

Romans: Comment and Commentary

“Therefore, accept one another,
just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God (15:7).”

Parenthesis: This verse seems to summarize the book.

“Accept one another:” the purpose of the book (12-15)

“Just as Christ accepted us:” the foundation of the exhortation (1-11)

- I. Prologue, 1:1-17
 - II. The Universality of Human Sinfulness, 1:18-3:20
 - III. The Universality of Divine Righteousness for the Jew and Gentile: Justification, 3:21-4:25
 - IV. The Assurance of God’s Righteousness: Sanctification
 - V. The Vindication of God’s Righteousness: His Promises to Israel, 9:1-11:36
 - VI. The Daily Application of God’s Righteousness: The Believer’s Walk, 12:1-15:13
 - A. The Application in the Church, 12:1-21
 - B. The Application outside the Church, 13:1-14
 - C. The Application in Doubtful Things, 14:1-15:13
- Here Paul supplies a lengthy example of what it means in practice to “walk according to love.” The point of Paul’s thought has to do with the balance between Christian freedom and responsibility.

The identity of “him that is weak” (v. 1) is not an easy matter to discern. It seems that the apostle has in mind Gentile and Jewish scruples. For the Jews, there were kosher laws for the preparation of meats like lamb and beef, and the avoidance of pork. Gentiles had scruples about wines offered as libations (v. 21). It seems that some believers looked down on others, both Jew and Gentile, who dissented from some practices because of their cultural background (eating flesh [v. 21], drinking wine [v. 21], and observing certain festivals [vv. 5-6]).

Bob Utley has a wonderful way of defining the issue of matters of indifference, matters without no rule or command. “Believers must be careful not to make their theology of ethics the standard for all other believers (cf. II Cor. 10:12). All believers must walk in the light they have but understand that their theology is not automatically God's theology. All believers are still affected by sin. We must encourage, exhort, and teach one another from the Scriptures, reason, and experience, but always in love. The more one knows the more one knows he does not know (cf. I Cor. 13:2)!”

Parenthesis: Must a believer who does not have scruples relative to an act, a resultant guilty conscience, but can do what others would be troubled over, relinquish his/her freedom out of love for those who have scruples and cannot do as you do in faith and a

clear conscience? The exercise of freedom is to be limited to the sphere or realm of exercise, not abandoned. If a believer is troubled in eating meat sacrificed to a meaninglessly dead idol, then chose meats not offered to idols or another main course when you dine with them and make no issue of it or in any way disparage them for their reluctances. When you are not among those who have a prohibitive conscience, you are free in your freedom to indulge! A secondary point of the passage is that there are believers without the scruples of somethings and the implication is that they have a right to exercise their freedom with certain limitations. Flaunting freedom of conscience is as sinful as violating one's conscience.

1. The problem, vv. 1-4

a. The command, v. 1

The expression, "weak in faith" refers to the failure of some to grasp the nature of justifying faith, resulting in fears that lead to ascetic opinions and practices (Will God continue to love me if I do that?). Superior spiritual insights should not cause one to look down on those who do not have the same insight or sense of freedom as a mature believer might.

b. The problem, v. 2

The person who has scruples about diet is normally a person who has not discovered the meaning of Christian freedom and has found it difficult to liberate himself/herself from a belief in the efficacy of works, if not for salvation, at least for sanctification.

The food scruple in this verse has to do with food in religious ritual and worship, either Jewish food laws or meat offered in pagan sacrifice. Our Lord taught that food does not defile, evidenced by the incident of Peter in the house of Simon the Tanner at Joppa (Acts 10). The origin of corruption is within, not without.

c. The counsel of Paul, vv. 3-4

Paul's counsel is that the strong should not despise, literally treat with contempt, the weak for their lack of understanding of freedom in Christ. Each person stands individually before God who is alone our judge, no one else.

1) God does not take scruples as seriously as we do, v. 3

2) God, not mankind, is the judge of behavior, v. 4

2. The principles, 14:5-15:13

a. The principle of freedom in Christ, vv. 5-12

1) The remedy through an example, vv. 5-9

a) The problem, v. 5a

Paul sights an example of scruple-exercise among Roman Christians. For some in the assembly all days are equally belong to God; for others there are special ones.

b) The command of Paul, v. 5b

Each believer is to study the Bible, seek the mind of the Spirit for illumination, and then follow that which seems to him/her to be the teaching of the Word.

c) The reason, vv. 6-9

We all, whether weak or strong, if we earnestly and submissively follow the teachings that we discern in the Word of God, live in a slave-Lord relationship. God accepts believers and they should be accepted into the full communion, even of brethren who may differ in debatable matters (*adiaphora*, “things in difference”).

