

# Accept the Weaker Brethren

📖 Romans 14:1-4

👤 Pastor Jeremy Thomas

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🌐 [fbgbible.org](http://fbgbible.org)

📍 Fredericksburg Bible Church

107 East Austin Street

Fredericksburg, Texas 78624

(830) 997-8834

We are studying Romans 12-15, which is the application portion of Romans. It is practical, so practical, all of this is grass roots Christianity and anyone interested in living the Christian life is going to nail down Romans 12-15. And when we come to this we don't come to it without doctrine. Romans 1-11 is the doctrine and doctrine comes first, doctrine always comes first. Doctrine teaches us facts, what we are to believe, how we are to think, it tells us reality. In Romans 1-3 Paul taught us the reality that all men are Condemned. In Romans 4-5 he taught us that in reality men are Justified by grace through faith. In Romans 6-8 he taught us that in reality those justified by grace through faith are Sanctified by the Spirit as they walk by grace through faith. In Romans 8 he taught us that in reality those who are justified by grace through faith will be Glorified to reign with Christ in the coming kingdom. In Romans 9-11 he taught us that in reality God has temporarily set the nation Israel aside and is dealing primarily with Gentiles. That is all doctrine and then in Romans 12:1 he referred to the doctrines as "the mercies of God." And he urges us on the basis of "the mercies of God" to present ourselves to Him as a living sacrifice, acceptable to God. He says this is our worship. Observe that worship isn't the singing portion of a church service. Worship is offering yourself to Him as a living sacrifice. Paul then goes on to describe in very practical terms what it looks like when we are offering ourselves to Him as a living sacrifice. He talks about the proper use of spiritual gifts, loving others, blessing others, helping others, praying for others, living peacefully with others, being humble, submitting to governing authorities, loving our fellow citizens and living in light of His any-moment-arrival. If you are doing these things you are worshipping God, this is your spiritual service and it is a reasonable to do in light of "the mercies of God."

Now we come to Romans 14 and here is where a great many Christians are confused. What many Christians think when they come to this chapter is that this is about gray areas. They read that one man can eat all things but another eats only vegetables or one person regards one day above another and another regards every day alike and they say, "This is talking about gray areas. The Bible has gray areas." And that is unfortunately how they look at most of the Bible. The whole thing is just a fog and nobody really knows. I hope that is not you. I hope that you do not come to the Bible or this chapter and say this is all gray. I hope you see that the Bible is very

clear, that it has a perspicuity about it and that this chapter is very clearly about weak brethren and strong brethren. In his respect the chapter is as black and white as can be.

Let's look at how black and white it is. Look at verse 1 and tell me this is a gray area. **Now accept the one who is weak in faith...** does that sound like a gray area to you? Is this negotiable? No, Paul is very clear, this is a command, you are to **accept the one who is weak in faith**. The issue is not a gray area but one strong and one weak in the faith. Now look at the latter part of verse 5 and tell me if you think this is a gray area. **Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind**. Is it a gray area that you are to be **fully convinced in your own mind**? That is not a gray area. It is a black and white area. You are supposed to **be fully convinced in your own mind**. If you are not you are doubting and doubt is sin. Now look at verse 13 and tell me if this is a gray area. **Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way**. Is that unclear at all? Is it a gray area? Is it okay to put a stumbling block in a brother's way? I think not. It is a command that is black and white and if you put a stumbling block in a brother's way you are committing sin. Now verse 15, the latter part of the verse, is this a gray area? **Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died**. Is that a gray area? If that is a gray area I am a blind pastor. It is just as black and white as can be. If I destroy with food my brother I have committed sin. And the black and white pattern continues in verses 20 and 22 and 23. Therefore, it is misleading to think that Romans 14 is chiefly dealing with gray areas. It is chiefly dealing with a black and white issue; how brethren strong in the faith and weak in the faith should treat each other with consideration as we may genuinely differ on certain kinds of issues relative to our growth.

