

Romans 14-16
About Theology

B R C
Study the Bible
and follow Jesus

NT #30 Bible Reading Class
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San Diego, CA

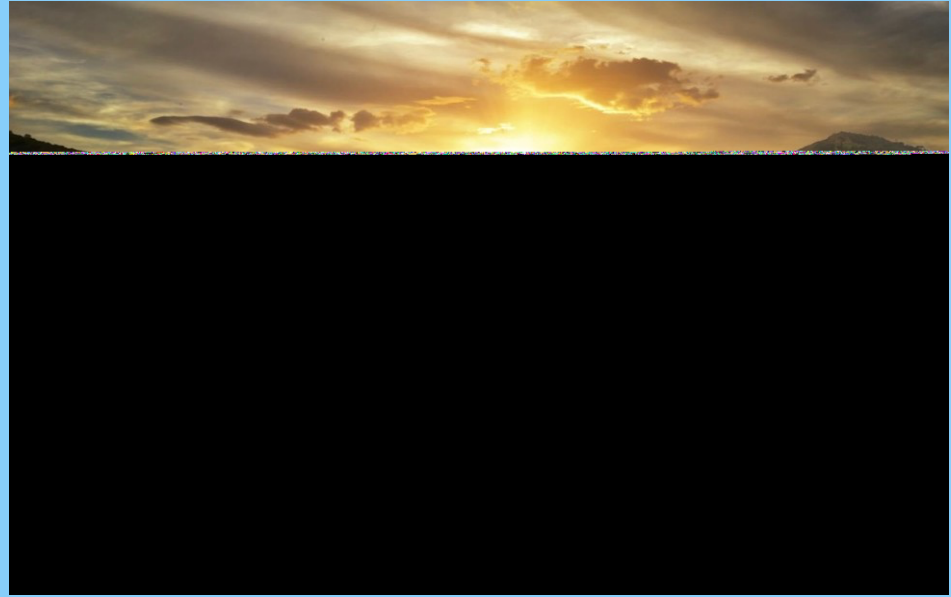
A Bible Reader's Conviction

- *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and **training in righteousness**, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NIV)*

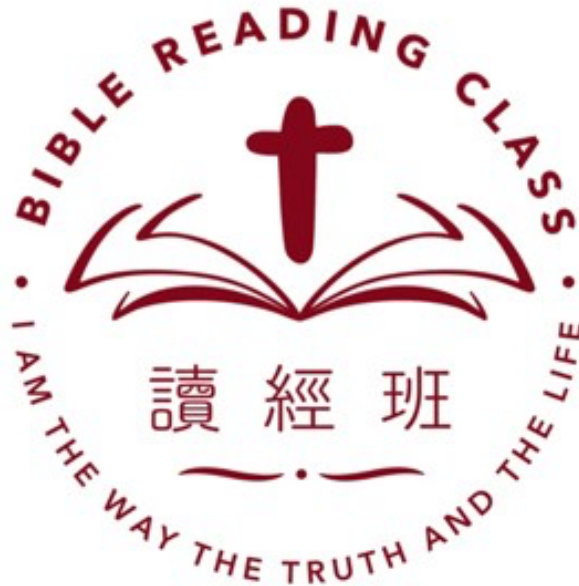
A Blessed Journey

1. *May you study God's Word with a reverent heart and walk in His will.*
2. *May the Lord's Word flourish, and may He add to the church those who are being saved.*
3. *May the Lord bless your days of reading the Scriptures.*

Study the Bible, follow Jesus

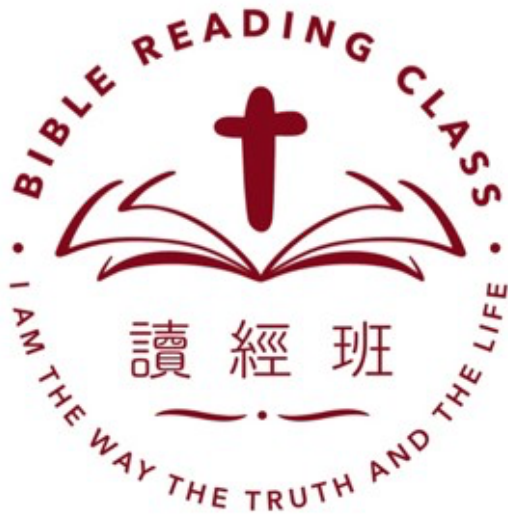


The Guiding Principles of BRC



- Christ-Centered
- Bible-Based
- Mission-Minded

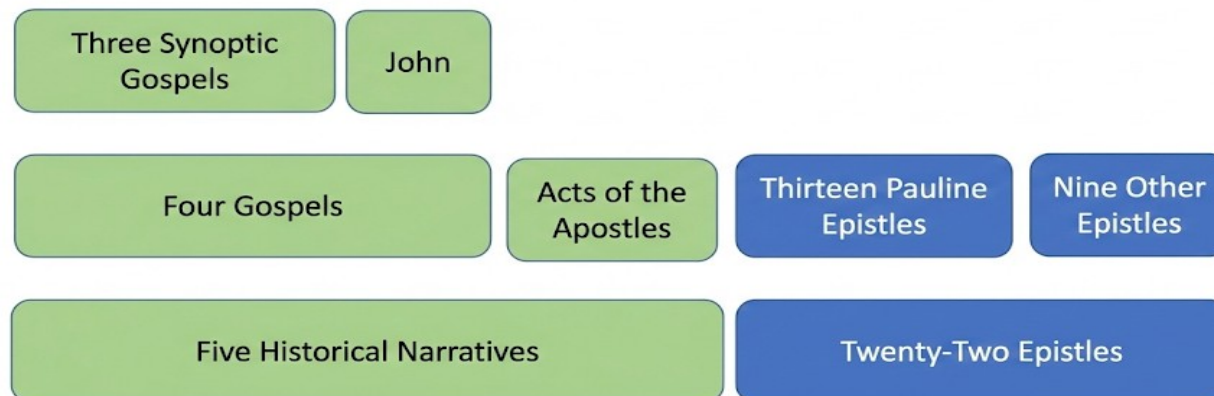
BRC: A Gentleman's Agreement



- *I'll complete weekly reading assignment*
- *I'll watch weekly teaching video in its entirety*
- *I'll complete weekly quiz (closed book)*

The Structure of the 27 Books of the New Testament

- *The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) John*
- *The Fourfold Gospel, Acts, The Thirteen Pauline Epistles, The Other Nine Epistles (General Epistles and Others)*
- *Five Books of Historical Narrative, Twenty-Two Books of Doctrinal Teaching*



Romans Chapter 14



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Romans Chapters 12–15: The Gospel and Christian Living

1. *The Christian and God, 12:1–2*
2. *The Christian and Himself, 12:3–8*
3. *The Christian and Others, 12:9–16*
4. *The Christian and Enemies, 12:17–21*
5. *The Christian and Government, 13:1–7*
6. *The Christian and God's Law, 13:8–10*
7. *The Christian and Life Attitude, 13:11–14*
8. ***The Christian and the Weak in Faith, 14:1–15:13***
 - *Appendix: Paul's Final Sharing, 15:14–33*

VIII. The Christian and the Weak in Faith: Accept One Another

- **Romans 14:1–6**

- *“Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.” (NIV)*

- **The Christian “do” and “do not”**

A. **Do accepto**: Accept the one who is weak in faith

B. **Do not argue** : Do not argue over disputable matters

The Weak in Faith

- **Scripture**

- *“Accept him whose faith is weak, without **passing judgment on disputable matters.**” (14:1 NIV)*

