

The Book of Romans, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 13: The Weak and the Strong; Final Greetings

Romans 14:1–16:27

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Romans 14 through 16 brings the great letter to a close, and the heart of the practical instruction is how a diverse congregation lives together in love amid genuine differences. Paul addresses the weak and the strong, those who differ over disputable matters such as foods and special days, and teaches them to welcome one another without quarreling, judging, or despising. He then calls the strong to limit their liberty in love so as not to wound the weak, grounds the whole appeal in the example of Christ who did not please Himself, and ends with personal greetings, a warning against those who cause division, and a soaring doxology. The teacher should be ready to handle the central and delicate doctrinal task of this lesson: distinguishing matters of opinion and conscience from matters of faith and clear doctrine.

This is the crucial frame. Romans 14 deals explicitly with disputable matters, areas where Scripture has not bound a particular position and where sincere, equally devoted believers may legitimately differ (in the examples Paul gives, whether to eat certain foods and whether to regard certain days as special). On such matters, Paul says, let each be fully convinced in his own mind (14:5), do not despise or judge one another, and do not wound a brother's conscience. The teacher must be careful, however, not to let this chapter be stretched into a relativizing of clear doctrine. Paul is not saying that everything is a matter of private opinion, that conviction does not matter, or that we may set aside what God has plainly commanded in the name of tolerance. The same Paul warns, only two chapters of teaching later, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught, and to avoid them (16:17). So the mature task is to discern the difference: to hold firmly what God has clearly revealed (the gospel, the terms of salvation, the moral commands, the pattern for the church and its worship) while extending genuine liberty and welcome on matters God has left to individual conscience. Where God has spoken, we submit and stand together; where He has left us free, we grant one another freedom and refuse to bind our opinions on others.

Two further points need clarity. First, the phrase whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (14:23) means that to act against one's conscience, doing what one is not convinced is right before God, is sin for that person; it is not a license to do whatever one feels. Second, the call to be fully convinced in one's own mind applies to matters of liberty, not to clear commands, which are settled not by personal conviction but by the authority of God's word. This lesson is profoundly formative for congregational life. It calls the strong to loving restraint, the weak to gracious acceptance, and all to pursue peace and mutual upbuilding after the pattern of Christ, who did not please Himself. As this study of Romans closes, the teacher should help students hold truth and love together, firm where God has spoken, gracious where He has left us free,

and devoted to the unity of Christ's church. The disciple being formed here is a peacemaker who neither compromises clear truth nor quarrels over opinions, and who welcomes others as Christ has welcomed them.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul writes, As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions, and warns that the one who eats must not despise the one who abstains, and the one who abstains must not judge the one who eats, for God has welcomed him (14:1-4). What does this passage teach about how Christians are to receive one another across differences in disputable matters, and what does Paul mean by the weak and the strong here?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by establishing the kind of issue Paul is addressing. He says, welcome the one who is weak in faith, but not to quarrel over opinions (14:1). The word opinions points to disputable matters, areas where Scripture has not bound a position and sincere believers may differ. In Rome these were chiefly about food (eating meat or only vegetables) and days (regarding some days as special). The teacher should make clear from the start that Paul is dealing with liberty issues, not with clear commands or moral absolutes.

Define the weak and the strong. The strong are those whose faith is robust enough to use their liberty freely, eating anything with thanksgiving. The weak are those whose conscience, often tender from background or scruple, will not allow them to do so. Note that Paul does not flatter the strong or scold the weak; he is concerned for both and calls each to a right posture toward the other.

Draw out the two commands. The one who eats must not despise (look down on) the one who abstains, and the one who abstains must not judge (condemn) the one who eats (14:3). Each is tempted toward a characteristic sin: the strong toward contempt, the weak toward condemnation. Paul forbids both. The ground he gives is decisive: God has welcomed him (14:3). If God has received a person, who are we to reject them over a matter of opinion?

