

The Nature of the Kingdom

Devotional Reading: [Proverbs 2:1–11](#)

Background Scripture: [Romans 14:10–23](#)

Romans 14:10–23

¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written:

“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,
‘every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.’”

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is

pleasing to God and receives human approval.

¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Key Text

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

—Romans 14:19

The Righteous Reign of God

Unit 3: God's Eternal Reign

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the danger of sitting in judgment on others.
2. Explain the concept of mutual edification.
3. Examine his or her position on tolerance and intolerance in light of the text.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

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- I. **On Inappropriate Judging (Romans 14:10–13)**
 - A. Current Problem (v. 10a)
 - B. Future Accounting (vv. 10b–12)
 - C. Necessary Conclusion (v. 13a)
 - D. Required Actions (v. 13b)
 - II. **On Personal Convictions (Romans 14:14–18)**
 - A. Issues of Conscience (v. 14)
 - B. Result of Behavior (vv. 15–18)
 - Chasing a Baseball Cap*
 - III. **On Vital Imperatives (Romans 14:19–23)**
 - A. Peace and Edification (vv. 19–21)
 - A Dose of Vitamin E-Squared*
 - B. Faith and Sin (vv. 22–23)

Conclusion

- A. Peace, Not Conflict
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

antonyms *ann-tuh-nimz.*

Ephesians *Ee-fee-zhunz.*

Introduction

A. Something Bigger than Myself

Have you ever had a day to do just what you wanted, only to feel let down afterward? Maybe it was a day off from work. Maybe friends gave you a break from your normal duties. Somehow we often experience disappointment at the end of such times.

Why does that happen so often? Perhaps it is, to some extent, because we long to be part of something bigger than ourselves. “Me time” sounds great, but God has put in us a desire that our lives matter for others.

The church is too often (because even once is too often!) the place where people seem most devoted to their own preferences. Churches have become infamous for the pettiness of their arguments over matters of opinion. We all grieve this fact, but it is likely that we all have been part of the problem at times. Today’s lesson will be the uncomfortable mirror in which we see ourselves in this regard.

B. Lesson Context

Our text comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans. The letter addresses a church divided between Jewish and non-Jewish (Gentile) followers of Jesus. While we cannot know the exact circumstances, it appears that

each group looked down on the other for the way it practiced life in God's kingdom.

Paul wrote the letter to show each group that they belong to God's kingdom on the same terms: faith in Jesus in response to God's good news about him ([Romans 1:5](#); [10:5–17](#)). So Paul says “first to the Jew, then to the Gentile” ([1:16](#)) that each group has the same status ([3:9](#); [10:12](#)). All have sinned, both Jews and Gentiles ([3:22–23](#)). Paul's addressees belong to God's kingdom not by observances of the Law of Moses, which defined the Jewish people. Rather, they belong by faith in Jesus, who died that all might live eternally.

This equality of status must be practiced. Jews were accustomed to keeping the laws of clean and unclean laid out in the Law of Moses (see [Leviticus 11](#); [Deuteronomy 14:3–20](#)). In a city like Rome, finding meat that was ceremonially clean was probably difficult. Add to that the fact that much meat had been offered in sacrifice to pagan idols, and it appears that many Jews in Rome had simply given up meat altogether.

Meanwhile, Christians from a Gentile background had been brought into God's kingdom by their faith in Jesus, being formerly excluded because they did not belong to the people of Israel (compare [Ephesians 2:11–13](#)). They had never been subject to the laws of clean and unclean. For Jewish followers of Jesus, dietary restrictions had always been a sign of devotion to God. But for Gentile followers of Jesus, these rules seemed strange and unnecessary.

Different practices with food matter little when we are with our own group. But the fellowship of the church brought these two groups together, and shared meals were a vital part of that fellowship. Whose rules should prevail?

I. On Inappropriate Judging

(Romans 14:10–13)

A. Current Problem (v. 10a)

10a. You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt?