(1) Some differences are equally valid before God, v. 6

Note that early Christians prayed before meals, perhaps following the example of Jesus (Mark 8:6, 7). It is interesting, and the clue to the emphasis in the verse that “Lord” is found three times. All lifestyle choices of believers are to be determined by the motive to please the Lord.

(2) The manner of handling differences can make a difference, v. 7

How anyone handles their scruples is important in the family of the church; the manner of conduct, their choices for action, must be in love as it relates to others. We must allow others to exercise their freedom even as we should others of ours.

(3) The issue of no difference: a single ownership, v. 8

The point is that since we have a common ownership, we must not live for ourselves, but collectively though different in some choices for Him. Simply put, we are not our own.

(4) The consequence of ownership: lordship, v. 9

2) A perspective fallacy, vv. 10-12

a) The context: misplaced priorities, v. 10a

The two questions found here are the focus of vv. 1-12. The weak judge the strong, the strong the weak. In both cases there appears the sting of animosity and disparagement. These dear Christians are having a difficult time getting along with each other for unimportant reasons!

b) The substantiation, vv. 10b-11

The apostle reminds his readers that everyone will face judgment for their actions. To sustain the point, Paul quotes Isa. 45:23. The point of that text is that judgment awaits the coming of God. Jesus Christ is that judge (Matt. 7:22-23, John 5:22, Acts 17:31). We will give an account of our choices before the supreme judge (I Cor. 5:10). We cannot act in such a fashion as to usurp the authority that alone belongs to God.

c) The conclusion, v. 12

The point is that believers are not to judge another brother or sister in the areas of indifference. In so doing, they would assume the role of Jesus Christ.

3) The principle of living life without offending, 14:13-15:6

The phrase “let us not judge one another” is found five times in vv. 1-12, four times in vv. 13-23. The grammar suggests an action that is ongoing but needs to stop.

a) The principle of caring for others, 14:13-15

1) The exhortation, v. 13

The “therefore” suggests a deduction to follow. Believers are neither to judge nor exasperate a weaker Christian. The focus here is upon the strong brother, not the weaker. Our freedom should be not used to damage another.

Parenthesis: One scholar has made an important point at this juncture. The topic of the strong amid the weak does not take up the topic of helping the weak become strong. The discussion is not helping the weak grow strong, but not hurting the weak. The distinction between the two Groups may have more to do with personal experiences, personal backgrounds, and personality than right or wrong. Love should cover over our differences!

2) A statement of Christian freedom, v. 14

Paul advocates the stance of the mature in these matters (v. 20, “all things indeed are clean...,” See also 15:1). However, attitudes make a difference. We all must live in the light that we have been given, though insight varies by topic for all of us.

3) The principle of love, v. 15

The reference to “meat” is likely to meats that had been used in sacrifice in the temples and sold in the markets at a cheaper price. Some abhorred idol worship so much that they felt it was wrong to eat meat culled from such practices. Others thought it was wise to buy at cheaper prices the same product.

“Destroy” should be taken in a figurative sense of harming another’s spiritual progress. Literally the word means “to cause grief, sorrow, or pain.”

b. The principle of serving others, vv. 16-18

1) The fact stated: a call to care in living, v. 16

This whole discussion does not address growing in grace, but the priority of love between differing Christian understandings. The believer’s inclusion in one of the two groups is based more on personality type, religious training, and personal experiences than “right” or “wrong.” The believer’s task is not changing others but loving and respecting the other group. It is an issue of the heart, not the mind. God loves, accepts, and gave His Son for all mankind, for both groups.

2) The reason, v. 17

The things that often cause disagreement and harm are trifles. The important things are spiritual, such as love for others that takes precedence over material things.

This is the only occurrence of the phrase, “Kingdom of God,” in Romans. This clearly indicates that the kingdom is present though not in its fullest manifestation.

“Righteousness, peace, and joy are gifts of the Spirit. I take it that righteousness in this context deals with moral issues meaning moral rightness, not imputed righteousness, indicative of our state rather than our standing before God.

