

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

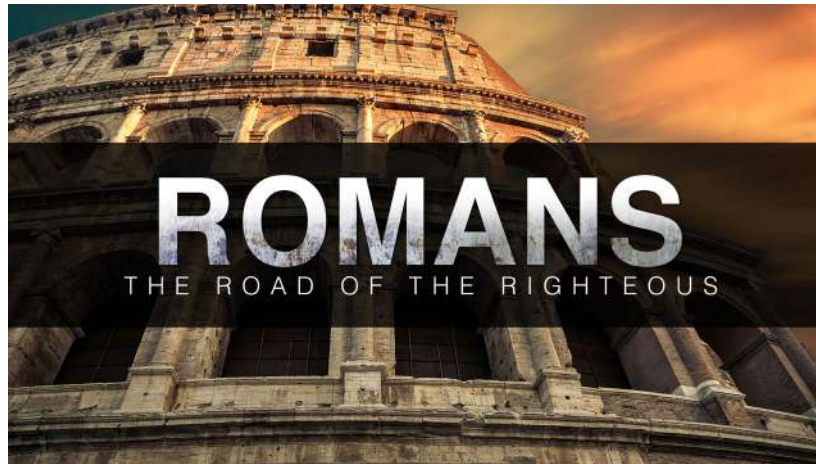
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 14:4-12

Written By

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Churches don't typically divide over major issues but over lesser, more insignificant and mundane ones. Take as a case study what happened to a pastoral friend of mine a few years ago.

The pastor in question could not wait to start his new ministry in the Bay Area of San Francisco. Although the church was older, he knew he, as a young man, could bring fresh new life to the strategically placed ministry. So he set out to make slow, appreciable changes. You can just imagine how this venture went over.

Since the inception of the church, massive and gaudy white chairs rested on the red carpet covering the ornate stage. The pastors sat on these chairs much like thrones during a worship service, only rising to perform their various Sunday morning worship duties. Wanting to have more room for the worship team and equipment, while also giving the church a more modern look to attract the young people, the new pastor made a bold executive decision. The chairs, or should I say, *thrones*, had to go. So, with one order, the maintenance team not only removed them from the stage but from the room altogether.



The pastor told me later he will never forget the first Sunday without the pastoral chairs. An older woman, a charter member of the church, walked down the aisle clutching her Bible to her chosen, almost reserved seat. After saying “hello” to old friends, she lifted up her eyes and to her absolute horror noticed the pastoral chairs were missing from their cherished, ordained positions. Throwing her hands up in utter despair she exclaimed, “My Lord, someone has removed the chairs.”

That, sadly, was the last service the young pastor ever preached at that church. Using her power, influence, and spiritual standing in the congregation as a devout and wise woman of God, the unnamed senior saint whipped the

church body into a frenzy. When she was finished, you would have thought the young man had denied the deity of Christ or the doctrine of justification by faith. After a brief meeting of the church, leadership decided the wisest course of action was to remove the priestly perpetrator.

What had nice lady done? She had taken a *spiritual preference* and forged it into a *spiritual principle*. Did God care if massive, white thrones adorned the stage for the pastors? No. Was this a theological or moral issue worth confronting? No. Who was this lady anyway? By Paul’s standards in Romans 14, she, who thought she was the mature, wise stronger saint, was, in fact, an immature, unwise weaker saint. Even though she had walked with Christ for years, she had failed to understand one central truth about God, a timeless truth embedded on the weathered parchment of Romans 14:

God Desires Unity, Not Disunity, In Life’s Grey Areas (Rom. 14:1-23)

Massive white worship chairs are a grey area. As I stated, like any grey area, they don’t impact doctrine or morality; hence, a pastor, in this instance, is absolutely free to have them on the stage or to remove them. True, he could have earned the trust of the people over a longer period of time before he made this decision, he could have shared his potentially explosive idea with key leadership people to get their insights; however, he was still free in Christ to minister as he felt led of God in this non-essential area. But, as I said, most churches experience schisms over lesser issues masquerading as major ones.

What does God want in the body life of a church and in the lives of individual parishioners? He wants them to be gracious, loving, and accepting in areas where Scripture gives them leeway to enjoy life without sinning. He wants them to realize they are to strive for unity in their diversity, which pragmatically means they will need to give each other slack, or grace, in areas of life God did not expressly address. He wants them to understand and apply the words of Pastor Chuck Swindoll:

God is pleased with variety. This freedom to be who we are is nothing short of magnificent. It is freedom to make choices, freedom to know His will, freedom to walk in it, freedom to obey His leading me in my life and you in your life. Once you've tasted such freedom, nothing else satisfies.¹

I couldn't agree more. The problem, on the other hand, is getting weaker/immature saints and stronger/mature saints to understand this principle of grace in the grey areas and to get along with each other.

