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Matters of Opinion (Romans 14)

In Romans 14, Paul admonishes his readers not to pass judgment on one another over days and foods. Based on this chapter of Scripture, many believe Paul teaches that God doesn't care about whether or not believers observe the commanded holy days and dietary laws in the Torah. They say that a person who observes these commandments is "weak in faith" because observing them is unnecessary. The important thing is that we don't judge each other or cause one another to stumble over these issues.

Let's read some of the relevant verses from Romans 14:

Romans 14:2-3

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

Romans 14:5-6

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Romans 14:13-14

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus [Yeshua] that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

Romans 14:20

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.

There is no question that Paul says believers ought not to judge each other over days and foods. He also teaches that one has the liberty to "eat anything" and "esteem all days alike," just as long as one is careful not to cause weaker believers to stumble. But the question is this: is Paul referring to the Torah's dietary laws and holy days in this chapter, such as the command against eating pork and the command to rest on the Sabbath? Or is he referring to something else?

We need to remember that Paul did not write his letters in a vacuum. In his letters, he often addresses specific congregational issues that have been brought to his attention. Since the exact circumstances he speaks to are not always spelled out, we have to do some work to figure out the context.

Many Christians assume that Paul must be referring to the Torah's dietary laws and holy days in Romans 14. And if we read this chapter in isolation, then that might be a reasonable assumption. But such a view is difficult to reconcile with both the broader context of Romans and what we know about Paul from elsewhere in the New Testament. Here are a few things to consider.

First, the Book of Acts documents that Paul regularly attended and participated in the synagogue services on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14, 44; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). In Acts 20:16, we see Paul expressing an urgent desire to be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Shavuot, or Pentecost. In 1 Corinthians 5:7-8, Paul instructs his readers on how they are to observe Passover. These references to Paul observing and teaching these commandments is what we would expect from someone who believed the Torah's holy days still ought to be observed.

Second, in Romans itself, Paul affirms the Torah's enduring validity. He declares that our faith does not overthrow but rather establishes the Torah (Romans 3:31). He teaches that sin is defined as breaking the commandments of the Torah (Romans 7:7) and admonishes believers not to continue living in sin (Romans 6:1-2). He calls the Torah holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). He calls the Torah spiritual (Romans 7:14) and says he delights in it (Romans 7:22). He says the Holy Spirit writes the Torah on the hearts of believers, empowering them to keep it (Romans 8:2-4). These types of statements are *not* what we would expect from someone who believed the Torah's holy days and dietary laws were no longer important.

Third, we have Paul's direct testimony on this issue. When he spoke to the local Jewish leaders in Rome, we read that he assured them, "I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers" (Acts 28:17). So, Paul testifies that he has never taught against the Jewish people or their "customs," which would undoubtedly include things like the Sabbath and dietary laws. The Jewish leaders in Rome admit, "We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you" (Acts 28:21). If Paul really taught the believers in Rome that they were free to disregard things like the Sabbath and dietary laws, surely the Jewish leadership in Rome would have heard about it. However, they said they hadn't heard anybody speak against Paul. Not only that, but Paul would be blatantly lying in Acts 28:17 if he did teach what many modern Christians accuse him of teaching!

For these and other reasons, we shouldn't be so quick to jump to the conclusion that Paul must be referring to the Torah's dietary laws and holy days in Romans 14. As we've seen, that interpretation is inconsistent with what we see elsewhere in Scripture.

Thankfully, there is another interpretation, which doesn't require Paul to contradict himself and makes better sense of the context and specific language used in Romans 14. We encourage you to set aside any

assumptions you might have about this chapter and try to look at it with fresh eyes. With that said, let's take a closer look at this chapter and see what we can find.

Conflict Over Opinions

To begin, the opening verse of Romans 14 gives us an important clue in understanding what Paul is addressing:

Romans 14:1

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over **opinions**.

There are two groups involved in this conflict. Paul refers to them as the "strong" and the "weak" (cf. Romans 15:1). Here, Paul says to the strong that they are to welcome those who are weak in faith, but not as an invitation to quarrel over opinions. The verb for "welcome" here, *proslambanō*, means to receive someone into your home or group (cf. Acts 28:2). In verse 3, Paul reminds both groups that God has welcomed them, so they should welcome each other. Scholars widely identify the "strong" in this section as mainly Gentile believers, and the "weak" as mainly Jewish believers, which will make sense as we continue.

