

Christian Living



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Romans 14–16.*

Memory Text: “Why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (*Romans 14:10*).

We are now in the last part of our study of Romans, the book from which the Protestant Reformation was born—the book that more than any other should, indeed, show us why we are Protestants and why *we must remain that way*. As Protestants, and especially as Seventh-day Adventists, we rest on the principle of *sola scriptura*—the Bible alone as the standard of faith. And it is from the Bible that we have learned the same truth that caused our spiritual forefather, centuries ago, to break from Rome—the great truth of salvation by faith, a truth so powerfully expressed in Paul’s epistle to the Romans.

Perhaps the whole thing can be summarized by the pagan jailer’s question, “What must I do to be saved?” (*Acts 16:30*). In Romans, we got the answer to that question—and the answer was not what the church was giving at the time of Luther. Hence, the Reformation began, and here we are today.

In this, the last section, Paul touches on other topics, perhaps not as central to his main theme, yet important enough to be included in the letter. Thus, for us, they are sacred Scripture as well.

How did Paul end this letter, what did he write, and what truths are there for us, the heirs not just of Paul but, indeed, of our Protestant forefathers?

* *Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 30.*

Weak in Faith

In Romans 14:1–3, the question concerns the eating of meats that may have been sacrificed to idols. The Jerusalem Council (*Acts 15*) ruled that Gentile converts should refrain from eating such foods. But there was always the question as to whether meats sold in public markets had come from animals sacrificed to idols (*see 1 Cor. 10:25*). Some Christians didn't care about that at all; others, if there were the slightest doubt, chose to eat vegetables instead. The issue had nothing to do with the question of vegetarianism and healthful living. Nor is Paul implying in this passage that the distinction between clean and unclean meats has been abolished. This is not the subject under consideration. If the words "he may eat all things" (*Rom. 14:2*) were taken to mean that now any animal, clean or otherwise, could be eaten, they would be misapplied. Comparison with other New Testament passages would rule against such an application.

Meanwhile, to "receive" one weak in the faith meant to accord him or her full membership and social status. The person was not to be argued with but given the right to his or her opinion.

What principle should we take, then, from Romans 14:1–3?

It's important, too, to realize that in Romans 14:3 Paul does not speak negatively of the one "weak in the faith" in Romans 14:1. Nor does he give this person advice as to how to become strong. So far as God is concerned, the overscrupulous Christian (judged overscrupulous, apparently, not by God but by his or her fellow Christians) is accepted. "God hath received him."

How does Romans 14:4 amplify what we've just looked at?

Although we need to keep in mind the principles seen in today's lesson, are there not times and places where we need to step in and judge, if not a person's heart, at least his or her actions? Are we to step back and say and do nothing in every situation? Isaiah 56:10 describes watchmen as "dumb dogs, they cannot bark." How can we know when to speak and when to keep silent? How do we strike the right balance here?

Before the Judgment Seat

Read Romans 14:10. What reason does Paul give here for us to be careful about how we judge others?

We tend to judge others harshly at times, and often, for the same things that we do ourselves. What we do doesn't seem as bad to us as when others do the same thing. We might fool ourselves by our hypocrisy, but not God, who warned us: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?" (*Matt. 7:1-4*).

What is the significance of the statement from the Old Testament that Paul introduced here? *Rom. 14:11*.

The citation from Isaiah 45:23 supports the thought that *all* must appear for judgment. "Every knee" and "every tongue" individualizes the summons. The implication is that each one will have to answer for his or her own life and deeds (*Rom. 14:12*). No one can answer for another. In this important sense, we are *not* our brother's keeper.

Keeping the context in mind, how do you understand what Paul is saying in Romans 14:14?

The subject is still foods sacrificed to idols. The issue is, clearly, not the distinction between the foods deemed clean and unclean. Paul is saying that there is nothing wrong per se in eating foods that might have been offered to idols. After all, what is an idol, anyway? It is nothing (*see 1 Cor. 8:4*), so who cares if some pagan offered the food to a statue of a frog or a bull?

