

## Romans 14:1-12 – “Weak and Strong Together”

(Pew Bible Page: 948-9)

**Intro:** It happens every year. Painfully, we hear stories of how a church, a body of Christ’s people, blows apart over some issue of disagreement among the members. The issues are various, but the cause is singular: everyone is convinced that they are right. At least that is what they believe. The reality is far different, however. When a church explodes, far from being right, everyone is wrong. Hear me clearly: there are times when churches divide over legitimate doctrinal issues, such as an issue like human sexuality in our day. But at the risk of making a broad generalization, such situations are probably far less common than thought. Often, the issue that kills a church isn’t a matter of great theological import. Most divisions seem to arise over *disputable* matters – things that honest Christians might hold different opinions about without prejudice to anyone’s soul. Our focus tonight will center on this kind of disagreement among believers. I know of no issue such as this today that is bothering the Body of Christ at Bible Fellowship! But on the theory that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” it seems prudent to investigate what the Scripture has to say about these kinds of situations so that we can keep from inadvertently falling into this well-worn trap of Satan.

**Proposition:** In the Body of Christ, some are weak and others strong. The weak and strong are called to live together in the Church.

Billboard:	(vv.1-4)	Controlling Principles
	(vv.5-9)	Motives Matter
	(vv.10-12)	Everyone’s Accountable

(vv.1-4) Controlling Principles – Christian unity does not depend on believers sharing the same opinions on every matter, as we learn in these four verses: **Romans 14:1–4 - 1** *As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.* The first principle the apostle establishes is that some believers are “*weak in faith*,” and others strong, but all believers are called to accept one another without quarrelling. What is meant by “*weak and strong*” when it comes to the matter of faith? Faith is trusting and obeying what God has said, it is confidence in God Himself, in other words. Let us begin by saying that you can’t even be a Christian at all without faith. So, faith is the watershed principle that establishes the Church’s unity. For the Body of Christ to hang together, all believers must sincerely hold from the heart the truths of the faith God gave us. These essential truths are not in doubt. They were given by Christ to His apostles and have been faithfully passed down to us through Scriptures we hold in our hands daily. They are unchanging from generation to generation and have been held by all orthodox believers since the days of the apostles. These essential truths are summarized for us in an ancient document, The Apostle’s Creed, and form a reliable definition of Christianity. To believe these basic tenants of the faith is to be counted as one of Christ’s followers. To deny them, is to place oneself outside the Christian faith.

But not everything we believe is included in the Apostle’s Creed. There are many “*disputable issues*” – things that some believers hold as true, but which other believers refuse to accept. There are differences of opinion among Christ-followers that don’t rise to the level of denying the basics of the faith. We’ll talk about some of those things in a few moments, but for now, let’s ask the question, “How does such a situation arise?” The Apostle’s answer is, “It arises because some are weak in faith, but others are strong.” What is meant by this?

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As we read our passage in context, we'll see that the difference between those who are weak and those who are strong is this: both the weak and the strong possess genuine faith, but the quality of their faith depends on having an accurate understanding of God's revelation. Weakness in faith is caused by misunderstanding what God intends. It is a misperception of the truth, but not a misunderstanding that would put one outside the Body of Christ. To be strong, then, is to understand the truth of God's revelation with greater accuracy. We have an example of such a situation in **Acts 18:24–26** - **24** *Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures.* **25** *He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.* **26** *He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.* Here is the textbook illustration of Paul's principle in Romans 14. Apollos was a true believer, but he didn't accurately understand the whole truth about Jesus. So, Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and helped him understand with more precision the things about Jesus. What can we learn from this? We learn first that when disputable issues arise in the Body, believers don't have to ignore the issue or remain silent rather than raising the matter for discussion. Too often supposedly insignificant errors are tolerated in silence by believers out of an understandable desire not to cause division. This is commendable, but a mistake. Nothing in our passage suggests that believers with differing opinions ought not to civilly discuss them.

But this raises another important question: How do we know if a matter at hand truly is “disputable”? Let me suggest three principles for determining if an issue is “disputable” or “essential,” for this subject will inevitably arise. Most of us think that ALL our opinions are essential truths, do we not? When considering an issue, it will be helpful to ask three questions:

- Is the matter under discussion essential to salvation? Can you get this wrong and still go to heaven?
- Are both sides of this issue reasonably defensible from Scripture? Do both sides have quality arguments emerging from the plain sense of the Biblical text? You might be surprised at how often this is the case!
- Does the Scripture *specifically* speak about this issue, or is it *silent* on the matter? Often, the things we hold as opinions are not mentioned in God's Word at all, but are drawn from mere inferences.

So, in verses 1-2 we are shown that some believers are strong, and others are weak, but that all believers should accept one another based on the watershed principle of holding a true faith in the essentials. No quarreling is permitted over “disputable matters,” but that doesn't mean there can't be discussion of the matter in dispute. How should such discussions take place? The answer is “respectfully.”