How do we go about striving for unity corporately and individually? Paul gives us the coveted principles in Romans chapter 14 where he addressed a church in conflict in the grey areas of daily living. From our analysis of the opening three verses, we discovered what I call the first two unity keys:

- *Unity Key #1: Mature saints who enjoy freedom in grey areas should accept immature saints who are more restrictive (Rom.14:1-2).* How did you fare this week? Did you (finally) accept another saint you had (pridefully) pigeonholed because you thought their faith life was too rigid and legalistic?
- *Unity Key #2: Check your attitude where non-essentials are concerned (Rom. 14:3).* Did your attitude improve this week toward saints who enjoy a life a bit too much from your perspective? Did your attitude improve toward saints who are wired for laws, rules, and regulations in their quest for holiness?

Unity occurs (as does maturity) as we not only hear the Word of God, but apply it in our lives. May the Spirit move each of us to make appreciable change where warranted.

Moving to the next section of Paul's advice to the schismatic saints in Rome, we unearth more precious principles regarding how to maintain unity among ourselves.

Unity Key #3: Judge Justly, Not Unjustly (Rom. 14:4)

Watch closely how Paul, the masterful teacher, develops this concept:

⁴ Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

The opening word in Greek is the second-person personal pronoun, *you* (σὺ), followed by the interrogative pronoun, *who* (τίς). By putting these two words together in this format, Paul made an emphatic statement. In our vernacular it is as if Paul said in utter dismay and unbelief, "Who do you think you are to judge someone else's servant?" Since Paul had just condemned the weaker brother, who was probably a converted Jew, for wrongly judging a stronger brother, who was probably a Gentile, for not observing his ritualistic understanding of Mosaic food laws (vs. 3), this question is, most likely, applicable to the tightly wound, law-oriented, highly legalistic Jewish brother or sister in Christ. Weaker brothers gravitate toward laws, rules, and regulations, many of which God never uttered, in order to steer clear of what they feel is sinful, godless behavior. As such, they tend to be legalists. What is legalism? Swindoll helpfully defines it for us:

¹Charles Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 80.

Legalism is an attitude, a mentality based on pride. It is an obsessive conformity to an artificial standard for the purpose of exalting oneself. A legalist assumes the place of authority and pushes it to unwarranted extremes . . . it results in illegitimate control, requiring unanimity, not unity.²

It is one thing to believe *you* must abstain from certain things in order to be holy, but quite another to impose your conclusions about a given grey area on another saint. Once you start judging them for not following your narrow interpretation and application of the Bible, you not only evidence you are a weak brother, you have drifted into the choppy, divisive waters of legalism. To you the following poem is the essence of truth:

Believe as I believe,
No more, no less;
That I am right,
And no one else, confess;
Feel as I feel,
Think only as I think;
Eat what I eat,
And drink but what I drink;
Look at I look,
Do always as I do;
Then, and only then,
Will I fellowship with you.³

Ever met a Christian like this? I have. I know a pastor in in CA who has. They are big on judging your freedom in Christ in areas where they have no business forming a judgment. But this usually does not stop them for they are all about measuring, monitoring, and *enforcing* their limited brand of spirituality. No wonder Paul looked at them and said,

⁴Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

His point should be well-taken. If the person is accepted by the Lord they serve in the given grey area, then who are you to tell them likewise? Who are you to impose your authoritarian laws upon them? Who are you to tell them what chairs can be on the stage during worship? Couched differently, Leon Morris wisely observes, “If a servant is acceptable to his master, it does not matter what his fellow servants think.⁴ Since Jesus accepts either a weak saint’s lifestyle or that of a stronger saint’s lifestyle in a given grey area, then neither one can, or should, pridefully judge the other, ever. Period.

No, this does not mean we, as believers, cannot judge, admonish, or confront other saints. In Matthew 7, Jesus forbid unjust, hypocritical judgment, or judgment of another of something you were, in fact, guilty of. The fact he supported judgment is validated by the fact he followed

²Ibid., 81.

³R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness From Heaven* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 259-260.

⁴Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 479.

this teaching on hypocritical judgment with these words, “⁶ Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.” This is, in itself, . . . wait for it . . . a judgment. Paul, also, counsels Christians in his writings to not shrink back from admonishing saints where sinful, unruly behavior or beliefs are concerned (Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 4:14; 1 Thess. 5:14). 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 is a living illustration of this truth:

¹⁴ And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame. ¹⁵ And yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother (2 Thess. 3).

Translated, if a Christian throws sound doctrine to the wind (as Hymenaeus and Philetus did in saying the resurrection had already occurred; 2 Timothy 2:16-18), or choses to sin willfully (as in 1 Corinthians 5:1-3), then judgment is in order because truth is at stake.

