

Redemption in Romans

All the Rest Is Commentary

Lesson #13 for September 25, 2010

Scriptures: Romans 14-16.

1. Romans 14 deals with the question of what is acceptable practice for a believing Christian. The particular question being discussed is food offered to idols. There are several very significant issues involved. Do we need to judge others to set them straight?
2. Read Romans 14:1-5. First of all, we need to understand that the issue was not vegetarianism. Paul was writing from Corinth. In Corinth almost all of the roads entering the city had pagan temples on them. It was expected that if one was bringing flesh food or alcohol into the city for sale, he would stop at one of those pagan temples and offer a portion of the commodity as an offering to the idol, thus dedicating all of it to that idol. The question for Christians was, "Is it acceptable to purchase food in the market and eat it if that food may have been offered to such an idol?" Furthermore, those pagan temples received much more meat and wine than the proprietors could consume. So, they opened up "restaurants" connected to those temples to prepare and sell some of the meat that they had received. Would it be acceptable for a Christian to eat a meal in such a restaurant? What did they think would happen if they did? Were they worshiping that idol? On one side, those who had come from pagan backgrounds believed that eating such food was in some way worshiping that idol. Others asserted that those idols were nothing more than chunks of stone, wood, or metal; and they could not affect the food in any way! But, that's not all:
3. Read Acts 15:28,29 (*GNB*). The issue is made somewhat more complicated by the fact that Paul had previously attended the Jerusalem Council where it had been decided:

²⁸The Holy Spirit and we have agreed not to put any other burden on you besides these necessary rules: ²⁹eat no food that has been offered to idols; eat no blood; eat no animal that has been strangled; and keep yourselves from sexual immorality. You will do well if you take care not to do these things. With our best wishes.

These very explicit instructions had come from church headquarters.

4. Since Paul was in Corinth dealing with mostly Gentile believers there and writing a book to the Roman believers who were also largely Gentiles, was he free to ignore the advice given at the Jerusalem Council even though the decisions at that conference were inspired by the Holy Spirit? (See Acts 15:28) To get the full context, one must read 1 Corinthians 8 and 10 (especially 1 Corinthians 8 & 10:23-33). Paul was clearly overriding the decision made by the "general conference" in Jerusalem and recognizing that the cultural situation he was dealing with required a different approach. Paul was suggesting that what matters is not so much the eating of the meat which may have been offered to an idol, but how one relates to other members in the Christian Church. Is that the way we should relate to church authority? Some would call such an approach "situation ethics."
5. It is interesting to compare Paul's approach in this setting to that of Daniel in Daniel 1. Review the story. While Seventh-day Adventists have often used the example of Daniel as proof that vegetarianism is God's first choice of diet, in fact, the primary reason why Daniel rejected the king's diet was because the food and drink had been offered to the Babylonian gods. Thus, by refusing to eat the king's food, Daniel was rejecting the Babylonian gods. And after three years, they were better looking, healthier, and smarter than any of the others.