- **Who are the weak in faith?**

- *Here, the “weak in faith” refers to **“those who, after believing in Christ, still keep the dietary laws”** (mostly Jewish believers). They believe that unless they keep the dietary laws, they cannot please God. Some even fear accidentally eating blood, so they choose to eat only vegetables.*
- *Another kind of “weakness in faith” **“comes from building one’s relationship with God on matters that are not important”**. This is a lack of discernment. They treat small matters as big ones and big matters as small ones. They do not value the kingdom of God (14:17) but focus on “what to eat and drink,” even judging others by these things. Paul says: if there are weak believers among you, do not reject them or despise them—accept them.*

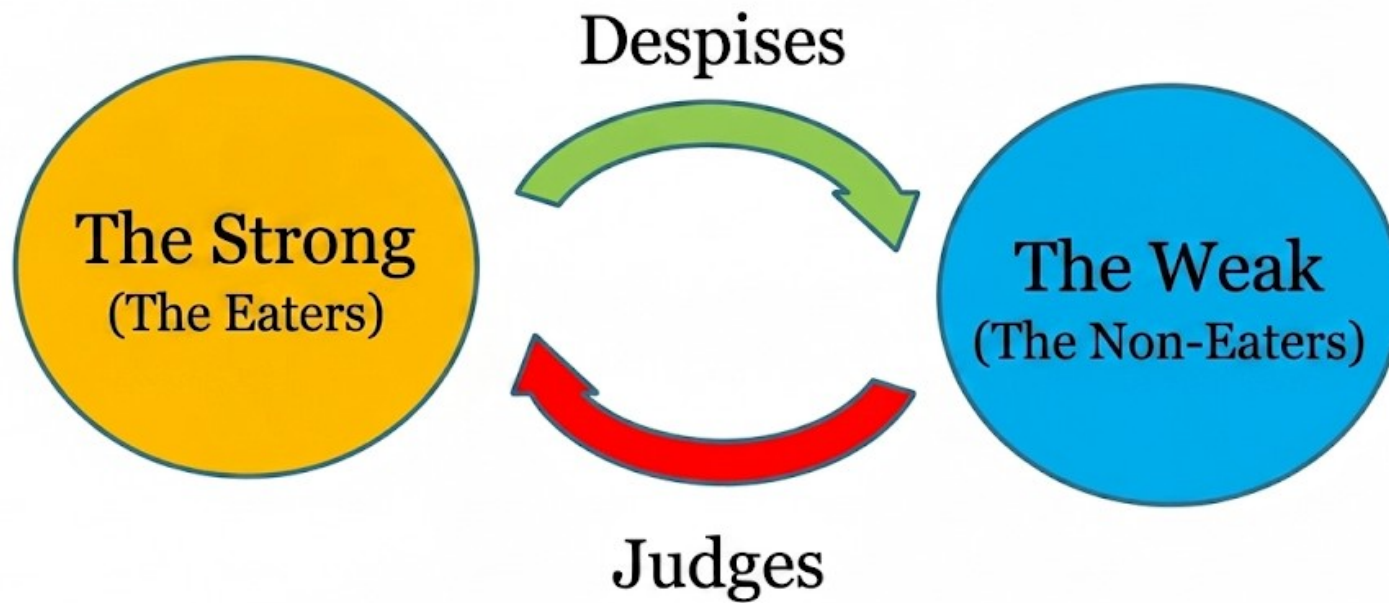
Allowing the Gray Areas

- **Scripture**

*“Without passing judgment on **disputable matters.**” (14:1 NIV)*

- **Not everything is black and white**

- *“Disputable matters” are non-essential issues, matters of differing opinions, things open to debate.*
- *In Christian living, not everything is black and white. Some things are clear: Jesus is the Son of God, the only Savior; do not murder; do not commit adultery... But matters such as what to eat, what to drink, predestination, euthanasia, women deacons, women pastors, voting choices, political parties... are not black and white. Scripture says: do not argue over disputable matters; do not pass judgment on others in such areas.*
- *Christians must allow freedom for themselves and others—allow the existence of “gray areas.” We live by principles, not by rigid rules. “Rigid rule-keeping” is the specialty of the Pharisees, and the Pharisees, as we know, persecuted Jesus and sent Him to the cross.*
- *Do not make every issue absolute. Do not impose requirements where Scripture has not required. Simply keep your own faith firm, act in love, and accept “brothers and sisters who differ from you in the gray areas”.*



Paul:
You are all wrong!

- *In essentials, unity;*
- *In non-essentials, liberty;*
- *In all things, charity.*
- -- *Rubert Meldenius*

Do Not Judge Another Man's Servant

• Scripture

- *“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.” (14:4 NIV)*

• Meaning

1. *Judging is not a horizontal relationship.* It is not something between equals. We judge others because we mistakenly think we have equal standing to do so.
2. *Judging is a vertical relationship.* It is from above to below—master to servant, God to man. When you judge others, you are seizing a privilege that belongs only to the Master. Scripture asks: “His own master is still there—who are you to judge?”
3. *The Lord is able to make the one judged stand.* The person you judge has a Lord who is mighty: *“He will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”* You think this person has fallen, but his Lord will cause him to stand.
4. *Judging others is not sinning against people, but sinning against the Lord.* You commit two errors: first, you take the Lord’s place; second, you underestimate the Lord’s power. Both errors are against God, not man.

What exactly does “do not judge” mean?

• Questions

- *A brother is committing adultery. If I confront him, am I judging him?*
- *A preacher predicts the exact date of the end of the world. If I warn others not to believe him, am I judging him?*
- *Jesus said, “Do not judge” (Matt. 7:1), and Paul said the same (Rom. 14:4). So what does it mean to “not judge”?*

What exactly does “do not judge” mean?

- What “do not judge” does not mean:

1. “‘Do not judge’ does not mean ‘do not use discernment.’ Jesus wants us to distinguish between true prophets and false prophets. Without using discernment, how can we tell the difference?”
2. ‘Do not judge’ does not mean ‘no distinction between good and evil.’ It does not mean adultery is acceptable, corruption is acceptable... that everything is acceptable. Scripture tells us to ‘turn from evil and draw near to God.’ If good and evil are not distinguished, how can we ‘turn from evil’?”
3. “‘Do not judge’ does not mean ‘do not express a differing opinion.’ A people-pleaser and a Christian are two different kinds of people. A people-pleaser avoids disagreement in order to gain approval. A Christian, for the good of the community, will often hold different opinions. Having a different opinion from others is not the same as judging them.”

What exactly does “do not judge” mean?

- What “do not judge” does mean:

1. Not judging means *“do not only point out others’ faults while failing to examine yourself.”* Jesus said, “Do not judge,” and then added, “Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own?” (Matt. 7:3) Jesus was warning His disciples not to focus on others’ small faults while ignoring their own major ones.
2. Not judging means *“do not cultivate a condemning mindset.”* Do not develop a judgmental mentality—a habit of seeing others as wrong and quickly passing judgment.
3. Most importantly, not judging means *“do not violate God’s sovereignty.”* The role of Judge belongs to God alone. We are the ones being judged (for we will all stand before God’s judgment seat, 14:10). Not judging means recognizing that our identity is that of the judged, not the judge, and therefore we dare not overstep and intrude upon God’s authority.

