

## The Book of Romans Study Guide

### Chapter 14 part 1

Paul now moves on to a teaching on maintaining harmony in spite of cultural differences within the congregation in Rome.

#### **14:1-6**

Paul identifies two problems that were evident in the congregation – conviction over the types of food and whether certain days hold greater significance than others. Later, in verse 21, he adds a related issue involving the drinking of wine. But he does not identify the nature of all of these issues. So, that calls for a cautious approach in drawing conclusions and making applications for this chapter.

**What are the potential issues that Paul is addressing?**

#### **1. Biblical dietary laws and holy days**

In this view, the Jewish believers of the congregation remained committed to observing the laws of kashrut (dietary laws) and felt that eating “unclean” food was a sin against God. The meat issue likely stemmed from the difficulty of obtaining meat that wasn’t ritually tainted in a pagan city like Rome. Historical records indicate that most meat sold in ancient markets came from animals sacrificed in pagan temples. As a result, some Jews in the diaspora continued to maintain a kosher diet by avoiding meat altogether. But those people in the congregation, mainly Gentiles, who did not have that connection to the dietary laws nor the conviction to keep them, “ate all things” (v. 2).

In a similar fashion, Jewish believers retained convictions that the Sabbath and annual festivals were not just traditions, but permanent ordinances, and the “sign” of the covenant that defined their identity. The Gentile believers of the congregation tended to lack that historical and theological connection, and thus did not have the same conviction as their Jewish counterparts and regarded every day alike (v. 5). But the problem with this argument about days is that the same proponents of this view claim that believers at this point in time were gathering on Sunday for worship. So, according to their own conclusions, they really weren’t regarding every day alike.

Moreover, in verse 6, the Greek word (*phroneō*) translated as “observe” (KJV, “regard”) is not same word used in the Septuagint (*phyllassō*) to translate the Hebrew term *shamar*, that is associated with observing the biblical holy days. Here, Paul is using a word that is about exercising your mind, not keeping or guarding something like the Torah.

#### **2. General cultural preferences.**

Rome was noted for groups that practiced vegetarianism. That included the followers of Pythagoras who practiced total abstinence from meat in order to avoid harming living beings. Likewise, Stoics taught that simple diets (vegetables and water) were more virtuous and disciplined than the “luxurious” diets of the Roman elite. So, it is possible that those preferences were in view in Paul’s argument.

Another possibility is a general opposition to eating meat that had been offered to idols, which

was clearly an issue for the believers of the city of Corinth according to Paul's writings in 1 Corinthians 8. This may also have been a lingering belief that eating meat gave pagan idols or demons literal control over their bodies, leading them to feel safer living as vegetarians. The same is true regarding his comments on days, because it was customary for some people to fast on Monday and Thursday during the ancient times (*Ta'anit 10a*), while others did not fast.

The core argument is that regardless of the specific origin, Paul's point remains that conscience and love for one's brother must override personal freedom. In verse 2, Paul defines "weakness" not as a lack of character, but as a lack of liberty. The "weak" person is the one whose faith requires a specific restriction to feel secure in their relationship with God.

- v 3-4 Paul concludes that in light of these different beliefs, the believers in Rome were not to hold in contempt and to judge those who believe differently than themselves.
- v 5 He shows that judging another believer is inappropriate because these are matters of conscience.

The believing community in the city of Colossae faced a similar challenge, for Paul later wrote in Colossians 2:16 – "No one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day." Both passages concern disputes over special days and eating and drinking. A distinction is that Romans 14 involves an instruction not to judge one another, while Colossians 2:16 is an instruction for believers not to allow people to judge them.

Paul's wording in this verse 5 is important: "Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind." "Fully convinced" (*plerophoreistho*) is a strong Greek term. It doesn't mean "do whatever you feel like." It implies a process of rigorous reflection. You must have a theological reason for your choice. And you must act out of a settled conviction that your choice honors God. That is what Paul is saying in regard to matters of conscience.

Yet that is something that many people fail to do. Instead, they rely upon traditions established by others, or they live their lives with a shallow, uncritical way of thinking.

- v 6 Paul moves from describing the conflict to explaining the motive. He argues that even though two people may be doing opposite things, they are able to do them for the exact same reason of honoring God with thanksgiving.

### **14:7-13**

- v 7-9 Paul provides the theological reason behind his instructions on food and days, namely the very nature of Lordship. By saying that "not one of us lives for Himself," he is telling the Romans that their "opinions" and "liberties" aren't actually theirs. This is an echo of his teaching in chapter 6 that believers become slaves to righteousness and to God as our master. And, in the ancient world, a slave didn't live for himself; he lived for his master to the end of his life. And, because of Messiah's resurrection, and thus He holds the "keys" to both life and death, He alone is the Lord and Judge over all.

So, by implication, we should not be judging one another according to what we eat and the days that matter to us. Such things are all secondary to our privilege of belonging to the Lord, and that should never divide the household of faith that He bought with His own life.

- v 10-12 Paul shows that judging others is inappropriate because we will all face judgment by Yeshua. He describes it as standing before His judgment seat (*bema*). In the Greek and

Roman cultures, every major city had a *bema*, which was a raised stone platform in the center of the *agora* (marketplace). That was where the Roman magistrate or proconsul sat to hear legal cases, settle disputes, and hand down sentences.

We have to recognize that this is not about the judgment of our sins and our justification by faith that secures our everlasting life as believers in Yeshua. That judgment took place when Yeshua paid the penalty in our place on the cross.

The judgment at the *bema* of Messiah, on the other hand, will be the evaluation of stewardship and faithfulness” of a believer’s life. In other words, the *bema* is about rewards and loss, not heaven and hell. The imagery of the *bema*, then, reminds us that since God is the only legitimate Judge, human judgment is both arrogant by taking God’s seat and premature by judging before the trial. And Paul reinforces that reality in verse 11 by quoting from Isaiah 45:23.

- v 13 In light of these things, Paul concludes that we should not judge one another in matters of conscience, like food and days. That is consistent with Yeshua’s teaching in Matthew 7:1 in the Sermon on the Mount, where he points out the folly of judging others according to a standard that we would not want to have applied to ourselves.

Then, in addition, Paul admonishes believers not to cause harm to others because of differing views. He uses two Greek terms to illustrate this:

- *Proskomma* – which refers to an object placed in a path that causes someone to strike their foot and fall.
- *Skandalon* – translated as “stumbling block” but more precisely refers to the trigger-stick of a trap.

Taken together, they describe an action, teaching or attitude that causes a fellow believer to fall and to get entrapped into actual sin. In the particular context of this chapter, it is a reference to pressuring someone to adopt your position on food or days, instead of simply describing your position and listening to theirs in return.