A person should not be made to violate his or her conscience, even if the conscience is overly sensitive. This fact the "strong" brethren apparently did not understand. They despised the scrupulosity of the "weak" brethren and put stumbling blocks in their way.

Might you, in your zeal for the Lord, be in danger of what Paul is warning about here? Why must we be careful in not seeking to be the conscience of others, no matter how good our intentions?

No Offense

Read Romans 14:15–23 (see also 1 Cor. 8:12, 13). Summarize on the lines below the gist of what Paul is saying. What principle can we take from this passage that we can apply in all areas of our life?

In Romans 14:17–20, Paul is putting various aspects of Christianity into proper perspective. Although diet is important, Christians should not quarrel over some people’s choices to eat vegetables instead of flesh meats that might have been sacrificed to idols. Instead, they ought to focus on righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. How might we apply this idea to questions of diet today in our church? However much the health message, and especially the teachings on diet, can be a blessing to us, not everyone sees this subject in the same way, and we need to respect those differences.

In Romans 14:22, amid all this talk about leaving people to their own conscience, Paul adds a very interesting caveat: “Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves” (NIV). What warning is Paul giving here? How does this balance out the rest of what he is saying in this context?

Have you heard someone say, “It is none of anyone’s business what I eat or what I wear or what kind of entertainment I engage in”? Is that so? None of us lives in a vacuum. Our actions, words, deeds, and even diet can affect others, either for good or for bad. It’s not hard to see how. If someone who looks up to you sees you doing something “wrong,” he or she could be influenced by your example to do that same thing. We fool ourselves if we think otherwise. To argue that you didn’t force the person is beside the point. As Christians, we have responsibilities to one another, and if our example can lead someone astray, we are culpable.

What kind of example do you present? Would you feel comfortable with having others, particularly young people or new believers, follow your example in all areas? What does your answer say about you?

Observance of Days

In this discussion about not judging others who might view some things differently from the way we do, and not being a stumbling block to others who might be offended by our actions, Paul brings up the issue of special days that some want to observe and others don't.

Read Romans 14:4–10. How are we to understand what Paul is saying here? Does this say anything about the fourth commandment? If not, why not?

Which days is Paul speaking about? Was there a controversy in the early church over the observance or nonobservance of certain days? Apparently so. We get a hint of such controversy in Galatians 4:9, 10, where Paul berates the Galatian Christians for observing “days, and months, and times, and years.” As we noted in lesson 2, some in the church had persuaded the Galatian Christians to be circumcised and to keep other precepts of the law of Moses. Paul feared that these ideas might harm the Roman church as well. But perhaps in Rome it was particularly the Jewish Christians who had a hard time persuading themselves that they need no longer observe the Jewish festivals. Paul here is saying: do as you please in this matter; the important point is not to judge those who view the matter differently from you. Apparently some Christians, to be on the safe side, decided to observe one or more of the Jewish festivals. Paul’s counsel is: let them do it if they are persuaded they should.

To bring the weekly Sabbath into Romans 14:5, as some argue, is unwarranted. Can one imagine Paul taking such a laid-back attitude toward the fourth commandment? As we have seen all quarter, Paul placed a heavy emphasis on obedience to the law, so he certainly wasn’t going to place the Sabbath commandment in the same category as people who were uptight about eating foods that might have been offered to idols. However commonly these texts are used as an example to show that the seventh-day Sabbath is no longer binding, they say no such thing. Their use in that manner is a prime example of what Peter warned that people were doing with Paul’s writings: “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:16).

What has been your experience with the Sabbath? Has it been the blessing it was meant to be? What changes can you make in order to experience more fully what the Lord offers you in the Sabbath?

Final Words

Read Romans 15:1–3. What important Christian truth is found in this passage?