6. In Romans, Paul was speaking to believers in Rome saying that those who were strong in their faith could eat whatever was sold in the market without asking any questions with regard to conscience. This is not a discussion about what was healthy. In Paul's day, he believed that taking this approach was saying that by eating the meat, one rejected the idols because he did not believe that offering the food to them affected the food in any way. Thus, Daniel and Paul did opposite things but for the same reason—to reject idols. What will Paul and Daniel have to say to each other in heaven? While Daniel was rejecting the Babylonian gods, fortunately, he also was eating the healthiest diet. Both Daniel and Paul were doing what Paul recommended in Romans 12: think through the issues, discuss it with your friends, pray for guidance, and then act in the most intelligent way you can.
7. Some of our Christian friends have used Romans 14 along with 1 Corinthians 10:25; Mark 7:18,19; and 1 Timothy 4:1-5 to suggest that the Seventh-day Adventist emphasis on a healthy diet is no longer required by God. How should we interpret those verses? Read in their full context, they are passages talking about people who for conscience or ceremonial reasons did certain things which they thought were right. If the only reason why you avoid certain items of food is for ceremonial reasons, then perhaps these verses do apply to you! Idols do not have the power to “hex” food. Does one become ceremonially unclean by touching or eating such foods.
8. Those who are familiar with the Adventist Health Study and other related research projects are aware that following such a healthy lifestyle can add up to 10 years to one's life. A young person might be inclined to say, “I don't care to live ten more years at the end of my life in some nursing home!” It turns out that if you eat the healthier diet when you are young, you stay “young” longer. So, the years you add will be healthy years—not just ten more years at the end in a nursing home!
9. There were also apparently some formerly Jewish believers in Rome who were encouraging the Christian believers to adopt the keeping of certain ceremonial sabbaths. At one time, there were quite a number of those ceremonial sabbaths. Paul placed the keeping of those ceremonial sabbaths in the same category as eating food offered to idols.
10. But there is another major issue to consider. The Jerusalem Council took place not to establish the basic foundation principles of Christianity—which it clearly did not address at all—but to establish criteria that would make it comfortable for formerly Jewish Christians to worship together with formerly Gentile Christians! It was all about getting along at church and not being repulsed by sitting next to another person who followed different ceremonial rules. Remember that in the early years, they almost always ate at least one meal together after worshiping together.
11. So, Paul went on to say that those who have a judgmental attitude—and from either side of the argument are condemning their opponents—are destroying the very peace and harmony God intended for Christian churches. What happens when a church chooses up sides and begins throwing verbal darts at each other? Today, the arguments might be over dress or what kind of music to play in church. Those are not core issues.
12. But honestly now, considering the full span of history especially since early Christian times, is it the seventh-day Sabbath or the ceremonial sabbaths that have created the most controversy? Through the history of our world, far more controversy has arisen over the seventh-day Sabbath than over any ceremonial sabbath. Why is that? Satan understands very well that a correct understand and observance of the seventh-day Sabbath will lead people to honor and admire our true Creator and God. That is a far bigger issue than any involving a ceremonial sabbath, and Satan knows it. He will do anything to prevent our

correct worship on God's holy day.

13. Does that mean that we are free to condemn those who do not observe the seventh-day Sabbath in just the way we do? Of course not! We may try to present the truth to them in a winning and convincing way, but even if they are not persuaded when we have done our best, it never gives us permission to condemn them. It never helps to beat people over the head with one's arguments. That would just drive them away.
14. While vegetarianism is indisputably a healthier lifestyle for most of us, it should not become a matter of condemnation either! Remember that Abraham and Sarah fed beef to the Lord and two angels. (Genesis 18:6-8) Did they refuse to eat it? Not at all! Did they ask for a second helping? Jesus fed thousands of people fish. (Matthew 14:13-21; 15:32-38) Jesus even created fish for His disciples to eat. (John 21:9) Or, should we say as one student did one time when asked, "Why do you think Jesus fed the disciples fish on the beach?" He replied, "I understand that He was living up to all the light He had!" No! It was what they were accustomed to eating. It was not a time for a lecture on health reform! Does this mean that our message on diet is not important? Of course not! As usual, we must interpret everything we read in the Bible in the context in which it was written. The question here is, "How can former pagans worship and eat together with former Jews without getting upset by each other's behavior?"
15. Read Romans 14:19-23. Paul discussed eating food offered to idols, keeping ceremonial sabbaths—even keeping the true Sabbath—and then he went on to effectively say, "Please do not do anything that will upset others within the church. If you have special beliefs about what is permitted and what is not permitted, keep that between yourself and the Lord."
16. What is implied by Romans 14:22,23? If you feel guilty about doing something, does that make it a sin? Would it be damaging to your conscience? And why would God condemn such people? And then Paul concluded by writing, "Anything that is not based on faith is sin!" What does that teach us about faith and sin?
17. God wants our minds to be as clear as possible and our thinking to be as good as possible. What if we have our minds preoccupied with something that we have done that gives us a guilty conscience? Can we be thinking clearly about the truth?
18. There are three definitions of sin in the New Testament. We usually refer to 1 John 3:4: "Sin is the transgression of the law," (*KJV*) or more correctly as it should be translated, "Sin is lawlessness" or "rebelliousness." But what about the definition in James 4:17 (*GNB*): "So then, if we do not do the good we know we should do, we are guilty of sin." Is there any limit to the good we know we should do? But, in Romans 14:23 (*GNB*) we read, "Anything that is not based on faith is sin." What does that imply? If faith is a relationship with God that helps us to become more like Him on a daily basis because by beholding we become changed, then sin would be anything that separates us from God. (Isaiah 59:2) If we are moving closer to God with the help of the Holy Spirit, we are acting in faith. If we are moving further away from God by following the Devil's example and our own selfishness, we are sinning. This is the most basic definition of sin and faith in the entire Bible. In what way does this verse serve as a conclusion to our discussion about food offered to idols? If we really claim to be Christians, we need to orient our lives to the standards that we have been given by God. Our lives are to be based on "principle." If we operate contrary to God's principles, we are moving farther away from God.
19. So, Paul went on in Romans 15:1-6 to speak to the "strong" to remind them that it is their duty to help the weak not to destroy their faith by putting stumbling blocks in their way. If we take the loving approach, we are helpful. If we take the selfish approach, we are destructive.

