***The Weaker Brother Principle
RO171-01***

**© Berean Memorial Church of Irving, Texas, Inc. (1977)**

Please open your Bibles to Romans 14 as we move to a new section and a new subject. Our subject is "The Spirit of Toleration," and this is segment number one.

**Different Opinions among Christians**

We begin with Romans 14:1-12. The section before us actually is Romans 14:1 through Romans 15:13. This section now deals with the conduct of Christians within the local church congregation when you discover that other people in your church have different opinions – different opinions about lifestyles; different opinions upon the implication of certain doctrinal issues; and, in fact, different opinions on doctrines in certain areas. This obviously is something that happens in every local church. It happened in the New Testament church. And early on, the apostle Paul took the trouble to give some instruction on what our response should be when that happens.

You and I know people within the circle of our Christian community who do things that we would never think of doing. They go to places we would never think of going. They have habits and ways of doing things that we recoil from. How should we respond to people like that? How should we associate with them? What should be our attitude in our relationships to them?

**Non-Negotiables**

**Salvation by Grace Alone**

The basic principle that Paul lays out here in Romans 14 is that we are to receive one another on the basis of a person's view of the nature of God, and on the person's view of how an individual gets to heaven; that is, on the grace plan of salvation. That's the basis. That's the basic ... essential: the nature of God, which includes recognizing Jesus Christ as the God-Man, the only mediator between God and man – He Who is complete deity and complete humanity, and a salvation which has been provided on the basis of no human contribution, but only on the basis of human acceptance as the result of the offer of this gift of eternal life from God.

**The Deity of Christ**

People who do not agree with us on that our people from whom we must separate ourselves. Anybody who does not believe that Jesus Christ is God cannot have a basis of fellowship and camaraderie with us. From those people, we indeed do separate. And there are some in the Christian community who are not really Christians. They call themselves Christians. They're part of a church religious group. But we cannot view them as brothers in Christ, and have fellowship with them, because they reject the deity of Jesus Christ.

**No Human Efforts Added to Salvation**

Those who have a way of salvation which adds human effort to what Christ has done, and, adds human merit to what Christ has done – these people are not in the family of God. Therefore, they cannot be viewed as our brothers in Christ. Therefore, they are not included in this basic principle of acceptance. We cannot accept that. There is an essential beyond which we cannot go. You have to have a right view of God. He is not just an impersonal force out there. He is the living Creator God. He is the one who calls the plays. He is the one who determines what is right; what is wrong; what is moral; and, what is immoral.

**Secondary Issues**

You must have a basic understanding of God's view of how a person enters heaven. With that, we have a ground of mutual fellowship. Christians, of course, then, are going to differ on a lot of personal convictions on secondary issues. And that's what this passage is all about – how to act toward Christians who have things that are not pertinent to the nature of God, or how you get into heaven (the plan of salvation), but who may differ in a serious way, and you may think they're really quite wrong; really out of line; really ill-advised; and, really acting in a nonsensical, foolish way.

**Mutual Toleration**

This section of Romans calls for great mutual toleration on these non-basic issues. Sincere differences may even exist on the implications of a doctrinal principle for personal conduct.

**Drinking**

As a minister of the gospel, I would differ with ministers, for example, who have no compunction about the use of alcoholic beverages. I based that upon the principle in Proverbs which tells political leaders that they must not use alcoholic beverages on any occasion. They are forbidden to use strong drink, because it may affect their judgment, and thus affect decisions that bring disaster to the whole nation. I, by implication, conclude that if somebody who is merely the president of the United States or the king of England should not use alcoholic beverages, for fear that he might make a wrong judgment. Or if he is merely a member of Congress or a member of parliament they must be careful not to do anything that would cloud their good judgment, certainly the person whose words may determine whether a person spends eternity in heaven or in hell, by the fact that he gives true information; that he gives clear information; and, that he gives accurate information, should have his senses about him, because what he deals with is much more important than any president, king, Congressman, or member of parliament could ever accept a human being's life, and certainly his destiny.

However, when I find preachers who imbibe, that's no problem for me. That is their freedom in their own conviction from the Lord to do that. I don't think it's a good thing to do. So, I don't it. They think that it's a good thing to do, and they are free to do it. And the consequences of each position must be left with the Lord.

