

**WHAT CAN WE EAT?**  
**ANSWERS ABOUT LIBERTY**  
**ROMANS 14:1-4**

One of the great themes of Romans is the freedom the believer has in Christ:

- ✓ for he who has died is **freed** from sin (6:7)
- ✓ But now having been **freed** from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life (6:22)
- ✓ But now we have been **released** from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound (7:6)
- ✓ For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you **free** from the law of sin and of death (8:2)
- ✓ that the creation itself also will be set **free** from its slavery to corruption into the **freedom** of the glory of the children of God (8:21)

We have spent much time thinking about the joy we derive from that freedom: we are not in bondage to sin and we are not in bondage to the Law or under condemnation from the Law. But what are the implications of that? How do we handle that freedom? What kinds of things can we do? This question has been considered by Christians for millennia — as far back as the first church as Paul's letters to Rome and Corinth (1 Cor. 8-9) demonstrate. And we still wrestle with these questions: what can we do if we are free?

- ✓ What kind of music is appropriate for worship? Anything (including secular)? Acapella only? Psalms only? Hymns only? Choruses only? Anything post-2000? Anything pre-1900? What about instruments? Drums? Choir or no choir? Lead singers or none?
- ✓ Parenting questions: how many children (1-2, 4, 8)? Contraceptive devices or not? Which kind? Spanking or time-outs? Neither? Both? Other? When do you stop spanking? When does our authority over them end? What is their responsibility to obey parents?
- ✓ Entertainment: movie theaters or not? TV or none? PG or R? (If R, sometimes? Never?)
- ✓ Books: Paper or digital? What kind of books? How many books?
- ✓ Vacation: How much is too much money for a vacation? How long is too long? Are there places from which we should be restricted? Can we go to the beach — at Spring Break?
- ✓ Clothing: what is modest (for both men and women)? Who decides? Can women wear slacks to church? Jeans? What about makeup?
- ✓ Spouse selection: courtship or dating? "Traditional" methods or online dating sites (which ones)?
- ✓ Vocabulary: what do you say when you hit your thumb with a hammer? "Substitute" words (if so which ones) — yay or nay? Is vulgarity ok? If so, are there limitations?
- ✓ Schooling: Public, private, or home? What informs those decisions?
- ✓ Merchandise: What can I buy and from where? Can I purchase a product from a company that supports homosexual marriage and transgenderism? If not, are there limitations? (It will be hard)
- ✓ Food: any foods? Limitations? ("I don't eat pork; if it was bad for Israel it's bad for me.") Are there restaurants that shouldn't be frequented? Can we eat out on Sunday?

- ✓ What about alcohol? Can a Christian drink alcohol? If so how much? In what contexts? (What about cigarettes and marijuana?)
- ✓ Politics: Can you be a godly Christian and be a Republican/Democrat/Libertarian?
- ✓ COVID: To mask or not? To vaccine or not?
- ✓ Are the choices we make for these kinds of things absolute? Or can they vary from person to person? Or culture to culture? (A pastor told about being in a European country at a church event where the European woman stood swilling her wine in her glass talking to an American woman, wondering how the American could be a pastor's wife and wear slacks to a church event.)

Questions about the freedom we have in Christ and its extent and limitations abound. (I've had discussions on just about all these issues.) And there are answers that guide us through those questions (which is why I've named my sermon the way I have).

Over the next few weeks, we will be examining what Paul says about liberty and the practical use of our freedoms. While there are many facets to what Paul will say, one theme dominates the section:

**USE YOUR INDIVIDUAL FREEDOMS AS A MEANS OF PRESERVING THE CORPORATE UNITY OF THE BODY.**

Our personal freedom is always subordinate to our corporate responsibilities. Our commitment to the unity of the church dominates this section. We want to act so unity is preserved.

In these opening verses Paul reveals preliminary thoughts and **three guides** for how we think about liberty issues (in the next section he will reveal a process for making decisions and then he will give some further warnings and exhortations in the last half of the chapter).

Whatever else this passage will do for us, we will not be able to walk away and say, "It's my freedom; I can do it if I want to do it." There are concerns that go well-beyond that sentiment.

