November 22, 2026

Notes:
This Lesson was created using:
- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *New American Commentary: Romans*, Mounce (NAC)
- *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*, Moo (NICNT)
- *Exalting Jesus in Romans*, Merida (Exalting)
- *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans*, Bruce (TNTC)
- *Be Right*, Wiersbe (Be)

UNITY: ROMANS 14:5-20

Introductory Activity

Discuss: What is your first impulse when someone disagrees with you? Do you (A) become combative and tell them why they are wrong? (B) Try to persuade them to believe as you do? (C) Write them off as ignorant and "less than"? Or you may respond differently; what might that be?

Discuss: The Nobel Prize-winning behavioral psychologist Daniel Kahneman believed the academic world to be a sea of disagreement. Oftentimes, academics practiced what he called "angry science" by criticizing and demeaning those with whom they disagreed. In response, he promoted and practiced "adversarial collaboration." If he encountered another researcher with whom he disagreed, he would invite that researcher to join him in a research project to collaboratively find a solution to the research question. Instead of trying to convince or demean one another, they worked together. This did not mean they always agreed, but it did result in the furtherance of understanding and knowledge for their field of research.

Summarize and Transition: In today's passage, Paul acknowledges that church members do not always agree about some things. He encourages them to work together for the furtherance of the Kingdom and their own spiritual growth. The passage will show that "Believers promote unity by accepting and edifying one another. (ETB LG, 129)

1. DISAGREEMENT (ROM. 14:5-8)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 14:5-8.

Explain: The overriding question in the passage is "How do I honor God with my life?" Paul points to two groups in the Roman church determined to honor God in different ways in two areas of life. First, we see there are **Multiple Options** for the believer in Rome. First, there is the option to honor the Sabbath (or other Jewish holy days) or to honor every day as a day of worship. Second, there is the option to eat or not eat certain foods. The reason for not eating certain foods might be related to Jewish dietary laws or because of the food's association with pagan worship. Since there are multiple options, Roman believers had to choose between **Multiple Choices**.

1. Do I eat or not eat?
    a. If I choose to eat, what do I do when I am around those who choose not to eat?
    b. If I choose not to eat, how do I relate to those who do?
2. Do I observe the holy days?
    a. If I do not observe them, what do I do when I am with those who do observe them?
    b. Likewise, if I do observe the holy days, how do I relate to those who do not?

Discuss: Before we dive into Paul's answer to the debate, let's bring it forward some. In the modern, Western church, we usually do not debate these specific issues as robustly as the early church might have. However, there are things in the church that might be similar. "What kind of spiritual practices might believers disagree over today?" (ETB PSG, 112) This could be any number of things: celebrating Halloween, the number of gifts you give on Christmas, where you go on vacation, missing church for a sporting event, what hotel you stay in,

drinking alcohol, buying and selling on Sunday, going to lunch at a restaurant on Sunday, wearing pants to church instead of a dress, wearing a ball cap in church, the translation of the Bible you use, wearing shorts to church, raising your hands in church, not raising your hands in church. You get my point. The Romans might have had it easier than us on this issue.

Explain: "Even the strongest churches still have to deal with conflict today. It might not be about food or holy days, but it could be something just as divisive." (ETB LG, 133) Warren Wiersbe writes, "Christians have a way of majoring on the minor." (Be, 158) As we are going to see in the next passage, Paul did not see these two issues as a test of orthodoxy or salvation. As a matter of fact, if we consider the more conservative views, to keep the sabbath or to not eat certain foods, Paul's lax response here, as opposed to his response to such issues in Galatians 4 and Colossians 2, where some individuals saw these practices as necessary for salvation, shows that the "conservative" believers in Rome did not see this as a salvation issue (i.e., do or don't do as a means of salvation). Instead, it was an issue related to living a God-honoring life. (cf. ETBC, 122) So here, to use Wiersbe's language, we are dealing with "minor" issues of daily living, not "major" issues related to the gospel or orthodox theology.

So how does one make a choice from the multiple choices listed above? First, Paul says, "Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind." (v. 5c) Fully convinced could mean you decide what the answer is and make a firm decision to abide by that answer. It could also mean searching the Scriptures to become fully educated on the right choice and sticking to it. Second, in verse 6 he tells us that we are to honor the Lord in our full-throated commitment. Honor God in eating and not eating certain foods. Honor God in keeping the Sabbath and honor God by observing every day as holy. In whatever way you choose to honor God in these secondary areas, be sure to honor God with all you have.

So how do we come together as a church body if we have differing beliefs about these secondary matters? We must understand that we serve **One Lord**. If we all agree on the primary issues, like what it means to be saved and other issues like the nature of God, we are probably believers and serve Christ as Lord. Therefore, we maintain unity in the body by letting other maturing, faithful servants of Christ (v. 4) honor Him as they see fit in these secondary areas.

