

Food Fight
Romans 14:1-4
ABC 3/26/17

If someone spends a lot of time talking about something, it's usually because they're interested in it & think it's important. Apparently Paul is interested in the way Christians treat each other, since he writes on this subject at length. Rom 14 begins a new section & it's one of the book's longest. Why does Paul give so much space discussing why Christians need to accept those with whom they disagree on non-essential opinions? Is something as *minor* as accepting & getting along with other Christians really that important? Paul thought so. As he's moved into the living out the gospel part of his letter he's written:

- 2 vss on the need to be transformed (12:1-2);
- 6 vss on serving each other with our spiritual gifts (12:3-8);
- 5 vss on how to act in church (12:9-13);
- 8 vss on how to respond to your enemies (12:14-21);
- 7 vss on how to respond to civil authority (13:1-7);
- 7 vss on how to live in light of Christ's return (13:8-14).¹

Now he gives 36 vss telling us how to get along with one another, in spite of our differences. As I think back over my years of ministry, I don't recall anyone ever asking me if it was wrong to lie, cheat, steal, murder, or commit adultery. Neither do I think any Christian's ever asked me if they should read the Bible, pray, love each other, or tell others about Jesus. The Bible is crystal clear about these things. But there are always questions about grey areas or debatable things. What does the Bible say about these things? Open your Bibles to Rom 14. The specific issue in this chapter is how a church can hold together when people have different views on secondary matters. Paul is writing about personal convictions, not the absolutes or fundamentals of the faith. Paul is gracious & gentle in his instructions concerning the **weak** believers because there was no heresy here, only a difference of understanding in the matter of Christian convictions & liberties. The way Paul sums up that difference is by saying that some were **weak** & others **strong**. His instructions are to **accept** each other (14:1; 15:7). **14:1-9** PRAY

James Montgomery Boice says,

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans vol 4*, p 1723

We are probably right to conclude that Paul is not thinking of any one area of action or belief specifically, though he throws out suggestions, but rather that he is intentionally being quite general... the problem is that Christians are always dumping on one another. Instead of getting on with living their own lives as best they can to the glory of God or ... they are wasting their time trying to find fault with one another. They do not trust what God is doing in the other Christian. We have to stop that behavior, Paul says. We must accept & support one another if we are to hear & heed what Paul is saying in this last major section of the letter.²

We have 2 people here representing 2 groups (or probably more than 2 groups because believers from Jewish backgrounds avoided meat for different reasons than believers from Gentile backgrounds did). Paul illustrates with one man who has faith to eat all things no matter where or how it was killed & cooked. The **weak** person eats only vegetables. Before we get into it, we need to know that on the issue of food, the NT is clear that we have freedom. The OT dietary regulations for Israel were for the purpose of separating them from the pagan nations around them & the pagan practices of those nations. Those laws came after 2500 years of history when God chose to establish Israel as a nation & give them His law on Mount Sinai. Most of those laws didn't matter for 2500 years, so it isn't right to claim that Israelite nutrition & culinary practices were God's plan for humans throughout history. Whenever God gave dietary regulations, it had to do with offerings of worship & with distinctions between His people & the world around them. Now before anyone gets offended or claims I'm against healthy eating, let me clarify that we're all free to eat what we believe is healthy & we can avoid what we don't think is healthy. But you must see it as a freedom issue. It was the **weak in faith** who ate only vegetables because they didn't understand they could eat anything. They probably ate veggies because they couldn't feel sure that meat was prepared under totally kosher guidelines or in total separation from idolatry. That led them to avoid all meat, which they were free to do, but they didn't need to do. The only food sin is eating too much or worshipping food or worshipping your appearance so much you starve yourself. & all those are issues that flow out of what we desire in our hearts, not what we put in our mouths. That's how Jesus framed this issue when He taught on it. Jesus did away with the OT dietary laws because they were no longer needed after His sinless life fulfilled the law. Turn to **Mk 7:14-19** & let's read what Jesus taught.

