

## **Romans 14:1-23**

### ***Righteousness in Conduct, Directed by Forbearance***

#### **A. Notes to the Text**

##### ***Verse 1***

Regarding the context, see Main Thoughts, 1, below. For greater detail on the division of the congregation into two groups, the "weak" and the "strong", see chapter 15:1. For the meaning of these words, see Main Thoughts, 5. The weak must be accepted as full members of the church. This admonition is addressed to the strong.

"Without passing judgment on disputable matters": without provoking arguments about the opinions of the weak. Debates about the issues at stake can become quite heated and cause alienation among church members.

"Opinions"[RSV]: do not deal with fundamentals (of doctrine). Being a vegetarian or a teetotaler does not affect the true doctrine.

##### ***Verse 2***

The strong thinks he can use everything, the weak does not.

##### ***Verse 3***

The danger is that the strong despise the weak, and that the weak pass judgment on the strong. God has accepted both as believing members of the church of Christ.

##### ***Verse 4***

The weak may not pass judgment on the strong, nor the strong on the weak, that because of his opinion regarding the matters in question he will fall from his position of faith. For passing judgment is not the prerogative of either the strong or the weak; the believers, as servants, are the property of the Lord Christ and he will uphold both groups so that they will stand in the faith.

##### ***Verse 5***

Besides the differences over foods, there was also dissention concerning the celebration of special days. It is not certain what this is about: Jewish fast and Sabbath days, or pagan lucky or unlucky days, or the celebration of the Sunday (first day of the week). Paul writes that everyone should decide for himself how to think about that. Of course this does not mean that every church member may have his own doctrines. Remember, this is not about true or false doctrine, but about customs and habits at a time of transition in the church, transition from the old to the new covenant.

### ***Verse 6***

The apostle shows why also in keeping the feast days the weak and the strong may not pass judgment on one another. Both groups have a pure motive for their opinions, in that they want to serve God, for which they all give him thanks.

### ***Verses 7-9***

Both groups belong to God in life and death. When they accept that of each other in faith, according to the covenant and promise, in important matters, surely one will not despise and judge the other for minor matters like eating, drinking and feast-days? Rather, both groups will leave it to the judgment of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has bought both groups at the high cost of his life. In this way Paul creates room for the individual believer to make practical decisions in his life in Christian freedom.

### ***Verses 10-12***

Thus, there is room and freedom, but with personal responsibility to God. When Paul speaks here of the judgment seat of God, he does not contradict the fact that Christ will judge the living and the dead, for the triune God judges through Christ (John 5:22; Acts 17:31).

We should be careful in judging others, since we are all to be judged by Christ (cf. Matthew 7:1,2; Luke 6:37; John 7:24). And if we are not called to judge officially, i.e. as office bearers, we should refrain from passing judgment on many things and many people (cf. the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, Luke 12:13,14; John 8:10,11).

### ***Verses 13ff.***

In the preceding verses the apostle addressed both groups, but from v. 13 on the strong are addressed.

### ***Verses 13***

Paul has a new argument: the strong may not tempt the weak to sin.

A "stumbling block" is a stone or object that lies in the way and makes one stumble. "Obstacle" is stronger than "stumbling block," for an obstacle is put before another on purpose, so that his fall is almost inevitable. That means: forcing the weak, against his conscience, to do what the strong wants. But when someone does what he is convinced in mind and conscience to be against God's will, the weak person is made to stumble (v. 15: destroyed), so that he may be lost.

### ***Verses 14, 15***

In principle, the apostle takes his position with the strong (see further Main Thoughts, 3), but he demands room for the weak. When someone believes that something is against God's law, then that something is sin for such a person. And

one does not show love to that neighbour (a fellow-brother or fellow-sister in the church!) if one forces him or her to do that deed anyway. Treat your neighbour in the church with care, for he is God's property! One should be more careful with someone else's property than with one's own.

### **Verse 16**

"What you consider good": the good of the strong is to be allowed the freedom to eat anything (cf. 1 Timothy 4:14). But when this freedom is abused to tempt a fellow-believer to sin, the latter will speak evil of this freedom, and rightly so.

### **Verse 17**

These differences of opinion could make one lose sight of the actual gifts of the kingdom of God. (See Glossary #8 and #24).

"Joy" is the heavenly joy for the peace and the righteousness given to us by God.

### **Verse 18**

The meaning of this verse is: the strong must serve Christ and not please himself by demonstrating his freedom (to eat all things) in an irritating and provoking manner.

### **Verse 19, 20**

"Peace": the harmony and growth of the congregation. "Upbuilding" [RSV]: literally house-building. The church is the house or temple of God, hence, a house under construction (see also 1 Corinthians 3:9ff.; Ephesians 2:21,22), of which the members are living stones (1 Peter 2:4ff). "Upbuilding" can also mean: edification [NIV], building up in the faith. Hence the warning in v. 20 not to destroy the work of God, that is, God's building, God's construction, the Church of Christ.

### **Verse 21**

Here the apostle formulates the rule: as strong ones you may be convinced that you are allowed to do something that appears to be forbidden to the weak, and then you as the strong must not do that if it could cause the weak to sin. (For "stumble," see verse 13.)

Meanwhile, the difficulty, to me, is in how far one must accommodate the weak in the faith in this respect! A weak person must surely not take away the freedom of the strong one completely.

### **Verse 22**

In short: In faith, as a strong person, hold on to your conviction (that you may eat all things), but keep it to yourself, so that you do not provoke the weak. For the sake of the weak you ought to forego the exercise of your freedom as occasion warrants.

