

THE GRACE AWAKENING STUDY NINE

The Grace to Let Others Be

Romans 14:1–17

Horizontal grace centers on our relationships with others. Relieved from our guilt and shame, we're free from the tyranny of pleasing people. We're free from others' demands and expectations, and they're free from ours. When we demonstrate horizontal grace, we accept others as they are.

—Charles R. Swindoll

SEVERAL years ago, the eyes of the world were drawn to the dramatic rescue of two stranded gray whales. The Alaskan winter arrived early that year, and an ever-increasing covering of solid ice cut off the whales from the open sea. A few kindhearted Eskimos with chainsaws attempted to slice through the ice to preserve a breathing hole for the whales. Media outlets broadcast the Eskimos' valiant efforts, and soon volunteers arrived with heavy machinery and a determination to save the whales.

But the volunteers' energy was soon exhausted. So the National Guard sent helicopters to drop five-ton concrete bashers to break up the ice. Then, in a joint effort with the United States, the Soviet Union dispatched two massive ice-breaking ships to carve a channel so the whales could swim to freedom.

Rescuing the whales required the combined resources of two governments, three weeks of heavy labor, and a cost of more than one million dollars. If humans will go to such lengths to set free creatures of the sea, how much further will God go to break sin's icy grip on us and lead us to freedom!

However, instead of enjoying God's ocean of grace, many Christians are still trapped—not by sin but legalism. Legalism with its layers of restrictions cuts them off from freedom and smothers them with shame. What is needed? Grace . . . not only vertical grace from God to free us from sin but also horizontal grace from us toward each other to free us from the grip of legalism.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Let's begin our study by meditating on a truth that is the foundation for grace-based relationships: "We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other" (Romans 12:5).

Think about the phrase "we are many parts." God did not stamp all of us out of the same mold. He delights in our differences and encourages us to be individuals—unique in personality, interests, gifts, appearance, and style. Shouldn't we encourage individuality too?

Legalism, however, requires that we all be alike, unified in convictions and uniform in appearance. Legalists use *comparison* to measure everyone by a singular standard and *control* to manipulate people through fear, threats, and criticism. Legalists tolerate only one style of music or fashion, one way to manage money, one way to rear children, and so on.

Legalism locks people in a frozen state so they can't be themselves or make their own choices. Grace's first task is to bash holes in the ice formed by comparison and control so that we can breathe and become the unique "us" God designed.

Do you feel trapped by others comparing and controlling you? If so, in what ways? In the space below, tell the Lord what you've been through. And then pray that, through this study, you'll experience God's grace to be you and then set others free too.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

Read *Romans 14:1–17* slowly and thoughtfully, observing carefully the flow of thought. Reading a passage aloud helps to focus your thoughts and tune out distractions.



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Observation: Paul's Instructions for Grace Living

The *Searching the Scriptures* method of observation requires that we take a close look at the words and phrases in a passage. Notice comparisons, contrasts, lists, descriptions, and definitions. Use the following questions as a guide to help you examine our passage in depth.

Romans 14:1–4

What are the two commands in Romans 14:1?

How did Paul describe the two types of Christians in 14:2? Which type was “weak in faith” (Romans 14:1)?

In 14:3, Paul commanded the first type of Christian to “not look down on” weak Christians who have sensitive consciences. Compare this command with the two commands in 14:1. Write these three commands together in one statement that summarizes Paul's instructions to the first type of Christian.

In what way should those who didn't eat certain foods (the “weak”) show grace toward those who did eat certain foods (14:3)? What basis did Paul give for this command (14:4)?



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Romans 14:5–8

According to Paul, those who ate any type of food also worshiped the Lord on any day of the week. They believed “every day [was] alike” (Romans 14:5). What did those with food convictions think about certain days of the week (14:5)? And why did they “worship the Lord on a special day” (14:6)?

Although the two types of Christians differed on food and days of the week, they were aligned at the heart level. What deeply held beliefs united these opposing Christians (14:6–8)?

Romans 14:9–12

In Romans 14:9–12, Paul appealed to the two groups of Christians not to condemn or look down on them but for what important reason?



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Romans 14:13–17

Instead of judging one another, what did Paul say the two groups of Christians should do instead (Romans 14:13)?

What was Paul's personal conviction about food (14:14)?

What guiding principle did Paul follow when eating food in the presence of others with different convictions (14:15–16)?

What characteristics of life in the kingdom of God should guide all our interactions (14:17)?

Now that we've observed what Paul said to these first-century Christians, let's explore the meaning of Paul's words and draw some universal truths that we can apply to our relationships today.



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Interpretation: Some Biblical Guidelines That Magnify Grace

Accurate interpretation of a passage depends on a clear understanding of the cultural context. Although issues about diet and days of the week might not rattle us today, they created extreme tension in the early church. Take a moment to read the background of these issues in a commentary, such as *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. For online study, you may wish to consult lumina.bible.org. Go to this link, and select Constable's Notes on the right column. Read the section "Conduct within Christian Liberty." What did you discover about those with a sensitive conscience about food and days of the week as compared to those who were free to eat anything and worship anytime?

