

**Romans (88)**  
**Call for Mutual Acceptance for the Strong and the Weak**  
**(Romans 14:1-15:13) (Part 2)**

The section of Paul's Epistle to the Romans that we are presently considering is Romans 14:1-15:13. The apostle was promoting church-wide fellowship in this body of believers that was located in the capital city of the Roman Empire. There were issues that he needed to address and correct, if his desire for them was to be achieved. There existed deep differences of opinion about how Christians were to live according to the will of God. These tended to be regarded as the basis of fellowship in the church. There were some whom Paul referred to as "strong" Christians, who had contempt for the "weak." The "weak" Christians tended to pass judgment upon the "strong", refusing to extend fellowship to them. The matters that separated these two groups were their different convictions on the foods they ate and the religious days that they observed. Their different views existed because of the different convictions that were held by the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians.

We emphasized last week that this problem of disrupted fellowship was a major issue for the apostle. Paul viewed the fellowship of the church, particularly between Jews and Gentiles, to be the realization of the purpose of God in history that results in praise and glory given to God. And so this desire to develop the fellowship of this church was more than an effort of Paul to solve some petty differences. Paul's desire for the glory of God was his greatest concern.

The first paragraph to which we gave our attention last Lord's Day taught the lesson, "Do not Judge Your Brother." The need not to judge was with respect to things that these Christians thought to be important, even essential, in order to live in a manner according to the will of God. Some of them believed that devout Christians should not eat any food but vegetables. They also believed that devout Christians should observe specific religious days before the Lord. These "weak" Christians were prone to criticize, even condemn those Christians who failed or refused to conform to their standards for Christian living. The Christians who were being condemned resented the unjust treatment heaped upon them. There was division in the church over these matters. The apostle urged the Christians to respect one another's convictions and not to impose their personal practices upon others. Every Christian will one day give an account of his life to the Lord Jesus, so you need not, you should not, pass judgment upon others. In the light of the Lord's end time judgment, every Christian had enough regarding his own life and practice to concern him. He should not add the sin of judging other believers to what he will already to give an account.

We now arrive to the next portion of this section of the epistle. This may be identified as comprising the remaining verses of Romans 14, which is in two paragraphs, Romans 14:13-23<sup>1</sup>. The subject of this portion of Romans 14 may be entitled, "Do not make your Christian Brother Stumble." Let us read these verses.

<sup>13</sup>Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. <sup>14</sup>I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. <sup>15</sup>For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup>So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup>For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Here again is an instance in which translators differ on what constitutes a paragraph division. The ESV contains two paragraphs (vs. 13-19 and vs. 20-23). The NKJV has two, but differs from the ESV in that it has different verse divisions (vs. 14-18 and vs. 19-23). The New American Standard Version (NASV) has one paragraph, (vs. 13-23), as does the The Greek New Testament (3rd Edition, United Bible Society).

<sup>18</sup>Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup>So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

<sup>20</sup>Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. <sup>21</sup>It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. <sup>22</sup>The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. <sup>23</sup>But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

**Verse 13** is a conclusion and proposal of the apostle to his readers, *“Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.”* Paul included himself in this word of instruction, “Let *us* not pass judgment...” This is often a good way to press home the command of Scripture in a manner that gets the point across, but in a way that may lesson a strong reaction from the one(s) that you are exhorting. He includes the words, “any longer”, which seem to suggest that Paul recognized that all Christians everywhere have a tendency to find fault and pass judgment upon others. Instead of passing judgment on others, let us purpose “never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” This depicts the Christian as walking with or toward His Lord and the destination to which God called him. It probably speaks of placing in the path of one’s Christian walk a reason for him halting or struggling to continue in his Christian walk. In other words, we should purpose never to be a cause of discouragement to another who professes to be a Christian and who is attempting to live for Him.

