

# ROM. 14:1 – 15:13

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## VI. A Plea for Peace Among Jew and Gentile Christians (14:1-15:13)

### Background

The most likely scenario for the founding of the church in Rome is that Jews, who were converted on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:10), brought their faith in Jesus back with them to their home synagogues. By the time of Romans, however, the church was predominantly Gentile.

What probably happened is that "God fearers," Gentiles who were interested in Judaism and attended the synagogue without becoming Jews, were the first Gentiles to be attracted to the faith. When Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in A.D. 49, this Gentile element became dominant. Jewish Christians who returned after Claudius' death in A.D. 54 found themselves in the minority. Recall that Paul is writing this letter from Corinth around A.D. 57.

The O.T. prohibited Israelites from eating certain kinds of meat (Leviticus 11, 20:25; Deut. 14:3-21) and any meat not slaughtered in such a way as to drain the blood (Lev. 17:10-16, 19:26; Deut. 12:15-25), while only Nazirites and priests on duty were required to abstain from wine (Num. 6:2-4; Judg. 13:4-5; Amos 2:11-12; Lev. 10:9). Scrupulous Jews would sometimes avoid all meat and wine when they were in an environment where they could not be sure how it had been prepared or used beforehand. These dietary rules and observance of holy days, especially the Sabbath, were considered very important matters of Jewish faithfulness.

When Jews became Christians, it was difficult for them to accept in their hearts that it was O.K. to eat the things they had long been taught were offensive to God and to accept that the prescribed holy days were not distinctively sacred. It was also hard because those rules were an important social link with their fellow Jews. This tension shows up in many places in the N.T.

Some Jews insisted that people must submit to the Mosaic law, in all its particulars, to be saved in Christ (e.g., Acts 15:1, 5). These are, of course, the Judaizers whom Paul so fiercely opposed in Galatians and elsewhere.

Others continued to practice ritual aspects of Judaism as a matter of personal conscience, without making it a test of salvation. Even among this group, however, there was a tendency to think that those not following the law were less faithful or less devoted to God, to hold them somewhat at a distance. Conversely, there was a tendency among those not following the law to look down on the lawkeepers as unenlightened and arrogant.

A. The strong and weak must receive one another (14:1-12)

1. Paul tells the Gentile majority that they are to welcome or receive the one who is "weak in faith," meaning the Jewish Christian who is weak in his grasp of the implications of the faith. They have underdeveloped convictions about what the faith allows.

a. Paul says these weak Christians are not merely to be tolerated but are to be accepted into the fellowship of the family of God.

b. Moreover, they are to be accepted with the right motivation and spirit. They are not to be received provisionally for the purpose of quarreling with them over their misguided convictions. That doesn't mean that teaching them is forbidden; it means that they are not to be received with the ulterior motive of setting them straight.

2. Those whose faith is strong enough to eat meat are not to despise the law-observing Jewish minority, but neither is the Jewish minority to judge those who eat meat, for God has welcomed them. Since God accepts the meat eaters, then so must the Jewish Christians. After all, it is the Lord's judgment of his servant that counts, and the meat eater will stand in the Lord's approval.

3. As I've said, Jewish and Gentile Christians differed in the observance of holy days and in the eating of meat. The scrupulous Jew considered certain days, especially the Sabbath, as a distinctively holy day, whereas the Gentile believer considered all days equal in holiness. The scrupulous Jew also considered it wrong (or at least inferior or less pious) to eat meat or drink wine that may be ritually unclean. Paul says that either practice is acceptable as long as it is done with a clear conscience.

a. The practices of both the strong and the weak are acceptable to God because *neither is sinful*. The one who observes holy days and abstains from meat and wine because he erroneously, but sincerely, believes it is God's will to do so is doing more than the Lord requires by restricting his freedom. The one who correctly understands that the ritual or ceremonial aspects of the law are not binding on the Christian, is enjoying his freedom in the Lord. It is like circumcision: one is free to do it, but it is not sinful not to do it.

