



GRACE CHURCH

Making Jesus Known Among Diversity

Romans 14:1-15:7

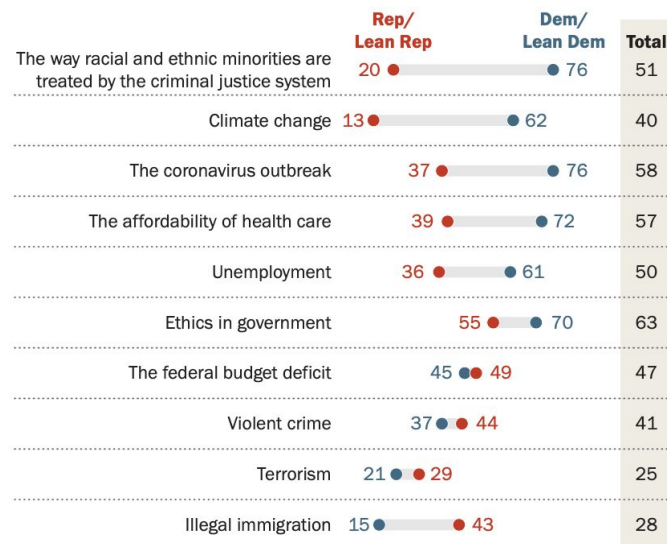
Grace Church | 8.16.20

Welcome, friends. I want to remind you that when we come to worship God by way of Jesus Christ, we are welcomed in. We belong in him. So for all those who have felt *other* in some way this week, like aliens or outcasts, this place is for you. The church is the earthly dwelling place of Christ's beautiful outcasts.

We need a place of rest and unity more than ever, don't we? Year by year, it seems like our culture grows more divisive, more polarizing. We are polarized politically, as we see more prominently in a presidential election year. The right seems more right and the left more left. I don't normally show images on Sunday, but I'd like for you to take a look at this from the Pew research center:

Republicans less likely than Democrats to view several issues, including the coronavirus, as very big problems

% who say ___ is a very big problem in the country today



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted June 16-22, 2020.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



I show this to show that we can't even agree across political lines what the *problem* is, much less the solution. Terms like "radical" "destroy" and "war" and "evil" and "fight" are par for the course on both sides of the aisle. Even Christians appear to be increasingly polarized: on social justice issues there is name calling and misunderstanding. On secondary theological issues there are harder and harder stances taken with less and less nuance. Many Christians fear that other Christians are taking too many cues from cultural ideologies. Many other Christians fear that some Christians are wedding themselves to a political party. Fear and worry is a driving factor: fear of the world, fear of one another, fear of drifting from theological orthodoxy, fear of being accused, fear of losing influence, fear of feminism or Marxism or some other idea, fear of government, fear of loss of freedom or rights. I have experienced, mostly online but also in person, how the general Christian culture in our country is increasingly polarized, slow to trust and listen and quick to judge or look down on one another. It's hard to assume the best of someone who you see as an ideological opponent or a radical.

Just consider for a second how even Christians are prone to have disagreements and differences in personal conviction. We have disagreements over health, especially right now. We have differing levels of worry and concern about COVID-19 and differences in the amount of risk we are comfortable assuming or believe we are assuming, about whether to wear masks or not and about whether they work or not. We have differences of opinion in how to approach medical care, vaccines, pregnancy and birth, diet, or otherwise. We have differences of opinion about government, about how regulated our society should be, about how much we should trust our government. We have differences in how we view economics and the economic good, over how to help the poor and needy. We have differences about social issues, we differ on our understanding of how racism shapes our culture, how much to value religious liberty, or exactly what level of activism we should assume on different issues of justice and fairness. We have differences in family and parenting decisions: some homeschool their kids, some send them to public school, some to private school, some discipline their kids or disciple their kids using different methods than others. We have differences in personal lifestyles: some drink alcohol, some abstain; some feel comfortable watching movies and TV shows that others do not. Some of our convictional differences come from our experiences in the world, some from ethnicity and background, and some from our education or upbringing. But make no mistake: we are a convictionally diverse people.

