

# “The Weak and the Strong”

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**Series:** *Romans*

**Bible Text:** Romans 14:1-12

**Preached on:** April 12, 2026

## **Christ Presbyterian Church**

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If you have a Bible, you can be turning to the New Testament book of Romans. We are in chapter 14. If you happen to not have a Bible, it's printed in the Worship Guide for you. We are in Romans 14, 1 through 12 this morning, and coming off of Easter Sunday where we actually in the previous passage at the end of chapter 13, we saw Paul implicitly spoke about the resurrection of Jesus as the event that has brought about the dawn of a new era, a new age. And it's an age where we can actually now become what we will be later, which is to say people who actually love each other. And Paul has more to say about how we do that, how we deal with each other on the inside of the church. It's been said people are the best, and people are the worst, right? And especially when they disagree with me, then they're really the worst. And Paul wants to talk about that. So let's read this passage and remember that it is God's word for us.

### ***Romans 14:1-12***

- 1 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.*
- 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.*
- 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.*
- 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*
- 5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.*
- 6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.*
- 7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.*
- 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.*
- 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.*
- 10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;*

*11 for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."*

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

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.

*Our Father, as we look now at your word, we plead with you to give us the help and the illumination and the clarity of your Spirit, so that your word might land on fertile soil. Would you help our hearts to be fertile soil? Would you help us to understand this implication of the good news of Jesus, that if we have been welcomed by you, we have to welcome one another. Give us the grace to understand. We ask Jesus in your name. Amen.*

Let me ask us a question. Is it safe for us to talk about Harry Potter yet? I'll describe your response as nervous chuckle. And you know why. Harry Potter books came out between 1997 and 2007, and largely speaking, the world loved them, loved the movies as well, except for a subset of evangelical Christians. To our own day, probably even in this room, the very mention of Harry Potter brings about a, is that okay? It's anathema because it's about wizardry, which is to say sorcery. The argument goes something like this from some Christians. It mentions wizards and witches and sorcery, therefore it's evil. The Bible says don't talk about sorcery or mention them. And if you read or watch it, you're sinning against God. Reactions are predictable. For some, it's yes and amen. Finally, we can say that it's evil, right? I've been waiting. And others are saying, what are you talking about? That is absolutely ridiculous. This is a great book. And that's just Harry Potter, which has now become one of the many, many issues that divides professing Christians. Why would Christians take up arms about Harry Potter, or Halloween, or wine, or whatever just came to your mind? Why do we do that? And I'm not going to tell you what to think about Harry Potter. Just spoiler alert, that's not why we're here. But we are going to talk about **issues of conscience**. And issues of conscience are incredibly tricky and difficult.

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*the only way that we can bear with the weak and the strong is if we ultimately understand that both belong to Jesus who is Lord.*

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Some people can enjoy a book, a movie, a glass of wine, whatever, with an absolutely free conscience before God, giving thanks. And other people, that same list, cannot enjoy aspects of that with a clear conscience before God. They cannot give thanks for it. The existence of such perspectives makes us react against each other in some relatively unhelpful and sinful sometimes ways. We're going to spend two weeks on this because the passage works out that way. Paul kind of provides the framework for how to think about this stuff today. Next week, we'll get more into the specifics of how we deal with each other.

But in this passage, what becomes clear is that, when it comes to issues of conscience, we are going to have to learn how to bear with the weak and the strong, and the only way that we can bear with the weak and the strong is if we ultimately understand that both belong to Jesus who is Lord.

So we're going to talk about the existence of the weak and the strong, the temptations of the weak and the strong, and then the Lord of both the weak and strong. That's the outline that we're getting into.

### **The existence of the weak and the strong.**

So first, let's talk about the existence of this strange thing. Remember, there were no chapter divisions in the original New Testament letter. So this passage would have come directly on the heels of the one previous where Paul talked about how we're supposed to *love one another* and *wake up from sleep* and *put off the deeds of darkness* and *walk properly*. So it follows that he wants to talk about how they deal with each other on the inside of the church. And so he puts language to something that would be observable both then and now. That inside the church, *chapter 14:1*, there are those who are *weak in faith*.

