

"We Live in the Kingdom of Grace"

Romans 14:13-23

Over the years followers of Jesus have disagreed about issues that the Bible does not give clear indication about. It's not that long ago that many Christians felt that ladies wearing pants or not wearing hats or men not wearing ties were signs of disobedience (some would have called it sin). Or that the presence of electric guitars and drums was considered sin to have in churches. Or to go to a theatre or play cards or riding a bike or playing a game or fishing on a Sunday was considered sinful.

Here in Romans 14 the apostle Paul was dealing with the neutral areas of his time; the biggest one being eating meat sacrificed to idols or eating meat that the Law formerly said was unclean. Even though Jesus said in Mark 7 that nothing is unclean to eat because it's not the meat – or instruments or clothes or games – that are sinful in and of themselves. Rather it becomes an issue when there's disagreement whether eating certain meat or doing an activity is considered sin to God.

For the newly saved Jewish person in Paul's day who grew up all their life with the idea that eating certain meats was disobedience and considered unholy to God, this was very shocking and hard to understand that now it was all okay? And for many of us who grew up with the impression that something or some activity was sinful and then come to Christ and see believers in Jesus doing these things it's hard to change our minds. And it can cause division in a church and as a result it might create a bad testimony in the community when we disagree about these neutral areas. So how do we move forward and be a testimony when we disagree on non-essentials? The key is to remember we are no longer under the Law but under grace. We live in the kingdom of grace.

Paul uses the adjectives 'strong' and 'weak' to differentiate between believers who had grown and matured to the point where they understood grace gives us freedom to choose how to serve God in the non-essentials, the areas that aren't clearly defined in Scripture. The 'weak' brother/sister is the one who still finds it difficult to shake off the traditions or their upbringing on what they formerly believed how they thought living for God looked like. Paul clearly says here in v.14 and agrees with Jesus that to eat or not to eat certain meat was no longer a spiritual issue to God, but for some who grew up with that, it still was.

In the first 12 verses Paul appealed to both parties for the sake of the gospel, don't let these non-essential issues that you have differing opinions on bring division to the church. Each party should become convinced for themselves how the Scriptures guide them in this area and to stop judging one another because that's not our job. It's Jesus' job and each one of us will stand before Jesus who will assess us, one-on-one and we will have to give to Him an account of our judgmental attitudes as well as how we served him.

What was happening was the strong disciples were looking down at their 'weaker' brothers/sisters in Christ because they hadn't matured yet to find freedom from some of these issues. Yet the 'weaker' disciples were judging the 'stronger' ones because they felt their use of their freedom in Christ was sin and so they accused them essentially of being hypocrites.

Paul is still riding this judgment theme when he continues in v.13,

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴ As one who is the Lord

Jesus, I am fully convinced, that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards anything as unclean, then for him it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil.

Paul is actually using a play on words in the original language in v.13. The phrase “make up your mind” is the same word in Greek as judging only in a positive sense. So essentially Paul was saying . . .

Judge Your Own Attitude, Not Your Brother **(14:13-15)**

“Let us stop passing judgment” presumes they were; and unfortunately, it’s a discouraging game we are all guilty of playing too much. Notice again the ‘get rid of/replace language’. Every time we’re asked to stop a negative activity we’re challenged to replace it with a positive one. Stop passing judgment, instead make up your mind not to hurt the weaker sister/brother by exercising your liberty in front of them. Making up your mind connects back to 12:1-2, the hinge that everything in the whole letter hangs on.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Recall to mind all God’s merciful ways and gracious blessings to us. Don’t let the world conform you into the way it thinks and lives but keep renewing your mind – making it new each day by going to God’s Word and thinking the way Jesus thinks. Make up your mind’ again means think beforehand; prepare yourself mentally and spiritually by changing the way you think about those who are not as mature in some areas as you.

So that we won’t hinder anyone’s walk with God (v.13)

Those who had no problem with eating meat sacrificed to idols or what the Law formerly called unclean or didn’t feel the need to celebrate the new moons or worship on the Sabbath (now on Sundays) because they now understood grace, were sometimes insensitive to those who were still struggling with these issues by practicing these things in front of them. This became a stumbling block in their path of following God. Paul says think beforehand about people who might be knowingly or unknowingly hurt by things they may not feel the same way as you do. That means,

Being patient with everyone’s maturing process (v.14)

Paul admits according to the Word that believers in Jesus are allowed to eat any meat or meat sacrificed to idols (since idols are not actually gods they are just pieces of wood or stone). But others had not matured to that point. If they think eating certain meats or doing certain activities is still sin then it is to them. Because he says in v.23 if we are not convinced its okay with God but we do it, then its sin because our conscience is guilty! So pray for and be patient with others who are still growing in grace. All of us probably struggled with issues we didn’t realize God said was okay that we had been told was not okay for a long time. We have such a hard time accepting grace. Even some Christians see God more as a taskmaster expecting God to zap them for the tiniest sin when in fact God constantly pictures Himself as a good and gracious Father who wants to give His children good gifts.