And so church, we come to worship today as a diverse people with diverse experiences and diverse opinions. If our mission is really to Make Jesus Known in our church, how do we do so to a group of people with so many different opinions and convictions? That is the question that Romans 14 helps us answer. It's a call for unity and charity among diversity. Let me give you the main idea. In our text today we will be taught to **Serve God with our Convictions, To Lay Down Our Convictions For the Sake of One Another, and to Welcome Our Diversity as Christ Welcomed Us**. Ultimately, we will see that the true gospel provides freedom and room to extend welcome, rest, and unity to diverse people who are all in Christ together. We make Jesus Known in the church by our unique love and open heart toward one another, regardless of secondary differences.



Exegetical Background

Paul writes to Jew and Gentile believers in Rome, eager to bring unity to the church by showing how the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. Jew and Gentile believers could not be more different in Rome: ethnically, culturally, politically, ideologically. The Jews were expelled from Rome in AD 49 and did not return until AD 54. Most scholars date the letter to the Romans around AD 55-57. Some Jews remained in Rome, but many fled. What does this mean? It means that although the church in Rome was primarily Jewish in its inception, it had to survive for five years without as many Jews, growing and adapting. So when the Jewish Christians came back to Rome after the death of Claudius, they entered into an increasingly diverse community of believers.

Paul's goal then in Romans is to unite the church in Rome theologically first, which will then lead to a unity of practicality. So he starts his letter by establishing the unrighteousness of both Jew and gentile—all are without excuse—whether under the Mosaic law or under God's natural law. The righteousness needed to be justified before God then does not come from following the Mosaic Law, nor does it come from any other outward morality or worldly wisdom. It comes from union with Christ by the Spirit. And so then Paul begins to make the turn to show in chapters 9-11 how the free and sovereign choice of God of the gentiles leads to the jealousy and repentance of the Jews. In other words, as the gentiles are grafted into the family of God by faith, the Jewish people who have rejected God will experience his grace as it truly is and many will come to faith in Christ under the new covenant. He then moves in chapter 12 to show how all of this is worked out practically in a diverse body who loves and serves one another.

So while the main argument of Romans is inherently theological in nature, the purpose of Romans is practical. Paul wants to help the Roman church understand, love, serve, and bear with one another even in diversity. It's a book about unifying across ethnic, cultural, and political lines. It's a book for a divided world full of prejudice, racism, political strife, and combative opinions. It's a book for our world.

Serving God With Our Convictions (14:1-12)

So we finally get to our text in Romans 14 and Paul has a problem to address. It's a problem of opinion and a problem of conviction and a problem of conscience. The first problem of conscience for the Roman church was that of *eating* in **verses 1-3**. Immediately we are hit with two diverging groups: the "weak in faith" who do not eat meat and the "strong in faith" who believe they can eat anything. Generally speaking, the "weak" are the Jewish Christians who abstain and the "strong" are the gentile Christians who partake, although the identification is flexible.¹ Notice it seems like the general call is issued toward the gentile believer, the "strong" one.

¹ Michael Bird, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Romans*, 466.



1. Do not despise or judge those with differing convictions

But let's look at the Jewish perspective first. The vegetarianism in verse 2 is not for health reasons but for purity reasons. Kosher meat was commonly not available to Jews in Rome at this time. It may have even been harder to get it for Christians, who would often be discriminated against by the Jewish butchers. So instead of eating pork or meat sacrificed to idols or any other food that was "unclean" according to Mosaic law, many of the Jews decided to just abstain from meat all together. Just to be safe. On the other hand, the majority of the gentiles had no problem eating any meat at all. So here we have a relatively small issue in our minds, but a large potential divider in the Roman church. Purity of diet was a monumental piece of Judaism and the Mosaic Law. Many Jewish Christians simply did not feel comfortable jettisoning their standards of purity before God, especially when Christ did not. Their abstaining is what set them apart from the Pagan culture they lived in, it's what made them distinct. I do not think that Jewish Christians in Rome were making this a gospel issue however. In other words, no one was saying: "If you don't follow Mosaic food laws, you cannot be a Christian". That was the Galatians problem with circumcision, but that isn't what we see here. The problem here is not that some Roman Christians were doubting the salvation of those who ate meat, but rather they were passing *judgement* on them, **verse 3**. They were saying: "abstaining from meat is a way to be more godly. Why would you even bother with eating that meat? That's what the world does." It was a personal decision and conviction, but one they took really seriously. Their fear was that if you get rid of these distinctions, Christians will end up looking just like the pagan world.