Christian converts from Judaism, which had strict food and Sabbath regulations, were most likely the ones sensitive about diet and holy days. They judged those who ate anything—particularly meat that may have been offered to idols. These legalistic Jewish Christians *condemned* the others: "How can you eat that?" Rather than loving in return, the liberated Christians reacted with *contempt*: "Why wouldn't you eat that?" Condemnation and contempt infected all the relationships and made for a very unhealthy church!¹

What medicine did Paul prescribe for this relationally sick church? A tonic of grace mixed with generous doses of love, dispensed in four guidelines for relationships.

Accept Others

The problem in the Roman church was not a food problem. It was a love problem, an *acceptance* problem. The problem still exists in churches today. Reread Romans 14:1–4, then write down a principle you discover about Christians accepting one another.



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Without the balm of grace and love, a heated reaction can erupt over any contentious issue: music styles, make-up, jewelry, movies, dancing, food, drink, houses, clothes, spiritual practices, and the list goes on. Accepting Christians who don't act like we act or think like we think is basic to letting them be themselves.

Allow the Lord to Direct Others' Lives

Write down a second guideline based on Romans 14:5–8. Focus on how Paul refused to dictate what his readers should do but allowed freedom for the Lord to direct their lives.

“We belong to the Lord,” Paul stated (Romans 14:8). Give people freedom to grow at the pace God leads them, to fail sometimes, and to learn from their own mistakes.

Don't Judge Others

What guideline about not judging others do you discover in Romans 14:9–12?

Freeing others means that we never assume a position we're not qualified to fill, namely, that of judge. We have blind spots. We don't know all the facts. We can't perceive people's true motives. And we certainly don't know God's will for someone else's life.

Express Liberty Wisely

What additional principle about limiting our freedom for the sake of love can you find in Romans 14:13–17?



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One way to show love is to express our liberty wisely by not flaunting our freedom but enjoying it in such a way that doesn't ruin others' faith.

Before applying these principles, let's take one more step in the *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study: correlation.



Correlation: Warnings from Proverbs

Correlating Scripture validates the truth we've discovered in one passage using a text from another passage. What similar instruction did Paul deliver to the Corinthian believers in *1 Corinthians 8:9–13*?

In summary, we magnify grace in our relationships when we accept one another, let the Lord direct others' lives, refuse to judge others, and express liberty wisely—all governed by the rule of love!



Application: Helpful Reminders That Keep Us Balanced

Let's consider a few actions that will put these guidelines into practice.

- *Concentrate on things that encourage peace and assist other's growth.* As Paul said in Romans 14:19, "Let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up."
- *Remember that sabotaging saints hurts the work of God.* When we tear down our fellow believers we "tear apart the work of God" (Romans 14:20).
- *Exercise your liberty only with those who can enjoy it with you.* Keep some liberties private so others don't stumble. That's not deception; that's wisdom.
- *Determine where you stand and refuse to play God in anyone else's life.* What is God doing in your life? When you're totally absorbed with answering that question, you won't compare or control others.



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What additional application points based on the principles from this study can you add?

Reflecting on Romans 14:1–17, which verse or phrase seems to have your name on it as particularly relevant to you?

What is the Lord revealing to you about grace and love in your relationships? How can you respond with practical life change?

Imagine if all your relationships were characterized by the four guidelines we studied in Romans 14. You and those you love would be like the liberated whales swimming in the open sea, free to be the individuals who God designed without the need for comparison or control. Commit yourself now to avoid the traps of legalism and help set others free.

Close your time opening your heart to God's grace. He loves you as no other person can. Breathe in His acceptance and grace so you can live out acceptance and grace toward those you love.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, thank You for Your care, which is constant and overflowing, totally free of comparison and control. Thank You for Your kindness which frees me from those who intend to trap me under restrictions and control me with shame. I am Yours today, released to follow Your will and be the person You created—free to swim in Your ocean of grace. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. In Romans 12:6–21, Paul described in detail the attitudes and behaviors of a relationally healthy church.



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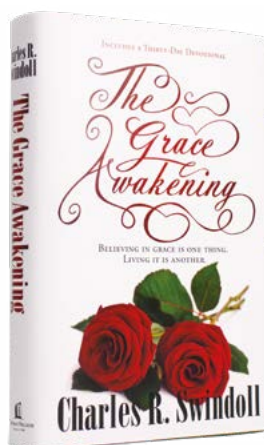
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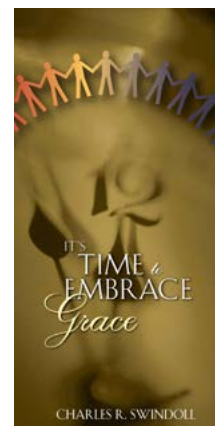
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For the 2019 broadcast, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Pastoral Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.

