathe too often: **“I am embarrassed that I might scandalize those who think highly of me, expecting that I would refuse a bath because of my piety. Why is this happening, father?”** (*The Fathers of the Church*, Vol 114, trans. John Chryssavgis, p. 281.)

Bonus fun fact: For seventeenth-century Puritans a hotly contested *adiaphora* was the practice of exchanging wedding rings.

² Note Carson’s useful point, “That something is disputed does not make it theologically disputable” (“On Disputable Matters”, *Themelios* 40.3 (2015): 383–88, where Carson addresses explains why homosexuality isn’t *adiaphora*). Stott suggests you discern whether an action puts you in the “weaker” camp by asking, “Can I thank God for this? Can I do this unto the Lord?” (cf. 14:6).

³ I was surprised to learn a former pastor of mine liked to watch what I found a very racy TV show. Am I the weaker believer?

Leader's Notes:

This passage may be easy to think you have right when you don't, quite.

Some things worth noting:

First, Stott's probably right in seeing this as *not* being about meat sacrificed to idols, as in 1 Cor 8. In the Corinthian church there were young believers who were converts from paganism. Their consciences were hurt by eating meat sacrificed to idols because it was threatening to draw them back into that world. What was ok for others was not okay for them, for practical and spiritual reasons. In Romans 14 idols aren't mentioned, but clean and unclean things and special religious days are. So more likely we are dealing here with Jewish Christians who are choosing to keep kosher. The vegetarianism may be because they are cut off from the source of kosher foods by being excluded from the Jewish community and the synagogues (like Daniel and his friends, Dan 1:3+). So, in one case new converts from paganism, in the other Jewish Christians.

The second key to recognizing this passage is that while a particular activity might be permitted in principle, it may be validly restricted for some believers. So watching R-rated films might lead one believer to a swap of lustful thoughts but might not bother another. The "weaker" believer decides, whether from a recognition of the risks or from a sense of Jesus' particular calling, to avoid these things. It might be a permanent restriction (think alcoholism or sex addiction), or temporary.

What is *not* in view here is the Jewish believer who feels Christians must live kosher to be saved. Paul refers to (a) the *adiaphora*, "matters of indifference" which are not forbidden by Scripture; (b) matters where one party's conscience would be violated. [By including *b* I depart from Stott, who includes pretty much anything not addressed by Scripture about which Christians differ (p. 358). I think Paul clearly only addresses matters of conscience, not all disputes.]

So it isn't just about matters where two people disagree; there has to be a party who acknowledges Scripture doesn't restrict, but feels called to restrict him or herself anyway for what he or she considers good reasons. Not that this doesn't prevent judgmentalism. The person who avoids R-rated films may feel that truly mature believers would do the same, in the "all things are possible, but not all things are profitable" sense, not recognizing that some believers may be able to view such things without falling prey to temptation, and may be able to enjoy or even benefit from them as a result. (So Paul is not really addressing things which are not forbidden biblically but are frankly a bad idea for anyone to engage in.)

This makes sense of several things in the passage:

- Paul doesn't address the weaker brothers as if they had missed the point of the gospel, even though he acknowledges they are restricting themselves beyond what is required of believers in general
- Paul's talk of passing judgment on the servant of another (14:3) makes sense if the "weaker" believers feel called by Jesus to live kosher, perhaps because they are afraid if they don't they'll fall into sin, or because they want to reach out to unconverted Jews, or for some other reason
- What's at risk is causing another to stumble (13), be injured or ruined (15) or fall (20), which could happen if Jesus or the person's good sense tells them not to do something and other believers, by word or example, induce them to do it anyway
- It is a matter of being "convinced in your own mind" (5), because voluntary personal restrictions are a matter of discernment of God's will for you and good sense in light of weaknesses and tendency to sin.
- "What does not proceed from faith is sin" (23): Remember, from Rom 4, faith is all about following whatever God's plan is for you and for believers in general. It's trust and obedience. So if you feel like God is telling you

not to watch that HBO series and do it anyway, you are sinning, even though it might be fine for another person. Jesus may have directives for you he doesn't give to others, and if you fail to heed them, you sin, whether or not your action appears on a list of biblical don'ts.

So question #3 is a red herring. The conscience isn't like a compass because consciences may validly disagree, given restrictions the HS laws on one believer and not another.

The answer to question #6 is the Jesus' willingness to pay the temple tax (Mt 17).

Note, as Bruce and Stott point out, this passage makes sense of the mysterious decision of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15. Why those laws? To help Jewish Christians not to stumble.

There remain some practical questions. Can the scruples of one person in a congregation restrict the rest? Is this temporary or permanent? Some may settle into a comfortable life of restrictions, happy to limit the rest of the Body, never attempting to grow into a place where they living within a fenced in yard for fear of land mines which affect only them.

The basic principle is, how can we promote unity by being willing to give up some of our freedoms for the sake of others?

In essentials unity;

In non-essentials liberty;

In all things charity.

—Rupert Meldenius (Stott, 375)

A useful resource is D. A. Carson, "On Disputable Matters", *Themelios* 40.3 (2015): 383–88, which he explains why homosexual activity is not *adiaphora*.

I wanted very much to find a way to work in prof. Larycia Hawkins, previously of Wheaton, who wore a hijab in solidarity with embattled Muslims, but it doesn't seem relevant.