b. When something is sinful, however, it doesn't become acceptable just because the one doing it believes it is not sinful. Some in Corinth justified eating sacrificial food at the cultic meals in pagan temples; they even pressed for the right in the name of knowledge, but Paul would have none of it (see esp. 1 Cor. 8:1-13 with 10:14-22). It is only when something is a matter of indifference to God that one's conscience is the controlling guide.

c. Of course, the scrupulous Jew believes in his heart that this is a matter of God's will (not a matter of indifference) and that his brothers are just not mature or pious enough to see it. In this case, we know the scrupulous Jew is wrong because Paul tells

us so, both implicitly, by the fact he labels the Jews "weak in faith" and leaves the issue as a matter of conscience (v. 5), and explicitly (vv. 14, 20).

d. Two facts limit the usefulness of this text in dealing with current disputes among Christians.

(1) First, we have no apostle or inspired interpreter to answer definitively whether a disputed matter of personal conduct is in fact a matter of indifference to God. For the Christians in Rome, the issue was how they would treat one another in light of *the fact* revealed by the Spirit through Paul that consuming ritually contaminated meat and wine was a matter of indifference to God. For us, the issue often is how to treat one another in light of *an unresolved dispute* whether the conduct is a matter of indifference to God.

(2) Second, Paul is here addressing matters of personal conduct (eating meat, drinking wine, and esteeming certain days), not corporate worship practices. There is a difference between these two in that one who fails to persuade a brother that some aspect of his personal conduct is contrary to God's will has no concern that he is a participant in that brother's conduct. His question is whether he should continue to receive that person as a brother despite the disagreement. But if corporate worship is a communal enterprise, something offered to God as a whole by a united body of believers rather than separate offerings by individuals, then we all share in how that worship is conducted – it is *our* worship. If half the congregation strums guitars or blows police whistles, those not engaging in that conduct are implicated in it in a way they would not be if that same conduct was done personally or privately. That's why worship is such a sensitive issue.

e. With those limitations noted, what about disagreements today over Christian ethics? How are we to treat one another when we disagree over whether certain personal conduct is acceptable to God, given that there is no apostle to assure us that the conduct is in fact a matter of indifference to God?

(1) There is no easy answer to this, and there are many difficult cases, but the end of v. 3 seems crucial – "for God has received him." That says to me that before we can rightly refuse to accept a brother for engaging in conduct that he contends is acceptable to God, we must conclude that the conduct is condemned with sufficient clarity to warrant the presumption that engaging in it a denial of Christ's lordship.

(2) The question, it seems to me, is not whether I'm convinced that the conduct in question is wrong but whether I'm convinced that a "reasonable" or "good faith" handling of the word requires that conclusion. It's one thing to disagree over whether things like social drinking, dancing, or attending R-rated movies is a matter of indifference to God; it's another thing to disagree over whether homosexual conduct is a matter of indifference to God.

4. Paul's suggestion that the observance of "holy days" is a matter of indifference to God raises several issues.

a. Is Paul denying that Sunday is an appointed day for Christians to gather for corporate worship?

(1) I don't think so. After all, Sunday is called "the Lord's Day" in Rev. 1:10, which shows that it is somehow distinctive from other days. In 1 Cor. 16:1-2 we see that Paul told both the Galatian churches and the Corinthians to set aside a sum of money for the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem on the first day of each week. And we see in Acts 20:7 that the saints gathered together on the first day of the week specifically to take the Lord's Supper ("to break bread").

(2) What Paul is saying is that, under the new covenant, the Jewish practice of considering certain days as distinctively *holy* is a matter of indifference to God. No day is holier than another to those in Christ; rather, all days are equally holy. So Christians are not obligated to observe the Sabbath or other Jewish holy days. The same truth is indicated in Gal. 4:9-10 and Col. 2:16-17. That means that those who seek to bind Sabbath observance on Christians are wrong, and if they are making it a test of salvation, they are lost.