Each Person Must Be Fully Convinced in His Own Mind

- **Scripture**

- *“One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.” (14:5 NIV)*

- **The importance of conviction**

1. *“Being fully convinced” means having conviction.* If you believe “this day is more important than another,” are you fully convinced? If you believe Christians must keep the dietary laws, are you fully convinced? If you believe Christians must not drink wine or eat blood, are you fully convinced? Will you change your position? Can you remain steadfast in what you hold?
2. *Having your own opinion in gray areas is not wrong, but your opinion must be firm.* Only with a firm heart can you act sincerely; without firmness, you cannot act sincerely. What God requires is sincerity. If you are convinced that some things may be eaten and others not, and you sincerely follow that conviction, God accepts your sincerity, for **“the one who eats, eats to the Lord.”**

Each Person Must Be Fully Convinced in His Own Mind

- ***This is between you and God***

- *Whatever you insist on, it is between you and God: “Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord; whoever eats meat does so to the Lord.” (14:6) Whether observing a special day or eating or abstaining, it is something you do personally before God. Do not use your personal conviction to demand others, and do not use it to judge others.*

- ***For the Lord, and with thanksgiving***

- *As a Christian, how do you know whether what you do is right or wrong? There are two tests:*
 - 1. **Am I doing this for the Lord?** Do I have selfish motives? Am I doing it purely for the Lord? (“**He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; he who eats, eats to the Lord.**”)*
 - 2. **Can I give thanks to God for doing this?** After doing it, can I say, “Thank God I did this”? (“**He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God... he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.**” 14:6)*

Everything Is for the Lord

- **Scripture**

- *“Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.” (14:6–9 NIV)*

- **The Christian life is for the Lord**

1. **The Christian life is for the Lord.** *“Eating or not eating for the Lord” is a small matter; “living and dying for the Lord” is the great matter. If you can do the small thing—“**eat for the Lord, or abstain for the Lord**” (14:6)—then can you also do the great thing: “**live for the Lord and die for the Lord**”? (14:8) If you are so firm in small matters, can you also offer your whole life to the Lord?*

Everything Is for the Lord

• The Christian life is for the Lord

2. From “the Lord lives for me” to “I live for the Lord”

• Many Christians believe in the Lord with the mindset that “the Lord lives for me”: my needs, my pursuits, my desires—all must be fulfilled by Him. But Paul says, **“We live for the Lord.” (14:8)** The purpose of my existence is for the Lord; the meaning of my life comes from Him. The direction of my life and the basis of my decisions are all for the Lord.

3. From “the Lord died for me” to “I die for the Lord”

• Christ died for me so that my sins may be forgiven. Therefore, I thank Him and am willing to die for Him (deny myself). I may not yet be able to die as a martyr, but I can make sacrifices for the Lord, endure losses, and suffer unjust treatment. As long as it is for the Lord, I am willing.

Everything Is for the Lord

- **The Christian life is for the Lord**

- 4. **Christ's lordship over my life**

- Paul says, **“We live for Christ and die for Christ.”** Paul is not boasting about his own piety; he is emphasizing Christ's lordship. **“Christ died and returned to life so that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living” (14:9).** Whether living or dead, Christ owns me. He is Lord. My living for the Lord and dying for the Lord is my acknowledgment of Christ's lordship over my life.

Why do you judge your brother?

Why do you treat him with contempt?

- *“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. It is written: ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’ So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. 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.” (judging others, treating others with contempt)(14:10–13 NIV)*
- **Basic concept:** *Every believer will one day stand before God and give an account. Since God is the Judge and we will all be judged by His standard, why judge others? Why look down on them?*

Walk according to the principle of love

- *“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. 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. Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.” (14:14–18 NIV)*
- ***Do not let your good be spoken of as evil:** You insist on doing something you believe is right—for example, you believe all foods are clean, including pig’s blood cake. So you eat it openly in front of believers who disagree, and they say, “You shouldn’t have done that.”*
- *Your belief that all foods are clean is “good,” but because you disregard others’ feelings, your good is spoken of as evil. Paul says this is not walking in love.*

Pastor, may I eat pig's blood cake?

- **The debate:**

- *Some believe Christians must not eat blood (Acts 15:20). Others believe Christians have no food restrictions and all foods are permissible (1 Tim. 4:3–5).*

- **Explanation:**

- **Statement:** *“Nothing is unclean in itself, but if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.” (14:14)*
- **Explanation:** *If it is food, it is permissible. Eating or not eating depends on your personal conviction. If you believe pig's blood cake is unclean, then for you it is unclean. If you believe it is clean, then it is clean.*
- **Statement:** *“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.” (14:15)*
- **Explanation:** *For Christians, love is more important than freedom. Even if I have the freedom to eat pig's blood cake, if a brother believes Christians must not eat blood, then for his sake, to avoid causing him to stumble, I choose not to eat.*

The Kingdom of God Is Not About Eating and Drinking

- ***Scripture***

- *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (14:17 NIV)*

- ***Misunderstanding***

- *Christians should not care about food or enjoyment; they should only pursue righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit.*

- ***Correct understanding***

- *Something as great as “the kingdom of God” cannot be reduced to trivial debates about what may or may not be eaten. Christians, do not lose perspective. Do not argue endlessly over small matters. Pursue righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

The Three Considerations of “All Things Are Permissible”

- ***Scripture***

- ***“All things are permissible,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are permissible,” but not all things build up. So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:23, 31)***

- 1. All things are permissible, but not all are beneficial***

- *Does what I do benefit myself and others? If beneficial, do it; if not, refrain.*

- 2. All things are permissible, but not all build up***

- *Does what I do edify brothers and sisters, or cause them to stumble? If it builds up, do it; if it causes stumbling, refrain.*

- 3. All things are permissible, but all must glorify God***

- *Does what I do glorify God? If it glorifies God, do it; if not, refrain.*

A Side Question Raised by the Passage:

Do “Loving the Lord” and “Being Happy” Conflict?

•

- *Among Christians, is it true that those who love the Lord are not happy, and those who are happy do not love the Lord?*

The Happy Liberal vs. the Gloomy Conservative?

- ***The Happy Liberal***

- *Eating, drinking, entertainment*
- *Casual relationships*
- *No Bible reading, no prayer, no worship, no service*
- *Appears very happy*
- *Does not love the Lord, yet promotes love and world peace*

- ***The Gloomy Conservative***

- *Eats and drinks, but not necessarily plays*
- *Strict in relationships*
- *Reads the Bible, prays, worships, serves*
- *Not as outwardly happy, sometimes even gloomy*
- *Loves the Lord and promotes love and world peace*

Loving the Lord, and Being Happy!

- ***God wants people to rejoice in their labor***

- *God blesses people so that they labor for their livelihood, and He enables them to rejoice in their labor: “This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.” (Eccl. 5:18–19)*

- ***God’s presence brings joy***

Going to the house of the Lord brings joy: “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” (Ps. 122:1) Those who seek the Lord should rejoice: “Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.” (1 Chr. 16:10) In God’s presence there is joy: “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his dwelling place.” (1 Chr. 16:27)

Loving the Lord, and Being Happy!

