

Romans 14: Context, Meaning and Application

by Walton Weaver

Introduction:

- A. Man is a responsible creature by reason of his ability to make choices. Because he is responsible, he is also accountable.
 - 1. He is first and foremost responsible to God as his creator, and as one who is responsible to God, he is also accountable to God.
 - 2. Both of these aspects of man's relationship to God are illustrated in Ecclesiastes 5:1-3.
- B. Just as man's responsibilities and accountability to God are determined by his relationship to God (made in God's image, and therefore a free moral agent and responsible and accountable to him as his creator), so also man's responsibilities to other men grow out of his various relationships to them. Relationship determines responsibility.
- C. This fact of man's responsibilities growing out of his various relationships is well illustrated for us in the context of Romans 14, the chapter that is the subject of our study tonight.
- D. So let's begin our study by considering Romans 14 in its context.

I. THE CONTEXT OF ROMANS 14.

- A. Responsibilities imposed upon us because of our relationship to civil government, Rom. 13:1-7.
 - 1. Why does God make man responsible to civil authorities?
 - a. Because they are from God — or have been ordained by him (v. 1).
 - b. Man therefore is to "submit" to them (v. 1). To "resist" their authority is "to appose the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves" (v. 2).
 - 2. Two reasons are given why we must obey: (1) "because of wrath" and (2) "for conscience sake" (v. 5).
 - 3. For this reason, "you also pay taxes," Paul says (v. 6), so you "render to all what is due them" (v. 7). Since they provide this service for you (protect you when you do good, and punish the evildoers, vv. 3-4), it is our responsibility to support them with our taxes.

- B. Responsibilities imposed upon us because of our relationship to our neighbor, Rom. 13:8-10.
 - 1. Law of love based on law to love neighbor as self.
 - 2. All the commandments (concerning murder, adultery, stealing, etc., are summed up in this one law (v. 9). Love is the fulfillment of the law (vv. 8, 10).
- C. Responsibilities imposed upon us because of our relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ, Rom. 13:11-14.
 - 1. Paul concludes this section with the charge to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (v. 14).
 - 2. Knowing that the time is short (v. 11) and recognizing that the night is almost gone, and the day is near (v. 12), Christians should “behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy” (v. 13).

TRANSITION:

This discussion of our responsibilities to civil authorities, to our neighbor, and to the Lord Jesus Christ has set the stage for Paul now to take up in Romans chapter 14:1-15:13 a particular responsibility that Christians have *toward one another* in the local church. The heart of what Paul is attempting to accomplish in what he says in this section appears at the following places:

“Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another” (14:19)

“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification” (15:2);

“Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be likeminded toward one another, according to Jesus Christ, that you may with one mind glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God” (15:5-7).

II. THE PERSONS INVOLVED IN PAUL’S DISCUSSION IN ROMANS 14:1-15:13.

A. Jews and Gentiles.

- 1. That there were both Jews (“the circumcision”) and Gentiles in the church at Rome is pointed out in 15:8ff.

2. Yet, it does not necessarily follow that the problem of the weak and the strong in the church there fell along these lines. The subject of the eating of meats and observing days might make one think so at first, but further reflection would lead to a different conclusion. It is practically impossible to determine exactly who the two different groups were that gave rise to the problem.
3. But different possibilities have been suggested:
 - a. *Ex-idolaters*. This view says that Paul is *dealing with* such people whose over scrupulous conscience would not allow them to eat meat which, before being sold by the local butcher, had been used in sacrifice to an idol (the same problem addressed in 1 Corinthians 8). But even though there are many similarities in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14, there is no reference in Romans 14 to meats offered to idols and no hint that the question of idolatry was involved in the dispute.
 - b. *Ascetics*. But there is not enough evidence to support this view. Contrast the view with how Paul deals with the ascetics in Colossians 2:16ff. where he says those who were binding such ascetic practices and the observance of days were robbing the Christians of their reward.
 - c. *Legalists*. That those who were “weak in faith” were *legalists* like those Paul deals with in the book of Galatians. If this is so, however, one wonders why Paul did not deal with them in the same manner as he did in Galatians. There he pronounced a solemn anathema upon them.
 - d. *Jewish Christians*. This would be Jewish Christians who were yet committed to Jewish regulations regarding the eating of certain foods and the observance of certain days. The problem with this view is that Jewish Christians would only be bothered by meat prepared by pagan hands, and yet Paul is dealing with a group who left off the eating of all meat: “For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables” (14:2).
4. It actually is not necessary that we be able to identify the two

groups along these lines. The next to categories that are specifically named in this section are all that is needed.