(3) That the "Lord's Day" is an appointed day of Christian worship does not mean it is a more sacred day in the sense the Sabbath was a more sacred day. I realize that some believe Sunday is a Christianized version of the Jewish Sabbath, but I think that is incorrect. As Andrew T. Lincoln comments ("From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982], 389-90):

[T]he Lord's Day need not be understood in terms of a sacred day. . . . The day can be said to be the Lord's because it is the appropriate day for worshipping Him, and this is significantly different from the view that sees the day, by analogy with the Jewish Sabbath, as a full twenty-four hour period belonging to the Lord in a distinct way from that in which all the Christian's time belongs to the Lord. Whereas the latter is in conflict with the sentiment approved in Rom. 14:5, the former need by no means be. There is a sense in which all of life should be a prayer, and yet a recognition of this does not detract from the need for specific prayer at specific times. Similarly the notion that all of one's time is devoted to the Lord does not detract from the necessity of specific worship at specific times. To claim that specifically Sunday is the appropriate day for a gathering of the Christian community for worship is not to imply that somehow in itself that day is holy.

b. Is Paul saying that Christians are free to make up their own holy days and observe them? I don't think so. The holy days he was speaking about had been prescribed by God in the O.T. It is one thing for the Jew who had been trained in the law all

his life to feel that observing these days was an honor to God; it is another thing altogether to feel that days not appointed or sanctioned by God can be observed in honor to him. We are not in the same position as those Jews whose consciences were caught in the salvation-historical shift wrought by Christ.

c. What about Jewish converts today? Would their observance of holy days and food laws still be a matter of indifference to God? It may be that more is expected in light of the completed revelation, and I would certainly try to teach them, but maybe they could have the same hyperactive conscience as the Jews of Paul's day. In any event, they must be careful not to bind their weak conscience on other believers, and they must not adopt other elements of the law that are inherently contrary to the gospel.

5. The Christian must follow his conscience because he or she lives to please the Lord, not his fellow believers. We are the Lord's from start to finish, and every aspect of our lives, even our death, is lived under his lordship. Christ's lordship is so total that it includes both the dead and the living.

6. Refusing to accept one another because of disputes over matters of indifference to God is absurd in light of the fact we will each answer to God not only for our practices but also for our refusal to receive one another.

#### B. Do not cause your brother to stumble (14:13-23)

1. Paul tells the Jewish and Gentile Christians that rather than judge each other, they ought to decide (or judge) not to place before their brother or sister a "stumbling block" or a spiritual trap ("cause of offense"). In other words, we are not to do something that will lead to the spiritual downfall of our brother or sister. It becomes clear in the following verses that Paul is speaking specifically of the differences between Jewish and Gentile Christians regarding the old covenant food laws.

2. The fact of the matter is that no food is "unclean," meaning ritually defiled as defined by the Mosaic law. Those aspects of the law have no continuing validity. Indeed, the Lord himself taught this, as Mark points out in Mk. 7:19b. But that is not the end of the story.

3. The Jewish Christians, whom Paul labels weak in faith, have not been able to fully internalize this truth. Their consciences have been so firmly trained regarding the Mosaic food laws that many of them cannot escape the sense it is wrong to eat meat or drink wine that may be ritually unclean. Because of that personal conviction, they would be sinning if they consumed this kind of food or drink. If you believe God forbids you to do something, your doing it dishonors God because it says you value that thing more than you value pleasing God (see v. 23).

4. Paul says to the Gentile majority that certain ways of exercising their right to eat meat and drink wine may lead their Jewish brother or sister into sin by pressuring

them to act contrary to their (albeit hyperactive) conscience. And that would not be consistent with the cardinal Christian virtue of love.

5. Paul goes further and commands them not to exercise their freedom to eat in such a way that it will "destroy" their weaker Jewish brethren for whom Christ died. They are not to let their good liberty be reviled, which is what would happen if they exercised it without regard for the tender consciences of their brethren.

