



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Romans 14:1-12

Romans

"Christian Liberty"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] This morning we are continuing our study in Romans chapter 14. We're going to look at a rather lengthy portion of it, verses 1 through 12, a passage in which Paul deals with problems in the church at Rome but they are problems that are in every church, problems that are common to man between those who are weak and those who are strong. Paul writes beginning in verse 1 of Romans 14:

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. 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. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. 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. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. 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. For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

May the Lord bless this reading of His Word. Let's bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace and it is extended to us in so many ways. It's extended to us in nature around us. We thank you for the sunshine, we thank you for the rain, we thank you for the things that we take for granted but aspects in which you reveal yourself in general revelation. We thank you, Father, for the specific revelation you give us in your Word and how you reveal yourself to us there and the fullness of your grace.

We see it in your character, your love, and your justice, and we're reminded of these things this morning as we look into the Scriptures and we're reminded of the kind of people that we are to be and reminded of the kind of people we are, how we so often fall short of what you would have us to be. We see these divisions within our own assembly and that of other assemblies. It's common to man, the weak and the strong and the conflict that arises over differences of opinion.

So, Father, we pray that you would teach us and correct us and give us a desire to do what is right, to do what is selfless, to seek to serve one another and maintain the unity of the church that the church might have a good and faithful witness for you, for your grace throughout this world, which is divided against itself, which is in rebellion against you, which is a place of darkness, for men love the darkness rather than the light. Help us to be light. We are that by your grace, Father. May we be men and women who witness to the grace that's been given to us, the life that we have in your Son.

So we pray that our time of study together would be to that end, that we would be corrected and we would be edified, we'd be built up

in the faith and in being built up be equipped and motivated to go out and be witnesses for Christ.

We pray, Lord, for our physical needs as well as our spiritual. Spiritually, we are completely dependent upon you. We are branches, Christ is the vine. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. But it is also true that our physical existence is in you. We live and we move and we have our existence in you. You give us life at every moment. Every second of life, every moment of our existence is a gift from you. You're so faithful to provide that we take it for granted and we don't even think of life in those terms, that we are given life by you at every moment, but it's true and we praise you for that.

We thank you for giving us life and for being patient with us because though we who have believed in Jesus Christ are redeemed, we're citizens of the kingdom to come, we are children of God, we're members of your family, we are still sinful members of that family. We're righteous, we've been declared righteous, but we're righteous sinners. Yet you're patient with us and you bless us in so many ways. You're faithful at every moment to provide our physical needs. We thank you for that, but we pray for those who are having difficulty health-wise, people who are sick and those who are facing surgeries or recovering from surgery, we pray that you'd bless.

We pray that you would give healing where that be your Will, but certainly in the midst of affliction, give encouragement that you're in control and you're guiding and providing, and there's great consolation in that fact and in the realization of that and the knowledge that your promises are for us and you're faithful to them. Thank you for that, Father.

We pray for our nation. We pray that you'd bless it. We pray for the men and the women that serve in our military. We remember them at this time, particularly remember them because they are abroad and they are fighting and fighting for what we believe to be a just cause, and we pray that you'd bless them in that and protect them. By your grace, through these endeavors, we pray that you would establish

justice. We pray for our leaders to that end. We pray that you'd bless them with wisdom, and we pray for our nation. We pray that you'd bless it materially. We pray that you'd bless it with peace.

But we pray most of all that you'd bless it with spiritual awakening. That you would bring men and women to a knowledge of yourself. We're the agents of that, we're the witnesses, we're the ones that are to go out and do your work and proclaim the gospel. Give us the courage to do that. Give us the clear thinking to do it well and wisely, and bless our time this morning as we study, that we would be built up in the faith, that we might do that well. So bless us to that end and bless our final hymn. As we sing it, may you prepare our hearts for our time of study together, and we pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] I think it's probably true to say that people tend to associate with those who are similar to themselves, who are likeminded, and so the world is full of societies, it's full of groups and clubs and fraternities that are organized around the things that people share in common. Race, social position, politics. That's very natural. God, however, does things differently. He is building the church with people who are unlike each other. Christ purchased with His blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. As a result, there is great variety in the church.