Paul exhorts us not to judge one another but instead,

Show Jesus-like love (v.15)

The night before He died Jesus washed the disciples' feet and told them to do the same for one another. He said

13:34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus' love is sacrificial love (agape love). It is an action of serving others at a cost to ourselves (time, energy, resources) without expecting love reciprocated. 'Your good at my expense.' Again, this involves making up our mind beforehand to put others ahead of ourselves. This is the direction Paul takes us now in vv.16-21. Stop thinking of yourself and think about the larger church context and your ability to impact the community. Judging one another hurts the church, so therefore Paul says . . .

Pursue What Strengthens the Church **(14:16-21)**

16 [Therefore] do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. 19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother [or sister] to fall.

This is kingdom living. You and I are parts of a whole. We exist and are saved and are gifted for the glory of God and the building up of the body. So, even though you strong disciples understand your faith through grace gives us far more freedoms than we originally thought, we may have to sometimes . . .

Limit our freedoms for others good to please God (vv.16-18)

By exercising their freedoms without giving thought to their weaker brothers who were offended by this, they in essence were causing blasphemy. The Greek word 'blasphemeow' is the word for 'speak evil of that which God deems is good.' But it's the weaker brothers saying the stronger brothers' freedom is sin – so its their fault, right? Wrong, Paul says. It's the stronger brother's fault for exercising his freedom in the face of his weaker brother whom he knows has an issue! The more mature follower of Jesus always has to set the example of love and sacrifice, so that she/he models grace and sacrifice to her/his brother who will eventually (Lord-willing) mature and grow up to the point where she/he will probably also overcome that issue.

Both the mature disciple and less mature disciple need to grow in their understanding that to follow Jesus means to put others ahead of yourself. 'The last will be first'; 'take the lowest place when invited to a banquet'; 'do not Lord it over others as the Gentiles do but whoever wants to be first must be slave to all.' Jesus said all those things. The apostle Paul even said this in Gal. 2:20,

Gal. 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

We exchanged the right to live for ourselves when we accepted Christ. Our opinions and evaluation don't matter to God, yet we live as if it's the bottom line. We can have our opinions about how worship went or how the message went or how you appreciated or didn't appreciate something that happened this morning, but its not about what we liked, its whether God was glorified. The kingdom of God is not a matter of our opinion about what we eat or drink or what we liked or didn't like, its about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Life is about the eternal not the externals. It's not about us or our opinions; its about how God was glorified and how the body was built up – even if it didn't go according to yours or my preferences. To pursue what strengthens the church we must seek to . . .

Encourage our church family over our own freedoms (or preferences or opinions) (vv.19-21)

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother [or sister] to fall.

We can substitute food to say 'Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of your opinion. Church life isn't about what we want, its about what we can do for others to help them grow spiritually which helps us grow collectively. If our opinion or preference about something we do or don't do becomes the standard by which we do things, and people don't agree with everything we like or don't like, how does that grow the body? How does that promote peace, righteousness and joy? Perhaps v.21 should say 'It is better for us to keep our opinions to ourselves else we will cause our brother or sister to fall.

Let's stop focusing on our preferences and opinions – which is a sign of immaturity by the way – but instead . . .

Live and Grow in Faith **(14:22-23)**

22 So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. 23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

The sin is not the eating or not eating; the sin is to do so without conviction that its okay or not okay to you. Paul says don't condemn yourself by doing something you're still not sure is okay. But don't condemn others who are okay with it as long as there is no clear biblical command against it.

Have you ever watched a show or a movie that you enjoyed, and then had someone come along and tell you they think its awful or stupid as if their opinion was all-authoritative? Or you were telling someone about an activity that you enjoy doing and they laughed at you or said 'I'd never do that' again as if their opinion is the 'gospel'? This is the feeling the Paul means when he says 'don't destroy the work of God'; it's a spirit-crusher, a joy killer and we've all done that to God's people if we're honest because we've expressed our views and preferences as if our opinion is 'the gospel'.

13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

Let's obey this command from God's Word – the all authoritative and last word on life. Let's change the way we think and re-examine our own attitudes, opinions and preferences to make sure we're not imposing our view on issues that are neutral as if we are all-authoritative and have the last word. We won't be able to do that if we're not realizing we are sometimes hindering the growth of our brothers and sisters by our attitudes and narrow-minded personal assessments. Let's make up our mind not to be the stumbling block for each other's spiritual growth. Let's admit that our narrow views actually reveal we are the weaker brother/sister at times and not the mature disciple we thought we were. Do we still have the same view on neutral matters that we had 10, 20, 30 years ago? That can show we might be inflexible and unwilling to change, and in actuality unwilling to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel of grace saves us from the burden of rule keeping. Obedience is not based on performance but on a desire to glorify God. And a Jesus-like sacrificial attitude to put others' needs and concerns ahead of my own so we can both grow in mutual edification.

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