



# **TWISTING GOD'S WORDS**

**The Most  
Misunderstood  
Text in the Bible**

**Randy Barber**

## Preface

**P**eter, speaking of the Apostle Paul, writes, “As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” (2 Peter 3:16).

Peter knew that Paul was called by God, and that he spoke with authority on behalf of the Lord. But he also acknowledges here that some of what Paul writes can be “*hard to understand*,” and that there would be those who see these difficult passages as an opportunity to twist and distort Bible truth to their own advantage. As Christians we are advised to “*Be diligent (study) to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing (interpreting) the word of truth.*” (2 Timothy 2:15). And then Peter finishes his thought in verse 17 by saying, “*You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked.*” These warnings are to be taken seriously as we look at two of the most misunderstood texts in the whole Bible.

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## The most misunderstood text in the Bible

I believe the most misunderstood text in the whole Bible is Colossians 2:16, *“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.”* A surface reading, without considering the context, would seem to say, “Don’t let anyone tell you what you can eat or drink, or what day you should worship on.” And I get many inquiries about this text. Recently Becky wrote, “Pastor Barber, I understand that you advocate Saturday Sabbath worship, and I’m wondering why in light of Colossians 2:16 that seems to negate the importance of the Sabbath.” Well Becky, I don’t believe that’s what the text is saying, and I also believe its important to interpret Scripture correctly.

The Greek word “*Exegesis*” means “reading out of.” To read out of Scripture what God is saying to us. The opposite is “*Eisogesis*” which means “reading into,” or attempting to read your own meaning into Scripture. It’s important that we don’t try to make the Bible say what we want it to say, but that we “read out of” Scripture the message God has for us. And the Bible must be its own interpreter, and you’ll see why that’s so important with this text.

The word “Sabbath” is used 56 times in the New Testament, but there is only one mention of “Sabbath” in the theological section of the New Testament, and that’s here in Colossians 2:16. And this is an extremely important text to sabbatarians, but it is just as important to non-sabbatarians, for it is the primary passage upon which they base their denial of Sabbath observance.

In July of 1880 the Congregational Pastor William Love wrote, “Some seventh-day sabbatarians acknowledge that if the word ‘sabbaths’ in this verse does refer to the seventh-day, then that settles the case against them. And all non-sabbath Lord’s day men might well acknowledge that if this verse does not teach that the fourth commandment is abolished, then that settles the case against them.” He went on to say, “This text, by its true meaning,

is a key to the right understanding of the Scriptures pertaining to the sabbath.” (*The Sabbath: The Change of Observance from the Seventh to the Lord’s Day*, Part 2, Article 2). Some refer to this text as the Achilles heel. So our challenge is to find the true meaning of the term “sabbaths” in the text.

Bible translators coined the terms Formal Equivalence and Functional Equivalence a long time ago. Formal Equivalence focuses on a word for word approach, and translates each word into its English equivalent. Here’s the Greek text for Colossians 2:16—

μη οὖν τις ὑμᾶς κρινέτω ἐν βρώσει καὶ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει  
ἐορτῆς ἢ νομνίας ἢ σαββάτων

And here’s the Formal Equivalence—

μη	οὖν	τις	ὑμᾶς	κρινέτω	ἐν	βρώσει	καὶ
not	therefore	anyone	you	let judge	in	food	and
ἐν	πόσει	ἢ	ἐν	μέρει	ἐορτῆς	ἢ	νομνίας
in	drink	or	in	respect	of a feast	or	of a new moon
ἢ	σαββάτων						
or	of sabbaths						

As you can see, Formal Equivalence alone leaves the translation difficult to read. Functional Equivalence attempts to translate the thought intended, and you need the proper balance of both to have a good readable translation. Too much Formal Equivalence and you end up with a stiff translation. Too much Functional Equivalence and you end up with a paraphrase. And with that said, the King James Version has done an excellent job of translating Colossians 2:16, “*Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.*”

What are scholars saying about this text? As you might imagine, the battle lines are drawn, and there are scholars arguing on both sides of this issue. Walter Martin wrote in *Kingdom of the Cults*, page 573, “Of all the statements in the New Testament, these

verses most strongly refute the sabbatarian claim for observance of the sabbath.” B. H. Carroll wrote in *Colossians, Ephesians, and Hebrews*, page 51, “This passage is the death blow to all sects which observe the seventh-day sabbath.” H. M. Riggle wrote in *The Sabbath and the Lord’s Day*, page 100, “Here is a clear, positive statement that the sabbath was taken out of the way by nailing it to the cross.”

