

The Gospel in Romans: Romans 14:1-4

INTRODUCTION

1. Romans 14 (technically 14:1-15:13) may be the central passage in the NT for discussing Christian unity in diversity.
 - There is a lot of “unity in diversity” that isn’t biblical unity at all, compromising the gospel for the sake of peace.
 - It is very important whenever we discuss fellowship and unity that we keep the gospel primary and pure.
 - Nevertheless, Christians and churches are often divided by needless bickering, carnality, and selfish behavior.
 - The final section in Paul’s practical exhortation concerning the gospel is helpful in correcting these issues.
2. Summary of central idea: DO NOT BE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS, BUT ABOUT DOING WHAT IS RIGHT BY YOUR BROTHER.
 - My brother’s welfare, including and especially a weaker brother, should have greater priority than my liberty.
 - This is radical in the context of American culture, but it is one of the governing assumptions of NT fellowship.
3. There is a lot to learn and incorporate into our thinking in this section (14:1-15:13), so we will take our time with it.

I. THE BASIC INSTRUCTION AND CONTEXT (1-2)

A. *What the Stronger Brother(s) Are to Do (1)*

1. The person who is described as *weak in faith* is not a person who lacks faith in Christ.
 - Paul is speaking to believers about their relationship with other believers. **vv. 3, 6, 8, 10, 15, 17**
 - He is *weak in the faith* (KJV, NET), i.e. he lacks proper understanding and confidence in aspects of it.
2. Such a person is to be welcomed or received into the fellowship of the saints, not cast out of it.
 - This forbearance is in sharp contrast to Paul’s uncompromising opposition to false teachers.
 - Paul yields no ground to those whose doctrine compromises the gospel. **16:17-18; Gal. 2:4-5; 5:1-4**
 - If this was a brother who sought to add or bind his views to the gospel, he would be disciplined.
 - Clearly the person in view here is not a threat to the gospel or to the purity and peace of the saints.
3. Clearly the weaker brother here is not weak in his faith in Christ or weak in his self-control.
 - It is because of the strength of his faith in Jesus that he feels compelled to go to such extremes.
 - His devotion is commendable to this extent: he gladly submits to whatever devotion is required.
4. Nevertheless, it is in his understanding of the faith that he is weak; he is insufficiently trained in truth.
 - But Paul doesn’t tell the stronger brethren to “straighten out the weak;” rather, to receive him.
 - *Welcome him*, but not for the purpose of quarreling about matters which don’t really matter.
5. The problem for the weaker brother is not so much ignorance as it is a troubled conscience.
 - He may or may not understand these restrictions on food do not matter, but they matter to him.
 - Paul’s concern is not that he be corrected and set straight but that he be loved and encouraged.

B. *The Basic Context of the Conflict (2)*

1. Verse two provides a basic outline of the conflict that helps us begin to understand what is at issue.
 - Though the discussion will be seen to include holy days and wine, the basic issue concerns meat.
 - Some among the Christians in Rome eat meat while others completely abstain; they are vegetarians.
2. One of the most common mistakes made in Romans 14 is conflating this context with 1Corinthians 8-10.
 - There is no doubt the two passages have *much* in common and teach complementary principles.
 - But the context of the two passages is very different; conflating the two is a superficial reading.
 - 1Corinthians describes a disagreement over meat that had been offered/dedicated to an idol.
 - The discussion seeks to define to what extent a Christian may participate in pagan culture.
 - Romans 14 has a very different setting: the conflict is entirely contained within the church.
 - Here the issue is more ascetic and explicitly religious; not culture but religious custom is in view.
3. A number of historical possibilities have been suggested to explain the setting of this text.
 - Converted idolaters (Gentiles) whose conscience is troubled by meat sold by idol worshippers.
 - This is certainly the background of 1 Corinthians 8-10, but it does not fit the description here.
 - The celebration of holy days and the drinking of wine are not consistent with this suggestion.
 - Ascetic Christians who believe extreme forms of self-denial and restriction are a path to holiness.
 - Asceticism was definitely a problem in the early church (cf. Col. 2:18-23), and it may be involved.
 - But the observance of days does not seem consistent, and ascetics usually are willful, not weak.
 - Legalists who misunderstand the gospel and believe rule-keeping is necessary for justification.
 - This cannot be the case because of the parallels in Acts 15 and Galatians where Paul addresses this.
 - Paul handles those who compromise or deny the gospel very differently than what he says here.

