

# THE STRONG BELIEVER AND THE WEAK BELIEVER: QUESTIONABLE FUNCTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR – CHRISTIAN LIBERTY ROMANS 14:01–09

## *Introduction*

The issue of Christian liberty vs. license is always confronting the believer and the church who wish to please their Lord. What can a believer *do and not do* socially and personally? Can he...

- drink socially?
- attend films, and if so, are any unacceptable?
- watch television, and if so, are all programs acceptable?
- gamble, and what is considered gambling?
- dance, and is there any form of dance unacceptable?
- listen to music, and if so, what music is acceptable?
- attend or participate in athletic events on Sunday?

There are a host of social and recreational functions that are sometimes questioned by the believer who is truly seeking to please his Lord in *all that he does*. This passage deals with the principles which are to guide the believer as he faces these issues.

- I. Accept the weak brother (vv. 1-2).
- II. Do not look down on or judge (criticize) others (vv. 3-4).
- III. Be fully convinced of right and wrong behaviour (vv. 5-6).
- IV. Watch out — watch what you do (vv. 7-9).

## **I. *Romans 14:01–02 Accepting a Weak Brother***

Accept or receive the weak brother. The word “accept” (proslambano) means to welcome, to accept, to take to oneself. However, there is a significant fact about the word that must be noted. It means...

- to accept a weak person just as *God graciously receives* men
- to take a weak person to oneself just as *God graciously takes* men to Himself

The believer is to “accept” the weak brother just as God accepts him. The exhortation is both forceful and tender, demanding and hopeful. It is forceful and demanding in that it gives the believer the opportunity to act as God acts, and it gives the weak believer great

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hope in being cared for and looked after. Now, note two instructions about accepting the weak brother.

1. The weak brother is to be received without criticism and argument over his weaknesses. There is to be no passing judgment in accepting him. He is to be accepted with open arms just as God receives men.

**Rom 15:1** *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*

**1 Cor 9:22** *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*

2. There are differences between Christians as to how they should live — about what is and is not allowed by God. For example, one Christian believes he can eat anything, whereas another Christian believes he must be a vegetarian. The Roman church was apparently dealing with this very problem. The Jews from their earliest history had a long list of laws governing food (see Lev. 11:1f), so there was probably some division within the church between the Jewish and Gentile converts as to just how closely these laws should be observed, if indeed at all. The point, however, is not limited to rules governing food. The Scripture is applicable to all the rules, scruples, taboos and restrictions of behaviour which some believers and churches say should regulate our lives. However, having said this, it is absolutely critical to note two facts.
  - a. This passage is *not dealing with the clear commandments of God*; it is dealing with those behaviours about which there are *clear differences of opinions* among men. *There is no dispute about the commandments of God in Scripture: they are to be obeyed.* In fact, Christian maturity is measured by our obedience to Christ (see note, Mt. 5:17-18).

**John 14:21** *“Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”*

**John 15:10, 14** *“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. You are my friends if you do what I command.”*

**John 14:21** *“Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.”*

**1 Sam 15:22** *But Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.*

- b. The person who is a vegetarian, that is, who governs his life by *strict rules*, is called the *weak* brother. Why would keeping strict rules cause a believer to be called a *weak* Christian? (see *Christian Liberty*, Rom. 14:2).

## ROMANS 14: 02 CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

*One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. **Romans 14: 02***

Both the weak Christian believer and the strong Christian believer thought the other was weak. This is important to see, for both are subject to criticizing and condemning the other (v. 3f).

Paul faced the issue of Christian liberty often; therefore, he is an excellent example to consider in discussing this issue. Paul was willing to become all things to all men when principle was *not at stake*, but when principle *was at stake*, he would concede nothing.

For example, Paul had Timothy circumcised, conforming to the law of Moses; however, here in Romans he exhorts believers to ignore outward observances and to resist them to the utmost. In another instance, he *would not allow* Titus to be circumcised — under any circumstance (Gal. 2:3-5); and he warned the Galatians that if they were circumcised, Christ would profit them nothing. They would be renouncing their salvation. What is the difference?