B. Brethren.

1. Paul is not discussing the Christian's relationship with outsiders. For the first several verses he uses the words "one" and "person" and "he who" when speaking of the different parties he has in mind, but when he comes to v. 10 he uses the word "brother." He does the same in vv. 13, 15, and 21.
2. In Romans the person who is a "brother" is one who has been justified by faith in Jesus Christ (3:21-26). This is the person who has repented of his sins (Rom. 2:4; 6:1-2), confessed the faith that is in his heart with the mouth (10:9-10), and been baptized into Christ (6:3-4).
3. The "one another" relationship he is describing (vv. 13, 19) is the relationship made possible by our being together in the local church. It is in the local church that we are to "pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another" (v. 19).

C. Weak and Strong.

1. There are two classes of people under consideration, the "weak" (14:1, 2; 15:1) and the "strong" (15:1) brethren.
2. The "weak" brother is described by Paul as one who is "weak *in the faith*" (14:1). He does not understand that he is free to eat all meats. He does not love the Lord less than the "strong" brother, nor is he indifferent toward his duties as a Christian. He does not have less faith (in degree) than his strong brother. He himself is strong in love and zeal for the Lord. He is simply weak on account of his misunderstanding regarding the faith of the gospel.

NOTE: *We will consider the meaning of "the faith" in more detail below.*

3. In contrast there is the "strong" brother. This is the term Paul uses to identify him in 15:1. Strong, though, in what way? In the context of Paul's discussion, "strong" means strong *in the faith* in contrast to the brother who is weak in the faith, though Paul does not repeat the words "in the faith" when he uses this term of him. This brother is "strong" in the faith in the sense that *he*

can in full conviction or conscience engage in that which the weak brother cannot. But how can he do this? This brother can eat meats and observe the days because he has a correct *apprehension* of what the truth of the gospel is on the subject.

III. THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM DISCUSSED IN ROMANS 14:1-15:7

A. What is the meaning of “the faith” (14:1)? We have already assumed the answer to this question in the comments we have made about the two different classes of persons involved.

1. There are only two possibilities: it means either (1) the faith in the objective sense, meaning the gospel, or it means (2) faith in a subjective sense, i. e., the personal faith or conviction of the individual.
2. Actually, the latter springs from the former, since faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17). But if a brother does not yet fully understand a matter, he may be described, as here, as one who is “weak in the faith” on that particular subject.
3. In my own judgment, this is how Paul is using the words “the faith” here. These words are better understood as faith in the objective sense, that is, the truth of the gospel. Paul is dealing here with a problem of *misunderstanding* regarding the truth concerning food and the observance of days. It is this brother’s *failure to understand the truth* on this subject that makes him “weak in the faith.” At issue is, what is the Lord’s will on this matter?

B. Exactly what was the problem?

1. Whatever the problem was that was dividing these two classes of brethren from each other (we will consider the problem itself in just a moment), Paul uses a word that clearly identifies the *nature* of the difference. We need to focus on this word for just a moment.
2. In 14:1 Paul describes the difference between the weak and the strong with the words “disputes over doubtful things” (NKJV). What does he mean by these terms?

- a. There are two words involved. The two words can mean: (1) *diakrkriseis*, “passing judgment,” and (2) *dialogismnōn*, “doubts, scruples,” thus,

“passing judgment over [the weak brother’s] doubts or scruples.”

- b. But there is a second possibility: The words can also mean respectively: (1) “quarrels” and (2) “opinions,” thus, “quarrels over opinions.”
- c. The first word appears only two other places in the N. T. (1 Cor. 12:10 and Heb. 5:14) where it means “distinguishing, discerning,” but the act of discernment can easily pass over into the meaning of “stand in judgment over,” and discerning can also involve quarrels.
- d. The second word refers to (1) the process of reasoning, or its result: “thought,” “opinion” (Mt. 15:19; Mk. 7:21; Lk. 2:35; 5:22; 9:47; Rom. 1:21; 1 Cor. 3:20; Jas. 2:4), or (2) it may refer to “doubts,” “disputes” (Lk. 9:46; 24:38; Phil. 2:14; 1 Tim. 2:8). New Testament usage slightly favors the first alternative. Some believe that the plural form of the word would tip the scale slightly in favor of the second meaning, but since Paul is discussing a matter that pertains to “the faith,” and how one understands the subject of meats and days, the first meaning is better here.

3. So Paul is saying, do not accept the weak brother *for the purpose of entering into debates with him* over his way of thinking or his way of reasoning about the matter under consideration.

C. But how can it be called a dispute or argument over a certain way of thinking if it is a matter that pertains to “the faith”? How can one be wrong *in his understanding* about a matter that has to do with “the faith” of the gospel and yet Paul call it a matter over which brethren should not be divided?