Now let's consider the Gentile perspective. **Look at verse 3 again**. The strong, those who in their freedom eat all the meat, are tempted to believe the weak to be tolerable but contemptible ("they are close minded!"). See the gentiles and certain Jews had no problem eating anything. It didn't concern their conscience, it didn't make them feel guilty. They were not afraid of looking or acting like the world: they knew their freedom was in Christ, not in their adherence to Jewish tradition or Mosaic Law. Their temptation is not towards legalism, it is towards license.

Ok, so now we have the two camps in mind, let's move on. We know that what we should be avoiding in our convictions is judgement or despising. But is there a *positive* side to this? How then should we form our convictions?

In **Verse 4** we find the reason that judgement makes no sense for Christians. How could you reject and despise someone who God has accepted? It's not your place. Only the master can judge the servant. Both the strong and weak are equal recipients of God's approval in Christ. You may judge a brother or sister because of their conviction, but your judgement won't mean anything in the end if the Lord has affirmed them. So remember the gospel: we are all sinners in need of salvation. No one stands on any other ground than the grace of God in Christ. It is even ground at the cross, and no room for throwing stones.

2. Seek to be fully convinced in your own mind



Verse 5 moves the example from meat to days: some observed the traditional Jewish holidays, many did not. Some observed Roman holidays as well. The point is not that convictions are arbitrary, but each person should be convinced in their own mind and not seek to pressure others with threats of unity or morality.

The call of Paul in this verse is important: seek to be fully convinced. He is not calling for us to get rid of our convictions. Instead it is the opposite. The church is not a place for empty passivity. We don't achieve unity by never having opinions on anything. We should seek to be convinced, by prayer and intentionality, to form our convictions. But how do we form those convictions? That is the important part.

3. Strive to please God, not man

In **Verses 6** we find out how to go about forming our convictions. How do you form convictions? In order to honor the Lord with faithfulness. When you are forming your secondary opinions: about whether to take part in this or abstain from that or send your kids to this school or that school or vote this way or that way, don't do it to please man. Don't do it because the world is doing it. Don't do it because that's how your family or your culture does it. Don't be afraid of being different, but don't be afraid of being the majority either. Fear God, honor God. Let your convictions be shaped by his word and by prayer.

This is what distinguishes secondary convictions from primary ones. The Scripture gives us our primary convictions. We are all unified on particular doctrine and particular ways we look different from the world and flee sin and honor God. But there are many places where the Scripture provides freedom. In those places, this is our aim: honor God, not man.

Verses 7-9 explains why we should be honoring god with our convictions. Because we are not our own. Jesus is Lord, Jesus is Lord over all convictions. He is Lord over life and death because he has conquered death through his resurrection. Making your decisions and forming your convictions is a way that seeks to magnify the prominence of Christ. I love the way Eugene Peterson puts it: "That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other".² If Jesus is Lord in our church, we will be free to please him with our convictions and not be restrained by one another.

Verse 10-12 double down on Paul's condemnation of judgement. Regardless of our personal disagreements, what is clearly wrong is judgement. First, because we are all "brothers" in Christ, and secondly, because we will all be judged by God in the end. If we have been justified by God, we can no longer condemn one another. If we belong to him, then we belong to one another. Christ

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*



went to the cross and bled out for you so that you could be in the family of God. And he did that for your brother too. He is not condemned before God, so why would you condemn him?

What is all of this showing us? That there is a specific way to serve God with our personal convictions. That way is by welcoming one another and not despising or judging one another, but remembering Christ is Lord. Let's move to some application. In 2020, how are we tempted to fit into these categories?