Conversely, whereas a believer is merely exercising his liberty in Christ in a so-called grey area to either live with less or more restrictions, judgment and admonishment is to be replaced by loving and gracious acceptance. Based on all of this, truth trumps traditions. If you want pastoral chairs on stage, great. If you want to remove them, great. Acceptance in a non-essential area is to be the order of the day because God accepts the choices of all of His servants in how they chose to live in grey areas. The question is, “Will you chose to accept believers who exercise their liberty in non-essential areas? Will you choose to accept believers who don’t impose their law-like ways on you, but who do live more rigidly?”

Remember, unity is guarded when we judge justly, not unjustly. May this premise continue to permeate in our hearts, minds, and church body to God’s glory, the maturation of His saints, and the local impact of this church.

A fourth unity key is disclosed in verse 5:

Unity Key #4: Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide (Rom. 14:5-6)

Long before the glowing and floating in the air Disney princess told Jiminy Cricket, of Pinocchio fame, to always remember to follow his conscience, Paul had the corner on this truth:

⁵ One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

There is nothing better than a living illustration when you are attempting to teach a truth. Paul knew this and that is why he said what he said in verses 5 through 6. You can just hear how this all played out in the Roman church.

On the one side, the Jewish believers in Jesus said, “The Mosaic Law calls for us to observe the Sabbath, which is from Friday night at sunset to Saturday night at sunset. To deviate from this is to sin against God. How dare you Gentiles, then, not join us for worship on the holy Shabbat.”

On the other side, the Gentile believers, who were used to worshipping false gods on any day of the week, could have argued, “Say, since the Lord is the Lord of every day, then why are you limiting His worship to just one day per week? Also, since Jesus rose on the first day of the week, which is Sunday, and since the church has since Pentecost worshipped on Sunday (Acts 20:7),

how dare you try and control us by telling us we have to worship on your specified day. Nowhere in Scripture does it say we *must*, post-resurrection, do this.”

In the heat of this grey area battle one thing was true in Paul’s mind: “Each person (the strong and/or the weak Christian) must be fully convinced in his own mind.” Convinced how? Convinced that what he is personally doing is for the Lord, for service and worship of Him. Hence, if one Christian chose to abstain from meat offered to idols in the local markets, and he did this because his conscience bothered him if he did it, then God accepted his self-imposed limitation.

Conversely, if another Christian had no issue eating any of the meat offered to idols in the local market, and he chose to partake because of the freedom Jesus granted him, then God accepted his freedom. Where a grey area is concerned it is crucial for you to listen to your conscience and act accordingly, but not to the point of making your conscience conviction a set of shackles by which to enslave and control me if I do not hold to your conviction. According to Paul, *when you have two opposing viewpoints concerning a grey area of the faith and practice it is quite possible for both believers to be right before God.* You might need to read that one more time. This time let it sink into the soil of your heart and mind so biblical change is realized.

I know another pastor who exercised his freedom in Christ in a grey area and lived to cave into pressure. He planted a church near what later became the Crystal Cathedral, and it did well. And he did well, too, as he purchased homes in California and made wise, well-thought-out investments. When he reached his sixties, God had blessed him greatly so he and his wife went car shopping. Because they were financially sound and solvent, they chose to purchase a BMW for his “work” vehicle. He did not have it long, however, because he took so much heat for driving a Beamer he eventually sold it and purchased something like a Camry. I ask you, “Was he free to purchase the car he did?” Of course. Was his conscience clear when he purchased it? Of course. It was not a sinful thing to do, after all, he had saved for it and he had his financial house in order. However, because some weaker believers in his church did not like their pastor driving a BMW because they thought it was sinful, he got rid of it. Sad, isn’t it? Where does it say, “Thou shalt not drive a BMW if you are a pastor?” Do you see just how destructive and controlling some saints can be?

For Paul, the sting of the divisive behavior in grey areas is removed when each person considers their conscience. Is my conscience convicting me that I shouldn’t be doing this because I’m doing it for the wrong reasons? Then I must abstain. If not, I’m free to enjoy the grace my salvation affords. Stated differently, if the Spirit of God convicts you in a grey area that you shouldn’t do something, then don’t do it. On the other hand, if the Spirit of God frees you in a grey area so that your conscience is not pricked, then enjoy the freedom Christ’s gospel gives you to live and enjoy life to the fullest.

So, should you join the sorority at your university? What does your conscience say? Should you play the drums in a non-Christian jazz band? What does your conscience say? Should you stay in your room when you are traveling with other business partners or should you join them for dinner, even if they are having a few drinks? What does your conscience say? Should you look for dates, as a single person, on a dating website like Eharmony, OurTime, or Elite Singles? What does your conscience say? Jiminy Cricket was right in a way. Let your conscience be your guide, and this most certainly applies where grey areas are concerned.