A stumblingblock is an impediment in the way over which a person may stumble. An occasion of falling refers literally to a trap. Here these terms are used metaphorically and convey the same thought, namely, that which becomes the occasion of falling into sin. In the most aggravated sense an occasion of falling is placed before a person when the intention is that of seduction; there is deliberate intent that the person may fall. We are not to suppose that the strong in this case are conceived of as actuated by that express intent. But this only accentuates the care that must be taken by the strong in the circumstance of weakness on the side of their brethren. The strong are regarded as placing a stumblingblock when they do not desist from what becomes an occasion of stumbling for the weak brother. What is condemned is the inconsiderateness that disregards the religious interests of the weak.<sup>2</sup>

Now in **verse 14** Paul makes the rather profound statement: *“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”* Here Paul is asserting the teaching that the distinction between clean and unclean foods as set forth in the Law of Moses is no longer to be regarded by Christians. The teaching of Christ and the implications of the realization of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ renders old behaviors obsolete, no longer applicable. For Paul the new era had dawned, and old things have been replaced by the new. Now it should be emphasized that when Paul declared that *“nothing is unclean in itself”*, he was not speaking of foods being unhealthy or healthy. He was declaring that what a person eats or does not eat has no bearing upon his relationship with God.

This change respecting God’s will of the diet of His people reveals a significant principle in our understanding of the nature of God and of His right to command His people in the way that He would have them live. We must not think that God’s law(s) are values or standards that are “above” God or to which God Himself is subject. What constitutes sin is what God has declared to be wrong. Wrong is wrong because God has defined it as such. This is not to say that standards of righteousness are not inherently moral in nature. The righteous standards of God’s laws reflect His holy nature. But respecting matters like foods or special days, they were only regarded by God as clean or unclean because He had designated them as such for a time, not because they were inherently holy in and of themselves. And perhaps it is in the matter of what kinds of food that God has permitted His people that this principle is best illustrated. What

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<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965, vol. 2, p. 187f.

one eats or does not eat is right or wrong solely due to what God has commanded. This can be shown from the different dietary laws that God has imposed upon His people through history.

In the Garden of Eden and after the fall, even unto the occasion of Noah's ark the flood, God had permitted mankind to be vegetarian only; they did not eat meat. We read of our Lord's instructions to Adam in Genesis 1:29, "And God said, ***'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.'***" We also read of this being declared to Adam in Genesis 2:

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food... The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ***"You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*** (Gen. 2:8f, 15-17)

God's will for what people could eat for food changed, however, after the flood. To Noah God declared,

***"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. <sup>2</sup>The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. <sup>3</sup>Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.***

However there was one limitation. We read in Genesis 9:4, "But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood."

But with the Law of Moses God again changed the diet of His people. He established the categories of clean and unclean. Only clean animals were permitted as food. We may read of these detailed laws in Leviticus 11.

And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, <sup>2</sup>"Speak to the people of Israel, saying, 'These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. <sup>3</sup>Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. <sup>4</sup>Nevertheless, among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, ***you shall not eat these***: The camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. <sup>5</sup>And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. <sup>6</sup>And the hare, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. <sup>7</sup>And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. <sup>8</sup>***You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you.***

<sup>9</sup>***These you may eat***, of all that are in the waters. ***Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers, you may eat.*** <sup>10</sup>But anything in the seas or the rivers that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is detestable to you. <sup>11</sup>***You shall regard them as detestable; you shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall detest their carcasses.*** <sup>12</sup>Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you.

<sup>13</sup>***And these you shall detest among the birds; they shall not be eaten***; they are detestable: the eagle, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, <sup>14</sup>the kite, the falcon of any kind, <sup>15</sup>every raven of any kind, <sup>16</sup>the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind, <sup>17</sup>the little owl, the cormorant, the short-eared owl, <sup>18</sup>the barn owl, the tawny owl, the carrion vulture, <sup>19</sup>the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.

