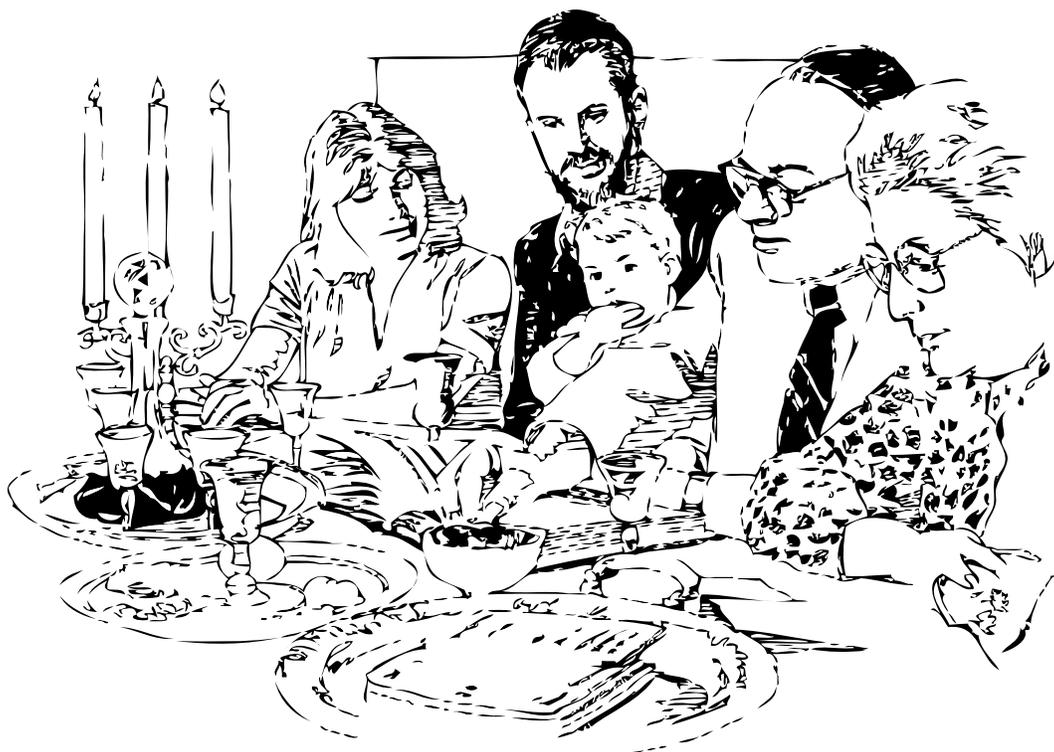


# Matters Of Conscience

*A Study Of Romans 14*



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# Matters Of Conscience

## Introduction

- I. In Romans 14, the apostle Paul discusses the relationship that brethren are to have with each other concerning matters of *personal conscience*.
  - A. He admonishes the *strong in the faith* to be careful in their dealings with those whose faith and knowledge are weak and for the *weak* not to judge those who are doing what God allows.
  - B. In such matters, each brother should be true to their conscience and do what they do as service rendered to, or in honor of, the Lord.
  - C. There is no place for condemning or despising one another in these matters of conscience, for Jesus will be the judge.
  - D. Of primary concern in this passage is not to put a *stumbling block* in a brother's way.
  - E. The importance of being true to one's conscience and not encouraging the weak brother to violate his conscience is the emphasis of the last half of Romans 14.
    1. Things harmless within themselves can destroy those whose consciences do not permit them.
    2. Those who understand the true nature of the kingdom of God will be willing to forego personal liberties to maintain peace and build up their weaker brethren.
  - F. In the days of Paul, some Jewish Christians still held a conscientious commitment to Jewish regulations regarding diet and the observance of days.
    1. They kept the Old Testament dietary laws, eating only ritually *clean* food (Rom 14:14, 20).
    2. They assured themselves that the meat was *kosher* (the animal having been slaughtered in the prescribed way) or, because of the difficulty of guaranteeing this, they might abstain from meat altogether.
    3. As for special days, they would have observed both the seventh-day Sabbath and other Jewish festivals.
- II. The problems discussed in Romans 14 are similar to those discussed in 1 Corinthians 8.
  - A. The church at Corinth was composed of both Jews and Gentiles, and both groups brought some baggage with them into the church.
  - B. Some of these new Christians were former idolaters, freshly converted from paganism (1 Cor 8:1-13).
  - C. Although now rescued from idolatry, their overactive conscience would not allow them to eat meat which, before being sold by the local butcher, had been used in sacrifice to an idol.
  - D. They feared that eating meat that had been offered to an idol would compromise and contaminate them (1 Cor 8:7-8 ESV).

