

SESSION 6
Accept



QUESTION 1:

How do you decide what's not worth arguing about?

THE POINT

Strong relationships are not hindered by differences of opinion.

THE PASSAGES

Romans 14:1-4,13-19

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

What a wonderful world it would be if everyone started reading from the right script, which just so happens to be the one in my hand!

But the reality is, I don't live in a perfect world ... and neither do you. We don't always see eye-to-eye. The question for each of us is: what do we do when we disagree—when the other person seems to miss our “right” way of seeing things?

A lot of us spend an enormous amount of time persuading—trying to get the “blind” person to subscribe to our point of view. But what if that approach doesn't work? (And it often doesn't.) What happens when you talk until you're blue in the face and the other person still stands his or her ground? Is the relationship over?

In the Book of Romans, Paul taught us to remain humble when we have differences in opinion. Clearly, some hills are worth dying on and at times we need to stand our ground, but Paul helped us to see where to draw those lines. Paul's instructions guide us to maintain strong relationships in spite of any and every difference of opinion.

Romans 14:1-4

- 1 Accept anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters.**
- 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables.**
- 3 One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him.**
- 4 Who are you to judge another's household servant? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And he will stand, because the Lord is able to make him stand.**

What's the difference between being *united* and being *unified*? If you were to take two enemies, handcuff them together, and lock them in a room, you'd see two persons united but not unified. Just because people are *together* doesn't mean that they are *unified*.

Paul addressed the importance of peaceful relationships—staying closely knit together. Romans 14 indicates rival groups of individuals were popping up in the church because members were joining forces according to their personal persuasions and preferences. Believers became critical of one another for holding different views. This division was wrong and out of place, especially given the fact that they were arguing over petty things. They were not debating the gospel or dividing over whether Jesus had truly died for their sins. They were not debating the most effective ways to reach their community for Christ. They were arguing over foods and festivals. *What foods should we eat—and not eat? What days should we celebrate on our calendar?*

Paul later referred to these two groups as the weaker and the stronger (Rom. 15:1). What made one group stronger was their spiritual maturity; they rightly understood Christian liberty. Those

in the “strong” group were far from perfect, but they understood that whether a person ate meat or only vegetables and what day another person considered holy did not point to disobedience or a lack of love and commitment to Christ.

Who were the people in the “weaker” party? These included the Christians who had grown up week after week with certain rules and practices—rules and practices that were deeply ingrained in them. Some also may have come from pagan backgrounds and thus believed the food sold in the markets was not good for food. These believers were every bit as saved as the “strong” believers. They were committed followers of Christ, but their conscience kept them from embracing new freedoms.

QUESTION 2:

How should we show love for brothers and sisters who are immature in faith?

While one group may have been more mature in their thinking, both groups were guilty of a critical spirit. Rather than running each other down and resenting the positions held by the other group, Paul challenged them to “accept” one another. *Accept* carries the idea of welcoming others and being generous toward them. The world defines *acceptance* as a full affirmation, even endorsement, of a person’s beliefs and practices. The Bible doesn’t use the word *accept* to mean we should condone sin. Instead, it’s a desire to stay close, even when both parties see things differently.

It’s important to keep in mind that Paul was talking about disputable matters—those things Scripture is silent about. He’s not talking about black-and-white sin. For example, when a believer sees a brother in Christ walking down the street in a drunken state, he should challenge his choices (Eph. 5:18). Likewise, if a Christian discovers her sister in Christ is involved in sexual immorality, she has an obligation to confront her (1 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 6:1).

In Romans 14, Paul was addressing “gray areas” in the Christian life. Still, in verse 4, he made it plain that each of us will have to answer to God for the way we have lived this life. God is not going to ask me what I thought about another person’s actions. God is the Lord and Judge over the other person. I’m not.

QUESTION 3:

What issues provide opportunities for Christians to treat one another with patience and understanding?

Romans 14:13-15

13 Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister.

14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean.

15 For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died.

As previously mentioned, the “stronger” group had a more mature understanding of Christian freedom, but Paul did not let this group off the hook completely. He challenged these believers not to be insensitive by flaunting their freedoms. They should avoid offending others: “Let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister.”