<sup>20</sup>***All winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you. <sup>21</sup>Yet among the winged insects that go on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to hop on the ground.*** <sup>22</sup>Of them you may eat: the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any

kind, and the grasshopper of any kind. <sup>23</sup>***But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you...***

<sup>41</sup>“Every swarming thing that swarms on the ground is detestable; ***it shall not be eaten.*** <sup>42</sup>Whatever goes on its belly, and whatever goes on all fours, or whatever has many feet, any swarming thing that swarms on the ground, ***you shall not eat, for they are detestable.*** <sup>43</sup>You shall not make yourselves detestable with any swarming thing that swarms, and you shall not defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them. <sup>44</sup>For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. <sup>45</sup>For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

<sup>46</sup>***This is the law about beast and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms on the ground, <sup>47</sup>to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.***

But now in Romans 14 Paul could say, ***“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.***

There is some indication that the distinction between clean and unclean foods was to show and teach the people of Israel by their diet as the covenant people of God that they were to distinguish themselves from the Gentiles nations who were “unclean” before God. Our Lord taught Peter this great truth, but it was hard for Peter to accept the new ways. We read of the difficulty of the apostle to embrace this new idea about all foods to be regarded as clean by the people of God. We read in Acts 10 of our Lord preparing the apostle Peter to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles. We read beginning in Acts 10:1:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, <sup>2</sup>a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. <sup>3</sup>About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” <sup>4</sup>And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. <sup>5</sup>And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup>He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” <sup>7</sup>When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, <sup>8</sup>and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

<sup>9</sup>The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. <sup>10</sup>And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance <sup>11</sup>and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. <sup>12</sup>In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup>And there came a voice to him: ***“Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”*** <sup>14</sup>***But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”*** <sup>15</sup>***And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.”*** <sup>16</sup>This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

<sup>17</sup>Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate <sup>18</sup>and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. <sup>19</sup>And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you. <sup>20</sup>Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.” <sup>21</sup>And Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?” <sup>22</sup>And they said, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.” <sup>23</sup>So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. <sup>24</sup>And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup>When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his

feet and worshiped him. <sup>26</sup>But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.” <sup>27</sup>And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. <sup>28</sup>And he said to them, **“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”** <sup>29</sup>So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.” (Acts 10:1-29)

Now it took a vision from God to convince Peter of the truth that God has rendered all foods clean, but what had convinced the Apostle Paul? Again we read in Romans 14:14 Paul could say, **“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.”** We see that Paul Himself confessed that he was persuaded **“in (by) the Lord Jesus”**, regarding this matter.<sup>3</sup> It may very well be the case that Paul was referring to our Lord’s own teaching about this matter.<sup>4</sup> We read in Mark 7 of this teaching of our Lord:

<sup>14</sup>And he called the people to him again and said to them, “Hear me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” <sup>17</sup>And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup>And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, <sup>19</sup>since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” **(Thus he declared all foods clean.)** <sup>20</sup>And he said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. <sup>21</sup>For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, <sup>22</sup>coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Paul may have been alluding to this teaching of our Lord that had shown him that foods are not inherently good or evil.

The reference to the Lord Jesus signals that Paul derived his certitude from the Lord Jesus Christ. That is, the statement that nothing is unclean harks back to the words of the historical Jesus in the Gospel tradition (Matt. 15:11; Mark 17:20). The words of Jesus Himself, when rightly interpreted (cf. the editorial comment in Mark 7:19), indicate that foods can no longer defile one.<sup>5</sup>

It should also be noted that in Romans 14:14 in which Paul declared that all foods are clean and therefore permissible to eat, that eating various foods do not commend or condemn a person before God, **Paul was aligning himself with those that he regarded as “strong” in the church at Rome.** And as we had pointed out last week, these would have been principally the Gentile believers in the church at Rome. The “weak” Christians in the church at Rome were Jewish Christians who continued to have regard for the distinctions between clean and unclean foods according to the Mosaic covenant. We should also remind ourselves that Paul’s instruction here is directed principally to the “strong.” It was their responsibility, as directed by love for the brethren, to limit their liberty for the sake of the “faith” of the weak.

