

“stand in judgment over.”⁹⁶ The opposite expression “**accept**” would include accepting them as members of our church, but it would also include welcoming that person into your circle of friendship as you would a family member (this same word is used with this sense in John 14:3; Acts 28:2; Phlm 17). Both groups have an exhortation to heed in this passage, and the reason Paul gives for them to listen to this instruction is that God has “**accepted**” both the weak and the strong (v. 3).

- After introducing both groups and pointing out that they both have an exhortation to heed, Paul focuses on the “weak” until verse 10.
- He begins by explaining why the “weak” should not judge the “strong,” so he is giving a second reason for his exhortation to the weak—the “strong” already have a Lord or master to whom they are accountable. They do not need the “strong” to be another master. Paul uses here the expression “**stand**” (v. 4) to refer to vindication before the Judge and “**fall**” to refer to condemnation. It is the Lord Jesus who will act as Judge and make this determination about our lives. Each believer is a personal servant of Christ, and nobody but Christ will ultimately decide whether his servants have done what is pleasing in his sight.⁹⁷
- Because Paul is addressing genuine believers, he expresses confidence that God will see to it that the “strong” believer does “stand” and not “fall” at the Final Judgment (v. 4b). They will be approved by their Master at the Final Judgment not because of what food they ate but because of their Master’s sustaining power.
- In **verse 5**, Paul switches to speaking of “sacred” days, but the same exhortations given in verses 1–3 apply in this situation. Some Christians in Rome (the “weak”) evidently believed that they still needed to keep the Sabbath and celebrate other Jewish festivals, while others (the “strong”) believed “**every day [was] alike.**” As with the issue regarding food, Paul clearly believed that the “strong’s” position was correct (cf. Gal 4:10; Col 2:16), but he also did not want the “weak” to sin by violating their conscience. It is always wrong to go against your conscience (we will discuss this more below). If our conscience is off, we should work to correct our conscience, but we should not do something that we believe to be a sin. As Paul puts it, “**Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind**” (v. 5b).
- Paul points out that both groups genuinely believed that what they were doing pleased God because both groups gave thanks to God before they ate their food (v.

⁹⁶ “This does not mean that the church has no responsibility to exercise discipline among its membership. Only a few paragraphs after 1 Corinthians 4:3–5, Paul impressed on the Corinthians how important it was “to judge” (κρίνειν, 5:12) a member of their community involved in flagrant sexual sin (5:1–14). At issue in Romans 14:1–12 and in 1 Corinthians 4:1–5 was the particular way in which believers sought to obey God as an expression of their faith, not the question of whether obedience to God really matters after all” (Thielman, 636–7).

⁹⁷ The word translated as “servant” in v.4 was used specifically of a domestic slave who served a master directly within the home, so “within the metaphor Paul is developing... outside interference between a master and this more personal kind of servant would be especially inappropriate” (Thielman, 631).

6). In other words, both sides had a clear conscience. One writer helpfully suggests a diagnostic question we can ask ourselves in order to evaluate whether we are free to do something: “Can I give thanks to God for this activity?” (Naselli, 178).

- That diagnostic question is appropriate in *all* situations because of what Paul says next. **Verses 7 and 9** can be summarized as “Everything that we do takes place before the Lord. There are no neutral areas of life; there is nothing we do or say or think that the Lord is unconcerned about” (*EBR*, 182). In **verse 9**, Paul points specifically to Christ’s death and resurrection, which was for the purpose of him having lordship over all, including the “strong.” These verses support Paul’s assertion that Jesus is our ultimate Judge or Master. Everything we do is ultimately supposed to be done for him; we belong to him, and he sees all things.
 - In **verse 10**, Paul returns to addressing both the “strong” and the “weak.” Not only do the “strong” have a Lord to whom they will answer, but all of us will stand before God’s judgment seat and give an accounting for our lives (**vv. 10–12**).
 - In **verse 11**, Paul quotes from Isaiah 45:23 to support his point. This specific passage is likely chosen because it refers to Gentiles standing before God in judgment. And we know from the way Paul uses this OT passage in Phillipians 2:9–11 that he believes that Jesus is the God to whom every knee, Jew and Gentile, will bow.
2. Giving Priority to Kingdom Values (14:13–23)
- This section turns the focus to the “strong.” They are not to put a “**stumbling block**” or “**obstacle**” in their brother or sister’s path (**v. 13**) or do anything by which their fellow Christian “**stumbles**” (**v. 21**). In **verse 15**, this same danger is described as “**destroy**[ing]” the “weak” brother, i.e., “**him for whom Christ died.**” Paul is using these various words to describe the same danger. Therefore, Paul is not referring to merely “offending” someone, as we might use the word *offend* today, but is instead speaking of causing someone to abandon the faith, resulting in eternal separation from God (see esp. Schreiner, 709–12).⁹⁸ He is talking about the type of “stumbling” from which you cannot recover. If the “weak” decide, based on the “strong’s” actions, to stop doing what they believe to be pleasing to God, they are in danger of abandoning their commitment to Christ altogether.⁹⁹ We will see below why Paul sees this as a possibility.