**Theological Context:** What Paul has said about liberty and conscience

- ✓ What freedom is not
- ✓ What freedom is
- ✓ The relationship of the conscience to freedom

**1. The Reality of DIFFERENCES (vv. 1-2)**

- ✓ There are "**WEAK**" people
- ✓ There are "**STRONG**" people
- ✓ Those different people have different ideas about **DAILY** concerns: food and worship

**2. One ATTITUDE to Guide Our Different Choices: ACCEPT One Another (v. 1a)**

**3. One CAUTION in Making Different Choices: Don't DISCRIMINATE (v. 3b)**

**4. One PRINCIPLE to Remember in Our Different Choices: God is (and will) JUDGE (v. 3)**

**Theological Context:**

- ✓ While Paul doesn't use the words "freedom," "liberty," and "conscience" in this chapter, it is clear that he is speaking of those concepts because of the examples he gives (vv. 2, 5).
- ✓ In a similar passage, he does use "conscience" (1 Cor. 8:7) and "liberty" (1 Cor. 8:9). He also connects conscience to liberty and the weakness/strength of believers (1 Cor. 8:9-10, 12).
- ✓ Paul is also continuing the theme of sanctification (chs. 12-15) and connecting one's personal actions to the influence those actions have in the church (loving one another, 13:8).

• **What freedom is not: "Freedom" does not mean "freedom to sin"**

- ✓ Engaging in sin is never freedom; it's always bondage. Sin traps and ensnares. We have been released from sin, not released *to* sin (6:1-2, 6-7, 12-14; 13:14).
- ✓ When Paul says things are "free" or "liberty" he means Scripture has not condemned; it is possible to make either choice and be right in God's sight (depending on the attitude with which its done).

• **What freedom is:**

- ✓ The believer is liberated from the bondage to sin (he can do something besides sin).
- ✓ The believer is liberated to obey God (which he could not previously do — 6:18, 22; 8:4).
- ✓ The believer is liberated from the obligations of the Law (7:4, 6)
- ✓ The believer is liberated to enjoy all the good gifts God has given (e.g., Acts 10:13, 28)

• **The relationship of the conscience to freedom (Rom. 2:14-15)**

- ✓ The heart, mind, and will are *information* about what is right and wrong (2:14)
- ✓ The conscience is the *evaluation* of how one is doing in relation to right and wrong (2:15) — it's the inner accusation and defense of one's actions — "that's wrong" or "that's good."

"Conscience functions as a guide, monitor, witness, and judge. Your conscience guides you to help you conform to moral standards, monitors how you conform to them, testifies to how you conform to them, and judges how you conform to them, thus making your feel guilt and pain...The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong. It's basically your...moral awareness turned back on yourself." [Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience* ]

- ✓ So the conscience here is constantly evaluating whether our use of freedoms is right or wrong.
- ✓ However, the conscience can be killed (2 Tim. 4:2) and it can be corrupted (Tit. 1:15). This passage gives evidence that may have happened in Rome: people were making choices and their consciences were saying, "That's right." But then the heart also said, "Those who don't do what I'm doing are wrong..." That attitude will destroy fellowship and harmony. So Paul is addressing corruption of the use of freedom to preserve unity and harmony in the church.

## 1. The Reality of DIFFERENCES (vv. 1-2)

### • There are “WEAK” people

- ✓ The major question in this chapter is, “Who are those who are **weak in faith**?” There are at least six different possibilities. In this context, it seems most likely that Paul is talking about Jewish believers who have genuine faith in Christ, but whose Jewish background is compelling them to maintain certain aspects of the OT Law (diet, feasts days, and Sabbath worship).
- ✓ It is pretty clear that those who are “weak” are not struggling over issues of doctrine; they are struggling over the application of doctrine — “If I am in Christ, what can I do/what must I not do?”
- ✓ The weakness of these individuals is in relation to **faith**. What does he mean?
  - He is talking about believers, because he doesn’t say they have “no faith” but that the faith they have (a genuine faith) is merely weak and “deffective.”
  - The weakness is not about a basic doctrine, or Paul would have corrected faulty thinking.
  - The weakness is in relation to their lack of confidence that they can have faith in Christ and do certain things (like eat pork, or meat sacrificed to idols). They are “troubled in conscience.” [Kruse] They have a lack of confidence in the privileges they have been granted in Christ.
- ✓ Those people existed in Rome and Corinth, and they exist today in the US, in Granbury, and GBC.
- ✓ One temptation and struggle for the weak believer is to not enjoy the freedoms of Christ. They are prone to legalism and emphasizing the hardness of the faith, and not enjoying the grace.
- ✓ It’s notable that Paul does not address *why* they are weak; the reasons may be as varied as the individuals. He just wants us to understand that there are weak people in the church body.

