



Romans - Chapter Fourteen

VI Romans 12:1-15:13 - God's righteousness in everyday life (continues)

Summary of Chapter Fourteen

It is certain that nothing is more threatening or more often fatal to Christian societies than the contentions and divisions of their members. This chapter, rightly understood, made use of, and lived up to, would set things to rights and heal all church groups.

It is likely that the early Roman church was made up of purely Jewish converts, who then quite correctly invited Gentiles into the church. In AD49 many Jews were expelled from Rome by Claudius Cæsar, leaving the Gentiles to grow the church for at least the following five years. Therefore, the church congregations had a heavy bias toward Gentiles but there were still a significant number of Jewish Christians, who had returned after the death of Claudius and who still kept the Ceremonial laws with regards to special days and dietary requirements, which seem to be the main points of contention in this chapter.

Paul wants to encourage those who are strong in their faith, and who know the true freedom that the Gospel provides, not to try to impose their freedom on others of lesser faith, especially those who found it necessary to hold on to the traditions of their Jewish heritage. In addition, those who believed in a narrow, more restrictive Christianity were not to impose their beliefs on those that enjoyed more freedom. The worst aspect of either viewpoint was if the actions of the one were to cause the other to withdraw from their position of faith. Paul's readers are reminded that the primary purpose of being a Christian is to do the Lord's will and that includes supporting and encouraging all others, not trying to put them down.

This chapter is a very strong exhortation promoting church unity, irrespective of levels of faith, ethnic origin or social standing. It is also important for non-believers to be able to view a unified church; otherwise, they would have no desire to investigate the faith in the first place. Paul alludes directly to the teaching of Jesus on themes such as love your neighbour, support for the weak and that people are more important than rules and ceremonies.

VI.b Romans 14:1-15:13 - The weak and the strong

Paul addresses a specific dispute, probably over whether Christians need to abide by the ceremonial law in general and Jewish food laws in particular. Paul clearly sides theologically with the strong, i.e. those who did not feel that their faith compelled them to follow those laws, but he encourages them not to despise or scandalise the weak in faith, i.e. those who feel it necessary to continue in their traditions in order to be identified as part of the family of God.

VI.b.i Romans 14:1-6 - Disputed issues of the law

Here we have an account of the unhappy contention which had broken out in the Christian church. The Lord had foretold that offences would come; and, it seems they did so for want of that wisdom and love, which would have prevented discord, and kept up union among believers, whatever their ethnic or social background.

The Jewish dietary traditions and their special feast days were the two most sensitive issues which could confront this still essentially Jewish movement as it began to develop its own distinctive character and identity. After the practice of circumcision, nothing marked out the Jewish Diaspora communities so clearly as their observance of the dietary rules and special days, as laid down in the Law of Moses. It was not so much that these laws held higher prominence in the Torah than others, but that it was the peculiar Jewish habits regarding their food, and the regular weekly Sabbath day of rest, which marked Jews out as different from other sects and societies, since these customs affected both their social and business relationships, and would catch the eye of the Gentiles most frequently.

To an outsider, the issue addressed in this section may have seemed like a minor dispute or issue, but not to Paul. For him the issue was much more fundamental. What was at stake was nothing less than the whole self-understanding of the new movement, for which Paul was an apostle; the main apostle to one part of the church, and an ethnic member of the other. What was really at stake here was the definition of Christianity itself.

If Paul were to break down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, and show that Christianity was not just an extension of Judaism, there had to be a move away from the hallmarks of Judaism, but not in a way that would isolate those who had called on Jesus as their Lord, but had not yet fully understood the freedom this opened up for them. The Galatian Gentile believers had, in fact, been persuaded to adopt Jewish customs as they understood that it was a necessary part of the faith: <<Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. 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! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you>> (Galatians 4:8-11).

For the Jewish Christians, or those Gentiles that had come to faith via Judaism, it was the keeping of the law that had marked them out as the people of God. Being asked to abandon these traditions was leaving them with a sense of identity crisis, something that was proving very difficult for some of them to comprehend.

Paul gives so much time to this issue as he recognises a crisis confronting the congregations in Rome that is of some magnitude, i.e. the danger of a split, which could have Jewish believers so alarmed by the abandonment of the old yardsticks of covenant loyalty that they lost their faith in Christ; the danger that a law-free Christianity might cut itself off from its Jewish roots and be influenced by crass insensitivity. The advice Paul gives is marked by great pastoral sensitivity and is of much wider relevance than to this issue alone. It is of relevance wherever concerns to maintain old traditions come into conflict with the concerns for a less traditional expression of the Gospel.