Apply it to the church. The teacher should help students see how easily congregations fracture over secondary matters, each side certain of its superiority. Paul's counsel is to receive one another as God has received us, holding our convictions on disputable matters without making them tests of fellowship. This sets up the whole section and protects the unity Christ died to create.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Disputable matters (opinions) as distinct from clear commands (14:1)
- The weak and the strong defined by the strength of conscience and faith

- The strong tempted to contempt, the weak to condemnation, both forbidden (14:3)
- God's welcome of a believer as the ground for our welcome of one another

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of issues is Paul addressing with the word opinions?
- Who are the weak and the strong, and what is each tempted to do to the other?
- Why does God's welcome of a person settle how we should treat them?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul forbids both despising the weak and judging the strong (14:3–4, 10). Which is your greater temptation, looking down on fellow believers you consider too strict, or condemning those you consider too lax? What would it look like this week to extend to them the same welcome God has extended to you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes Paul's twin warnings, do not despise and do not judge (14:3–4, 10), and asks students which is their characteristic temptation. The teacher should help each person locate themselves honestly.

Describe the two temptations. Some believers tend toward the strong person's sin: looking down on others as fussy, narrow, immature, or legalistic, with a quiet sense of superiority. Others tend toward the weak person's sin: judging others as loose, worldly, careless, or compromising. Most of us lean noticeably one way. Naming our tendency is the first step to repenting of it.

Apply the leveling truth. Paul asks, who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls (14:4). The other believer is God's servant, not ours, and answers to God, not to us. This dismantles both contempt and condemnation, because we are not the master of our brother.

Move toward welcome. The question asks what it would look like to extend to others the same welcome God has extended to us. Invite students to think of a specific believer or group they have despised or judged over a matter of opinion, and to take one step toward receiving them as God has received them, perhaps a conversation, a softened attitude, a refusal to keep score on a disputable matter.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The two characteristic temptations, contempt and condemnation
- The other believer as God's servant who answers to God (14:4)
- Self-examination to identify our own leaning

- Extending to others the welcome God has extended to us

Discussion Prompts

- Are you more tempted to look down on the strict or to judge the lax?
- How does remembering that your brother is God's servant change your posture?
- Whom might you need to welcome this week as God has welcomed you?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul says that each person should be fully convinced in his own mind, that whoever observes a day or eats does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God, and that none of us lives or dies to himself, for we are the Lord's, and we will all stand before the judgment seat of God and give an account of ourselves (14:5–12). What does this passage teach about living everything before the Lord, about the role of personal conviction in matters of liberty, and about why we should leave the judging of one another to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul deepens the principle with three truths: each should be fully convinced in his own mind (14:5); whatever we do, we do to the Lord and give thanks (14:6–9); and we will all stand before the judgment seat of God (14:10–12). The teacher should unfold each.

Explain be fully convinced in his own mind (14:5). On disputable matters, each believer should reach a settled, sincere conviction before God rather than acting carelessly or merely following the crowd. The teacher should clarify the scope: this applies to matters of liberty, not to clear commands. We are not free to form private opinions about what God has plainly revealed; there, conviction submits to the authority of Scripture. But on genuine liberty issues, each is to act from honest, God-directed conviction.

Unfold living to the Lord. Paul says the one who eats and the one who abstains each does so to the Lord, with thanksgiving (14:6). The deep principle is that everything in the believer's life, even our handling of disputable matters, is to be done to the Lord. We are the Lord's in life and death (14:8). This lifts the whole discussion above mere preference: the question is always how to honor the Lord, not how to please ourselves or win an argument.