Before my kids were old enough to pick up after themselves, they would leave their blocks, cars, and assorted jagged toys scattered across the floor. I soon discovered the wisdom of clearing a path to the kitchen each night. It only took one disastrous trip to the fridge

in the dark for me to realize the pain of a stumbling block. CRASH! BOOM! POW! This was the racket from Ben Mandrell falling on his face after tripping over one of those little foot daggers!

Of course, I couldn't be angry at my baby boys for causing me to eat carpet. They didn't know any better. Unfortunately many Christians are fully aware they are putting down stumbling blocks. They know some Christians see a particular activity as offensive, but they don't care. They're going to do it anyway.

Out of respect for others, mature Christians will restrict their freedom, removing anything from their lives that would cause others to feel wounded in their conscience. Our personal relationships should trump our personal freedoms. The strong should move toward the weak.

Simon was a vibrant, young worship leader. While in college, he was often called on to lead the music in chapel services as well as in surrounding churches. One Sunday, he was invited to bring his band and lead the music at a more traditional church. The pastor was very kind and appreciative, but he did request that Simon wear a coat and tie, the normal attire for their church leaders. Feeling insulted, Simon hung up the phone and wondered: "How could this church insist on a dress code that is not found in Scripture? Why can't they accept me for who I am?" Simon made a decision in the heat of his emotions. He rejected the pastor's request and arrived on Sunday in his faded jeans and favorite T-shirt. His attitude? "Those people can get over it." It is easy to fall into Simon's selfish, self-centered way of thinking. It is likely that you—just like me—at some point have tried to justify your behavior by saying, "Those people need to get over it." This mentality does not build healthy relationships. Furthermore, wounding your brother or sister in Christ for no good reason is wrong.

We need to have the opposite attitude. Whenever we consider the conscience of others as we make adjustments to our lives, we are demonstrating maturity more than compromise.

QUESTION 4:

How do you balance enjoying your freedom and avoiding stumbling blocks?

Romans 14:16-19

16 Therefore, do not let your good be slandered,
17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.
18 Whoever serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and receives human approval.
19 So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.

So what is to be the main focus of believers? The kingdom of God. In verse 17, Paul wrote, “For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

- ▶ We live to make the kingdom of God and His glory known throughout the earth.
- ▶ We live to build His kingdom and promote His purpose.
- ▶ We live to see our Savior return in power and glory, with our lives prepared and poised for service.

Paul goes even further to keep us on track: “Whoever serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and receives human approval.” We serve Christ when we ...

- ▶ ... “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33).
- ▶ ... give proper proportion to trivial things.
- ▶ ... keep the cause of Christ in full view and refuse to “major on the minors.”

In so doing, we sense God’s pleasure and relationships thrive.

Verse 19 is particularly helpful in completing this thought: “So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.” We are called to wear the badge of a servant. We are talking about preferences and differences of opinion. Times may arise when we must make a clear moral and biblical stand, and that stand could cause division. Even then, we must stand for truth in a loving way, with unity in mind (Eph. 4:15). When someone disagrees with us or offends us, our natural reaction is to run away from the person, build a wall of defense, or just keep our distance. Sometimes these boundaries are needed, but the healthiest Christian response is to maintain the relationship. We are called to stick with it and serve the people

DIGGING DEEPER

RITUALS, REGULATIONS, AND EATING

Paul’s vision of one new humanity in Christ was coming to fruition in Rome. Gentiles and Jews, the rich and the poor, Romans and servants were joined in the grand experiment whereby all the nations of the earth would come to bow before the Lord. Paul envisioned the Jews maintaining their religious distinctives and the nations coming to God through Christ without going through the law. The table—that which served as the common meeting place for families and groups—could be the very thing, that divided those in the church.

The situation within the fellowship of believers in Rome brought together around the Lord’s table

Jews and Gentiles in a most uncomfortable intimacy. For the Jews, table rituals were not to be shared with Gentiles. The great equalizing character of Christian fellowship had already subdivided into old groupings as if there were two distinct churches, and not one living body of Christ. Paul found such division unacceptable.