But then the Presbyterian Clergyman Gordon Clark, in *Colossians: Another Commentary on an Inexhaustible Message*, page 94, cautioned, “The context speaks of food and drink, feasts and new moons. All this is ceremonial. Then are not the sabbaths here condemned ceremonial sabbaths?” Albert Barns, in *Notes, Explanatory and Practical*, page 279, wrote, “The use of the term in the plural number [sabbaths], shows that Paul had his eye on the great number of days which were observed by the Hebrews as festivals.” And Jamison, Fausset, and Brown in their *Commentary of the Whole Bible*, wrote, “The sabbaths of the day of atonement and feast of tabernacles have come to an end with the Jewish services to which they belonged. But the weekly Sabbath rests on a more permanent foundation, having been instituted in Paradise to commemorate the completion of creation in six days. Leviticus 23 expressly distinguishes ‘the Sabbath of the Lord’ from the other sabbaths.” And we’re going to look at Leviticus 23 in context in a moment, but first let’s look at the Ten Commandment Law—

### **Baptist**

“We believe that the Law of God, the Ten Commandments, are the eternal and unchangeable rule of His moral government.” (*Baptist Church Manual*, Article 12).

### **Lutheran**

“For up to this day mankind has absolutely trifled with the original and most specific revelation of the holy God, the ten words written upon the tables of the Law from Sinai.” (*Crown Theological Library*, page 178).

### **Methodist**

“No Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.” (*Methodist Church Discipline*, page 23).

### **Presbyterian**

“We must not imagine that the coming of Christ has freed us from the authority of the law; for it is the eternal rule of a devout and holy life, and must therefore be as unchangeable as the justice of God which it embraced, is constant and uniform.” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the History of the Gospels*, page 277).

### **Dwight L. Moody**

“The commandments of God given to Moses in the mount, are as binding today as ever they have been since the time when they were proclaimed in the hearing of the people.” (Dwight L. Moody, *Weighed and Wanting*, page 15).

### **Charles H. Spurgeon**

“The Law of God must be perpetual. There is no abrogation of it, nor amendment of it. It is not to be toned down or adjusted to our fallen condition; but every one of the Lord’s righteous judgments abideth forever.” (*Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia*, Baker).

### **Sunday School Times**

“The law of the Ten Commandments has to do with moral principles, and these are unchanging in any age.” (*The Sunday School Times*, October 17, 1948).

### **Billy Graham**

“The Ten Commandments are still God’s standard. God never changes. The Moral Law is absolute forever..” (Dr. Billy Graham, *Decision*, April, 1989).

And I couldn’t agree more. So most denominations recognize the Moral Law or Ten Commandments as binding forever. And

God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone with His finger (Exodus 31:18). And Jesus said in Matthew 5:18, *“Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the law, till all is fulfilled.”* A “jot” and a “tittle” are equivalent to the dotting of an “i” or the crossing of a “t.” And yet I’m sure many of you have heard someone say, “Nine of the commandments are moral, while the fourth commandment is ceremonial.”

So let me ask you, why would God write nine moral principles in stone, and mix in one ceremonial principle? If you think the fourth commandment is ceremonial and no longer binding, it’s like saying God didn’t know what He was doing. But He is all-knowing, and He does know what He is doing. And Jesus said, *“Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no way pass from the law...”* So God’s Moral Law, or Ten Commandments, cannot be altered by anyone as long as heaven and earth exist. And right at the heart of the Moral Law is the Sabbath commandment. *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”* (Exodus 20:8-11).

Still someone will argue, “Yes, the Ten Commandments are still binding, but the Sabbath command was given only to the Jews.” I’m aware that that seems to be the popular thing to say, but the problem with that argument is that it doesn’t hold water. And this is just another way of trying to say the fourth commandment is ceremonial.

The Sabbath was given at Creation in Genesis 2:1, 2000 years before Abraham was born, and 2000 years before the first Jew existed. Genesis 2:1-3 says, *“Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the*

*seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.*” So God blessed and sanctified the seventh-day, setting it apart for holy use. And the seven-day cycle is the product of the seven days of Creation, and the seven-day week has no other purpose for its existence. A day is the time it takes the earth to turn once on its axis. A month is the time it takes the moon to go one time around the earth. A year is the time it takes the earth to go one time around the sun. But there is no astronomical reason for a week. The seven-day week comes to us from Genesis 1, and that’s the only reason for its existence. Notice what *Eadie’s Biblical Cyclopedia*, page 561 says, “It is not the Jewish Sabbath. There is no Jewish element, any more than there is in the third commandment, or the sixth.”

God placed the seventh-day weekly Sabbath in the heart of His Moral Law, written with His finger on tables of stone, as a memorial to Creation, and it began 2000 years before there was a Jew. Yet many will still argue that the Sabbath commandment is ceremonial. I agree that there were ceremonial sabbaths, but the seventh-day Sabbath of the Moral Law, written with the finger of God, cannot be considered ceremonial.