Apply the judgment seat (14:10–12). Paul asks why we judge our brother, since we will all stand before the judgment seat of God and each give an account of himself. This is sobering and clarifying. We have our own account to give; we are not our brother's judge. The teacher should help students see that remembering our own accountability to God curbs the impulse to sit in judgment on others over matters He has left to conscience.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Being fully convinced in one's own mind on matters of liberty (14:5)
- The scope of personal conviction, liberty issues, not clear commands
- All of life, including disputable matters, done to the Lord (14:6–9)
- The judgment seat of God and personal accountability (14:10–12)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to be fully convinced in your own mind, and to what does it apply?
- How does doing everything to the Lord reframe disputes over opinion?
- How does remembering your own account before God curb judging others?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says we will each give an account of ourselves to God (14:12). When you are tempted to pass judgment on another believer over a matter of opinion, how does remembering that both of you answer to the same Lord, and that you must give your own account, change the way you treat them?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes the truth of the judgment seat (14:10–12) and applies it to the moment we are tempted to judge a brother. The teacher should help students use this truth as a practical check on a judging spirit.

Recall the temptation. We pass judgment on other believers easily, especially over matters of opinion: their choices, their scruples or lack of them, their preferences. Often this judging makes us feel righteous while it quietly corrodes our love and the church's unity.

Apply the double remembrance. Paul gives two truths to remember: both of us answer to the same Lord, and I must give my own account. Remembering the first humbles me, because my brother is not accountable to me but to God. Remembering the second redirects me, because I have enough to answer for in my own life without taking up the role of judge over others.

Move toward a changed practice. Invite students to identify a believer they tend to judge over a matter of opinion, and to practice, the next time the judging thought arises, turning it into two responses: leaving that person to their own Master, and attending to their own account before God. The aim is to replace a judging reflex with humility and self-examination.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The judging reflex as corrosive to love and unity
- Remembering that both believers answer to the same Lord
- Attending to our own account rather than judging another's
- Replacing judgment with humility and self-examination

Discussion Prompts

- Over what matter of opinion are you most tempted to judge another believer?
- How does remembering you both answer to the same Lord change that?
- What would it look like to attend to your own account instead?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul shifts from our right to our responsibility, urging us never to put a stumbling block in a brother's way, warning that we can destroy by our liberty the one for whom Christ died, and reminding us that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, so we should pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding (14:13–23). What does this teach about how love limits the use of our own liberty, and why does Paul treat wounding a weak brother's conscience as such a serious matter?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul turns from the believer's rights to the believer's responsibilities. Even though the strong are right that no food is unclean in itself, love limits the use of liberty: do not put a stumbling block in a brother's way; do not destroy by your food the one for whom Christ died (14:13–15, 20–21). The teacher should help students grasp how seriously Paul treats the wounding of a weak conscience.

Explain the stumbling block. The strong, by flaunting their liberty, can embolden a weak believer to act against his own conscience, or can wound and distress him, or can even drive him away from the faith. Paul calls this destroying the one for whom Christ died (14:15). The teacher should let the weight of that phrase land: a careless use of liberty can do real spiritual harm to a person Christ valued enough to die for.

Set out the priority of love over liberty. Paul does not deny the strong their freedom; he insists that love must govern its use. It is no longer enough to ask, am I free to do this? We must also ask, is it loving, will it build up or wound my brother? If walking in love means voluntarily limiting a liberty for a brother's sake, the strong should gladly do so (14:21).

Lift up the kingdom principle (14:17). The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The teacher should help students see the proportion here: secondary matters are not worth fracturing the church over, because the kingdom is about far weightier and better things. We pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding (14:19), gladly setting aside our rights when love requires it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love limiting the use of liberty for the sake of a weaker brother (14:13–21)

- Wounding a weak conscience as destroying one for whom Christ died (14:15)
- The priority of the question is it loving over the question am I free
- The kingdom as righteousness, peace, and joy, not eating and drinking (14:17)
- Pursuing peace and mutual upbuilding (14:19)

Discussion Prompts

- What is a stumbling block, and why does Paul treat it so seriously?
- How does love change the question from am I free to is it loving?
- What does it mean that the kingdom is not about eating and drinking but righteousness, peace, and joy?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul warns the strong not to wound a weaker believer by the careless use of their freedom (14:13–21). Is there a liberty you enjoy that, exercised without care, might harm or stumble a weaker brother or sister? How does love sometimes call us to limit even things we are genuinely free to do, for the sake of someone else?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes the call to limit liberty in love (14:13–21) and presses it into the student's own freedoms. The teacher should help students apply the principle without either guilt-mongering or dismissiveness.