Discuss: Earlier we discussed the question, "What kind of spiritual practices might believers disagree over today?" In light of Paul's instructions in verses 6-7, let's consider the question: "How can we implement Paul's instruction when we encounter disagreements like these? (ETB PSG, 112)

Summarize Transition: In the next passage, Paul is going to help us see how this plays out in a little more detail. In this passage, though, Paul, in effect, tells us to stop worrying about our neighbor's actions related to these secondary issues. Let them live to honor the Lord Jesus as they understand Scripture, and you honor the Lord Jesus as you understand Scripture. Note one important component to this decision-making process: it is based on Scripture. I don't get to decide what kind of life is honoring to God, and you don't get to either. Instead, we must be fully convinced of what the Bible says constitutes a holy and honorable life. Again, we might differ on what we think the Bible says; and, as we will see below, one will be correct, and one will be incorrect. Nevertheless, "Believers should allow other believers to express their love for God as God directs them." (ETB LG, 133)

2. ACCOUNTABILITY (ROM. 14:9-12)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 14:9-12

Explain: In verse 9, Paul continues with the concept of Jesus being our One Lord. Christ's lordship over all is true by His divine nature. Moreover, His lordship is demonstrated in the lives of believers who have submitted

themselves to Him as their Lord. The church should be a picture of that Lordship. The church that does not submit to Jesus as Lord is weakened in its ability to fulfill His purposes and plan. Likewise, the individual believer is weakened in his or her ability to be and accomplish all God wants for them if they refuse to daily submit to Him as Lord. When I was a teenager, I served as the "manager" of the basketball team. To be clear, I was the waterboy. I enjoyed it because it was a nerd's way of spending time with friends and going to the games with them. One thing I remember from that time is the "plays" the guys had to learn. Number 5 goes here. Number 15 does a pick-and-roll now. Number 8 throws the ball to him. He goes in for a layup. If done correctly, it was a well-orchestrated series of moves with the purpose of scoring two points. If, however, one player decided to be a showboat and refuse to submit to the coach's plan, things would not work out the way the coach intended. It would also throw off everyone else's game. It is the same with the church. We are to submit to God's plan and follow His playbook because He is Lord. We have one Lord who leads the church, but He also gives us the rules. The Lord gives the rules, and the Lord judges how well we keep those rules. He is our **One Judge**.

Reread verses 10-11 ([10] But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. [11] For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God.)

Explain: In verse 10, Paul asks two questions. The first question, "why do you judge your brother or sister?" seems to be aimed at the more "conservative" faction who keeps the holy days and refuses to eat certain foods. They, it seems, are judging their more "liberal" friends for being too lax in their Christian lifestyle. The second question, "why do you despise your brother or sister?" is directed to these more "liberal" believers. They seem to be looking down on their "conservative" friends because they "just don't get what it means to live in freedom and grace of Christ." Both groups received condemnation for their inner thoughts.

Every generation of believers debates its own set of issues. There are always those who think others are doing things they should not be doing. Back in the day, it might have been playing cards or going to the movies. If you did those things, some would accuse you of being an unfaithful follower of Christ. On the flip side, there are always those who think others are *not doing* things they should be doing. Again, back in the day, if you did not go to church Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night, you were an unfaithful witness for Christ. A college student who does not go to BCM/BSU or the Wesley or RUF is accused of not being a good follower of Christ. Of course, I want folks in the church house as much as possible. Of course, I want college students to participate in a campus-based ministry. Of course, I do not want people to participate in hobbies that might seem a little dubious. However, Paul reminds us that we are not their judge. There is only one Judge, and it is Jesus. To question the commitment and even salvation of others whom **Jesus has already saved** is to question not just them but their Savior.

Now let's stop and make a slight clarification related to service in the local church. Some positions come with some expectations. Some lifestyle choices will preclude some people from serving in some ways. Service as a deacon, a finance committee member, a children's worker, etc., will have different expectations than a person serving on the kitchen crew, the parking lot crew, or even the evangelism team. Such expectations are not sinfully judgmental. Instead, they serve to protect the church and church members. They also serve to help people take their next step in the sanctification process. We should not exclude people from service, but we should find the best place of service for the betterment of the church and themselves. We will speak more about helping people grow in their faith through expectations in the next part of our lesson.

So, we should not "judge" nor "despise" our brothers and sisters in Christ for their choices related to these secondary issues because Christ is the One True Judge. Paul goes on to say we should not judge them, but we

should judge ourselves because one day there will be **One Defendant**. (Reread verse 12, "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.)