**What is God Like?**

So, we do have sincere differences on even implications of doctrinal principles. The local church unity is to be maintained in spite of diversity of opinions. That is the will of God. Unity is to be maintained. Friction is to be avoided. You do this, first of all, by recognizing what God is like. He really is omnipotent. He really is omniscient. He really is omnipresent. And He really can kick the fool out of you, and straighten people up in a hurry.

When you remember that, then you are not so inclined to go around muscling and straightening out people yourself. Local church unity has been created by God the Holy Spirit, not by us. The Bible never calls upon us to create a unity within a congregation. It only says, "You be respectful of the unity which God the Holy Spirit has created, and you leave things with the Lord, eventually, to resolve. The carnal Christian whose views are not accepted, because he is carnal, will shove off from the congregation to do his own thing elsewhere. Consequently, he often leaves his right church; his right congregation; and, his right pastor-teacher, and forever after, he's floating out there in a secondary religious experience because he was incapable of leaving things with the Lord.

**Personal Conduct vs. Theology**

This context here in Romans 14 indicates that we are dealing with differences of personal conduct. We're not dealing with differences in theology. A Christian may act in total sincerity in some way, even though this is not supported by Scripture, and even not supported by the facts of reality.

***Live and Let Live*; and, *Mind you own Business***

*People do strange things.* People have reasons that are strange to analyze: temperament; background; and, family influence, that sometimes is hard to understand. But *mutual toleration is the key to Christian unity*. The principle of the Bible, that many Christians never seem to learn, is: *live and let live*, and *mind your own business*.

**Mutual Toleration is the Key to Christian Unity**

When a person has not crossed beyond the essential line of having a wrong view of the nature of God, or a wrong view of salvation, then you have a ground for Christian fellowship, no matter what. And since we have learned that the principle of "agape" love is impersonal, this person may do many things that are offensive to you. Yet you are able, with ease, to maintain a goodwill attitude toward him. You may not socialize with him, and you may not have any dealings with him, but nevertheless, you wish him well. You wish for the best. When he needs your help, you are there to give it. But you will never walk in personal camaraderie with a person like that. You have to have a common ground of common virtues and common values that you share. Nevertheless, mutual toleration is the key to Christian unity.

***There is no Ill Will on your Part***

We have to leave room for Christians to function at different stages of their spiritual maturity, and that's the problem. Some of you who have walked with the Lord for a long time have also become very mature in the Word of God. Those of you who are serious students of the Word of God, this is an important part of your life. We have some clowns in this congregation that seldom show up in this church service. They come in and come out. They may have some residue of biblical viewpoint, but they believe that they can make it without the fellowship of this congregation instructing in this official time in the Word of God. They're quite wrong. And they'll have all eternity to regret it. And unfortunately, they influence a lot of people with a lot of wrong ideas and misconceptions. You have to be on guard that even toward a person like that, *there is no ill will on your part*. You have to recognize them for the immaturity that characterizes them and say, "Let us hope that they will come to a better stage." The problem is that some of these people have been in Christianity all their lives, so they assume that they're mature. But those, very often, are the babes in Christ if ever there were infants in the Lord.

Our practices are then governed by our stage of maturity; they are governed by our background; and, they are certainly governed by our natural temperament. But Christianity gives the believer great freedom in his personal choices, governed only by the moral code and the principles of doctrine. But as Christians, we have liberty in Christ. We have great personal freedom to make all the choices in the world. Some Christians try to bring other believers under their own arbitrary rules – rules which are based on their preference; their temperament; and, their personal persuasions, rather than that they are rules of Scripture. That's what we're talking about – not trying to force other people into a lifestyle that you believe is what is the way it should be. But you believe that, not because there is a scriptural basis, but because that is what you see as the implications of doctrine, and because this is what appeals to you.

**Brothers in Christ Forever**

A brother in Christ is always a brother in Christ, no matter what. So, our brethren continue to be our brethren, even when we may heartily disapprove of their foolish lifestyle and of the things they do that, in time, we know they will regret.