Help students identify a relevant liberty. Most believers enjoy freedoms that, exercised carelessly in the wrong company, could wound or stumble a weaker brother or sister: matters of food and drink, entertainment choices, the use of money, freedoms in things Scripture has not forbidden. The point is not to manufacture endless scruples but to grow sensitive to others.

Clarify what love asks. Paul is not asking the strong to adopt the weak person's scruples permanently or to live in bondage to others' opinions. He is asking them to be willing, out of love, to limit a liberty in a particular setting where exercising it would harm a brother. Love is willing to forgo a right for the good of another, as Christ did.

Move toward a concrete sensitivity. Invite students to consider whether there is a liberty they exercise without much thought for its effect on others, and one specific way they could exercise it more lovingly, more sensitive to the weaker believers around them. The aim is a heart that holds its freedoms loosely for the sake of love, after the pattern of Christ who did not please Himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Liberties that may wound weaker believers if used carelessly

- Love willing to forgo a right for the good of another
- Limiting liberty as voluntary love, not permanent bondage to others' scruples
- Holding our freedoms loosely after the pattern of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a liberty you enjoy that might stumble a weaker believer?
- What is the difference between lovingly limiting a liberty and being enslaved to others' opinions?
- How might you exercise that freedom more lovingly this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul calls the strong to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please themselves, pointing to Christ, who did not please Himself, and urging us to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us, so that together, Jew and Gentile, we may with one voice glorify God (15:1–13). How does Paul ground the call to unity and mutual acceptance in the example of Christ, and what does it mean to welcome one another as Christ welcomed us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul reaches the climax of his appeal by grounding it in Christ. The strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not please themselves, for Christ did not please Himself (15:1–3). And he calls all to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us, to the glory of God (15:7). The teacher should help students see that Christian unity is rooted in the gospel itself.

Unfold the example of Christ. The pattern for how we treat one another is Jesus, who did not please Himself but bore reproach for our sake and gave Himself for us. If Christ set aside His own comfort and rights to serve us, the strong can surely bear with the weak rather than pleasing themselves. Christlikeness in the church looks like self-giving love, not self-assertion.

Explain welcome one another as Christ welcomed you (15:7). Our acceptance of one another is to be measured by Christ's acceptance of us. He welcomed us while we were weak, sinful, and undeserving. That welcome becomes the standard for how we receive fellow believers, especially those who differ from us. We are to extend to one another the same generous, undeserved welcome we ourselves received.

Note the goal: united worship (15:5–13). Paul prays that they may live in such harmony that together, with one voice, they glorify God, and he celebrates that in Christ both Jew and Gentile, once deeply divided, now praise God together. The teacher should help students see that the aim of all this counsel is not mere coexistence but a united community glorifying God with one voice, a living display of the reconciling power of the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ, who did not please Himself, as the pattern for the strong (15:1–3)
- Welcoming one another as Christ welcomed us (15:7)
- Christian unity rooted in the gospel and the example of Christ
- United worship of Jew and Gentile as the goal (15:5–13)

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul ground the call to unity in the example of Christ?
- What does it mean to welcome one another as Christ welcomed us?
- Why is united worship, not mere coexistence, the goal of this counsel?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul holds up Christ, who did not please Himself but bore with others for their good (15:1–3), as the pattern for how we treat one another. Are you more often a builder of peace and unity in your congregation, or a source of friction, criticism, or division? What is one concrete way you could pursue what makes for peace and build others up this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes the example of Christ who did not please Himself (15:1–3) and asks students whether they build up or tear down the unity of their congregation. The teacher should help the class examine their actual effect on the body.

