

## ***Diets and Day Disagreement***

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Text: Romans 14: 1-12

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### **OPENING PRAYER:**

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for the evening of the Lord's Day. And for our often conscious sense of your presence with us, as we enjoy the progress of your Spirit's work within us, the illumination of your word, the blessing of our fellowship. As we sense the accumulation of blessing that pours down upon us from your heavenly throne of grace. We pray, as we come to you now, towards the end of this day, that our Savior Jesus Christ would abide with us, that he would open the Scriptures to us. That he would prepare us for the days that are to come, and that he would reassure us, that He is with us, and that he means to bless us. So we pray instruct us from your holy mouth we pray, that we may receive that bread without which we know we cannot live and sustained by it, may be strengthened to live as we have sung and now pray for the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hear us and help us we ask for Jesus our Savior's sake. Amen. Please be seated.

### **SCRIPTURE READING:**

Now, our scripture reading in our studies in Paul's letter to the Romans, this evening, is in Romans chapter 14. You'll find the passage on page 948 of the pew Bible, if you'd like to use that version, the English Standard Version, that is in the rack in front of you. And our reading is Romans chapter 14. And tonight we read from verse one through verse 12. Romans chapter 14, let us hear God's word.

*As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 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. 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. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Everyone should be fully convinced in his own mind. 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. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

### **SERMON:**

I was really hoping this evening, as my colleague David Lawton was speaking to the children, that there had been somebody from Scotland in that Bible study group he was in as a high school student. Often when people say to me, we're going to visit Scotland this summer, my face lights up -- at least as lit up as my face ever gets. And I usually say to people, something like this: One of the great things about Scotland, now you understand there are many great things about Scotland. But one of the great things about Scotland is that you don't need to go very far before you see something new and different and fascinating. You don't need to get onto a highway and go another 500 miles before you see the next thing that you're supposed to see before you die. And I feel very much the same about Paul's letter to the Romans, don't you? There is a marvelous typography to Romans. The scenery seems to change from one chapter to another. We've seen the dark background of the opening three chapters. We've seen the blood drenched chapters of chapter three and four. And into the beginning of chapter five, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." We've seen the chapters that take us, as it were, deep down into the character of the Christian life in which Romans chapter six and Romans chapter seven, and Romans chapter eight, are not only all true of the Christian believer, but all true of every Christian believer throughout the whole course of his or her life. And then we have been diving into chapters nine to 11. And thinking about the exalted mountain top topic of God's providential and saving dealings with humanity. And then into chapters 12 and 13, where he is dealing as it were, with life on -- in the low lands and the basic nitty gritty of living the Christian life. And there is a sense now in which the terrain changes once again, and from chapter 14, verse one, virtually to the end of chapter 15, verse 33, Paul is focusing his attention on a particular burden that he has for all the churches, and obviously here for the church of Christian believers in Rome. He is concerned to give them gospel instruction about how Christians deal with one another when they're dealing with Christians who differ from them in certain particular practices.

Now, it's clear here, isn't it that Paul has very specific situations in mind. What isn't quite so clear, is exactly what specific situations he has in mind. It's clear, I think, that this is a different

situation, from the one he addresses in First Corinthians chapter eight, and chapter 10, where there was a difference of practice among Christians. It's certainly a different situation, from the concern he has with the Colossians where there are people telling them that there are things that they are to avoid touching and things that are to avoid tasting. It's different again, from his concern, in the Letter to the Galatians, where again, that was a deep seated difference in practice that actually got into and poisoned, in Paul's view, the very heart of the gospel. What he is speaking about here is gospel believing Christians disagreeing about how the gospel works out in practice, in their personal lives, and in the Christian community.

That may seem to us to be an odd thing if we've been tracking with Paul's letter to the Romans from the beginning. Because we know the Apostle Paul had never been in Rome. He'd never worshiped in the churches in Rome. But when eventually, and it shouldn't be too long now, we get to chapter 16, we discover that the apostle Paul knew an extraordinary number of Christians who were living in Rome. And he was even familiar with particular house churches in Rome. He seems to mention at least three of them in chapter 16, and about 30 different individuals whom he seems to have known personally. So we should have no difficulty in appreciating that when the apostle Paul writes this, he is not simply drawing a bow at a venture. But he understands that this is a real situation in the church in Rome that is likely, if it isn't already, and it certainly looks to me as though it was already coming to the surface, it's creating a problem that has the potential to divide Christians from one another. That's why the keynote he strikes right from the very beginning of this section, in verse one is the keynote of welcome. Christians should be those who welcome one another.