Verses 3-4 caution us against two dangers that often arise when disputable matters exist among believers. One danger is “despising” the one who doesn't hold our view. This is to treat our brother with contempt – to look down on him as if he is somehow inferior and not our equal. Contempt is a dangerous poison in the Body of Christ and pride leads many believers to swallow it whole. Avoid falling into the sin of treating another brother with contempt. The second danger we are warned of is to “pass judgment” on the one who disagrees with you. This is quite serious, because when we pass judgment, we are saying, “Surely this man's profession is empty. He couldn't possibly be a believer and hold that point of view!” This is such a dangerous view to take that the apostle immediately followed the warning

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with the stern admonition: “*Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?*” Then Paul reminded us that Christ alone is the one who makes any of us stand or fall. So, avoid making judgments about a brother’s condition. Leave those judgments in the competent hands of Jesus.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Biblical principles should control relationships among believers with differing opinions.

(vv.5-9) Motives Matter – Having established the controlling principles in verses 1-4, the apostle used two examples of disputable issues in his day to raise the issue of motives. Through the lens of “special days,” and “the one who eats,” Paul pointed out that when believers hold differing opinions, we still possess a basic unity of purpose: Everyone is trying his best to honor the Lord. **Romans 14:5–9 - 5** *One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.* Paul pointed to the fact that when believers differ, it is usually because of a sincere conviction of the truth of their point of view. He commended this! Even when one gets the matter wrong, at least he should be “*fully convinced in his own mind,*” concerning the issue at hand. Sincerely held errors are still errors, but at least there is no intent to deceive behind their propagation. In fact, as we are shown, everyone here is trying his best to honor the Lord. People usually don’t hold differing opinions for any other reason. As our text tells us, “*None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lords.*” Recognizing that everyone is trying to honor the Lord counts when we are discussing disputable matters. There are no villains here, just believers with different understandings.

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Recognizing that those who differ with you have an honorable motive, matters, when disputes arise.

(vv.10-12) Everyone’s Accountable – The apostle closes this section of his discussion by pointing out that each believer will have to give an account of himself or herself at the judgment seat of Christ. **Romans 14:10–12 - 10** *Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; 11 for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” 12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.* I could say more about this, but I think Eugene Peterson has a more impactful word than I can bring. Peterson translates these verses this way: **Romans 14:10–12 - 10** *So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I’d say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we’re all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren’t going to improve your position there one bit. 11 Read it for yourself in Scripture: “As I live and breathe,” God says, “every knee will bow before me; Every tongue will tell the honest truth that I and only I am God.” 12 So tend to your knitting. You’ve got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.*

[DOCTRINAL POINT] Everyone will give an account for *himself* at the judgment seat of Christ.

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[APPLICATION] Now, lest all of this seem a bit academic to our generation – after all, we aren’t too worried about “special days” and “the one who eats,” the issues of Paul’s day – Let me bring this down to a few specifics we might be tempted to differ with others over today.

1) Eschatology – The exact nature of events surrounding the return of our Lord Jesus are debated and disputed by many sincere followers of Jesus. Sincere brothers and sisters in Christ hold differing, defensible opinions on the question. We can give each other a pass on this issue, to honor our Lord.

2) Ecology – Pardon the pun, but global warming is hotly debated by Christians today, some dismissing it while others hold that it is a fact. Facts are stubborn things, and time will settle the issue beyond dispute. In the meantime, we can grant each other grace on this one, too.

3) Political Persuasions – Some in the Body of Christ are “blue,” others “red.” Scripture is silent on the matter, simply giving us principles to live by and calling us to honor the Lord with whichever choice we make. It is important for us to check these matters at the door of the church before entering the assembly of God’s people. Treating those who differ with contempt or passing judgment on them is strictly out of bounds for God’s people.

4) Styles of dress within limits of modesty – We all have our preferences. Some like to wear ties; others come to church in tee-shirts and sweatpants. So long as we dress modestly, and intend to honor the Lord, we can probably keep our opinions on ice in these matters.

5) Liturgy and music styles – “Different strokes for different folks” is probably the best attitude to take. We all have our preferences and that’s OK. We can give others the liberty to like what they like too, so long as everyone’s motive is to honor the Lord.

6) Readymade Prayers – I like them. Not a few times have I thought “I wonder what I was really thinking when I (extemporaneously) prayed that one.” But others have a different opinion and would never consider praying a written prayer. We don’t need to get our shirts in the proverbial knot about this issue either, so long as everyone is trying his best to honor the King.

7) Spiritual Gifts – Different believers have different understandings on this matter. Let’s be at peace with those who see the matter differently.

8) Borrow Money or Pay as You Go – Either way is acceptable to the Lord so long as our motive is to honor Him in all we do.

**Conclusion:** I could go on, but here is the salient point: The priority of unity and building up others while maintaining Church order is the point of these principles. Nothing here should be construed as endorsing positions that contradict the plain sense of Scripture. But there are many disputable issues that don’t fall into that category. Let’s be sure to avoid Satan’s trap for dividing the Church over non-essential matters. Let’s keep weak and strong together in the Body of Christ.