When rules and observance are made the *means of salvation*, they become a fatal heresy; and in the case of Titus and the Galatians, this is what was happening. Rules and observances are contrary to God's method of saving men. There is all the difference in the world between a man who approaches God *by means of rules* and the man who approaches God *by means of Christ*. The first man believes he is saved by his works, that is, by the morality of keeping rules; whereas the second man believes he is saved by Christ and Christ alone.

The problem of the weak brother is that he is just a little bit mixed up as to how day to day cleanliness comes. He feels a tinge of conscience to observe some rule in order to keep his life clean. He feels that he keeps the favour of God by doing *extra* works. He just has not matured to the point of understanding that even his day-to-day cleanliness comes from the *righteousness of Christ*.

There are essentially two reasons why the strict or judgmental man is weak in the faith.

1. He still believes in the necessity of works. Down deep within his heart he still believes that he can gain *some favour* from God by doing certain things and abstaining from others — things that are not taught in the Bible, that are reasoned out by himself and others as commendable and beneficial. To some degree he is still trying to gain and to maintain a right relationship with God by his own works. He has not fully accepted the way of God's grace and love. He has not yet understood that he is accepted *in* the righteousness of Christ and in His righteousness alone.

He has not yet understood — not fully — that he is short, and always will be short, of God's glory, unable to do any work or act perfectly. He has not grasped that he must trust the love of God to count him righteous in Christ *every day*. He is not completely liberated from a belief in works and self-righteousness.

2. He does not know the meaning of Christian liberty. He sees Christianity as a thing of rules and regulations, and he governs his life by these rules and observances. In many cases even the thought of Christian liberty *frightens* him.

Now, having said this, it is of *utmost importance* that a believer keep in mind his duty as a Christian (see Rom. 6:1-2; 6:14-15). There are *commands and prohibitions* given in the Bible about which there are no questions. A believer must unquestionably obey them (see Rom. 14:13-15; 15:1-3; see Exo. 20:1f; Rom. 13:1f; Gal. 5:19f; Eph. 4:17f). □

## II. *Romans 14:03–04 Judging or Criticizing Others*

Do not look down on or criticize or judge others. As the strong believer and the weak believer associate together, both are subject to serious sin.

- => The believer who understands his liberty in Christ is subject to *look down on* the weaker brother. The words looking down on, condemn, despise (exoutheneito) mean to hold in contempt, to treat as meaningless and utterly wrong.
- => The weak believer, the believer who feels he must observe *extra* rules, is subject to judging (krineto), criticizing or censoring others.

Three reasons are given for not looking down on, despising and judging one another, three reasons that stand as a warning to believers.

1. God Himself has accepted the strong believer. The believer who walks in the liberty of Christ and does not live a strict life has been accepted by God, no matter what the more legalistic believer may think. There may be some man-made religious rules which he does not observe, but he has trusted Christ, and he obeys the Word of God. Therefore, he is not to be criticized and judged, but he is to be accepted into the fellowship of the more legalistic believer.
2. No one has the *right* to judge the Lord's servant. Note: both believers belong to the Lord; both are the servants of the Lord. Therefore, the Lord alone has the right to judge them. Believers do not have the *right to play God* and to judge each other. They have no right to condemn and pass judgment upon each other's behaviour and works, for they do not belong to each other. They each belong to Christ; therefore, He alone determines whether or not they stand or fall and are accepted or rejected.

3. God *will hold* the believer up. There is no question about the matter: the believer will be held up, for God is able to make him stand.

**Phil 1:6** *Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

**2 Tim 1:12** *That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.*

**2 Tim 4:18** *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

**1 Pet 1:5** *[You] who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.*

**Gen 28:15** *I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."*

**Psa 37:28** *For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off.*

**Prov 2:8** *For he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.*

### III. **Romans 14:05–06** *Believer's Behaviour*

Be fully convinced of right and wrong behaviour. The Jews had made a maze of rules governing the Sabbath and special holy days.

**Gal 4:9-10** *But now that you know God — or rather are known by God — how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!*

**Col 2:16-17** *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*

Again, this issue was apparently a hotly debated issue between the Jewish and Gentile believers in the Roman church. But again, the issue is much broader than the mere observances of *holy days*; it involves all the man-made restrictions laid upon men by legalistic believers and churches. In saying this, however, it bears repeating: Scripture is not talking about the commandments found throughout the Bible. The commandments and instructions of Scripture are to be kept. The present passage is dealing with the legalistic tendencies of men, the rules and regulations which some men put forth as commendable and beneficial to practice.