After Paul expressed that there are no “unclean” foods for the Christian, he stated in verse 14b, **“but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”** In other words, even though the former classification of unclean foods no longer applies to the Christian, if the “weak” believer eats those foods while believing them to be unclean in his conscience, he makes them unclean unto himself. In other words, he is sinning when he eats those foods because he is violating his conscience.

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<sup>3</sup> The Greek preposition translated “in”, “in the Lord Jesus”, may also be translated “by the Lord Jesus.”

<sup>4</sup> John Murray differs from this idea, saying that Paul’s concern is for his understanding of what it is for a Christian to be “in Christ” that informed his behavior, that “The latter formula (“in the Lord Jesus”) should not be taken as a mere appeal to the teaching of Christ in the days of his flesh (cf. Mark 7:19), although this teaching is relevant.” See Murray, vol. 2, p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 731.

We next read in **verse 15a**, *“For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.”* Again, Paul was giving directions to the Christian that he earlier described as “strong.” The Christian who is strong, who knows that no food in itself is clean or unclean and it matters nothing before God if eaten, he should order his diet when in the presence of a weak brother so as not to cause him to be grieved. Now this is not speaking about offending a Christian because he does not think that you should eat a donut or have a piece of cake. The “weak” Christian that Paul was considering here is one who thought that by eating a certain kind of food that one was defiling himself before God, that he could not live rightly before God because of what he was eating. The bottom line is that we should be concerned that our behavior does not cause others to fall short of the blessing that is in Jesus Christ.

Paul then declared in **verse 15b**, *“By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.”* What did Paul mean to “destroy” the one for whom Christ died? Paul was speaking of the damnation of this “weak” (professing) Christian by having become grieved by the behavior of another Christian.

“Being grieved” on its own is a vague term, but in this context it is linked in the closest possible way with ἀπόλλυε (destroy) (see v. 15). Thus the grief inflicted on the weak is not merely a general feeling of sorrow or injury. The grief causes one to go astray in the faith and experience ruin.<sup>6</sup>

John Murray, however, differs from this position. Even though he addressed the nature of the very strong wording of Paul respecting the “grief” of the weak brother and the association of the word “destroy” with the matter of salvation, Murray stops short of saying that Paul was concerned about the final salvation of the weak.

The strength of the word “destroy” underlies the serious nature of the stumbling that overtakes the weak brother. Are we to suppose that he is viewed as finally perishing? However grave the sin he commits it would be beyond all warrant to regard it as amounting to apostasy. The exhortation “destroy not” is directed to the strong. In a similar situation the weak person is represented as perishing (1 Cor. 8:11). But here likewise it would be beyond warrant to think of apostasy. Furthermore, the destruction contemplated as befalling the weak should not be construed as eternal perdition. All sin is destructive and the sin of the weak in this instance is a serious breach of fidelity which, if not repaired, would lead to perdition. It is upon the character of the sin and its consequence that the emphasis is placed in order to impress upon the strong the gravity of his offense in becoming the occasion of stumbling. It would load the exhortation with implications beyond this intent to suppose the weak believer by his sin is an heir of eternal destruction. It is a warning, however, to the strong believer that what he must consider is the nature and tendency of sin and not take refuge behind the security of the believer and the final perseverance of the saints.<sup>7</sup>

Now, although I am sympathetic with Murray’s position and would prefer to take his view of the matter, it would seem that his view is not best here. The words that Paul used, the mode of expression that Paul employed, seem to suggest that he was concerned about the “weak”, that is professing believer, was in danger of apostatizing if the strong did not deal with him in “love.” This was John Calvin’s view. Regarding verse 15 he wrote:

He now explains how the offending of our brethren may vitiate the use of good things. And the first thing is, -- that love is violated, when our brother is made to grieve by what is so trifling; for it is contrary to love to occasion grief to anyone. The next thing, --that when the weak conscience is wounded, the price of Christ’s blood is wasted; for the most abject brother has been redeemed by the blood of Christ; it is then a heinous crime to destroy him by gratifying the stomach; and we must be basely given up to our own lusts, if we prefer meat, a worthless thing, to Christ.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 734.