- III. In the Roman letter, Paul does not insist that everybody else agrees with him concerning *days* and *meats*, as he did in the book's early chapters when he discussed the plan of salvation.
- A. Paul described the Roman issues (Rom 14:1) as "doubtful things" (NKJV), "doubtful points" (NEB), "disputable matters" (NIV), or "opinions" (RSV, ESV) on which all Christians didn't need to agree.
  - B. The sixteenth-century Reformers called such things "matters of indifference."
  - C. I prefer to call these items "matters of conscience."

#### Discussion

### I. Instructions To The Brethren

- A. How to treat each other (Rom 14:1-4).
  1. The *strong* understand correctly that God permits all foods.
    - a) Paul does not say that the weak are exhibiting *faith* by their abstaining.
    - b) The *weak* eat only vegetables, probably to avoid the risk of eating unclean foods (cf. Dan 1:8, 10, 12, 16).
    - c) The weak were not vegetarians for health reasons but because it was the only foolproof way of ensuring that they would never eat non-kosher meat.
    - d) The strong should receive and not despise the weak.
  2. On the other hand, the weak are not to judge those whom God approves.
    - a) "Paul's designation for the overscrupulous believer is 'weak in faith,' meaning that this man's faith is not strong enough to enable him to perceive the full liberty he has in Christ to partake. He is not troubled by questions of doctrine but is plagued by doubt as to whether it is right for him to eat some foods (cf. v.23)." (Everett F. Harrison, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, comments on Rom 14:1-4)
    - b) It would have been possible for the strong to ridicule or mock the weak with their delicate conscience.
    - c) The weak were prone to pass judgment on those who felt the liberty to eat anything.
    - d) Paul said the weak must not stand in judgment, for God has accepted the strong believer, and it was not their place as fellow servants to pass judgment on the strong.
    - e) The strong stand or fall before God.
  3. "*The one who eats anything* might take pride in having thought the matter through and freed himself from his fears and compulsions; therefore he might *look down on* his duller, weaker brother, with his self-created fence around his self-created law. But *the abstainer* is more likely to develop a 'holier-than-thou' attitude and *pass judgment* on the other as careless or a libertine." (David Stearn, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, comments on Rom 14:3-4)
  4. Sometimes, even today, some brethren abstain from *lawful things* and become proud of their humility!

5. Paul did not attempt to conceal or disguise what these people were.
    - a) The ones who abstained from eating meat were weak in the faith, immature, untaught, and mistaken.
    - b) Yet they were not to be ignored, reproached, or (at least at this stage) corrected, but rather to be received into fellowship.
  6. We are to *receive* (“welcome” ESV) those who are weak in the faith (Rom 14:1).
    - a) It means to welcome them into the fellowship of the congregation.
    - b) It implies the warmth and kindness of genuine love.
    - c) The word *receive* is used in the New Testament of Philemon giving Onesimus the same welcome he would give to Paul (Phlm 17).
    - d) It is used of the Maltese who *welcomed* the bedraggled, shipwrecked company after they had swum ashore (Acts 28:2).
    - e) The word is used of Jesus, who promises to *receive* His people into His presence in heaven (John 14:3).
- B. The observance of days and the eating of certain foods (Rom 14:5-9).
1. The weak thought that some days were more important than others.
    - a) The reference is not exclusively to Jewish holy days, but to any day a believer might have regarded as especially holy.
    - b) Of course, Jewish believers would have the Sabbath and other holy days of the Mosaic Law in mind.
  2. The strong understood correctly that every day is the same.
    - a) Both views are permissible.
    - b) Each person must follow their conscience.
    - c) Paul considered the Sabbath no longer a binding commitment but a matter of one’s personal conviction.
    - d) If one felt the need to observe special days, this would not exempt them from New Testament commands involving worship “on the first day of the week” (1 Cor 16:1-2; Acts 20:7).
  3. Whether one observes a special day, eats all foods, or abstains from some foods, the important thing is the honor of the Lord and giving thanks to God.
    - a) Fundamental to the whole discussion is the reality that the Christian’s life is not his own.
    - b) Both in life and in death, Christians belong to the Lord, and He alone is their judge.
- C. Do not *judge* each other (Rom 14:10-13).
1. The strong should not despise the weak, and the weak should not judge the strong, for everyone will stand before God, Who will judge all on the last day (Rom 14:3 ESV).
  2. Christ is to be our judge.