But first, we see right away that Paul was addressing matters of opinion. These were not matters of settled law that believers in Rome were quarreling over. While most Christians in modern times might think of things like the Sabbath and dietary laws as matters of opinion, that wasn't the case in Paul's day. There were certainly debates regarding *how* to observe some commandments in the Torah, but everyone recognized the commandments as valid and authoritative. The earliest evidence we have of Christians beginning to abandon commandments like the Sabbath is from the second century, long after the time of Paul.

For more on this, see our teachings <u>The Lord's Day Part 1: Sabbath and Sunday in Scripture</u> and <u>The Lord's Day Part 2: Sabbath and Sunday in History</u>.

Once again, Paul is not addressing commandments. He says not to quarrel over *opinions*. What's more, even though Paul had his own opinion about which side of this issue was correct (Romans 14:14), he does not seem to take a side in this debate. Instead, he indicates that the opinions on *either* side are to be tolerated. What Paul encourages here is unity and mutual understanding *despite* differences of opinion. Neither side is to judge the other because God has welcomed them both (Romans 14:3). This should make it obvious that the issues Paul deals with here are not matters of sin. As we mentioned earlier, Paul defines sin as breaking the commandments of the Torah (Romans 7:7) and admonishes believers not to continue living in sin (Romans 6:1-2). It would be strange for Paul then to say God *welcomes* those who believe they can just disregard some of God's commandments a little later in the same letter.

So, what are the differences of opinion between these two groups? There are two contentious issues Paul addresses in Romans 14. Let's look at the first one:

1) Conflict Over Foods

Romans 14:2

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

As we can see, Paul is addressing a conflict between those who believe they may eat "anything" and those who eat only vegetables. The word "anything" must not be taken out of context here. Again, these are matters of *opinion*, not commandments. So "anything" must mean any *biblically permitted* foods. Some other people, Paul says, avoid more than just the meats prohibited by the Torah. That is, they have restricted their diet to exclude meat entirely. This isn't a diet the Torah requires. The Torah prohibits eating meat only from unclean animals, not all animals.

So, this was the difference of opinion: some people believed that they could eat anything that the Bible permitted; others believed that they should avoid some foods even though they were biblically permitted, particularly meat (and wine, as we will see in verse 21).

Why did some believers feel that they should eat only vegetables? The reason is that vegetarianism was an easy way to avoid potentially eating meat that some considered *koinos*. *Koinos* is a word that is usually translated as "common" in the New Testament, and unfortunately, it is also sometimes translated as "unclean." Here is where we need to bring out some important, often-overlooked details in this conflict that Paul is addressing.

Later in chapter 14, Paul says the following:

Romans 14:14

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus [Yeshua] that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

When Paul says in Romans 14:14 that "nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean," the word translated as unclean in that verse is the Greek *koinos*. The important thing about the word *koinos* is that it does not mean biblically unclean. When the New Testament and Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—speak of unclean meats per the Torah's dietary laws, the word used is *akathartos*. If Paul were referring to meat from unclean animals in Romans 14, we would expect him to use the less ambiguous term *akathartos*, but he doesn't. He uses *koinos*. While this word is usually translated as "common," when used in the context of food or eating, it specifically denotes ritual impurity.

For instance, the Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament defines *koinos* as "ceremonially unclean, impure." (F. W. Gingrich, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1965], p. 118)

Similarly, according to scholars D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham:

Unclean (koinos) denotes ritual impurity.

-D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, G. J. Wenham, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994)

Again, there is a distinction between food designated as ritually impure and meat from animals that the Torah calls unclean. In the minds of many first century Jews, foods could be considered *koinos*—ritually impure—for various reasons. Many of the reasons for considering certain foods *koinos* were not derived from explicit biblical commandments, as we'll see. Regardless, if food was deemed *koinos*, many Jews

considered it unacceptable for food, even though it was acceptable for food by biblical standards.

For instance, we see the word *koinos* used in the context of eating biblically permitted food during Yeshua's confrontation with the Pharisees in Mark 7. The Pharisees criticized Yeshua's disciples for neglecting their hand-washing rituals. The Pharisees asked, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (Mark 7:5). The word "defiled" in this verse is *koinos*—that is, ritually impure. From the Pharisees' perspective, eating with ritually impure hands made one's food ritually impure by association. While the Torah does command priests to wash their hands when serving in the Tabernacle (Exodus 30:17-21), there is no commandment for non-priests outside of the tabernacle to wash their hands before eating. In fact, Scripture explicitly identifies the Pharisees' ritual as "tradition," not a commandment (Mark 7:3-5).