"Christians are not clones," Leon Morris wrote. We are not identical in all respects. We differ in race, in social standing, in wealth and politics – in many ways, and while the variety adds to the richness of the church, it also gives potential for divisions within it as well. It did in Rome. There were tensions within the church. Paul either knew that or assumed it because he now deals with it in a lengthy section of the book of Romans, from chapter 14 verse 1 through chapter 15 verse 13. Here, Paul gives advice on how people are to live with one another who are united in their love for Christ but divided in their understanding of how to live for Christ.

The church was divided among those whom Paul calls the weak in chapter 14 verse 1 and the strong in chapter 15 verse 1. That's the division, and I think that's a division that is probably found in every church to some degree or another. The weak Christian that Paul refers to here is not the person who lacks moral strength or lacks self-control and is easily overcome by sin. That certainly is a weak person, but that's not the weak person that Paul is speaking of here, but the person whose convictions keep him or keep her from doing certain things and enjoying the liberty of the Christian faith.

The strong don't have those same convictions. The strong don't feel the same restrictions, and they do enjoy their Christian liberty. In Rome, the two existed within the church and the two were in conflict, and Paul wrote this section of the book in order to help resolve the tensions. No one was more qualified to do that than he was. I have in my library books on the apostle Paul and books that deal with his life and his theology, and some of them have some insightful titles. One is *Paul, Apostle of Liberty*. Another is *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. That characterizes Paul, this liberty and this freedom.

Professor F. F. Bruce described Paul as a man who enjoyed his Christian liberty to the full. "Never," he wrote, "was there a Christian more thoroughly emancipated from un-Christian inhibitions and taboos. So completely emancipated was he from spiritual bondage that he was not even in bondage to his emancipation." Paul understood Christian liberty, and he wanted people to be able to experience it fully. He told the Galatians it was for freedom that Christ set us free. He wanted all Christians to have a heart set free. Paul's solution to the conflict between the weak and the strong in Rome was not to force freedom on the weak, nor was it to allow the weak to impose their rules on the strong.

His counsel was to be accepting of each other. That's how the chapter begins, " Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions." Paul doesn't identify the weak specifically. He doesn't tell us who these people

were or what the composition of this group was, but as he develops the problem in the church, we do get a good idea of who they were from the issues that concerned them.

They had scruples. They had strong convictions about diet and days or as some people have put it about food and festivals, which suggests that they were Jewish converts, people who had grown up under the law, and continued observing aspects of the law of Moses. There were also Gentiles at that time during Paul's day who had strong views on similar things as well, strong views, for example, on diet. Some of them were pagans, people who had come out of a heathen background, and they reacted to all of that and they reacted in a way by becoming ascetic; that is, they denied themselves things, material things. They gave up eating meat, they ate only vegetables.

So the weak, the composition of this group, was made up mainly of Jewish Christians, it would seem. Maybe some Gentile converts out of paganism, but people whose past practices and whose past concerns and convictions still influenced their present lives. Now, that's not uncommon. In fact, that's very common. As Leon Morris wrote, people don't come into the Christian life with minds like empty slates. We don't come with a blank mind into the Christian faith. Rather, we come in bringing all the baggage or much of the baggage from our old life into the new life.

Sanctification is the process whereby the Holy Spirit unpacks our lives of wrong ideas and bad habits as well as imparting to us righteousness, correcting our wrong thoughts, giving us right ideas, and then giving us the spiritual strength to live according to them. So many of these people had lived for years in a Jewish or a Gentile culture and the customs of their former life were not easy to give up. They brought them into the Christian life. These are the people whom Paul is speaking of here. They were largely Jews, we would assume, but probably some Gentiles as well.

Now, the issue that was troubling them, the issue that was dividing the church, was not an issue about salvation. The issue was

not one of justification by faith. The issue was rather how should we live now that we have been justified. So it's not an issue of how are we to be saved but rather now that we are saved, how are we to live that saved life, and they believed that we should live it according to certain ritual requirements of the Mosaic law. Others in the church didn't feel compelled to do that. They didn't feel compelled to follow their diet or their schedule. They understood that Christ's coming put an end to the law and to its rituals.