In what way does this passage capture so much of what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

What other verses teach the same idea? Most important, how can you yourself live out this principle?

As Paul brought his letter to a close, what varied benedictions did he utter? *Rom. 15:5, 6, 13, 33.*

The God of patience means the God who helps His children to endure steadfastly. The word for “patience,” *hupomone*, means “fortitude,” “steadfast endurance.” The word for “consolation” may be translated as “encouragement.” The God of encouragement is the God who encourages. The God of hope is the God who has given hope to humankind. Likewise, the God of peace is the God who gives peace and in whom one may have peace.

After numerous personal greetings, how does Paul bring his letter to a close? *Rom. 16:25–27.*

Paul ends his letter in a glorious ascription of praise to God. God is the one in whom the Roman Christians, and all Christians, can safely put their trust to confirm their standing as redeemed sons and daughters of God, justified by faith and now led by the Spirit of God.

We know that Paul was inspired by the Lord to write this letter in response to a specific situation at a specific time. What we don’t know are all the details regarding what the Lord had revealed to Paul about the future.

Yes, Paul did know about the “falling away” (*2 Thess. 2:3*), although how much he knew, the text doesn’t say. In short, we don’t know if Paul had any inkling of the role he and his writings, especially this letter, would have in final events. In one sense, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that in these texts Protestantism was born, and in them those who seek to stay faithful to Jesus have had and will have the scriptural foundation upon which to base their faith and commitment, even as the world wonders “after the beast” (*Rev. 13:3*).

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Unity and Love in the Church,” pp. 477, 478; “Love for the Erring,” pp. 604–606, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5; “Helping the Tempted,” p. 166, in *The Ministry of Healing*; p. 719, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

“I was shown the danger of the people of God in looking to Brother and Sister White and thinking that they must come to them with their burdens and seek counsel of them. This ought not so to be. They are invited by their compassionate, loving Saviour to come unto Him, when weary and heavy-laden, and He will relieve them. . . . Many come to us with the inquiry: Shall I do this? Shall I engage in that enterprise? Or, in regard to dress, Shall I wear this or that article? I answer them: You profess to be disciples of Christ. Study your Bibles. Read carefully and prayerfully the life of our dear Saviour when He dwelt among men upon the earth. Imitate His life, and you will not be found straying from the narrow path. We utterly refuse to be conscience for you. If we tell you just what to do, you will look to us to guide you, instead of going directly to Jesus for yourselves.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, pp. 118, 119.

“We are not to place the responsibility of our duty upon others, and wait for them to tell us what to do. We cannot depend for counsel upon humanity. The Lord will teach us our duty just as willingly as He will teach somebody else. . . . Those who decide to do nothing in any line that will displease God, will know, after presenting their case before Him, just what course to pursue.”—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 668.

“There have ever been in the church those who are constantly inclined toward individual independence. They seem unable to realize that independence of spirit is liable to lead the human agent to have too much confidence in himself and to trust in his own judgment rather than to respect the counsel and highly esteem the judgment of his brethren.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 163, 164.

Discussion Question:

Given some of the themes of this week, how do we as Christians find the right balance in:

- (a) Being faithful to what we believe, yet not judging others who see things differently from the way we do?
- (b) Being true to our own consciences and not seeking to be the consciences for others, while at the same time seeking to help those who we believe are in error? When do we speak and when do we keep silent? When are we culpable if we do keep silent?
- (c) Being free in the Lord and yet at the same time realizing our responsibility to be good examples for those who might look up to us?

Saved in the Sky: Part 2

I opened my heavy coat and tried using it to break my free fall. Then I began praying the most earnest prayer I have ever prayed, believing it was probably going to be my last:

“God, there’s nothing I can do to save myself, but I really want to see Your hand at this moment.”

I realized that the worst thing I had ever done was deciding to leave God. What would happen to me now? An apartment in Leningrad and all the military honors in the world didn’t matter anymore.