The Trap of the “Weak”: Fear

The concern for those following Jewish food laws, in Paul's mind, is that those following these strict food laws would fall into the trap of legalism. Instead of loving and accepting their brothers and sisters in Christ, they would judge them on the basis of the Law. In so doing, they cut out gospel unity by placing an extra standard of belonging. This too is the temptation of our hearts: to place extra standards of belonging. Now there are obviously some very extreme standards we might place on one another—we could say you are not welcome in this church unless you vote a particular political party, or you are not welcome if you are a different race or a different culture or speak a different language. That kind of legalism has happened in the history of the church before, sadly. But our temptation lies a little more subtle. We are unlikely to dissociate completely from those that differ than us, but we can be prone to subtle, discrete judgement in our hearts. We see someone expressing their opinion on something secondary: political, social, or even theological, and our hearts naturally move towards judgement. Or we see someone participating in something we would not dare participate in: they have more than one beer at the party, they let their kids watch too much tv, they watch and enjoy TV shows we would never dare watch, they read books we would never read or share posts on social media we wouldn't dare share. They go out to participate in a protest or identify with a social group that we deem has suspicious motives. The heart of the subtle legalist is inherently restrictive, and I think it comes from a heart of fear.

When we pass judgement on others because of their freedom, most of the time it is a place of fear. This is why Paul lumps this in the category of being “weak” in faith. The “strong” and the “weak” are not identifiers of those who are strong or weak in their quality of faith. We shouldn't see this as “good” and “bad” or even “mature” and “immature”. Remember that we are not judged by the amount of our faith, but by the object of our faith. Both camps are recognizing their identity in Christ: he is their object. Paul is commenting here in the state of their conscience. The weak in faith are pulled toward restriction. And sometimes, this can be a great thing for them, a necessary thing. It can keep them from indulging in sin they know they are prone to. The command is not to jettison conviction (Jews could still practice Torah!), but rather not to use conviction as a standard for unity. A person with a history of drunkenness who abstains from alcohol oftentimes is making a wise choice that is honorable. So listen carefully: I am not labeling any restriction that you place on yourself as wrong. All I am saying is that when you turn to judge your brother and sister who does not have that same restriction, I think you need to check your heart for fear.

What do I mean by fear? I mean these kinds of things. If you are convinced that if a church member votes democrat that they may be selling themselves out to the liberal agenda, then you are



operating from fear that leads to judgement. Flip it: if you are convinced that if a church member votes republican that they are identifying with Trump and equating their faith with the right, then you are operating from fear that leads to judgement. If you are convinced that if a church member advocates openly for some form of social justice, then they are probably secretly a marxist or have jettisoned Biblical justice, then you are operating from fear that may lead to judgement.

Hear this too: there are fears that are often legitimate. We should be concerned about one another and hold one another accountable. We certainly should be concerned if we have actual evidence that some of our members are so enamored with the politics right or the left that they are forgetting the Kingdom of God. We should be concerned if we have members who are completely ignoring or warping Biblical principles of justice. But this text is screaming to us: welcome one another even in diversity. Trust one another. Don't give yourself over to fear. Don't let your fear drive you to judgement of one another.

The Trap of the "Strong": Pride

It is a good thing to have freedom in the Lord. God has made the world, and everything in it. I will admit that my tendency is not to lean towards restriction, but towards freedom. I rarely find myself asking the question: "why would they ever do that"? But I do find myself asking the question: "Why *wouldn't* they do that?" In other words, the judgement of this camp is a different kind of judgement. The standard of belonging is not based on judging someone for what they do, but despising them and looking down on them because of what they don't do. Again, modern examples abound. Some in our congregation may abstain from alcohol, for God-honoring reasons. But the moment that their abstinence becomes a hindrance to our unity, I am despising them for their convictions. I am using my freedom as an opportunity to sin. Think of the example from earlier that is so forward in our culture today. If you are convinced that if a church member does not openly advocate for all the same issues as you or sees the problems in our country differently than you than they must not care about the poor or oppressed in a Biblical way, you are desiring them and judging them because of their freedom to not do what you choose to do. The heart posture of those who despise others in their Christian freedom is wicked: it says "I'm better than you because I'm not bothered by what you are bothered by."