Same discussion, *chapter 15:1*, he says there are those who are *strong in faith*. In context, they're not, they're not strong and weak, meaning I believe more than you do. It's they're strong and weak as it regards to things that he calls *opinions*. That's the word he uses in verse one. Now there are plenty of things in the Christian life and in the scripture that are not opinion level. They're just, they're absolute. They're black and white. It's very clear. That's not what he's talking about. Some things are opinion level and not everybody agrees on them, and Paul gives two examples from the passage.

Look at verse two. *One person*, the strong person in faith, *believes that he can eat anything. The weak person can only eat vegetables.*

Now most likely this is addressing a smaller minority of Jewish background Christians who live in Rome, who still feel like they have to observe the Jewish ceremonial laws according to food in order to be faithful to God. They're not doing it to justify themselves. Paul talks strongly with about people that want to justify themselves on issues like that in Galatians. Not what he's saying here. That they just out of wisdom and conscience, they feel like, look, I don't know if that meat was prayed over to a pagan deity. I don't know if it was prepared according to the kosher food laws. And my people have always eaten meat according to the kosher food laws. So you know what? I'm just going to eat vegetables. So they abstain.

What's interesting is that Paul says that those who feel the freedom to eat the meat are the strong. And really the way we could think about the word strong is they are, they're free. Their consciences are clear before God. To eat, to not eat, they don't feel like they can't.

There's a place in Corinthians where he told them, eat the meat that's sold to you in the meat market without raising a question about issues of conscience. Meaning you don't know if the pagan butcher prayed an incantation over that meat and you don't have to worry about it. Because idols don't actually exist in reality. And so you can just eat the meat. That's okay.

There's another place in Timothy where Paul says everything created by God is good in and of itself and nothing is to be rejected if it's received with Thanksgiving.

And God made clear to Peter that those clean, unclean laws of the Old Testament are no longer binding in the New Covenant. Christ has fulfilled them. You're now free to eat bacon, which we know and love.

So the strong are those who are free in their conscience to eat whatever they want. The weaker people who are not free in their conscience. Now the weak person in this case, again, they feel like my people have always abstained from eating meat unless we knew exactly how it was prepared. And I just feel like I'm going to dishonor God if I don't know. So I'm just going to abstain.

We see it in verse five too. *One person esteems one day is better than another. Another esteems all days alike.* This is probably referencing special feast days and fast days on the Jewish calendar.

I'd like to make it clear here that he's not talking about the Lord's Day or the Christian Sabbath in this situation. That's one of the Ten Commandments. And it's true that Christ fulfills some of the ceremonial aspects of the Sabbath command. But that's part of the moral law that is binding on all people for all time. We're called to observe the Christian Sabbath. This is about other sorts of days and seasons. And again, a Jewish background Christian would say for thousands of years, my people have always worshiped the Lord on this feast day or this fast day, and I don't feel free to stop doing it. I believe in Jesus. I know this doesn't save me, but I still would like to do it.

The weak doesn't feel freedom. The strong does feel freedom. And the first thing that we need to note is that this exists. It existed then. It exists now. It exists in here. The church always has these sorts of issues.

Yeah, food and days, perhaps less so. Alcohol is like the easiest, you know, top level thing to talk about. School choice. The entertainment choices that you feel like you can make or that you don't feel like you can make. How you use technology, social media, your parenting methods, specifically your disciplinary methods. Even just bringing those up, I feel your tension rising. Politics, how to vote, whether to vote at all. Those things matter. And there's wisdom to consider in all of it. And we want to be biblically informed on every single aspect of that. And yet, I cannot stand here and tell you, this is exactly what you should do for school with your kids. And I would be wrong to say this is exactly how you should vote, or whether you should vote at all. I would be wrong to do that. I would be binding your conscience. You have to figure those things out before God, according to his word, and your own conscience.

And especially if you're new to the life of the church or you're just kind of getting going here, you might not have ran into this yet, but buckle up. You absolutely will. In your community group, Bible study, friend group, you're going to meet a Christian, you have this shared profession of faith, and you're going to be shocked and appalled that they either do something or don't do something. Some of you know it all too well. And we just need to understand this is not inherently evil. We're called to be united, but we're not required to be uniform.