**Weak Christians**

So, we come to Romans 14:1. Right off the bat, we have to deal with a certain category of Christian that's in the local church. And here he is described by the word "weak." The Greek word looks like this: "astheneo." This word means "to lack strength in some way." Here it refers to lacking the strength of spiritual maturity. This is the constant status of certain people in the congregation. It is their personal characteristic. It is a spiritual principle which is laid out here – that some Christians are spiritually immature. That does not mean that they have not been Christians very long. Many immature Christians have been Christians for years. They never go anywhere in terms of maturity because they are not taught the Word of God, or because they are negative to what they are taught, or because the Word is taught, but they're not here to be taught. They're home; sleeping in bed; getting rested up; getting recovered from whatever they did the night before; getting done the things that they wanted to get done and haven't been able to do; and, all the nonsensical things for which people will exchange spiritual nourishment. Those who do not get nourished upon the Word of God become "astheneo" type Christians. They become weak.

**Weak in Bible Doctrine**

This passage, I remind you, applies to genuinely born-again believers. We are not talking about unbelievers. And what they are weak in here, he says: "Him that is weak in the faith." The Greek word "faith" looks like this. It is the word "pistis." This refers to trust in the truth of Scripture. In the Greek Bible, it is *the* faith. Therefore, it is referring to the body of doctrinal truth of what the Bible teaches. A Christian has doubts or meanings about the implication of what the Bible teaches. He is a weak Christian. He doesn't know what the Bible teaches. When he is taught what the Bible teaches, he just doesn't know whether he can believe that. When he is told what the implications of a certain doctrinal principle are, he's not sure that that's the way it is, so that he has a great deal of uncertainty. He is just weak. There is no basic conviction in him. It refers to the sphere of Bible doctrine categories of truth, and their implications in daily living.

We may translate this, therefore, as: "Now him who continues to be weak in the faith," because that's the way the Greek language reveals what this person is. He's not just weak, but this is his *lifestyle* to be spiritually weak. He just keeps on. He never gets any strength. Yet, here he is: sitting among us; moving among us; and, operating within the local church. He has opinions. He has viewpoints. He has ways of doing things. He has a lifestyle. And he affects the rest of us. And we must be related to him.

This is not referring, however, to the Christian who is a rebel under negative volition to doctrine. This is referring to a Christian who just is unsure of the full implications of God's grace in his conduct, because he doesn't know enough about the Word of God, and he's not committed to Scripture.

The person who is weak is the person who does not understand the freedoms that we have in Christ. This is the kind of person who is hanging onto empty and pointless religious rituals and traditions from his past, very often. The weak Christian is the one who absolutely would not think for one moment of not being in church on Christmas morning. And certainly he would not think for one moment of not being in church on Christmas Eve. He would be fearful of God, were he not to show up for such holy occasions. He is weak, and he is ritualistic, and he thinks that he's making it with God by these little procedures. It is characteristic of weak Christians to be hanging on to pointless, empty, ritualistic events. He is basing his beliefs and his practices on something other than the Bible. He is basing his beliefs on something that his parents taught him. And they taught that child because their parents taught them.

Every now and then, God, in His grace, grabs one of us who came out of a system like that, and for no reason at all, he raises in our minds that marvelous question: how do I know? What is the basis of my authority? And once that thought enters a young person's mind, and he makes the connection that "I know from Scripture," suddenly all of the traditions in which he was raised, and all of the opinions that were unfounded in Scripture just roll off of him, and he makes the breakout from weakness into biblical strength.

The weak Christian is hanging on to beliefs that have been passed on to him that have no connection whatsoever with Scripture. He is trying to gain God's favor by ascetic practices. He is the legalistic type of Christian. He believes that he can gain God's favor by things that he does do, or thinks that he does not do. He does not understand that he already has God's favor 100%. And all he has to do is to be grace-oriented, and enter all that God already is ready to do for him. Because he is not grace-oriented, he does not feel kindly toward the Christian who is. He does not have a relaxed lifestyle before God, and he highly resents the Christians who are mature, and who walk in the happy freedoms that we have in Christ.

**Receive Him**

However, we Christians are to face up to the fact that there is someone like this within the congregation: weak in the faith; weak in confidence in the things of God; and, weak in the things of the Word of God. Our attitude toward him, the Bible says, is that we are to receive this person: "Receive him that is weak in the faith." The word "receive" is the Greek word "proslambano." This word means "to accept." Actually, this word has a little prefix here. The word "pros" is a preposition which means "face-to-face." And when you add that to the word, it emphasizes and conveys the impression of walking up to a person, and taking hold of him by the shoulders, because "pros" means "face-to-face" (looking at him), and tenderly drawing yourself to him – putting your arms around him.