¹ Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.

Romans 14:1

Accept him whose faith is weak. The exhortation here is directed to the strong, for they are tempted to enter into quarrels with those who have a weaker faith and cannot accept that Christ has fulfilled the law, including those aspects that involve special dietary requirements,

and thereby passing judgement on them. The Jewish Christians, who held fast to the Laws of Moses, were known to have disputed the claims of others that God had indeed declared such food to be clean: <<"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" >> (Acts 10:14-15). Those who are strong in the faith can accept the revelation given to Peter that all things God gives are clean and therefore they can eat anything given to them, but those described as weak would find it hard to give up their traditions and will refuse to eat anything not prescribed under the law, and it seems that both sets were offended by the actions of the other.

Those who were characterised by Paul as being weak may have disputed this and claimed to be the stronger one by holding fast to their beliefs and traditions. Paul sees them as the weak for their lack of faith in the Gospel that declares a new freedom in Christ.

Readers who knew Paul would expect no less forthright an opinion on these matters from him. Indeed, some of his readers might well have been surprised that he was not more forthright. Any who knew the fierceness of his polemic in Galatians against very similar attitudes might well wonder at the difference in tone, he is much gentler to the Romans. The reason for that difference is not immediately clear, but a large part of it at least probably lies in the difference between the situations addressed. In Galatians, Paul was fighting furiously to maintain the viability of his law-free mission and the very existence of some of his earliest churches, or at least the very existence of his 'Gospel for the Gentiles' within some of his earliest churches. Had the missionary zealous traditionalists won there, the whole expression of the Gospel for which he stood might have been eclipsed, or, in many respects worse still, set completely adrift from its Jewish foundation. But in Rome it was the more liberal understanding of the Gospel which was dominant, and the Jewish Christians, trickling back to Rome following their expulsion from Rome in AD49, were in a much more vulnerable position, both in numbers and in their socio-political circumstances. The real danger, however, was the same - of a rift between the two main groupings, with the consequent danger of Paul's Gentile movement losing its Jewish roots.

² One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.

Romans 14:2

The strong are operating in the belief that all foods are permitted, i.e. they are allowed to eat everything. Notice that Paul does not say that the weak are exhibiting faith by their abstaining. The weak eat only vegetables, probably so that they avoid the risk of eating unclean foods: <<But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favour and sympathy to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead>> (Daniel 1:8-16).

Paul's counsel was clear. The more liberally minded should not take advantage of their position, both their majority numbers and their less exposed position as non-Jews. They should not exploit their own readiness to discuss their differences as a way of making the

more inhibited newer members feel inferior. They should not pressure them to accept the will of the majority and conform to the dominant ethos. The liberality claimed by the more liberal should be accorded to the traditionalists; liberality to be less liberal. Thus is the tone set for the major thrust of Paul's guidance to those who regarded themselves as strong in faith.

If Paul means actual vegetarians, which seems most likely, for if the Jewish Christians had no kosher butcher and could not guarantee the source of meat, they would most likely abstain. The choice to not eat meat would not have been based on modern thinking, where millions of people think it cruel to slaughter animals for food. In Paul's day, and throughout Jewish history, it was as natural to kill a sheep for food as it was to cut corn or pick fruit. The people, who Paul referred to as weak, would be Jews concerned as to whether the meat was kosher, i.e. killed in the prescribed manner to ensure all the blood was drained out. This was because many of the Jewish Christians still held on to their traditions even though Jesus had fulfilled the law and therefore replaced the ceremonial laws that came from it, and which required such practices as food preparation, personal cleanliness routines and Sabbath observance.

³ The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.

Romans 14:3

The strong are liable to ridicule and mock the weak with their delicate conscience. Conversely, the weak are prone to pass judgment, i.e. look down on those who feel at liberty to eat anything. The weak must not stand in judgment, for God has accepted the strong believer.

Paul uses well-reasoned arguments to provide gentle arbitration between the two groups calling on each to show a willingness to understand the other and being careful not to apportion blame to either party. He instructs them to give all their efforts to the things of Christ in which all agree and not to the things which are vague or doubtful. Paul had adopted a similar approach with the Corinthians: <<I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought>> (1 Corinthians 1:10), and to those in Philippi: <<All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained>> (Philippians 3:15-16). This shows that there is more to unite believers than to divide them and, providing people are not proclaiming ideas that run contrary, or are harmful, to the Gospel, they should be allowed such minor differences without it leading to confrontation or division.

