

## **Romans 14:1-23**

### **Introduction:**

This paper is a commentary on Romans 14:1-23. It is the first in a series of four papers. The purpose of this paper is threefold.

First, I want to present an understanding of the conflict Paul addresses in chapter fourteen of his letter to the Romans. Second, it is my intent in presenting this paper, and a later one on Galatians 2:11-21, to bring clarification to the classic interpretation of these two passages. Traditional evangelical orthodoxy teaches that the Apostle Paul addressed two similar doctrinal conflicts in the churches in Galatia and Rome. Despite this perspective the apostle actually responds uniquely to each situation, to issues that are profoundly different. Third, this paper forms the foundation for my second paper in which I will look at what we can learn from Paul's exhortation on how we ought to interact with each other when our views of truth differ from others'.

### **Orientation to the letter:**

Most of us have heard teaching on this passage at some point. Based on this passage, Christians have been exhorted not to smoke, not to drink alcohol, not to dance, and essentially not to do anything that might offend or cause anyone to stumble. In other words, even if you believe that a particular behavior is not wrong, if someone else might think it's wrong, you shouldn't practice that behavior because if you did, you could cause him or her to fall.

As is true with all books of the Bible, coming to terms with the historical context and purpose of a book is crucial to an accurate understanding of the book. If we don't orient ourselves to the book, we run the risk of drawing the wrong conclusions about what we're reading. We have to know why the author is writing the book, and what he's trying to accomplish. We have to know which issues he's addressing, or else without realizing it we may alter the author's intended meaning.

I want to look at this passage in its historical context to better understand what Paul is saying and why.

**Historical:** Clarifying the historical context will help our understanding of Romans fourteen.

No one really knows the origin of the Roman church, but it began quite early. From the book of Acts we learn that there were people from Rome present on the day of Pentecost. They were pilgrims who had traveled from Rome up to Jerusalem to take part in the Jewish festival. These Jews were eyewitnesses to the events of the day of Pentecost. The apostles, through the teaching of the scriptures taught many of these pilgrims that Jesus was the Messiah they had been looking for. They instructed them in the events that had taken place, and their significance. When the pilgrims left to return to Rome, they were new believers who understood the Gospel.

These new believers went back to Rome and began proclaiming the Gospel to the Jewish community. Eventually this created a controversy and about 49 A.D a riot ensued. Emperor Claudius had no tolerance for this conflict and confronted the crisis by banishing all Jews from Rome. He ordered believing

and unbelieving Jews alike to leave Rome. We know from the book of Acts that among those who were forced to leave Rome were Aquila and Priscilla, who left for Corinth. There Paul met them and they became life long companions and fellow workers. For five years no Jews were permitted to travel or live in Rome. The edict against the Jews lasted until Claudius' death in October of 54 A.D., when it was rescinded.

That's the first piece of historical information that is critical to our understanding Paul's letter and central to *why* he wrote the letter.

We also know from the book of Acts that Paul is in Corinth when he writes his letter to the Romans. He is about to travel from Corinth to Jerusalem. For some time he has been taking an offering from the Gentile churches in Acai, Macedonia and Asia to help the poor in Jerusalem who have been in the throes of a famine. At the end of his letter he writes that he focused on taking this relief fund to Jerusalem. He is aware that a boat is about to leave Corinth for Rome with several of his friends who had been residents of Rome prior to the edict and are now returning home. These Jews are going back to rejoin an entire Gentile church that is in Rome. We know this, because all the Jews had been forced out of Rome. This small group of Jews, who had been working with Paul in the churches in Corinth, is part of a much larger group traveling back to Rome. Paul wants this letter to precede his own trip to Rome and so gives it to Phoebe to deliver to the Gentile church in Rome.

## **Why did Paul write the letter?**

Paul's purpose is to prepare Gentile believers in Rome for the challenges the impending influx of Jews will present. They have never faced this before. In the past, Jewish communities had responded poorly to Paul's declaration of the Gospel. Those communities are returning to Rome. Paul wants to give his readers crucial information concerning what they are about to encounter. To accomplish this, he articulates the Gospel and provides his readers with the perspective they will need to confront what lies ahead. Paul warns them against three particular threats: the attacks of unbelieving Jews, false teachers, and practical problems that arise when believing Gentiles live alongside believing Jews.

First, Paul is writing to strengthen his readers against attacks of unbelieving Jews against the Gospel.