- ***Do not seek the pleasures of sin, but seek the joy that is in the Lord***
 - *The pleasure of sin is worldly, temporary, and comes with harmful side effects. The joy in the Lord is heavenly, lasting, and without harmful side effects. Moses “**chose to be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin**” (Heb. 11:25), and received peace and joy from God.*
- ***Conclusion***
- ***Christians have more fun!***

Do Not Destroy the Work of God for the Sake of Food

- *“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 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.” (14:19–21 NIV)*
- **Food:** *a secondary issue—what may be eaten and what may not.*
- **The work of God:** *believers; the church.*

Whatever Is Not from Faith Is Sin

- **Scripture**

- *“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. 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.” (14:22–23 NIV)*

- **Meaning**

- *Here, “faith” refers to “certainty in one’s practice”—a person “not condemning himself in what he approves.”*
- *Each person’s level of faith differs, and their understanding of truth differs, so their actions differ. As long as you are convinced that what you do is right and does not offend God, then your action is “from faith” and does not offend Him. Conversely, if you are not certain whether something offends God but you do it anyway, then your action is “not from faith.” Whatever is not from faith is sin.*

Whatever Is Not from Faith Is Sin

- **Walking in freedom in Christ:** *God knows our levels of faith differ, and our understanding of truth differs, and He allows such differences. God gives Christians considerable freedom: as long as we agree on essential doctrines, He allows us to differ on secondary matters. In the early church, God allowed believers to eat differently. Those who believed all foods were clean were allowed to eat all foods. Those who believed they should eat only vegetables were allowed to eat only vegetables.*
- **Each person must be convinced:** *Whatever is “from faith” (being convinced it is right), even if done wrongly, God does not count as sin. Conversely, whatever is “not from faith” (not being sure it is right), even if done correctly, is counted as sin.*
- **God looks at your heart:** *This is because God does not look at outward actions but at the heart. Those who act with a heart that fears God—even if mistaken—are not punished. Those who act without such a heart (not sure whether it offends God but doing it anyway) are counted as sinful.*

Two Types of Christians: the Weak and the Strong

- **Scripture:**

- *“Accept the one whose faith is weak.” (14:1)*
- *“We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.” (15:1)*

- **Meaning:**

- *Though all are Christians, each person’s level of faith and understanding of truth differs.*
- *In Paul’s time, the strong believed all foods were clean; the weak believed some were clean and some were not.*
- *The strong placed their faith in Christ and the kingdom of God; the weak placed their faith in what may or may not be eaten, or other trivial matters.*
- *The strong must bear with the weak, because you are stronger.*

The First Principle of Christian Relationships: Grace and Truth

• Scripture

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:14,17)

• Application

- The church must resemble Christ: Christ is the head of the church; the church is His body. A church that resembles Christ is a good church; a church that does not resemble Christ is not a good church, no matter what else it accomplishes.*
- Christ is full of grace and truth: Christ came full of grace and full of truth. He is not grace without truth, nor truth without grace. He is full of both.*
- The church must have grace and truth: Is the church a place of love? Yes, it must have grace. Is the church a place of truth? Yes, it must have truth. A church that speaks only love but not truth does not resemble Christ. A church that speaks only truth but not love also does not resemble Christ. Only a church with both love and truth can be said to be “Christlike.”*

The First Principle of Christian Relationships: Grace and Truth

- ***A “people-pleasing church” is not a good church***

- *“You’re right, I’m right, everyone is right”; “Everyone is a zealous brother, everyone is a God-loving sister”; “Nothing else matters, as long as we have love.” Such a church that refuses to distinguish right from wrong is not a good church.*

- ***A “Pharisee church” is also not a good church***

- *“Always criticizing others, never examining oneself”; “Saying much, doing little”; “High in doctrine, low in love.” Such a cold, legalistic, Pharisee-like church is not a good church.*

The First Principle of Christian Relationships: Grace and Truth

- ***A church that resembles Jesus is a good church***

- *A church that resembles Jesus is a church “**full of grace and truth.**” Believers can discern right and wrong according to truth, and they can accept one another through God’s grace. Paul saw that in the Roman church some believers were weak in faith and some were strong, and he could distinguish between the two. Paul instructed the strong to bear with the weak in love and called believers to accept one another. A church that balances truth and grace is a Christlike church.*

Who Are the Strong in Faith?

• Who are the strong in faith? According to Romans 14–15, the strong have two characteristics:

1. **They have a correct understanding of truth.** They know what the gospel is and what it is not; what is important and what is not; what comes first and what comes later; what is permissible and what is not.
2. **They place “love” above “freedom.”** They are willing to bear with those who are not strong. For the benefit of others, they are willing to “not please themselves,” to make sacrifices for others, and to accept certain inconveniences for themselves.

Romans Chapter 15



Please Your Neighbor

- **Scripture**

- *“Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up.” (15:2 NIV)*

- **Meaning**

- *“Pleasing your neighbor” is not flattery. “Pleasing your neighbor” does not mean seeking people’s approval, nor trying to win favor or curry favor with others.*
- *The purpose of “pleasing your neighbor” is spiritual. The purpose is “for his good, to build him up.” This benefit is a spiritual benefit; this building is the building up of spiritual life. The purpose of pleasing your neighbor is to help his spiritual growth.*

Paul's Three Doxologies and Three Wishes

- **Scripture**

1. *“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (15:5–6 NIV)*
2. *“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (15:13 NIV)*
3. *“The God of peace be with you all. Amen.” (15:33 NIV)*

- **Meaning**

- **Know your God**

1. *God is the God who gives endurance and encouragement (given through Scripture, 15:4).*
2. *God is the God of hope.*
3. *God is the God of peace.*

Paul's Three Doxologies and Three Wishes

- ***Paul's desires for believers***

1. ***Worship desire:*** *that you may glorify God with one mind and one voice.*
2. ***Inner desire:*** *that your hearts may be filled with joy and peace, and abound in hope.*
3. ***Blessing desire:*** *that the God who gives peace (blessing) may always be with you.*

Paul's Three Prayer Requests

- **Scripture**

- *“I urge you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me:*
 - 1. Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea*
 - 2. and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord's people there.*
 - 3. so that I may come to you with joy, by God's will, and in your company be refreshed.”*
(15:30–32 NIV)

Paul's Three Prayer Requests

• Did God answer Paul's prayers?

- *Paul's first request was that God would rescue him from the unbelievers in Judea. At that time Paul was preparing to return to Jerusalem to deliver the charitable offering to the church there. He feared that some "unbelievers" would rise up to harm him. What happened? A group indeed rose up against him, leading to his arrest and imprisonment (Acts 21:27–36). It seems God did not rescue Paul from their hands—did Paul's prayer fail?*
- *After Paul was arrested, the commander wanted to flog him, but God protected him from being flogged. More than forty men vowed to kill Paul, but God protected him from being killed. The high priest and elders accused Paul before Felix, but God protected him from being condemned. Two years later they accused him again before Festus, and God still protected His servant.*
- *So did God hear Paul's prayer? Yes—but not according to human expectations. Humans desire smoothness and safety; God's will was for Paul to experience trials, be preserved in trials, and fulfill God's gospel plan through trials.*

Paul's Three Prayer Requests

- *Paul's second request was that the offering he delivered to Jerusalem would be accepted by the saints there. The offering came from the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (both in modern Greece), most of whom were Gentiles. The Jerusalem church, however, was mostly Jewish. Would they accept the gift? Paul was concerned, so he asked for prayer that the offering would be received.*
- *Did God hear Paul's second request? Scripture does not record the outcome, but we can see Paul's love and concern. His love moved him to labor, travel far, and deliver the offering personally. His concern was that racial barriers or pride ("unwilling to receive help") might ruin the good work.*
- *Though Scripture does not record the result, Paul's love, concern, and humble prayer reveal the heart of a servant of God—and through that, the heart of God. As for my personal view, I believe the spiritual maturity of the Jerusalem believers surely surpassed racial pride, and they received the gift with gratitude to God.*

