

WHEN CHRISTIANS DISAGREE, PART 1

Romans 14:1–12

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Romans 14:1–12 (NIV)

“Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to 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. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? 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 confess to God.’ So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

Beginning with Romans 12, we started looking at the practical section of Paul’s letter to the Romans. The theme of Romans 12 had to do with love among believers. The theme emerging in Romans 13 had to do with submission of believers to authority of one another. Romans 14 has to do with the theme of tolerance and patience believers practice toward one another. Someone has

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said that the favorite indoor sport of Christians is trying to change one another. This is the chapter that addresses that.

It is evident from reading the beginning of 14 that the main part of the church at Rome is the mature body. It is not the weak saints who are in the majority. The admonition is to the church as a whole, and the church as a whole is evidently mature. They are told to welcome the one who is weak.

As we look at Paul's admonition to the Romans to receive the weak Christian, the legalistic Christian, we must recognize at the outset that there are different forms of legalism that are present in the New Testament. Not always would Paul tell the church, "Welcome the legalistic brother." In fact, in Galatians and in Colossians he would have some very strong things to say to those who sought to pervert the gospel through legalism.

In Galatians, he indicated that those who were legalists in the Galatian churches were indeed perverting the gospel. They were perverting it because they were saying that one is saved on the basis of his own effort, his works, rather than faith and they were bringing the believers back into bondage, back under the Law. Paul wishes that if they didn't stop this, they would be accursed and cut off. These strong words to the legalists in Galatians are a real contrast to the words which he speaks here in Romans 14.

When he writes to the Colossians, he has strong words, also, to say to the legalists that are there, who are observing days and seasons and feasts, and the like. It is evident from reading the Colossian letter that their legalism was bound up with, also, the worship of angels, and with a de-emphasis upon the centrality and the fullness of Jesus Christ. So in the Colossian context, legalism was treated not as from within the faith. But the legalists were treated as they were at Galatia—as coming from outside the faith and perverting the faith.

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The legalists in Rome were not like the legalists in Colosse or the Galatian churches. These were persons who were indeed Christians. It just happens that they were weak in the faith. They were in the faith. And by the way, the Revised Version says: “And for the man who is weak in faith.” The literal is “the man who is weak in the faith.” That is to say, he is indeed a Christian, but he does not have a strong grasp on what it really means to be a Christian.

William Barclay says there are two reasons why this legalist is weak in the faith. One reason is that at heart, even though he’s a Christian, he’s still a legalist. He still hasn’t gotten away from understanding relationship with God in terms of rules and regulations. He has, therefore, an inadequate grasp of the great doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ through grace. That, indeed, salvation is God’s gift and not the reward of our effort of being good. William Barclay also says that the legalist has not yet liberated himself from the belief that if he will work real hard, he can pile up standing with God.

Paul says there is a principle to be observed in receiving this brother who is indeed in the faith, but does not have a real good grasp upon what it means to be a Christian.

The first admonition that Paul gives in regard to the principles of the weak and the strong relating to each other are that those who are weak must be received. “As for the man who is weak in the faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions or vain arguments.” There are several options that the Church can take in regard to the person who is rule-oriented in his Christian life. He’s not perverting the gospel, but he’s continually insisting upon a lot of things that appear to be peripheral to the Christian faith, appear to be in those areas we sometimes call matters of grayness. And insist that instead of there being a gray area, everything is black and white.

The first option that we can have is not the option that Paul recommends here. It’s, “Let the legalistic brother who is in the faith go off and start his own church somewhere so that he can be

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comfortable in his own setting, away from the Christian who is strong in the faith. If we look at Acts 15, we see how the Early Church came to grips with this. There were persons who were weak in the faith. That is to say, they thought it would be wrong and offensive to God if they ate things that were strangled. I submit that your salvation does not rest on whether you eat things strangled or the neck cut off with an ax. But there were some Christians who believed that Christ had saved them, but maybe were not too certain that their standing with God would be all that secure if they ate something that was strangled. Their conscience was so deeply-engrained in regard to abstaining from things strangled that, for them, it was a sin. That idea shows that they had a weak grasp of the faith.

But the Early Church did not say, “All of you people who want to only eat things that are strangled, go off by yourself and start a church. The First Strangled Chicken Church. All the other believers will meet together on the opposite corner at the First Non-Strangled Chicken Church.” No, in the body of Christ, one of the diversities that we are to discover is the diversity that there are differing opinions in regard to some things that, in respect to salvation, really don’t have a bearing. And we allow tolerance and differences to exist. So we don’t say to the person who has strong convictions about every point, “Go off by yourself and form your own group.” We’d only do that if they were perverting the gospel.