So now someone asks, “How do you know that Saturday is the seventh-day?” Besides the fact that every Dictionary on the face of the earth states that Saturday is the seventh-day, there’s a ton of proof that the weekly cycle has never been altered. We’ve had two Calendars since before the time of Christ—the Julian from 45 BC, and the Gregorian from AD 1582, and the weekly cycle remained constant during this transition. *The Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 5, page 188, dealing with this calendar change says, “The continuity of the days of the week was maintained.” So the weekly cycle has remained constant since long before the time of Christ. God gave us the seventh-day Sabbath at the close of creation week, wrote it in stone, and placed it in the heart of His Moral Law—and He has protected the weekly cycle down through history. In 108 languages of the world “Saturday” is rendered “Sabbath.”



Spanish .....	Sabado
Italian .....	Sabbato
Portuguese .....	Sabbado
Latin .....	Sabbatum
Bulgarian .....	Shubbuta
Russian .....	Subbota
Arabic .....	As-Sabt
Greek .....	Sabbaton

Furthermore, any Sunday-keeping church will tell you they celebrate Easter Sunday, in memory of Christ’s resurrection, on the first-day of the week, so the weekly seventh-day Sabbath of the Moral Law is Saturday, and the first-day of the week is Sunday, and any pastor or priest will tell you the same.

So you ask, “What does this have to do with Colossians 2:16?” And my answer is everything! And we’re almost ready to go back to Colossians 2, but first I want you to notice these statements about the Ceremonial Law—

“Besides the law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel, as a church under age, ceremonial laws...” (*The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, Chapter 19, paragraph 3).

“Ceremonial Law is that which prescribes the rite of worship used under the Old Testament.” (Reverend Charles Buck, *A Theological Dictionary*, page 230).

“Under the New Testament the liberty of Christians is further enlarged in their freedom from the Ceremonial Law.” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter XX, Article I).

“The word ‘law’ is used by New Testament writers in two senses. Sometimes it refers to the Ceremonial Law of the Old Testament, but the New Testament also speaks of the Moral Law...” (Dr. Billy Graham, *Associated Press Dispatch*, Chicago Tribune).

The Moral Law was meant by God to last forever. The Ceremonial Law, which called for the sacrificing of animals, was meant to last only until the cross. Someone says, “But Paul spoke against the law!” Never one time did Paul ever speak against the Ten Commandment Law (Romans 13:9), but he clearly spoke against the Ceremonial Law continuing after the cross. The *Sunday School Times* says, “Paul’s argument against ‘the law’ was aimed at this rabbinical code; and at the continuance of the Ceremonial Law which Christ’s redemptive work had canceled.” (*The Sunday School Times*, April 21, 1934).

Paul struggled throughout his entire ministry with Judaizers, who followed him from church to church telling the new Christians that they had to be circumcised and keep the feasts to be saved. The Moral Law does not call for circumcision, sacrificing of animals, or keeping of feasts days, but the Ceremonial Law did. So what were these ceremonial feast days? Israel had seven yearly feasts—four in the spring, and three in the fall. The four spring feasts were, Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, and Pentecost. The three fall feasts were, Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles. Some of them, but not all of them, were called sabbaths (plural). So they were ceremonial sabbaths to be celebrated once a year. So now, let’s go back to Colossians 2, and begin reading with verse 14—

***14 “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross.”***

God wrote the Ten Commandments in stone with His finger (Exodus 31:18). Moses wrote the Ceremonial Law in a book, or a scroll. Deuteronomy 31:9 says, “*And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests, the sons of Levi...*” Hebrews 9:1 says, “*Then indeed, the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary.*” Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:15, “*Having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances...*” So “*the handwriting of ordinances*” that ended at the cross was the ceremonial, sacrificial, ritual law that Moses wrote

in a book. Do you remember what we just read from the Sunday School Times? “Paul’s argument against ‘the law’ was aimed at this rabbinical code; and at the continuance of the Ceremonial Law which Christ’s redemptive work had canceled.”

Galatians 5:1 says, “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage.*” That’s not referring to the Moral Law which James calls the Law of Liberty (James 1:22-25), but to the Ceremonial Law which commanded the sacrifice of an animal every time they sinned. Hebrews 10:26 says that once Christ died there is now “*no more sacrifice for sin.*” Once Jesus, the Lamb of God (John 1:29) died on the cross for our sins, we do not need to sacrifice anymore.