Paul's Three Prayer Requests

- *Paul's third request was that God would allow him to go to Rome and be refreshed together with the believers there (15:32). Did God hear this prayer? Yes—but not in the way humans expect.*
- *Paul did go to Rome, three years later, but as a prisoner. In Jerusalem, stirred up by the “unbelievers,” he suffered three years of imprisonment. Later, as a Roman citizen, he appealed to Caesar and was sent to Rome, where he lived for two full years (Acts 28:30). During his time in Rome, he **“proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31 NIV).***

Learning to Pray from Paul's Prayer Requests

- From Paul's prayers, we learn three things about prayer:
 1. **Believers must pray.** *The apostle Paul entrusted his matters to God through prayer. If Paul needed to pray, how much more should we humbly pray and entrust ourselves to God.*
 2. **Pray with a submissive heart.** *Paul prayed, “that I may come to you with joy, by God's will” (15:32). For Paul, prayer was not demanding but submitting—not asking God to obey him, but seeking to obey God. In prayer we discern God's will and submit to it.*
 3. **God's ways are higher than human ways.** *Paul's three requests did not unfold exactly as he expected, but God had a better plan. God's plan included the spread of the gospel and also Paul's suffering. We must acknowledge our limitations—we see little and understand little. God's ways are higher than our ways. After praying, we trust God, believing He has the best plan.*

Romans Chapter 16



W.Wang

Commendation

- **Scripture**

- *“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.” (16:1–2 NIV)*

- **Meaning**

1. *Phoebe is our sister: Phoebe was likely the letter carrier who brought the Book of Romans from Corinth (where Paul wrote it) to Rome. Paul commended her to the Roman church and called her “our sister.” “Our sister” is a warm and affectionate title, showing deep family-like fellowship: Phoebe is one of us; she is our sister. Among Christians, “brother” and “sister” are the most beautiful titles—better than director, deacon, chairman, or professor. I am a Baptist pastor, and in Baptist circles (especially among Southern Americans), they love to call one another “brother.” When I interact with American pastors, whether white or Black, they often say, “Brother Wang, how are you?” I love this title; it feels warm, like family.*

Commendation

2. **Phoebe is a deacon of the church in Cenchreae:** *The word “deacon” is diakonos in Greek (meaning servant). This word appears frequently in Scripture. Most of the time it is translated “servant” or “minister” (meaning-based translation), and sometimes “deacon” (a transliteration).*
- *May a church have female deacons? Those in favor say: Look, Scripture mentions a female deacon—Phoebe. Those opposed say: No, Phoebe was a servant of God, not a deacon. Because views differ, practices differ. Some churches have female deacons; some do not. Generally, Southern Baptists rarely have female deacons, though there are exceptions.*
 - *Cenchreae was a seaport about six miles east of Corinth; Phoebe was the “deacon” of the church there.*
 - *Each church has its own deacons. A deacon of Corinth cannot serve as a deacon of Rome, and a deacon of Rome cannot serve as a deacon of Corinth.*
 - *Whether Phoebe was a servant of God or an official deacon, Paul instructed the Roman church to receive her **“in a way worthy of his people”** and to support her in every way.*

Greetings

- **Unity in diversity**

- **Twenty-six people:** Romans 16:3–16 contains Paul’s greetings to the Roman church—26 individuals in total. Only two are unnamed (**Rufus’s mother, 16:13; the sister of Nereus, 16:15**). All others are greeted “by name.”

- **A diverse church:** From Paul’s greetings we see that the Roman church was diverse:

1. Both men and women;
2. Both Gentiles and Jews (Paul’s phrase “**my relatives,**” 16:7,11, refers to Jews);
3. Both nobles and slaves (several names were common slave names; others were aristocratic);
4. Both new believers and believers older in the faith than Paul (16:7).

Greetings

- **The testimony of the church:** *The Roman church overcame four major **human barriers**—**gender, race, class, and spiritual maturity**. In the church there is no male or female, no racial division, no class distinction, no spiritual hierarchy; all are one in Christ Jesus. This is a beautiful testimony—a glorious picture of the church!*
- **Churches in homes:** *In this section of greetings, Paul greeted several “**churches in their houses**” (16:5,11,14,15). Such greetings raise an important and interesting question: What exactly counts as a “church”? Are buildings with crosses on their roofs the only churches? Can a private home also be considered a church? Or are none of these the church, but rather those who are “**in the Lord**” (16:11), the “**brothers**” (16:14), and the “**saints**” (16:15) who are the true church?*
- *Paul’s meaning is clear: only the people in the Lord are the church. The “church” has never been a building. From the beginning, “church” referred to living people who received new life through faith in Jesus. When believers gather, the place is not the church—the people are the church. Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Eph. 5:25). Christ did not die for buildings but for sinners, that they might be born again.*

Greetings

- **The question of “apostles”**

- Paul greeted Andronicus and Junia, saying they were **“outstanding among the apostles” (16:7)**. We have heard of the apostles Peter and Paul, but never of the apostles Andronicus or Junia—what does this mean?
- The Greek word for “apostle” means “messenger” or “one who is sent.” Scripture uses the term in two ways:
 1. **“Apostles of Jesus Christ”**: the twelve chosen by Jesus (later Matthias replaced Judas, Acts 1:26), plus Paul and James the Lord’s brother.
 2. **“Apostles of the churches”**: messengers sent out by churches (2 Cor. 8:23), similar to modern missionaries.
- In everyday usage, “apostle” usually refers to “apostles of Jesus Christ.”
- In Romans 16:7, the apostles mentioned are “apostles of the churches”—messengers sent out by a particular church.

Warning: You Must Avoid These People!

- **Scripture**

- *“I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.” (16:17)*

- **Application**

- *Paul tells Christians that although some people may be among you, you must not draw near to them; instead, you must avoid them. These people have three characteristics:*
 - 1. They cause divisions among you:** *Some people in the church are like glue—helping believers look to Jesus and promoting unity. Others are like termites—hollowing out God’s house and causing the church to fall apart. They create discord, stir suspicion, form factions, gather followers, and build little groups loyal to them. To expand their influence, they sacrifice the unity of the church. When they are present, there is always conflict; when they are absent, the church is peaceful. Paul says: avoid such people!*

Warning: You Must Avoid These People!

2. **They cause you to stumble:** *These people not only damage relationships between people but also damage people's relationship with God. In Scripture, "stumbling" refers to stumbling in faith—becoming doubtful of God, distant from God, or unbelieving.*
 - *Those who cause others to stumble are often very eloquent. Paul says they use **"smooth talk and flattery to deceive the minds of naive people" (16:18 NIV)**. If you only listen to their words, you cannot tell—they may even appear to be zealous believers. Thankfully, Jesus gave us a test: **"By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt. 7:20)**. Look at their fruit. What happens to those who draw near to them? Some Christians strengthen others' faith; others cause people to grow cold, doubtful, distant, and unbelieving.*
 - *A very enthusiastic sister often "cared for others" and formed her own group, claiming to help believers. After some time, church leaders noticed something wrong: Why did those she "helped" become spiritually cold? Why did members of her group stop attending church? The leaders applied the principle "recognize them by their fruit," identified her as one who causes believers to stumble, and drew a clear boundary—warning others to avoid her.*

Warning: You Must Avoid These People!

