

Romans 14:5-9 What are the special days, and what are they not?

There are two groups of people in Romans 14, whom Paul calls the *weak and the strong*. I have argued that the former are Jews who have not yet fully believed in Jesus, and the latter are believers, mainly Gentiles. I think the strong and the weak can be distinguished on the basis of those who have, or lack the *dunamis* power of God (Acts 1:8, Romans 15:1), i.e. true faith in Jesus, and it is this that classifies them as strong or weak. This approach differs from the common interpretation that describes the weak as those who are still attached to the so-called ceremonial law (dietary laws, Jewish feasts, Sabbath.)

The weak eat only vegetables and consider one day more sacred than another. However the strong were free to eat 'all things' and considered every day alike. For Paul, the matter of sacred days was a matter of personal conscience (Romans 14:5-6).

In our day Christians read Romans 14:5-6 casually and immediately assume God has made attendance at Sunday worship optional for believers. This is certainly not what Paul meant. Sabbath and the biblical feasts were never disputable matters in Paul's day, especially for Jews, and there was no such thing as Sunday worship. Christianity, for various reasons, moved their day of rest from Saturday to Sunday over a period of 3 centuries. Nevertheless Christianity always retained one day as a special day of rest. Historically, Romans 14 has not been used to argue for the abolition of the day of rest. Our present situation in the UK has been compounded by the Sunday Trading Laws introduced in 1994.

But let's try and imagine the incredulity of the weak in faith (1st century Jews) to the suggestion that the Sabbath had now become a matter of conscience. Can we imagine them saying,

- Paul, don't you know that the Sabbath day of rest was instituted by God at creation?
- Paul, don't you know that Sabbath day of rest is the fourth commandment?
- Paul, don't you know Sabbath is a sign of the covenant with Israel?
- Paul, don't you know that Sabbath will be kept during the millennial reign of Messiah, in passages like Isaiah 58? How can this be a matter of personal opinion?

When we weigh the evidence, the idea that Paul thought the Sabbath was optional is really impossible. The idea that God did away with any of the 'ceremonial' laws in His word raises all sorts of problems. The main problem with this idea is that it is very difficult to classify so-called ceremonial laws as only ceremonial. The Bible itself does not classify the Torah into moral, ceremonial and ritual parts, but describes itself as a whole. The so-called ceremonial laws usually have a lot of moral values attached to them. For example,

Exodus 23:12 *"Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed.*

In this verse we see that God instituted the Sabbath for the most vulnerable in society, the working animals, young children and foreigners. This verse shows that Sabbath is rooted in the moral values of animal welfare, family life and justice. Jesus said,

Mark 2:27 *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*

In saying this He made it clear that Sabbath is not primarily ceremonial but a day set aside *for man*. The day of rest was God's idea for our physical and spiritual renewal. We are wired up to function best in cycles of daily work and rest, and weekly work and rest. In Jesus' day the Sabbath had become a burden for many rather than a joy. This was due to the many extra rules (halacha) added to the Biblical teaching. Jesus broke these rules, especially when it involved saving life. He was accused of breaking the Sabbath, but he didn't break the biblically ordained Sabbath.

So what should the day of rest look like for us?

1. **It is a day for physical refreshment.** It is a day to cease from our normal work and do something different and relaxing. A prominent Christian writer said he puts down his pen on Sunday's. It can be difficult in the modern world, but I suggest you do everything possible to arrange your life so that you have Sunday as your day of rest. But if you can't, then make other time. We are not designed to work 24/7.
2. **It is a day for spiritual refreshment.** Jesus went to synagogue (church) and we should WWJD! It is a day for spiritual input, and also, like Jesus, for ministering to the needs of others. If you really can't get to church on Sunday, then make sure you get your spiritual input in some other way, like attending house group. We are living in a world which is constantly moving away from godliness, and the Christian life is a daily struggle. We need to hear the word of God regularly – and other Christians need us as well!
3. **It's a day for family.** Eat together, invite others, go out together, play a game. Parents spend time with children, and grandparents with grandchildren.

We often think we have too much to do and there is no time for rest. The truth is that there will always be too much to do. If we lay it down for the Lord it is amazing how He honours those who honour Him. On the other hand if we really are too busy, maybe we should be disciplined to reorganise our priorities.

I think a proper reintroduction of a Sabbath day of rest into society could be revolutionary in terms of family life, good health, justice in the work place, and in attitudes to animal welfare and creation care – although I can't see that it is very likely at the moment in the UK, but at least Christians can still set an example. There is much more that could be said about the Sabbath, but hopefully I have said enough to show that Paul could not possibly have been talking about Sabbath in Romans 14. (The problem with thinking God has abolished any aspect of the law (God's teaching) is that it is a slippery slope.)

What therefore did Paul have in mind when he spoke about special days? I don't think we can be sure, but I think the most likely option is that Paul is talking about special fast days. Fasting was common enough in the first century among the Pharisees, and the disciples of Jesus, for Jesus to comment on it (Matthew 6:16-18). It is very interesting that a note in an early Christian document called the Didache mentions fast days,

Didache 8:1 *But do not let your fasts coincide with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Monday and Thursday, so you must fast on Wednesday and Friday.*

Although the Didache (90-130AD) is later than Romans (56-58AD) it is at least possible that the issue of fasts was a point of contention at Rome, with the weak (Jews) feeling obligated to the Monday and Thursday fast, while the strong (Gentile believers) felt no such obligation.

This idea fits in well with the flow of Paul's thought in Romans 14:5-6: *One person esteems one day [a fast 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 [fast] day, observes it in honour of the Lord. The one who eats [on that day], eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains [by fasting], abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God.*

(NB The NIV adds the word *meat* in 14:6, which draws our attention back to 14:2. However the word *meat* is not found in the Greek – see KJV or ESV.)

The Bible does not prescribe special fast days and nor did Jesus. Therefore the issue was for Paul a matter of personal choice. We could perhaps put Christmas into the same category. It is not a biblically ordained feast, but it is still very valuable to celebrate the Word Who became flesh. On the other hand Jesus instituted Communion, so that is not disputable, although the when's and how's differ between churches. We are not to allow genuinely disputable matters to divide us, but rather our focus should be on Christ who died and lived again and who is Lord (Romans 14:7-9).