So, this is a very tender word here. The English just says "receive," but the Greek is much more tender. It says, "Reach out; take this slob; take this character that irritates you; take this person who is so dumb that you can't believe that anybody, at his age, could have grown so dumb so quickly; just reach out and put your arms around him; you draw him to yourself tenderly; and, you receive him.

This is in the present tense, which indicates to us that this is to be our constant attitude as Christians toward weaker brothers. It is in the middle voice, which in the Greek language tells us that if you do this, it will be to your great personal benefit. Middle means that it bounces back to you. It is in the imperative mood, which means it is a command from God. So, the idea is "keep on receiving to yourself." The Christian who is strong in spiritual maturity is tempted to reject the weak Christians as irritating idiots. And indeed they are. And because they are irritating idiots, we are tempted to push them aside; to brush them off; and, to want to pass by and have nothing to do with them. The Word of God says, "Don't do that."

People who waste their lives and their freedoms tend to want everybody else to do the same thing. So, that's irritating. The strong Christian knows what freedom is. He knows what freedom is from control of the sin nature. He knows what grace has done in breaking that hold on him. And here comes a weak Christian, and wants to re-impose that legalistic binding of the sin nature upon him. The strong Christian is simply not a legalist type who's out there trying to gain favor. He knows he already has it in Christ.

**Legalism**

Please remember that a legalist is someone who is trying to do something to gain God's favor. When we say that we are not legalists, we do not mean that we do not obey rules. Obviously, Christians have many rules that they must obey because they are the moral code of God. They are the principles of doctrine. And all of those are rules which we must obey. Legalism does not have anything to do with keeping rules. Legalism has to do with keeping rules because you think that that's how you're going to make it with God: both in salvation; and, in spiritual development. And that's not true.

It says, "Receive this believer who is weak in the faith. Draw him tenderly to yourself, but not for a certain reason." He says, "Be careful that you don't do this for doubtful disputations." The word doubtful looks like this in the Greek Bible: "diakrisis." And this actually refers to an act of judgment. It means don't receive him for passing some judgment on him. Don't come up and put your arm around him because you're going to let him have it. That is exactly the picture that you have here – "not for doubtful disputations." Disputations is the word "dialogismos." "Dialogismos" means "an opinion" or "a reasoning." So, it refers here to the sincere conviction that the weak believer has which is not justified by Scripture. This is his personal doubts or his personal hang-ups. And Christians who are strong in the faith and in sound doctrine are not to pursue Christians just to pass judgment on their views. When you do receive this weak Christian, and you do treat him kindly, it should not be from the motivation that you're going to straighten him out. He may invite you to straighten him out. Then that's something else. But you're not lying in the bushes, waiting to pounce upon him.

That's what Paul means by these two words. Don't receive him just so that you can expose his erroneous views and his legalistic conduct. Do not pursue this person so that you can start a quarrel. And it's very easy to do this. You have to be very careful not to do this publicly.

I read of a group of people who are having a social event. And there was one young lady who was very zealous for the Lord. And she would go right to every stranger, and want to know whether they were Christians, and what they thought about Jesus Christ. And a lady was invited by one of the people in the group. She was a total stranger. This zealous Christian girl went up to her and said, "Are you a Christian?" And the lady said, "No." And she said, "What do you think about Jesus Christ?" The lady said, "Well, frankly, I don't believe he is God." And she promptly said to the whole group of people in the room, "Folks, this is Pam. She doesn't believe that Jesus Christ is God. We want you to meet her."

This is what Paul is saying: "Don't do that." Don't come up and greet somebody to expose his error to the group, under the hope that somehow you will shock and straighten him out. Fortunately, there was another person there who was kind enough to walk right up, and take her by the hand, and say, "Well, maybe someday she will. Come here and let me show you around." And she saved the day for the lady, who later said, "I was ready to walk out at that point."

You may be able to refute your weak brother's scruples with Scripture, but you might so devastate him in the process, and you might so shake his confidence in ever knowing what is right and wrong, that he may get so discouraged, and just quit seeking what is right and wrong. Some people cannot take a heavy hand of being corrected. They have to take correction gently. Some will become so discouraged, when they were so confident that they were right, to get blown out of the water, they just throw their hands up and say, "That's it. I'll never be able to figure this out." And what you have done is that you have caused them to be so discouraged that they will not pursue the knowledge of what is right and what is wrong, and for them to pursue spiritual maturity. It takes time, and it takes instruction in doctrine to build a spiritual maturity structure in the soul. Many people will never make it. They must be pitied, but they are still our brothers in Christ. They must be pitied, but they must not be pilloried. Some Christians will resort to human viewpoint. They miss the glories of grace. It takes a lot of patience on the part of mature saints in associating with people like that.