3. **Leading you to depart from the teaching you received:** True Christians are steadfast in the truth. Once they confirm the truth, they do not change. Paul was absolutely certain that the gospel he preached was **“received by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12)**. He was so certain that he believed that even if an angel came and preached a different gospel, it must not be accepted: **“Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse!” (Gal. 1:8 NIV)**
- Christians receive truth from those who preach it, for “faith comes from hearing the message” (10:17 NIV). Since the preacher is certain, the learner must also be certain. Paul told the Roman believers: You must not depart from the teaching you received! What you first received was the pure gospel, the truth from God. If anyone leads you away from that teaching, avoid them.

Warning: You Must Avoid These People!

- *Some people refuse to be taught, yet love to teach others. The result of their teaching is that they cause people to “depart from the teaching you received.” One obvious characteristic is that they talk about God and the Holy Spirit, yet lead people away from Christ. To move away from Christ is to move away from truth, for Christ is the truth (John 14:6). To move away from Christ is to move away from the gospel, for Christ is the gospel (1:2–3).*

These people speak theology, traditions, “new revelations,” psychology, charismatic ideas, or prosperity teachings—attracting uninformed believers. But the result is that people depart from truth and drift away from Christ. Paul says: avoid such people!

Wrong Motives and Methods

- **Scripture**

- *“For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” (16:18 NIV)*

- **Application**

1. **Motivation:** Paul says, *“Such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.”* This means their motives are wrong. They may work and serve, but not for the Lord—only for themselves. *“Serving their own stomach”* does not mean they want good food, nor that they care about dietary laws (“what to eat, what not to eat”), but that they act **for self-interest**. Their selfishness is heavy; their goal is not God’s glory but personal gain. Some seek praise and reputation. Some seek influence and expand their own following. Some seek material benefit, using their influence to do business, sell things, or gain advantage. We must be faithful to the Lord, mindful of the Father’s work, serving Christ—not “serving our own stomach.”

Wrong Motives and Methods

2. **Method:** These people use “*smooth talk and flattery*”—pleasant words that entice the heart. “Smooth talk” translates *chrestologia*, from *chresto* (“good”) and *logia* (“speech”), meaning “pleasant speech.” “Flattery” translates *eulogia*, from *eu* (“good”) and *logia* (“speech”), meaning “words of praise.” In American funerals, the “eulogy” is based on this Greek word.
- Those who divide the church and lead people away from God speak very attractively. Unlike Paul, whose “*letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing*” (2 Cor. 10:10 NIV), these people always speak charming words and flattering praise. They use appealing speech to win people’s affection, drawing them close and leading them to follow.
 - In normal human relationships, not all words are pleasant. In marriage, parenting, and friendship, there are kind words, but also **honest words, corrective words, and even heated words**. These may not sound pleasant, but they are real. If someone interacts with you and most of what you hear from them is “pleasant talk” and “flattering words,” you must avoid them.

Doxology

- **Scripture**

- *“Now to him who is able to establish you in accordance with my gospel, the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ, in keeping with the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.” (16:25–27 NIV)*

- **The essence of the gospel**

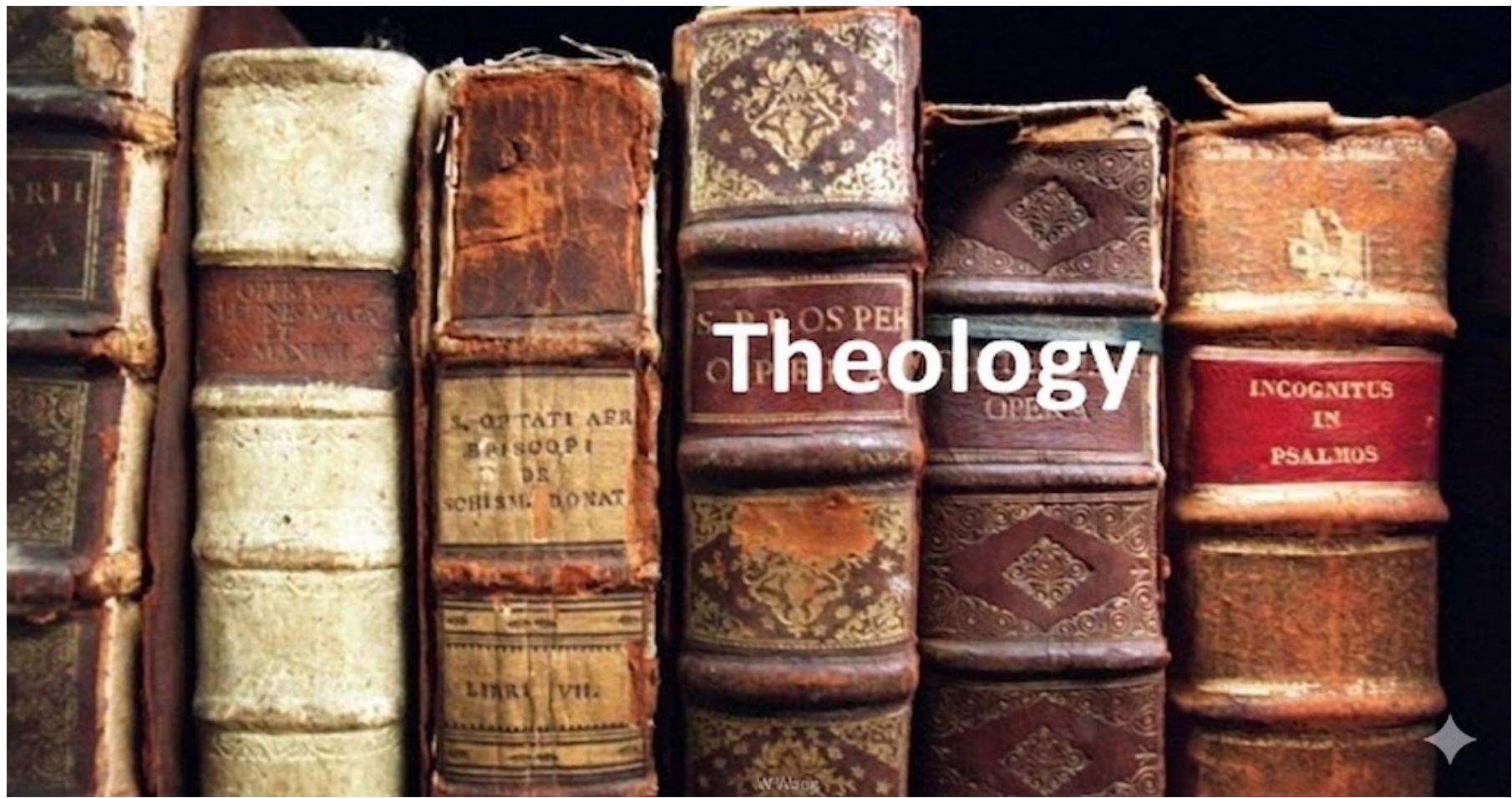
1. **The content of the gospel is Jesus:** At the end, Paul mentions three things—*“my gospel,” “the message I proclaim about Jesus Christ,”* and *“the mystery hidden for long ages.”* These three terms are synonymous—they all refer to the gospel. The gospel is Jesus Christ. The gospel was once hidden but is now revealed through the cross of Christ. To preach the gospel is to *“preach Jesus Christ.”* If one speaks for a long time but does not speak of Jesus Christ, that is not preaching the gospel. Paul was a gospel preacher; he said that regardless of what others wanted to hear, *“we preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23 NIV).*