What kinds of issues do we differ on? Let me tell you what kinds of issues are not in view and then we will look at what kinds of issues are in view. First, the issues are not doctrinal. Doctrine is very important because it is involved in application, how you live your life. And there are doctrinal differences among Christians that are a proper cause for division. For example, the Christian who rejects the Trinity is differing on the nature of God and that will have consequences on one's balance of the one and the many. We cannot maintain fellowship with those who disagree on the nature of God. Or take for example the Christian who rejects the substitutionary nature of the blood atonement and simply thinks of the cross as a moral influence that is to cause us to reform our lives. That will have practical consequences. We cannot have fellowship with that view of the atonement which falls so far short of the substitutionary core. So there are genuine doctrinal differences that are a proper cause for division. Those are not the kind of issues this chapter is talking about. Second, the issues are not sin. Sin is clearly spelled out in the Bible as any want of conformity to the holiness of God. Sin cannot be tolerated, either in ourselves or in the assembly. It is sin to think adulterous thoughts. It is sin to deceive. It is sin to malign. It is sin to speak unwholesome things and so forth and so on. We cannot differ on these things. We must agree on these things. So there is the issue of sin and that is not what this chapter is talking about.

So if the issues that we may genuinely differ on are not doctrinal and they are not sin what are they? They are scruples, amoral things, things that are neither moral or immoral but some people are sensitive to them, these are the weaker brethren. Alva J. McClain says of the weak brethren, "These men about whom Paul is speaking were exceedingly sensitive... They were so sensitive... that they picked out indifferent things, things that were neither moral nor immoral."<sup>1</sup> For the weaker brethren these things were a big deal. The chapter deals mainly with food, drink and the observance of certain days. Why are these things such a big deal to some believers? Because they are raised in a culture that says certain things are wrong and certain things have to be observed. In our day some people are raised in a culture that says donating blood, organs or tissues is wrong; some people are raised to think that watching or playing sports is wrong; some people are raised to think that buying products from immoral companies is wrong; some people are raised to think that reading books outside the Bible is wrong; some people are raised to think that women wearing pants is wrong; some people are raised to think that men wearing earrings is wrong; some people are raised to think that playing cards is wrong; some people are raised to think that using tobacco or alcohol is wrong; some people are raised to think that swimming with the opposite sex is wrong. The list goes on and on and so for them it is wrong as we will show. But it is not wrong for others and we will show how that can be. It is not that the standards of God have changed. It is something else. Some Christians cannot do these things for good reason. But ultimately these things are nothing more than scruples. There is one way you can identify these. If Christians from one culture have a common hang up and they go into another culture on the planet and see that the Christians there do not have these same hang ups they may be offended but they should realize that these things are really just their cultural and individual scruples. So as much as you may be convinced that the Bible is against these things the Bible is not against these things. You were raised to think they were wrong and your conscience tells you they are wrong but they are not wrong. They are just your reservations and that is what this chapter is about and how those with certain twinges of conscience should treat those who do not share those twinges of conscience and how those who do not share them should treat those who do. These are not to cause divisions. And if someone does divide over these issues then that is the sin, that is where the problem is, the problem is not the scruples or the freedom from the scruples but the refusal of one party to treat the other side with consideration. So in that sense the chapter is about doctrine and the chapter is about sin, but not normally where people think. The doctrine is consideration for others and the sin is not being considerate of others on these amoral issues.

Now, of course, all these things can be pushed to the point that they are in the category of sin and then they are wrong for everyone. Take drinking alcohol, that is okay in moderation but it is not okay to get drunk, the Bible is clear about that. Or take women wearing of pants. A woman can wear pants but there are some pants she should not wear because they are too tight, that is immodest, and the Bible is clear about immodesty. So these things can be taken too far and then they become sin and as I said before we are not to tolerate sin. Sin is sin, it is intolerable. But what the chapter is about is not sin but certain issues that some people are sensitive to because they were raised to think a certain way and when they came into the Christian life they brought that way of

thinking into the Christian life. Now once they became a Christian they are to be transformed by the renewing of their mind. But that is a process, that is something that takes time, years and years, and so the general idea is to move from being weak to being strong. But there will always be some weak and some strong and so there is a genuine doctrine of consideration for one another in these verses. We need to really take it easy on one another, think these things through and be cautious, even though our sensitivities may be offended at one of these points.