If we find ourselves in disagreement with another person in church, we should first stop and ask ourselves, 'if God has accepted this person, dare I disown them?' In reference to spiritual difficulties and dangers, our own and others, much of our hope and comfort are grounded upon the divine power, we can refer to: <<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>> (1 Peter 1:5) and: <<To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy>> (Jude 24).

⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Romans 14:4

This verse is likely directed to the weak. It is not their place, as fellow servants, to pass judgment on the strong; the strong stand or fall before God, and they will stand righteous before God on the last day because God will give them grace to keep them from falling away. The problem is that the traditionalists cannot conceive of a faith that is outside of the constraints of their understanding of Christianity, which was based on observing the law. They would see those who did not adhere to the traditions as being outside of Christianity as they had come to understand it. Paul's response is the challenge the traditionalists for their too narrow view and to proclaim to them that Christianity is much larger than they clearly perceive it. It is not just a bolt-on addition to the traditions of the law that the Jews had observed, theoretically at least, for centuries.

To his own master he stands or falls. The word for master and Lord in this verse is the same word. It is translated differently to suit the sentence structure that indicates Paul was using it as a metaphor. Part of Paul's challenge to the traditionalists is to show that God accepts the views and practices of those who he has called to faith, and that the traditionalists should not judge them for it, since God has not. This is a crucial step in Paul's pastoral tactic. He gets the traditionalists actually to accept that someone who differs from them, and differs from them in something they regard as fundamental, is never the less acceptable to God and accepted by God. With genuine recognition that the spectrum of Christian opinion on such crucial matters is broader than any particular expression of Christian opinion, there can be a real respect among fellow believers across the spectrum of Christian liberty. Without such recognition and respect, the Gospel itself has been abandoned and the traditionalists fall back into the ancient trap of dictating to God and setting up their own judgement in place of God's.

In 1 Corinthians Chapter 8 Paul goes further still to talk about food that has been sacrificed to idols and then offered in a restaurant, or to Jewish guests at a dinner, or even in the market place. This would even be something that Gentile Christians would understand and be reluctant to accept now, as it would remind them of the lifestyle that accompanied paganism. That was the context that Paul insisted equally that:

- Since God was the creator, all meat was good in itself and therefore could in principle be eaten, and
- If someone else's conscience was being hurt, even those who had a robust conscience about eating the food should abstain from doing so.

Paul is not avoiding saying that it is the Gentiles who eat meat, i.e. the strong, and the Jewish Christians that avoid doing so, i.e. the weak, for there were many Jews, Paul included, who had worked out that all foods were clean and therefore acceptable and, as noted earlier that, due to their pagan background, there were many Gentiles who were perhaps avoiding meat as idol worship and sacrifices were very common in Rome. Paul simply puts it that, 'some of us do it one way, and some of us do it another way'. More importantly, he says that both are equally right for they are following their conscience before God and will be judged by him and not by men.

⁵ One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Romans 14:5

The weak thought some days were more important than others. Given the Jewish background here, see v.14, the day that is supremely in view is certainly the Sabbath. The weak want to hold on to the Sabbath law and the other festival dates whereas from the perspective of the strong every day is the same. Paul is stating that both views are permissible as long as each person is following his own conscience before God. What is remarkable is that the Sabbath is no longer a binding commitment for Paul but a matter of one's personal conviction. Unlike the

other nine commandments in Exodus 20:1-17, the Sabbath commandment seems to have been part of the ceremonial laws of the Mosaic covenant in Paul's understanding and, like the dietary laws and the laws about sacrifices, it is no longer binding on new covenant believers. Paul's tone is clearly condemnatory to the Galatians for their observance of the ceremonial calendar: <<You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!>> (Galatians 4:10), and he offers advice to the Colossians: <<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>> (Colossians 2:16-17). However, it is still wise to take regular times of rest from work, and regular times of worship are commanded for Christians: <<And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching>> (Hebrews 10:24-25), and: <<On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight>> (Acts 20:7).