And here you'll see verse two. Again, in verse five, one person believes he may eat anything, the weak person eats only vegetables. Verse five, one person esteems one day, as better than another while another esteems all days alike. That, potentially, at least we've got two groups of people here. It's possible, we've got three groups of people. Even possible, we've got four groups of people. And I think if you do the mathematics, it might even be possible that there are five different groups of people. There are those who eat. But observe days in one way. Those who eat and observe days in a different way, and so on and so forth. But basically, basically, it's clear from the language Paul uses, that he's speaking about Christian believers, who apply the gospel, basically, in two different ways. And you'll notice the language he uses about these groups. verse one of chapter 14, is the weak, which implies there's another group that he might be thinking of as the strong. And then if you fast forward to chapter 15, verse one, he puts it out on the table, "we who are strong, have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak."

Now, there's a little twist here in this language, because those who are weak are the ones who would say, I am a believer with a strong conscience. That's the little twist. Paul describes himself as belonging to the strong in faith, chapter 15, verse one, "we who are strong, have an

obligation to the weak, but the weak are those who would say in response, I have a strong conscience about this. And therefore, I abstain." And so we need to look out for that lest, we think ourselves, you know, most of us tend to think, you know, if you're gonna side with one group or the other group, you're gonna side with the strong. The difference between the strong and the weak is this. The weak have a strong conscience. The strong, have an instructed conscience. Strong consciences are not necessarily biblically instructed consciences. And that's, in some ways, the extraordinary illuminating thing that the apostle Paul is saying here. Why do I say that? Because conscience -- Paul makes it clear Christians need to follow their consciences. But conscience must never be allowed to be independent of Scripture. A strong conscience, uninformed by Scripture makes you what Paul calls a weak believer.

Now, that's a more complex beginning to this exposition than I ever intended. But all will become clear-- it will all come out in the wash.

First of all, notice Paul's description of the situation. There are differences between believers. Let me put this negatively so that this is absolutely clear. Here, this is not a difference about how Jesus Christ saves sinners. This is not the kind of difference that we find in the Galatian epistle where Paul says, teach anything other than this gospel as some people are doing and let them be a curse. He is speaking about Christians who agree mentally on the gospel, and are absolutely resolutely committed to Jesus Christ in saving faith for the forgiveness of their sins. We might put it this way. These are two groups of people who believe everything in Romans chapters one through 11, who believe they are sinners who believe Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, who have experienced Jesus Christ transforming their lives, who in their struggle against sin know that they've been set free from its dominion, that they've been given the Holy Spirit, and they are in the midst of a work that God is doing in history, and have consecrated themselves as living sacrifices to the Lord. All of that Paul recognizes is possible. And yet there still be differences of opinion about how the gospel works out in practice. He isn't speaking here about Christians, welcoming all and sundry. We may welcome all and sundry but we don't welcome all and sundry as brothers in Jesus Christ. So here he is speaking about fellow believers, and how it is that fellow believers handle these frankly, often niggling differences, that there are among us. Positively, he says, *Now among you, Roman Christians, there are some who are weak, and some who are strong, weak, because their consciences have not yet been liberated fully by the gospel, strong, because their consciences have been informed by the gospel. And they enter into the freedom of that gospel. How are they to respond to those who remain weak.* And the issue presents itself, the issue presents itself in terms of what some of the Christians were prepared to eat, and some of them were not prepared to eat, and how some of them observed certain days and regarded them as special, and how others of them regarded all days as though they were identical.