Their faith made them strong. Their understanding made them strong in the faith. Paul agreed with the strong. In fact, in chapter 15 and verse 1, he identifies with them. He says, "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength." So he identified with them but again, Paul's solution was not to force freedom on the weak or even to try to win the weak over to the correct position. He wanted them to know the truth, of course, but his concern here was not so much with the rightness or the wrongness of either position as it was with peace in the church.

So he seeks to unify the two factions by counseling mutual acceptance. Accept the one who is weak in the faith, he tells the strong. That means more than simply tolerate them. Literally, this word "accept" means take to oneself. It's used, for example, in Philemon 17 where Paul instructs Philemon to accept his runaway slave, Onesimus, in the same way that he would accept the apostle if the apostle came to visit him. So the strong in Rome were to accept the weak as brothers and sisters, accept them into their fellowship as though they were accepting them into their own home, accepting them into their own circle of friends.

They were to accept them as equals with themselves, not as inferiors, and they were to accept them with the right motivation. They weren't to criticize them, Paul says. That would only cause quarrels and the church isn't to be a battleground, it's to be a place of peace, it's to be a place of growth. Now, the reality is sometimes it must be a battleground because people come in with wrong ideas that

affect the gospel. They challenge the grace of God and they bring ideas that are not only false but they're heretical, and then divisions must take place. That's not the case with this situation.

These were not issues of heresy. There were differences of opinion that could be not only tolerated and lived with but the individuals could be accepted – in fact, should be accepted. The church is to be a place of peace and growth, and that's what Paul counsels here.

Well, in verse 2, Paul cites one of the issues that was in dispute. He writes, "One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only." The weak Christians probably became vegetarians as a safeguard against eating non-kosher meat in pagan Rome while the strong wouldn't have worried about that. But you can see how Jewish converts who had lived all their life eating kosher and being in Rome and coming to a new understanding of things still holding onto these old customs would be very concerned about eating contaminated meat in a pagan city like Rome, and so rather than take a chance on offending themselves or doing something that violated their conscience and their belief, they simply avoided meat altogether.

That wasn't the case with the strong, who may have been Jewish themselves. It was probably a mix among them, some Jewish believers and some Gentile. They weren't worried about ceremonial purity, they understood their relationship to the law. They knew that they were not under the law. They understood their freedom from it and so they had no scruples about eating meat or scruples about the kind of meat that they did eat. But in that kind of situation, you can just imagine that there's going to be tension because here is a situation in which there are two groups who have two different sets of standards by which they live, two rules of conduct that are very spiritual in their nature.

They govern their spiritual lives in many ways, and so very naturally there's going to be divisions among them. These two opinions, these two sides, are going to clash.

Paul understood that, he knew that, and so he warns against that in verse 3. The strong one who eats meat is not to have contempt for the weak person who doesn't eat meat, and the weak person is not to judge the one who eats meat. Paul was a good student of human nature. He knew the way we are naturally, he knew the tendency of people, and Paul knew that those who considered themselves to be strong in the faith and enlightened about God's Word might have a tendency to look down on the weak, to think them foolish for their practices, even superstitious for not understanding what the Word of God taught and the change that has come about with the new dispensation in which we live.

So he warns them about their arrogance and looking down and despising the weak individuals within their congregation. He also knew that the weak would have their problematic response as well. He knew the weak might consider themselves pious and pure for holding firmly to the rules of a more structured life and judge the strong to be sinners because they did not meet their standard.

Now, all of this is relevant to us. We might wonder how is this idea of not eating meat and diet and, as we'll see in a moment, days, how does that apply to us? Well, it does because these same things happen in the church today. The examples may not be quite the same but they are similar. Christians have their taboos, food and drinks and certain practices that they consider wrong, even though they're not explicitly forbidden in the Bible. I think we can say even though they're not implicitly forbidden, either, but we tend to be a people who make rules and say there are some things we shouldn't do that haven't been explicitly prohibited and we build up this system of taboos such as regarding food and drink and certain practices.

It may be drinking wine, that's a common one. Maybe even coffee or Cokes or – I don't know, eating cheeseburgers. There's all kinds of ways and reasons to abstain from food and maybe not because of kosher or non-kosher reasons or spiritual reasons. Maybe health reasons. A person gets himself or herself on a particular diet and it

begins to work and they think, "Well, everybody ought to be on this diet," and pretty soon it becomes a spiritual standard for that individual and for others.