<sup>7</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 2, p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Baker Book House, 1993), vol. 19, p. 505.

Interestingly the editor of Calvin's commentary, Henry Beveridge, felt compelled to write a qualifying footnote lest Calvin's words be misconstrued as teaching that true Christians can lose their salvation.

From the words, "destroy not," &c., some have deduced the sentiment that those for whom Christ died may perish forever. It is neither wise nor just to draw a conclusion of this kind; for it is one that is negated by many positive declarations of Scripture. Man's inference, when contrary to God's word, cannot be right. Besides, the Apostle's object in this passage is clearly this, --to exhibit the *sin* of those who disregarded the good of their brother, and to show that sin was *calculated* to do, without saying that it actually effected that evil. Some have very wisely attempted to obviate the inference above mentioned, by suggesting, that the destruction meant was that of comfort and edification. But no doubt the Apostle meant the ruin of the soul; hence the urgency of his exhortation,--"Do not act in such a way as tends to endanger the safety of a soul for whom Christ has shed his blood;" or, "Destroy not," that is, as far as you can do so. Apostles and ministers are said to "save" men; some are exhorted here not to "destroy" them. Neither of these effects can follow, except in the first instance, God grants his blessing, and in the second his permission; and his permission to his people he will never grant, as he expressly told us. See John 10:27-29.<sup>9</sup>

The point Paul is making is that he was concerned about the final salvation of the "weak" being put in jeopardy by the careless and unloving behavior of the "strong" Christian. This is also the position of Douglas Moo:

Paul sharpens his point by issuing a direct command: "Do not because of food destroy one for whom Christ died." This command raises the stakes in two ways. First, instead of speaking generally about the "spiritual harm" (v. 13b) and "pain" (v. 15a) that the "strong" might cause the "weak," Paul stresses that their actions can "destroy" them. "Destroy" might refer to the spiritual grief and self-condemnation that the "weak" incur following the practices of the "strong" against their consciences. But Pauline usage suggests rather that Paul is warning the "strong" that their behavior has the potential to bring the "weak" to ultimate spiritual ruin—failure to attain final salvation. If Paul is not simply exaggerating for effect, perhaps he thinks that the "weak" in faith might be led by the scorn of the "strong" to turn away entirely from the faith.<sup>10</sup>

In **verse 16** Paul gave further instruction to the "strong." "*So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.*" What was it that was regarded as "good"? We might assume that Paul is speaking of the otherwise "good" meat that the strong Christian eats, but leading the weak Christian to think of that food as "evil." But actually what Paul is referring to as "the good" here is the gospel that brings salvation. He was concerned that the "weak" Christian may come to view the Gospel believed and proclaimed by the "strong" Christian to be "evil." By his refusal to believe the true gospel, he would then perish in his sins.

The strong should not cause sorrow to the weak by what they eat but rather should refrain for the sake of the weak. They must beware lest they **destroy** the faith of a brother or sister. If the strong do not act in love, the goodness of the gospel may be wrongly identified as evil, for their lack of love for the weak contradicts Christ's love. God's kingdom centers on the gifts of **righteousness, peace, and joy** granted by the Holy Spirit, so that bodily appetites become secondary.<sup>11</sup>

The offense that a "strong" Christian could cause toward a "weak" believer could be similar to the idea conveyed in our Lord's warning of Matthew 18:5 and 6:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 505f.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 854f.

<sup>11</sup> *The ESV Study Bible* (Crossway Bibles), p. 2181.

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!”

Paul is concerned about a callous lack of love shown by some toward others in the church that could result in people turning away from the truth of the gospel.

We then read in **verse 17**, “*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*” If the “strong” Christian were to grieve the “weak” Christians because of what the strong Christian ate, it might result in reaffirming the errant belief (or faith) that the kingdom of God is received due to what one eats or does not eat, rather than upon the reception of the grace of the Holy Spirit in righteousness, peace, and joy. Here these three gifts of the Spirit are set forth as blessings of the kingdom that persons of faith receive.

