

### Weak Christians and Strong Christians

#### Romans 14:1-9

Romans 14:1-9 - *“Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. <sup>2</sup> For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. <sup>5</sup> One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup> He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord, and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”*

#### Background Notes

Romans 14 is part of the practical division of the book of Romans, and it’s all about **scruples**. A “scruple” is a dictate of conscience that inhibits one’s actions. Scruples involve matters or areas of life that are morally neutral in themselves, and yet they affect the conscience. But they don’t affect every believer’s conscience the same way. For example, do you feel that it’s OK to wear jeans to church on Sunday? Is it OK for men, but not women, to wear jeans to church on Sunday? Is it OK for teens to wear jeans to church on Sunday, but not for the older folks? Is it OK to wear jeans to church on other days of the week, but not on Sunday? You see, we’re dealing with an issue here which is morally neutral. There is nothing immoral or unbiblical about a pair of jeans! The Bible doesn’t condemn or condone the wearing of jeans on Sunday! However, most Christians have some kind of dress code or standard in their minds as to what clothing is acceptable and what is not acceptable to wear to church on Sunday.

So to have “scruples” about something is to be reluctant to do something because of a tender conscience in an area of Christian practice that usually is of secondary importance, and is essentially **morally neutral**. That’s really what Romans 14 is all about. Now I mentioned Sunday “dress code,” but we could also mention many other things -- such as, is it OK to drink a glass of wine with your dinner? Is it OK to play drums in church? How about guitars? There are many more things that we could mention there, and maybe we will...

Who is the “weak in faith” Christian (v1), and who would be the “strong Christian,” according to Romans 14? The weak Christian is one who has scruples (a tender conscience) about something that is morally **neutral** – for example, the Christian who has a rigid, legalistic dress code for Sunday is the weaker Christian. We need to understand that, in the

context of Roman 14, to be weak in faith doesn't mean that you have a small faith, or that you're not spiritual. Being "weak in faith" means being weak in understanding some areas of the faith. Weaker Christians are more hung up in areas where they don't need to be hung up! The stronger Christian has more freedom in these morally neutral areas.

By the way, the Bible does have a dress code! Dressing in a vain way, or in an offensive way, or in a way that draws attention to oneself violates the biblical dress code. But the Bible's dress code doesn't dictate whether people can wear jeans to church on Sunday or not, or whether a woman must wear a dress to church on Sunday. However, before we're through with Romans 14, we'll see that the proper use of Christian liberty also determines how we dress!

In the early church, there were several areas where believers had scruples. One area was: was it OK to eat meat, or was it better to be a vegetarian? After all, some of the meat sold in the market place had been dedicated to the pagan gods! (Read 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 in this connection.) Another area was the matter of continuing to observe the Sabbath and the other special Jewish festivals of the Old Testament Law. The early Christians differed in their opinions and in their consciences concerning these things.

Today we have other matters. What is proper to do on Sunday afternoon, for example? Or what music is proper for worship? Should Christians go to movies that are produced by Hollywood? Is it OK to play the office football and basketball pools? Should a Christian drink a glass of wine at dinner? Some Christians would be surprised to discover that fellow-believers might have "scruples" in these areas of life! And Christians in different cultures around the world have scruples in different matters. So our two doctrinal points help weak and strong Christians to love one another and live happily together.

## Doctrinal Notes

### 1. Weak and strong Christians should live together in happy fellowship.

Verses 1- 2: *"Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. <sup>2</sup> For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables."* In the early church, the weaker Christian was the vegetarian – one who refused to eat meat for conscience' sake. The stronger Christian was the believer who had no problem eating fish, or beef, or pork on any day of the week. Now notice what the Scripture is teaching here – **both** the weak and the strong, regardless of their scruples, are to be received into fellowship!

Whether or not a person watches football on Sunday afternoon is not to be a test for reception into church fellowship! (Did you wonder why I used that example? There are some good football games going on this afternoon!) Whether or not a Christian drinks wine with his dinner is not to be a test for whether or not a person is received into church fellowship. It's fine to discuss these matters with one another, but you see, they're **not to be a test of fellowship!** Whether or not the person is a **true believer** – **that's** the test for fellowship! Scruples are not to be a test for Christian fellowship.

Now remember, we're not talking here about moral matters like fornication or drunkenness – the Bible very definitely has standards in moral areas for church fellowship! And the Bible is not talking about doctrinal matters here, either. Reception into fellowship very definitely requires that a person be sound in doctrine as to the Person and work of Jesus Christ. But matters that are **morally neutral** are not to be a test of fellowship. Weak and strong Christians should live together and have fellowship together.

## 2. Weak and strong Christians should not judge or despise one another.

Verses 3-4: *“Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.”*

Notice the two words that are used here – **judge** and **despise**! The stronger Christian tends to **despise** or look down with contempt at the weaker Christian: “I can't believe that you're so hung up about clothes that are proper for Sunday! What difference does it make whether a man wears a tie or not?” On the other hand, the weaker Christian tends to **judge** the stronger Christian: “Look at what he's wearing to church! I can't believe it! This is the house of God, and he's wearing jeans to church! And I hear that he watches football on Sunday afternoon as well!”

So what does the Bible command here? **Stop it! Both of you!** This is our heavenly Father reprimanding us here! Weak and strong Christians should **not** judge or despise one another.

## 3. Weak and strong Christians should look to the Lord and not to each other for approval.

Verses 6-8: *“He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord, and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.”*

In these areas of moral indifference, such as Sunday “dress code” or drinking a glass of wine with meals (etc., etc.) we should **not** be looking to one another for approval or disapproval -- we should live before the **Lord!** That's the point of verse 7. The point is not that our lives don't affect others -- the point here is that **we answer to the Lord.** First and foremost, do our lives meet with **His** approval?

Even in areas that are morally neutral, we should always ask ourselves if what we are doing meets with **the Lord's approval.** Why? Because He is the **Lord!** He is to be the Judge of how we live out lives as His followers! *“For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living”(v9).* So how we live all the way through life --even in our deaths and how we die – we should live our lives before the Lord. We want to glorify the Lord and be approved by Him in life and in death. Both weak and strong Christians should look to the Lord and not to each other for approval!

## **Practical Application**

### **Let's not use false tests for spirituality!**

Unfortunately, areas of life that are morally neutral can wrongly become tests for spirituality. The brother who wears a white shirt and tie to church is somehow thought to be more spiritual than the brother who comes in a blue denim shirt with open collar. The sister who is a teetotaler is thought to be more spiritual than the sister who has a glass of wine at dinner. How wrong can we be? These are false tests for spirituality!

Writing to the early Christians at Rome, the apostle Paul said that they could observe the Sabbath and give thanks to God. Or they could decide not to observe the Sabbath and give thanks to God. They could eat meat – any meat, even meat offered to idols -- and give thanks to God! Or they could be vegetarians and give thanks to God! These things were not to be a test of spirituality. They were a measure of understanding the faith -- but not a test of spirituality.

How dare we go against God's Word and judge the spirituality of fellow believers by the musical style or the instruments they use to praise the Lord, or whether or not they use makeup, or by their Sunday afternoon activities, or by their use of wine with meals – etc., etc. Let's not use **false tests** for spirituality!