- Jewish Christians whose consciences are not fully freed or sufficiently trained by the gospel of grace.
 - This seems to be the view of most scholars and is, by far, the most likely explanation of the context.
 - Some Jews who truly believed and knew the gospel would still wrestle with certain Mosaic laws.

“The Judaizers of Galatians were legalists who imagined that they could put God under an obligation by their obedience and insisted on the literal fulfillment of the ceremonial part of the law as necessary for salvation. With such legalism Paul could not compromise. But the possibility which we have in mind here is that the weak, while neither thinking they were putting God in their debt by their obedience nor yet deliberately trying to force all other Christians to conform to their pattern, felt that, as far as they themselves were concerned, they could not with a clear conscience give up the observance of such requirements of the law as the distinction between clean and unclean foods, the avoidance of blood, the keeping of the Sabbath and other special days.” (C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, p. 337)¹

- Imagine living with certain dietary restrictions or religious patterns only to become a Christian.
- These habits do not change overnight, nor does a well-trained conscience quickly adjust.
- Just like Daniel, these brethren went to extremes to avoid defilement. (cf. Dan. 1:8-16)
- The weakness was not in their faith in Christ; they didn’t deny the gospel or seek to add to grace.

“*Faith* here means, persuasion of the truth; a man may have a strong persuasion as to certain truths, and a very weak one as to others. Some of the early Christians were, no doubt, fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, and yet felt great doubts whether the distinction between clean and unclean meats was entirely done away. This was certainly a great defect of Christian character, and arose from the want of an intelligent and firm conviction of the gratuitous nature of justification, and of the spirituality of the gospel. Since, however, this weakness was not inconsistent with sincere devotion to Christ, such persons were to be *received*.”

(Hodge, *Romans*, p. 647, emp. in original)

II. THE EXPANDED INSTRUCTION AND CONTEXT (3-4)

A. What Both Parties Are Not to Do (3)

1. Both the strong and the weak have responsibilities to each other, though especially so for the strong.
 - Those with greater understanding and greater liberty always have a greater corresponding duty.
 - But the “weak brother” is not off the hook; we will have much to say about abuses of this passage.
2. The stronger brother who eats freely is not to despise or view with contempt the one who does not.
 - How tempting it can be to look down on sincere brethren whose conscience is stricter than ours!
 - Far more important than our personal liberties is the responsibility to love and support brethren.
3. The weaker brother who cannot eat freely is not to pass judgment on the one who does.
 - Why? Because God has welcomed him. The stronger brother is not condemned; he trusts in Christ.
 - How easy it is to despise those whose commitment to holiness seems far less than our own!
4. This passage calls for discernment in distinguishing issues essential to the gospel from those that aren’t.
 - Paul is not suggesting a gospel of works and a gospel of grace can or ever should co-exist.
 - That question is ably dealt with in many other passages of Scripture; that is not the issue here.
5. The challenge is recognizing issues on which brethren disagree but are, nevertheless, accepted by God.
 - The question of what is appropriate to eat was a big deal both to the strong and to the weak.
 - Either brother (or both) could imagine this as a “gospel issue,” one over which to break fellowship.
 - The strong brother may seem to be an antinomian (against God’s law) to the weak, and the weak brother may seem to be a legalist to the strong. Both would be serious sins requiring discipline.
6. But Paul is clear: fellowship is not to be broken in this case; it must be maintained and protected.
 - The reason is God’s acceptance of each one. That would not be so if the gospel was compromised.
 - What we have in common in Christ should outweigh my self interest in my rights or my scruples.