The strong person may feel free to drink alcohol or not drink alcohol. He or she may drink or not drink for any number of reasons, but it's not because the conscience is bound. The weak person, for a variety of reasons, may not feel free in the conscience to drink alcohol. It's just not on the table. To be strong in an area doesn't mean strength with no boundaries, right? If you feel free to drink alcohol, guess what you're not free to do? You're not free to get drunk, and you're not free to trample over the weak, brother. We'll talk about that more next week. And if you did that, that would be evidence not of a free conscience, but a seared conscience, which is a very different thing than a free conscience. The difference is the person who feels free versus the person who doesn't.

Let me just say this as well. Everyone's strong in some things and weak in other things, and they change. So there's no such thing as an always strong free conscience Christian, and there's no such thing as an always conscience-bound restricted Christian. No, no. It flip-flops, and it changes over time, and you might be different ten years from now on an issue than you are right now, and that alone should give us a little bit of humility.

But there are issues that aren't black and white. We can be strong or weak on them. It exists. The problem comes not in the existence of this, but in what you and I do about it, and in how we interact with each other. So let's talk about the temptations of the weak and the strong.

### **The temptations of the weak and the strong.**

Let's say you're the strong person. You have freedom of conscience, and you believe that you can eat any of the meat that's sold in the city of Rome in the first century, no issue. And you have a brother or sister in your little local church, in your community group, that is a committed vegetarian, and they're coming from a Jewish background, adherence to kosher laws. You might be tempted to write them a letter, like Ron Swanson from Parks and Recreation wrote the owner of a vegan restaurant, where he said,

*“Veganism is the sad result of a morally corrupt mind. Reconsider your life. Ron Swanson.”*

Or another place where he says,

*“I eat twice as much meat, just so that one vegan who thinks he's making a difference isn't making a difference at all.”*

You might be tempted to say any of those things, or have the bumper sticker that says PETA, people eating tasty animals, right?

Besides being funny, what can be underneath that? And we can bring this one up, because we're not really fighting about this, right? If we were fighting about this, it would not be safe territory to tread on, probably. What's underneath that sometimes? Besides humor, there can be disdain. You know what that feels like. You know what it feels like when you don't just differ with somebody. You think they are ridiculous for holding that view. Disdain wells up when we begin to wonder, what's wrong with them? Why can't they be free like I am? Why can't they just enjoy this and appreciate it? Don't they know they're free? The temptation of the free person is to disdain a brother or sister who's trying to follow his or her conscience before God.

Paul says it in verse 3, *let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains*, because that is going to be his or her temptation. And here's where that ultimately comes from. Ultimately, the person, the strong brother who ends up disdaining the weak is standing in the place of God and is making an evaluation and is saying, you are such a buzzkill, and you are ruining this and I am now against you. You're out. That's the temptation of the strong.

The weak person has temptations too, though. The weak person's conscience isn't free with regard to whatever it is, meat, days, alcohol, other such things. But here's where it turns. It turns when you can't understand how anyone's conscience could possibly be free on this issue. In fact, you can't understand how anyone who loves God and wants to honor him can't see this.

How do they not see that the meat on the plate has been sacrificed to a pagan idol?

How do they not think that's a big deal?

How can they not understand that God cares about the days that we set aside for fasting and consecration?

How can they read a book about witches and sorcery and not understand that God condemns them?

Can they not see what spiritual maturity looks like? They must not be as spiritually mature as me. They must not know God as well as I do. Can you hear it? It turned.

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*The strong person despises the weak, but the weak is tempted to judge the strong.*

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And Paul says, again, verse 3, *let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.*

That sense of judgment will turn you into a legalist. And in the proper sense, the legalist says, I do this or I don't do that. And God accepts me because of it and is happier with me than he is you. The weak person can put himself in the place of God and can also evaluate and can say, how can you participate in that? These are the temptations, disdain and judgment.

My guess is that you're already thinking about where you're weak and where you're strong. And some of you by temperament are probably prone to being more free. Right? You kind of came out of the womb just with a free conscience. And others of you came out of the womb with a bound conscience. It's just kind of how you're wired. And there's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with that until it goes wrong.

If you're naturally a free person, I need to ask you the question, in your enjoyment, is there ever a limit? Is there ever a place where you have to say no?