He explains the Gospel in contrast to Pharisaical Judaism. He argues for what makes the Gospel true and what makes Pharisaical Judaism not true. He articulates the Gospel and clarifies the differences between the truth of the Gospel and the opposing attitudes, beliefs, and teachings of Pharisaical Judaism. Paul hopes to prepare his readers against the coming criticism of the Gospel. Pharisaical Judaism was the Judaism of the masses. The only Judaism they knew was the Judaism that the Pharisees had taught them. Paul is aware of the problems that are likely to develop with unbelieving Jews returning to live alongside believing Gentiles. He is writing to support them against the attacks of unbelieving Jews against the Gospel.

Second, Paul wants to strengthen his readers against the teaching of false teachers we find in other New Testament letters. These are people who ostensibly believe in Christianity, who even believe that Jesus is the Messiah, but in fact, hold to the same beliefs as the Pharisees. The apostle wants to protect Gentile believers from being seduced away from a true knowledge of the Messiah, into a pseudo-understanding of the Messiah. Confusion is likely to develop when Jews who appear to be true believers return to live alongside Gentile believers. Paul is writing to bolster his readers against the traps of falsely believing Jews who have faulty convictions and could lead Paul's readers away from belief in the true Gospel.

Third, Paul also understands the practical problems that are likely to develop with believing Jews living alongside believing Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles have never liked each other and throughout the history of the world, there has been no greater conflict than that between Jews and the various nations around them. The people of Israel were chosen by God to be His people. This sets them apart. God did not choose the rest of the world in the same way that He chose Israel. God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants distinguished them from other nations. From the moment God chose the descendants of Abraham to come through Isaac and not Ishmael, God declared that there would be enmity between their offspring. Israel became conscious of being a nation uniquely distinct from others by being separated to God after the Exodus. From then on, this distinction dominated all relations with other nations. On their return from Exile, the nation of Israel was conscious of the danger of contamination from their neighbors. This led to their having such a hard and exclusive attitude toward other nations that by the time of Christ, "gentile" was a term of scorn. The Jews now regarded other nations—Gentiles-- as hated enemies. This distinct identity and fear of

contamination by other nations is largely responsible for the enmity that existed between Jews and Gentiles. It is also part of the reason some Jewish Christians believed that Gentiles must be circumcised and adhere to the Mosaic Law to be true disciples of Christ.

To the Jews, Gentiles are pagans. They have never eaten kosher, they don't believe like Jews, dress like Jews, they don't talk like Jews, and they don't live like Jews. Those differences are about to come into conflict with each other. Being a Jew himself, and aware of the tumultuous history between Jew and Gentile, Paul was alert to the psychological dynamics that come to bear when believing Jews live along side believing Gentiles. How are they going to relate to one another with contrasting perspectives on their faith? In the latter part of Romans, that's the issue that Paul is addressing. One man keeps the Sabbath. Another man doesn't. One man eats meat. Another doesn't. One eats kosher. Another doesn't. One keeps festivals. Another doesn't. How were they to relate to each other, when they came from radically different historical, cultural, and theological perspectives?

#### **Chapter fourteen:**

Paul is addressing the different perspectives held by believing Gentiles and believing Jews regarding what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and pursue righteousness. That's the issue in Romans 14. Paul was aware of the different perspectives that existed between these two groups and how they were going to clash. He is writing to speak to this conflict and instruct his readers on how to relate to one another, through the lens of the Gospel.

Paul makes two basic points in Romans 14. The first one is directed to Jewish believers. Don't condemn your Gentile brothers. As tempting as it will be to judge your Gentile brothers for their practice of unrestricted freedom, don't go there.

His second point is directed to Gentiles. Don't insist on practicing the freedom you have at the expense of loving your brothers. Loving your brothers takes precedence over the exercise of your freedom.

**The text:**

*Accept the man who has a faulty set of beliefs—but not for the refutation of his views. 2•One man believes he can eat all things; the one with faulty beliefs eats vegetables. 3•The man who eats is not to hold in contempt the man who does not eat; and the man who does not eat is not to condemn the man who does eat, for God has accepted him. 4•Who are you—you who condemn the servant of another? 5•To his own master he either stands or falls. 6•And he shall be made to stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. [14:1–4]*

In the modern evangelical culture to be “weak in faith,” is to be lacking in some essential aspect of belief. That's not the way Paul uses the term. He uses the term “faith” to describe a person's set of convictions-- his or her set of values. In this context “faith” is those convictions you have about the nature of reality and what God does and does not require of you.