The second option is receive them, but keep them at arm’s length. Give them their own Sunday School class or whatever. That kind of option is negated by the verb that is used here by Paul, which is translated “welcome them.” Literally, it means to receive to one’s self. It’s a stronger verb than simply to receive. It means to take to one’s self. The same word is used in Acts 28:2, when Paul is shipwrecked on the island of Malta and the text says, “The natives showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed or received us to themselves. It had

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begun to rain and was very cold.” It was the gift of hospitality that was involved there. So the legalist in the faith is not to be kept at arm’s length.

The third option is to receive the legalist, but go to work right away destroying all of his mistaken notions with strong arguments. Really pound the truth and the liberty of the gospel into the legalist. That is negated by the fact that we’re to receive for the purpose of fellowship, and not for argument. Paul does not want the church to be caught up in these kinds of hassles. Nor does he want us to be involved in such things.

He wants us to take the fourth option. Which is to receive, but to not hassle, the weak over their conviction. Not to get into dispute within the church over these things.

The weak in faith operate strongly by a well-defined sense of conscience. We have known that in regard to conscience, conscience sometimes goes beyond the right and wrongs that are in Scripture. Sometimes conscience is dependent upon what we’ve been brought up with. There’s a basic conscience, which comes from the revealed Word of God in Scripture, which hones us and sharpens us, and about which there can be no difference and no toleration. But there are other matters where a person has a sharp sense of conscience.

One of the quirks of my own conscience is that I was brought up very much with the understanding that playing any games associated with anything that was a card was wrong. In my college days, I happened to discover playing rook in Christian college dormitories, and it wasn’t until my senior year that I actually played a game of rook. But still today, my conscience is weak in regard to handling any cards other than rook cards. I won’t do it.

I was preaching in Yugoslavia and teaching there in the Bible school. The different standard among believers. For example, Yugoslav believers would not go to a soccer game. One of the sharpest legalists in the class that I taught had a well-defined sense of where everything was spiritually. I was lecturing along one day, talking about different standards of conscience from

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culture to culture. I simply said, “Like, for us in America, the part of the church which I come from would be strongly opposed to the consumption, the drinking of alcoholic beverages.” I said, “Beer has never touched these lips.” I had an eyeball fix on him when I said this. As the words were translated, his mouth literally fell open. His wife shot him one of these kind of looks that only a wife can give her husband. Because it was such a common part of their experience that beer was like Coke. I personally have a conscience and conviction against drinking of beer, and I would not encourage anyone to go out and drink it. But among Christians, there is a universal that is forbidden in Scripture, and that is drunkenness.

I find that Christians have different standards on how to use a recreational thing called a ball. If it is a rubber ball that is round with air pumped up in it, in some circles it is ok to dribble it down wood and shoot it through the hoop. If the ball is elliptical in shape and made out of leather and filled with air, it is ok in some quarters to kick that ball up and down the playing field. If it is a small, wooden ball that is hit with a mallet through some iron hoops, it is also ok to engage in that sport. But if it is a smaller wooden ball that is hit with a stick across a green, felt table, that becomes a matter of conscience. Or if it is a larger wooden ball with three holes in it that is rolled down a hardwood floor, in some cases that is also offensive to conscience.

There are a whole lot of areas that describe how the weak person operates. The weak person operates by conscience. We can get into big hassles and can say to persons, just sledgehammer them and say, “You are all wrong. You need to get with it.” Not at all. The weak in the faith are to be received, and received fully, but not to enter into hassles over conscience.

The weak in the faith function this way from a sincere desire to serve the Lord and not be offensive to the Lord. So it springs from good motivation.

Conversely, if the weak in faith operate by conscience, the strong in faith operate by knowledge. They look at the Scripture and say, “All things are lawful.” That was the pet theme of some of

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the believers at Corinth—all things are lawful. But Paul says there's a higher way. The highest way is to be mature in the faith. The mature in the faith operate by love. The mature in the faith may say, "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but let him seek the good of his neighbor" (1 Corinthians 10:23-24).

So the option which Paul presents is that the church is to be diverse enough so as to permit many elements of diversity. If only the people are united firmly enough in a faith worked by love that we're to discover among ourselves that what unites us in Christ is greater than our differences. I have areas of conscience that I still maintain, myself strongly persuaded of. You may not have the same conviction of conscience. But don't denigrate me by all the time reminding me that I am weak in the faith. And I'll try not do that to you in areas—where you have a more sharply-defined sense of conscience—that really don't relate to salvation. Let us exist together as the Lord has ordered.