***14 “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross;***

***15 And having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.”***

Jesus made a show of “them” (the ordinances) “openly” on the cross, which is the subject of verse 14. At Jesus’ death the veil of the temple was torn from “top to bottom” (Matthew 27:51), and the temple service with its sacrifices, rituals, and festivals ended forever. But when was the last time you read about “*principalities and powers?*” Ephesians 6:12 says, “*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*” That has to be a reference to Satan and his demons. A Polysemy is where a word or phrase can have multiple meanings. Jesus also made a show of the principalities and powers “*openly, triumphing over them in it,*” meaning the cross. And as a result of this, Paul instructed the first century Christians to—

***16 “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.”***

Earlier Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown referenced Leviticus 23. Verse 13 says, “*And the meat offering thereof shall be two tenth deals of fine flour mingled with oil, an offering made by fire unto the Lord for a sweet savor; and the drink offering thereof shall be of wine, the fourth part of a hin.*” The sacrificial system revolved around the offering of a lamb as one’s substitute for sin. Along with that sacrifice was a meat (or food) offering, and a drink offering. We still use these two emblems (unleavened bread and wine) today in our Communion Service. The bread symbolizes Christ’s broken body, and the wine symbolizes His spilt blood.

Paul mentions these meat and drink offerings while writing about the wilderness tabernacle in Hebrews 9:10, “*Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him who did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; which stood only in meats and drinks, and diverse washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.*”—or the cross. So the “meat” offering was flour mixed with oil that was placed on the sacrifice as it was burning to give a sweet smell, and the “drink” offering was wine, that was poured on the sacrifice along with the meat offering. You can read more about these “meat” and “drink” offerings in Numbers 28. And remember, the word “meat” in the KJV is a generic word meaning “food.” So “meat offering,” “grain offering,” and “food offering” are all referring to the same thing.

**16 “Let no man therefore judge you in meat (offerings), or in drink (offerings), or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.”**

Another name for “*holy day*” would be “festival.” The “*new moon*” refers to a special sacrifice that took place at the beginning of each new month, and “*sabbath days*” refer to those yearly feast days that were called “sabbaths.” The word “sabbath” means “ceasing” or not working on that day, so you have the “ceasing” of the weekly Sabbath of the Moral Law, and you have the “ceasing” of the yearly sabbaths of the Ceremonial Law. Remember this

from Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, “The sabbaths of the day of atonement and feast of tabernacles have come to an end with the Jewish services to which they belonged. But the weekly Sabbath rests on a more permanent foundation, having been instituted in Paradise to commemorate the completion of creation in six days. Leviticus 23 expressly distinguishes ‘the Sabbath of the Lord’ from the other sabbaths.”

Albert Barnes wrote, “There is not the slightest reason to believe that he [Paul] meant to teach that one of the Ten Commandments has ceased to be binding on mankind. If he had used the word in the singular number—‘THE Sabbath’—it would then, of course, have been clear that he meant to teach that that commandment had ceased to be binding... But the use of the term in the plural number [sabbaths], show that he had his eye on the great number of days which were observed by the Hebrews as festivals... No part of the Moral Law—The Ten Commandments—could be spoken of as ‘a shadow of good things to come.’” (Albert Barnes, *Commentary on the New Testament*, Comments on Colossians 2:16). So it was the Ceremonial Law with its festivals, rituals, yearly feast sabbaths, and animal sacrifices that ended at the cross.

**17 “Which are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ.”**

This phrase is the key to understanding verse 16. All the items Paul lists in verse 16 are shadows or types symbolizing the reality that is Christ. In contrast with the shadow, Jesus is the fullness of reality. Henry Cowles summed it up, “All these Mosaic ceremonial services foreshadowed the coming Christ; they were only the shadows of which Christ is the body. Hence the ‘body’ having now come, the prophetic shadows have served their purpose and should cease.” (Henry Cowles, *The shorter Epistles*, page 174).

Notice what William Plumer of the Presbyterian Board of Education wrote, “The context clearly shows that Paul speaks not of the weekly Sabbath, nor of any institution of the Decalogue, but of matters besides the Moral Law.” (William S. Plumer, *The Law of God as Contained in the Ten Commandments*, page 307).

Remember what William Love wrote in 1880, “Some seventh-day sabbatarians acknowledge that if the word ‘sabbaths’ in this verse does refer to the seventh-day, then that settles the case against them. And all non-sabbath Lord’s day men might well acknowledge that if this verse does not teach that the fourth commandment is abolished, then that settles the case against them.” And I am going to say that a proper understanding of Colossians 2:16 should settle the case for all of us as well.

Now, remember when we talked about Formal Equivalence and Functional Equivalence? And remember when we talked about Exegesis and Eisegesis? Hold on to your seats—

**King James Version** reads—

*“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.”* To me, that is the perfect balance of Formal Equivalence and Functional Equivalence, and the perfect translation of the text. Am I saying you should only read the KJV? No, I’m not saying that. I’m just saying that in this instance the translation is very well done.