The point is this: the Torah does not say that clean food becomes ritually impure if you touch it with unwashed hands. That idea comes from later tradition. Nevertheless, many Jews of Yeshua's and Paul's day held that perspective. This is important context to keep in mind when we see Yeshua and Paul seeming to disregard these matters of ritual purity. They weren't disregarding biblical commandments, but rather man-made traditions.

Once again, *koinos* is different from *akathartos*, the word for Torah-prohibited meats. However, there is a connection between the two terms. Peter uses both of these terms in Acts 10:

Acts 10:9-14

The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were **all kinds of animals** and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is **common** [koinos] or **unclean** [akathartos]."

For our perspective on Peter's vision in Acts 10, and why we do *not* think it teaches that God abolished his dietary laws, see our teaching, <u>Acts 10: Peter's Vision</u>. However, for now, we want to focus on just one point that will be relevant to our discussion on Romans 14.

As we can see from the passage we just quoted, Peter describes the animals he sees in the vision as both *koinos*, common, and *akathartos*, unclean. What's fascinating about this vision is that the sheet probably contained a mixture of clean and unclean animals. What scholars have proposed is that *koinos* refers to *clean animals* that many Jews at the time saw as having become ritually defiled by association with unclean animals. According to Craig Keener:

[T]he appearance of "all" animals in the sheet probably suggests that **they cannot be limited to either clean or unclean**. But some, at least, must be unclean (certainly the ἑρπετὰ [reptiles]), which explains Peter's reticence to eat them. The other, clean animals are not necessarily irrelevant either. It is probably not that Peter does not know how to butcher them in a kosher manner, in contrast to his tanner host; this ignorance would seem strange for a fisherman. **But if clean animals are present, their mixture with the unclean might seem to contaminate them for a strict observer of kashrut**.

-Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2013), vol. 2, p. 1769

Scholar Ben Witherington, likewise, has recognized this point:

[H]e refers to both the common (κοινὸν) and the unclean (ἀκάθαρτον). The former probably refers to something that could be defiled by association with something unclean, the latter to something inherently unclean. In other words, Peter assumed that because of the considerable presence of unclean animals and the possible problem of contamination, there was nothing fit to eat in the sheet.

-Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), p. 350

So, from the perspective of many believers in Paul's day, particularly Jewish believers, some clean foods could be rendered *koinos*—that is, ritually impure—through association with unclean animals. This is a significant distinction! Once again, this means that many Jewish believers at this time not only avoided unclean meat per the Torah's dietary laws but also avoided any *clean meat* that they regarded as having become ritually impure. This is similar to what we see in Mark 7. Some Jews would not eat food unless they washed their hands first, per the tradition of the elders. Touching food with ritually unwashed hands made the food *koinos*, even though the food itself was clean by biblical standards!

There is one more thing to mention on this point. When we keep reading Acts 10, we discover that the common and unclean animals from Peter's vision were symbols representing Jews and Gentiles (Acts 10:28). Many Jews during this time saw Gentiles as "unclean," and so they refused to fellowship with them out of concern that the Gentiles would cause them to become *koinos*—ritually impure—by association. The vision God gave Peter helped him recognize that this mentality was entirely unbiblical and inappropriate:

Acts 10:28

And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person **common** [koinos] or **unclean** [akathartos].

When Peter says it is unlawful for Jews to associate with Gentiles, he is not referring to the Torah but to cultural taboos at the time. The Greek word for "unlawful" here is *athemitos*. By contrast, the Greek word for "against the law" is *anomia*. Here is how the BDAG lexicon defines the word *athemitos*:

This term refers prim. not to what is forbidden by ordinance but to violation of tradition or common recognition of what is seemly proper.

-W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, "ἀθέμιτος," A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd Edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000)

Again, the Torah does not forbid Jews from fellowshipping or eating with Gentiles. But over time, this became a cultural taboo. For instance, the Book of Jubilees, written around 100 BC, warns Jews against associating with Gentiles. It says: "Separate yourself from the gentiles, and do not eat with them"

(Jubilees 22:16, quoted in Keener, *Acts*, p. 1778). This attitude is reflected in some Jews' criticism of Peter after he ministered to Gentiles. They said to him, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Acts 11:3). From their perspective, Peter had made himself *koinos* through his association with the "unclean" Gentiles. But this attitude toward Gentiles directly conflicted with the heart of the Great Commission, which demanded making disciples of "all nations" (Matthew 28:19), hence the need for Peter to get over his prejudices.