Doxology

2. **The purpose of the gospel is obedience:** At both the beginning and end of Romans, Paul states clearly that the purpose of the gospel is **“that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith” (1:5; 16:26 NIV)**. Obedience is the mark of a disciple. The purpose of the gospel is to **“make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19)**. Modern evangelism often seeks only a raised hand; Paul’s evangelism sought obedience to the truth. One seeks a decision; the other seeks submission to the Lord of life. These two approaches produce two very different results. Modern converts are often unstable; Paul’s converts stand firm for generations. Should we not reflect on this in the light of Scripture and history?
3. **The result of the gospel is the glory of God:** In the final verse of Romans, Paul gives glory to God through Jesus Christ: **“to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!”** Humanity lost God’s glory through sin. The gospel restores that lost glory through the redemption of Jesus Christ. This glory belongs to God alone. May glory be to the only true God forever. Amen!

Appendix: The Roman Road (God's Plan of Salvation)

1. **The universality of sin**, 3:23: *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (NIV)*
 2. **Christ's cross**, 5:8: *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (NIV)*
 3. **Two outcomes**, 6:23: *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (NIV)*
 4. **How to believe in the Lord**, 10:9: *“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (NIV)*
 5. **Prayer of decision**, 10:13: *“for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” (NIV)*
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Talking About Theology

- *Theology: The study of the nature of God and religious belief.*
- *First, everyone must understand that theology is not God's revelation but human learning. Theology, like biology, zoology, and geology, is a human discipline. The only difference is that its subject is not animals or plants, but God and religion. What is a theology degree? A theology degree is a professional degree, like those for teachers, engineers, doctors, or nurses. It does not mean that someone with a theology degree has a better relationship with God or receives more revelation; it only means that an accredited institution has certified them as qualified for a certain profession.*
- *Christians must understand that theology is not the Word of God. **Theology is human opinion about God**—human writings, human products, human words. When you read Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, Arminius, Karl Barth, Watchman Nee, or Witness Lee, you are not reading God's revelation but their views about God. What is the difference between reading theology and reading Scripture? When you read theology, you build your faith through someone else's insight. When you spend three years studying Scripture, you are reading God's Word, receiving God's revelation directly, and building your faith through God's Word, knowing God through His Word.*

Talking About Theology

- *Theology: The study of the nature of God and religious belief.*
- *Christians must understand that reading theology and reading Scripture are two completely different concepts, producing two completely different results. If you want to know God, read Scripture. If you want to know what Calvin or Arminius thought about God, read theology.*
- *Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Calvin, Arminius, Karl Barth, and Watchman Nee were brilliant men. They studied Scripture diligently, thought deeply, analyzed logically, and organized Christian doctrine clearly and impressively. What Jesus did not say, they said. What Paul did not say, they said. Where Scripture is silent, they developed doctrines.*
- *But because they are human, their views differ and often conflict. For example, Calvin emphasized the perseverance of the saints—once saved, always saved. Arminius said believers can lose salvation if they fall away. Calvin said “regeneration comes first, then faith”—the Holy Spirit regenerates you before you can believe. Arminius said “faith comes first, then regeneration”—you first choose to believe, then experience the Spirit’s new birth.*

Talking About Theology

- *Watchman Nee accepted Dispensationalism, dividing God's dealings with humanity into seven dispensations—human government, law, grace, etc. Other groups say, “Where did you get that? Scripture never divides God's work into dispensations—you invented that.” Different people have different views of the Christian faith. So who is right? Whom should we listen to?*
- ***Key point:** If something is from God, it must be consistent. God cannot contradict Himself. God's way is broad and spacious, able to include all peoples. Man's way is narrow, rigid, exclusive, conflicting, and intolerant.*
- *A person filled with human opinions—exalting Calvin, Arminius, or Watchman Nee—will live out that person's pattern. A person filled with God's Word—exalting Jesus Christ—will live out Christ's pattern. If someone thinks theology is the Bible, or even greater than the Bible, he will live like a confused person. Yet such confused people often feel proud, thinking only those who share their views are right and all others are wrong. Reformed people exalt Reformed theology. Dispensationalists exalt Dispensational theology. Everyone else is wrong; only we are right. Sadly, such frogs in the well are not few.*

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

- *“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord, or instruct the Lord as his counselor?” (Isa. 40:12–13 NIV)*
- *A person uses his own wisdom to “study God,” constructing a system of theology and declaring what he believes to be “truth”—such as total depravity, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and so on. His followers learn, promote, and propagate this theology. After generations of polishing and expansion, it becomes a massive doctrinal system—this denomination, that denomination.*
- *Then someone goes to this or that seminary to “study theology,” spends years there, writes a thesis “required by the seminary but read by no one afterward,” and receives a theology degree. When church members hear that someone with a theology degree has arrived, they assume he is a Bible expert, stand in awe, and listen attentively. But he is not a Bible expert—he is a theologian of a particular school, preaching “truth” through the lens of his theology.*
- *You do not read Scripture, do not listen to God’s Word, but listen to him. It is like going to the Grand Canyon but not looking at the Grand Canyon—locking yourself in a dark room to hear a “specialist” describe his opinions about the canyon, looking at a few photos he took, and then going home. Are you out of your mind?*

Read Scripture First, Then Theology

- *So, do I oppose studying theology? On the contrary—I believe ministers should first receive theological training before serving. There are two reasons. First, theology is a discipline of logic. A preacher cannot rely only on zeal; his thinking must be logically organized so that his words can persuade. **Theology provides logical training grounded in Scripture**, systematically organizing the faith, which helps preaching.*

Second, you must understand theology to protect the flock. If someone invades your church with his theology and lofty arguments, and you do not even understand what he is saying, how can you protect the sheep? A member asks, “Pastor, I heard a preacher say that according to Reformed theology, this passage must be interpreted this way. What do you think?” You are stunned, because you do not even know what Reformed theology is. You stammer, “Well... maybe yes... maybe no...” The member sees you understand nothing and follows someone else.

- **Key point:** *Before studying theology, you must first study Scripture well. Most Christians have never carefully studied the Bible. Some say, “God has called me; I am going to seminary,” even though they have not yet read Scripture well. After several years, they graduate—knowing clearly what Calvin said, but unclear about what Jesus said. Tell me, what will such a person preach? Someone who reads theology but not Scripture—what will he preach?*

Feeding the Lord's Sheep with God's Word

- *Many Christians have a wrong idea: theology is “advanced,” Scripture is “basic.” Anyone can read the Bible, but only special people can read theology. You tell such a Christian, “Jesus said, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” He yawns. You tell him, “Calvinism, point four: irresistible grace.” He widens his eyes, grabs pen and paper, afraid to miss anything. He cannot distinguish between God’s Word and man’s word—what can you do with such a Christian?*
- *That said, when a church is spiritually shallow, the pastor bears responsibility. Pastors must equip the congregation in truth, help them delight in God’s Word, and lead them to study Scripture. Many Christians have no appetite for Bible reading; before leading them to study, you must help them delight in God’s Word.*
- *How do you give appetite to those without appetite? The Lord’s worker must first love God’s Word himself. If the pastor has confidence in Scripture and **“correctly handles the word of truth”** from the pulpit, the congregation sees it. If he diligently studies Scripture, meditates on God’s Word, and feeds the church with it, he will influence the people. But if the pastor does not preach God’s Word—or uses Scripture merely to package self-help and motivational talks about overcoming emotions, circumstances, or relationships—then the congregation will love success and motivation, not God’s Word. Only when Scripture is preached from the pulpit and studied in the pews will the church’s foundation be strong and believers’ spiritual lives grow.*