**New Kings James Version** reads the same—

*“So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths.”* “Meat” is the old KJV way of saying “food.” So either meat offering or food offering is correct. In the KJV “days” is supplied, so the NKJV word “sabbaths” is correct. And one must remember that “sabbaths” is plural here, and it refers to the yearly sabbaths of the Ceremonial Law. Now fasten your seat-belts, because you’re about to run head-long into glaring Eisegesis—

**New International Version**—

*“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.”* This text has nothing to do with dietary restrictions or what you eat or drink. Paul, in Colossians 2:16, is talking about food offerings and drink offerings. Most of the new translations miss

this completely. And they take “sabbaths” out of the plural in an attempt to make it mean the fourth commandment. This is even more blatant in these following versions—

**Contemporary English Version—**

*“Don’t let anyone tell you what you must eat or drink. Don’t let them say that you must celebrate the New Moon festival, the Sabbath, or any other festival.”*

**Good News Translation—**

*“So let no one make rules about what you eat or drink or about holy days or the New Moon Festival or the Sabbath.”*

**New Life Version—**

*“Do not let anyone tell you what you should or should not eat or drink. They have no right to say if it is right or wrong to eat certain foods or if you are to go to religious suppers. They have no right to say what you are to do at the time of the new moon or on the Day of Rest.”*

I’m not here to condemn any person or belief system. God is the Judge. But I am here to address what I see as an abuse of God’s holy Word. An honest mistake is one thing, but to intentionally twist Scripture to make it say what you want it to say is wrong. And we need to remember what God said in Revelation 22:18, *“For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: ‘If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.’”*

It’s wrong to alter God’s Word, and it’s wrong to not speak up when you see it happening. I encourage you to be honest with yourself, honest with one another, honest in your study of God’s Word, and honest in your relationship with God. Don’t try to make the Bible fit the theology of your life, but rather make your life fit the theology of the Bible. Don’t try to make the Bible fit the

way you want to live, but rather bring your life into conformity with the Bible.

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We had just finished studying this very topic in a crusade in Pennsylvania, and as the crowd left the auditorium, Pastor John remained behind to talk. He said, “Wow! I would never have believed it. I’ve used Colossians 2:16 for more than thirty years to disprove the importance of the Sabbath, and in a little more than an hour you completely popped my bubble. But at least I still have Romans 14:5. I’m sure you’ll agree that Romans 14:5 will clear the whole matter up.”

## What about Romans 14:5?

Every time we study Colossians 2:16 someone will bring up Romans 14:5, “*One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.*” This text is interpreted by some today as removing the distinction between days, thus leaving the Christian free to worship on any day of his choosing. But is this what Paul is saying to his readers? Not at all.

Romans 14 covers one topic and one topic only, and that is eating or not eating. Paul is actually talking about food and fasting. How do I know? Look at the next verse. Verse 6 reads, “*He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.*” Now go to the end of the chapter. Verse 20 says, “*Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.*” Meyer’s explains that because Paul does not enter into a lengthy explanation of “days,” but returns immediately in verse 6 to “food,” indicates that the controversy over “days” stemmed around food. (*Meyer’s New Testament Commentary*). Weiss argues from Romans 14:6 that there is no contrast between “him who observes the day” and “him who eats,” and that they are really addressing the same subject. (*Expositor’s Greek Testament*).



The letter to the Romans came less than a year after Paul addressed the Corinthians, and the similarity between 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 is difficult to miss. The first letter to the Corinthians was written around AD 55, and Paul wrote his letter to the Romans less than a year later in AD 56. And since he wrote Romans from Corinth, the struggle at Corinth was still fresh in his mind. In 1 Corinthians 8 the problem is identified as eating foods sacrificed to idols. According to ancient practice pagan priests would sell the food that had been offered to their pagan gods out of the back door of their temple. Paul told the Corinthian believers that because the idols meant nothing to them, it was not wrong to eat the foods dedicated to them. However, he said, not everyone would have sufficient religious training to understand this, and could not with a free conscience eat such foods. So Paul urged those on both sides of this issue not to judge or place a stumbling block in the other one's way (Romans 14:13).

Paul is not speaking of food hygienically harmful, and he is not addressing the issue of clean versus unclean flesh foods. He is talking about food offered to idols, and he is not suggesting that the Christian of strong faith may eat anything. God already told us through the prophet Isaiah that anyone eating swine's flesh at the Second Coming (Isaiah 66:15-17) will be destroyed, so this is not to be viewed as a contradiction of that. Paul has already established that the man of faith will regard it as an act of worship to maintain good health (Romans 12:1; 1 Corinthians 10:31). He has established before we arrived at chapter 14 that the man of God will see to it that his body is preserved holy and acceptable to God as a living sacrifice (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

Few Jews comprehended the fact that the Ceremonial Law had met its fulfillment in Christ (Colossians 2:14-16; Ephesians 2:15), and was henceforth no longer binding. And because Jewish converts to Christianity would find it difficult to let go of a life-long habit of ceremonialism, it appeared best to Paul to allow the various elements of the Jewish ceremonial system to gradually disappear as the mind and conscience became more enlightened. This is why he had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), so as to be more

accepted by the Jews, even though he taught that circumcision was “nothing” (1 Corinthians 7:19). This is the background for what you are about to read in Romans 14—

<sup>1</sup> ***“Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.”*** “*Weak in the faith*” means one who is new in the faith, one who has not matured in his Christian experience, or one who has a limited grasp of spiritual things. “*Doubtful things*” means disputes (or arguments) over opinions, not over something as important as the Moral Law of God. Paul says that believers are to be welcomed into the church, but not for the purpose of drawing them into an argument about eating or not eating.