Now, my own view is that almost certainly what is going on here is a tension between Jewish believers and Gentile believers. And one of the things that probably had happened in the Roman church once or twice, I've commented on the fact that because of controversy and rioting in Rome, and A.D. 49, Claudius had expelled all who were of Jewish origin, because as the historians of the period say, there was some, there was some rioting over somebody called Crestus. And I think most scholars of antiquity assume that this is a reference to our Lord Jesus Christ. And so these Christians, as well as the Jews, because Christians, in those days were regarded by the authorities simply as a sect of Judaism, were thrown out of Rome. And then in the early days of Nero, they had been able to come back. And so we have a situation a very interesting situation, which you're gonna imagine happening in almost any church, where the church in that period of a few years had changed its culture, and was dominantly a Gentile church. And then these Jewish believers had been able to return. And when they returned, it was, it was probably even clearer than it had been a few years before. Because the gospel had made even more progress in these years. That there were differences of practice that could cause flashpoints of tension, and division, and alienation, and eventually produce what I call huddling in the church, where one company would huddle here and another company would huddle there. And this huddling company would stay away from that huddling company and blame them for huddling. And exactly the same thing would happen in reverse. And so there were Christians who probably were particularly sensitive about eating meat. Perhaps in this instance, because now it was becoming increasing difficult for Jewish Christians who had converted to Jesus as Messiah to buy kosher meat from the Jewish butcher. Who had begun to realize this, this, this one who has accepted Jesus as the Messiah, there a, there a different race of man altogether. And similarly, with the observation of days, you know, there was a, there was an entire life calendar in Judaism. And it's not easy to get rid of the life calendar. Well I still know what time it is, at this moment in Scotland. Wake me up in the middle of the night and say, What time is it in Scotland, I'll look at my watch. And I'll tell you exactly what time it is and Scotland. Those things that have been in us from birth. You see, they they don't they don't just drop off when we become Christian believers. They need to be worked through. And Paul is wanting to help these Roman Christians work through these differences together so that they may put on display the glorious unity of the gospel about which he was so passionate.

And he's laid such a marvelous groundwork for their certainty right from the very beginning. This is one of the wonderful things about walking patiently through Romans, even although we're going at a little pace, to begin to see, Ahh he had set the situation to deal with this, right from Romans 1:16 and 17, "the Gospels, the power of God for salvation, for all who believed the Jew first and also the Gentile." And he'd shown how we're equally under sin and condemnation. And how God brings us together in the shalom of Jesus Christ. And how God is working his purposes out as year succeeds to year. That its Jew and Gentile being brought together in one glorious new community. And actually, within a relatively short time. This was

being recognized. And so people started describing Christians as a third race of men that were Jews and there were Gentiles. But these Christians, they were a third race all together, because here in Christ Jesus, Jew and Gentile had been brought together. And so Paul's passionate concern that the reconciling work of Jesus Christ should be displayed in the church is being applied here. Even when we are in a season, as they were in a season, when we don't all understand fully how the gospel applies in the life that we seek to live for the glory of God.

And that's the question Paul is asking here. We mustn't lose sight of that, in the instruction that Paul gives, that this instruction is not something in addition to the gospel of God's grace. This instruction rises straight out of the gospel of God's grace. Paul means to teach us how it is that we can recognize there may be differences among us of how we work the gospel out, and yet unreservedly, unconditionally, we are able to welcome one another in the bonds of Jesus Christ. And not least, that the strong are able to welcome the weak without immediately diving in and saying, if we're really going to have fellowship, there's something here I need to sort you out on first of all. And so this is a very important section for my, my how many churches would have been saved all kinds of agony and shame in the community if Paul's great principle of gospel, welcome had been worked out among God's people. So that's the situation at least in general terms.

Then I want you to notice, let me just illustrate what I mean. Let me get to the point here. There's something about being -- I was at a conference at the beginning of this last week in which the other two speakers were both Scotsman. So I'm thoroughly refreshed. The last time, the last time I was at this conference in Cleveland at the Church of my friend, Alistair Begg, Alistair and I went out late at night when everything was over to just have a chat together. And we found an all day diner. And as I looked down through the menu, I said to him, now, you understand we were brought up just a few miles from one another, roughly the same time, give or take a few years, I think just a few years -- four if I can remember rightly. And I said to him,

"Look, Aleister, there's oatmeal on the menu, and they serve it all day".

Now that would not have caught your eye. But it caught my eye. I said to him,

"You know, there's something in oatmeal that helps you sleep and we've had some day, and this will help us sleep."

It's not narcotic. And so we had oatmeal. But you see what I had noticed was that the oatmeal would be served with cream and brown sugar. And we were like a couple of escaped convicts. The waitress was astonished that we ordered oatmeal. Why was this such a delight? I tell you this. It was for this reason. When we were little boys, we were brought up in the old Scottish

way. We would say to our mother in the morning if it was oatmeal for breakfast, porridge as we called it,

"Can we have sugar on our porridge?"