Nevertheless, these cultural sentiments ran deep within early Judaism. Not only did many Jews avoid fellowshipping and eating with Gentiles; they also avoided eating any meats or drinking any wine that came from Gentile sources, which are the two things Paul explicitly mentions in Romans 14:21. The idea was that foods and drinks handled by "unclean" Gentiles were rendered ritually impure by association, and therefore became unacceptable for consumption by Jews.

There is an abundance of historical evidence that shows Jews restricting their diet when Gentiles were in positions of control over food preparation. For instance, the apocryphal book of Judith, dated between 135-78 BC, records that Judith brought her own wine, oil, grain, fruit, and bread when going to the Assyrian camp and dining with Nebuchadnezzar's general, Holofernes (Judith 10:5; 12:2, 19). In the book of Tobit, written between 225-175 BC, we see that Tobit also refused to eat the food of the Ninevites after he was taken into captivity (Tobit 1:10-11). Josephus mentions Jewish priests he knew who ate only figs and nuts when they were in Rome (Josephus, *Life of Flavius Josephus* 14). In the later rabbinic literature, we also see regulations governing the interactions between Jews and Gentiles that developed over time. Many of these regulations prohibit Jews from eating foods and drinking wine handled by Gentiles (m. *Tahorot* 7; m. *Avodah Zarah* 2, 4-5).

So, it's no surprise when we get to the Book of Romans and see that some Jews were apprehensive about consuming meat and wine. Since the meat and wine would have been purchased from the public marketplace in Rome, many Jews would have considered them to be *koinos*. There are a few reasons why some Jews would have felt this way. It's possible that some Jews suspected that the meat and wine were used in offerings to false gods—an issue Paul addresses directly in 1 Corinthians 8-10. Some might have suspected that the blood from the meat wasn't drained properly. Or, as we've suggested, their apprehension simply might have been based on a ritual purity concern due to a deeply ingrained aversion toward foods and drinks handled by Gentiles. As scholar E. P. Sanders writes:

[B]ecause of ignorance, general suspicion, or the long-standing association of meat with sacrifice, Jews were reluctant to eat Gentile food, especially meat, **just because it was Gentile**. The objection, that is, may not have been technical—'it has blood in it'—but vague and traditional—'our family has never eaten Gentile meat' [...] Some Jews would eat Gentile meat if they could receive the right assurances about it, **others simply would not eat it because it was Gentile**.

-E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), pp. 279-280

Now Paul's statements about "unclean" foods in this chapter make a lot more sense. Paul says he doesn't consider anything *koinos* in itself—that is, he doesn't consider clean meats purchased from Gentile sources to be ritually impure and unsuitable for food. But he does say that such meat is *koinos* for anyone who thinks of it as *koinos* (Romans 14:14). That is, some believers, because they are "weak in faith," have genuine doubts about whether it's okay to consume certain foods and drinks due to ritual

purity concerns. Therefore, when they attend fellowship meals, they might be seen eating only vegetables instead of partaking in the meat and wine (Romans 14:2).

You could see why this was such a controversy in Rome! It's rooted in long-standing tensions between Jews and Gentiles. On one side, you had some Jews refusing to eat "Gentile food" because they feared it would make them ritually impure. How do you think that made some Gentile believers feel? Probably like they were being judged and looked down on as unclean. On the other side, you had Gentile believers enjoying "ritually impure" meat and wine in the presence of their Jewish brothers, which probably made some Jews feel uncomfortable and like *they* were being judged.

From Paul's perspective, even though he's persuaded that nothing is *koinos* in itself, this is not an issue to divide over. In fact, he encourages his readers—those he calls "strong" (Romans 15:1)—to be especially considerate toward the weak, even if it means not eating meat or drinking wine in front of them (Romans 14:13-23; 15:1-6). Based on the historical tensions between Jews and Gentiles that we see throughout the New Testament, Paul probably sees it as a miracle that Jewish and Gentile believers are gathering together to begin with. He doesn't think it's worth possibly messing all of that up over this disagreement regarding ritual purity. If Jews are joining Gentiles for fellowship meals, they have already come a long way. Perhaps, as they continue to grow in faith, like Paul, they will be persuaded that nothing is *koinos* in itself. Regardless, Paul says not to let this issue destroy the fellowship. He tells the "strong" that they "have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak" (Romans 15:1).