Paul's second piece of counsel is that each should be fully convinced in his or her own mind on such contentious subjects. Not that such definite opinions need to be reached on the whole range of issues affecting Christian belief and conduct. But these particular issues did make all the difference to social lifestyle and to the harmony of the Christian congregation. The point is that the strength of conviction with which one held his or her view should not intimidate the other. Each should weigh such issues before God and reach his or her own judgement, even if it meant differing, and differing quite fundamentally, with the other. Here it is clearly implied that Paul's firm recognition that Christians will disagree with one another on important issues, and yet each can be convinced of the rightness of his or her position. They can disagree, and both be right, that is, accepted by God. It was not necessary for one to be wrong for the other to be right. The richness of Christian truth and its expression could allow a range of views and lifestyles and all are legitimate, if strongly held in good faith.

⁶ He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Romans 14:6

But lest his readers think he is advocating complete liberality and cannot distinguish liberty from licence, Paul is careful to add a crucial qualification. He is taking it for granted that both of the parties in the dispute have indeed reached their conclusions before the Lord, and live out their different patterns of conduct in honour to the Lord and in thankfulness to God. That is to say, the range of acceptable liberty is restricted to what is appropriate as Christian obedience and as the expression of the creature's dependence on a creator: <<For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened>> (Romans 1:21). Only what can be received from and offered to God in humble thankfulness is Christian conduct. This is the real foundation for Christian faith and lifestyle, not particular expressions in traditional and ritual form. Whoever can lay claim to such obedience and hold his or her conduct up before God, in thanksgiving to God, should be accepted as a Christian, even if that conduct is controversial or what others might count as inappropriate for their discipleship. Christian faith will have clear enough lines of expression, but not as determined by limitations of race, culture and national tradition. Therefore, whether one observes a special day, or eats all foods, or abstains from some foods, the important thing is the honour of Christ, i.e. does so to the Lord, and to give thanks to God.

Believers must also recognise the righteousness, at least in their intention, of each group. The strong are prepared to eat whatever is given them, pork, non-kosher food, etc, because

it is seen as a gift from God and they eat it for his glory. The weak, on the other hand, refuse such food for it is forbidden under the ceremonial law and they are keeping the law for the glory of God. Therefore, neither side should be in contention with the other but, in fact, should give God thanks for raising up faithful people, even if one or the other has misunderstood the message that has been given. The only time their needs to be contention is when people, either in ignorance or wilfully, are damaging the Gospel message.

It should be noted that, although there may be believers behaving in a way that they themselves believe to be acceptable, but which is held to be truly controversial in a particular fellowship then the leadership must always reserve the right to deal with it. They would normally discuss an individual believer's behaviour and action, and if it is strongly believed to not be of the Lord then they would deal with the individual in a loving and appropriate way that is honouring to God, and in the best interest of all concerned.

What Paul is doing by this is to educate the communities not to look at each other as either Jewish or Gentile Christians, but as fellow servants and disciples of the same Lord. Jews and Gentiles who have the faith to believe in Jesus are welcomed equally only because of Jesus' own achievement in his death and resurrection. Paul seems to be echoing what he stated in Romans 10:9-13 <<That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" >>.

Paul does not seem to be suggesting here that there was a problem in Rome of the same magnitude as he had encountered in Syrian Antioch some years earlier: <<When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. "If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 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. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:11-21). But that might be only because the different Christian groups in Rome were scattered and not even attempting to come together for fellowship meals or joint worship, whereas in Antioch they had been doing so.

The term weak in faith does not imply someone who is not committed to God, or is a bit shaky in their beliefs, but those who have not yet worked out in their own minds, as fully as others at least, the consequences of believing in God as creator and Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord. For Paul, believing this meant that all foods were now clean just as Jesus had implied: <<For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body. (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean")>> (Mark 7:19).

Whether a believer chooses to eat foods or not, and whether they choose to keep the special days or not was a matter for the individual, but has to be done with the sole desire to honour the Lord.

VI.b.ii Romans 14:7-12 - The final judgement is the only one that counts

Throughout the bible there are accounts of priests praising God for the animals he has provided for sacrifice, and of Christ or others giving thanks for the food they eat. It is not what believers are given but that they are given it at all, and so freely, that God deserves their praise: <<And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him>> (Colossians 3:17). Paul confirms this in vv.7-8 and grounds it all in v.9, for believers are totally the Lord's, and he is theirs: <<For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain>> (Philippians 1:21).

Paul then expands the argument further as to why believers should never judge their brother, for all of them will one day need to give an account for their own actions (vv.10-12), and so believers should be looking to themselves and not worrying about the speck in their brother's eye. They need to remember their brothers are not accountable to them nor are they accountable for them.

⁷ For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. 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.

