

OpenTheo

Is Romans 14 Saying That Christians Can Just Make up Their Own Rules?

January 4, 2024



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether the Christian liberty described in Romans 14 is the same thing as making up our own rules, weaker and stronger Christians in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, and the claim that once a person accepts Jesus as Savior, he is redeemed and no longer a sinner.

- * How can we explain the idea of Christian liberty as found in Romans 14 to someone who claims it's just the same thing as making up our own rules?
- * Regarding the "weaker" and "stronger" Christians Paul talks about in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, should weaker Christians eventually mature in their faith and understanding, and is it the stronger's job to help correct the weaker's theology?
- * How should I respond to the claim that once a person accepts Jesus as Savior, he has been redeemed and is no longer a sinner?

Transcript

This is Amy Hall and Greg Kolkel, and you're listening to Stand to Reason's hashtag STRAskPodcasts. What do we got, Amos? Alright, Greg. Well, we kind of talked about the law in the last episode, so we're going to continue on that topic.

This one comes from Ethan A. How can we explain the idea of Christian liberty as found in Romans 14? Does someone who claims that it's just the same thing as making up our own rules? Well, when someone makes a comment like that, I'm going to have to ask for more information. What do you mean it's just making up our own rules? Have you read Romans 14? I actually can't see how a person would come to that conclusion by reading Romans 14. Now, this is a chapter that's dedicated to the broader issue of being sensitive to Christ.

You know, the weaker brothers and also being careful not to be judgmental. Alright? So

this passage is talking about areas where there is Christian liberty, where there's genuine liberty, and all that means is, where we have latitude to make choices that are not sinful in themselves. But in this particular category, there are some people who think those things are going to be more important.

Those choices are sinful, but they're mistaken. This is what Paul says. Now, the example here in the text is eating meat that's been sacrificed to idols.

And Paul is saying, hey, the idol is nothing. The meat that sacrificed to idols is not tainted. If you want to go in the market and buy this meat, it seems to me as I recall, maybe that kind of meat was less expensive.

But if you want to eat the meat, you're not eating any judgment to yourself, essentially. There's nothing wrong with this. It's not what goes into a person, as Jesus pointed out, but it's what comes out of him that matters.

So on the one hand, he's establishing a feature of Christian liberty. But notice what he's saying is, Christians have liberty to do the things that are not sinful. And it just turns out that this isn't a sinful thing, and he's making it clear.

There are all kinds of other things that Scripture talks about that are sinful that we are not supposed to be engaging in. So there's nothing, there's no antinomianism here. There's no antinomians like no law.

Okay? It isn't like we're living a life without law. We're just making up whatever we want as we go along. There's no hint of that in this passage.

Paul is just saying, what do we do with circumstances where some people think something is wrong when it isn't wrong? And he says, there's two things we do. First of all, the Christian who understands, he's the stronger brother, and all that means is that he has a richer understanding of what's right and wrong. That he needs to be sensitive, that he doesn't offend or cause to stumble another brother, and characteristically that means not that they don't like what you're doing, but that they're actually falling into sin.

Maybe doing the thing that you have the liberty to do, but they think it's wrong, but they do it, and therefore they violate the conscience. So we need to be sensitive to them, but on the other hand, Paul says, the weaker brother should not be judging the stronger brother for exercising their appropriate liberty in Christ to do something that's not a sin. That's the liberty.

He's saying it's not a liberty to make up our own rules. It's the liberty to do things that are not sinful. Now, if somebody else thinks they're sinful, then we kind of, we have to be careful of that.

And Paul gives directives about how we do that. But at the same time, there's two

injunctions here. One is to not, is to not be judged, let's see, to be sensitive to others who maybe have a weaker conscience, and the other injunction is not for the weaker brother, not to judge the stronger brother.

In the exercise of his Christian liberty. And so there's different characterizations there. There's not a hint of antinomianism here.

Like we're lawless, that is we have no law, we're bereft of guidelines, and therefore we just make it up as we go along. Nothing like that. You can read from chapter 14, verse one, all the way to verse 23.

You're not going to get that idea. Now, some people said, well, this is Christian relativism. How so? He said, because one set of rules apply to one person and another set of rules apply to different people in the same circumstance.

It's not quite accurate. Because what Paul is saying is, it's not sin to eat meat, sacrifice to idols and the analog, the parallel, in modern times, characteristically as alcohol. Paul is saying that's not sinful.

But it is an objective, more principle that you are not to violate your own conscience, even if your conscience is misinformed. That's the objective, more principle. And the best thing is to have a conscience that's biblically informed.

But as long as the weaker brother is the weaker brother, he should do what he thinks is right, follow his conscience. Because if he does it, if he thinks he's sinning and it's not sinning, he's still sin. But at the same time, not fall into a different sin, which is judging your brother who is exercising his liberty.

Yeah, Paul is certainly very clear about what is sin and what is not sin. This is not a blanket statement about do whatever you want as long as you think it's okay. This is a very specific situation where you have a lot of Jewish believers coming out of a situation where they have been very careful to follow the dietary laws and other certain restrictions and laws about, as Paul says, one person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike.