The end of the verse praises the strong as well as the weak, when each has a clear conscience before God in his decision and, hence, in faith, according to God's Word, decides either to eat all things or not.

### **Verse 23**

But he who is in doubt about eating or not eating all things, who as a weak or strong person is uncertain in his decision, does not act from faith, for faith gives certainty (cf. Hebrews 11:6).

"Everything that does not come from faith is sin": read in the context this means that whoever eats or does not eat all things, without being certain in faith, commits sin. The following thought is the basis for this: when we as Christians do something, or refrain from doing it, we should be certain, in faith, that the LORD either approves of it or not. When you are not sure whether the LORD approves of doing something, but do it nevertheless, you commit sin. When you are not sure whether the LORD wants you to refrain from doing something and you do it just the same, you sin as well.

Being for or against something must be rooted in faith, which is not controlled by our own opinion, nor by our own conscience (which can fail), but by God's Word.

## **B. Main Thoughts**

1. The context can be described in this way: righteousness (that is: the new way of conduct of the man who is justified through Christ) is not directed and led by love alone (13:8-14) but, because of that love for God and for the neighbour, also by forbearance of each other in the congregation of Christ. When there are differences of opinion among us, (not doctrinal differences), we will be forbearing of each other. That is the theme of chapter 14:1-23.
2. Forbearance (tolerance) is a word that is quite popular with people nowadays, also in so-called ecumenical relationships. In relations between world religions many plead for tolerance, which must be shown, for example, in the "dialogue," which is held on the basis of equality. In politics too, tolerance is an ever-returning topic.

But in the meantime intolerance is steadily increasing. Those who advocate and defend the truth according to the Word of God are tolerated less and less. An example: others do not want to hear about the true and the false church.

We may postulate that tolerance is only permissible when the difference lies within the boundaries of God's truth and law.

3. Among the members of the Christian church in Rome there was a difference about food and drink (whether it should be vegetarian) and about celebrating certain days (for or against). Paul calls those who wished to eat only

vegetarian food and to celebrate certain feast days "the weak in faith." Those who ate everything and deemed all days equally holy and special, he calls "the strong in faith." We are not informed about the background of these disputes.

It is typical that while the apostle groups himself with the strong, he does not wish to see the weak judged, but tolerated.

In other churches there were similar disputes (see Galatians 4:8-11; Philippians 3:2ff.; and Colossians 2:16,17; in these three instances the apostle states his position quite strongly, because he sees Christian freedom, among others, threatened; and also 1 Corinthians 8; where Paul speaks in a milder tone, because there, as in the church of Rome, he sees no threat to Christian doctrine and freedom). In Galatia, Philippi and Colosse, Paul deems false doctrine to be the root cause, but not in Rome and Corinth. There, it was a difference of opinion within the church, within the boundaries of God's truth and law. In these circumstances the message is: bear with one another in love, and do not make differences of opinion into doctrinal differences. Thus, do not charge each other with heresy, as if there were heresies everywhere.

4. It has been said that the differences in Rome's church belonged to the so-called *adiáfora*, that is, the minor points or less important things; the things one can be for or against, because they are neither good nor evil in themselves, since God's law says nothing about them. Article 50 of the Church Order states: "On minor points of church order and ecclesiastical practice, Churches abroad shall not be rejected." Thus, for example, the Reformed fathers did not regard the fact that a church had an Episcopal form of church government as one of these ecclesiastical minor points. Within our Reformed churches the following are considered minor points: in baptism, sprinkling once or three times; and celebrating the Lord's Supper standing, sitting, or being served individually at the front of the church. In Romans 14 such minor points are not in issue, for Paul chooses for the strong, so that in his opinion all food is clean (v. 14) (see Mark 7:15; Acts 10 and 1 Timothy 4:4).
5. What exactly is meant by "weak" and "strong" in faith? Prof. B. Holwerda had this to say:

Both groups believe that they belong to Jesus Christ, and both want to serve him in obedience. Being weak in faith has nothing to do with seeking refuge in faith. Both groups have the true faith of Lord's Day 7. But herein lies the difference: one accepts Christ and all his benefits, the other - due to limited insight - does not. One believes and enjoys the full freedom gained by Christ, also regarding food, for instance in the deliverance from ceremonial food

laws and days of fasting; the other does not acknowledge this freedom for himself and disputes it regarding his brother.<sup>1</sup>

6. Some other points that are considered by some to be similar to those in Romans 14 may be mentioned. Being vegetarian; starting the day together as a family with Scripture reading and prayer and closing the day in the same way in the evening; having no Scripture reading or prayer at meals during the day; being a teetotaler; smoking; what is and what is not allowed on Sunday. Prof. Lekkerkerker also mentions differences in political choices among Christians and states: "Generally we should regard different decisions on political issues in the light of what Paul writes in Romans about the contrast between the weak and the strong." (What are your thoughts about these various matters?)
7. Clearly, the main thought is this: Paul does not say that believers should have the same views on all matters, or want the same in everything. There may be differences in habits and customs. Thus, there are legitimate differences in habits and customs between Reformed people in The Netherlands, and Canada, Irian Jaya, etc. That is not to say that each can decide for himself what is right or wrong, because Romans 14 talks about differences within the framework of God's law and truth. In that framework the church members have to bear with one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Ed. Note: Quote is from *Populair-wetenschappelijke Bijdragen* (1962)