It seems to me that the Church is always in danger of going off to one polarity or the other. One side of the polarity is the legalist who always reminds us of things we are not to do. The other side is the libertarian who is always telling us all the things we can do. We go from pendulum to pendulum in this regard. The legalist wants holiness without any freedom. The libertarian wants freedom without any holiness. The Lord wants us to see that we're both part of the same Church. There are certain bounds of legalism which, if pushed, become a perversion of the gospel. Just as there are certain aspects of freedom that, if pushed, also become a perversion of the gospel. They both drop off the end of what it really means to be in the faith. There is to be the existence together of the strong and the weak within the Body.

In verses 2 and 3, Paul gives us the temptation of the strong and of the weak. The temptation of the strong, or of the mature, is to despise the weak. One who believes that he may eat anything,

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while the weak believes he can only eat vegetables. Let him who eats, not despise him who abstains. The person who feels no conviction about eating meat, which was the issue in the Early Church. There are two things that Paul sites here—the keeping of days, and whether or not you're a vegetarian. The person who recognizes it's lawful to eat meat and looks at the conscience of his brother who says, "I can't eat meat; I must eat vegetables," is liable to get a little bit irritated with him. That's a form of despising him. That irritation can then pass to ridicule. That ridicule can then pass to outright contempt. Paul is saying, "Keep away from that option if you consider yourself strong and mature in the faith."

The temptation of the weak is that the weak will pass judgment on him who eats—that is, him who eats meat. The temptation of the weak is to criticize, or to be censorious, or outright condemn and say, "I don't know how in the world you can be a Christian and do that."

I'll never forget when I was a sixteen-year-old kid attending a camp meeting. The evangelist was preaching. In that particular era, there were well-defined standards of what women should wear or not wear in regard to cosmetics. This particular evangelist gave the illustration that when farmers painted their barns bright red, it looked beautiful. But when it caught fire, the first thing that began to crack and peel was the old, red paint. He used that as an illustration of if you really get on fire for the Lord, the first thing that begins to crack and peel is you-know-what. If you're strong in the faith, immediately the reaction sets in: irritation, ridicule, contempt.

But on the other hand, if you are weak in the faith—and I have seen this—judgment is passed on persons who didn't exactly meet the standards. "If they're doing that, if the gal is wearing lipstick, then they must not be a Christian because true Christians don't do that." The temptation of the weak to pass judgment on the strong. Isn't this interesting that this wasn't something that came into being in 1950 or 1960 or 1970, but it's always been a part of the church? All the way back to the first century, they've struggled with these problems.

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I think it's great that the New Testament lets us see that the faith produces this kind of diversity among us. We're to overcome this diversity with love toward each other.

Paul, in the last part of verse 3 and through the following of verse 12, gives us some principles.

That if we're strong, we're not to despise the weak. Or if we're weak, we're not to judge our brother. There are four reasons.

I. The first reason, this is an admonition for the strong—we're not to despise because God has welcomed our brother.

That's the clear part of the last phrase of verse 3: "For God has welcomed him." It's his presence in the body of Christ—the fact that he confesses with you that Jesus is Lord and has forgiven his sins, the fact that he sings the songs and shares the prayers and enjoys the testimony of God working in his life, has received the same Spirit and shows the same fruit of the Spirit—is the mark that God has welcomed him. And how dare you unwelcome to the Body whom the Lord has welcomed?

We have tried to say in this church time and time again, our goal is, in this local body, to be a microcosm of the Church wherever it is found. The Church is always in danger of setting up rules which are in addition to the requirements that the Lord has set for entering into the Kingdom. The Church, if I understand the gospel correctly, does not have the liberty to create rules for admission to its membership which are higher than, or beyond, or stricter than, the rules that Christ has set for admission into His spiritual Body. That rule is simply this: If you believe in your heart and confess with your lips that Jesus is raised from the dead and He's Lord, you shall be saved. It's on the basis of that confession that we're constituted part of the true Church. How dare the local church or the temporal church say something beyond that? We cannot refuse to welcome whom the Lord has welcomed. To do such would be an insult to the Lord. Let not the Church refuse whom Christ has received. God has welcomed them.

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So both the weak and the strong are to get this in mind. There are two different kinds of children, but both in the same family.