"No". She would say, "you may not have sugar on your porridge."

We'd try again. It was the same routine. We loved it. "Mother. Let's have sugar on our porridge. It's Tuesday."

"You may not have sugar on your porridge. Eat your porridge with salt. Put the salt on your porridge."

"Mother, please let us have sugar.."

"You will not have sugar on your porridge."

And then the climactic part of the drama. "Why can't we have sugar on our porridge?"

Answer: "Because that's the way the English eat porridge."

So back to a few years ago, 10 o'clock and the all day diner in Chagrin Falls. And now with my liberated conscience -- I pour on the brown sugar. I share the cream. And we feel terribly naughty. Because there's still something about our mother's accent ringing in our consciences saying, "Eat your porridge with salt."

Now you see... That was that was a little ethnic difference. But the differences these people felt -- these Jewish Christians, you see they had received them not just because their mother had told them, but because they believed God had told them. And so you can understand how deep rooted these things were, and how easy it would be, how easy it would be for them to respond ill to those who put sugar in their porridge. And never to feel that that was something they could ever do for themselves.

So what do we do? And Paul uses a different language here doesn't he? He speaks about the language of despising. And he speaks about the language of condemnation. And these are the two dangers in the situation. There is this description of the situation I've tried to give. Now the two dangers. The first is that someone will despise someone else. The strong will say that is absolutely ridiculous that you think you need to put salt in your porridge. What a stupid fellow you are. And the other believer may see him putting sugar in his porridge and think that man is sinning his soul away. Now of course the issues were so much more important. There were

dietary regulations in the Old Testament scriptures. For many years, every single Jewish Christian in this period had been brought up in a period of Jewish history where what you ate, and how you observe days was a, was an issue upon which people had shed their lifeblood in the past. And so it was deeply ingrained in them. When it would be so easy for the strong, Paul says, who believed they could eat anything, and that all days were alike that the calendar of the mosaic ordinances had been consummated in Jesus Christ. He's not, I think, speaking about the use of the Lord's day. Because the New Testament continues to use special language about one day in the week, but the general observation of the calendar was, it was absolutely, absolutely irrelevant. Don't be so stupid. Looking down the nose. And the Jewish believers passing judgment and condemning them. And it's when we engage in these things that we create shibboleths, isn't it? Little tests of whether we're going to really be in fellowship with him or her or them. Or whether we're only really going to be in fellowship with them, once we've sorted them out on a and b and c.

Remember the story of the shibboleths in the book of Judges? It's actually worth just reading a couple of verses there, because the story is so marvelous. In this conflict between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites. Just listen to it. "The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. And when any of the fugitives of Ephraim said, 'let me go over', (that is let me go over the ford), the man of Gilead said to him, are you an Ephraimite? When he said, 'No, I'm not.'" (He was but he said no, I'm not.) Many of you know what they then said, "They said to them, 'then say Shibboleth.' And if he said Sybil, eth, (which was the way they said it), they cut them down."

It's like me saying to an Englishman say "lock". You want to cross the border, say "lock". Now most English people don't have that {makes the specific accent sound} sound. And so they say "lawk". Well, I better not go there. Or vice versa. And you see these little, these little signs. And they magnify themselves. And we become alienated from one another.

Now, you know, I think there are tests for this in our fellowship with one another. If my first reaction to a fellow believer is to see and draw attention to those areas of application and outworking, in which he differs from me, if that's the first thing I see, then I'm in danger of raising that into a Shibboleth. Or if my second reaction is either to tend to look down my nose at him and see myself as superior, as the strong are likely to do, or to back off and to condemn. Then I am in precisely the situation that the apostle Paul is seeking to dissolve by His grace. Because he's not only an apostle, he's a pastor. And one of the things you discover as a pastor, because it's your duty, as well as your privilege to love all equally. You commit yourself to that -- to love all equally and then you discover that those you love equally don't equally love one another. But have these barriers, these huddles, in which they don't engage in real fellowship with one another because of the Shibboleth. And that's why Paul's first exhortation is that we should welcome all those whom Jesus Christ has welcomed.