Now this is not to say that false doctrine is not to be corrected. You are to do that. But the response is to be left with God. Someday we will all know which one of us is right, and which one of us is wrong. Someday we will all know who of us lived a life with wisdom, so that we maximized our opportunities, and we maximized our eternity. Someday we will all know who blew it; who wasted his life; who pursued temporal trivials; and, who has lost out in a great enrichment in eternity. But you don't treat rudely or with contempt those whose religious opinions you do not share.

Just remember that all parts of your human body are needed, even if some part of it is not too healthy, and even if some part of it is very unpleasant to you because it's hurting. You still need all parts of the body; and, so too, in Christ, all parts of the body are important.

Romans 14:1 says, "Receive him that is weak in the faith." Tenderly draw to yourself the Christian who is weak in personal grace freedoms. But don't do it just to expose him, and because you're going to straighten him out. Do it just because he's a brother or a sister in Christ.

Romans 14:2 says, "For one believes that he may eat all things; another who is weak eats herbs." So, Paul says, "Let me illustrate what I'm talking about." Here we have one Christian who believes something. He has a personal conviction. It's his personal confidence and attitude. Here it is in reference to something that he may eat: that he may consume certain foods. Here you have a Christian who has no problem consuming all kinds of foods. He does not feel under restrictions of avoiding certain kinds of food for religious reasons. He does not hold to the Old Testament dietary rules that were imposed upon the Jewish people. They were not to eat certain foods. These were not simply because of religious reasons, but because there were health reasons. But we Christians may eat those things.

So, you're a Christian who chooses not to eat pork chops. You don't eat ham. You don't eat all that good stuff, because you think that there is a dietary law that's revealing that pig meat is not good stuff to eat. It's not healthy. But here comes another Christian. He loves pigs’ knuckles. He goes crazy over pickled pigs’ feet. And those tails, oh those tails – how he loves those tails. It's a holiday treat. And all the rest of that. Now what is your attitude to be? You look upon him and say, "Boy, you really ought to know better than that. There are good reasons why you shouldn't do that." And the weak Christian is going to jump on the strong Christian who goes for a ham and cheese sandwiches: "Let not him that eats (those of you who have no restrictions, and you have no hesitancy about eating anything – you have that freedom in Christ) – don't you people, on the other hand, despise those who don't eat it."

So, don't go looking down upon those of us who are not pig-eaters. If you are, just go ahead and do it. Just be very relaxed, and very happy about it. And don't make any issue, because it is no issue. You can do it; or, you cannot do it. Ant the apostle Paul says, "There is that difference. There are some in our congregation who will eat anything." We have something like that here. They'll just eat anything. But there are some people who will not eat meat. This happens to be here in reference to eating meat. You have the person who is weak, and all that he will eat is herbs. The Greek word is "lachanon." "Lachanon" is a word for "green plants." It's a word for "vegetables. It refers to a Christian who is a vegetarian because he believes it is either wrong or it is unhealthy to eat meat.

You may not like to go to dinner to somebody else who is a vegetarian. I've done that. That's an experience in itself. It was like Churchill always hated to eat with General Montgomery because Montgomery was a vegetarian. And anytime that Montgomery invited him to lunch, Churchill hated it, because it was going to be a vegetarian meal, but he had to go just to be nice.

Here's a Christian who only vegetables. Some New Testament Christians had scruples about eating meat. Some of them had scruples that they thought were based on good reason. There was the problem about eating meat which had been previously offered to an idol in worship. People would bring animals to sacrifice at the pagan temples. I'm talking about the pagan temples. They would make their offering, or they would bring a piece of meat. They would go through the ritual of worshiping the God through this sacrifice of the animal and of the meat. Then, when the ceremony was over, the priest would take the animal; dress the animal down; and, then send the parts of the animal to the temple butcher shop. If you wanted the best meat in town, you went to the temple butcher shop, because that's where the best stuff was. People brought good things to worship their God. Now all this meat is hanging here in the butcher shop, and Christians, who are not under any restriction over where this meat had come from – the fact that it had once been on the altar of this idol God, and knowing that there is a demon behind this idol God, they would go, and they would buy these choice cuts of meat. And other Christians looked at that and said, "That is terrible. You shouldn't do that. That meat was once offered to an idol. It was in respect of a demon God. I don't see why you don't gag on that meat when you try to eat it. I can't eat that."