Explain: In verse 12, Paul gives a warning that serves two purposes. Let us first note that every believer will face the judgment seat of Christ. This judgment Paul references here is *not* related to salvation. Instead, it is related to how believers lived under the lordship of Christ. The first purpose of this warning relates to the admonition not to "judge" or "despise" our brother and sister based on their decision related to these secondary areas. Our thoughts and feelings related to them will be judged by Christ. If our thoughts are unmerciful or ungraceful, they will be judged by the One filled with grace and mercy. The second purpose of this warning concerns our choices related to these secondary issues.

- If we are "fully convinced" (v. 5) that something is right and good and do not do it, we will be held accountable. (Do what you think is best.)
- If we are fully convinced that something is unrighteous and do it anyway, we will be held accountable. (Avoid what you think is wrong.)
- If we fail to be fully convinced by the Word about what is righteous or unrighteous and do not adhere to the Word, we will be held accountable. (The Word is the final Authority on what is actually best or wrong.)

Summarize and Transition: Let's spend less time judging other believers for what they do or don't do; let's spend less time looking down on others for what they do or don't do; and let's spend time examining ourselves. Am I doing what I know to be right? Am I not doing what I know to be wrong? Am I searching God's Word for His guidance on how to live properly as a disciple of Christ? We should consider ourselves most consciously because "every believer will be held accountable for their actions and choices." (ETB LG, 135)

3. LOVE (ROM. 14:13-18)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 14:13-18

Explain: This passage seems to be directed toward the more lax believer or what some call the "stronger" ones. As Paul makes clear in verse 14, related to the issues under discussion, eating and holy days, this group has things right. Let's be clear, these two issues are settled for the modern believer because we believe that the NT is the inspired Word of God. However, related to some issues today (as we saw above), we find ourselves in the same place as the Roman believers *before* they received Paul's letter. There are some areas that might be called "grey" areas. The Bible does not speak directly to those areas. Therefore, we, like the Romans, have multiple options to choose from and multiple choices to make.

This passage can help those church members today who might be more lax in some areas than other church members. It helps answer the question, "What do I do if I think it is ok to do something but some other church members do not agree?" First, Paul says, **Love Your Brother and Sister** (15). (I am going to call this person the "more liberal" church member. I simply mean they are more lax than the "more conservative" church member in some choices. I am not talking about politics or theology.) Paul says if you hurt your brother or sister because of their choice not to participate in X, then you are not walking in love. So, love is the underlying factor in answering the question, "What do I do if I think it is ok to do something, but some other church members do not agree?" How, though, might you hurt them?

Discuss: How might the church member who thinks it is ok to do X hurt the one who does not think it is ok to do X?

Explain: Paul answers this in verse 15b by telling us to **protect your Brother or Sister** (v. 15b). He says do not "put a stumbling block or pitfall" before them. In other words, don't flaunt your "freedom." I am going to pick a completely made-up "rule." Let's say you think it is ok to wear white after Labor Day, but another person

thinks Hezekiah 9:1 commands us not to wear white after Labor Day. If you have that person and their family (including their children who have been taught that it is unrighteous to wear white after Labor Day) over to your house for dinner on the Friday after Labor Day, **you should not wear white to dinner**. Now immediately some just bristled at that statement: “It’s not my fault they have misinterpreted (the completely made up) words of Hezekiah 9:1!” or “Someone needs to correct them. I mean they are raising their kids with some messed up understanding of the text. Someone needs to teach them!” or “Why should I have to change what I do just because they have wrong beliefs?” Do you see what you are doing there? First, you are reacting as any person would. This is exactly how the Romans were talking before Paul wrote his letter. They were “judging” and “despising.” Second, you are (sorry to be blunt here) not acting as a loving follower of Christ. Wearing white after Labor Day (or whatever the issue) is a secondary issue; it’s minor (to use Wiersbe’s word). Merida reminds us that "love limits its own liberty." (Exalting, 228) We should put down our freedom to wear white after Labor Day out of love for our friend and fellow church member. Moreover, in putting down our freedom, we are actually protecting them. "Peer pressure and flaunting one's freedom in front of the [more ‘conservative church member’] may lead the [him or her or their children] to violate their conscience or perhaps even walk away from the fellowship." (Exalting, 228) We must reorder our priorities. Put down, for the benefit of others, your prideful feelings of superiority and your need to be proven right. Again, being frank, don’t be a jerk; just love people because people’s walk with the Lord is at stake.