Well, that's not different, really, in essence, from what the weak in Rome were doing. The Bible didn't forbid eating meat, forbid in the Old Testament eating certain kinds of meat and had to be prepared in a proper way, but the law did not prohibit eating meat. It didn't promote vegetarianism. But these people adopted these rules of life for themselves. They did it, as Paul will explain, from a right motive. They did it out of devotion to God. But the truth of the matter is God's not concerned about food. He doesn't recommend any special diets. Now, certainly matters of health are important. Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and we should honor that.

The Bible does forbid gluttony and it forbids drunkenness. Those aren't the issues here, though. The issue is food, drink, are these things inherently wrong, are they evil within themselves, and the Bible does not condemn any food or drink. It doesn't prohibit any food or drink. In fact, in Mark 7:19, we read that Jesus declared all foods clean. It is what comes out of the heart that matters, not what goes into the stomach. But what comes out of the heart is bad for both those who eat and those who don't eat if what comes out of their heart is that of despising or judging one another. Both are wrong attitudes, and while God's not concerned with food, God is concerned with attitudes that contradict His attitude.

He has accepted both the weak and the strong in Jesus Christ. Every believer in Jesus Christ is accepted equally in His eyes. Paul says that. So we're not to judge others. We who have been accepted by God, in other words, are to accept one another. Christians can't reject from their fellowship those whom God has welcomed in because it's not our fellowship, it's not our church. It's God's church and so we must receive all whom God has received. Paul develops that point further in verse 4. He asks, "Who are you to judge the servant of

another?" That's a rhetorical question. Obviously, it's not our place to judge the servant of another.

We have no authority to walk into another man's business and tell his workers how to perform. A worker answers to his boss, not to us. As Paul says, "To his own master, he stands or falls." And that's true for the Christian. We answer to Christ, not to critical Christians. It is Him that we must please, and it is He who determines what is acceptable, and it is He who determines whether our behavior is acceptable, not other people.

Now, that does not mean that we shouldn't give correction where it's needed. Of course we should. When we see a brother sinning, we need to go to him and we need to talk to him and we need to give good counsel and we need to give recommendations that we think are wise and helpful to others. Of course, the issue there is what's the attitude of the heart? We're to speak the truth in love, and so that sometimes involves correction. We're to show mutual concern for one another. We are to bear one another's burdens. But we are not to engage in mutual criticism and ostracism.

God has accepted every believer in His Son, regardless of race, maturity, intelligence. He has done it not on the basis of our performance but on the basis of Christ's person and work. So because God has accepted us, we are to accept others and do so on the same basis, that of grace not of works. It's only by the grace of God that we are what we are, and only that grace can change us and make us stand, and of course we all need to change. We all must stand. But we can only stand and we can only change by God's grace. That is His work and He does it well. Paul says of the Lord's servant, "He will stand for the Lord is able to make him stand."

So we don't need to come between a fellow Christian and Christ, between a servant and the master. It is not self-imposed rules that make people stand. It is not criticisms that do that, that enable us to stand, it is God's power that does that. He is able to do that and He does that – only He can, and so we're to leave that work to the Lord,

to the Holy Spirit. So there was to be no judging people about food, about eating or not eating, but food wasn't the only issue that divided the church in Rome. There was also a controversy over the Sabbath and perhaps Jewish feast days as well.

Paul writes in verse 5, "One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind." Paul doesn't actually identify the one day here as the Sabbath, but that identification does fit the context of dietary laws and Jewish ceremonies, and the issue of the Sabbath and Jewish feast days was a point of controversy in other places in the early church. In Galatians 4:10 and Colossians 2:16, Paul writes of Christians in those places in Asia Minor observing the days and seasons of the Jewish calendar and being judged by others in regard to observing the Sabbath. That probably is the issue here.

The one day above another was the Sabbath, which the weak, the Jewish Christians who were still tied to the law, were holding to. The strong, on the other hand, believed that every day was equally dedicated to God's service. That was Paul's position. He doesn't recommend it here but the fact that he says each person must be fully convinced in his own mind certainly suggests that he did not believe that Sabbath observance was binding on believers. Paul couldn't have said that if he believed that the church was under the Sabbath law because observing it was never a matter of conscience.