Romans 14:7-8

Fundamental to the whole discussion is the reality that the Christian's life is not his own. Both in life and in death, Christians belong to the Lord, and he alone is their judge.

The point is that the Christian is not a law unto himself but neither is any Christian a law unto someone else. One cannot claim freedom for oneself without allowing freedom to the other. What is right for one cannot be a sure guide to what is right for another. If the strong should not try to force the weak into a frightening liberty where guidelines are far less clearly drawn, then neither should the weak seek to restrict the strong within the limits of their own more tightly defined liberty. The convictions of one should not be used as a stick to beat the other or as a yardstick to which to judge the other. Such issues lie wholly with the Lord. It was in order that he might have such rights and claims over individuals that he died and lived again. For anyone else to lay claim to the authority to determine conviction and conduct of another would be to usurp the exclusive rights of Christ and to fall again into the primeval sin of trying to do God's work for him.

⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written:

“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,
‘every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will confess to God.’”

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Romans 14:9-12

The strong should not despise the weak, and the weak should not judge the strong, for everyone will stand before God, who will judge all on the last day. The future day of judgment is

prophesied in Isaiah 45:23 <<By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear>>. Every person will give an account of his life to God at the judgment. Though justification is by faith alone, what Christians do will affect God's evaluation of their service to him and the rewards they will receive: <<By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple>> (1 Corinthians 3:10-17), and: <<For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad>> (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Verse 10 portrays two sides, both who think that they are right and condemn the other's choice as wrong. What Paul is saying is that each can be accepted for operating out of their own truths provided they accept above all else there is one Lord, and it is before him and him alone that every Christian lives and dies, stands or falls; this is Paul's great emphasis in this paragraph. Of course, there are situations where one or both may not be following a truth at all and that has to be challenged, but over some issues Christians can legitimately differ; it is simply OK to let the other side be content in their interpretation.

Final judgement matters because God is committed to putting the whole world to rights; God will judge through Jesus the Christ, calling each believer to account. Judgement has already begun with God's condemnation of sin on the Cross and his raising of Jesus to new life. Christians now live between that event and the final judgement, and everything they do happens in that light. They do not live to themselves; they do not die to themselves. It isn't up to them what they do and don't do. It is up to the Lord, the God whom they serve and who will one day require an account from everyone.

Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23 in v.11 to strengthen his argument. In that passage it originally states that God had sworn by himself, the highest witness one can give oath by, but here it says as surely as I live, for Christ is alive forever, and believers can live in him and through him, by his grace and mercy. But the two sayings mean the same, as for God to swear as surely as I live, he is swearing by himself as he gives himself the prerogative to have life in himself. For ultimately, all life is in him, through him and for him alone.

Justification by faith calls for mutual respect among believers; justification being about God anticipating in the present the verdict which will be announced in the future: <<But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus>> (Romans 3:21-26), and: <<That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on

him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" >> (Romans 10:9-13). All of those who have chosen to believe in Jesus as the Christ of God, the Risen Lord, are already declared to be forgiven sinners, to be in the right, to belong to the one renewed people of God.

We have to remember that such terms used in these descriptions are relative to human thinking and understanding, for God exists outside of time, and for him there is no past, present or future: everything just is.

God has declared all believers to be righteous; Paul is calling them to behave in such a manner irrespective of their background or their particular viewpoint on a range of issues. They already stand before their creator God, and must take responsibility for their own thoughts and actions: <<for each one should carry his own load>> (Galatians 6:5). Followers of Jesus are to find ways of living out in practice what it means to live to the Lord and to die to the Lord.

The conclusion is clear. Neither of the different groups in Rome have any right to pass judgement on the other, any right to make slighting or condemnatory remarks about those who disagree with them within the circle of believers. Each must answer for themselves and not for any other. And each will answer for themselves in the final judgement; Paul's citation of one of the most powerful monotheistic passages in the scriptures (Isaiah 45:23), would have a powerful effect particularly on those seeking to be loyal to Jewish traditional beliefs. And one of the things each will have to give account of is precisely such condemnatory or slighting attitudes to those whom God had already accepted. Thus ends the first part of Paul's charter of Christian liberty and mutual tolerance.

VI.b.iii Romans 14:13-23 - The way of love and peace

In essence, what Paul is asking the strong in the group, those whose understanding of their faith allows them to eat and drink what they like and not to observe particular holy days, as they see the law now fulfilled and defunct, is that they give greater consideration to those whose faith does not allow such considerations. Paul does not want the former group to cause any irreparable harm to the believer whose faith is weak by being unaware of his or her concerns. For, if someone considers food to be unclean, for him it is unclean. If someone who is strong then knowingly continues to eat that unclean food in the presence of the person for whom it is unclean then the problem escalates to what Paul sees as an evil act, an act clearly outside the behaviour expected in a Christian community.