I believe the primary concern for the "strong" in faith is that of foolish pride. Oftentimes those who are more apt to exercise their Christian freedom don't think about how their actions affect others. While those who are restrictive may have too much concern for the actions of their brothers and sisters, those who operate in their Christian freedom often have too little. They are foolishly caught up in themselves, and are always looking down on those who are not as "free" as they are. When you enjoy your Christian freedom more than you enjoy Christ, it's easy to assume you are the sole epitome of faithfulness. Don't let your pride drive you to look down on those who Christ has lifted up in glory.

We form our convictions to please God, and in our convictions we refrain from passing judgement. Our convictions are good things, but they are not everything. Sometimes God calls us to lay aside our convictions for the sake of one another.



Laying Aside Our Convictions For The Sake Of One Another (14:13-23)

...Prevents Stumbling Blocks and Confusion

13

No Stumbling Blocks. Don't judge one another, rather *judge* how to not put any stumbling blocks in one another's way. A stumbling block is an obstacle that is placed for the purpose of creating offense or manufacturing disturbance for another believer.³

While Paul is convinced that nothing is unclean in itself, he knows this personal conviction and freedom will not be the same for everyone. This is what he means by **verses 14-15**. If a Christian is convinced in his or her conscience that the food is unclean, there is no reason they have to partake of it. For them, it is unclean. Why? Rather than becoming a moral relativist (speak your own truth) Paul appeals to the *love* that is meant to exist between the family of God. If we walk intentionally in a way where we grieve one another with our freedom and convictions, we are not walking in love. The emphasis here is not on the rightness of Paul's conviction or his theology of freedom. He thinks he is right, but he doesn't push it. Why? Because it is far better to love than to be proven right. Winning an argument and losing a brother is a poor, poor, tradeoff.

Verses 20-21 doubles down on this. In a world where face-to-face interactions are often substituted for texts, social media posts, and emails, it is easy to lose this sense of love. We believe that being in the right is the most important aim and goal of our communication. But here there is a different example. By what you eat, by what you say, by what you argue, by your freedom: do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. Love is far more important than your personal conviction. Flaunting your freedom in a way that grieves another brother or sister is a direct attack on the ones who the gentle shepherd has gathered up. In a similar way, judging a believer for exercising Christian freedom that you don't is heaping guilt and judgement on one for whom Christ died to free from judgement.

Another downside of flaunting Christian freedom and conviction is that it brings confusion. I think this is what Paul means by **verse 16-17**. If some Christians are saying "no true Christian should ever eat that meat!" and other Christians in the same church are saying "Real Christians eat anything they want!" then all that causes is confusion. They are calling Christian freedom, which is a good thing, an evil thing. So if the modern church has some saying "no Christian should ever vote Democrat" and some say "no Christian should ever vote Republican" then all we are doing is causing confusion and divisions. We are calling by our actions Christian freedom, which is good, evil. But when we lay aside our convictions for one another, we clear up that confusion by providing room for diversity of opinion. The kingdom of God is not about whether you eat or you

³ Bird, *Romans*, 474.



drink or whether you vote democrat or republican. It's about righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

...Promotes Peace and Faith

Laying aside our convictions when necessary has positive benefits as well. **Verse 18** reminds us that in laying aside our convictions as secondary, we are not only serving one another, but serving Christ, which is accepted by God and is ultimately good for others, promoting peace and mutual upbuilding. When we are not afraid to lay aside our convictions at times, we gain benefit not only for others but also for ourselves. We build bridges instead of tearing them down. This kind of humble service promotes peace.

It also promotes faith. **Verses 22-23** shows us how our personal convictions are more about personal faith than outward action. The one who eats the food from idols is blessed when he doesn't feel any personal judgement. Christian freedom is a good thing, and he feels the pleasure of God when he partakes. Allowing those with strong consciences to partake in Christian freedom strengthens their faith. But another Christian may do the same action and feel something so, so different. They may feel condemnation before God, and so that same action that was holy for one Christian may be sin for another. So when we allow some Christians to exercise freedom, we promote faith. But when we also provide the space for Christians to abstain from freedoms, we also promote faith.