<sup>2</sup> ***“For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables.”*** “*Eat all things*” is a reference to eating foods offered to idols. Because some of the “weaker” or newer Christians did not understand that it was not spiritually wrong to eat the food that had been offered to idols, they abstained from flesh foods entirely, which means their diet was restricted to vegetables. It does not mean that they were “weak” because they ate only vegetables. The word “*weak*” comes from the Greek meaning “weak in faith.” Many of the new converts still believed that the idols had power, and to eat the foods offered to them meant that they could still be controlled by those pagan gods.

<sup>3</sup> ***“Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.”*** “*Despise*” comes from the Greek meaning “to look down on.” The person with the stronger faith is not to look down on the person with the weaker, or newer faith, and the one with the newer faith is not to judge the one of religious experience in the matter of eating or not eating. Both parties are in the wrong according to Paul, and both parties are exhibiting spiritual pride instead of Christian love.

<sup>4</sup> **“Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.”** “Another man’s servant” is a reference to God’s servant. The one who is condemning here is condemning one of God’s children, one who is responsible to God, not to his criticizing fellow Christian.

Verse 5 is where the problem comes in for many Christians. It’s a discussion of “days” and it’s easy for some to try to force the word “day” to mean the Sabbath. But there is no evidence that the discussion about “the weak or the strong” in 1 Corinthians 8 or Romans 14 has anything to do with the Sabbath. The word “eat” appears 15 times in Romans 14, and the words “Sabbath” or “Worship” do not appear at all. So then the question is, what does the word “day” have to do with eating? Some commentators believe the “disputes” (verse 1) started with food offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8), and expanded at some point to include “feast days” and “fasting days,” all of which center around the context of food. Everett Harrison says, “The close association with eating suggests that Paul has in mind a special day set apart for feasting or for fasting.” (*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*). *The Pulpit Commentary* on Romans 14:5 suggests, “days” being only briefly referred to in a chapter where the main subject is food, would cause some to suppose fast-days only to be meant; in which case the necessary point of conscience would be to abstain from food, or certain kinds of food, on certain “days.”

Israel celebrated seven yearly feast days, and they had certain fasting days when they did not eat anything from sunset one day to sunset the following day. There were major fasting days, and minor fasting days, and a strict Jew still observes those fasting days to this day—

- 3 Tishrei—the Fast of Gedaliah
- 10 Tishrei—Yom Kippur
- 10 Tevet—Asarah B’Tevet
- 13 Adar—the Fast of Esther
- 17 Tammuz—Shivah Asar B’Tammuz
- 9 Av—Tisha B’Av

In Luke 18:12 the Pharisee took pride in the fact that he was not like other men and that he fasted twice a week. Zechariah 7:4-7 says they also observed special fasting days during the fifth and seventh months. These were, and still are, very special “days” to the Jewish people.

As Christians we believe that the ceremonial feast days, festivals, and fasting days ended at the cross. And Paul was constantly having to deal with Jewish converts to Christ who continued to try to impose their ceremonial beliefs on the new Gentile converts. This is the subject of Romans 14:5, and remember, if you read the entire chapter together, in context, Paul is dealing with eating or not eating.

<sup>5</sup> ***“One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.”*** “Esteems” means “to judge” or “to approve of.” “Fully convinced” means “fully persuaded.” Paul does not suggest that believers should have no convictions regarding eating or not eating, rather he is saying that each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. No attempt should ever be made to rob another individual of the freedom to make up his or her own mind. The word “alike” does not appear in the original Greek and was therefore added by the translators.

Verse 21 continues, *“It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.”* Paul tells them that they must consider the conscience of others and to put others before themselves. Then he continues, *“Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God.”* Since this dispute over food was not a doctrinal or moral issue, Paul is saying that what a person “approves” is to be a private matter and not to be done for show, which is exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 6:16, *“Moreover, when you fast do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly I say to you, they have their reward.”* Hastings tells us that both Jews and Gentiles abstained from certain foods on certain days, and this was a constant point

of contention between them. (*Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*). And most everyone is aware that Catholics practice a kind of fast, where they do not eat meat on Friday. Albert Barnes, commenting on Romans 14:5 says, “The discussion had reference only to the special customs of the Jews which they would attempt to impose on the Gentiles.”

