

### **Introduction:**

This is the second paper in this series. This paper will address several questions regarding how a person believes that truth is true and believe that truth matters and gives others the freedom to arrive at truth, particularly when their understanding of truth differs. I want to look specifically at what we can learn from Paul's exhortation to the Romans on this matter and about how we ought to interact with each other when our view of truth differs from one another.

From the beginnings of the Church, Christians have disagreed with each other about much that is written in the Bible. The sovereignty of God, free will of man, the gifts of the spirit, the second coming of Christ, the tribulation, the pre-existence of Christ and the atonement are only a few of the more prominent topics theologians and everyday Christians have passionately debated over the centuries. With a little research you can easily discover which side of a theological issue any particular faith community has identified itself with. Depending on which position you take on any one of these issues will most likely determine which Christian group you associate with, or don't. In fact disagreements regarding these issues have created literally thousands of distinct and separate denominations. A casual perusal of the yellow pages under the heading of "churches" graphically illustrates this reality. Individual groups find it impossible to associate with another based on their particular interpretation of the bible.

These denominations exist in part because as Christians we strive after a valuable but volatile commodity: the truth. We want to know it, and want others to know it. At least we want others to know our version of it. We count on and live our lives based on our understanding of what we believe to be truth. Our eternal destiny hangs in the balance. For example, if Jesus is not who he says He is, then we are lost and are to be pitied.

As the sheer numbers of denominations attest, truth by its very nature can be divisive; if some things are true, other things are false. If you are right in your opinions, then those who believe differently from you are wrong. This cannot be avoided. Truth is truth, and anything other than the truth is a lie. As such, we would all agree that truth is important, because error costs us something. People with wrong conclusions can make hurtful choices, and that can be destructive. But errors are inevitable in this life. Because we are broken and none of us understands truth perfectly, all of us are living with a certain amount of error. Therefore, disagreements are bound to happen. What we need to know is how to live with each other given that reality.

One of the most troubling questions we face in our interactions with each other is how should we as followers of Christ respond to each other when our view of truth differs from one another? How should we respond when our convictions regarding the practice of our faith differ from other well-meaning, sincere believers? Should I tell you I think you are wrong? Should I tell everyone else I think you are wrong? What should my attitude toward you be? Are you so wrong that I should stop associating with you and write you off as a heretic? To add to the confusion, we are followers of the man who called the Pharisees hypocrites and whitewashed tombs. We are students of the Apostle Paul, who called down God's curse on anyone who preached a different gospel, and who publicly confronted Peter. We are also followers of the man who ate with tax-gatherers and sinners. Sincere believers have fallen

off both sides of the fence in responding to fellow believers who view some aspect of their faith differently.

In Romans 14 the Apostle Paul shows us how to think about these questions in his own handling of the divisive issues of the first century church. With a rapidly expanding Gentile church, Paul had to cope with disagreements about the appropriate place of Jewish religious practices in a culturally diverse church.

Because these issues don't appear to be significant today, we may not pay much attention to these parts of Paul's letters. Although the issues themselves are not in the forefront in current of theological debate, the principles Paul used to address them are very much appropriate for our discussion. Those principles provide the foundation for understanding how we should go about interacting when we disagree with each other.

### **Background pertaining to Romans 14:**

Chapter fourteen of Romans is addressing the different perspective believing Gentiles and believing Jews have on what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and pursue righteousness. Paul was aware of the historical, cultural and theological diversity that was going to exist in Rome between believing Jews and believing Gentiles. He understood that their individual perspectives on the faith were going to clash. He is writing to address those problems and instruct his readers, regarding how to relate to one another, through the lens of the gospel.

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 declares that there will be enmity between their offspring. Israel became conscious 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 having such a hard and exclusive an 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 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 a true disciple 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 also alert to the psychological dynamics that will come to bear as 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, this is the issue that Paul is addressing. One man keeps the Sabbath. Another man doesn't. One man eats meat. Another one doesn't. One eats kosher. Another doesn't. One keeps festivals. Another doesn't. How were they going to relate to one another,

when they came from radically different historical, cultural experiences and theological perspectives?

### **Review of Romans 14:**

Paul is aware of the divergent lifestyles, beliefs and religious practices that are about to collide between believing Jews and believing Gentiles. He understands their individual perspectives on the Christian faith are very different. That is the issue Paul is speaking to in Romans 14. He is dealing with the question: How should the people who are wrong about their convictions view and interact with those who are right about their convictions? And how should those who are right about their convictions view and interact with those who are wrong about their convictions?"

He is writing to address these issues and instruct his readers, regarding how to relate to one another, through the lens of the Gospel.