## II. Admonitions To The Strong

- A. Do not destroy a brother for whom Christ died (Rom 14:14-18).
  1. Since Christians are not under the Mosaic Law, Paul no longer accepts the view that some foods are unclean (cf. Lev 11; Deut 14).
  2. Still, if anyone thinks certain foods are unclean, they are unclean *for that person*.
  3. The strong in the faith should not cause sorrow to the weak by what they eat but rather should refrain for the sake of the weak.
    - a) They must beware lest they destroy the faith of a brother or sister.
    - b) If the strong do not act in love, the goodness of the gospel may be wrongly identified as evil.
    - c) The kingdom of God centers on righteousness, peace, and joy so that bodily appetites become secondary.
- B. Pursue the things that make for peace (Rom 14:19-23).
  1. Paul urges the strong not to destroy God's work in the weak by eating food that will offend the weak.
  2. He assures the strong that all food is *clean* (an indication that Jewish dietary laws are in view).
  3. Still, even the strong with no convictions against eating such food fall into sin when others stumble and fall away from Christ upon observing how the strong behave.
  4. In Romans 14:22-23, the strong are addressed.
    - a) "The faith that you have" means their faith that they may eat anything.
    - b) They are not asked to surrender their convictions, but they should not behave in a way that injures the faith of others and thereby brings judgment to themselves.
  5. No one should eat unclean food if he doubts the rightness of the activity.
  6. Indeed, anything believers do apart from faith is a sin, for faith glorifies God by trusting Him (Rom 4:20), and a lack of faith dishonors Him.

## III. The Application For Us

- A. The observance of foods.
  1. Consider Jews who obey the gospel of Christ.
    - a) What if they decide to keep kosher after their conversion?
    - b) Is there any harm in that? No!
    - c) Ten years after the church's establishment, Peter still kept the Old Testament's dietary laws (Acts 10:9-15).
  2. Consider Muslims who convert to Christ.
    - a) What if they decide to keep halal?
      - (1) *Halal* is the term used to designate permissible food according to Islamic law.
      - (2) Foods that are forbidden (*haram*) include pork, blood, birds of prey, and animals that have been strangled or beaten to death.
    - b) Islamic dietary restrictions are nearly identical to those of observant Jews.
    - c) Often, when Muslims travel to non-Islamic countries, they eat at kosher restaurants.

3. Consider a Seventh-Day Adventist who becomes a Christian.
    - a) What if they decide to remain vegetarians?
    - b) No part of the New Testament demands that you eat meat!
    - c) However, prayer now makes all foods clean (1 Tim 4:1-5).
  4. Consider a Catholic who obeys the gospel of Christ.
    - a) Is it wrong if they decide to eat fish on Friday?
    - b) When I was in school, we didn't have a choice!
    - c) There is no harm if they abstain from meat on *any* day of the week, including Friday.
  5. The dietary laws of the Old Testament are no longer binding, but James tells us there are still a few restrictions (Acts 15:19-20; cf. Acts 21:25).
- B. The observance of days.
1. Can a Jew keep Shabbat (the Sabbath) after converting to Christ?
    - a) This is precisely the question posed in Romans 14!
    - b) Even after his conversion, Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem for the Day of Pentecost (Acts 20:16; cf. Act 13:9).
    - c) Jewish converts today might even keep the Seder meal (Passover).
    - d) In America, there are many Jews who claim to be Christians, and they have rewritten the Passover Haggadah to honor Christ.
  2. Can a Muslim still observe *Jumu'ah* (Friday prayer)?
    - a) Yes, he can devote any day to prayer, but now he is praying to the God revealed in the Bible, not the Quran!
    - b) He might even fast during Ramadan, as he did before becoming a Christian.
    - c) During Ramadan, Muslims fast during daylight hours; at sunset, they break their fast with prayers and a meal.
  3. Maybe you were brought up in a home that forbade work on Sunday—perhaps you lived in Zion, Illinois, and didn't have a choice.
    - a) Sometimes, people refer to Sunday as “the Christian Sabbath”—the truth is there is no such thing!
    - b) However, if you decide to rest on Sunday, you have not sinned!
  4. Can a converted Catholic keep special days unto themselves?
    - a) Most religious people in America think that December 25 is the birthday of Christ, and they almost universally have some ceremony or observance on Christmas Eve.
    - b) I don't know the day of the week, or even the month, when Christ was born, and the Bible does not give us the date!
    - c) The emphasis of the New Testament is upon the death of Christ, not His birth in Bethlehem of Judea.
    - d) However, if you want to have a special celebration in the privacy of your own home, there is nothing wrong with that!
    - e) I might not join you in it, but neither will I condemn you!