⁹⁸ Words have “friends” and mean certain things when they are combined with other words. Here we have several words being used together that are commonly used for eternal death or separation from God, i.e., the fate of the unsaved. The word translated “**destroy**” in **v. 15** is commonly used by Paul in other passages to describe the eternal punishment of the unsaved (Rom 2:12; 1 Cor 1:18, 29; 15:18; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:10). A “**stumbling block**” (**v. 13**) is also often used in the NT as a metaphor for falling away (the verb form sometimes is translated as “fall away”) from faith in Christ or rejection of Christ (see, e.g., Matt 13:21; 18:6; Luke 17:1; Rom 9:32–33; 11:9; 16:7; 1 Cor 1:23; etc.). Paul also uses the term translated as “**obstacle**” in **v. 15** in 1 Cor 8:9 (where it is usually translated as “stumbling block”) to describe the “destruction” or “ruin” of a professing believer (v. 1 Cor 8:11).

⁹⁹ This passage would be parallel to other passages that teach that God not only holds apostates responsible for

- In **verse 14**, Paul states his own personal conviction about food. He does not believe that any food is “**unclean in itself**.” To put it simply, Paul could eat bacon without sinning! However, that same food would be “**unclean**” if another Christian considers it to be “unclean” (v. **14b**). So, someone else eating bacon would be a sin for him if he believed that eating bacon was a sin, but his belief did not make Paul’s bacon-eating a sin. Therefore, Paul is saying that our own personal convictions regarding something have an impact on whether that action is a sin *for us*. At this point, Paul is referring to the concept that we usually refer to as our conscience. Although Paul does not use the word *conscience* in this section (he does in a similar passage in 1 Cor 8–10), he is referring to the conscience when he says that the “weak” can be “**hurt**” (v. **15a**). Our conscience is like a smoke detector that alerts us to danger. It does not make something right or wrong but lets us know when something wrong occurs. A conscience has been defined as “your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.”¹⁰⁰ In Rome, the “consciences of some Christians still tell them that eating certain foods is wrong, and Paul is worried that the activity of the strong in faith will create such pressure on the weak that they will cave in, go against their consciences, and eat meat” (*EBR*, 183). The conscience of the “weak” was not calibrated correctly according to God’s Word. However, their decisions were not heretical. Until the “weak” became personally convinced by God through his Word, the “strong” should not do anything to attack their conscience. Like a smoke detector or a speedometer on a car, paying attention to an improperly calibrated conscience is far better than completely failing to listen to what your conscience says is dangerous. To sum it up, “if your conscience is (wrongly) informing you that it is wrong to eat bacon, then it is sinful *for you* to eat bacon—even if it is not inherently sinful to eat bacon” (Naselli, 181).
- At the center of his argument (vv. **17–19**), Paul gives three reasons why the “strong” should be careful in exercising their liberty in Christ.
 - First, it would be unloving to damage the conscience of a fellow believer (v. **15a**). This type of action would be against the “standard” of “**love**.” For example, if you ate bacon in front of someone who believed bacon-eating was wrong, and your actions led them to violate their conscience, you would be encouraging them to sin! And this would not be an expression of love.
 - Second, as an inference from the previous reason, believers should not use their liberty, which is a “**good thing**,” in such a way that it could “**be spoken of as evil**” (v. 16) or “slandered” (CSB). Here Paul is likely referring to the response of

their actions but also holds others responsible for actions that might cause some to abandon the faith (cf. Matt 18:7).