And to the weak, conscience-bound person, do you believe that there are actual issues of conscience, or is the world always black and white?

If you think that life should be lived with no limits, you will sin against God, and you'll disdain the prude who abstains with all things.

And if you think there are no areas of conscience, you'll not just balk when another person takes a different view. You'll leave, or you'll drive them out, but you won't stay because the purity of the church and the purity of your own soul is of first importance.

In neither case is there the prospect of fellowship, much less love.

Where do you do this? With whom do you do this? Over what issues do you do this? This is naturally residing in the human heart. Think about your week. Who have you disdained or judged? Why did you do it?

Sometimes we're name brazen and name calling as we do it. Sometimes we name call. You know the names.

We blast the fundees, right? The fundamentalists. We blast them. The conservatives who don't drink and they're not free. And you know what, I just don't even think they understand the gospel.

Or we blast the liberals, the kind of too loose people. And they're just not as spiritual, and I don't understand why they don't see that this matters. And I'm just not sure that they really understand the gospel.

So you see in both cases, what they're doing is they're taking an issue of conscience and they're turning it into a gospel issue. And when it's a gospel issue, they're putting themselves in the place of God and they're evaluating. And the root of that is pride because we're assuming that I'm right, my standards are right, everybody else should hold my position. And we know this. God doesn't want us to live that way on the inside of his church. He's God and we're not. And we're going to have to learn how to deal with each other in humility.

Let me make a distinction though. It is a temptation to disdain another person. It is a temptation to judge another person. But those things are not the same thing as having a disagreement or a conversation or making an argument. There is a place for conversation, disagreement, and argument on the inside of Jesus's church. I don't know how or when it happened, but at some point over the past, what, 30 to 50 years, we began thinking, I guess we're supposed to be nice. And if we're supposed to be nice, we can't talk about controversial things. And if somebody comes against me and makes an argument, I view that as a personal attack. I don't know when that happened, but that's not helpful for anyone.

It's possible for an argument to slip into sin, but the conversation is good. Part of being in the church. If I go to you and I say, tell me why you feel free to do that, watch that, experience that. Or if I come to you and I say, tell me why your conscience is bound, and you don't feel free to do this. If you're bound and you don't understand the free person, why don't you ask him? Why don't you get into it? Why don't you bring it up? But with humility and looking for fellowship, not looking to win. See, that's where it turns for us. When I just want to win, I'm going to sin. If I want fellowship, there's a chance that we can have a real conversation and still welcome each other.

Ask questions, try to understand their position, their story, their perspective. Perhaps they would invite yours. They might not. You'll at least know each other better, potentially love each other better for talking about it, whether you persuade them or not.

How do we move in that direction? Helpful conversations where we differ rather than just trying to win and destroy each other. That can really only happen if we both understand ourselves to be submitting to Jesus as Lord. It has to do with our relationship to God. That's the last point here. Let's talk about the Lord of the weak and the strong.

### **The Lord of the weak and the strong.**

Paul says to the weak person who's tempted to judge, let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. God is the welcomer.

He welcomes the pagan background Roman believer, and He gives that person the forgiveness of sin, clothes him or her in the robe of Christ's righteousness, that righteousness from God. He welcomes them in. They're fully in.

He's also the God who welcomes the Jewish background Christian whose conscience is struggling and has all of this categorical history and scriptural heritage to think through. He gives the Jewish background Christian the forgiveness of sin and clothes him or her in the robe of Christ's righteousness, the righteousness from God.

They are both accepted by grace. They're in. They're in the kingdom. It's true that both parties are actually free in regards to the kosher food laws. That's true. The scriptures are relatively clear on that. To the Roman background person, God doesn't say come to me and then I will force you to accept the kosher food laws. He doesn't say that.

The *one who eats meat, verse six, eats in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.* And he's doing that because God has welcomed him. His conscience isn't condemning him, and neither should the weak person. Because God welcomes him. We can't judge him. He stands before, verse four, his only master. It's the Lord himself who's able to make him stand.

So the strong person welcomed by God isn't trying to rebel. That's the caution. Look at verse seven. *None of us lives to himself. None of us dies to himself.* We're not in charge. The Lord is. And we either eat or abstain unto the Lord. That's the takeaway.

