



The Book of
ROMANS

Small Group Study 4: Romans 12–16

Week Three: Romans 14:1–23

Key Verses

- “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”
- Romans 14:17 (CSB)

Key Principles

- Every Christian should act in a way that seeks to honor the Lord.
- Arguing with, despising, or judging one another based on human opinions dishonors God and minimizes the work of Christ on our behalf.
- When our convictions are rooted in Christ—in God’s Word and our love for others—the church can, and will, be unified.

Read

Think about two cultures, families, or societal classes that haven’t blended together well. American churches, for example, have long struggled to find unity in a nation with a history of racial divisions.¹ Sunday mornings are still separated significantly along ethnic lines, as Christians of different backgrounds worship in different places. What is happening now is not an exact analogy to what was happening in Paul’s day, but thinking about both situations helps us to understand the cultural climate of the New Testament and how we can apply Paul’s letter to our current context.

Inside the Roman church, cultural practices and preferences divided Christians from Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Instead of accepting one another as God has accepted them, varying opinions regarding what to eat and how to throw a party were met with judgment and disdain. Arguments justifying one’s own actions and condemning those who differed were prevalent. Paul seeks to address such issues in Romans 14 with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul explains repeatedly throughout Romans 1–11 that a life pleasing to God is only possible through the cleansing, sacrificial blood of Christ. Now, in chapter 14, Paul directly addresses the divisions within the church, building on the foundation of the first 11 chapters. Both groups, Jews and Gentiles, had disagreements over how to act in ways that reflect God’s righteousness, and in their disputes, they had forgotten what brought them together in the first place: the righteousness of Christ.

There are two sides to every dispute. Within Romans 14, Paul uses the terms “weak” and “strong” to differentiate between two groups of Christians. By this, Paul is not implying that one is better than the other. The term “weak” refers to Christians who likely come from a culture where food was ceremonially sacrificed to false gods (1 Corinthians 10:14–22). Thus, such foods—even when they may not have been used to honor false gods—would always remind this weak group of idol worship. The weak group also wanted everyone to observe more holidays with strict religious observances. In these ways, the weak brothers and sisters found it difficult to embrace the freedom they have in Christ and see previously forbidden foods as honoring to God, and they began to view certain behaviors with a sense of legalism. The strong group, conversely, felt free to eat any type of food and to view all days as equal in God’s sight.

Paul encourages *both* sides to not get hung up on these issues. One view is not better than the other. Neither set of rules is completely right. Remember, the Christian life of living sacrifice (12:1) is not about obedience to rules; it’s about faith in Christ. Paul points out that both groups can continue to honor Christ with their convictions. The weak brother or sister may choose to abstain from eating certain foods or to observe certain days, the strong can do the opposite, and both groups can honor God with their convictions (14:3–5). The crucial point is that **every Christian should act in a way that seeks to honor the Lord** (14:6–8).

This is how the gospel helps us handle disputes like this. Any one of us will be tempted to spend too much time debating which lifestyle choices are most pleasing to God. When we do this, we often put too much emphasis on our opinions and forget that God is the true Judge. According to this passage, the work of God is what was accomplished in the gospel: Christ died and lived again so we could become members of his kingdom with *him* as our Lord and Judge (14:9). His kingdom is “not [a matter of] eating or drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (14:17). Followers of Christ should place their trust in *Christ’s* righteousness, not their own; they should be careful not to elevate human opinion since Jesus is the ultimate Judge. He has accepted both the weak and the strong into his kingdom (14:3). Because of this, we must accept one another. **Arguing with, despising, or judging one another based on human opinions dishonors God and minimizes the work of Christ on our behalf.**

1 For further reading, see Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

God's acceptance of us in Christ redefines what is clean or unclean. In other words, the gospel provides a new freedom in our behavior, as we are accepted by grace and not specific behaviors. This freedom in Christ will lead Christians to a variety of opinions regarding which everyday decisions are most honoring to God. Paul's goal here is that Christians not condemn one another because of their disagreements. Disagreements between brothers and sisters in Christ can be appropriate, but we should never judge or condemn one another for our respective convictions.