² Boice, J. M. *Romans: The New Humanity*, Vol 4, p 1725

Let me paraphrase: *Don't you get it? It's not about what you eat, it's about what you want & worship & how that comes out in what you do.* Sin starts from within us & Jesus declared all foods clean (19). Eat what you want (or your doctor or wife lets you eat). Mark was writing under the guidance of Peter who understood this lesson well, though he'd struggled with it at times (Acts 10). When we have the knowledge that God created all things & owns all things (1 Cor 8:6-7), then we'll trust we can eat all things no matter how or where it was killed. Then, as 1 Cor 10:25-26 say, we can eat whatever is put before us without asking any questions, **for the earth is the Lord's, & all it contains.** With that freedom understood, we can have strong faith to eat all things & be protected against wrong applications of the OT & wrong additions to the NT. It's all clean because God made it all to be enjoyed. Whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we can do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

1. What Does It Mean to Be Weak in Faith? 1a

It's significant that the word Paul uses to describe the **weak** brother is often used for the word *kosher* in the Greek translation of the OT.³ It's likely that Jewish scruples about diet were one thing Paul had in mind. We shouldn't overlook the fact that Paul was writing to Rome from Corinth & he'd faced a form of this problem there (1 Cor 8:1–13 & 10:23–33). But it wasn't just Jews who weren't eating meat. In the pagan world of that day animals were continually being offered as sacrifices at their temples. The animals weren't burnt up nor thrown away. After the offerings were made, the priests would present the meat for sale in the marketplaces. Those who went to buy meat would end up with meat from animals that had been sacrificed to idols. What was a Christian to do if he went to a friend's home & meat like this was served? Wouldn't eating it somehow defile the Christian or give legitimacy to pagan practices? At the least, weren't Christians supporting pagan religions financially by buying the meat they were selling? Paul answered that *an idol is nothing at all* (8:4-5) & that a Christian should feel perfectly free to eat the meat. For the sake of those whose consciences might be hurt by this, however, we should be sensitive & not impose our freedom on our weaker brother. In a manner parallel to what he says

³ Gerhard Kittel, editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol 1, p 490

a bit further on in Romans, Paul wrote, **Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble** (1 Cor 8:13). So what are we to do about matters of eating or not eating or similar matters? The important thing in Romans is that Paul's not even dealing with this issue as one to be resolved, but rather with the attitude that either scorns or condemns other Christians. That's the issue! Not the eating or not eating. In other words, what you eat or don't eat doesn't matter, so stop arguing about it! **2**

The **weak** avoid meat & the **strong** are free to eat it. But notice that avoiding meat, the behavior of the **weak**, isn't sin, but is God-honoring behavior. Vs 1 tells us they're acting **weak in faith** not with *no faith*. What they're doing is faith-driven. Paul says in vs 23, **Whatever is not from faith is sin** & he doesn't accuse the **weak** of sinning. The weak brother here is literally **weak in the faith**. This doesn't mean he doesn't trust in Jesus as his Savior or that he's confused about the gospel. Rather, Paul says the one who is weak in faith eats vegetables only, apparently for religious reasons, not for health reasons. He thinks eating meat somehow would damage his relationship to God. He doesn't understand the full ramifications of faith in Christ that frees us from the law (Rom 7:1-6). The **strong** brother knows that eating or not eating meat has no effect on one's relationship with God, so it doesn't bother his conscience to eat a rib-eye or even a slice of ham or bacon. Paul says the weaker brother is not to judge the brother who eats meat, **for God has accepted him** (3). He assumes both the **weak** & the **strong** are the Lord's servants & they're doing what they do out of a desire to please God (4, 6). These non-essential matters do not determine whether a person is saved or not. A person is saved if God has accepted him. God accepts sinners when they turn from trusting in their own works & trust in the death & resurrection of Jesus to forgive their sins. Those who've been accepted by God live to please God. They may need to learn what pleases God, but that is their desire. We shouldn't immediately jump to the conclusion that someone who does things we don't approve of, but isn't sin, is not saved or is a 2nd class Christian. He may need to grow, but so do you. We may never agree on the particular issue, but if it's a secondary matter where Scripture isn't specific, then we may need to agree to

disagree & we shouldn't accuse each other of not being saved. Another evidence that the abstinence of the **weak** is God-honoring behavior is found in 6.