This is what Paul commends to them, do what's right in your own mind, but if they were under the law of the Sabbath, he could never have said that because it was a matter of law, not of conscience, and disobeying it was punished by death, so obedience was required on pain of death. Now again, this is an issue that is relevant for the church today because there are many Christians who believe that Sunday is to be observed as the Sabbath. The *Westminster Confession* and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, for example, refer to Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. That was the view of the English and the American Puritans and it is the view of many reform churches today.

Other Christians believe that Sunday is a new institution. It is the Lord's day with its own characteristics and not governed by the rules of the Sabbath. But these are different views held among Christians, sometimes held within a single assembly, and as you can imagine and as I have witnessed myself, they can lead to controversy within a church. Those who believe that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath lay down rules restricting activity, which can tend to lead to legalism. Doesn't always do that and I don't mean to suggest that it does, but it can lead to legalism.

So eating out on Sunday or going to a baseball game or a movie is considered to be breaking the Sabbath, and of course Sabbath breaking is a sin. So if people do that, then they're looked upon as sinners and there's conflict within an assembly over that very issue.

But I think there are good reasons for rejecting an identification of Sunday with the Sabbath. One is the fact that in the Old Testament, the Sabbath is described as a uniquely Jewish institution. In Exodus 31:13-17, it is called a sign between God and Israel forever, so the Sabbath is described as an institution that was established with Israel only. There's no evidence that it was observed by Gentiles. In fact, in the 1st century, the Romans looked down upon the Jews for keeping the Sabbath. They thought that was an odd tradition, to stop working one day out of the week. They did not do that.

Gentiles did not observe the Sabbath. In fact, there's no evidence that the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob – observed or anyone observed it before the law was given at Mount Sinai. The Sabbath was for Israel. It is a part of the law of the old covenant, and as Paul has explained in the book of Romans, we are no longer under the law.

We are under a new covenant with its new standards. Now, those standards include worship on Sunday, observing Sunday as the Lord's day, and there's nothing in the view which holds every day alike that encourages a relaxed attitude toward Sunday worship. We are to observe the Lord's day and we are not to forsake the gathering

together of the saints. That's what the author of Hebrews tells us very firmly in Hebrews 10:25. He says, "As is the custom of some," so evidently some took a rather relaxed view of worship with the people of God, of meeting together on Sunday, and that's not uncommon.

The Bible is very clear, we're to be very conscientious about this day and concerned to meet together with the saints and to be of mutual assistance to one another and to be built up in the faith together. So it's clear that Sunday is a day to be taken seriously by the church, but Sunday is not the Sabbath and it is not governed by the rules of the Sabbath. Now, Paul could have argued all of that. In fact, he could have argued much more than that because there are extensive arguments that can be given on this issue, but Paul does not do that because, again, his purpose was not to take sides or rule on the Sabbath controversy; it was to promote peace and unity in the church.

This was not a problem of mixing law and grace. The gospel was not at issue here. What was at issue was a difference over Christian conduct and practice, so Paul didn't forbid observing Saturday as the day of rest. We are free from that. We're not under the law. But being free from the law not only means we are free not to practice its ceremonies but we are also free to do so if we choose to do so. Paul did that. He ate ham with the Gentiles. He kept kosher with the Jews. He did what was appropriate in the circumstance. Not being under the law, he was free to do that. As Professor Bruce wrote of Paul, he was not even in bondage to his emancipation.

So Paul did not lay down a rule on this matter. He let the Roman Christians solve this issue in their own minds. It is a matter of conscience, and so what he was saying to them in effect was, "Think about this, study this issue, understand the issue, and whatever conclusion you come to, whatever you believe is right, then you do that. You hold to that." Not everybody comes along at the same pace. Not everyone is enlightened to the same degree. Some people do not understand some things and they won't understand it until God

enlightens them. Well, what are they to do in the meantime? To violate their conscience?

No. Paul is saying, "In this matter, you do what you think is right," and he leaves that to them. The real issue, as Paul explains it in verse 6, whether it's observing days or diets, the real issue is serving the Lord, honoring Him in our conduct and being thankful. "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." A person who observes the Sabbath or a special diet out of conviction that it honors the Lord should continue to do that without being censored by the strong, by those who don't do that.