Paul introduced two disputes at the beginning of [Romans 14](#): one about eating certain foods ([Romans 14:2](#)) and the other about the sacredness of certain days ([14:5](#)). In the verse before us, we see him ask pointed questions to clarify what is at stake regarding these issues. He has shown the readers over many chapters that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty of sin but that both can be restored to God’s kingdom by expressing faith in Jesus. Therefore, no Christian, regardless of background identity, can *judge* another’s status on other criteria. To do so over the foods that others eat is most unfitting for a follower of Jesus!

B. Future Accounting (vv. 10b–12)

10b. For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.

This verse in context implies two reasons for not passing judgment on others in the manner above. First, if any judging is to be done with regard to practices of dietary choices, that will be God’s prerogative, not ours. Second, we will be called to account on the last day for all judgments we formulate (see [Romans 14:12](#), below; see also [2 Corinthians 5:10](#)).

11. It is written: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’”

To stress that God alone is judge, Paul quotes from [Isaiah 45:23](#). This

text promised the Israelites that God would not only restore them to their homeland after exile in Babylon, but he would also bring salvation to all the earth ([Isaiah 45:22](#)).

Now through Jesus' death and resurrection, God had ended the deeper exile of sin and has made salvation available to all nations. As a result, no human group or category has privilege over another. *Every knee will bow and every tongue will acknowledge God* as ultimate king (see also [Philippians 2:10–11](#)).

12. So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

God's forthcoming judgment defines our responsibility, and his Word stresses human accountability ([Matthew 12:36](#); [Romans 3:19](#)). Popular culture likes to quote [Matthew 7:1–2](#) as a prohibition against any and all judgments that Christians may express. However, that practice ignores the context in which Jesus uttered that warning. At certain times and in certain situations, making judgment is indeed valid and necessary (examples: [Matthew 7:15–20](#); [1 Corinthians 5](#)), but those cases are not in view here.

Sometimes membership with a certain group can seem to justify judging others. After all, if everyone in “my group” sees others in the same way, then our judgment of them seems justified. That may have been the situation for the Roman Christians. But judging with a group is no better than judging as an individual ([Exodus 23:2](#)).

What Do You Think?

How do you decide when, if at all, believers should show judgment?

Digging Deeper

How do [Romans 16:17–18](#); [1 Corinthians 5:11–6:5](#); [1 Timothy 6:3–5](#); and [Titus 1:10–16](#) inform your answer?

C. Necessary Conclusion (v. 13a)

13a. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.

This statement serves as a transition from what Paul's readers were no longer to do, to the positive action of what they should do instead.

D. Required Actions (v. 13b)

13b. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

Judging fellow believers is to give way to caring for them. Paul uses figures of speech to describe such caring: a *stumbling block* is something in a roadway that can make someone trip (see also [1 Corinthians 8:9](#)); an *obstacle* is something that blocks a path or causes a misstep. The two may be seen as synonyms. Paul uses similar figures of speech in [Romans 9:33](#), reflecting the Hebrew parallelism of [Isaiah 8:14](#). Paul further discusses this in [Romans 14:20](#) (below).

II. On Personal Convictions ([Romans 14:14–18](#))

A. Issues of Conscience (v. 14)

14a. I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself.

The phrase *nothing is unclean in itself* points to the issue of eating food, which Paul introduced in [Romans 14:2](#). Now he reaffirms the new distinction between clean and unclean foods: there is no distinction. This reflects what *the Lord Jesus* declared in [Mark 7:14–23](#): purity is not about food but about a person's inner character (compare [Matthew](#)

15:11). Israel's rules regarding clean and unclean food were always intended by God not as definitions of right and wrong behavior for all people, but as cultural boundaries that defined Israel as a distinct nation. Good and evil have always been about our inner dispositions that drive our actions.

14b. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.

Romans 14:2 establishes that the one who *regards something as unclean* is the one “who is weak” in the Christian faith. Such a person hasn't yet reached the point of fully accepting the truth that external things, like food, do not make a person unclean. Years or decades of avoiding unclean foods can be a practice that is hard to let go of! If such a person's conscience still considers a food unclean, then *for that person it [still] is unclean*.

B. Result of Behavior (vv. 15–18)

15. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.