“Weak” in this context means to be deficient in some way, to fail to meet a standard. To be weak in faith is to have a faulty set of convictions or an inadequate grasp of what constitutes the holiness or righteousness that God desires. Some people are right about their convictions and some people are wrong. Those who are weak in faith are those mistaken in their convictions. In contrast, those who are not mistaken in their convictions are not weak in faith. Those who are weak are Jewish believers who have been enculturated

in a set of religious scruples that stem from a lifetime of being taught the Mosaic Covenant. Those who are not weak are Gentile believers who have not been taught the Mosaic Covenant. The believing Jews are considered weak in faith because they are deficient in their understanding and unnecessarily restrict themselves from what they can enjoy in this life. They believe they must not eat meat. They believe they must keep the Sabbath. They also believe certain foods are unclean.

**The question is,** “How should those who are *right* about their convictions view those who are *wrong* about their convictions?” In addition, “How should those who are *wrong* about their convictions view those who are *right* about their convictions?”

From the vantage point of the Jews it looks like the Gentiles are being disobedient and unrighteous. Therefore, it would be appropriate to judge them. But, Paul says to the Jewish brother, “Don’t condemn the unrighteous Gentile”. Why? Because in verse four Paul states, “***Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master, he stands or falls and he will stand, for the Lord is able make him stand.***” To the believing Jew he says, God is the master of your Gentile brother – not you. It is not your position or responsibility to decide whether he’s damnable or not. He says the same thing in verse twelve:” ***So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.***” The Gentile isn’t required to give an account of himself to his Jewish brother. The Jewish brother is not the judge – God is the judge. Paul is reminding Jews, (those whom he describes as weak in faith), that God is the master of his Gentile brother.

Next Paul asserts that the Gentile brother is going to be accepted by God, or, as he puts it, “***he will stand.***” To stand is a positive term. The Gentile believer will stand, instead of fall. He will stand instead of being destroyed



by the judgment of God. Again, verse four, ***“Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master, he stands or falls and he will stand for the Lord is able make him stand.”***

The Gospel is the foundation for what Paul is saying. His point is that no one stands at the judgment seat because of his or her obedience. No one stands because they are holy. No one will receive mercy at the judgment seat because they have earned it. Those who stand will stand because they have an advocate – Jesus Christ the righteous--who will appeal to God for mercy on their behalf. Paul is posing the question to the Jewish believer, “Do you believe that God is able be merciful to your Gentile brother?” Is his unrestricted lifestyle going to prevent God from granting him mercy?

Paul goes on,

***One man respects one day above another day; another man respects every day [alike]. 2•Each is to be fully convinced in his own mind. 3•The man who has regard for the day regards it for the Lord. 4•And the man who eats for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God. 5•But the man who does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat and he [too] gives thanks to God. [14:5-7]***

***Now not one of us lives [to the fullest] for his own sake, and no one dies [to the wonderful things that this life offers] for his own sake. 2•If we live [to the fullest], we live [to the fullest] for the Lord. 3•And if we die [to the wonderful things that this life offers], we die [to the wonderful things that this life offers] for the Lord. 4•Therefore, if we live [to the fullest] or if we die [to the wonderful things that this life offers], we are the Lord’s. 5•Now to this end the Messiah died and then lived, that he might be master over both those who die [to the wonderful things that this life offers] and those who live [to the fullest]. [14:5–9]***

As we read the passage, we can see that everything in it deals with the question of freedom. One person has faith that he can eat meat, another believes he can only eat vegetables. One person believes some food is

unclean, while another has determined that all food is clean. One person is convinced that he needs to set aside the Sabbath, another believes all days are alike. Every example refers to religious values. Do you, or do you not have restrictions where you limit yourself? Some strive to honor God by restricting their lives, and others do not. Paul insists that God is going to look at the heart of the person rather than whether he restricts himself.

Paul uses the term “lives” to represent the unrestricted enjoyment of the things that God has given in this life. In contrast, the one who “dies” is the one who restricts himself. He is the one whose religious convictions keep him from enjoying meat, or eating unclean food, or practicing certain behaviors on the Sabbath. Not one of us enjoys everything this life has to offer for his own enjoyment. And not one of us denies himself of the things this life has to offer for his own sake. If we enjoy those things that life has to offer, we enjoy them for the Lord. If we restrict ourselves from those things life has to offer, then we restrict ourselves for the Lord. Therefore, whether we don’t restrict ourselves or whether we do restrict ourselves, we are the Lord’s, and to this end Christ died and lived again that He might be Lord over both Jew and Gentile.

Paul emphasizes to the Jew, even if you believe your Gentile brother is wrong in his convictions, his heart is right. Ironically, Paul is addressing the one who is wrong, yet believes that the one who is right is wrong.