¹⁰⁰ Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 42. I highly recommend this work on the biblical view of the conscience.

unbelievers who see believers living in a manner that contradicts the gospel and then speak evil. Again, we would be unloving if we caused fellow believers to sin by leading them to call evil something good that God has given to his people.

- Third, the building up of the congregation is *far more* important than our food and drink (**vv. 17–19**). The “**kingdom of God**” will be made up of believers, and they are presently being gathered into congregations and becoming more like their King.¹⁰¹ This gathering of kingdom citizens is characterized by “**righteousness and peace and joy in** [i.e., produced by] **the Holy Spirit.**” Food and drink are incidental to this kingdom program. We should not be thinking in terms of what we are allowed to do but in terms of what would be the best for the advancement of Christ’s mission of building his Church, the people of his kingdom. We should not tear down God’s work over food (**vv. 20–21**)!
 - In **verses 22–23**, Paul reminds us that, if we violate our conscience (i.e., we are doing something that we believe displeases God), we are sinning, even if that action is something that another Christian knows to be right. Paul uses “**faith**” here in **verse 23** as he did in verses 1–2, that is, to describe our individual belief that something is pleasing or displeasing to God. “Maintain your convictions about disputable matters, but you do not need to broadcast those convictions. If you have freedom, do not flaunt it; if you are strict, do not expect others to be strict like you” (Naselli, 183).
 - Based on everything Paul has said in this passage, I think we can draw two conclusions regarding the potential harm that the “strong” could bring upon the “weak”:
 - We should limit our freedom if we find that our actions are encouraging another believer to sin by ignoring his conscience. Because if we ignore our conscience, we are always sinning. And we do not want to cause our brothers and sisters to sin.
 - If we persist in using our freedom in a way that causes a professing believer to ignore his conscience, we run the risk of causing him to abandon his conscience completely and depart from the faith. We would then be guilty of contributing to someone’s apostasy.
3. Following Christ’s Example of Other Regard (15:1–6): The chapter division here is unfortunate because Paul is continuing his discussion of the “strong” and “weak.”

¹⁰¹ A large concept like the “kingdom of God” can sometimes be referred to by a significant part that makes up the whole. Sometimes in the NT the part being referred to is the **person** who rules the kingdom, i.e., Jesus the king, sometimes it is the **people** who that King rules over, and sometimes it is the **place** that these people will one day enter. At Christ’s Second Coming, all three components will come together in a perfect kingdom that will last forever. But at this time, the focus is on the gathering and building up of the people, and that seems to be Paul’s focus here in **v. 17**.

- Paul summarizes his argument from 14:1–23: Those who are “**strong**” (and Paul includes himself in this group) should seek to lovingly encourage the “**weak**” and not seek to please themselves (**vv. 1–2**; cf. 1 Cor 8:13).
- Paul **supports** this summary (“**For,**” **v. 3**) by noting that Christ did not seek to please himself but endured insults, especially on the way to his crucifixion. Paul quotes from Psalm 69:9b, a psalm that contains other connections with Jesus’ betrayal and crucifixion (e.g., Ps 69:25 and Acts 1:20, and Ps 69:21 and Matt 27:34; Mark 15:36; Luke 23:36; John 19:29). Paul has already used words from this psalm regarding David’s enemies to describe the people of Israel who rejected Jesus (Rom 11:9–10; cf. Ps 69:22–23). It seems that the author of the psalm, David, as God’s prophet, spoke words about himself¹⁰² that would also be very appropriate on the lips of his greater son.¹⁰³ Jesus learned from reading David’s words, and reading this psalm today reminds us of the rejection that Jesus endured for God’s glory. Therefore, we should be willing to decide to build up others rather than merely trying to please ourselves.¹⁰⁴ In this way, we will be like our Lord Jesus.
- In **verse 4**, Paul reminds his readers that despite not being under the OT Law, the OT, including Psalm 69, as Scripture, still instructs and encourages us. “In other words, something is wrong if one only studies the Scriptures academically and does not regularly receive nourishment and strength to live the Christian life” (Schreiner, 723), and this includes the OT. Interesting to note that this call for perseverance appears here in this discussion of loving brothers with whom you differ.
- **Verses 5 and 6** are a prayer by Paul for the unity of the believers in Rome. Paul wants to see the believer united “**so that**” (introducing a **purpose**) they can **together** “**glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**” In 16:17, Paul tells us that there are some professing believers that we will need to separate from because they are teaching heretical doctrine (i.e., they have created disunity by teaching lies), but here, he is speaking about unity among believers who may differ on personal convictions. He wants to see them glorifying God with “**one mind**” and “**one voice.**” These verses can probably be viewed as Paul’s purpose for writing the letter to the Romans. Everything that Paul has said in this letter about the believer’s