- C. What if you are a Christian and know a brother in Christ is celebrating Christmas as a *religious holy day* in his home?
1. The best thing you can do is to keep your mouth shut—it's none of your business—they are observing the day unto the Lord!
  2. "Don't you know the pagan origins of some traditions people keep at Christmas?"
    - a) Yes, I am well aware that many traditions people keep at Christmas originated in ancient Roman paganism.
    - b) I am also aware that many of the people who are very vocal about "the pagan origins of Christmas" are *very* inconsistent in what they choose to condemn in others!
    - c) It does not bother me that some parts of Christmas originated in paganism, for every day of the week and almost every month of the year has some connection with Norse or Roman mythology.
      - (1) *Sunday* is from Old English and means "the day of the sun."
      - (2) *Monday* is from Old English and means "the day of the moon."
      - (3) *Tuesday* was named after Tyr, the Norse god of war.
      - (4) *Wednesday* is short for "Woden's Day," named after Woden, the most powerful god in Norse mythology (his usual name is Odin).
      - (5) *Thursday* was named after Thor, Odin's oldest son—he was the god of thunder.
      - (6) *Friday* was named after Freya, the Norse goddess of love and beauty.
      - (7) *Saturday* was named after the Roman god Saturn, who also gave his name to the planet.
    - d) In addition, what calendar are you using?
      - (1) The Gregorian calendar we use was named after Pope Gregory XIII and has been used since 1582.
      - (2) The Romans used the Julian calendar, which Julius Caesar introduced in 46 BC.
      - (3) According to the Jewish calendar, we are in the year 5784 (2023 on the Gregorian calendar).
      - (4) When you tell people the date, are you honoring Roman Catholicism, Roman paganism, or Jewish tradition?
  3. Sometimes, you will hear Christians say, "But what if someone drives by your house and sees your Christmas tree? They will think you are observing a Roman Catholic Holy day."
    - a) What if they drive by and see nothing?
    - b) Will they assume I am an atheist?

4. I do not observe any religious *holy day*, but I do celebrate many secular *holidays*—such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Veteran’s Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, and, if the mood strikes me, Groundhog Day.
  - a) God prohibits *the church* from establishing holy days (Gal 4:9–11).
  - b) God does not prohibit *you* from reading the calendar or observing traditions and customs that are a part of our culture.
  - c) Some preachers leave you with the impression that if you smile during December, you have somehow sinned—and heaven help you if you wish someone “Merry Christmas.”
  - d) Christmas is a civil holiday, not a religious holy day.
    - (1) If you don’t believe me, ask my Jewish neighbors—they have the second-largest Christmas display in my neighborhood.
    - (2) In America, many non-religious people celebrate Christmas.
  - e) We celebrate many civil holidays in our home—if you don’t, that is fine, but mind your own business and leave me alone.
  - f) I will not complain if *you* choose to sit in your house during December and frown all day—I probably won’t even notice the difference!
  - g) I don’t know anyone who can get through December without observing some part of Christmas (meals, football, travel, lights).

*Conclusion*

- I. I am grateful that I am not obligated to keep the Old Testament’s dietary laws, festivals, and holy days.
- II. I am also grateful that, as a Christian, I can observe and keep special days “unto myself” or “unto the Lord” if I so desire.



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