Name the two kinds of members. Every member either tends to build peace and unity or tends to generate friction and division. Builders bear with others, overlook minor offenses, speak well, pursue reconciliation, and please their neighbor for his good. Dividers criticize, take offense easily, gossip, form factions, and insist on their own way. Most of us can recognize our tendency honestly.

Apply the Christlike pattern. Christ did not please Himself; He served others at cost to Himself. The builder of unity follows that pattern, asking not how do I get my way but how do I serve the good of others and the peace of the body. This is not weakness or the abandonment of conviction; it is strength bent toward love.

Move toward a concrete act. The question asks for one way to pursue peace and build others up this week. This might be repairing a strained relationship, refusing to spread a criticism, speaking a word of encouragement, yielding a preference for the sake of unity, or simply choosing not to take offense. The aim is for each student to become, in some concrete way, a peacemaker in the body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Builders of unity versus sources of division in the body
- Christ's self-giving as the pattern for serving the peace of the church
- Pursuing unity as strength bent toward love, not abandonment of conviction
- Concrete peacemaking in the congregation

Discussion Prompts

- Are you more often a builder of peace or a source of friction in your congregation?
- What would pleasing your neighbor for his good, rather than yourself, look like?
- What is one concrete way to pursue peace and build others up this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

In handling the weak and the strong, Paul calls each to be fully convinced in his own mind (14:5) and says whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (14:23); yet he also warns at the letter's close to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine you have been taught (16:17). How do we rightly distinguish matters of opinion and conscience (where we extend liberty and welcome) from matters of faith and clear doctrine (where we must stand firm); why must Romans 14 never be used to relativize what God has plainly taught; and what does it mean that whatever is not from faith is sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson and a fitting climax to the whole study, because it requires the mature discernment that holds truth and love together. The teacher should give it ample time. The task is to distinguish matters of opinion and conscience, where we extend liberty and welcome, from matters of faith and clear doctrine, where we must stand firm together.

Establish the distinction carefully. Romans 14 is explicitly about disputable matters, areas where Scripture has not bound a particular position and where sincere, devoted believers may legitimately differ. Paul's own examples are foods and the regarding of special days, neither of which the gospel binds. On such matters, each is to be fully convinced in his own mind, no one is to despise or judge, and the strong are to limit their liberty in love. This is the realm of Christian liberty, and Paul's counsel is grace, welcome, and forbearance.

Now guard the boundary firmly, for this is the doctrinal heart of the lesson. Romans 14 must never be stretched to relativize what God has plainly taught. Paul is not saying that everything is a matter of private opinion, that conviction does not matter, or that clear truth can be set aside in the name of tolerance. The same letter that says welcome the weak also ends by saying, watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them (16:17). Paul, who pleaded for forbearance on foods and days, drew a hard line against those who corrupt the gospel or divide the church over false teaching.

The mature believer must therefore discern the difference: where God has clearly spoken (the gospel, the terms of salvation, the moral commands of God, the pattern He has given for the church and its worship), we do not have the liberty to form private opinions or to tolerate error; we submit and stand together. Where God has left a matter to individual conscience, we grant one another genuine freedom and refuse to bind our opinions on others. The error to avoid in both directions is real: making opinions into tests of fellowship (binding where God has not bound), and making clear doctrine into mere opinion (loosing where God has bound).

Clarify the two key phrases so they are not misused. First, let each be fully convinced in his own mind (14:5) applies to matters of liberty, not to clear commands. Personal conviction is the deciding factor on disputable matters; it is not the deciding factor on what God has plainly revealed, which is settled by the authority of His word, not by how convinced we feel. Second, whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (14:23) means that to act against one's conscience, doing what one is not persuaded is right before God, is sin for that person. It is not a blanket license to do whatever we feel, nor a statement that sincerity makes anything acceptable. It teaches us to act in faith, with a clear conscience before God, and to respect the consciences of others.