- 3) The motive, v. 18
Believers live unto God, not themselves. For a believer to curtail their freedom for the sake of another that the exercise would damage them is to serve Christ; it is an affirmation of love and care for those whom Christ purchased.
- c. The principle of up-building, vv. 19-20
 - 1) The command stated: pursue the path of peace and nurture, not personal freedom, v. 19
Peace and nurture should be our goal of all our actions.
 - 2) The converse stated: do not hurt a brother over trifles, v.20a
“The work of God” in this context cannot mean maturity; that indeed is not the subject of the action. It refers to the Spirit’s activity in the life of a weaker brother.
 - 3) The issue of conscience: maintenance of a good conscience is important for all, v. 20b
The reference to meat has to do with meat sold in the marketplaces at a cheaper price because animals had been used in the temples for sacrifices. Some believers, having come from a pagan background, found it repulsive and sinful.
- d. The conduct implored: care for the spiritual health of others, vv. 21-23
 - 1) To the strong: do not offend, v. 21
Values that are not prohibited, and embraced, should be cautiously exercised. We have a right and duty to give up our freedoms to protect others.
 - 2) To all: do not violate your conscience, v. 22
 - 3) To the weak; guard your conscience, v. 23
3. An exhortation to tolerance, 15:1-6
It is important in reading this section on the strong or weak believer that Paul does not see one better than the other. Neither falls to the judgment that what they are doing is sinful. Sin is only apparent to Paul when the conscience is violated. Thus, “weak” and “strong” are not to be seen as worse and better. The terms should not carry a valuation of bad or good.
 - a) The example of Christ, vv. 1-4
 - 1) The exhortation, vv. 1-2
It is clear from Paul’s exhortation that he places himself among the strong. The strong, those free from the inhibitions and scruples of the weak regarding food and days, are asked to tolerate the infirmities of the weak.
 - 2) The basis, v. 3

The ground of the exhortation is the example of Christ. The text cited is Psalm 69:9, a psalm in which David writes typically of Christ. The reproaches that fell on David from Saul prefigure those that fell on Christ from His enemies. As Christ did not put Himself first, neither should anyone at the expense of another. Like Christ, believers should have a servant's attitude.

- 3) The role of the Scriptures, v. 4
"For" gives the reason Paul can cite a Hebrew text to support his exhortation. An Old Testament text can be cited because it is part of the literature whose intent is to give saints hope. The Hebrew Scriptures give strength to endure affliction and temptation.
- 4) A prayer for unanimity, vv. 5-6
 - (1) The content of it, v. 5
The unity that Paul wishes for the Romans in context is moral, not doctrinal. There is to be unity in disposition and action, or, in other words, not merely pleasing themselves individually.
 - (2) The intent of it, v. 6
Unity in the assembly of God's people glorifies God! It is interesting that Paul selects a passage from each section of the Hebrew canon (the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets).

In Deut. 32:43 Moses saw the Gentiles praising God with the Israelites. Ps. 18: 49 pictures David rejoicing in God for his victories among the nations that had become subject to him. The remaining two quotations (Ps. 117:1, Isa. 11:10) picture the Gentiles praising God alone apart from participation in Israel.

Applications

1. Christians should not allow meaningless things to separate them from fellow believers. It is particularly endemic in some Christian circles that absolute conformity is the expected normal. How can we discern between values created by the negative experiences or upbringing and those that are genuine and inviolable?
2. Do you come from a tradition that at times confused cultural mores with biblical mandates? Are there rules that you were exposed to as a child that you now see as culturally based rather than Scriptural? As you are rearing children or help with the nurture of your grandchildren, is it possible that you are teaching things that are preferences only without saying so? Can you identify ways that you have been hurt by rules that really were more culturally rooted than anything else?
3. We must keep our consciences free and not allow them to be spoiled by the conduct of others. What is certain is that we cannot oppose the moral teachings of the Bible. If we sincerely believe that a particular action is wrong because in our memory banks are negative experiences that frighten and weaken us to do it, it is wrong for us until, if ever, our attitudes change. Spiritual maturity is not about being a weaker or stronger believer. Often believers with unnecessary scruples are quite spiritually mature outside the area of their weakness. Further, strong believers in the areas delineated by our passage may be

spiritual immature. Have you met people with limited freedoms but are godly? Would you not like to be like them?

4. The peace and edification of the church is to be sought with all personal sacrifice except for the surrender of truth, love, and duty. Too many of our churches promote spirituality and spiritual progress by rules that are unwarranted biblically. People are judged in such a fashion that the health of the church is frequently weakened. Legalism, rules unsanctioned by the Bible, is not what this passage is describing. People with scruples are to be loved; legalism is not to be tolerated. It will inevitably result in a weak, unhappy, bickering flock of God's people.
5. Toleration and conformity to the scruples of others do not mean the loss of freedom for us, simply the judicious exercise of it. If we surrender our freedoms because someone would be hurt by them, we will have few freedoms. Our freedom would be reduced and defined by the weakest among us. We have a right to live our faith if we do so with a clear conscience that does not stand opposed to the dictates of God, nor exercised in the presence of those who we would thereby harm spiritually.
6. It is the duty of those who are not offended by a particular endeavor or action to be sensitive to those that find it discouraging and dangerous in their faith-life to care for, not subvert, the scruples of fellow believers. This can be done by an action itself or by supposing or acting as if they are less spiritually mature. It is clear the "weaker or stronger" is not about spiritual progress as it is the amount of baggage that we bring into our new-found faith.