In verse 1 Paul says, **Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.** Alright, this is a very clear command. This is a command for the one strong in faith. But before we can identify the one strong in faith we need to identify the one **weak in faith**. Who is the **one who is weak in faith**? The Greek has the definite article before **faith** and so he is the believer **who is weak in the faith**. When we say **the faith** what do we mean? We mean the system of Christian truth or doctrine. Someone who is weak in the system of Christian truth is someone who does not have a good grasp of the Christian faith. And in particular, as we will see, he does not have a good grasp of the freedom that we have in Christ. Remember that Paul said in 1 Cor 10:23 that "everything is permissible but not everything is profitable." That means that there are times when those with liberty will have to forego their liberty. Paul said a few verses later in 1 Cor 10:32 "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God." Give no offense, that is a rule of thumb. Sometimes we have to forego liberty in order to not give offense. And remember that we do have liberty. Paul said to the Galatians 5:1, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." The particular issue there was circumcision, taking on circumcision as a necessity to being justified before God. But you were justified by faith alone and you were set free. There was no necessity to be circumcised. Now having been set free doesn't mean that you understand that you are free but you were set free nonetheless. Understanding this freedom takes time. What is this freedom? What are we free to do now that we have been justified? Paul says in Gal 5:13, "you were called to freedom brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." Let us be clear. Our freedom does not mean freedom to sin. It means freedom to serve. No Christian is free to sin. Sin always has consequences. It collects what is due. But freedom is to service; serving one another. Another rule of thumb is laid out by Paul in 1 Cor 10:31, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." If you can do it to the glory of God it is fine." Now when I say that I am not giving you a license to sin. I am speaking about things like eating and drinking in moderation. Eating and drinking in excess is sin. So you have to be careful not to push these too far. Moderation is always a key. But the weaker brother is held captive by some of these things even in moderation and he has not yet grown to understand his freedom in Christ so he cannot do them in good conscience and he should not do them. You always must be fully convinced in your own mind.

Now in this case verse 2 says the weaker brethren cannot do what? He cannot **eat all things** but can eat **vegetables only**. Here is what happened. And remember, this is not an isolated case, this is one person's hang up because of the culture they were raised in. You may have some other hang up but let's look at this person.

When this person was born and started to develop he developed in a certain culture, let's say it was Jewish culture and he had certain parents, they may have been upper, lower or middle class and they had his boy educated according to some religious curriculum. What all of these influences did was establish this boy's mindset, his way of thinking and the standards in his mind for making value judgments. His conscience was sensitized to these standards. Then this Jewish boy became a Christian and what do you think happened? You do not think that all the standards in his mind suddenly vanished do you? You do not think that his conscience was no longer sensitized to those standards do you? Of course not. That boy was in the faith but he was still **weak in the faith**. He still had much to learn. As Paul said in Romans 12:2 he needs to be transformed by the renewing of his mind so that his conscience can approve of the things that God approves of. Now do you see that that Jewish boy is not unlike anyone in this room? You grew up in some culture too, you developed a certain way of thinking, a mindset that had standards and your conscience was sensitized to these standards. Then one day you became a Christian and you carried over those same standards and your conscience still judged according to those standards. Initially you were **weak in the faith**. No one is born strong in the faith. Our weakness may not be meat like the Jewish boy here but it was something. If you can't eat, drink and be merry to the glory of God you shouldn't do it. That was always Paul's argument. Whatever you do do it all for the glory of God. If you can do that your fine. Keep in mind it's important to stay in balance. Balance is the key to the Christian life. Most people are out of balance. If you get nothing else out of this get the importance of balance in the Christian life. You must stay balanced. Everything in moderation, nothing in excess...

So here in verse 1 we have the **one who is weak in faith**. He is the one who is in the faith but does not have a full grasp of the Christian faith, and in particular, he has not grown to understand the freedom in which we stand. But the verse is addressing the one who is strong in the faith. He is not mentioned clearly here but he is in 15:1. He is the opposite of the one who is weak. Therefore, he does have a full grasp of the Christian faith, and in particular, he understands the freedom we have in Christ and he should not abuse this freedom. This command is for him. And the command is that he is to **accept the one who is weak in faith**. The word **accept** means "to welcome one into your home or circle of acquaintances." So he is to welcome him into his home or circle of acquaintances the one who does not understand his freedom in Christ. Now what is all-important is noted by the disclaimer at the end of the verse. He is to welcome him AS HE IS. Paul says, welcome him, **but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions**. In other words, the strong believer understands his freedom to eat all things because God has made all foods clean and so he invites this Jewish boy over to dinner in order to get him all straightened out on meat and how he is free to eat meat. That is what many strong believers have done. They think they are going to help this weaker brother. They invite this Jewish brother over and serve him pork. That is sin to do that. Or take the brother who grew up Mormon and because of that background has an aversion to donating blood. Now he is a Christian and so the stronger brother invites him over while he is hosting a blood drive. Is that what we are supposed to do? That is not what we are supposed to do. That is sin. If we are strong we are to accept the one who is weaker in the faith AS HE IS. You have not been sent by God to

straighten him out. You are not helping him out. Jesus is not going to give you a merit badge for trying to set him free. You are not doing anyone a favor. You are sinning. But this is often how stronger brothers try to change the opinions of weaker brothers. They only make them fall. It is not right. Paul will tell us more about this later.