Likewise, the weak should not judge the strong who eats all things and who honors all days out of the enjoyment of his or her Christian freedom and from a motivation to glorify God. The question, as James Boice put it, is: Are you serving God by what you do? Does Sunday really count for you in your Christian life and walk? Are you using it well? Those are good questions, questions we ought to examine our lives with. We are free, I believe, free to watch a football game on a Sunday afternoon or go out to eat. That might be an enjoyable break. Might be good for us to do that. But there are times when it might be best not to do that, when that's not the best use of our day or our time.

The issue is doing what we do for the Lord, and we can't be other people's judge or guide in that matter. As Paul puts it in verse 7, "For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 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." In other words, Christ is our Lord, and the Christian is His servant. What we do, we do for His benefit, not for the benefit of other Christians who may be acting as our judge. That was the purpose of Christ's death and resurrection. Paul explains that in verse 9: "For to

this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."

Christ died in order to purchase a people for God who would live for Him and be to His glory, so by His death, He became our Lord. Christ, of course, has always been Lord in the sense that He is God, in the sense that He is God's eternal Son and the Creator and sustainer of all things. Paul is not referring to that. He's referring to what happened as a result of Christ's death and resurrection. He became Lord, in a special sense, of all those He died for and brought to salvation.

As the Son of God, Christ has lordship over the whole creation. He gives life and existence to everything that is. He is Lord of history. He rules over the whole realm of nature. He governs the planets and the stars and the angels and men. He's God the Son and He is the Lord of the universe. But men don't acknowledge that. They don't worship Him, they don't obey Him, they don't know Him, they are ignorant of His being and His authority. So while they are part of His creation and He is Lord over them in that sense, they are not part of his kingdom.

It was by His death that He delivered multitudes from that ignorance and from sin's awful penalty and power, and because He did, He brought us into a new relationship with Him, a new lordship. It is a relationship that is vital, that is living. He is resurrected, He is alive, and so as our Lord, He guides us in a special sense. He protects us every day and He promises to bring us safely to heaven at last. He's Lord in that sense, and Paul says by virtue of His death and His resurrection, He's Lord in this way and Lord both of the dead and the living. Death can't separate us from Him. Nothing can separate us from His lordship.

He's Lord over us through time and eternity and forever, and so it follows that we must live for Him. Live for Him now in time as we will live for Him throughout eternity. Live for Him in obedience. Live for Him, not for those who judge us or look down on us, and we

must respect His lordship over other Christians and not try to impose our opinions, our rules upon them. We live for the Lord. We die for the Lord. Ultimately, we are answerable to the master, not to men. And we will answer to Him.

So Paul asks in verse 10, "But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt?" The fact that it is a brother has a bit of a rebuke or a word of correction within that very word. It is a brother who is being criticized in this situation, and that shows that this judging is unnatural. It divides a family. It sets brother against brother. We should be united in love and mutual concern, not bickering and battling with one another.

I made the observation at the beginning of the study that it seems true that people are naturally drawn to those who are similar to themselves and likeminded. As believers in Jesus Christ, we have no one more similar to ourselves in this world than fellow Christians. For all of our differences, and there are many, many differences, but for all of those differences, they are insignificant. They pale into nothing, they're minor compared to our similarities.

We have the same heavenly Father, the same spiritual nature, we have new hearts, we're new creatures in Christ, and we have the same destiny. We are all members of God's family and members of God's family in a hostile world, so the criticism that is so common in the church is unnatural.

Now, that's there, I think, by implication, but what Paul is certainly saying is, again, it is not our responsibility to judge the actions or question the standing of God's people. That authority belongs to God alone. "For," Paul says, "we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." We're going to stand before the judgment seat of God. Now, that thought seems a bit strange to some, maybe to you. In fact, if you have been studying the book of Romans, going along with us, you might think, "Well, that doesn't seem to fit with Romans 8:1 where Paul said there is now no condemnation for those who are in

Christ Jesus. How can we be brought before the judgment seat of God?"