This could and indeed must be avoided, and can easily be done so by the person who is strong. It is wrong for the strong just to say the weak are wrong and they should get over it.

Romans was written during the winter of AD57, just a couple of years after the exiled Jews started to return to Rome. As the Jewish Christians returned, they may well have encountered strong Gentile Christians engaging in what they would have seen as pagan traditions, e.g. eating pork, which was the cheapest and most commonly available meat in Rome in that era. They may then have concluded they had made a mistake in coming to Christ, or at least in accepting the concept of a single church, and would then perhaps call down curses (v.16) on those who were in fact their brothers and sisters in Christ. In v.15 Paul sees such behaviour and its consequences as undoing the work that Jesus had accomplished on the Cross. It would be a reversal of priorities (v.17), focusing attention on food and drink instead of on the major realities of God's Kingdom, i.e. justice, peace and joy. It would be to pull down the house which God is so carefully building up (v.20).

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.

Romans 14:13

Paul now turns his attention to the strong. Over against the danger of the more conservative brother's condemnatory attitude toward the more liberal, is the danger that the liberal will despise the conservative for his clinging to the old ways. The danger is that the self-consciously strong will grow contemptuous of the other's weakness, of what they regard as too narrowly restrictive practices, and that confident in the rightness of their views, they will flaunt their liberty before the traditionalists, and ride roughshod over the latter's sensitivities. So with a neat play along the range of meaning of the word judge, Paul calls on his readers all to avoid passing judgement on one another and to judge their obligation rather in terms of avoiding giving offence to the other.

Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. Sometimes in a believer's walk it is possible for individuals to become so focused on what they need to do, and then compare what they are doing with what others are or are not doing, that they actually make it very difficult for others to walk their own journey. This type of action may not be intentional and, indeed, it is hoped that it rarely is. But Paul recognised it as a problem and therefore advises believers to actively give thought to what the consequences of their own actions might be in relation to others and to determine not to cause any hindrance to others.

As was discussed in an earlier passage, Christians are called to take responsibility for their own decisions. They must then ensure that such decisions do not counter the work of others but are complimentary to them. The best way forward is to place the concern of others first.

¹⁴ As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.

Romans 14:14

Christians are no longer under the old covenant; hence Paul no longer accepts the view that some foods are unclean, refer to Leviticus Chapter 11 and Deuteronomy Chapter 14 for details of the commandments detailing the food laws. Paul, however, goes on to say that if anyone thinks certain foods are unclean, then they are legitimately unclean for that person.

The bold statement I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself may have come by direct revelation to Paul, through his understanding of the Gospel or from being told of Peter's vision as recorded in Acts 10:14-15. See v.1 for these verses.

Paul also advises that if a person has doubts then to abide by that which they believe to be right, e.g. if he believes it is wrong to eat non-kosher food then do not eat it but, at the same time, do not condemn those who are convinced in their own minds that it is alright to eat it. If a person believes it is a sin to eat it then for that person it is a sin and if he genuinely believes it is not a sin then for him it is not a sin. However, the latter statement needs a lot of care as believers could talk themselves into all sorts of desires not being a sin! In Paul's case he is fully convinced therefore there is no room for doubt in his mind.

Under the curse all things in creation were made unclean, but for those in Christ they are clean and for those outside of Christ they remain unclean: <<To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted>> (Titus 1:15), where pure means made pure through Christ.

The new age should reflect the first age in having no clear boundary between Jew and Gentile, between sacred and profane; with a return to the immediacy of dependence on God alone, such was the blessing that Adam had enjoyed, albeit too briefly, and not on national traditions as well. Almost certainly, Paul here echoes a saying of Jesus in the form in which it was cherished in the Hellenistic mission: <<Nothing outside a man can make him

'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean")>> (Mark 7:15-19). The fact that Paul does not explicitly call on Jesus' authority to back the saying may be significant, as indicating Paul's awareness that the saying was understood in a less radical way elsewhere within the new movement: <<What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean,' but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'>> (Matthew 15:11). But Paul was quite sure that, as related to the question at issue, this tradition of Jesus' teaching provided a definitive principle which put the question beyond doubt for him. However, Paul does not try to impose his own understanding of the Gospel on the weak but follows his own advice by accepting the position of the weak as truly and justifiably held by them before God, and he advises others to show the same degree of tolerance toward their brother.