Eating or not eating is the focus of Romans 14. Observance of special ceremonial feast-days and fasting-days is the focus of verse 5. Just as Paul said eating food offered to idols was “nothing” (1 Corinthians 8:4), and circumcision was “nothing” (1 Corinthians 7:19), so also observing these ceremonial rituals no longer held any value, and met their fulfillment in Christ and His death on the cross (Colossians 2:14-16). To keep them after that point was meaningless. And there is strong evidence that Paul chose to allow the various elements of ceremonialism to gradually disappear rather than attacking them openly. The sum and substance of verse 5 is this—Those believers whose faith enables them immediately to leave behind all ceremonialism should not despise others whose faith is less strong. Nor should those of weaker faith despise those who seem to be more lax. Each believer is responsible to God (Romans 14:10-12). There is to be no force or compulsion among Christ’s followers. If they choose to eat or not eat, they are to do it to the Lord.

Is there evidence that Paul is referring to ceremonial days, rather than the Sabbath of the Moral Law? In trying to understand Paul’s intent in Romans 14:5, one must consider the content of the rest of the book. In Romans 2:12 Paul says that all mankind will be judged by God’s law; in 3:20 that it is by the law that we have the knowledge of sin; in 3:31 that faith establishes the law in our hearts; in 6:1-2 that grace saves from its transgression; in 8:4 that the demands of the law are met by those in Christ; and in 8:7 that the carnal mind is at enmity with the law. Those to whom Paul wrote this epistle were commandment-keeping Christians in the church at Rome. Can you imagine the ruckus it would have caused had they felt that Paul was saying that we can now choose a different day to worship on other than God’s Sabbath. Therefore

Romans 14:5 cannot be made to mean that Paul spoke against the Sabbath of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11). Remember that the Bible was written by men who were “moved” (inspired) by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21), but the Moral Law is the one place in Scripture that was not written by men. It was written directly by the finger of God (Exodus 31:18) on tables of stone. Therefore it cannot be removed or altered.

For Paul to say in Romans 14:5 that the word “day” refers to the fourth commandment is a direct contradiction to everything else he taught in Scripture. Paul knew the difference between the Ceremonial Law and the Moral Law, and when he refers to an abolished law, he means the law of ceremonies, sacrifices, and rituals also called the Law of Moses. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, in their comments on Romans 14:5 affirm that Paul was referring to ceremonial days and not the Sabbath of the fourth commandment (*Vol 3, page 270*). Notice again what *The Sunday School Times* says, “Paul’s argument against ‘the law’ was aimed at this rabbinical code, and at the continuance of the Ceremonial Law which Christ’s redemptive work had canceled.” (*The Sunday School Times, April 21, 1934*).

Someone said to me a while back, “Do you really think it matters which day we keep?” Friends, it’s not a question of days. It’s a question of whether we will obey God and take Him seriously. If I took a piece of white cloth, threw it on the floor and stomped on it, not one person would have a problem with that. If I took a piece of red cloth, threw it on the floor and stomped on it, not one person would have a problem with that. If I took a piece of blue cloth, threw it on the floor and stomped on it, not one person would have a problem with that. But if I took those three pieces of cloth and sewed them into a flag—it would be a different issue, wouldn’t it? God blessed, hallowed, and sanctified the seventh-day at Creation, and then wrote it in stone in the heart of His Moral Law. To ask if the Sabbath really matters to God, seems like the wrong question. Maybe the better question is, “Am I willing to put God first? Am I willing to make Him sovereign? Am I willing to obey Him without question? That’s the real issue.

## Why the Sabbath matters to God

A friend of mine said recently, “I see no reason for keeping a day holy.” And my answer back to him was, “We don’t have to see the reasoning. If God said it, that is all the reason we need.” What if Peter had taken the same attitude as my friend? Jesus told him to go and catch a fish and he would find the tax money in the fish’s mouth (Matthew 17). Peter could have reasoned, “I see no reason for looking for money in a fish’s mouth. That’s not where money is found.” What a blessing Peter would have missed had he not obeyed. What God asks us to do does not have to make sense to us. Naaman was told to dip in the Jordan River seven times and he would be healed (2 Kings 5). His first response was anger. He could not see the reasoning behind bathing in a muddy river to heal leprosy. Had he not reconsidered and obeyed, he would never have been healed. What God asks us to do does not have to make sense to us.