### • There are “STRONG” people

- ✓ Interestingly, Paul does not use the word **strong** in this chapter (though he does in 1 Cor. 8). However, it is clear that the people who **have faith** (v. 2) are “not weak” — they are in contrast to the weak. They have confidence in their implications of their faith; they don’t waver.
- ✓ Interestingly, while Paul seems to identify with the strong (v. 14), he doesn’t belabor the point. He is not trying to correct or change the practices of the weak (or the strong).
- ✓ The **strong** are people that understand that we have been freed from the responsibilities of the Law as a means of being sanctified; he understands the right of the believer to eat all kinds of foods, etc.
- ✓ The majority of the people in Rome were likely “strong” — he hints at that when he addresses the church in v. 1 — “*all y’all* accept the *one* weak...” He contrasts a large number with an individual.
- ✓ One temptation for the strong is to dismiss and overlook (mock?) the weak, and maybe (though the text doesn’t say it), to compel the weak to change without adequately teaching them.
- ✓ That leads us to the next reality...

• Those different people have different ideas about DAILY concerns: food and worship

- ✓ Whether someone is weak or strong, there is a temptation to compel others to have the same opinion as us —

<i>Believe as I believe, No more, no less; That I am right, And no one else, confess. Feel as I feel, Think only as I think;</i>	<i>Eat what I eat, And drink but what I drink; Look as I look, Do always as I do; Then, and only then, Will I fellowship with you. [Hughes]</i>
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- ✓ That attitude will produce disharmony and destroy love in the body (cf. 12:9ff; 13:8).
- ✓ Paul identifies two particular areas of disagreement; it's unclear if this was actually happening in Rome, or if his experience with Corinth is bringing these examples to mind. Regardless, it is issues just like this that can divide fellowship and create disharmony.
- ✓ Paul identifies two potential issues of difference (there are dozens): food and worship
  - The one who **has faith** (is strong) eats all kinds of food (v. 2, he is not bound by the Law. He is not burdened by doubts about “did I sin when I ate that meat? Did it have a little pork that I didn’t know about? Was there a piece of shellfish in the sauce?” He knows the liberty of **Mk. 7:19**; Acts 10:15; **1 Tim. 4:4-5**. He doesn’t question or have doubt about those things.
  - In contrast, the **weak eats vegetables** (the word “only” is supplied by translators; cf. v. 21). He is a vegetarian. We don’t know exactly why — commentators have speculated about cultural influence or meat offered to idols (1 Cor. 8) or OT Law or health. *Why* he does what he does is unimportant in this context. We only need to see that he is vegetarian and it isn’t a sin.
  - Similarly, there are different kinds of worship (v. 5). One (the weak person) **regards one day above another** — he likely keeps OT feast days and perhaps the Sabbath (akin to **Col. 2:16**). The other **regards every day alike** — “no sanctifying benefit to keeping feast days.” Note that while the two are doing two different things, neither is sinning; both honor the Lord.
  - There is no priority to resolve differences so everyone does the same thing. Uniformity of action is not Paul’s (or God’s) goal.
- ✓ There *are* differences about how to live in the church body; the most important concern for Paul in this verse is, “how will we live with one another in a way that exemplifies we love each other more than we love our liberty?” How will we relate to one another? *His goal is loving unity* (not uniformity)...

## 2. One ATTITUDE to Guide Our Different Choices: ACCEPT One Another (v. 1a)

- The main principle that Paul wants the Romans to know about liberty issues is given in the very first verse: (everyone) **accept the one who is weak**.
  - ✓ To accept someone is to bring them into fellowship. It is companionship. Even intimacy.
  - ✓ When we think of “accepting” others, often it has the idea of “tolerating” — I don’t like it, but I’ll put up with it. I “accept” that I have to pay taxes, but I don’t like it; I “accept” that a particular person is my boss, but I don’t like him.
  - ✓ We tend to use the word synonymously with “acknowledgement” but avoid using “fellowship.”
  - ✓ When Paul says, **accept**, he means “bring them into full fellowship and relationship in the body.” There are no limitations on service.
  - ✓ I imagine that Paul envisions both meat eaters and vegetarians serving together as elders or AWANA leaders or counselors or home group leaders. And he envisions that after participating at an event at church that they will share a meal and pray together and help each other.
- Notice that Paul also offers a contrast to what acceptance is: **not for the purpose of passing judgment**.
- We aren’t evaluating **opinions** — the thoughts and motivations for why people do what they do. They have “scruples” about issues that have been formed with a variety of influences that we don’t understand (we can’t see the heart). We just know it isn’t sin, so we encourage and embrace them.
- No one is saying, “I welcome you but I will really welcome you when you attain to my level of spirituality and stop doing what you are doing (again, we are not talking about sin issues in this ch.).
  - ✓ So to accept another is not to say, “I’m so glad he is joining the body so that I can compel him to change his opinion.” No one is saying, “My job is to pull on you as hard as I can to get you to change.”
  - ✓ Likewise, the one who is **weak** is not saying, “I’m glad I am here so I can enlighten you and compel you to stop acting unwisely and irreverently.”
  - ✓ Neither are welcoming and accepting. They are condemning. Acceptance says, “I embrace your participation in the body and I welcome and will even work to help you practice your preferences.”
- You will miss other things I say from this passage; don’t miss this principle. This is the heart of what Paul says — we accept one another because we love one another (12:9ff; 13:8). We will be known by love and we will defend each other’s rights to exercise liberty in different ways.
- (This is especially important in churches when so many have made a variety of decisions in the past 18 months. Don’t let those become divisive in the church or in your home.)