¹⁰² It is also possible that David was speaking on behalf of the Messiah as he does for God in Ps 110 and the prophet Isaiah does for the Suffering Servant, i.e., Ps 69 was originally intended to convey Jesus’ own words. Either way, the words in Ps 69 apply to anyone who suffers for doing what is right before God, which was likely true of David and was especially true of our Lord Jesus.

¹⁰³ John 2:17 connects the first half of Ps 69:9 with Jesus’ zeal for God’s temple. Also, while the NT writers do not make this explicit, Jesus’ treatment by his own biological family fits with David’s words in Ps 69:8.

¹⁰⁴ As Moo notes, the fact that Paul chose a verse that speaks of insults may indicate that the “strong” were enduring insults from the “weak” for their convictions (*EBR*, 186). Then part of the command to “bear with the failings of the weak” would be to patiently endure these insults.

vertical relationship with God has prepared for this emphasis on the believer's horizontal relationship with believers who differ from him on non-essential matters.

4. God's Design of United Praise (15:7–13)

- Similar to verse 1, **verse 7** is a command that summarizes everything that Paul has said in 14:1–15:6. He is no longer addressing the “strong” but is making a general call to all believers to accept each other. Paul uses the same imperative, “**accept**,” that we saw in 14:1, creating bookends around this section. As in 14:1, at a minimum, it means that we should accept those who differ on these non-essential matters into our church, but it also means that we should love them and accept them into our homes and circle of relationships. In other words, we should treat them as part of the family of God alongside us.
- **Verses 8–12** are the grounds (“**For**, v. 8) for Paul's appeal in **verse 7**. Paul says that Christ became “**a servant of the Jews**” (v. 8a) for the purpose of keeping the promises made to the Patriarchs (“**the promises made to the Patriarchs might be confirmed**”) and so that the Gentiles would also “**glorify God for his mercy**” (v. 8b). Paul explains that this second purpose was always God's intention by citing several OT passages which speak of God's plan for the Gentiles to praise him alongside the Jewish people (cf. 2 Sam 22:50; Ps 18:49; Deut 32:4; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10). By working towards the unity of Jewish and Gentiles believers, Paul, and by extension, all of us as believers, are working towards a plan God revealed to us in the OT. On the other hand, if we create disunity in the church, we are working against Christ's mission! It was never God's intention to save only the Jewish people through the Messiah, and it was certainly never God's plan to forget the special promises made to Jacob's descendants. Instead, it was always his plan to have a kingdom someday with a special role for the restored Jewish people while also being a global empire with people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, all of them saved by the perfect life and sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus (see esp. Is 49:5–6).
- **Verse 13** is a prayer for the Roman Christians, which ends this section of the letter and incorporates many of the important topics of the letter to this point. God is the one who gives us hope (“**God of hope**”; cf. 5:2, 4–5; 8:20, 24–25) and fills the believer with “**joy and peace**” (cf. 14:17) as a result of their trusting in him (“**in believing**”; cf. 5:1). “Jews and gentiles alike can look with eager anticipation to the time when together they can be set free from all remaining vestiges of sin and enjoy God's presence fully (Cf. 8:19–25)” (*EBR*, 188).

VI. The Letter's Closing (15:14–16:27)

A. Paul's Ministry and Travel Plans (15:14–33)

1. Looking Back: Paul's Ministry in the East (15:14–21)