Now let's look at the second issue dividing believers at Rome:

2) Conflict Over Days

The second matter of opinion Paul addresses concerns days:

Romans 14:5

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Like with the conflict over foods, Paul says God accepts people on both sides of this conflict over days. This is not an issue to divide over.

Once again, many Christians assume this verse is talking about the Torah's holy days, like the Sabbath. But that is unlikely for a couple of reasons. First, Paul never explicitly mentions the Sabbath or holy days anywhere in Romans, which should *at least* give us some pause before concluding the Torah's holy days must be the subject here. Second, whatever the specific issue was, it was within the realm of *opinions*, not commandments (Romans 14:1). First-century Jews and Christians never considered holy days like the Sabbath mere matters of opinion. As we mentioned earlier, we don't know of any Christians abandoning such commandments until the second century, long after Romans was written.

There is another option for how to interpret the "days" mentioned in Romans 14:5. Some scholars have proposed that Paul is addressing traditional fast days. Notably, some early church fathers, such as Augustine (*Letter 36*, to Casulanus) and John Chrysostom (*Homilies on Romans 25*), have interpreted these verses in Romans as applying to designated days of fasting.

How likely is it that the conflict in Romans 14 was over traditional fast days? Well, we know that the Pharisees were known for fasting twice a week (Luke 18:12), and the rabbinic literature discusses setting aside Monday and Thursday for fasting (Tosefta to m. *Ta'anit* 2:4). The Torah does not require fasting twice a week—this was just a common practice of the time.

In contrast to the Pharisaic practice of fasting Monday and Thursday, the Didache, an early second-century Christian document, instructs its Gentile readers not to fast on the same days as "the hypocrites," but to fast on Wednesday and Friday instead (Didache 8:1). For whatever reason, the writer to the Didache community thought that fasting on the traditional days of Monday and Thursday was associated with hypocritical people. According to the scholar Toby Janicki:

The Didache instructs that followers of Messiah are to fast on Wednesday and Friday instead of on Monday and Thursday. These days are offered as sectarian alternatives to normative Jewish practice. It is possible that at certain times and places the fast days of Monday and Thursday were dominated by individuals looking to make a show of their righteousness. Fasting on the alternate days of Wednesday and Friday further safeguarded against making fasting an ostentatious show of piety, because no one in the broader Jewish community would suspect anyone of fasting then.

-Toby Janicki, *The Didache: A New Translation and Messianic Jewish Commentary* (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2017), 308-309

In any case, it's clear from the Didache that there were indeed historical controversies regarding which days to fast. At least one early Christian community differed from the normative Jewish practice. The author of the Didache associated the practice of fasting on the traditional days of the week with hypocrites, and he commanded that the Didache community fast on different days of the week. Thus, since we know there controversies over fast days between some groups, it's not unreasonable to think that the conflict Paul was addressing in Romans had to do with designated days of fasting.

This option seems much more likely, especially in light of the very next verse. Paul connects designated days with "eating" and "abstaining":

Romans 14:6

The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

So, one's observance or non-observance of the day is defined by their eating or abstaining—that is, whether or not they fast. In either case, they give thanks to God. It's easy to see how some might judge others for fasting or not fasting on particular days. However, Paul says this difference of opinion is not worth dividing over. He encourages the believers in Rome to love and welcome each other despite their differences of opinion over traditions and issues that aren't clearly mandated in the Scriptures.

In conclusion, Romans 14 does not teach that God doesn't care whether or not believers observe the commanded holy days and dietary laws. Both the broader context of Romans and the things we know about Paul from elsewhere in the New Testament preclude such an interpretation. When we examine this passage closely, a much more likely interpretation emerges: the conflict over foods had to do with concerns over ritual purity, and the conflict over days had to do with traditional days of fasting. In both

cases, Paul is addressing matters of *opinion*, not commandments. Therefore, since the issues in Rome didn't concern obedience to the clear commands of Scripture, Paul doesn't take a side. While he had his own opinions, he tolerates the opinions different from his own. He encourages his readers to do the same in hopes that the fellowship at Rome could be united in Messiah, despite their differences.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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