Now some may have trouble understanding that Paul was actually speaking of his concern for the eternal salvation of the “weak”, who were in the church at Rome. Consider these words:

How do we explain the eternal destruction of the “weak” in this situation? It seems strange at first glance that the “weak” would be separated from Christ simply by eating meat and drinking wine. Some hints are provided in the text, though not enough to answer this question definitively. Before I offer an answer it is imperative to grasp firmly the danger to which the “weak” are exposed. We have seen that the “weak” are not “grieved” (v. 15) merely if they disagree theologically with the “strong.” Being “grieved” is often understood to denote the feelings of sadness one experiences when others engage in behavior that is deemed inappropriate. We have already seen, however, that the grief intended here relates to eternal destruction. Thus the “weak,” then, is to engage in behavior that is contrary to their faith and conscience. In the community they hide their convictions and partake of food that they consider defiled. This hypocrisy injures their conscience and plunges them toward ruin. Thus Paul argues in verse 14 that even though all foods are clean, they are unclean if anyone “thinks” they are defiled. In other words, it is wrong for the “weak” to eat the foods at issue and drink wine because they are convinced that this eating and drinking are forbidden by God. Their subjective judgment determines whether eating is beneficial for them. They are grieved (v. 15), then, because they are persuaded that they have violated a divine norm. It is understandable that one’s faith would be destroyed if he or she began to engage in behaviors that violated what was understood to be the moral norms of the faith.<sup>12</sup>

Paul concluded this paragraph by stating that the “Strong” Christian who limits his own liberty due to love for the brethren is serving Jesus Christ and is acceptable to God. He will also tend to be approved by others. The paragraph concludes with **verses 18 and 19**:

***Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup>So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.***

Paul then gives further encouragement for the “strong” Christians in the church at Rome to live in a manner that will build the body. He first gives a negative command in **verse 20**:

***<sup>20</sup>Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.***

Here we see the great potential harm that the Christian may bring to the cause of Christ. For the sake of food, one can “destroy the work of God.”

Now how do we understand this? Is not God omnipotent in all of His works? How could the work of God be destroyed by something you or I do or fail to do? Of course God accomplishes all of what He has

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<sup>12</sup> Schreiner, p. 736.

decreed to take place in history. No one can restrain or frustrate God from accomplishing all of His will. But sometimes God begins a work of salvation in a person's life but it is not in His purpose to carry it through to completion. In other words, He may illuminate a person to the reality of his sin, show him the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, that man may even embrace Jesus Christ in "faith", but that faith is not of a saving nature. Then someone comes along and God allows him to "destroy" the work that had been done to that point. Why would God do or allow such a thing? It may serve as warnings to His people that they do not fall into the same error or practice. It may cause some true Christians to repent of belief or behavior that would have resulted in their ruin, but observing another's fall, they are warned.

Now in verse 10b Paul again affirms that belief and practice of those that he had designated as "strong." "Everything is indeed clean." But if the "strong" Christian is not careful, that is, if he is not loving so as to curb himself, then he commits wrong when he causes a brother or sister to stumble.

Paul declares his views plainly in **verse 21**: "***It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.***" The practice of the "weak" was not to eat meat or drink wine. The common practice of the "strong" was to eat meat and drink wine. But the "strong" would be doing a good thing if he did not eat meat or drink wine, or do anything that would result in a Christian brother to stumble. Here "to stumble" would be to abandon the faith. In other words, we are to do all we can do for the spiritual benefit of those about us so that they too would experience the kingdom of God.

Now some churches have sought to codify the restriction of the "strong" out of concern for the "weak" that might be adversely affected by their members' behavior. This church had done so in the last century. I was given a copy of the book, *The History of Leominster*, in which the belief and practice of this Baptist church of Leominster, Massachusetts, are included in an appendix. Here is a statement in the standing resolution of the church:

In view of the evils arising from the use of intoxicating liquor to the church of Christ and the salvation of souls, *Resolved*, that we will individually abstain from the use of liquors as a *drink*.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly this resolution was dropped at some point later in the history of the church. I am curious when this occurred, whether this policy was changed after the disaster of Prohibition that was imposed upon our nation in the "Roaring Twenties." Paul would have regarded this policy to have been the legitimization of the belief and practice of "weak" Christians in the church at Rome. Again, the "strong" Christians in Rome drank wine and ate meat as their common practice.