¹⁵ If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

Romans 14:15-17

In recognition of what he is advising, Paul returns to the anchor of Christianity, and that is an attitude of genuine love for one another. If Jesus was prepared to die for his love of the weak then this was to be something honoured above all else, especially their food and rest days.

The strong should not cause sorrow to the weak by what they eat but rather should refrain for the sake of the weak. They must beware lest they destroy the faith of a brother or sister. If the strong do not act in love, the goodness of the Gospel may be wrongly identified as evil: <<So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognised; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor">> (Ruth 3:14), for their lack of love for the weak contradicts Christ's love. God's kingdom centres on the gifts of righteousness, peace, and joy granted by the Holy Spirit, so that bodily appetites become secondary. Paul's readers would surely recall that characteristic of Jesus' teaching, as indeed of Jesus' own practice, which was the same sort of denial that God's rule should be thought to depend on rules about eating and drinking. Much more important were personal relationships; that they should express the mutual acceptance of each by God and mutual responsibility for each before God, the life which each should live out of God's sustaining grace that they should contribute to mutual well-being, i.e. peace, and should give occasion for the joy, which they experienced through their shared experience of the Holy Spirit. This is particularly the impression that all believers should be making to those outside of the faith.

It should be noted that the principle cuts both ways. If the weak should not be so insistent on observing strict dietary rules as though they were an essential manifestation of God's kingly rule, neither should the strong be so insistent on refusing to have anything to do with such observances and on despising those who did. The ritual moment was just not that important. And genuine liberty in the Spirit would show itself in the freedom not only to ignore such rules, but also to observe them, if in the event such observance was a manifestation of the relation of God's rule. Only when liberty is liberty to deny oneself and not just liberty to enjoy all that God the creator has provided, is it the liberty of the Spirit of Christ.

¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

Romans 14:18

Verses 17-18 show that believers are not going to stand before the throne of grace to be asked whether they ate or did not eat, whether they kept certain days or not, but whether they feared God and worked his righteousness by faith in all that they tried to do, in an attempt to fulfil his will. It goes on to show that they are expected to live their lives in joy, which should not be difficult given the abundance of God's goodness in everything they see and hear. Followers of Jesus are also called to live their lives in peace and love with one another with the aim of serving Christ: <<The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever>> (Isaiah 32:17). This seems to be the part that churches found so hard in the early days and find even harder today. It is easier for people to find fault in others than to admit to their own failings and to have to address them by bowing the knee to God and asking for his help.

Paul is driving home the point that the conduct of believers is not about them but about their submission to Christ as Lord of their lives; it is not about getting on with their daily business but being about their Father's business. Paul would no doubt also expect his readers to pick up the inference that Jesus himself provides the pattern. The echo of Jesus' teaching had been a consistent feature in the preceding verses on not causing another to fall into temptation, on true cleanliness, on love of neighbour as the single most important guiding principle of conduct, and on the Kingdom of God. And implicit too was the thought that Jesus' ministry itself had been characterised by just such concerns, both in the matter of living according to the right priorities, i.e. people are more important than consistency of rules and rituals, and in his concern for the weak, as evidenced not least in his death on behalf of such. To serve the Lord was to follow the pattern he provided: <<But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted>> (Romans 6:17), the pattern contained in the traditions about him: <<So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him>> (Colossians 2:6), consistent with this thought of Jesus throughout the chapter as the Lord who directs daily conduct with a view to God as the final arbiter.

¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Romans 14:19

Those who show such love for the weak please God and stand out before others as selfless servants of Christ. All Christians are summoned to edify others and to strive for peace. Although Paul has already made his point with sufficient clarity, he obviously feels its importance so strongly that he comes at it once more from a third angle. The more liberal must be conscious of their responsibility not only to the conservative individual, and not only before the wider public, but also to the congregation itself. To press home this point, Paul draws on two concepts of rich connotation for him. To be a responsible member of the body of Christ in Rome means actually working for peace, that is, once again, not merely an individualistic quietness of mind, but a positive well-being, which covers the whole range of spiritual and social relationships.

²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

Romans 14:20-21

Paul urges the strong not to destroy God's work in the weak by eating food that will scandalise the weak. He assures the strong that all food is clean, another indication that Jewish food laws are in view, but even the strong who have no convictions against eating such food, fall into sin when others stumble and fall away from Christ upon observing how the strong behave.