Looking below, I could see the open parachute of my commander. All of a sudden, some wind came and pushed me right into his parachute!

But you can’t stay on top of a parachute for long. As I slid off, my commander grabbed me with his strong hands and held on with an iron grip! We were falling fast, and he told me how to hold my feet so we could land as safely as possible. After landing, we were taken to the hospital with only minor injuries.

The next day, a story appeared in the newspaper about this extraordinary experience. Everyone recognized that things such as this don’t just happen. It was a miracle.

From then on, my prayers were different from what they had been before. Two weeks later, when I had my appointment with the general, my answer was ready.

As I walked into his office, he looked at me and smiled. He was quite sure that I would agree right away to his proposal.

“Sir,” I told him, “I have thought about your generous offer, and I have decided not to stay in the army.”

Shocked, he asked, “What will you do?”

“Well, sir, I will follow the call of the party. I’m going to go to new places and cultivate new territory.” At that time, the Communists wanted to develop land in Siberia and were encouraging people to settle there.

The general stared at me. “Well, soldier, I’ve seen many crazy people, but you are the craziest of them all!”

After his time in the military, Pastor Zhukaljuk secretly worked as a pastor and organized the underground work of publishing religious books and materials for the Seventh-day Adventist believers in the Soviet Union. He and his wife, Yevgenia, were imprisoned for this work and later released. They have been married for 63 years.

Read more stories from the Euro-Asia Division in the Mission Quarterly online at www.AdventistMission.com.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 14:10*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Recognize that personal conviction, love, and harmony bring righteousness to the body of Christ.

Feel: Have a great sense of personal responsibility to live by his or her own convictions and by compassion for those in his or her sphere.

Do: Examine the things in life of which God has convicted him or her and lift up others in the walk of faith to live according to what God has convicted them to practice.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Personal Conviction and Love Are Essential.

A What personal convictions has God recently laid on your mind and heart?

B How can you love others who do not share the same conviction(s) as you do?

II. Feel: Both Strong Personal Conviction and Sympathy

A What do you feel when God places conviction on your life about something He wants you to do?

B How does compassion help you to set aside your personal convictions so that you can love another person?

III. Do: Increase Self-Awareness of Personal Conviction and Assist Others in Their Developing Convictions.

A How might you determine what God is trying to convict you about personally?

B How can you lift up your fellow church members in their relationships with Christ, even if you disagree with them?

► **Summary:** The Christian life is one of responding to the convictions that God lays upon our hearts while also—for the sake of love, peace, and harmony in the Spirit—lifting up our brothers and sisters in Christ, whom God is convicting differently.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Romans 14:10*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Know how to live according to the convictions that God places upon your heart while accepting that others around you have the equal right to do the same.

Just for Teachers: This lesson is a paradox. God calls us to live in certain ways. We become convicted of those ways. Yet, He also calls us to love our brothers and sisters in Christ and, at times, set aside our lifestyle convictions in order to lift them up. Offer a prayer for harmony and compassion at the beginning of the lesson.

Opening Discussion: When Cory was in evangelistic field school at the end of his seminary training, he worked with a young man who attended the evangelistic meetings. The young man had just spent a wonderful Sunday together with Cory and his wife and some of their friends at a park. As they were leaving the park, Cory suggested that they go out to eat. The young man mentioned to Cory that he would rather not go out to eat until sundown, because Sunday was his Sabbath. Cory told him that they were willing to respect his beliefs and his request. Cory then asked the young man about what he had learned in the meetings regarding the seventh-day Sabbath. They talked through the texts that the young man had learned and about the clear evidence from Scripture. Cory asked him what his conviction was regarding the Sabbath and whether it made sense to him to keep the seventh day as Sabbath, thus freeing them to go out to eat before sundown on that beautiful Sunday. Cory once again gave the young man space for his personal convictions, not wanting to force a decision. The young man decided that he would try out his new conviction about Saturday Sabbath observance.