Did you notice how much credit Paul gives to the **weak** Christian? His behavior is God-directed & he's deeply thankful as he abstains. This **weak** brother is acting in faith & he's God-centered & overflowing with thanks to God. Is this what you think of when you think of **weak**? Another thing to see about the **weak** brother's abstinence from meat is it isn't because he thinks this is the way he's justified or saved or accepted by God. This **weak** brother isn't like the Judaizers in Galatia who thought circumcision was essential to salvation (Gal 5:1-3). We know this because Paul was furious with that false gospel (Gal 1:6-9), but he gives no criticism of these **weak** brothers in Rome. They don't think their abstinence earns God's acceptance or earns their salvation. One more thing we see in the **weak** one's abstinence from meat is that they regard it in some sense as **unclean**. 14

Paul wouldn't have said this if it was irrelevant to the situation. The **weak** viewed meat in some sense **unclean**. They were so concerned with offending God they chose only to eat vegetables & stay away from meat. They were immature in their understanding & needed to grow. But they weren't promoting heresy that undermined the gospel. So Paul's concern was the potential divisions among Christians because they were wrongly judging one another over secondary matters.

2. Why Does Paul Call Them Weak? What's **weak** about not eating meat? It's based on faith, God-honoring, & expressing gratitude to God & not self-sufficiency. So how is it **weak**? & I hope you see Paul's pretty impressed with the **weak**. He's thankful for them. He's practicing what he's preaching. He's accepting the weak (1) & certainly not despising them (3). So what's their weakness? I think the answer is the same as the answer to the question why they view meat as **unclean**. If we could understand that, I think we'd see why Paul calls them **weak**. It seems to me the **weak** regard meat as **unclean** because they believe eating meat won't bring glory to God as much as abstaining will. I base this on the end of vs 6 where it says that **He who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, & gives thanks to God**. In other words, the **weak** one is making his choices

on the basis of what he believes will most honor & express gratitude to God. They are good, well-motivated choices given his convictions. He must believe that those who eat meat don't honor God as much as they would if they didn't eat meat. Why they believed this, Paul doesn't say. What's important to know is Paul believed they were wrong in this conviction. The belief that there's something about meat that makes not partaking of it more honoring to God was a mistake. They lacked the knowledge that would support & liberate their faith. They knew God, they loved God, & they trusted God. But they didn't understand something that would've strengthened their faith. What knowledge did they lack? Paul makes the connection between lack of knowledge & weakness in 1 Cor 8:6-7. He's dealing with a situation similar, though not the same, to the one in Rome. He says, **1 Cor 8:6-8**.

Paul gives us a connection between lack of knowledge & weakness. **Not all men have this knowledge**. What knowledge? The knowledge that all creation is from God & through Christ & for God. & lacking this knowledge, eating certain things are viewed in themselves as less honoring to God. Paul puts it this way in 1 Cor 10:25-26, **Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking question for conscience' sake; *For the earth is the Lord's, & all it contains***. The faith to eat what you will to the glory of God is based on the fullness of knowledge that **the earth is the Lord's & all it contains**. The **weak** lacks this knowledge, & maybe other knowledge as well, & therefore their faith is limited in its exercise. The **strong**, on the other hand, have a fuller understanding of God & His relation to the world & are freed by this truth to embrace more of God's creation in a God-glorifying way. In Paul's thinking, the **weak** & the **strong** are both God-centered thankful people. Their differences are in their convictions about what behaviors are **unclean** & what behaviors give God more glory. & even with this, the differences only relate to non-essential things. You can see this as we turn to the question of...

3. How Should We Treat Each Other When We Have Differences? He says it positively in vs 1 & negatively in vs 3. In vs 1 he tells us to be accepting of the weaker brother & be sure that as you welcome him into your life, you keep divisive questionings to a minimum. I take that to mean questionings about non-essential matters. The positive instruction Paul gives about how the

strong & **weak** should treat each other is to welcome & accept each other. Don't let yourself pass judgment over non-essentials & create barriers to unity & fellowship. Receive the **weak** into friendship & fellowship. There's an affection & commitment & care & kindness. Love shows patience with people who are weaker & are learning & growing & striving to honor the Lord with what they do. The **weak** are trying to live by faith & trying to honor the Lord. We need to be sure our motive is to love people & not just fix them or make them perfect *like we are*. The negative way of saying it is in **vs 3**.

The word **contempt** means to view as worthless, to disdain or disrespect someone because of their preferences or opinions. You might not be arguing with them in public but you truly despise them. The word **judge** carries the idea of isolation or separation. Typically, the **strong** are tempted to treat the weak with contempt & look down on them. Paul hasn't done that in this chapter & we shouldn't either. & usually the **weak** will be tempted to judge the **strong** because the strong seem to be spiritually careless. So the **weak** are tempted to point out behavior they think is wrong. They aren't legalists who say you aren't saved if you do that, but if you're spiritually careless like that you may dishonor God. As you know, pride is usually at the root of problems over minor issues. We baptize our pride by claiming we're defending God's Word & we're protecting others from heresy. But the truth is, we're proud that we're *right* on some minor point on which others haven't yet seen the light. Or we take pride in keeping some manmade rules that *less spiritual* believers don't keep. By judging others, we feel superior to them. But this is the sin of pride. We must recognize that in every church there will be differences & we must be careful to deal with these differences with humility & love.