Honoring Those Who Serve the Lord

- *Whether lay believers, pastors, missionaries, seminary professors, or other workers—all who serve the Lord deserve our respect. Lay believers who give time and money to serve despite work and family deserve admiration. Pastors must preach the Word, shepherd the flock, and lead the church; they need endurance to do the Lord’s work. Seminaries aim to train workers and often operate under financial and staffing shortages—this is not easy.*
- *Whether individuals or institutions, all who faithfully and wisely serve the Lord deserve our love and respect. Those who benefit should express gratitude; do not receive help silently. Even a simple, sincere word of thanks is a great encouragement to those who serve.*
- *Pandemic, political polarization, social division, the Russia-Ukraine war, anti-China sentiment, racial discrimination, global warming, inflation, international instability, rising Christian nationalism, the overturning of abortion laws, the age of big data, AI permeating all aspects of life, increasing secularization, declining Christian population—this is today’s world. The following words are well-intentioned counsel and critique for churches and seminaries amid waves of societal upheaval. Expressing heartfelt respect and gratitude first may remove unnecessary misunderstandings.*

Two Ivory Towers

- *We must face the problem of disconnection: the church is disconnected from society, and the seminary is disconnected from the church. In church you speak of hallelujah, amen, anointing, covering, election... and society understands none of it. What they care about—social justice, the marginalized, sickness and death—you never mention. What they do not care about—Calvin, Arminius, speaking in tongues—you talk about endlessly. You speak what they do not want to hear; what they want to hear, you do not speak. You oppose abortion, oppose homosexuality, oppose immigration, oppose environmental protection, oppose science, oppose the reality of global warming—this they understand. You harbor hatred, hypocrisy, love falsehood, dislike truth—this they also understand. You weaponize your ideology through voting—this they understand. They think: Why should I join such a group? Why should I identify with such a faith? So when they distance themselves from you and despise you, hopefully you understand as well.*
- *Thus, the church—already disconnected from society—officially parts ways with society and drifts farther away. Tell me, how can a church that distances itself from society preach the gospel to society? This inability is seen in the children and families of Christians. Children abandon their parents' faith because their parents said dinosaurs were fake, but they later discover dinosaurs are real. Global warming is real, but parents say it is fake. Parents say Christianity is good, yet Christianity divides society, supports morally corrupt politicians, and attacks those who disagree. Christians cannot distinguish true from false, right from wrong, practice hypocrisy, and speak lies—how do you expect your children to believe?*

Two Ivory Towers

- *Seminaries are vocational schools, just like medical schools, music conservatories, or culinary institutes. Their purpose is to train professionals. In theory, those who graduate from seminaries should be well equipped to serve in the church. In reality, many graduates cannot preach, cannot lead, and cannot meet the needs of the church. After a few years, they must move on. Part of the reason is that seminaries build behind closed doors, designing unrealistic courses and teaching impractical knowledge.*
- *Christians assume that someone ignorant of Scripture will become a Bible expert simply by entering seminary. Wrong. Scripture is learned by reading it yourself, not by seminary instruction. Seminaries offer only limited Bible courses. Someone who does not understand Scripture before entering seminary will still not understand Scripture after graduation. And seminary courses are not all theology—only a few credits are. Other credits are sociology, psychology, counseling, administration... highly theoretical and minimally practical. They fail to connect with society—and even fail to connect with the church.*
- *Thus Christianity has produced two ivory towers: the church's ivory tower and the seminary's ivory tower. The church is an ivory tower within society; the seminary is an ivory tower within the church. Those inside live their own lives, ignoring the world outside. The amusing—no, ridiculous—part is that they loudly claim they want to serve and change the world outside the tower.*

Salt That Has Lost Its Saltiness

- *“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” (Matt. 5:13)*
- *A dish is bland; add salt, and it becomes flavorful. A dish is bland; add salt, and it remains bland. What happened? Not enough salt? Add more—still bland. Something is wrong with the salt. Taste it —ah, the salt has lost its saltiness. No wonder adding it does nothing. Add churches to society, add seminaries, add more and more—taste it, still bland, because they have lost their saltiness.*
- *Calling the church and seminary “ivory towers” may sound harsh, but the intention is kind. Self-isolation is not a survival strategy. Society is changing rapidly; the church’s needs are urgent. If we do not face reality and reform, we will be eliminated by the times. Look at Europe! England is Anglican, Methodist, or Presbyterian. France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland are Catholic. Germany and the Nordic countries are Catholic or Lutheran. Greece is Eastern Orthodox. Outwardly Europe is Christian; in reality, its churches are desolate. European thought and life have long been secularized. Aside from cathedral monuments, true believers are few.*

Those Who Rely on Jesus Christ

- *Will America follow Europe's path? Judging by the yearly decline in believers, America becoming a second Europe seems only a matter of time. Evangelical Christianity—dominated by white evangelicals—creates political storms, yet its influence on society is weakening. Church and seminary attendance continues to fall. For example, Golden Gate Seminary renamed itself Gateway, sold its expensive Mill Valley campus, and moved to cheaper Ontario, California. Southwestern Seminary in Texas sold part of its campus for \$11 million—largely due to financial pressure from declining enrollment.*
- *In contrast, in the days of Jesus and the apostles, disciples traveled from town to town, lived among the people, and preached among the people. They had no church budget, no beautiful buildings, and no seminary graduates. But they studied God's Word and followed Jesus. Their ministry was vibrant and powerful. Crowds came to the Lord—men and women, free and slave, Jew and Gentile. They had no support from high officials; in fact, they were a grassroots movement with no power or influence. Their only reliance was Jesus Christ.*

Those Who Rely on Jesus Christ

- *Augustine appeared 300 years after Peter and Paul; Thomas Aquinas 1,000 years later; Luther and Calvin 1,500 years later; Karl Barth and Watchman Nee 1,900 years later. To Peter and Paul, these men were unknown “later generations.” Peter did not read their writings before preaching; Paul did not read their writings before preaching; the disciples did not read their writings before preaching. They preached better than anyone, and no generation has surpassed them. But you—wealthy, influential, with property and resources—abandon God’s Word, exalt human words, and after all your preaching, few believe. You appeal to political power, causing chaos, yet driving people to despise the church and turn away from Christ. And the church itself? Increasingly secularized—not transforming society, but being transformed by society. Which is better? Which is stronger? Who is right? Who is wrong? The answer is obvious.*

The Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Foundation of the Truth

- *Brothers and sisters, let us diligently read God's Word and adjust ourselves before God. We do not adjust ourselves according to Calvin, but according to the Lord Jesus Christ. If we study theology, it is to increase our equipment, not to build our faith upon it. Scripture is our foundation, not Calvin. May you find God's Word sweet, may your spiritual life be renewed, and your foundation be firm. May your church become a pillar of the truth, building up believers, proclaiming God's Word, and becoming a vessel of blessing.*
 - ***This is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. Beyond all question, the mystery from which true godliness springs is great: He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:15b–16 NIV)***
-