

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 14:14

One of the oldest principles of community in the Bible: The strong are to protect the weak.

As 1st century Christians debated dietary laws and Jewish calendar observance, Paul tells the “strong” to consider how their “freedoms” may negatively affect the “weak”.

Paul's “play on words”: “Stop judging one another, but rather make this simple judgment ... not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.”

Instead of judging others in Christ's body, we are to make a judgment or decision to protect them. Paul gives us three reasons. Here's the first one:

1. Nothing Is Unclean In Itself:

Verse 14: “As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.”

Don't miss this: Paul, a Jewish Christian, is telling other Jewish Christians “No food is unclean in itself.”

For many of them, that statement must have been difficult to absorb. A large portion of the Old Testament laws identified unclean foods from the categories of mammals, birds, fish, and insects. See: Leviticus 11.

Was Paul denying the Old Testament dietary laws, or pointing to something else?

- **At Creation:**

At creation, everything God made was considered “good”. Our first parents had no dietary restrictions. Genesis 1:29: “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.”

Were Adam and Eve vegetarians? Is that what Genesis 1:29 is saying or is it a positive statement of what they could eat?

- **Abel, The Keeper of Sheep:**

Genesis 4:2: “Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, while Cain was a tiller of the soil.”

Genesis 4:3-4: “In the course of time ... Abel brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering...”

How could Abel bring the fat portions of a firstborn sheep without killing it?

The statement about “fat portions” appears again hundreds of years later. When the Mosaic Law was instituted the “fat portions” of animal sacrifices were offered to God, but the meat was eaten. (Leviticus 3:9)

- **Where There Is No Law:**

Looking at pre-Mosaic Law passages, we find that animals were not considered unclean – because the Law had not yet come into force. In Genesis 9:2-4, God told Noah:

“All the animals of the earth, all the birds of the sky, all the small animals that scurry along the ground, and all the fish in the sea ... I have given to you for food, just as I have given you grain and vegetables. But you must never eat any meat that still has the lifeblood in it.” – Genesis 9:2-4

Paul's insistence that no food is by itself unclean is clearly biblical. Until the Law of Moses came into effect, there was no such thing as a clean or unclean animal. For hundreds of years, these rules did not exist.

- **Why Did God Institute The Mosaic Dietary Laws?**

When the Mosaic Code came into force, God instructed the Israelites that certain foods would be allowed, while others would not.

Many theories have been offered on why these new restrictions were instituted, but they remain just that – theories. We are never told why God gave Israel these restrictions.

So, how can Paul now tell these Jewish-Christians that the Old Testament dietary laws are no longer binding?

The only real answer is that the Mosaic Code is no longer in force.

Can we prove that from the New Testament? Let's look at Mark 7. Here's the background: When Jesus' disciples sat down to eat, the Pharisees complained they had not followed the Jewish tradition of washing before eating.

The Pharisees had an entire ritual that had to be performed. Let me describe it:

They rolled up their sleeves and secured them. Then they took an egg-sized cup and poured the water down their wrists and hands, letting the water roll off their fingers. This was repeated for both hands. Afterwards, they said a prayer and sat to eat.

After the Pharisees complained about Jesus' disciples not following the traditions of the Elders, Jesus pointed out that they had neglected far more important issues, such as providing for their elderly parents.

He told them: “Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” – Mark 7:13

Here’s where this all comes into focus for the discussion of clean and unclean foods.

Later, when Jesus was alone with his disciples, they asked him what that discussion was about. Jesus said, “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” – Mark 7:18-19

No food is in and of itself unclean. After recording Jesus’ words, Mark immediately writes, “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”

The One through whom the Father created the world set the clock back to the pre-Mosaic period and declared that all foods were clean.

- **The Duty To Protect The Weaker Christian:**

Paul understands that other Jewish-Christians may not have the same “freedom” of conscience. He says, “If anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.”

Note the end of that sentence: “Then for him it is unclean.” In reality, is it unclean? No. Food is just Food! But for a Jewish Christian who is still trying to find freedom, some foods still “feel” unclean.

That’s the second part of the issue. If a Jewish-Christian’s conscience tells him some food is unclean – because he hasn’t broken away from Old Testament dietary laws - then for him it is still unclean.

It’s not a problem of food, it’s a problem of conscience. As John Stott puts it,

“The paradox ... is that some foods are both clean and unclean simultaneously. On the one hand, the strong are convinced that all foods are clean. On the other, the weak are convinced that they are not.”

This is Paul's first reason we need to consider how we will deal with those who do not share our “freedoms” on “matters of conscience”:
Nothing Is Unclean In Itself.