One pastor found this out the hard way. He was personally convinced it was a sin to eat chocolate, among other vices. He decided to have a visual demonstration that would add emphasis to his sermon & teach his people a lesson they'd never forget. As he began his sermon, he placed 4 worms in 4 separate jars. The 1st was put in a container of alcohol; the 2nd in a container of cigarette smoke; the 3rd worm was put in a container of chocolate syrup; & the 4th in a container of dirt. Then, the preacher preached against the sins of the 1st 3.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the minister showed his congregation the following results:

- The first worm in the alcohol – dead;
- The second worm in the cigarette smoke – dead;
- The third worm in the chocolate syrup – dead;

- The fourth worm in the good clean soil – alive!

The minister then asked, *What have you learned from this demonstration?* A little old lady in back, quickly said, *As long as you drink, smoke, & eat plenty of chocolate, you'll never have worms.*⁴

Things the Bible doesn't forbid are open to personal preference. What we must do is accept one another, even if our preferences are different. That's what Paul takes up in the end of vs 3-4. He mentions 3 great truths that give a firm foundation for accepting each other even with our differences.

A) God Has Accepted Us in Jesus Vs 1 tells us, *Accept!* This means to take to one's self; to receive into fellowship or companionship.⁵ The word is used by Paul as he exhorted Philemon to receive Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, as a brother, to welcome him home as if he were receiving Paul himself (Philemon 1:10-17). It's also used in Rom 15:7 of Christ receiving the believer to Himself. Vs 3 tells us **God has accepted him**. Loving people like God loves us in Christ means accepting them right where they are no matter the differences of opinion we have. God accepts us in Christ based on what Jesus has already accomplished for us so we're accepted & loved unconditionally, not based on our performance. Aren't you glad for that? Jesus accepted us by His grace, so we can & should show grace to one another in how we accept each other. The **strong** & **weak** should accept each other because God has welcomed each of us who have faith in the saving work of Jesus. God has already accepted the other Christian as they are. We know this by definition since a Christian is one who stands before God not on the basis of his own righteousness but because of the work of Jesus. Since the other believer's been accepted by Jesus, you should accept him too. This doesn't mean everything the other Christian does is right any more than everything you do is right. But it means they're accepted because of Christ's death on their behalf. In other words, the basis of their acceptance is not their works but Christ's work. The **weak** & the **strong** believe in Jesus who died for them. They're accepted by God in Christ. We're to accept those whose choices may be quite different from ours because **God has accepted him**. Since we're accepted by grace apart from our works, obviously we need to accept

⁴ <http://media.colonial.org/files/PDFs/CBC/Grey%20Matters%20Part%201.pdf>

⁵ Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek NT*, p 379

other believers on the same basis. To put it another way, who are we to reject the person whom God has accepted? We should accept them even if we don't agree on all debatable issues.

B. God Will Be Our Judge How do we get over our natural, but destructive tendency, to scorn or judge believers who don't have the same convictions on secondary issues we have? **4a**

Paul is saying, *Stop & think! What right do any of us have to judge the personal opinions of other believers?* Paul's not talking about doctrine or sinful behavior. He's talking about questionable areas, matters of conscience, & personal conviction. We aren't omniscient, so we don't know all the facts. We're unable to see into people's hearts & we cannot read their motives. We all must understand that we will all give an account to our one Master in heaven. The other Christian doesn't answer to you but to God. You don't need to elect yourself as judge. Leave it to God. Why is it so hard for us to realize this? You are not their master. God is. We need to remember it's not only other Christians who give an account to God, but you will have to as well. If that is true, don't you think you have enough to be concerned about without trying to straighten everyone else out? Of course, no one is always right in everything they do, but let Jesus worry about straightening them out, especially in those areas that don't really matter. In the meantime, worry about your own accountability & determine that when you stand before Jesus you'll hear Him say of you, **Well done, good & faithful servant** (Mt 25:21, 23). The 1st foundation of our accepting one another is that God has accepted us & the 2nd is God will be our judge, it isn't our job. 3rd ...