Apparently, what the Jewish Christians in Rome were seeing Gentile Christians eat was causing problems. Considering the nature of the “stumbling block” and “obstacle” (Romans 14:13b, above), the word *distressed* in this verse indicates something more serious than mere sadness or irritation. This conclusion is backed up by the implications of the word *destroy*. Acting in a visible way that violates another person's conscience can result in spiritual destruction of someone for whom Christ died. This is no minor matter. It goes to the core of the gospel. We are called to have a high regard for the conscience of fellow

believers—higher regard than we have even for our own. Paul has more to say on this issue in [1 Corinthians 8:7–13](#).

What Do You Think?

How will you show love toward believers who may have a stricter conscience than yours regarding behavior not prohibited by Scripture?

Digging Deeper

How will you decide to forgo something in consideration for that believer?

16. Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil

Those in Rome who understood that Christ had set aside the rules of clean and unclean had an accurate grasp of God’s truth. They were ready to act on it as an expression of their faith. Theirs was a *good* position. But to act without concern for those who had not yet grasped this truth was to invite good actions to *be spoken of as evil*. That phrase is also translated as a form of the word “blaspheme” in [Romans 2:24](#) and [1 Timothy 1:20](#). It is a strong term for an insult, especially directed to someone of high standing. The implication is that we can provoke slander that can extend even to Christ himself if we get careless in regard to what Paul is saying.

17. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

Rules and practices regarding food are among the most obvious ways that groups of people mark their differences from other groups. Food preferences are central to a people’s culture. Even apart from Israel’s rules of clean and unclean, those rules were important to the Israelites because they were observed constantly (compare [Acts 10:14](#); [11:8](#)). But Paul reminds us that God’s *kingdom* is not merely about what is easily

seen. Food is nothing compared to what God has done in Christ, what now defines his people as subjects of his kingdom.

Paul's three terms that characterize that kingdom are important. The Greek word translated *righteousness* occurs about 100 times in the New Testament, and one-third of those are in Romans. Quite simply, the word *righteousness* refers to that which is right and just.

The word translated *peace* is also a favorite of Paul's in Romans. Its usage occurs in the greeting at the beginning ([Romans 1:7](#)) and in a word of assurance at the end ([16:20](#)). God's peace is not just a cessation of strife. It is harmony in loving, caring relationships. The gospel calls us not just to get along but to work for one another's benefit.

The word translated *joy* also occurs dozens of times in the New Testament. About one-third are in Paul's letters but only three times in Romans (here and [Romans 15:13, 32](#)). Joy flows from the abiding sense of confidence that God is making things right as he establishes his kingdom.

Despite the high frequency of each of the three terms in the New Testament, [Romans 14:17](#) is the only place where all three occur together. This says something about Paul's concern! Peace and joy are among the fruit of the Holy Spirit ([Galatians 5:22, lesson 10](#)). Here Paul ascribes them along with righteousness as being associated with the Spirit. The Spirit's presence, not our adherence to food laws, marks us as belonging to God's people (compare [Ephesians 1:13](#)). In identifying us as God's righteous people, the Spirit empowers us to love others and so to surrender our own preferences.

What Do You Think?

How should a believer respond to rules or preferences that seem

uncomfortable, but not against Scripture?

Digging Deeper

How will you live with righteousness, peace, and joy in your above response?

Chasing a Baseball Cap

I was wearing my favorite baseball cap as I rode a ski lift to the top of a mountain. About three-fourths of the way up the hill, the cap blew off my head, and I watched it fall to the ground below.

Stepping off the lift, I could see my cap lying on the ground about 100 yards downslope. It didn't look too far away, so I set out to retrieve it. The problem was, the slope was steeper than it looked; and gravity took over as I carefully began to make my way down the hill. I picked up speed, and soon I was involuntarily running down the hill—on the verge of losing control. Just in the nick of time, I grabbed a tree that kept me from tumbling down the steep slope.

After I successfully retrieved my treasured possession, I reflected on the foolishness of my decision. I had risked serious bodily injury for the sake of a silly baseball cap! Why did I go to so much trouble for something that is relatively unimportant? Now whenever I wear that cap, it reminds me to choose my priorities wisely.

In the Christian life, there's a danger of majoring in minors, of becoming preoccupied with lesser things. How will you ensure that you don't make that mistake?