One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he was weak eats vegetables only. So they've been trained their whole lives to eat certain things and to do certain things on certain days, because that's the law that God gave to leave people to Christ ultimately. But you don't just, I can see how people would be confused about whether or not they needed to continue to do that.

So Paul's saying have grace for those people and don't try to make them go against their conscience because, and this is the overarching thing he gives here in Romans 14, that we are not supposed to live and die for ourselves. We're supposed to do everything for the glory of God. And so because God will enable us to stand at the end and that our

righteousness depends on him, we don't have to follow these dietary laws and things like that.

But like you said, Greg, if you think you do and you go against it, now you're violating your conscience and that is an objective rule as you pointed out. So you're right. This is not any sort of relativism at all.

It's just Paul trying to, trying to help people to work out how to bring the Jews and the Gentiles together when people have different ideas about how this is all going to work out. Okay, and on that note, let's go to a question from World View Cafe. Elaborate on weaker and stronger Christians.

Is it implied that weaker should eventually mature in their faith and understanding? Is it the stronger's job to help correct the weaker's theology? I know that this depends on the cause of the stumbling and incomfortableness. Well, it's interesting. I think we can take our few from Paul here.

What is Paul doing? Paul is, first of all, identifying one as the weaker one and one as a stronger one. So the weaker is a pejorative term here. He's not just saying you have some people who believe this and other people who believe this.

These are different beliefs. He's saying one set of beliefs reflects an accurate understanding and those are called a stronger and one set of beliefs represents an inaccurate understanding and those are called weaker. And then what does he do? Then he explains why the stronger believer is correct theologically.

All right, so he's informing. He's trying to bring people up to speed, so to speak, on correct moral thinking about these matters. So for worldview, cafe, I think the answer simply as we do, kind of what Paul is doing.

If a person is open to hearing the reasons why something they thought was wrong isn't actually wrong before God, fine. And if they're persuaded, fine. Now their conscience is informed by a, I think, a more accurate understanding of God's desires and therefore they can experience more liberty as Christians than they had before.

And therefore that frees up their life to enjoy their life more. It seems to me that it doesn't have the liberty. Having liberty is a feature of a satisfying life.

You get to enjoy more that God has provided that is not prohibited. So I think this is exactly what Paul is doing here. He's giving instruction so that the weaker can be stronger, but he's also exhorting the stronger not to look down on the weaker brother.

That's another element I hadn't mentioned. But to, but to be, but to be, show care to them in their sensitivity. But also there's nothing wrong with trying to explain to the weaker brother that this point of view reflects theological weakness, not theological

strength.

Make sense? Yes. So he says in verse three, the one who eats is not to regard with contempt. The one who does not eat.

Is not, is not to judge the one who eats for God has accepted him. And by the way, pardon me for interrupting Amy, but this is a part I mentioned it before, but it almost never mentioned in these discussions. No.

The person who's offended or bothered, for example, say the alcohol thing, I'm convinced biblically that you, that imbibing an alcohol is not wrong. There's no biblical argument in favor of that idea that this is immoral. There is an excess that is.

All right. But notice that in their culture now, all the emphasis is on telling the stronger brother not to, not to behave in a certain way because someone might stumble. But there's no instruction to the stumbling brother, not to judge the one who's exercising their liberty.

I've just not heard it. It's not part of the conversation. But it is Paul's injunction.

Yeah, it's true. Throughout this, he gives instructions to both sides and he's, he's requiring both of them to not judge the other and not to condemn the other in different ways. Right.

Right. Now, what makes this difficult to answer the question just plainly is that I think it requires some wisdom because when you think about Paul's reaction and Galatians. Oh, yeah.

It's much stronger than this. So they're, they're, they're, they're have to be situations where. Because he comes down on the apostle Peter pretty hard.

Yeah. So in, in, well, part of the reason is because, well, this, we're talking about Galatians. What happened was Peter was separating himself and some of the other leaders were separating themselves from the Gentiles and they were saying you had to be circumcised.

And so all Galatians is all about what is the law? What was its purpose? Why are we not under it now? What, you know, we're, we're under Christ now that he makes this whole argument here. And so what I think probably maybe this is the key. It was this, it was the disruption of the church, the separating of the Jews and the Gentiles that so infuriated Paul in that situation.

And so I guess that would make sense in this case where his goal is to help them to live together. And okay, so you disagree until you're brought to maturity, all of you. Here's how you, here's how you fit together.

But if, if, you know, but he comes down very hard on people who are dividing over this. Yeah. I think the, the other thing that's going on just to flush that circumstance out a little bit more.

Peter was hanging with Paul and the Gentiles. Everything was fine until the duty I was, came. And then Peter changed his behavior and started hanging with the duty I was.

He was just separating himself with the Gentiles. Okay. And he didn't want to offend the Judaizers.

The problem is here, someone say, well, see, there he's being sensitive. He's not causing the other to stumble, maybe. But there was something else that was a stake here.

It was the nature of the gospel. And this is what Paul is arguing the whole book of Galatians. He's, he's just saying what the gospel really amounts to and how this works and what, what Peter's actions were doing were not.