### **To Jewish believers:**

Put yourself in the shoes of a Jew who's been enculturated into the Mosaic Covenant your whole life. At the core of your being you believe it is wrong to eat meat, to eat unclean food, or 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. When a Jew sees a Gentile not keeping the Sabbath, eating unclean food, or doing anything else that they believe is dishonoring God, they are convinced it is an act of disobedience and unrighteousness. Consequently they are tempted to pass sentence, and condemn their Gentile brother.

He describes Jewish believers as being "weak in faith". Practically speaking, they believe that they must not eat meat. In this context, it's over the issue of whether or not the meat could have been offered to idols. They also advocate keeping the Sabbath and abstaining from certain unclean foods. According

to Paul, the one who is weak in faith is the one who is deficient in his understanding and unnecessarily restricts himself from what he can enjoy in this life.

To be weak in faith is to have a defective or inadequate grasp of what constitutes the holiness or righteousness that God desires. These Jewish believers have been enculturated in a kind of religious consciousness that stems from a lifetime of having been taught the Mosaic Covenant. Paul is telling them that they are wrong regarding their perspective of what God desires from them when it comes to the Gospel.

He tells those who are wrong in their convictions not condemn their Gentile brothers. To the Jewish believer it looks like the Gentile believer is being disobedient and unrighteous. This is intolerable to the Jewish believer.

Paul responds to this perspective, “Don’t condemn the brother who can eat all things”. The Greek word here is **krinw**. It can be translated to pass sentence upon, to act as a judge, to condemn. Why does Paul say this? Because in verse four Paul states, “Who are you to condemn the servant of another? To his own master, he stands or falls and he will stand for the Lord is able make him stand.” Paul is saying that God is master over the “one who believes he can eat all things”. The Gentile brother is not required to justify himself to his Jewish brother. The Jewish brother is not the judge – God is the judge. Paul exhorts Jewish believers, those whom he describes as weak in faith, that God is the master of their Gentile brother.

His second point to the Jewish believer is the Gentile believer is going to be accepted by God, as Paul puts it, “he will stand.” “To stand” is a positive term. The Gentile will stand, instead of fall. He will stand instead of being destroyed by the judgment of God. He will be accepted by God, just as surely

as the Jewish believer will. So again in verse four, Paul says, “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 will stand at the judgment seat because of his or her obedience. No one stands because they are holy. No one will receive mercy because they have earned it. Those who will stand will stand because they have an advocate – Jesus Christ the righteous—who will appeal to God for mercy on their behalf. Even if their Gentile brother is wrong in his convictions, do you believe that God is able to be merciful to him regardless? Is his unrestricted lifestyle going to prevent God from granting him mercy?

#### **To Gentiles believers:**

In this context the Gentile believers are those who have not been so enculturated, they have not been taught the Mosaic Covenant. Consequently, they have a very different set of convictions. They have never considered they are not free to eat all things. Paul tells those who are correct in their convictions to not hold in contempt the Jewish brother who restricts his behavior. To the Gentile believer, the Jewish believer is wrong and immature in his faith.

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 or sister who is weak in their convictions. It is inappropriate.

Why? He uses the same reasoning here as he did previously with the Jewish believers. They should not hold their Jewish brother in contempt because God will accept him – God will make him stand. 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.” In effect he is saying, Gentiles, leave room for the work of God in the heart of your Jewish brother. 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 in contempt your Jewish brother for their faulty convictions, then 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.”

### **The second point to Gentiles:**

Now then, each one of us shall give an account of himself to God. Therefore, we should no longer condemn one another. 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 causing someone to be uncomfortable. That is not what Paul has in mind here. “Don’t actually cause substantive harm to your brother by your



actions.” Don’t insist on practicing the freedom you have at the expense of loving your brother. Loving your brother takes precedence over the practicing of your freedom.

Paul is implying that I bear some responsibility for the condemnation of somebody else because of our own actions. Yet, Paul would also argue that we are all responsible for our own behaviors and when people are condemned, their own choices 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 be strongly influential on other people.

Paul’s is not saying that our actions can actually cause somebody to go to hell. He is raising the issue that if the exercise of our freedom could possibly cause harm in someone’s life, then why would we not refrain from exercising our freedom. Given the reality our lives influence others, those whose priority is love will care what kind of impact their actions have on others. Would not our commitment to be a 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?