Well, the apostle Paul gave some precise guidelines for dealing with these weaker brethren. Notice 1 Corinthians 8:1-13. The apostle Paul had to deal with this issue, and it became so big (such a big conflict) in the early New Testament church, that he had to deal with it. And it was an example of the whole thing that he's talking about in Romans 14. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul says, "Now as touching things offered unto idols. When he begins a section in that way – "Now as touching things . . . ," he's indicating that he has had a question which has been sent to him previously, and he's now going to give the answer to that question. Christians have finally sent to him through messengers and said, "Paul, give us the scoop. Is it all right for us to buy this meat at the temple butcher shop, and eat it?"

"Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies." Paul says, "We have information. Those of us who are versed in doctrine – we've got a lot of information, but you have to be careful because that can make you arrogant. It can make you puffed up." But if your "agape" impersonal love is working, you're not going to let your superior knowledge steamroll over the weaker brother. If any man thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." That's a good principles. Those of you who are students of any subject know that, as you study a subject, you finally come to the point where you've learned so much about that subject, that now you know how much you don't know. When you stepped in, you learned it early on, and you thought you knew a lot about it. But the more you get into it, that's when you discover: "Boy, I don't know very much about this," because you do have a handle on the thing now.

So, Paul says, "When you really get a handle on spirituality, on spiritual principles and doctrinal truth, you'll be overwhelmed with how much you don't know. So, you're not going to go playing an arrogant pope who knows it all.

**There is no other God but One**

Verse 3: "But if any man love God, the same is known of him. As concerning, therefore, the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one." So, we begin with that principle. Sure, you offered it to your idol, but you weren't offering it to anything because there's nobody there. There's only one real God, and He was sitting there watching your foolishness.

Verse 5: "For though there be that are called gods, weather in heaven on earth, as there are many gods and many lords. But to us there is but one God, the Father of Whom are all things, and we are in Him, and one Lord Jesus Christ by Whom are all things, and we are in Him." So, here Paul is laying the basic groundwork. You have to have a right understanding of the nature of God – who He is as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent Creator. You have to have a right view of Jesus Christ and His role in your personal salvation. That is our common ground on which we must have to stand together as Christians.

Verse 7 says, "However there is not in every man that knowledge. For some with conscience of the idol into this hour, eat it as a thing offered unto an idol. And their conscience, being weak, is defiled." There are some Christians who are so spiritually immature that they are not comfortable about eating this meat offered to an idol. Why? Because genuinely within their own consciences, they understand the Word of God at that point of their maturity, and in their thinking about the things of God, and in their personal experience, they think this is wrong. It is a wrong thing to do.

So, what should you do to a Christian like that? You know that it's not a wrong thing to do. He thinks it's a wrong thing to do. Now what are you going to do to him?

Verse 8: "But food does not commend us to God; for either if we eat, are we the better; and, neither if we do not eat, are we the worse." Nobody gains any favor; any spirituality; or, any merit with God by the principle of the kinds of food you eat or don't eat. What you eat does not affect your relationship with God. Under Judaism, what they ate affected their relationship with God. What you eat does not affect your relationship with God.

So verse 9 says, "But take heed, lest by any means this liberty of yours to eat anything become a stumbling block to them that are weak." The concern here now is that you're not going to hurt a brother or a sister in Christ because you know that you have freedom to eat that good meat from the idol altar: "For if any man sees you, who has knowledge, sitting at the table in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols?" Here's another principle. Every one of you here, I can assure you, has someone who looks upon you as an authority in spiritual things. He looks upon you as someone that is a role model in some respect.