***That’s what six through nine was all about, “he, who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God. But he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us enjoys what we enjoy, for ourselves, and not one dies for himself. If we enjoy the things of this life, we do so for the Lord. And if we deny ourselves, we deny ourselves for the Lord. Therefore, whether we enjoy or deny, we are the Lord’s.”***

Whether you are a Jew who restricts his behavior or a Gentile who does not restrict your behavior, don't judge your brother based on the expression of his convictions. To the Jew, is your Gentile brother striving to honor God in his heart in exercising his freedom? To the Gentile, is your Jewish brother motivated to honor God in his heart by restricting himself? If he is striving to honor God and he gets it wrong – what is God going to look at? Is He going to look at his performance or his heart? Paul insists here that God is going to look at the *heart* of the person and not at whether he restricts himself or not.

***Now you, why do you condemn your brother? 2•And you, why do you hold your brother in contempt? 3•For we shall all stand at the judgment seat of God. 4•For it is written, “Because I am living”, says the Lord, [I declare] “that every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall acknowledge God.”<Isaiah 45:23> [14:10–11]***

Again, in Romans 14 Paul addresses the conflict that occurs when a community of believing Jews who keep the Sabbath, eat kosher, and don't eat meat, come into contact with a Gentile believing community who has not been keeping the Sabbath, eating kosher or doing anything that the Jewish community considered important to living a righteous life.

His first point is addressed to the Jewish believers. It is an exhortation in the form of a question. ***“Why do you condemn your (Gentile) brother?”*** The Greek word here is *krinw*. It can be translated to pass sentence upon, to act as a judge, to condemn. Put yourselves in the shoes of a Jew who's been enculturated into the Mosaic covenant for his entire life. At the core of your being you believe it is wrong to eat meat, to eat unclean food, to act inappropriately on the Sabbath. It is a moral issue for you. Everything about it has all the psychological and emotional impact of immorality and

unrighteousness. Paul understands that, and because that's the case, when a Jew sees a Gentile not keeping the Sabbath, eating unclean food, or doing anything else that he believes is dishonoring God, he is convinced that it is an act of disobedience and unrighteousness. Consequently he is tempted to pass sentence and condemn his Gentile brother. Paul says, don't go there.

His second question is addressed to Gentile believers. It is also an exhortation in the form of a question. ***“And you, why do you hold your (Jewish) brother in contempt.”*** The Greek word here is *exoutheneo*. It can be translated, to regard with contempt, to look down on, to count as nothing, to make of no account. “You Gentile believers should not give in to the temptation to regard with contempt those whose emotional and psychological wiring is such that they can't bring themselves to exercise the same kind of freedom. It's too deeply engrained in them. Even when you see how inadequate their perspective is, how wrong it is, don't look down on your brother who is weak in his convictions. It is inappropriate.”

Why? Because God will accept him – he will stand, just as surely as you Gentiles will. That's what Paul means in verses ten and eleven, ***“for we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”*** Evangelicals often incorrectly interpret what Paul is saying here, because in our idiom to stand before the judgment seat means to go before God to be judged. But ***“stand”***, here, is a positive term for Paul. ***“For we will all stand, and not fall before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, as I live says the Lord every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall give praise to God.”*** In its original context, this verse is a prophecy that all of Israel from every end of the earth will come and bow their knees to Him, and give praise to God. It is a prediction of Israel coming back to obedience. God in his sovereign work has determined that those who belong to Him are going to stand before His

judgment seat, and their knees will bow to God and their tongues will give praise to Him.

Gentiles, leave room for the work of God in the hearts of your Jewish brothers. Just because they are wrong in their convictions doesn't mean that they won't stand before God. God is not going to hold their faulty convictions against them. They will stand because of the mercy of God. If God is not going to hold them in contempt for their faulty convictions you shouldn't either.

Next Paul makes the same point to Gentiles that he made to the Jews. "God is his master, not you. You Gentiles are not God. It's not your position or responsibility to decide whether or not these Jews with an inadequate understanding are damnable or not. That's God's position."

***Now then, each one of us shall give an account of himself to God.***

***2•Therefore, we should no longer condemn one another. 3•Rather, you are to conclude this—not to put down an obstacle for your brother to trip over, not to set a trap.***

***[14:12-13]***

He uses really strong language in this passage. Don't let the exercise of your freedom offend or cause your brother to stumble. The strong language describes doing actual substantive harm to your brother. Our use of the word "***offend***" can be very misleading. We think about hurting someone's feelings, or making someone uncomfortable. That is not what Paul has in mind here. He is saying, "don't actually cause substantive harm to your brother by your actions." Paul seems to suggest that the exercising of our freedom could actually cause another person to be condemned.