II. The second reason why we're not to despise, or to judge, is because our brother is God's servant.

Verse 4: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the master is able to make him stand." What Paul is saying here is you're not to have any gloomy views of your brother's chances of being saved, because he differs from you on some non-essential issue. His salvation, after all, is not in your hands. His or her salvation is in the Lord's hands. He doesn't work for you. We are servants together of God. I don't have the right to criticize someone else's employee. It is that employer's right to criticize, correct and reward his own employee. So Paul uses this analogy in the Church. I like Bill Gothard's pen which he passes out with the long letters PBPGINFWMY—"Please Be Patient, God Is Not Finished With Me Yet." That's the attitude we have toward one another as servants of the Lord. We're not going to be able to make someone else stand or fall. It's the master that makes that person stand or fall. So who are we to pass judgment or despise?

III. Thirdly, Paul says the reason we're not to despise or to judge is that both the weak and the strong can be right if their motivation is right.

Verses 5–9. If there's honest conviction, both are right. "One may esteem one day as better than another while another man esteems all days alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind." There are some, even today, who believe that the only day to worship the Lord is Saturday. Others believe that the only day to worship the Lord together as the Body is Sunday. There are others who believe that any day is ok. If we want to make it Tuesday or Wednesday, that's fine. That's our special holy day. There are some, I think, I'd drop off the continuum if

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they say, “Since we worship the Lord every hour of the day, there’s never the need for us to come together as the body of Christ.” I’d say they have perverted the gospel.

But whether you keep it on Saturday or Sunday, I don’t really think the Lord cares. If it is from the sincere conviction of the heart. We are not to despise those who keep the holy day on a Saturday. Neither are we to feel guilty if we keep it on a Sunday. If our heart is right, we are doing it unto the Lord. It’s an honest conviction, and not simply a tradition which somebody has passed down.

Also, we are both right if we’re giving our honor to the Lord. Verse 6 three times uses that phrase, “Doing it in honor of the Lord.” He who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord. He who also eats, eats in honor of the Lord since he gives thanks to God. He who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. In other words, the meat eater who looks at his beautiful steak setting before him on the table, bows his head, and gives God thanks. Also the vegetarian who asks the blessing upon his salad. The point is not for the salad eater to say to the meat eater, “You shouldn’t eat that steak,” but to recognize that before one ate, one truly gave thanks to God for it. If honor is being given to the Lord, then we’re not to pass judgment, or we’re not to despise. It is, indeed, so easy to pass judgment or despise.

Ray Stedman tells the story about hearing of a young girl who had been converted from being a nightclub singer. She was a fresh, young Christian who was asked to sing in a church meeting. She wanted to do her very best for the Lord, so she dressed up the only way she knew how to dress up, and she sang a song that she thought was expressive of her faith. The style of singing she had been taught to sing was the torchy style, so she gave a song that really reflected the style she had sung as a nightclub singer. But she was singing it to the Lord. One of the saints came up to her and said, “How can you sing a song like that and still claim to be a Christian? God would never be happy with a Christian dressed the way you are and singing in the kind of way that

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you're singing." The poor girl was taken aback. She stood there for a moment, then broke into tears and ran. Why did that happen? Because a believer, at that point, was not intuitive or did not have wisdom or discernment to understand the motivation. That, in spite of the way in which it was presented, it was out of the sincere desire to be an honor for the Lord. We ought not to be judging one another in respect to this. Two differing standards. If what is done is being done in honor to the Lord.

I would simply say to those of you who had a liberated or non-liberated conscience, whatever you're doing, when you do it can you really give honor to the Lord in doing it? If you can't give honor to the Lord in what you're doing, then it's time for you to reassess what you're doing. The condition is, can you honor the Lord through it?

Paul also says, in verses 7 and 8, that if Jesus is Lord in life and death, He can, therefore, make us—whether we're weak or strong—in the right. If Jesus is truly Lord of our life. There are some who take verses 7 and 8 and say Paul is not being literal at this point, but symbolic. That "death" is being used to describe the person who is weak. The person who is legalistic sees all death as a form of limitation. They are saying that the way to translate 7 through 9 is to read it something like this, "None of us lives to himself. But if the strong in faith is living, he lives to the Lord. If the weak in faith are dying, they're dying to the Lord. So whether strong or weak, we're the Lord's. For to this end Christ both died and lived again, that He might be both Lord of the weak in faith and the strong in faith." That may be a little bit fanciful way of looking at it, although I think the idea is basically correct. It's the same Lord who's Lord of the strong and the weak. Paul's reminder here is more in the direction to say that we can never escape from the lordship of Jesus Christ. Whether we're living or whether we're dying, we're His. We're His now eternally, since we've come Him. In view of that fact, we're to live life not in condemnation of one another, or in judgment of one another, but under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

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This brings him, then, to the last theme of how to relate to one another. He says, “Each of us must give an account to the Lord” (Romans 14:12). “Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or why do you despise your brother?” (verse 10). Notice how he directs the questions to the person who passes judgment on the weak Christian. The despising is being done by the strong brother who doesn’t like, or ridicules the attitudes, of the weak brother.