When Christ died on the cross, He suffered in our place, He bore the full penalty of our sins, He made complete atonement. It's finished, he said. In the words of the Old Testament, He cast our sins into the depths of the sea. They are gone. There's no condemnation. So how can it be that we will all stand before the judgment seat of God? Of course we cannot stand before God to be judge and punished for our sins. For the believer in Jesus Christ, that happened once for all at the cross. This judgment is different. It is a judgment in which believers will give an account of their lives before the Lord.

Paul wrote the same thing in 2 Corinthians 5:10: For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

The Greek word that is used in both those texts for judgment seat is the word *bema*. It's the word that's used in Acts 18 of the place in Corinth where Paul was brought by an angry mob and made to face Roman justice for preaching the gospel. It still stands there today in the ruins of the city, a large stone platform, and on it there is a plaque with the word *bema*. Paul wrote this verse, he wrote the book of Romans from the city of Corinth, and I can't help but believe that he must have had the image of that great stone judgment seat in his mind when he wrote this.

But the judge that he thought about was very different from the Roman ruler that he faced. Christ will give us a perfect hearing as He reviews our lives and He rewards our deeds. That will happen for every believer, and Paul gives the biblical proof for that in verse 11 where he quotes Isaiah 45:23: "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." That's the proof that we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Bible gives witness to that.

Well, finally, verse 12, Paul draws the sobering summary and conclusion from that and that conclusion is that we will all stand before Him. No one is exempt from this judgment that we will face. "So then," he writes, "each one of us will give an account of himself to God." As someone has said, Paul's reminder is two-pronged because on the one hand, it shows why it is wrong for believers to criticize one another, and it's the point that we've been making all along, and that is it is not we but God who is the judge. It's not our prerogative to do that. God is the one before whom we give an account.

On the other hand, the very fact of judgment reminds us that we will have to answer to the Lord for our behavior, whether good or bad, as Paul told the Corinthians. We will have to give an account of every aspect of our lives, our words, the way we spoke to other people in all of the conversations of our lives. We will have to give an account for how we used our gifts, and God's gifted all of us in many ways. Have to give an account of that. How we use our time, how we use our Christian freedom. We're going to give an account of that, and that is a sobering thought. To think that someday we will give an account to Christ for our lives, how we lived them, what we did with what He gave to us.

Sobering, I say, but it's also encouraging because it is then that He will reward our service. It is then that we hope to hear Him say those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." Now, that's something to strive for. That's something, to go back to last week's lesson, something to wake up for, to get busy about, to hear those words, "Enter into the joy of our master."

Well, that day is close at hand. Paul told us that back in chapter 15. He wrote, "The night is almost gone and the day is near." Christ's coming is nearer today than it was yesterday. And because it is, Paul said, put on the Lord Jesus Christ. This is urgent. Put Him on now. When we do that, when we put on Christ, we put off

criticism, put off judging and despising our brothers and sisters. We behave as Christ did. In the words of Bishop Moule, we are to be severe with self but gentle with others. Christ was that way. He was gentle with others. May God enable us to be that.

And if you're here without Christ, may He help you to know that you're without Christ and that you need Christ. He is the Savior of the world, and there is a day of judgment coming that does involve eternal punishment. That day will come for every unbeliever who has ever lived, but there is a way of escape. The way of escape is Jesus Christ, who died for sinners, who bore the penalty of sin in their place so that all who believe in Him, whoever they may be, whatever variety there may be in the world, whoever that person is, whoever believes will be saved, accepted by Christ, received into God's family.

So if you're here without Christ, look to Him, trust in Him, receive forgiveness from Him, and you who have done that, live as Paul as told you to live, as he's instructed us to live. Be people who are – well, in the words of Bishop Moule, severe with self but gentle with others. May God give us the grace to do that. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and your grace. We are reminded of problems that are typical of the church because they're typical of human nature. Where there are differences of opinion, there are divisions within groups, within churches, and the strong and the weak have different attitudes toward one another, judging on the one hand, despising on the other. That's human nature but it's not germane to the heart that you've given us, a new heart, a new mind, the mind of Christ, and so may we live according to that.

May we be the new creatures, live according to the nature that we have and behave as the new creatures you have made us. We look to you to bless to that end. We pray that you'd make us good and faithful witnesses. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.