This story, though, haunts Cory. What were his true motives for trying to persuade the man about the Sabbath? Was it just because he had wanted to eat then, as opposed to letting him know about how important the Sabbath was? Did he do the right thing, or not?

Questions for Discussion:

- ① Do you think Cory gave the new believer enough space to make the decision on his own? Why, or why not?
- ② Do you think that Cory would have been holding to his own conviction?

tions about the Sabbath if he had not gone out to eat on Sunday for the sake of this new believer? Why, or why not?

③ Describe a time you had to walk the line between conviction and love for a new believer.

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: Help your class to see that the following scriptural passages are not speaking to an issue that would encourage the breaking of the Ten Commandments. Rather, they concern a less significant, non-salvation issue, fraught with broad possibilities for interpretation.

Bible Commentary

Introduction: Do a brief overview of Romans 14–16 with your class. The last three chapters of Romans form the basis for a lesson on how to treat fellow believers who are at different stages of spiritual growth. The stronger and the weaker believers are following personal convictions and loving one another at the same time. Thus, the ability to set aside personal convictions in these areas for the harmony of the body of Christ is part of what it means for the righteous to live by faith. We must trust that God knows what people need to know, and He knows how and when they should apply what they know.

Consider This: How can we know, when confronted with tricky ethical issues, that we are making choices based on genuine Christian principles (values) as opposed to being driven just by a multicultural relativism?

I. Different Interpretations *(Review Romans 14:1–12 with your class.)*

This passage is a difficult one. Paul is writing to the Roman believers regarding an issue of eating and drinking. Commentators are split on how best to interpret these verses. It could be that the weaker believer, the one who does not eat the meat, is a Gentile believer who comes from the background of eating food sacrificed to idols and therefore is convicted to stay away from this food, lest he or she fall back into old idolatrous habits. It is also possible that the weaker believer could be a Jewish believer who still is holding to the dietary laws of the Old Testament for the purpose of gaining salvation by keeping the law rather than by relying on faith in Christ. The Jews had been removed from Rome for ten years, and as they came back into Rome, it may have been hard for them to find meat that

had been prepared in the proper way—drained of all the blood. They therefore decided to avoid eating meat altogether.

Either way this passage is interpreted, Paul makes it clear that whether the person eats or doesn't, he or she does so to the glory of God. Different believers hold different convictions; and yet, none is to judge another. They are rather to leave the judgment of these convictions to God and to welcome their fellow believers as God has welcomed them.

Consider This:

1. Which of the two interpretations outlined do you think is more likely?
2. Does it matter which interpretation should be the preferred one?

II. Putting Aside Our Own Convictions (*Review Romans 14:13–23 with your class.*)

In this passage it sounds as though Paul is talking only to the stronger believer. He is encouraging the stronger believer to set aside some of his or her freedom in order not to cause offense to the weaker believer.

The truth is that Paul is speaking to both the stronger and the weaker. These letters were to be read aloud in the churches; so, both the stronger and the weaker would be listening to the letter together. Paul is calling both of these groups to set aside their previous convictions regarding food and drink, all for a new conviction: the conviction of love and harmony with other believers. Paul is not calling the individuals to live differently in their own lives as much as he is calling them not to force others to change to their own way of thinking. Instead, each one needs to live according to the conviction of conscience; for if a believer goes against that conviction, only then would that action constitute a sin.

Believers must, however, interact with the other believers in a manner that does not cause needless offense. In other words, believers must not place judgment upon others and force them into their ways of thinking or into their own image rather than into the image of God, which the Spirit is convicting them about.

Consider This: What does this passage tell us about what it means to live by faith?