**It is Dangerous to Ignore your Conscience**

Paul says, "Suppose here this weak brother in Christ comes by because they not only sold the meat at the butcher shop, they also had a little restaurant area where you could sit down and be served the meat that had been prepared that had been used in the idol offerings. This man walks by, and he sees you, a Christian that he esteems. He views you as somebody who knows the mind of God, and he sees you there eating the meat offered to idols, that has been a conscience problem for him. So, what does it do to him? It causes him to say, "Oh, nuts to my conscience." And he shoves aside that sensitivity toward right and wrong which he should not ignore. His conscience is not properly trained, which in the case of a weaker brother (that's the problem). He does not have his conscience trained in doctrine so that his conscience is sending out right signals. But the point is, it is dangerous to ignore your conscience.

That was Martin Luther's claims. When he stood before the papal court at the Diet of Worms, when he said, "If you may show me from Scripture that the books I have written and these things I've said are wrong, then I will recant, and I'll take it all back. But if you cannot do that, then for me to take all this back and say it is not true would be a violation of my conscience. And that is wrong before God and man." Luther put his finger right on the issue. Even if your conscience is legalistic in some way, you must respect conscience. And this Christian who is weak – his conscience is misguiding him. It's denying him some Christian freedom. He shouldn't be pushed around, and he shouldn't be moved in the direction to ignore his conscience.

Verse 11 says, "And through your knowledge shall your weak brother perish for whom Christ died." How? Well, he's not going to lose his salvation. But it does mean that you have taught this brother not to be sensitive to what he thinks is right and wrong. But he will just look on the crowd, and what he sees others do, that's what he'll follow.

Well, maybe in your case, if he follows you, all will be well. But when you have instilled that attitude in him, there's a lot of people he will follow, as role models, that are wrong, and then things will not go well for him: "But when you sin so against the brethren and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." It's a sin to wound the conscience of another Christian. And when you do that, you have also sinned against Jesus Christ, because Christ is in this believer. He is part of the body of Christ. And when you wound a believer spiritually, you have wounded the Lord Jesus Himself.

**The Weaker Brother Principle**

"Wherefore," verse 13 says, "if food makes my brother to offend, I will eat no meat while the world stands, lest I make my brother to offend." That is a classic example of how we deal with a Christian who is weak in the faith; weak in his understanding; weak in doctrine; or, weak in maturity, so that he has certain attitudes religiously that are not well taken. But you do not push him around. So, if he's going to be offended by your eating those ham and Swiss cheese sandwiches, don't do it when he's there. Go home. And while you watch the A-Team, eat your ham and Swiss cheese sandwiches privately. And do not offend his conscience.

What foods a Christian eats today are only governed by their dietary significance and importance. There is no spiritual significance on whether you are a vegetarian or a meat-eater. In the book of Colossians, the apostle Paul points this out again in Colossians 2:16-17: "Let no man therefore judge you in food or drink, or in respect of a feast day, or the new moon, or of a Sabbath day, which are a shadow things to come, but the body is of Christ." The point that he is making is: don't let anybody judge you with these religious rituals; with what you eat; with what you drink; with the holidays you observe or don't observe; or, the special occasions. All of that indeed was in Judaism. But all of that were pictures of Christ. Christ has arrived. All that He was to do has been fulfilled. You don't need the pictures anymore. And don't let anybody tell you that you must hang on to the picture when the reality has finally arrived.

**Live and Let Live**

Romans 14. Within the local congregation, you will find Christians who are weak in the faith. They do not have spiritual maturity. Therefore, they are restricted in their freedoms in Christ. Their freedoms in Christ cause them to be legalistic in things where they should not be hesitant. But it also causes them, because of their maturity, to do things that they shouldn't do – things that are offensive, and things that, indeed, are questionable. But he does this out of sincerity. He doesn't eat meat. He doesn't eat any kind of meat. He's particularly offended by certain kinds of meat. What should we do with him? We still look at him face-to-face; put our arm around him; and, draw him generally to us. He's our brother in Christ, and we let him do as he pleases. The principle of the Word of God. Paul says, "Is live and let live."

The rest of this section, all the way through Romans 15:13 is going to further illustrate and explain how to deal with Christians, and live with Christians who have different opinions; different ways of doing things; and, different lifestyles, and how we deal with them, and still maintain the unity and the forward motion of the work of God in that local congregation. Live and let live.

Dr. John E. Danish, 1988

[**Back to the Romans index**](http://www.christiandataresources.com/romans.htm)

[**Back to the Bible Questions index**](http://www.christiandataresources.com/allarticles.htm)