Another fact needs to be mentioned as well. Paul is not suggesting that the Lord's Day is not important. He is not suggesting that it is all right to ignore, neglect or abuse the Lord's Day. Far from it. What he is attacking is an attitude that substitutes a Christian day for Christianity. The Lord's Day is very important to God, for it is the day set aside for the worship of His Son and for the rest and relaxation of His followers. However, the believer is not to worship the day, but worship the Lord of all days.

The point is this. Whatever the believer does, he must be fully convinced that it is right and not wrong. Note two points.

1. The believer is to be fully convinced in his own mind when dealing with questionable matters. The believer is to make the decision for himself; no one else is to decide for him. But note:
  - => He must make sure the matter *is questionable*, that it is not covered by some command in the Scripture.
  - => He must be honest and intelligent in deciding if the behaviour is right.
  - => He must not violate his conscience *at all*, not in the least.
  - => He must be absolutely sure to do no wrong.
2. The believer is to live as he sees and understands God's will. The point is very simply stated: one man dedicates every day to the Lord and sees every day as the Lord's; the other man dedicates every day to the Lord, but he believes Sunday and holy days are more special and meaningful and should be especially set aside for God. Note that the same attitudes prevail toward food: one man *gives thanks* to God and eats everything; another man *gives thanks* and eats only vegetation. The point to note is that...
  - both men dedicate and worship the Lord every day. They differ only in that one man sets aside some days for an extended celebration to God.
  - both men thank God for their food. They differ only in what they are eating.

Now note the crucial factor: the hearts of both men are focused upon God. Both men are dedicating their lives to worship and serve God and both are thanking God for what they have. Their hearts are right with God. The differences between them are external and concern material things: days and food. Therefore, both are acceptable to God. Both are fully convinced that what they are doing is right before God.

#### **IV. *Romans 14:07–09 Watch What You Do***

Watch out — watch what you do. There are two *supreme reasons* why the believer must watch what he does.

1. The believer belongs to Christ in both life and death.

- => He does not live to himself alone: he does not do as he wills, follow his own desires, do his own thing, give in to his urges and passions.
- => He does not die to himself alone: take his death into his own hands or expect to handle death by himself.

The believer does not live for himself; he lives for Christ. He has committed both his life and his death into the hands of Christ, surrendering all he is to Christ. While he lives he is the Lord's, and when he dies he is the Lord's. The Lord's dominion does not extend only to this life, but in the other life as well. No matter where the believer is or what he is doing, he is the Lord's. The Lord is his Lord, for the believer has placed his life and death under the care and keeping of the Lord. The Lord is the Master and God of his life; therefore, the believer watches closely what he does: he makes sure that what he does pleases his Lord, *for the welfare of his life and death is under the Lord's care.*

**Luke 20:38** *"He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."*

**Rom 14:8** *If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.*

2. The believer has been purchased by the Lord's death and resurrection. Christ died, bearing the sin of the believer upon Himself, so that the believer could be freed from the coming judgment upon sin. The believer has faith in the death of Christ. He believes that...
  - when Christ died, he *symbolically died* with Christ.
  - when Christ hung upon the cross, he *symbolically hung* upon the cross with Christ. How? By faith. God loves man so much that when a man truly believes in the death of Christ for his sins, God will take that man's *faith* and count it as the death of Christ, as the believer having died with Christ. It is the same with the resurrection of Christ. When a man truly believes in Christ, God counts the man's belief as the resurrection of Christ. The man is identified with Christ in the resurrection of Christ, and he is given a new life that is both abundant and eternal.

The point is this: it was for this purpose that Christ died and arose — that He might be the Lord both of the living and the dead. He is the Lord of all believers whether they are living on this earth or deceased and passed on into heaven. The true believer has been purchased by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The believer does not belong to himself: he cannot act selfishly and sinfully in making decisions about behaviour. He must obey and please the Lord, for the Lord has purchased the right to the believer's life and death.

**2 Cor 5:14-15** *For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.*

**Rom 6:10-11** *The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

**Gal 2:20** *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ■*