Now one might ask, since this is the case and the "strong" Christian should abstain from eating meat or drinking wine in the presence of those who have a conviction against doing so, should we not therefore exclusively use grape juice in the Lord's Supper? I do not believe that Paul would have ever allowed the changing of the cup of the Lord's Supper to be grape juice rather than wine, for that would have been a stumbling block for all the Jews, who would have only used wine in the observation of the Passover Meal, the context in which the Lord's Supper was instituted.

Paul again gave approval of what the "strong" may do in the next verse. **Verse 22** reads, "***The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.***" Paul pronounced the one "blessed" who eats meat and drinks wine with a clear conscience before God. Paul commends this one for the knowledge that he has of God and His ways and for his practice before the Lord. He congratulates the one who is "strong" in these matters and can practice these things before the Lord with a clear conscience.

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<sup>13</sup> David Wilder, *The History of Leominster or the Northern Half of the Lancaster New or Additional Grant, from June 26, 1701, the ate of the Deed from George Tailanto, Indian Sagamore, to July 4, 1852* (Fitchburg, 1853), pp. 248f. Interestingly, and to our church's credit, it also took a stand in 1853 against slavery: "Resolved, That we will not withhold our testimony against this sin and consequently against those engaged in it, and that we will not hold in church fellowship or invite to our communion any person who shall buy, sell or willingly hold as property, any man, woman, or child, or accept any such as our pastor or spiritual guide" (p. 249). This was in effect in 1853, eight years before the Civil War.

Throughout this passage Paul never congratulated the “weak” for eating only vegetables and refusing to drink wine. They were “weak” for doing so. In fact he warns the “weak” in **verses 23 and 24**: ***“But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”*** But the apostle cared for the “weak” and taught the “strong” to curtail their liberty for the well-being of the “weak.” He was in fact encouraging the Gentile Christians to be patient and loving toward the Jewish Christians who had difficulty in understanding and living according to the truth of the kingdom of God.

We might address several matters for our consideration in the light of what we read in Romans 14 and what Paul had written in other places in his epistles. First, here in Romans 14 Paul promoted toleration for those Christians who observe special days and restrict their diets as they seek to serve God; however, Paul did not tolerate the least deviation or compromise of Christians regarding holy days or food laws to the Christians at the church at Colossae and the churches in the region of Galatia. To those churches Paul wrote the following words. First, to the church at Colossae he wrote:

<sup>8</sup>Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ... <sup>16</sup> So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, <sup>17</sup>which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ. <sup>18</sup>Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, <sup>19</sup>and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations-- <sup>21</sup>“Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” <sup>22</sup>which all concern things which perish with the using-- according to the commandments and doctrines of men? <sup>23</sup>These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Col. 2:8, 16-23)

To the churches of Galatia Paul wrote,

<sup>9</sup>But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? <sup>10</sup>You observe days and months and seasons and years. <sup>11</sup>I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain. (Gal. 4:9-11)

And so in Romans 14 he advocates toleration and allowance, but in Colossae and Galatia he advocated no compromise, to do so was to deny the gospel. How do we understand this? In those epistles Paul was pressing upon Christians not to deviate or compromise the gospel, which these false teachers were leading them to do, saying that eating specific foods or observing religious days was essential as a means of salvation. Paul would not compromise with them in the least. But in Romans Paul was concerned with behavior of those who might turn away from the true gospel because of their regard for food and holy days that they were observing as Christians before the Lord. It was a different situation with a different problem to be addressed.

May the Lord enable each of us as Christians be mindful of what we do and not do and may the Lord enable us to govern ourselves according to our genuine love for the brethren.