But for now in 14:2 Paul says, **One person has faith that he may eat all things**, that is the stronger brother. He has learned what the Christian faith means. It means that we have liberty in Christ. We can eat **all things**. Why? Because God has declared all things clean. Remember the story of Peter at Joppa? Peter was a fine Jewish fellow. He was visiting a tanner named Simon. He went up on the rooftop and he was praying and he saw a menu drop out of the clouds that had all kinds of unclean animals on it. And he heard a voice that said, "Rise Peter, kill and eat!" And Peter said, "But I have never eaten anything unclean my whole life." And the menu disappeared. Then it happened again and the voice said, "What God has made clean no longer consider unclean." This happened three times. Do you remember what Peter thought? It says Peter was greatly perplexed. How could this be, thought Peter? How could God declare something clean that before He had declared to be unclean? Well, that question kept Peter confused until some men came to him and explained that Cornelius, a Gentile centurion had been directed by an angel of God to come to Joppa and fetch Peter to come to him at Caesarea in order to give him a message. It was then that Peter understood that God was not one to show partiality and that God welcomes in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right. If God welcomed them then Peter concluded that he should welcome them too. It seems to me that Peter was remembering what our Lord had taught in the gospels; that it is not what enters into a man that defiles him but what comes out of a man. The Jews thought it was what entered a man. They thought that because Gentiles ate unclean food they were unclean. This was a great hang-up for Jews. They could not associate with Gentiles. But what Peter learned on that day was that the food did not make them unclean. Clean and unclean was one thing but the Bible never taught that what enters into a man makes the man unclean. He had been trained in the wrong standard. It was a very sensitive issue to his conscience. He was weak. But on that day his mindset was changed and he was able to go into Cornelius' house and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter had learned a great deal that day and he had grown stronger in the faith, but that is not to say that he did not struggle with this same issue later. His sensitivities to unclean food remained difficult for him. Do you remember what Paul reports happened later? Some Jewish men came from James to where Peter was working with Gentile believers. When they arrived Peter had been eating with the Gentiles but then he immediately stopped eating with them. Why did he do a thing like that? Because he was still a weaker brethren. He knew what was right, he had the right standard, but it was not rooted strongly enough in his thinking and he fell back into his former thinking. Tell me you don't know what I'm talking about! This is every one of us. We have all caused division over some minor thing. It was major to us but minor in reality. So Paul opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. What Peter had done is the middle of verse 3, he had **judged the ones who could eat**. He had judged those Gentiles but had God judged them? God had not judged them. **God accepted them**. God accepted those Gentiles who ate all kinds of meat. They were enjoying bacon and eggs, ham and cheese sandwiches, shrimp and lobster and Peter had been

enjoying it too. But when some Jews came by his prior sensitivities overwhelmed him and he stopped eating them. I say too bad for Peter but the bottom line is he was judging those Gentiles who ate. He was in the wrong. He was sinning. That is why Paul opposed him to his face. We must always oppose sin. The reason stated is because **God accepted** them. They had done nothing wrong. God had declared all foods clean. Let me be clear, this is not a matter of nutrition and whether a food is good for you. The matter of nutrition is a different matter altogether. The Bible says there is a balance to everything. You cannot consistently say "Drinking beer is sinful and then turn around and gorge yourself!" You don't think you can act that way and get away with it do you? That is hypocrisy to the nth degree.

Now as for those who could eat, they were Gentiles. They did not have trouble with meat. It was not part of their sensitivities. They had eaten meat all their lives. Verse 3 says to them, **the one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat**. So let's look at it from the other side. A Jewish brother comes in to eat, he is the weaker brother and he can't eat meat. His conscience tells him no. Okay. No big deal. Don't try to make him eat. Paul says the stronger Gentile brother who can eat is **not to regard him with contempt**. He is to just let it go, accept him AS HE IS. Understand that it takes time for the Jewish brother's standards in his mind to adjust to his newfound freedom in Christ. He has not eaten meat his whole life. It is the same with any of these kinds of issues. Say a person raised from the cradle in the Roman Catholic Church comes to Christ. Every Friday they have been keeping Lent for 35 years. They only eat fish on Friday and they eat it religiously. Here comes Friday and they have to eat fish. Okay. What is that to you? What do you care? Are you going to straighten him out? Why do you regard with contempt this person who cannot just relax and eat whatever they want on Friday? You should be able to not judge them at all.