I think it's pretty clear when you read the text. Peter wasn't trying to be sensitive to the cultural issues or respond to the cultural sensitivities of the Jews. He was trying not to get in trouble from the Jews.

And so he's siding with them in an act of hypocrisy. And that's what Paul was condemning, this act of hypocrisy. What's at stake here? It's not just making people feel better.

It's the nature of the gospel itself that's at stake here. And are we one together? And is circumcision, does that make the difference? Paul says in Galatians 5, look at it, if you were getting circumcised, then Christ is of no use to you. And then he adds the phrase to clarify you who are seeking to be justified by law.

Okay. So this is the issue that's going on here. This, this element of creeping into Christianity now, the Judaizer adding justification by law as part of justification by grace.

And here's Peter waffling back and forth. And then Paul comes down and pretty hard in the first couple chapters. Yeah, that's a great point, Greg.

And you'll notice in the Romans 14 chapter, he makes a point of saying, you stand in Christ. So he is, he's underscoring this whole idea of the gospel and the nature of our righteousness and our ability to stand before God is all in Christ. And so he's making that clear, even in the midst of saying, you know, you don't judge, you don't condemn either side, but just know that your righteousness is in Christ.

It's not in these things. So yeah, that that was, I like the way you explained that, Greg. All right, let's squeeze one more question in here.

This one comes from Eric. What is the apologetics response to once a person accepts

Jesus as savior, they have been redeemed and as such are no longer a sinner? Well, this has to do with linguistic conventions. Okay.

And in the New Testament, the phrase sinner was often used of unregenerate people or people who were not in God's camp. It was not meant to imply that those who were in God's camp in some sense, whether it was the Old Testament sense or the New Testament covenant sense regeneration. They didn't sin because all of sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Romans three.

And so, but what the word was meant to describe is people who were living in a sinful world, and according to their sinful natures, they were following a trajectory according to the flesh, the way the phrase that Paul uses in Romans chapter eight. They were according to the flesh and the word Gentiles also use that way. We are not sinners like the Gentiles or something like that or look at how the Gentiles work.

Well, Paul was using language like this even with Gentiles when he's writing letters to Gentile communities, but he was referring to the Gentiles as those outside of the camp. Interestingly, I mean, this is a subtle, I think, reference to the fact that those Gentiles who are now believers as Christians have entered into the Jewish covenant system, the new covenant in particular, they have been grafted in. And so are not considered outsiders or Gentiles, but now drawn in because of the Jewish covenant and the Jewish Messiah that now they fall under, even though they're Gentiles.

And that dividing wall is kind of broken down between the Jews and the Gentiles. That's in Ephesians two. Yeah, but notice, even though I spoke it down, everybody's not nothing.

What they are, it's not like Christianity is this whole new thing. What Christianity is is the fulfillment of covenant Judaism, which Gentiles are now included in, which was largely a secret or a mystery that has now been revealed in the New Testament. But in any event, it's a, I'm trying to remember where I was going with this particular point, or the sinner's language.

And so these are linguistic conventions. That's all they are. Everybody's sinner.

And we all sin. We think of the two greatest commandments that Jesus offered, and we all break these commandments virtually every second of our lives. We don't love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strengths.

I have never done that. I have no conscious awareness of a moment in 50 years of knowing Christ where that's been true of me. And precious few moments where I've considered my neighbor over myself, some on occasion, but not, nevertheless, I'm constantly in sin.

So all our sinners all the time. The New Testament language is using the word sinner

oftentimes simply describe the outsiders, those who are not under the covenant of grace. They are also referred to as Gentiles, even though many of those who are under the covenant of grace are, in fact, non-Jewish.

But now they've been drawn into a Jewish provision, a Jewish covenant they're grafted in. So I guess if someone were to say this statement to you, the first thing you could ask is what do you mean by a sinner? Because that's the key to this whole thing. Because clearly, I mean, we just talked about Peter's sinning.

We talked about Paul excoriating Peter for what he was doing. He was sinning. Look at 1 Corinthians.

They were sinning. The whole book is written to tell them that they were sinning. And then, of course, back to Romans for a second.

Why by that surprise? So in Romans 8, when Paul is talking about how, because we're in Christ, now the Holy Spirit enables us to put our sin to death, he talks about how we are groaning within ourselves, waiting for the redemption of our bodies for our complete redemption so that there's no longer any sin. And he says, let's see, for in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope for who hopes for what he already sees. But if we hope for what we do not see with perseverance, we wait eagerly for it.

So he's looking ahead to a place where there's only righteousness in ourselves, in creation, and we have not made it there yet. And that's it. That whole idea is very clear.

So I think that distinction just asking the question of what they mean by center. Yeah. Good one.

All right. We're out of time. Thank you, Eric.

And thank you, World View Cafe. And thank you, Ethan. We appreciate hearing from you.

Hopefully, I got those names right this time. All right. We love to hear from you.

Send us your question on Twitter with the hashtag STR. Ask or you can go through our website at str.org. Just look for our hashtag STR. Ask a podcast page and you'll find a link there.

And make your question short. If it's short, we will consider it. All right.

Thanks for listening. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.