What is at stake therefore is not simply the eternal salvation of the weaker individual but the very existence of God's work, the church, which too can be destroyed by irresponsible exercise of liberty. For in human relationships absolute rules are dangerous, since any principle governing human conduct must take account of the circumstances in specific instances, just as Jesus had shown. So if the practice of wholly legitimate liberty results in the downfall of a fellow Christian that should be enough for anyone who seeks the well-being and building up of the church to which they both belong. Over against the ruling that all is clean, Paul lays out the principle of self-restricted liberty in the most far-reaching terms; what applies to eating meat and drinking wine applies also to anything which causes a fellow believer to stumble and fall on his or her own pathway of discipleship.

²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

Romans 14:22

The strong are likely addressed here. So whatever you believe means their faith that they may eat anything, as confirmed in vv.1-2 and v.23. They are not asked to surrender their convictions, but they should not behave in a way that injures the faith of others and thereby bring judgment on themselves.

Paul says that believers should keep things between themselves and God. By bringing disputes into the church there will always be division, whereas they should seek unity in all the things that are necessary, allow liberty in all the things that are not necessary, and in all things allow charity. Jesus is full of grace and truth and his followers are called to be like him.

The balance was a difficult one to maintain between Christian liberty and love, and Paul must have been conscious of how easy the full range of liberty can lapse into legalism on one end, just as easily as it can lapse into licentiousness at the other. So here he makes one final summarising attempt to set the proper balance for any congregation, where fundamental disagreements exist between members - a kind of charter of Christian liberty.

His summing up starts with a reminder of his opening counsel (v.1). The freedom of faith carries with it the obligation not to force that freedom on others. The more liberal can rejoice in the liberty they have in matters of personal conduct before God without having to parade that liberty before others. The liberty is no less real for not being exercised. Indeed, it only sows itself as true liberty when it restricts its full range for the sake of another.

²³ But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Romans 14:23

No one should eat unclean food if he has doubts about the rightness of the activity. Indeed, anything believers do apart from faith is sin, for faith glorifies God by trusting him: <<Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God>> (Romans 4:20), and lack of faith dishonours him.

The point of v.23 is not so much a warning to people to be sure they are acting from pure and complete motives of faith, although it serves as that as well. It is, more specifically, a warning

to the people indicted in v.22, the people who have thought through the relevant issues and are happy to consume all kinds of food and drink, don't put other people in the position of v.23. They must not insist that all other Christians conform at once to the freedom which they celebrate.

If something seems to a believer to be as sin then, even if it is not a sin but he chooses to do it believing it to be a sin, then the will to do evil is there and it is as if he has indeed sinned (v.23). Conversely, if he believes something that is a sin to not be a sin, then it is still a sin to commit it. Therefore, he must always seek guidance on anything that has not been soundly taught to him through the Gospel truth. Paul acknowledges his own sin of persecuting the church even though he did so in ignorance, and accepts it was God's mercy to save him: <<Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief>> (1 Timothy 1:13).

Paul's advice is: <<All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained>> (Philippians 3:15-16), and John writes: <<Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God>> (1 John 3:21). Paul gave a fuller answer to the Corinthians of the impact of the stronger brother continuing in his way, knowing that it offends the weaker one who abides by the old laws: <<Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ>> (1 Corinthians 8:9-12). Although both sides were shown to be at fault in the initial case, Paul calls upon the stronger, more mature Christian to be the one to take responsibility to pacify the weaker one. The meat may belong to the stronger and he can do with it as he wants, but the weaker one belongs to Christ and it is not for the stronger one to destroy him. Even if he does not perish it is no thanks to the stronger that he does not.

Many people destroy themselves by doing what they want to do, but to destroy others, who are the 'work of God' is contrary to everything the church stands for; Christians should all be working to protect and enhance the work of God.

By God's grace, believers may eat all that God has made clean for them and it is not a sin to do so, but to eat it in a way that gives offence makes it into a sin.

Christians can do little to stop people speaking ill of them or their faith, but they can ensure they give others no ammunition with which to shoot at them, and Paul gives advice to Timothy how to guard against this: <<Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity>> (1 Timothy 4:12). The strong should not do what they know to be right if it is likely to bring reproach from those who believe it to be wrong: <<As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honour>> (Ecclesiastes 10:1). It is better to seek agreement and share in knowledge and wisdom, then act once agreement and understanding are reached and firmly established.