III. The Example of Christ (*Review Romans 15:1–6 with your class.*)

Christ is always meant to be our Example as we live by faith, and that ideal is true for this passage, as well. Jesus came to this earth to lay down His life for people, not to force them into submission. He could have come with great force, but as He told Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this

world' ” (*John 18:36, NKJV*). Instead, Jesus laid down His life and was raised again to give us the freedom to choose whether to follow Him or not. This gift of freedom shows great strength, and, in the end, the exercise of it will be the only way for the universe to live in harmony.

Consider This:

1. How can the example of Jesus help you to allow people to live by their own convictions?
2. What does it really mean to live in harmony with other believers in the body of Christ?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Offer a time of quiet reflection for the members of your class to consider and apply the following application questions. They could discuss them in small groups and then pray for one another. You could then ask for volunteers to share their thoughts and answers with the group at large, if they would like to. If possible, hand out paper and pencils so that people can write down their answers in silent reflection.

Application Questions:

- ❶ Have you ever pushed your own agenda on another person to the point of offense?
- ❷ How can you make the offense right and live in harmony and Christian love with this person?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: You may want a whiteboard or poster board for this activity. If such supplies are not available, ask the participants to make simple mental notes to report on.

Activities:

- ❶ List the lifestyle choices that your church is most stirred up about, even to the point of being judgmental.

-
- ❷ How can you help your church to make more principle-based changes in these areas of ethical contention?
-

As Christians, we need to recognize our sinful condition before we see a need for change. That change can come only through Christ working in us. One expression of His work in us is in the area of stewardship. The first quarter guide entitled *Stewardship: Motives of the Heart*, by John H. H. Mathews, aims to teach us what our responsibilities as stewards are and how we can, through God's grace, fulfill those responsibilities, not as a means of trying to earn salvation but instead as the fruit of already having it.

Though stewardship encompasses many different aspects of the Christian's life, we will define it now, broadly, as managing tangible and intangible possessions to the glory of God. Stewardship is the daily practical expression of what it means to follow Jesus; it is an expression of our love for God, a means of living out the truth that we have been given in Christ. We are stewards because God first loved us. It is our hope that this quarter will teach us about how to live as God would have us live—which includes freedom from the love of the world, in all its manifestations.

Lesson 1—The Influence of Materialism

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The God of This World** (*1 John 2:16, 17*)

MONDAY: **Filling the Barns** (*Luke 12:15–21*)

TUESDAY: **The Allure of Materialism** (*Matt. 6:22–24*)

WEDNESDAY: **Love of Self** (*Rom. 12:3*)

THURSDAY: **The Ultimate Futility of Materialism** (*Deut. 7:6, John 15:5, Gal. 2:20*)

Memory Text—*Romans 12:2, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: God tells His people not to “be conformed to this world” (*Rom. 12:2*). The world conveys the idea that the good life, the abundant life, can be found only in money. Money's greatest achievement is instant gratification, but in the end it cannot answer our deepest needs.

Lesson 2—I See, I Want, I Take

The Week at a Glance:

SUNDAY: **The Prosperity Gospel** (*2 Cor. 8:7*)

MONDAY: **Blurred Spiritual Eyesight** (*2 Cor. 4:18*)

TUESDAY: **The Steps of Covetousness** (*Gen. 3:1–6*)

WEDNESDAY: **Greed—Having Things Your Way** (*Isa. 56:11*)

THURSDAY: **Self-Control** (*Gal. 5:22–25*)

Memory Text—*Matthew 13:22, NKJV*

Sabbath Gem: The Word of God gives us guidance on how to avoid the spiritual trap of materialism.

Lessons for the Visually Impaired The regular *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* is available free each month in braille and on audio CD to sight-impaired and physically handicapped persons who cannot read normal ink print. This includes individuals who, because of arthritis, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, accident, and so forth, cannot hold or focus on normal ink-print publications. Contact Christian Record Services for the Blind, Box 6097, Lincoln, NE 68506-0097. Phone: 402-488-0981; e-mail: info@christianrecord.org; Web site: www.christianrecord.org.