### 3. One **CAUTION** in Making Different Choices: Don't **DISCRIMINATE** (v. 3b)

- Whether we are weak or strong, we both have a temptation and tendency to act unlovingly.
  - ✓ So Paul cautions that the strong are not to **regard with contempt** those who don't eat. The idea is that he treats them with disdain, as if the non-eater has no worth — "he doesn't get it..." This person considers himself superior and looks down on the other person because of his actions.
  - ✓ And similarly, he cautions that the weak are **not to judge the one who eats**. He makes a distinction with the one who eats, "I don't see how you can eat meat/drive that car/take that vacation" and be a godly Christian. Like the meat-eater who is contemptuous, this is a form of spiritual pride.
  - ✓ These two terms **contempt** and **judge** are roughly synonymous — Paul wants us to see that there are temptations for both these kinds of people.
  - ✓ The problem is not whether someone eats meat or vegetables. The problem is what I think about the person who doesn't do what I do ("my faith is better than yours"). The problem is about judgmentalism, divisiveness, disunity, disharmony, and lack of love.
- There is no room for any of these things in the church because **God has accepted him**.
  - ✓ Not only does God not treat my brother contemptuously or judge him, but God **accepts** him.
  - ✓ This word **accept** is used 4x in this passage (only 12x in all the NT) — 14:1, 3; 15:7 [2x]. The idea in both this chapter and ch. 15 is that we accept each other because God accepts us.
  - ✓ When we talk about how God has accepted us, we think about fellowship, intimacy, joy, fellowship, harmony, and delight. God is not reserved in His fellowship with us.
  - ✓ The reason God accepts us is because we are in Christ (5:12ff); He further accepts the actions of both the weak and the strong in this context because neither is sinning and both are attempting to honor the Lord.
  - ✓ Because He puts no restrictions on fellowship, we put no restrictions on fellowship for liberty issues.
- It is not our call whether or not to accept each other into the body of Christ. God has already done that. So because He has done that for us, we do it for each other.

### 4. One **PRINCIPLE** to Remember in Our Different Choices: God is (and will) **JUDGE** (v. 4)

- When Paul wants to drive home a point, he will sometimes do it with questions: e.g., 6:1-2; 9:20.
- The force of his question in v. 4 is, "who made you judge and jury?" "Have you forgotten who the Judge is?" "Have you forgotten that He *will* judge (all men)?"
  - ✓ We have forgotten who is in charge. Yes, the other person (whether weak or strong) is a servant of someone else; but they are servants of the Lord — not me. I have no authority over them.

- ✓ Paul draws the principle from real life: whoever is a slave and has a master will be judged by that master. If I'm not the master, I don't have a right to judge that person's choices of liberty.
  - ✓ He will either **stand** in righteousness or **fall** in judgment to his master.
  - ✓ Paul's clear point is that the **Lord** will judge him (he makes the same point in **1 Cor. 4:3-5**).
  - ✓ It is notable that in this verse, Paul also anticipates that both weak and strong **will stand** (there will be no condemnation). The Lord will make them to persevere in their faith and preserve them (both).
- Whenever we create divisions and break fellowship over non-sin, liberty issues, we not only are harming the unity, love, and fellowship of the church body, but we are assuming that we have a position that we do not have. Even worse, we are assuming we have a divine position and divine authority.
  - We don't have that position.
  - Moreover, we have forgotten that we also will be judged by God. We will have to give an account to Him for our actions (1 Cor. 4:4; **2 Cor. 5:10**) — and we need to prepare for that meeting and not worry about judging others now.

**CONCLUSION:** Do you remember those issues about which we have opinions that I mentioned earlier?

Parenting? And marriage? And worship music? And food, clothing, and merchandise? And entertainment? And money? And politics? And COVID? We have opinions. And there are some biblical principles to informing our consciences so we develop wise opinions (we will start talking about that next week).

But more than our opinions about those topics, we must have the opinion and attitude of loving our brothers in Christ who are making opposing decisions as their expressions of love for Christ.

When your brother does something different than you, do you love him to the point of accepting him, advocating for him, and helping him to exercise His divinely-given prerogative for liberty?

**BENEDICTION:** **1 Corinthians 11:33-36**