Let's go one more round on this application on both sides. COVID-19. Some of us are very restrictive right now: we are very careful not to see too many people, to go too many places. The risk you are willing to take on is very low. And that is a valid concern that in Christian freedom you can have. But others of us, in the same church united by the same Christ, are less concerned. Maybe we are not convinced of the danger, or we simply value other things more highly enough to accept more risk. Now, let's apply the principles of this text.

If we are given to *more* restriction, we are called not to judge those who Christ has saved. We can reason with them, we can try to show them why we believe our conviction pleases God, but we cannot judge them. We cannot assume that they are blind or unfaithful, especially from afar. We cannot moralize their actions in a way that doubts their place in God's family. We are called to consider if we are being unnecessarily shaped by fear, and come to God with our convictions in order to ask: am I pleasing him? And ultimately, we are called at times to lay aside our convictions if it means we are restricting our brothers and sisters from exercising their Christian freedom. If every time we see a brother or sister in a picture without a mask our first thought is to put one on them, we may be close to rendering a judgement that is not ours to judge. We may be developing a heart that is not of faith, but of fear, and we may unnecessarily be placing our fear on others. When we place our fear on others, we weaken their faith in Christian freedom and cause them to have doubts they never had. Since whatever does not proceed from faith is sin, we may be causing our brother or sister to stumble into sin by our fear, judgement, and restriction on them. If you are not living in fear but in true wisdom that causes you to accept less risk for the sake of your health or



others, your call is to lay some of your conviction aside. This may mean you bear an unnatural burden that is isolating and difficult, as you watch others participate in freedoms you cannot. But you are not a less than Christian.

If we are given to *less* restriction (less freedom) we are called not to despise those who Christ has called family. We don't know how the Holy Spirit is working in them. Not all who are in full quarantine right now are living in fear. Many may not be, but rather living in wisdom. If we flaunt our freedom to accept risk, we tell our brothers and sisters: I'm better than you, and you are missing out. We make our freedom the goal of faith, and not Christ himself. The man or woman who is immunocompromised and has decided to take extreme measures for this year or however long necessary may not have the same freedom you do, but they have the same Christ. Watch out that in your freedom you are not given over to pride. Consider how God may be calling you to give up some of your freedom: to wear a mask or stay home more, so that your brother and sister who stays home in Christ is not driven to stumbling, so that you can say to them: I care about you. I am not better than you because I have more freedom. Do not destroy your quarantined brother or sister just because your conscience is clear. Remember that the kingdom of God is not a matter of quarantines and masks and freedoms and health, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let us pursue what makes for peace and of mutual upbuilding, and not for judgement.

Welcoming Our Diversity as Christ Welcomed Us (15:1-7)

Let's close by reading **15:1-7**. I won't go verse by verse in this, I just want you to hear it as a final charge and notice a few things. First, all of this talk of freedom and sacrifice is rooted in Christ. He was the freest human of all. He bore no reproach, and was without sin or sinful thought. He could participate in all the good things of God without any fear of abusing them. He drank wine without any fear of drunkenness. He entered into conversation without any fear of pride. And yet, Christ humbled himself. He came as a man, accepting the limitations of men. He followed Mosaic Laws. He didn't come to please himself, but to die for us. He came to bear our reproach and our sin so that we could be free in him. His innocent blood was spilt freely so that we could now live in harmony with one another. He died for a diverse bride, not to bring uniformity but to bring true unity. With one voice and different pitches and tones, we can now all glorify God because of Christ. What good news.

And now? We remember Every ideology, worldview, religion, or club has an *entrance fee*. Before you can be fully welcomed, you must believe this, pay this, ascent to this, agree with this. We are no different. So the question is: Who has a seat at the table at Grace Church? **Verse 7**. Our standard of welcome is not how we vote, or what we look like, or what we advocate for, or what risks we take with our health or what schools we send our kids too. Our standard of welcome is how Christ has welcomed us. He welcomed us not because we fit his standards, but because he loved us. He welcomes us by laying down his life for us.



So church, our welcome is love. We love one another, as Christ loved us. We use our convictions to serve God, and we lay aside our convictions for one another. All are welcome here who come by way of Jesus Christ. Let's partake in this supper of welcome now, even in our diversity.