Close by uniting truth and love, which is the whole burden of this section. The teacher should help students see that these are not in tension but belong together. We hold clear doctrine firmly precisely because we love the truth and love people enough to tell them the truth; we extend liberty graciously precisely because we love our brothers and refuse to wound them or divide the church over matters God has left free. The disciple being formed here is neither a compromiser who calls everything opinion nor a quarreler who treats every opinion as a test of fellowship, but a person of truth and grace, firm where God has spoken, gracious where He has left us free, and devoted to the unity of Christ's church.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Distinguishing matters of opinion and conscience from matters of faith and clear doctrine
- Liberty and welcome on disputable matters (foods, days) where God has not bound (14:1-12)
- Standing firm together on clear doctrine; Romans 14 not a tool to relativize what God has taught
- Paul's hard line against those who divide the church contrary to sound doctrine (16:17)
- Fully convinced in his own mind (14:5) applying to liberty, not to clear commands
- Whatever is not from faith is sin (14:23) as acting against conscience, not a license to do as we feel
- Holding truth and love together, firm where God has spoken, gracious where He has left us free

Discussion Prompts

- How do we tell the difference between a matter of opinion and a matter of clear doctrine?

- Why must Romans 14 never be used to relativize what God has plainly taught?
- What does whatever is not from faith is sin mean, and what does it not mean?

Question 10

Student Question:

As our study of Romans ends, look back across this final section and the whole letter. Paul has called you to welcome one another, to hold truth and love together, to pursue peace, and he closes with greetings to ordinary saints, a warning against division, and a doxology to the God who brings about the obedience of faith among all the nations (16:25–27). Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these chapters and through the book of Romans as a whole. What is the single truth you most need to carry forward from this study?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question closes both the lesson and the entire study of Romans. The teacher should help students gather not only this final section but the sweep of the whole letter, and name how Jesus has been forming them through it.

Recall the close of the letter. After the counsel on the weak and the strong, Paul ends with a long list of greetings to ordinary saints, a commendation of Phoebe, a warning against those who cause division, the promise that the God of peace will soon crush Satan, and a soaring doxology to the God who is able to strengthen us and who brings about the obedience of faith among all the nations (16:25–27). The great doctrinal letter comes to rest in real people, real unity, and the worship of God. Note that the obedience of faith, with which the letter opened (1:5), now closes it (16:26), framing the whole book.

Trace the journey of the whole study. Romans has taken us from the universal guilt of sin, through justification by grace through an obedient faith, into baptism and newness of life, the struggle with sin and the victory of the Spirit, no condemnation and the inseparable love of God, the sovereign mercy of God and the universal gospel, and finally the transformed life of living sacrifices who hold truth and love together. The teacher should help students feel the unity and grandeur of this journey from sin to grace to transformed living.

Encourage a single, lasting takeaway. As the study ends, invite each student to name the one truth from the whole book of Romans they most need to carry forward, and one way they will live differently because of it. The goal of the entire study has never been merely more knowledge but real transformation, people actually becoming more like Christ. Close by giving thanks to the God of Romans, who justifies the ungodly, pours out His love, and is able to strengthen us to the obedience of faith, and to whom, with Paul, be glory forevermore.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The letter resting in real people, unity, and worship (Romans 16)

- The obedience of faith framing the whole letter (1:5; 16:26)
- The sweep of Romans, from sin to grace to transformed living
- Transformation, not mere knowledge, as the goal of the study

Discussion Prompts

- Which single truth from these chapters, and from Romans as a whole, most needs to shape your life going forward?
- How has the book of Romans changed the way you see God, yourself, and the gospel?
- What is one way you will live differently as a result of this study?