But Paul goes on in verses 16-18 and tells the Romans to **Protect Your Witness**. He begins by saying, “Do not let your good be slandered.” He reminds us of our priorities. The gospel and the good it produces in this world through the church **is our priority**. If we (again, being frank) start fighting over stupid stuff because we put stumbling blocks and pitfalls before our “more conservative” brothers and sisters, folks are going to talk bad about us. Folks in the church will talk bad about us, and folks outside the church will talk bad about us. You might say, “Well, I don’t care what people say about me.” Well, according to the Word of God in this passage, you should. He is actually saying here something the individualist church member in the West needs to hear: You are not free to practice your “freedom” if it is going to hurt others and hurt the witness of Christ in this world.

Summarize and Transition: This is a tough passage to read. Remember it is written to people who more accurately understand Scripture. They know it is ok to do X, and they are correct. That is what Paul says in verse 14. But he says that we should put down our freedoms for the benefit of others, and he is an example of this. In I Corinthians 9, Paul is dealing with different criticism directed towards him and his ministry, but he says something telling in verses 19-23. It would be great to read it all, but he begins in verse 19 with “Although I am free from all and not anyone’s slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people.” He goes on to say that when he is with the Jews (the “more conservative” church members), he does not flaunt his freedom. (v. 20) When he is with the Gentiles (the “more liberal” church members), he expresses his freedom in Christ. We can be reminded in all of this that “as members of the body of Christ we’re to spur on each other to spiritual growth” (ETB LG, 137), not hamper spiritual growth or the work of the Kingdom.

This passage is directed to the church member who feels it is ok to do some things. But this passage can be difficult to hear for the more conservative among us. That is because we so often equate people’s actions in these secondary areas to their salvation. “A Christian would never do that,” we say. Those in this camp should heed Paul’s words as well. Don’t cave in if you're “fully convinced” of something, but hold back on the judging too (this includes the passive-aggressive side comments too). In the next passage, Paul continues talking to the Roman church members who have an accurate understanding of the two issues in their church: eating and Sabbath keeping. He is going to encourage them to help build up the body.

4. EDIFICATION (ROM. 14:19-20)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 14:19-20

Explain: In verse 17, Paul said: “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” You can replace “eating and drinking” with whatever secondary issue you are thinking about (see the list we made in the first point of the lesson). He says all of those things are not the essential building blocks or components of the Kingdom of God. Instead, the essential components are righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Some will say that these secondary issues *are* about righteousness. Well, they might be, but they are about *living out the righteousness we received from Christ*. And for those who say we should refrain from certain things in order to live righteously, maybe we should consider doing some things that help us live righteously, like practicing forgiveness and openness, welcoming the stranger, loving the unlovable, or seeking peace. You see, it’s not easy being a follower of Christ. As a result, Paul says that we should “pursue what promotes peace [in the body] and what builds up one another.” (v. 19) We are to **Pursue Peace and Build up the Kingdom**.

Discuss: What are some things we can do to pursue the things that promote peace and build up one another?

Explain: There might be a myriad of ways, but I thought of one. Back up in verse 4, Paul talks about being a servant to Christ. That reminded me of the fact that those who so often tear down others for what they do or don’t do are the ones who have a lot of time on their hands. Maybe one way to pursue peace is by getting busy building up the Kingdom. It is hard to criticize someone because of their decision related to secondary issues if you are building a ramp for a disabled person together or serving in the food pantry together or teaching a kids’ Sunday school class together or sharing the gospel in Mexico together.

In verse 20, believers are told **Don’t Divide and Destroy**. Again, Paul is writing to the Christian who has a full understanding of freedom in Christ, but this applies to both groups. “Do not tear down God’s work because of” some secondary issue. You might put it this way: “Don’t blow up the church and its reputation in the community by fighting over these secondary issues.” If you think a church member has some things wrong or believes wrongly ***and you have a close relationship with them,*** then talk with them about it. Maybe you are wrong, maybe they are wrong, but have a conversation, not a fight. Moreover, if there is a church member **with whom you do not have a close relationship** who believes differently about a secondary issue, then, frankly, keep your mouth closed. As we might say, “it’s none-ya business.”

Summarize and Transition: Folks like to get up in other folks’ business. But Paul tells us these secondary issues are not the business we should be about. The Kingdom is not those things. We should remember that "not the externals, but the eternals must be first in our lives." (Be, 158) As a body of Christ, let’s pursue the eternal things and seek to build each other up. “Believers are to build up one another, pursuing peace in our relationships with other believers.” (ETB LG, 139) We do that through prayer, study, and working for the Kingdom.

CONCLUDE

There is so much to consider in this lesson, but the main takeaway is that we should seek unity in the church. We all have different opinions about many different things. Many of those things are secondary to the gospel message and the work of the Kingdom. Let’s strive for peace and unity. The challenge this week is simple. Memorize Romans 14:19 and apply it to your relationships in the church.

> So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.
>
> Romans 14:19