IV. Paul’s word is that, “We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God” (verse 10).

The judgment seat is an intriguing theme. In the Greek, it is the word *bema*. When I was in Corinth a year ago, I had the opportunity, in going through the ruins of Corinth, to see the large, high, stone area which was the great stone platform on which the proconsul sat and before which Paul stood. We know in Acts 18 that Paul appeared before the *bema*, the judgment seat of Gallio. It was at the same location I was standing. There was the Roman magistrate sitting up there, and Paul is hauled up before his court. The *bema* was the court. Paul, just after he writes this Roman letter, gets imprisoned. He will later have to appeal to stand before the *bema* of Caesar. Paul says in Acts 25, “To Caesar’s *bema* [or judgment seat] I am appealing.” Paul recognized that beyond the judgment seat of a proconsul, beyond the judgment seat of the emperor, was the judgment seat of God, before whom we will all stand.

In 2 Corinthians 5:10, it is called the judgment seat of Christ. A better rendering of the text in Romans 14:10 is the judgment seat of God. This is a judgment seat before which all of us, as believers, will stand. In fact, where it is used in Scripture it is used to describe the appearance of Christians before the judgment seat of God. There is a judgment for unbelievers. It is taught in Revelation 20:11, where we are told there is going to be a great white throne, and the dead are going to be raised up at the end of the age, and the wicked dead are going to be judged. But this is the judgment seat of Christ. The judgment seat of God.

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What's involved here? Is this the judgment seat to determine whether or not we have been saved? No, that's not what Paul was saying here. When we become a Christian, our salvation is no longer in doubt. We're not waiting to get into the presence of the Lord to figure out whether you made it. We're to have the confidence and assurance that we are saved now. I'm not waiting to be surprised in heaven for the Lord's words, "We played games with you down there. There was this principle that you didn't see or you didn't give adherence to." No, the confession is very simple. If you believe in your heart, confess with your lips, "Jesus is Lord," you'll be saved.

We've already passed from death unto life.

The judgment seat of the Lord, then, is not something that lets us know whether or not we're in the Kingdom. If we're already in the Kingdom, what's the judgment seat for? Paul, with a very clear word to the Corinthians, lets us know what it's for. He talks about appearing before the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 he says: "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames" (NIV).

When we appear before the Lord, if our salvation is based upon Him, it is secure. Our foundation is Him. He's going to assess what we did with the life which He gave to us. If we have built our life upon the things that really don't matter—wood, hay, and straw—things that are combustible, then that is purged and passed away. But if we have built our life on solid things, then that work is going to survive and be blessed.

Paul is simply saying here, "It's impossible for us to judge the motivation of one another. It's impossible for us to judge the secrets of another's heart." So we're to focus in upon the theme of

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the fact that God holds it His responsibility and authority to judge us. We may be sure that God will judge us. This will keep us free from depending upon legalism, for legalism attempts to say we can build our own case with God. And the legalist who's really perverting the gospel must come to grips with the fact that God is going to judge. But also the libertarian, the person who is just doing anything, without regard to conscience. The law of God must also come to grips with this fact that we appear before God's judgment seat.

Knowing that we are to appear before the judgment seat of God causes us, then, to evaluate what we're doing now. So that the idea of teaching that Christians are going to be judged is not to make us fearful of that prospect, but to help us to move that future judgment into our experience right now so we can assess our life and get our priorities straight, if they're not straight, and serve the Lord the way He desires. In fact, we have to ask ourselves. If we, as a Christian, were to see ourselves right now appearing before the judgment seat of Christ and we're to be judged, I daresay that you know, and I certainly know, the areas in my life that are hay, wood, and stubble, and the areas in my life that are gold and silver and precious stone.

What the Lord wants us to do, by giving us this teaching, is to examine—for us to seriously examine—where we're at. Knowing that we're to face the judgment seat of Christ makes us, then, not so much concerned to receive the judgment of a brother, or even pass judgment upon another brother.

This is the first of three parts of the message "When Christians Disagree," because this theme goes right on through the middle of Romans 15.