We don’t have real control over the consequences of our actions. But we do have control over what we value. We may refrain from practicing our freedom and other may be destroyed, or we may choose to practice our freedom and they may not be destroyed. But if we practice our freedom, in spite of the likelihood that it will cause my brother harm, then we are just as culpable, whether or not our action destroys them. Paul is focusing on priorities, not on the effect our actions have on others. If we know that our actions may cause real harm to someone, let love determine our choices. Let

love dictate how we interact with our brothers when we make decisions about exercising our freedom or not.

What picture is Paul envisioning with a Gentile brother exercising his freedom resulting in causing harm to his Jewish brother? Imagine the Jewish believers steeped in the religious obligations of the Mosaic Covenant. Alongside, Gentile believers believe, rightly, that they are not responsible with respect to those same obligations. What potential impact could the freedom exercising Gentile believers actions going to have on the Jewish believers?

From the day they were born, it has been engrained 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 relationship with God in the same way. Consequently, my Jewish brothers could to respond in one of two ways. One, they could condemn their Gentile brother as a unrighteous sinner and not be able to get past how offensive their behavior is to them, or two, they could conclude that you can believe in Jesus and be an outrageous, disobedient sinner 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 as we find ourselves in a particular set of circumstances, in relationship to a particular group of people, and we judge that situation, we can go one of two directions. We could say to ourselves, "I'm free in Christ, I'm free to exercise my freedom." Or, on the other hand, we could consider what it looks like to love our brothers. Paul is advocating that the decision be made out of our priorities. As disciples of Jesus, our priority is to love his brother.

## **To both Jew and Gentile believers:**

Thus far I have outlined how Paul is addressing both Jewish and Gentile believers who are coming from very different perspectives. Now I will address the question of how they can relate to one another given these differences. What follows is my suggested paraphrase of this passage.

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. If we live [to the fullest], we live [to the fullest] for the Lord. 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. Therefore, if we live [to the fullest] or if we die [to the wonderful things that this life offers], we are the Lord's. 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]. [14:7-9]

Paul uses the term "lives" to represent the unrestricted enjoyment of the things 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 that this life has to offer for his own enjoyment. And not one of us denies himself of the things that 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 that life has to offer 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.

Whether you are a Jew who restricts your 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 what he does? To the Gentile, is your Jewish brother striving to honor God in his heart when he restricts his behavior? If he is trying to honor God, and he gets it wrong – is God going to look at his behavior or his heart? Paul insists here that God is going to look at the heart of the person not at whether he restricts himself or not.

### **Conclusions from Romans 14:**

Although the Christian church has been chronologically removed from the circumstances in Rome by some two thousand years, there are significant parallels between the two that are worth considering.

Like the Jews who sincerely believed they were right in their convictions, the church today holds to doctrines and convictions just as dogmatically.

Like the Jew who was intolerant of his Gentile brother because he held different convictions regarding his faith, sincere believers today who hold other than orthodox doctrinal views are often judged, considered heretical or at the very least held in contempt. These doctrinal conflicts have resulted in divisiveness beyond what is even reasonable. Like the Jews who excluded others under the banner of truth, doctrinal purity and unity, the same dynamics are played out in the church today and cause many church splits.

The underlying problem that existed in the conflict between Jew and Gentile in New Testament times remains with the church today. Focused on their doctrinal differences, the relationship between the two was defined by “who was right and who was wrong.” The conviction that their understanding of faith was the correct one only served to justify their criticism and contempt for one another. This caused further divisiveness and separation.

In Romans chapter 14, the apostle Paul advocates a much higher priority than insisting that our doctrinal convictions are correct or that we have the right to exercise the freedom we have in Christ. Through the lens of the gospel of grace he speaks to the issue of how believers ought to relate to one another. He reminds his readers that God is the judge of those who are right in their convictions and those who are wrong in their convictions. Whether right or wrong, they should leave room for the work of God in their brother's heart and not judge or hold him in contempt. He exhorts those who are not restricted in their freedom to exercise love toward the brother who is restricted. According to Paul doing what is best for your brother should always take precedence in the practice of the freedom you have.

According to the apostle Paul, unity is not based on the agreement of our doctrinal or theological convictions. Unity comes from an awareness of my need for the mercy of God and my granting that same mercy to my brother, even when that brother has come to different conclusions about his faith. Mercy not only takes into account our moral failure but also makes room for our being wrong about what we believe. Mercy makes all the difference in the conclusions I come to about myself and about the brother who may disagree with me.

No one in the history of the church has been more of a champion for truth than the apostle Paul. His New Testament letters attest to that fact. One of the great truths repeated throughout his letters is the truth that we should love our brothers, and if we don't have love for them, even if we have all knowledge, we have nothing. Consequently, how we relate to brothers who we have doctrinal disagreements with can be a litmus test for the genuineness of our faith.