C. God Will Make Us Stand in the Last Day 4b

In other words, I didn't save the one with whom I differ, God did. I'm not the one who will keep & perfect him, God is. I'm not his Lord & Judge, God is. So I need to let God be God & trust He'll deal appropriately with my brother on these non-essential matters if He thinks they need correcting. But my job is to love my brother, accept him in Christ, & trust God to work in his life. Paul goes beyond the statement that believers have a Judge in heaven here. He now says, *Every believer will be upheld in the judgment.* Every believer will stand & be accepted in the last day. The Lord is the reason that a true Christian will not fall away. God is the source of our eternal security. That doesn't mean we'll never sin or trip up or fall temporarily. It means we rest our

security in the Lord, not in ourselves or our ability to keep ourselves from falling. We lean on Him, long for Him, & love Him as our Protector & Provider. The point is we should trust the Lord to protect & preserve every other Christian & that can bring freedom to the way we treat them. The weakest believer you know will stand glorious & vindicated & loved & forgiven & righteous & accepted in the last day. Therefore, welcome, receive, & accept one another into unity & harmony & fellowship, not on the basis of divisive ideas about non-essentials but on the basis of the glorious truths that God has accepted the Christians from whom we differ. Dwell on these great truths, & accept one another with our differences in non-essentials.

Here are 5 brief points of ...

4. Application A. Make Up Your Own Mind Only the confident can truly accept others. Study the issue, whatever it is, until you're confident of your position. (That doesn't mean you can't change your mind later, it means you come to a place where you don't agonize over it constantly.) Once you're confident, you won't feel the need to attack people who believe differently nor to defend yourself when others attack you. If you know what you believe, it's easier to talk graciously with those who hold differing views.

B. Give Others the Right to do the Same. If you have the right to your opinion, others have the right to theirs, even if it differs from yours. Give others the same rights that we claim for ourselves.

C. Enlarge Your Circle of Friends. By that I mean make sure you associate with those who disagree with you about some things. It's good to have friends who truly like you but don't see eye-to-eye with you on every issue. Just because someone has a different opinion than you is no reason to give them the stink eye, the silent treatment, the cold shoulder, & cut them out of your life.

D. Focus on Things that Unite Not Divide. This ought to go without saying, but I need to emphasize it because there's something in our nature that wants to divide us into groups. The great unifying factor for the people of God is the Lord Jesus Christ. He's broken down the wall that separated us from God. In Him we're joined together in the body of Christ. Read the great

list in Eph 4 of the things that unite us: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God & Father of all (4-6). These are the primary issues of the Christian life. These are the things that have always been believed by all Christians everywhere. They unite the body of Christ across generations & geographic, political, racial, & national boundaries. Focus on these things! They matter far more than all these other issues. Remember the words often attributed to Augustine: *In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity.*⁶

E. Live So No One Can Criticize Your Decisions. That means living a life marked by gracious humility, kindness, compassion, love for others, honesty, integrity, & hope. If these things are present in your life, then it won't matter whether or not you only eat veggies. & if those things aren't present in your life, then what you eat or don't eat won't matter anyway. Live so those who disagree with you look up to you as a model worth following.

It's lunch time. Maybe your idea is to cook some steaks or lobster tails, homemade bread, loaded baked potatoes, & an apple pie with ice-cream & cheddar cheese for dessert. Sounds good to me. Or maybe you prefer to serve tofurkey with bean sprouts & soy milk. For dessert you dip asparagus in chocolate. That doesn't trip my trigger, but what I prefer doesn't matter at all! Here's Paul's point: If you want to cook some steaks, cook some steaks. If you want to have tofu & chocolate-covered veggies, have at it. It doesn't matter to God! He's not up in heaven checking your menu to see if it passes muster. Eat what you want & don't feel you need to explain yourself to anyone else. The danger is the meat-eaters will look down on the vegetarians & the vegetarians will act holier-than-thou to the meat-eaters. But we mustn't fall into that trap. Accept one another. Adjust your attitude & refuse to argue about these things. Each one of us will answer to God, not to each other. Accepting others in the Lord will go a long way to stopping food fights from ever happening in the church. Instead, rest in God's love for you in Christ & show that love to others. Whether you're **weak** or **strong** & whether others are **weak** or **strong**, focus on the essential command of love rather than the non-essentials where you may differ. & pray for God to teach all of us to accept one another & walk together in love.

⁶ Find the whole story here: <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/quote.html>