And that leads us. Thirdly, and to the directives that he gives to the fellowship. There's the description of the situation and general terms. The dangers inherent in the situation. And then I want you to notice the directives that he gives on these directives emerge from a heart and a mind that is submersed in the Gospel in what Jesus Christ has done. And in what Jesus Christ's Spirit accomplishes in those He unites to Jesus Christ. And the first principle obviously, is welcome the weak. You are strong. You are free. You have a conscience that has been instructed more fully by the word of God. Don't you dare despise somebody whose conscience you believe has been less clearly instructed, but rather welcome him. And incidentally, no, *Yes, but*s about this. Let's have no *yes-butteriness* in our fellowship. "*Oh, yes, I uh. But*" No, says Paul, welcome him, and not to quarrel over opinions.

Second, do not dare to pass judgment on another believer. Why? Because no other believer is your servant. And you and I are not the masters of any other believer. You don't pass judgment on someone who stands or falls before another master. And the amazing thing is that Paul says, *You may condemn this individual, but surprise, surprise, the Lord Jesus Christ died just as much for him or her as for you, and that Lord Jesus Christ, who died in order to be their master, is able to make them stand before His judgment, and will make them stand before His judgement.*

Then you notice in verses six through nine, he says this, this is very helpful, I think, in very challenging. He says, *Think the gospel through clearly, but always honor conscientious motivation, of devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ.* You know, you see what he's saying. He's saying, you know, the possibility is that I look at our fellow Christian who hasn't worked the gospel through as fully as I have. And I draw a line from that to the notion he's not as committed to the Lord Jesus, as I am. Come on now, says the Apostle Paul. The very reason he or she lives this way, is out of commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. That's why they don't eat the meat. That's why they do observe the days. It's the way in which however, uninstructed more fully by the gospel they need to be they are expressing their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. And it should be crystal clear to all of us that it's possible to be more correct theologically, with less devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ than another believer has. So he says, Be careful. And recognize he says, this is your brother.

That's something isn't it? And then he adds most solemnly. And remember that for this too, you will have to give an account before God. Now, remember what our Lord Jesus said, because Paul, I think, is clearly echoing it here in Matthew chapter 25, isn't it? In the great picture of the judgment when the sheep and the goats are on the left hand and right hand of the Savior and the Savior's canon of judgment is this... Now mark this carefully, the Savior's canon of judgment is "in as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers. You've done it to me." And so too despise the weak is to despise the Savior who died for the weak. And Paul

had actually said that, it's absolutely amazing! He had said in Romans chapter five, it was when we were weak, that Christ died for us. And the implication here is that I need to drag to the cross, any a sense of demeaning my fellow brother or sister, and let it die there for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, my friends, the thought, fleetingly passed through my mind this week, I wonder if I should mention some of the things that might divide us. And then I think I had the wisdom to realize that that might divide us. And so I make this appeal to you. If there is in relationship to a group of believers, or an individual believer in our church family, if there is that disposition of, I welcome them -- but. I keep my distance. Take this word from Paul. Jesus, went the distance in order to welcome them. And you and I, by God's grace, need to do the same.

Well, he's not done with this, but umm. I think that's enough to be going on with, don't you? To help us, really to be the family of Jesus Christ here. Let's pray together.

**CLOSING PRAYER:**

Heavenly Father, what a marvel, your word is that it addresses us in these issues in which we are in need of such help and guidance, so that we can be secure. You, you give us instincts. Blood bought instincts to love one another, and to care for one another, and to give ourselves to one another. And then we get all cluttered up at times like these Roman Christians and get into our little groups, and we begin to fire arrows at other believers because we are strong and we think they are weak or because we have strong consciences and condemned those who have been liberated from the things that we feel so bound to. And it's such a scary thing for us to think that our Lord Jesus didn't wait until we'd sorted ourselves out. Before he came toward us, and died for us and welcomed us. And we pray for the grace with fresh and full hearts instructed by your word. We have so many questions, so many things to work out. Actually, we thank you that you that you haven't just sent down an enormous rule book from heaven, but you sanctify us actually in the process of thinking through how the gospel works out in our life together in fellowship. And we pray that by your grace, we may be able to do that more and more. And the wonderful, mutual embrace of the love of Jesus Christ for us, will help us to embrace all those whom Jesus Christ has embraced -- before they get sorted out. And before we are fully sorted out, in order that we may walk, arm in arm, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder as members of the family of our great Savior. So help us Lord, and make us more and more a family and a fellowship that brings honor to the Savior, who has died for us all. We pray this in his name, amen.