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*God welcomes both sides and you do what you do according to your conscience as unto him.*

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There is such a thing as the strong position and the weak position. There is such a thing as freedom or not freedom. But when it comes to this, it's gray and you either abstain or you eat as unto the Lord.

And he's the one who's also in charge of justice and judgment. That's how Paul ends the passage. He says judgment. That's how Paul ends the passage. *Why do we pass judgment on a brother? Why do we despise a brother? We'll all stand before the judgment seat of God.* See, you can't put yourself in the place of evaluation, whether you're strong or weak, because that is reserved for God alone. And he quotes Isaiah 45 here. Ultimately, *every knee will bow to me. Every tongue shall confess to God and each person will give an account of himself.*

This is part of the cure for the person who despises a brother. And it's the same cure for a heart that wants to judge a brother. It's to stop worrying about your brother and start bowing to the Lord before whom you live or die. The only one who's able to actually evaluate. Until you get the vertical relationship with God properly in perspective, you have no resources to deal with the horizontal.

If you go too far in your freedom and you use it for sin, God will hold you to account. If you go too far in your restraint and you start living based on your own righteousness or judging others, God will hold you to account. But he is the one who is both welcomer and judge.

Now, how is that possible?

How can God be the welcomer and the judge?

And you may be here and you're not yet a Christian, you're not sure where you're at spiritually speaking, and this whole discussion seems a little ridiculous. You may honestly think, can't we just do whatever we want? Aren't we just free? And I would say, well, yeah, and no. The bigger question is, is there a judge of the living and the dead? Because if there is, it's better to not think about, I'll do whatever I want. It's better to think, how will the judge of the living and the dead evaluate me? Paul mentions that Jesus Christ died and lived again to be Lord of the dead and the living.

And if you're here and you're not yet a Christian, what I would press into you is this, quoting back what Paul quotes, *every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess*. Some will do it freely and joyfully because they have been welcomed by the grace of God, by faith in Jesus Christ, and others will do so because they are the conquered enemies of God Almighty, and they will bow, and they will confess, and then they will know his justice. And that's bad news.

If you're not yet a Christian, it's a good day to bow the knee joyfully to Jesus and ask him to forgive you and rescue you. See, the fact that God is the Welcomer, He welcomes us when we come to Him by faith in His Son, who is the Judge who took justice. That's how it works. It's the Gospel that makes sense of God as Welcomer and Judge. He welcomes us because He's gracious, and He welcomes us on the basis of the judgment that Jesus experienced on the cross for us. We just talked about this over Good Friday and Easter.

If you're a Christian already, it's a good day to remember that you live and you die and you eat or don't eat and you drink or you don't drink and you observe a day or you don't observe a day, whatever it is, you do it unto the Lord. He's in charge.

Freedom of conscience? Yes, it's in many areas. Consider all of it unto Him. You've been welcomed by Him, but don't despise a brother who abstains. In the areas where your conscience isn't free, don't judge your brothers. Live your life before God and not men. We're always going to have issues of conscience. And on our best days, they're going to provoke discussions and some controversy, maybe an argument or two, maybe an actual laying out of positions. Good. They should. That's fine.

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*There will always be people who have a weak conscience or a strong conscience on any number of issues, but resist the urge to despise, resist the urge to judge.*

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There's one judge, and that judge happens to be the one who welcomes us by faith in the Lord Jesus. So leave judgment to Him. Let's be people who actually do what He says in chapter 12.

Let love be genuine. Let's seek fellowship. And even when we disagree, bow our knee to the Lord Jesus, who really is alone, the Lord of the conscience. Let's pray together.

*Our father, we thank you for your word and that you equip us on things that confuse us. Thank you that you give us clear teaching on things that sometimes in our minds get really blurry and fuzzy. We praise you, our God, that you have welcomed us by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus. We praise you that you are our judge and our life is evaluated before you and that for those who are in Christ, there's no condemnation. So help us not to disdain a brother who's different from us or a sister. Help us to help us not to judge someone who is freer on an issue than we are. Help us to pursue fellowship and love, we ask, Lord Jesus, because you first loved us. We pray in your name. Amen.*

\*\*Portion of scripture read before sermon—Isaiah 45:18-23