In 14:4 Paul puts it this way, **"Who are you to judge the servant of another? Is that person your servant? I think not.** So you don't have any business butting in. It's none of your business. That person has one judge in this kind of matter and that judge is Jesus Christ. He is the person's master so you stay out of it. You have no business criticizing them behind their back. You shouldn't run off and mockingly say to someone, "Did you know so and so keeps Lent?" Shut your pie hole. You are sinning. I hear a great deal of this. I have been involved in a great deal of it myself. I know the attitude. It is a sinful attitude. We have no business sneaking around talking about such things. We are not God almighty. That person belongs to God almighty and will answer to Him. Always keeping in mind that all we are talking about here are amoral issues. These are not sin unless they are practiced in excess. And if someone is sinning that is a wholly different matter. This is about keeping Lent. This is about drinking a beer. This is about women wearing pants. This is about a guy wearing an earring. This is about some family not celebrating Christmas and other such things of such trivial importance. You can't show me anywhere in the Bible where these things are sinful. These are just your opinions. You were raised to think that way. You are convicted about them. That is fine. But do you hold others to your convictions on these matters? If Jesus Christ is the other person's master then let Jesus Christ deal with it and you worry about yourself.

As verse 4 says, **To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.** Jesus Christ is His judge (v 10-12). It is before Jesus Christ that this person **stands or falls**. The word **stands** means “to validate, to reinforce, to uphold.” If the man holds to his scruples Jesus Christ is going to validate him, reinforce him, uphold him. He is not going to condemn him. He has eaten only vegetables for the purpose of glorifying God and there is nothing wrong with that. As long as it is done to the glory of God it is fine, this cannot be secretly used to do something for some other reason. When we do something for His glory He is honored by it even though it is just because of our scruples.

We'll stop here for today but we are in a very important area. This is basic to your well-being and being in harmony with other believers. You don't have to agree on everything. You do have to agree on doctrine. You do have to agree on what is sin. But you do not have to agree on so many of these issues that are culturally conditioned amoral things. I realize that some of you are going to really struggle with this because your convictions are strong. It is fine to have convictions. I am not condemning you for your convictions. I just hope you are not condemning me for mine. That is the issue. Your resolve not to condemn others for their convictions on these types of things is to take precedence over your own convictions about these things.

In summary, in 14:1 the strong brother is commanded to **accept the one who is weak in the faith AS HE IS**. You don't welcome him into your home for the purpose of straightening him out and helping him get free from some scruple. It is sin to do that. You must accept him AS HE IS, scruples and all, can't drink a beer, can't play cards, can't donate blood, can't carry a gun, whatever it is. Verse 2, the specific example is from a strong Gentile believer who **has faith that he may eat all things**, and a Jewish believer **who is weak and eats vegetables only**. In verse 3 both are given commands. First, the strong **one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat**. You don't look at them and disdain them for their weakness. You don't despise them because they can't partake. You accept them. Second, the weak **one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats**. It goes both ways. You are to accept one another AS YOU ARE. Verse 4 asks the weak brother, **Who are you to judge the servant of another?** The stronger brother who can partake is the servant of Jesus Christ. He is not your servant. Jesus Christ will take care of it. **To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand.** Jesus Christ will validate him as long as he maintains his integrity in eating to the glory of God. This is not to be a problem. Unfortunately it is in many cases a big problem.

In conclusion what can we learn? First, we have all been culturally conditioned to think certain things are right or wrong that are amoral; having your child circumcised, watching TV, eating sushi, whatever. These things are not right or wrong. Second, when we become Christians we carry these things into the Christian life. Second, once in the Christian life we have been freed from these things. Third, initially we still cannot do those things because our conscience is sensitized to these things. We are weaker brethren. Fourth, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. Through this we realize that we are free and are able to put these scruples behind us. Fifth, we are not to judge those who have the scruples. And those with the scruples are not to hold with



contempt those who do not have them. Sixth, we are to show consideration to one another and accept one another as we are. Seventh, they belong to Jesus Christ and He is their judge on these matters. They are matters of conscience and only God can judge the conscience. We should not judge them.

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<sup>1</sup> Alva J. McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, 229.