—D. F.

18a. because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God

Visual for [Lesson 11](#). *Show this visual as you discuss the lesson commentary associated with [Romans 14:19](#).*

Deferring to others' needs and concerns is at the very core of kingdom life, and Christ himself was the supreme example of one who did so (see [Philippians 2:3–8](#)). Christ did the will of his Father, so to serve *Christ* is to do what is acceptable and *pleasing to God* the Father. Indeed, service to Christ is of much greater importance to God than focusing only on a person's observance of rules about food.

18b. and receives human approval.

Deferring to others' concerns even gains *human approval*. In the social structures of the first century AD, Jewish Christians stood apart

from the larger Jewish communities because of their acceptance of Gentiles as God’s people. Gentile Christians, for their part, had abandoned the pagan worship that required loyalty to the Roman Empire. If these two “renegade” groups became known for their arguments over food, their credibility would suffer all the more. But if they could demonstrate love, their example could shine ([John 13:34–35](#)). When the church fights, a vile reputation results. When its members love as Christ did, we become the salt and light of the world ([Matthew 5:13–16](#)).

III. On Vital Imperatives

([Romans 14:19–23](#))

A. Peace and Edification (vv. 19–21)

19. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

The peace of God’s kingdom is a gift of God. But putting peace into practice is not automatic. Returning to stating imperatives, Paul tells his readers *to do what leads to peace* (compare [1 Peter 3:11](#)). They must apply diligent effort to make sure that everyone in Christ’s body is respected, included, and loved. Conflict will be necessary when confronting doctrinal defection, moral defection, or divisiveness (see [Romans 16:17–18](#); [1 Corinthians 5:11–6:5](#); [1 Timothy 6:3–5](#); [Titus 1:10–16](#); [3:10](#)). But such conflict should serve the greater good in protecting the integrity of the church.

More than just absence of conflict, peace means edifying one another, or building one another up. The noun *edification* and the verb *edify* compare human relationships to constructing a building (an edifice). Our aim is to make others stronger, their faith more resilient. Paul

has much more to say on this subject in [Romans 15:2](#); [1 Corinthians 14:3–26](#); [2 Corinthians 12:19](#); and [Ephesians 4:11–13, 29](#).

What Do You Think?

Who will you edify through your God-given sense of peace?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to avoid being a “stumbling block” ([Romans 14:13](#)) to that person?

A Dose of Vitamin E-Squared

Every November, his letter catches me by surprise. You’d think I would be expecting it, because the same thing has happened more than 20 years in a row. Yet when I see the envelope in my mailbox and recognize the sender’s name, my heart jumps.

It all started more than two decades ago when Robert began attending our church. Later he admitted that he had come reluctantly, mainly to satisfy his young son, who had asked, “Dad, why don’t we go to church?” Robert sat in the back, preparing to be bored. To his surprise, he was greeted kindly, and the minister’s message about Christ was more compelling than Robert had expected. Soon he attended a class that I was teaching on the basics of the Christian faith, and a few weeks later, he confessed his faith in the Lord and was baptized on a November evening.

He has sent me a letter on the anniversary of his baptism ever since. In these letters he tells me about his growth as a follower of Christ, and he always thanks me for helping him find the Lord. These letters reveal what can result from a dose of spiritual vitamin E-squared: “encouraging

edification” —initially from me to him, now from him to me. To whom can you offer such a vitamin this week?

—D. F.

20–21. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

Paul repeats his observations from [Romans 14:14](#) (see above), but more forcefully. The opposite of “edify” in [14:19](#) is *destroy*.

B. Faith and Sin (vv. 22–23)

22. So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

The word *believe* is used here in the sense of what believers are allowed to do. And in certain cases, the truth of that belief must be kept between oneself and God to avoid creating a stumbling block. The phrase *condemn himself* points to avoidance of a second area of destruction: as the “weak” ([Romans 14:1–2](#); [15:1b](#)) end up stumbling, the “strong” ([15:1a](#)) do so as well.

23. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Paul continues with a comparison of opposites (antonyms) as he affirms a doctrinal principle. For those with the *faith* to affirm that all foods are clean, the important matter is not food but the consciences of fellow believers. Some whose faith is weaker, who still believe some

foods to be unclean, may follow others' examples and eat foods still thought (but wrongly so) to be unclean. And if they act against their own consciences in this way, they have sinned since actions that do not *come from faith* are *sin* by nature.

Conclusion

A. Peace, Not Conflict

Up to the point of today's lesson text in Romans, Paul had spent many chapters reminding the Christians in Rome that no group had any preference before God. Faith in Jesus—not being in a certain biological lineage or doing better works—is what brings sinners of every ethnicity into God's kingdom. United with him in death and resurrection, they are now dead to sin. They live a new life, empowered by God's Spirit, transformed to love and serve one another ([Romans 6:1–14](#)).

But can we bring that truth to shared meals? Can we exercise our faith in such a way as to defer to one another on matters of conscience? Can we be patient with one another as we learn to use our freedom for the benefit of others, not ourselves? The concern of those with strong faith should be for the welfare of those with weaker faith. The former must support the latter, both in what consciences direct and in the growth of faith toward greater understanding. Of such love, grace, patience, and edification is the kingdom of God.

What Do You Think?

Which concept or imperative in today's lesson do you have the most trouble coming to grips with? Why?

Digging Deeper

How will you resolve this problem?

B. Prayer

Gracious Father, we thank you for our freedom in Christ! Lead us to use that freedom to build up others, never to tear down. May we be instruments of your peace in the name of your Son. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Be strong enough to serve the weak.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Ask the class to list behaviors or social norms that they follow every day. Allow two minutes for learners to call out responses while you write those responses on the board. (Some examples might include brushing teeth, tipping the local barista, stopping for traffic lights, etc.)

Ask the following questions for whole-class discussion: 1—Which of these are mandated rules and which are socially accepted norms? 2—How do you tell the difference? 3—How do you respond if someone does not follow either? 4—How does your understanding of love inform

your response?

Transition to the Bible study by saying, “Today’s text challenges Christians about how to respond when the behaviors or choices of others do not match what we are accustomed to. Sometimes these differences are matters of faith, and sometimes they’re matters of opinion. We’ll find guidelines for coping with them as we study today.”

Into the Word

Before class, ask a learner to prepare a five-minute presentation on the context of today’s Scripture text. The presentation can include information from the Lesson Context portion of the commentary or outside resources.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Romans 14:10–13](#). Ask the following questions for whole-class discussion: 1—How does the Scripture context inform your understanding of these verses? 2—Why did the Roman church struggle with passing judgment?

Divide the class into small groups. Distribute a handout (you create) with the following headers written across the top: *Behaviors to Avoid / Behaviors to Adopt / Results That God Wants*. Ask the groups to read [Romans 14:14–23](#) and write down the reference of every verse from that passage under at least one column. Then write a paraphrase for each instruction given.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Building and Encouraging Love” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have participants work in pairs to complete as indicated.

After calling time under either alternative, have the class present their findings for discussion.

Into Life

Write each of the following statements on a separate index card. (Note: You may also make a photocopy of this page and cut out the paragraphs.)

- With many people suffering from diabetes and other lifestyle-related disease, I'm offended that our congregation offers a vast assortment of donuts and pastries each week. Christians should not be contributing to such health problems.
- I used to think that he was a wonderful Christian, but then I heard him talking about the jokes and memes that he posts on his social media accounts. Many of these so-called jokes make fun of people he disagrees with regarding political or social issues. I can't believe that a Christian would make fun of another person in that way.
- My dad was an alcoholic, and I can't begin to describe the chaos created in our family by his drinking habit. I was offended when a preacher once said that a flourishing relationship with Jesus is like enjoying a sip of the finest wine.

Divide the class into three groups and give each group one of the cards. Ask each group to respond to their given statement in a way that reflects the principles taught in today's study.

Discuss the following questions in whole-class discussion: 1—What does it mean for Christians to edify each other? 2—How should our attitudes toward tolerance or intolerance be shaped by the teaching in today's Scripture text?

Option. Distribute copies of the "Weighing All the Angles" activity from the activity page. Have participants complete it individually (in a minute or less) before discussing conclusions in small groups.