A fourth concept to build peace and unity is showcased in verses 7 through 12:

Unity Key #4: Note, How You Judge In The Here And Now Will Be Judged In The Hereafter (Rom. 14:7-12)

Let's get into this point by first reading the text in question:

⁷ For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; ⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore, whether we live or 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.

What is Paul getting at here? Good question. Paul is saying that once you become a believer life is no longer about you, it is about you being responsible to the Lord who saved you. When you were a non-Christian, life was all about you. You devised your own brand of what constituted orality. You went where you wanted to go without a thought of whether you should be there or not. You did not give much thought as to who you were with, and it really didn't matter what they were doing either. *Live and let live* was your motto. What you did with your free time had basically no boundaries. What you watched and read was whatever gratified you at the moment. What you ate and drank really didn't matter all that much either, so long as you enjoyed it and no one was hurt.

This all radically changed at the moment of faith. You were no longer your Lord, now the living Lord was, and is, Lord of your life and you are responsible to Him in every facet of your life, internally and externally. In life, therefore, you are called to live for Him, and in death you will live for Him because you will exist in His glorious presence forever. Donald Grey Barnhouse aptly puts the change this way: "The moment a man is born again, he is recentered. Once all things centered in himself, but now he has a new horizon and views life from his new position in Christ the center."⁵ You are, as a new Christian, a new creation with new thoughts, priorities, passions, and desires which all, in their base form, revolve around Jesus, your Lord (2 Cor. 5:17). He is now your Lord and you owe him a life which reflects His lordship, especially in light of how costly it was to secure your new status as a saint.

How does this apply to grey areas? It applies in a big way. Because we now are servants of the Lord, we are each culpable and responsible to Him for how we live this life of faith. And because this is true, Paul reminds us that we shall all have to *individually* give account for the quality of our Christian walk.

¹⁰ But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? 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 GIVE PRAISE TO GOD." ¹² So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

Talk about some much needed motivational words. If you truly believe you will stand before Christ and be judged for how you treated other Christians in grey areas, should this not change how you behave? If you truly believed Jesus when He said, 'I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter (Matt. 12:36),' should this not move you to talk less than you do? Should this one truth not motivate you to speak differently to Christians who do not hold your convictions in non-essential areas? If you truly believe your tongue will be tried by the Lord one day, then should you not start taming your tongue in areas where God gives

⁵Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 184.

saints much grace and freedom? Indeed. Paul is very clear here and elsewhere concerning the judgment of believers by Christ,

“We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (2 Cor. 5:10)

No believer will get a pass on judgment day. Each of us will give account for how godly or carnally we lived in all areas of our lives, the grey ones included. Words of critical judgment spoken by you against Christians who merely enjoyed freedom in Christ will be accounted for when you see Christ. Words of disdain you uttered against believers who were wound tighter than you in grey areas will also be dealt with by Jesus. And from what we know from other Scriptures, He will reward us accordingly. Paul tells us this much in his first letter to the Corinthians, a letter sent to a church rife with all kinds of judgmental schism:

¹² Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. ¹⁴ If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire (1 Cor. 3).

I think fighting over whether a pastoral chair should be on a worship stage at all times is nothing less than straw. I think working for unity by accepting how other saints chose to live in the grey areas of life is, well, nothing short of gold and silver.

You ready to give account to Jesus for how you live in areas where Scriptures are silent? If not, this moment is all about getting ready. Much is at stake. Your spirituality and maturation for starters, and our unity is following close behind.

Who among us is ready to say, “God, forgive me for building with straw.”

Who among us is ready to say, “God, I’m going for the gold?”

For those who want to move from straw to gold in grey areas but might not know how, permit me to give you some common sense advice next time you don’t know what to do. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Will this activity really bring God glory, or will it detract from His glory?
- Will this activity increase or diminish my witness for the gospel?
- Will this activity potentially set me up to be a slave to sin, when I am now free in Christ (Rom. 6:19ff)?
- Will this activity cause my body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit, to be desecrated in some fashion (1 Cor. 6:19-20)?
- Will my participation in this activity cause other believers to struggle with their faith (1 Cor. 8:8-90? If so, I must refrain.
- Will my participation in this activity be perceived as being highly unwise or wise?

Going for the gold in grey areas is no simple task; however, for spiritual athletes who run on this track they will discover that the good Lord will give them the wisdom they need to know what to do.

So, drop the straw in your hand, and pick up the gold. The gold is all about striving for unity in areas where the Scriptures are not clear, and where God has given us the freedom to choose how we think we should live.