1. This is a very important question because it gets to the heart of one of the central differences that has come up between brethren on the nature of the problem being discussed in this passage of Scripture.

- a. Some are maintaining that Romans 14 teaches that even when we have differences over *doctrinal* matters we may continue to have fellowship with those brethren whom we judge to be wrong in their beliefs or practices.

- b. Others are saying, no, Romans 14 is not discussing doctrinal matters, but matters of *opinion*.
- 2. So, who is right? My answer is, both are right! But be careful to note how these terms are used. *Definitions of the terms used must be in keeping with the nature of the subject being discussed in Romans 14.*
 - a. Even if the subject of Romans 14 concerns a “doctrinal” matter, keep in mind that *Paul gives these brethren specific instruction as to what the truth is on this subject.* The very fact that Paul describes it as *a matter that allows different ways of thinking* about it, while at the same time he calls it a matter that pertains to “the faith,” should cause us to be cautious in the application we make of it. But how can Paul call it something that pertains to “the faith” and at the same time allow (at least temporarily) different ways of thinking about it?
 - b. The answer to this question has to do with the nature of the subject itself. The subject being discussed pertains to the eating of meats and the observance of certain days. But the eating of certain meats and the observance of certain days *is no longer bound on anyone.* This is a matter that God himself has loosed.
 - c. Since this practice is now a *liberty* and is no longer a responsibility imposed upon Christians (i. e., no man is any longer *bound* to eat only certain kinds of meats and is no longer bound to observe only certain days) then it matters not if one eats foods previously not allowed, or that he observes days that were once forbidden. Such things are now a matter of indifference with God (on meats see also 1 Tim. 4:4-5).
- 3. Perhaps someone says, “But the weak brother *thought* the strong brother was sinning by eating such meats and treating all days alike, and yet God tells this weak brother not to judge (condemn) him (14:2). Isn’t this the same thing as our accepting one whom we think is engaging in a sinful practice?” In other words, in order that we may “pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another” (14:19), doesn’t this place us under the responsibility of accepting a brother today, and having fellowship with him,

even when in our judgment he is wrong on a doctrinal matter?

Answer: I ask this question: Is the matter which he practices a matter which God himself has loosed? This is the only reason, so far as I can see, that God required the weak brother not to condemn the strong brother who eats all meats and sees all days alike. Does the man who eats all meats (*the strong brother* whom the weak brother thinks sins in eating such meats) and the person who commits fornication, practices idolatry, commits murder, steals from others, corrupts the worship he offers to God by introducing unscriptural practices, baptizes people for some reason other than the remission of sins, etc. belong in the class because such people can do these things without having any scruples about them?

What if a brother who had just come into the body of Christ still *thinks* that the fornication he had been in the habit of committing in worship to a pagan god in a pagan temple is still okay? Would Paul's instruction in Romans 14 apply to him? Surely all must agree that it would not. But, just in case, let me suggest that Romans 14 would not apply for the following reasons (SEE CHART # 1):

1. Both classes of brethren in Romans 14 were specifically told the following:
 - Do not “despise” the other, because “God has received him” (14:3).
 - “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand” (14:4).
2. The reason: Not because the brother misunderstands and God will for that reason overlook it and accept him, but because it is over a subject that God says is now a matter of indifference since meats and days don't matter any more.
3. Question: But would God make a brother stand, even though still young in the faith, who does not yet *understand* that fornication is a sin, and as a result of his misunderstanding still practiced it as an act of worship to a pagan god?

Keep in mind that the problem discussed in Romans 14 *is not dealing with a matter that is sinful*. The subject under discussion is clearly *a matter of*

indifference with God. In addition to what he says in vv. 3-4, Paul says: “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean in itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (14:14). He makes the same point a few verses later: “. . . All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense” (14:20). He means the same thing when he says, “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking . . .” (14:17).

It is true, however, that Paul does show in this chapter that *one MAY sin even in a matter of indifference* with God, and he will do so, Paul says, if he should engage in that act without faith (14:23). Though meats are nothing with God, should one eat such meats without faith (that is, not having full confidence that his eating is right), the lack of such faith in the rightfulness of his act is a sin.

— **Special Note:** I believe that the material on “Context” in Part I of this outline was suggested in an outline on Romans 14 developed by Warren E. Berkley. Maybe I will be able to verify soon whether or not this is the case. The rest of the study is an outline built from my book *That They All May Be One: Studies on Unity, Freedom, and Authority in the Body of Christ*, pp. 211-223. More details are found there than we have included in this outline. – ww