“If God has not made the point in question a term of communion, we have no right to make it a ground of condemnation.” (Hodge, *Romans*, p. 649)

¹ I would take issue with how Cranfield characterizes some of the related questions (e.g. the eating of blood; which is explicitly prohibited in the Noahic, Mosaic, and New Covenants; and the keeping of the Sabbath, which continues in the New Covenant albeit with important changes from the Mosaic observance of the seventh day). But I believe his basic analysis of the historical context is accurate and his description of it is very helpful. –JME

B. *The Bigger Context of the Conflict (4)*

1. There may be no teaching in the NT more misunderstood and misused than that on judging others.
 - The NT sternly admonishes unrighteous and hypocritical judgment. (cf. Matt. 7:1-5; John 7:24)
 - It also illustrates and enjoins righteous judgment within the body. **1Cor. 5:11-13**; cf. Matt. 18:15-17
 - Too often we judge when and where we shouldn't while failing to judge when and where we should!
2. A major part of balancing our responsibilities with regard to judging others is remembering who we are.
 - You are not God, and it is not for you to sit in judgment of the world and decide who lives or dies.
 - On the other hand, you are a servant of God, and we must faithfully confess all that He has said.
3. In this matter, the weak and the strong serve the same master and are subject to His ultimate judgment.
 - It is not my job, ultimately, to "fix" my brother; God will ultimately choose to do that or not.
 - It is my job to recognize him as my brother, to love and support and encourage and help him.
4. The judgment of God is a huge factor in this entire chapter, and Paul will speak of it again very soon.
 - If my brother's practice endangers him when he is judged by God, I should be quick to correct him.
 - But if our differences do not extend to the jeopardizing of his soul, I should not act as if they do.

"How liberal and how faithful was the apostle! He would concede everything, and become all things to all men, where principle was not at stake; but when it was, he would concede nothing for a moment. What might be safely granted, if asked and given as a matter of indifference, became a fatal apostasy when demanded as a matter of necessity or a condition of salvation." (Hodge, *Romans*, p. 650)

5. The acceptance commanded by Paul is in view of God's acceptance of both brothers in the Lord.
 - It is not an unconditional or uncritical acceptance of anyone and everything without repentance.
 - The challenge in applying this is recognizing what does and does not threaten the gospel!

"There is a similar need for discernment today. We must not elevate non-essentials, especially issues of custom and ceremony, to the level of the essential and make them tests of orthodoxy and conditions of fellowship. Nor must we marginalize fundamental theological or moral questions as if they were only cultural and of no great importance. Paul distinguished between these things; so should we." (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, p. 358)

6. We need wisdom and grace to recognize *brothers* with whom we disagree are still brothers in the Lord.
 - This is not to minimize the need for sound doctrine; it isn't saying what we believe doesn't matter.
 - It is saying the bond of love and peace and unity created in and by Jesus Christ matters very much.
7. What text is the weak brother violating? He is not contaminating the gospel. He is not causing division.
 - He is not confusing obedience with his justification. He knows he is saved by grace thru faith alone.
 - He is not binding his scruples on others, not will Paul allow him to do so. So where is his sin?
8. I am my brother's brother, not his God, not his judge, and I am not ultimately responsible for his soul.
 - I am responsible for loving him and helping him, admonishing and encouraging him.
 - But ultimately God will judge us all, and if we are saved, it will be God who did that as well.

PRAYER OF REFLECTION

O Lord, we come confessing our difficulty in rightly applying this passage. We have often judged brothers in ways we shouldn't have, and we have far too often failed to judge in cases where we should. We come to this text as those who have often failed, but also as those who want to be obedient to all that you say. We want to be as passionate about purity of doctrine as we are about preaching to the lost, and we want to be as passionate about working for peace among our brothers as we are about promoting sound doctrine.

Help us, Lord, give us the wisdom and understanding and insight we need as we walk through this passage in the coming days and weeks. Give us grace to be at peace and to work for it. Give us strength never to compromise the gospel, but to contend earnestly for it. Above all, O God, be glorified in us and through us. Use us for Your will, use us up in Your service, and save us in the end. In Jesus' name we do pray. Amen.