

Week of November 13



DAY
1

The Overview Romans 14:1–15:15

This is the final week of devotional readings in our *UnDivided* series on Romans 12–15.

We have covered a lot of ethical and moral teaching on how we are to live with one another as the people of Jesus; how we are to interact with the government; how we are to engage with the non-Christian world around us; and finally, how we are to pay special attention to the painful issues that divide us.

I would not blame you if you have skimmed through these chapters in Romans in previous times of reading this letter.

In these two chapters, Paul is talking about issues we don't understand, like eating or not eating certain foods and observing or not observing certain days. He uses categories that are strange to us. Clean and unclean. Weak and strong. It just seems confusing, and maybe even irrelevant.

Paul calls them **disputable matters**. The Church was quarreling over them. And judging one another about them. And damaging one another's faith! As you will see in the next few days of this devotional, we do the same thing—only we have our own disputable matters. They are different matters than the people of Paul's day, but they are the same bad behaviors and have the same tragic outcomes.

Today, read or skim through Romans 14:1–15:15. We will look at the issues that divide us, the theology that changes us, and the better way Paul has for us the rest of the week. For today, just become familiar with what is there. By the end of the week, you will have a great understanding of their situation and ours.

For each devotion this week, look at the final column for ideas on reflection and application.

DAY
2

The Issues that Divide Us Romans 14:13

The disputable matters of Romans 14–15 involve two things. The first matter involved food sacrificed to idols and now being sold at market. This was a standard practice throughout the Roman Empire. The question was simple: Is that food ritually unclean and unholy? Can a Christian use this food or not? This was a hotly contested matter for churches throughout the Roman Empire.

The other matter was holidays or holy days or sacred days. There were a lot of them in the Roman Empire. Some of them were Empire-wide. Some of them were specific to regions. Usually, these days were to commemorate great events or to celebrate the gods. It is also possible that there was a tension of worship on Saturday (the Sabbath) or Sunday (the first day of the week). Either way, it was another strong, antagonistic debate.

Disputable matters. They were secondary at best! Maybe not even that important. But Christians are well known for majoring on the minors. Of making theological mountains out of mole hills. No matter the disputable matter, we find ways to make it MUCH more important than it is.

The disputable matters of the last few years have been around COVID-19. Wear masks or don't wear masks. Wash your hands or don't wash them. Avoid close social contact or go ahead and hug everyone. We did to one another (about COVID-19 issues) exactly what Christians in Rome were doing about food and holidays.

We judged the other side as being in serious error (14:4,13); we destroyed one another's faith and said the other was

being a weak, fearful Christian (14:15); we had a failure of love (14:15); and the unity of the Body of Christ was torn apart. Over masks! Judgment, condemnation, and separation because of opinions about disputable matters. It is one of the perennial issues in the history of the church.

DAY
3

The Theology that Changes Us **Romans 14:17–18**

Paul is always a theologian, even when he is being a pastor and talking about relational issues. He has a strong theology that guides every rebuke and recommendation he makes in these chapters. He gives seven reasons why we need to shape up and go through an attitude adjustment.

- 1) We are accountable to our master, Jesus. You are not my master, and I am not your master. Jesus is our master (14:4-5).
- 2) We belong to the Lord Jesus (14:7-9).
- 3) We will give an account to God, who is our Lord and judge. We don't judge, we entrust judgment to God. He is the just judge (14:10-12).
- 4) We have freedom of conscience on these matters (14:5). There are many core, primary, vital, essential beliefs that are a part of the Christian life. On these matters, our response is to say "yes" and "amen" to the historic, apostolic faith. On disputable matters, study the Bible, listen to the church tradition of interpretation, talk things over with pastors and friends, and then you are free to come to the best interpretation you can. You give the same freedom to the other person. When we do this, we let go of judgment, condemnation, and division. These values of freedom of conscience and freedom of religious belief are core to our democracy. They must be core for the church.
- 5) The Kingdom of God, and the values and priorities of that Kingdom, are far bigger and better than our personal opinions on disputable matters. Our focus is on righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit—not winning a contest over personal interpretations and petty opinions (14:16-18). Read these verses several times.
- 6) We are to imitate Jesus, who considered the interests and needs of the other person (15:1-6). See also Philippians 2:1-5.
- 7) Christ is the missional servant of all. The Church is the mission of Jesus in the world. Accepting and loving one another is at the heart of our mission. Without it, we fail in our mission (15:7-15).

DAY
4

The Better Way of Life Together **Romans 15:14–15**

Paul finishes this section of teaching with two comments. First, he is convinced that the Roman Christians are full of goodness, knowledge, and competent to help one another on these things (15:14). Second, Paul is bold in reminding them of these things (15:15). In other words, you know what to do, I am reminding you of what you already know, now live up to the truth you know. Throughout these two chapters, Paul drops many exhortations.

First, a reminder of what not to do. Don't judge, condemn, divide, and destroy (multiple times in these chapters).

Do not allow good things to become a source of division (14:16).

Make every effort for peace and building one another up (14:19, 15:2). And accept one another (15:7).

Control yourself and limit yourself for the sake of others (14:21). See Galatians 5:13-15 on how to use your freedom responsibly.

Keep your personal opinions on disputable matters between you and God. It is better to pray them through with God than argue over them with others (14:22).

If you consider yourself to be the stronger one, then bear with the one you consider the weaker Christian. If you destroy the weaker one, you are the weak (and sinful) one. Notice the brilliance of what Paul says. Everyone considers themselves to be the stronger one. Everyone sees the other person as the weak one. That is how you see them. That is how they see you. That makes for a win-win, for the stronger must always be kind, gentle, humble, and loving to the one who is weaker (15:1-2).

Keep the spirit of unity in Christ as your greatest priority (15:5).

Live with joy, peace, and hope in the power of the Holy Spirit (15:13).

And for a bonus insight, check out Romans 16:17-18.

PERSONAL REFLECTION & LIFEGROUP CONVERSATION

Day 1: This one requires a lot of self-awareness. What are some of the disputable matters that really upset you and on which you tend to judge others?

As you read, think about possible disputable matters that are hurting the church of North America in our time.

Day 2: This day looked at one of the most troubling and divisive issues of recent years: COVID-19-related policies. Masks, social distancing, vaccinations—these and others became the MOST disputable matters of our time. What were your attitudes and behaviors like toward those who held a view different from your own?

How much did you experience anger, judgment, and separation from others who didn't see things as you did? What about those you tried to be respectful of, but they didn't do the same for you?

Did you lose any relationships because of these disputable matters?

Day 3: There were seven theological reasons Paul provided for why we reject disunity and dissension, and why we practice love, acceptance, honor and respect, and UNITY. Identify two or three of the reasons that are the most powerful motivators for you. How well did you do in the last few years with these motivators?

Day Four: Paul gives 10 descriptions and prescriptions for the better way of life together in Jesus. These are commands and exhortations. While they are all important, how well do you understand the power of his stronger–weaker argument?

Do you agree that if you are a stronger Christian than you are obligated and responsible to follow all the other commands Paul gives? Have you acted as the stronger or weaker Christian in the disputable matters of our time?