The objection could be raised that each person is condemned by his own choices, and how he responds to our exercising our own freedom is his responsibility`.

Paul is implying that we bear some responsibility for the condemnation of somebody else because our own actions. Yet Paul would argue that we are all responsible for our own behaviors and when people are condemned, their own choices have brought that about. Their responses to everything in their lives are their own responsibility. However, it is also true that our actions can significantly influence what other people believe and what other people choose. The model of our lives can strongly influence other people.

Paul elaborates his point further.

**I have understood and have become convinced by Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in and of itself. 2•But to the one who considers something to be unclean, to this person it is unclean. 3•Now if through food your brother is brought to grief, then you are no longer walking in accord with love. 4•Do not destroy with your food the one for whom the Messiah died. 5•Therefore, what is good for you should not be allowed to be indicted; for the Kingdom of God is not food and drink, rather it is righteousness (*dikaiosune*) and peace and joy by the Holy Spirit. 6•Now the man who serves the Messiah in this [way] is acceptable to God and approved by men. 7•So then, we should pursue things of peace and things that build one another up. 8•Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. 9•On the one hand, all things are clean; but, on the other hand, to the man who eats so as to become a cause of stumbling, they are evil. 10•It is good neither to eat meat nor to drink wine nor [to do anything] by which your brother trips up. [14:14–21]**

**Any conviction that you have, have as your own conviction before God. 2•Fortunate is the one who does not condemn himself by what he finds acceptable. 3•But the one who doubts is condemned if he eats; for it is not out of conviction, and**

**everything that is not out of conviction is sin.**

**[14:22–23]**

**Now we who are able [to eat] ought to bear with the faulty beliefs of those who are not able [to eat] and ought not to please ourselves. 2•Each of us is to please his *neighbor*, to bring about what is good, to bring about his {the neighbor's} edification. 3•Now indeed, the Messiah did not please himself; rather, as it is written, “The reproaches of the one reproaching you fell upon me.”<Psalm 69:9>**

**[15:1–3]**

Given the reality that our lives influence others, those whose priority is love will care what kind of impact their actions have on others. Paul is raising the issue that if the exercise of our freedom could possibly cause harm in somebody's life, then why would we not refrain from exercising our freedom? Would not our commitment to being loving people make us want to restrict our freedom, if that freedom could possibly bring harm to another person? Shouldn't love take precedence over enjoying our freedom?

Paul is not suggesting I'm to blame if my actions influence a person toward his or her own destruction, although this is how this passage is often taught.

We don't have real control over the influence of our actions. But we do have control over what we value. We may refrain from exercising our freedom and others may be destroyed, or we may practice our freedom, and they may not be destroyed. But if we practice our freedom, in spite of the likelihood that it will cause harm, then we are just as culpable, regardless of whether or not our actions destroy them. Paul is focusing on priorities, not on the effect that our actions have on others. If we know that our actions may cause real harm to someone, love should determine our choices. Let love be such a priority that we wouldn't want to risk harming others. Let love dictate how we interact with our brothers when we make decisions about exercising our freedom or not.

**In this context, how is Paul envisioning the possibility of a Gentile brother exercising his freedom resulting in hurting a Jewish brother?**

Imagine that Jewish believers are steeped in the religious obligations of the Mosaic Covenant. Alongside, Gentile believers feel, rightly, that they are not responsible with respect to those same obligations. What potential impact could the freedom-exercising Gentile believers' actions have on Jewish believers?

From the day they are born, it is ingrained in the Jewish mind that certain behaviors are dishonoring to God. They are now on their way back home and are going to be confronted by a whole community that doesn't look at life and their relationships with God in the same way. Consequently, my Jewish brothers could respond in one of two ways. One, they could condemn their Gentile brothers as unrighteous sinners and not be able to move past how offensive their behavior is to them, or two, they could conclude that you can believe in Jesus and be outrageous, disobedient sinners at the same time. To the extent that there is the potential for that kind of impact, Paul is saying, let love dictate how you handle that situation.

Paul is not drawing a rule-based picture. He is purposely being general and vague. He is telling us that as we find ourselves in a particular set of circumstances, in relationship to a particular set of people, and we judge that situation, we can go one of two ways. We could say to ourselves, "I'm free in Christ, I'm free to exercise my freedom." Or, on the other hand, we could think about what it looks like to love our brothers. Paul is advocating that



the decision be made based on our priorities. As disciples of Jesus, our priority is to love our brothers.