Someone asks, “How much can a day really matter to God?” Notice what theologian Clifford Goldstein wrote, “In every religion, men revere something—shrines, cities, even people. They kiss holy land; their ears clutch the syllables of holy men; they immerse themselves in holy water; tangibles, touchables, holy things that they can see, revere and feel. In Genesis, however, the first thing declared holy is not a hill, a shrine, or a place, but a block of time—the seventh-day. *‘Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it’* (Genesis 2:3). The word sanctified is translated from the Hebrew meaning ‘to set apart for holy use.’ Though Creation dealt with the heavens, the earth, the birds, the sea, the beasts of the earth, and things of space—it was time, not space, that God first pronounced blessed and holy. This action makes sense, because, besides space, time is the dimension in which God’s creation—the heavens, the earth, the birds, the sea, and the beasts of the earth exist. Also, if God had made one specific place holy, a hill, a spring, a city, not all people would have easy access to it. They would have to travel to worship there. But time comes to us, instead of us going to it. Once a week the Sabbath

circles the globe, arriving on one sundown and leaving on the next. The seventh-day washes over the planet each week like a huge cleansing wave. We never have to seek it. The day always finds us.”

Goldstein continues, “Meanwhile, holy cities can be burned. Holy people can be killed. Holy shrines can be looted. But time is beyond the fire and the knife. No man can touch, much less destroy it. Therefore, by making a special time holy, God has made the Sabbath invincible. We can no more stop the Sabbath than we can stop the sunrise. God protected His memorial from the objects of space, which are vulnerable to men, by placing it in time, which is not. Finally, men can avoid holy things. They can hide from objects, people, places. But they can’t flee from time. We can ignore it, be ignorant of it, hate it, but the Sabbath always comes, and nothing, no one, can stop it.” (Clifford Goldstein, *A Pause for Peace*, pages 46-47).

Wordsworth wrote, “In doing only things of which we ourselves see the reason, we may be only obeying ourselves and not obeying God. Therefore Almighty God tests our faith by things of which we do not see the reason.” (Bishop Wordsworth, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, Volume 1, page 272).

## **So what’s the bottom line?**

Colossians 2:16 is addressing ceremonialism and the yearly sabbaths of the Ceremonial Law that ended with Christ’s death on the Cross. Romans 14 is addressing the subject of eating or not eating, and in verse 5 Paul is referring to a “day” of feasting, or a “day” of fasting. In neither of these texts is Paul suggesting that it is OK to disregard one of God’s Ten Commandments.

As Christians we’ve been taught that the Word of God is infallible, and as such must be the foundation of our faith and practice. In past generations this was an important principle, but things seem to have changed in today’s society. Church has become more of a social club where people and their “feelings” are



placed before the Bible. We are not as interested in interpreting Scripture correctly, as we are in making it suit the way we want to live. It's time to get back to the Bible. It's time to put God first and take Him serious. So what's the bottom line?

God gave us ten rules to live by (Exodus 20:1-17), and He personally wrote them in stone with His own finger (Exodus 31:18). What is the significance of stone? When we say something is "set in stone," we mean that it is permanent and can not be changed. Then in Deuteronomy 11:26-28 God says, "*Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, and a curse, if you will not obey the commandments of the Lord your God.*" Did those commandments disappear with the New Testament? Not at all. Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-19, "*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled*" (meaning at Christ's return). A little logic should tell us that heaven and earth have not yet passed away. So does God mean what He says, and does He say what He means?

There's a bumper sticker that reads, "God said it, I Believe it, and that Settles it!" There's another one that reads, "The 10 Commandments are not Multiple Choice." And yet that's exactly what many of us are doing today. We are picking which ones we want to live by, and which we do not. James 2:10 tells us that if we break one we've broken them all. Now it's true, that man cannot perfectly obey God's Law by himself. But we must direct our will by choosing to obey God. Jesus said that with Him "*all things are possible.*"

The New Testament is clear. 1 John 3:4 (KJV) defines sin as "*breaking God's Law.*" 1 John 2:4 reads, "*He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*" And then on the very last page of the Bible, Revelation 22:14 reads, "*Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city.*" And we read in Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 that the

Commandments of God will be the standard for the Judgment at the end of the world. And so I encourage you to put God first in your life. If the Ten Commandments are no longer important—the Bible means nothing. If obeying God is no longer important—the Bible means nothing. Remember—what is popular is not always right, and what is right is not always popular. God bless you as you continue to study His Word.

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When we walk with the Lord  
in the light of his word,  
what a glory he sheds on our way!  
While we do his good will,  
he abides with us still,  
and with all who will trust and obey.

Not a burden we bear,  
not a sorrow we share,  
but our toil he doth richly repay;  
not a grief or a loss,  
not a frown or a cross,  
but is blest if we trust and obey.

But we never can prove  
the delights of his love  
until all on the altar we lay;  
for the favor he shows,  
for the joy he bestows,  
are for them who will trust and obey.

Then in fellowship sweet  
we will sit at his feet,  
or we'll walk by his side in the way;  
what he says we will do,  
where he sends we will go;  
never fear, only trust and obey.

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