Paul, expressing the concern of his heart, admonished the Roman believers, “Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food ... It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles” (Rom. 14:20-21, NASB). For Paul, the unity of the body took precedence over the rituals of tradition and culture.

Charles W. Draper, “Rituals, Regulations, and Eating,” *Biblical Illustrator*, Winter, 2005-06, 52-55.

God has placed around us. As we wash the feet of our friends as well as our foes, we keep the focus on Christ and not ourselves.

We may never see a greater test of the depth of our love than when disagreement hits our family. Families sometimes have fierce disagreements. As a result, fathers and sons, sisters and brothers may suffer from years of estrangement that stem back to a single heated discussion. Sadly, decades can pass, and the substance of the argument will be completely forgotten, but the wall of separation stands high and unyielding. Civil wars are usually the worst kinds of clashes. A family has no winners when Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas gatherings are removed from its scrapbook of memories.

Scripture compels us to do our part to preserve relationships. The kingdom of God is about “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” May we promote these things in the lives of our families and our churches. Never give up on the hope of healing.

QUESTION 5:

What does pursuing peace look like in our church?

ENGAGE

Consider the following issues that can cause division within the Christian community. Write down your conviction or preference beside each one.

- Church attire
- Worship music style
- Church building budget
- Emphasis on local versus international missions

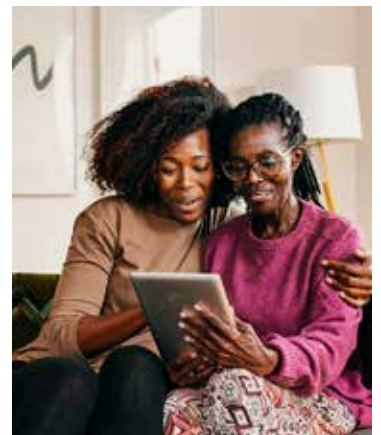
Given where you land on these issues, what are some practical ways you can respond to those with different views, in light of Romans 14:19?

LIVE IT OUT

What will you do to build relationships in spite of any differences of opinion?

- ▶ **Extend grace.** If someone has offended you because their actions go against your convictions, forgive. Do not hold these actions over their heads.
- ▶ **Let go.** You may feel perfectly free in Christ to participate in some activities, but others do not. Let go of your freedom to engage in the activity in order to respect and serve the other person.
- ▶ **Agree to disagree.** Meet with someone with whom you have a difference of opinion. It might help if you each communicated why you hold to a certain conviction; in the end, however, you may still choose to agree to disagree. Maintain love and respect for the other person in spite of the difference.

Your relationships are more important than your opinions. Love Christ by loving other people more than you love your rights or opinions.



COMING NEXT QUARTER

LIVING WITH HOPE IN A BROKEN WORLD

- Session 1 **The Basis for Our Hope** (1 Peter 1:1-9)
- Session 2 **The Expression of Our Hope** (1 Peter 1:13-25)
- Session 3 **The Testimony of Our Hope** (1 Peter 2:4-15)
- Session 4 **The Endurance of Our Hope** (1 Peter 3:8-17)
- Session 5 **The Joy Arising from Our Hope** (1 Peter 4:1-2,12-19)
- Session 6 **The Culmination of Our Hope** (1 Peter 5:5b-11)

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND TO POLITICS?

- Session 1 **How Should I Respond to Politics?** (Romans 13:1-10)

WHY DO I NEED THE CHURCH?

- Session 1 **We Are Joined Together** (Ephesians 1:20-23; 2:8-10,19-22)
- Session 2 **We Pray for One Other** (Ephesians 3:14-21)
- Session 3 **We Support One Other** (Ephesians 4:1-7,11-16)
- Session 4 **We Encourage One Other** (Ephesians 4:17-32)
- Session 5 **We Strengthen One Other** (Ephesians 5:8-21)
- Session 6 **We Stand Together in Spiritual Battle** (Ephesians 6:10-20)