20. Read Romans 15:7-13. Paul began to summarize by repeating his earlier points that the gospel was given to the Jews, (Romans 3:1-4) but also that it was intended for the Gentiles. His proof is that it says so in the Scriptures—the Old Testament! (2 Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10) So, the gospel is clearly intended for both Jews and Gentiles.
21. Paul was not apologizing for speaking so boldly about what he believed. He had set as a goal for himself to preach the gospel in places where no one had done so before. Do not forget how Paul felt about the core issues in the gospel! (Galatians 1:8,9) That brought him to Romans 15:22-33, his plans to visit Rome and to travel on to Spain. But first he had to make a visit to Jerusalem to carry the large sum of money that he had raised among the Gentiles to help the suffering and poor among the Christians in Palestine. This was going to turn out to be Paul's last book written in complete freedom. In Jerusalem he would be arrested and imprisoned and finally transferred to Rome where he appeared before Nero.
22. Some people wonder how Paul could know so many people in Rome having never been there. It reminds us of the famous ancient saying, "All roads lead to Rome." No doubt, Paul had worked with numerous people particularly in Asia Minor and Greece who had reason to visit Rome or even to move there for business reasons. Some may even have traveled there hoping to spread the gospel.
23. What are we supposed to do with Paul's words in Romans 16:16 (GNB), "Greet one another with the kiss of peace." In some parts of the world, that would seem very natural. In other areas, they would expect a big hug. In conservative England, it might be better as J. B. Phillips suggested in his translation of the New Testament, "Give one another a hearty handshake all round for my sake."
24. Notice that Paul was still working with Timothy who sent his greetings. But, how do we explain Romans 16:22 (GNB): "I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, send you Christian greetings." Was Paul not the author of Romans? Certainly, he was. However, that is not the issue in this section. Tertius was simply the secretary or amanuensis that Paul had been using.
25. Then Paul concluded with a glorious prayer of praise.
26. Romans is, no doubt, the most comprehensive and far-reaching declaration about the gospel in all of Scripture. It focuses particularly on the implications of the life and death of Jesus Christ. Those implications are broad and deep. It would have enormous implications for the Christian church if Christians read it regularly and sought for an ever deeper understanding of its many meanings. Here we see Paul's answers to such critical questions as: Why did Jesus have to die? Has God given up on His friends, the Jews? What is the meaning of baptism? Since all human beings are sinners, is there any basis for us condemning each other? And when dealing with such delicate matters as eating food offered to idols, what is the right approach for Christians? This lesson has enormous implications for conservatives and liberals in the Christian church today.
27. Imagine how different things would be on this earth if all Christians lived out the principles outlined in the book of Romans!

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