6. You see, the kingdom of God in which we participate is not essentially a matter of eating and drinking but a matter of righteousness, peace, and joy that are produced by the Holy Spirit. Here I think Paul is referring to moral living, support of and harmony with fellow Christians, and joy in the life and fellowship with which God has blessed us. The one who serves Christ with these priorities on straight is pleasing to God and, rather than being blasphemed by the weak, is esteemed by them.

7. In vv. 20-22 Paul rephrases the same points he made in vv. 13-15. The believer should not eat meat, drink wine, or do anything else when to do so will harm his brother or sister by pushing them to act ahead of their conscience. The strong should not exercise their convictions in their weak brothers' faces, thereby placing a stumbling block in their path, but should abstain in those situations. That is what it means in v. 22 to keep the convictions (faith) you have to yourself before God. Since Paul clearly stated that all food is clean, he obviously is not forbidding all teaching of the weak. However, even the teaching regarding such practices must be done with care not to "push."

8. In v. 22b-23 Paul says blessed is the strong believer whose conscience does not condemn him when he exercises his liberty, but the weak believer who eats with doubts about its propriety is sinning and is therefore under God's condemnation. What is to happen is that the weak are to have their consciences enlightened, and then they can follow the strong in exercising Christian liberty together.

### C. The example of Christ (15:1-6)

1. Rather than the strong pleasing themselves by insisting on the unfettered exercise of their liberty, they ought to bear the weaknesses of the weak, meaning they ought to ease the burden of the weak by accepting them and doing what love requires toward them.

2. Each of the strong should please his weak "neighbor" (fellow believer) for the neighbor's spiritual benefit, which results in the growth and solidarity (edification) of the community of faith. For even the Christ did not please himself but went to the cross where he bore for others the ultimate insults against God. As Cranfield remarks on v. 3:

The purpose of the quotation [of Ps. 69:9] is to indicate the lengths to which Christ went in His not pleasing Himself. If He, for men's sakes, was willing to bear, as one element of his sufferings, the concentration of all men's hatred of God, of all their futile, inanely contemptuous, insolence against God, how

absurdly ungrateful should we be, if we could not bring ourselves to renounce our self-gratification in so unimportant a matter as the exercising of our freedom with regard to what we eat or whether we observe special days – for the sake of our brothers for whom He suffered so much!

3. Having quoted Ps. 69:9, Paul reminds them that the Scriptures were written for their instruction, so that with endurance and by means of the encouragement provided by the Scriptures, they might remain steadfast in their hope. Though written in the past, it is God's word for us today.

4. Verses 5-6 contain a prayer of intercession that Paul offers to God and records for the benefit of the Roman Christians. It serves as an indirect way of exhorting them. His prayer is that they may have a "like mind" among themselves, meaning that, despite their differences over food laws and holy days, they might remain united in their devotion to the Lord and to serving him in the world. Only when such unity exists are we able to glorify God in the way he deserves to be glorified. Division over matters of indifference diverts the church from its purpose.

#### D. Final appeal (15:7-13)

1. Paul urges the saints to accept one another as fellow members of a family because they have been received by Christ and therefore *are* fellow members of a family, the family of God. This kind of acceptance and unity redounds to the glory of God.

2. They also are to receive one another because Christ has acted to bring God's blessings to both Jews and Gentiles in fulfillment of Scripture.

a. Christ became a servant of the Jew (e.g., Mat. 15:24 – he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel) in order to show that God is faithful, which he did by fulfilling the promise of blessing that God had made to the Jewish patriarchs.

b. He also became a servant of the Jew in order that the Gentile might glorify God for the sake of his mercy through their subsequently being grafted into the people of Israel.

c. In vv. 9b-12 Paul quotes various Scriptures to show that the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews in the praise of God has always been part of God's purpose.

3. Paul rounds off his exhortation to the weak and strong with another prayer report. Paul prays that, despite their differences, they will be filled with joy and peace in their believing, because it is only in this kind of community that the hope produced by the Spirit abounds. The more joy and unity there is in our fellowship, the more the Spirit generates a genuine expectation of heaven.