Indeed, Paul commands both parties not to elevate human opinions above our unity in Christ. We must not judge or despise. When we sense the Holy Spirit giving us personal convictions and preferences, let's avoid forcing our views onto others in the body. If our freedoms and practices might cause others in the body to stumble, may we be willing to lovingly set aside our freedom and abstain (14:15). As verses 18–19 explain, followers of Christ are not to allow rules about food or human opinion to come before honoring and worshiping him, or cause division between those for whom he sacrificed himself. For example, Christians can hold different opinions about worship styles, political involvement, financial commitments, or education choices. These decisions are important and should be made from a place of faith in Christ, but Christians can come to different personal conclusions without losing fellowship with each other.

Paul's words urge us to examine our convictions. Are our convictions truly from the Lord? Or are we clinging to cultural practices and preferences as a form of self-righteousness? Even with the best of intentions, no human culture gains more direct favor with God. Paul wants readers to know that Jesus is the only way to obtain righteousness. And **when our convictions are rooted in Christ—in God's Word and our love for others—the church can, and will, be unified.**

Study Guide

The following study questions are meant to help us wrestle with the text of Romans and see how the gospel displays God's righteousness. Set aside some time this week to meet with God and answer these questions for yourself. Complete each question *before* your weekly small group meeting. Then, when you gather with your small group, be prepared to discuss your answers together.



**Read Romans 1:16–17 to remain focused on Paul's major points.
Then, read Romans 14:1– 23 in preparation for this week's study.**

Highlight

Circle all the instances where Paul refers to God in Romans 14, including words such as "God," "the Lord," and "Christ."

Highlight any Old Testament quotations in Romans 14. Where are they from? Go back and read those verses in their Old Testament context.

Underline each time you see words related to "honor," "thanks," or "give thanks" in Romans 14:1–7. In what specific ways is Paul encouraging readers to "honor" or "give thanks"?

Where do you see sets of opposites in Romans 14:1–23 such as "weak" and "strong" or "living" and "dead"? List out the verses where you see these contrasting words.

Explain

What does it mean to be “weak” and “strong” in the context of Romans 14?

Why does Paul encourage his audience to avoid a judgmental attitude?

Read Isaiah 45:23–25 and summarize it in one or two sentences. How does this passage help Paul reinforce what he is saying in Romans 14?

According to the context of Romans 14:5–9, what does it mean to live and die “for the Lord” (14:8), and why should we do it?

Apply

Romans 14 raises an important idea—the freedom we all have in Christ allows for differences of opinion in many instances. What are some areas where Christians can agree to disagree?

Ask the Spirit to convict you of ways you previously have discouraged others in the body and “torn down” the work of God (14:20), even if it was unintentional. What are some practical steps you can take to “build up” someone with whom you disagree on a particular issue (14:19)?

How can you and your small group listen well to each other and honor the Lord in areas where you might have differences of opinion? (Possible areas of discussion could include worship styles, political involvement, financial commitments, education choices, or other preferences.)

How can Romans 14 impact conversations with your One? Does your One see your life as one ruled by Jesus and his righteousness? (Possible areas of discussion could include worship styles, political involvement, financial commitments, education choices, or other preferences.)

Respond in Prayer

Each week of this study guide will include a recommended Scripture passage that helps us focus on the faithfulness of our great God. Set aside some time this week to read through the selected passage and use the prayer prompts below as your guide. We recommend praying through this passage on your own at home *and* together with your small group.

This Week's Prayer Passage: Romans 14:1–23

Read Romans 14:1–23.

Pray through the following prompts, according to the A.C.T.S. method.

- **Adoration:** Reflect on how Jesus is the only perfect, all-knowing, and gracious Judge (14:9–12). Praise him as the One who has died for both the Jew and the Gentile (14:9, 14).
- **Confession:** Admit that we do not always act out of faith (14:5, 9, 22–23). Confess to God the ways that you have tried to stand in his place as judge over others (14:3, 10–12, 22). Confess that we often toil to produce righteousness in ourselves and others rather than resting in what God has provided for us (14:14, 17).
- **Thanksgiving:** Thank God for Jesus. Thank Jesus for being the only Lord and only Judge over the dead and the living (14:8–12). Praise him for being gracious to us, even if we act out of

personal opinions (14:1, 3, 18; 15:7). Finally, thank him for being our righteousness and leading us into repentance.

- **Supplication:** Ask God to help us rest in his righteousness and remind us that any effort to please him on our own will always fall short. Ask the Lord to give you his power to make decisions out of faith in order to give him all the glory (14:6). Ask God to lead you in compassion, humility, and grace as you meet others for whom he died and who may have different opinions than you (14:8–9). Ask God to continuously remind us that he is the gracious Judge, and we are not—nor should we try to be.