

Romans 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 14. As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls, and he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one 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 day observes it in honour of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains abstains in honour of the Lord, and gives thanks to God.

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love, by what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then, let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

In Romans chapter 14, Paul addresses issues of judgment and conscience. Paul might have been speaking to specific issues of concern in the Roman church of which he had heard. However, there is every reason to believe that such issues were common in the churches to which Paul ministered, so it would not be strange to address them at this juncture. The unity of the church as one body in Christ is a matter of particular concern for Paul, and he is especially alert to the way that congregations might divide along particular fault lines between Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, weak and strong, etc. Paul addresses similar issues elsewhere, in places like 1 Corinthians.

[3 : 25] Paul begins by instructing them to welcome someone who is weak in faith, who might have scruples about all sorts of issues that a mature Christian would not. In welcoming such a person, however, they should be careful not to get involved in quarrels over adiaphora, things that are neither commanded nor forbidden, issues about which faithful Christians are permitted to differ.

Paul gives the example of differences in belief concerning dietary matters, what foods were permitted or forbidden to the Christian in various contexts. We find examples of some of these differences in the area of idle food in 1 Corinthians.

Such questions could be very difficult in situations with different modes of practice coming into collision. Some Jews, for instance, might still be observing kosher requirements. Some converts from paganism might have very sensitive consciences about the slightest contact with anything that might have any association with idols. The fundamental principle that should apply in such cases is one of welcome without passing divisive judgment. As Paul says in chapter 15, verse 7, therefore welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Paul is concerned that such matters don't become the cause of alienating judgment or division. There are matters concerning which judgment must occur. For instance, in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, Paul is adamant that sexual immorality not be tolerated in the church, but that unrepentant offenders be removed from fellowship. However, on *Adiaphora*, we must recognize that it is not our place to judge our fellow Christians.

This refraining from judgment goes in both directions. It isn't just the strong who must refrain from judging the weak, but also the weak who must refrain from judging the strong. Judgment is to be left to the Lord, before whom we must all stand on the last day. The Lord is able to make both the weak and the strong brother to stand before him. Paul gives a second example of holding certain days to be holy.

[5 : 21] Presumably, Paul chiefly has in mind Jewish Sabbaths and feast days. The important thing is that everyone act in good conscience, properly convinced that they are acting in integrity. Whatever practice is adopted, it is to be adopted in the sight of God, as those who will be judged by him, not primarily in the sight of others, as those involved in judging and being judged by our neighbours. Christ has died and rose again, in order that he might be Lord of all. Consequently, all of our lives must be lived with reference to him. So often we are preoccupied with how we appear relative to others in the realm of human judgment.

We constantly judge and are judged, whether or not we are doing so verbally. Paul challenges this entire way of life, calling us to live above all else in the light of Christ's judgment, and not our neighbours.

Recognising that we are all subject to the judgment of God puts all of our attempts at judgment into a very different perspective. Our judgment seat is petty and premature. Paul's teaching here resonates with that of our Lord in Matthew chapter 7 verses 1 to 5.

Judge not that you be not judged, for with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, Let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite! First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. When we are aware that we will have to give account of ourselves before God, we will be much less inclined to judge and condemn others. We might think here of the experience of being in the same room as a world-renowned expert, when someone makes an obvious error in something related to that expert's field. We will be much more hesitant about speaking up to judge that person, well aware that the expert can see much in us that is no less worthy of judgment.

[7 : 21] Playing on the verb, Paul says that rather than judging one another, we should rather judge not to put a stumbling block or offence before a brother. This of course is a far more modest form of judgment, and far better for the health of the people of God. Paul claims that nothing is unclean in itself. The source of uncleanness is the heart, not objects in the world. He came to this persuasion in the Lord Jesus. Perhaps Paul is suggesting that this is a particular teaching of Jesus which he had received from others. We might here be reminded of Mark chapter 7 verses 18 to 23.

And he said to them, Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach and is expelled? Thus he declared all foods clean. And he said, What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person. However Paul develops this teaching even further. If someone's heart is wavering in unbelief or uncertainty concerning something, that thing is unclean for that person.

It is the heart that makes the thing unclean, not vice versa. If we act in ways that cause others to stumble or to go against their consciences, even if something is clean in itself, we are risking great spiritual harm to them by encouraging them to go against their consciences. Perhaps most

damning, for the sake of our liberty to eat what we want, we are putting little value upon the spiritual safety of someone that Christ redeemed at the cost of his life. Paul makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verses 10 to 13. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. For Paul this is very much a matter of priorities. Paul hardly ever speaks about the kingdom of God using that expression, although the reality of the kingdom pervades his writing. However he does so here. The kingdom of God is about God's saving justice, by which we enjoy good standing with him. It is about peace with God and our neighbour. It is about rejoicing in the spirit. Anything that gets placed before this is a problem. Paul fleshes out this point further in verses 19 to 21. The work of God in our brother is of so much greater value than is our freedom to partake in whatever we want. As Paul argues elsewhere, we should be prepared to surrender our liberties in such minor matters for the sake of what really matters and has value. If saving our brother from stumbling involves refraining from eating meat or drinking wine, then so be it. Paul is concerned that people refrain from judging their neighbour while acting in clear conscience themselves. Our conscience must be clear, not merely in not believing that what we are approving is wrong for us, but also in being clear of causing any harm to our neighbour. When we act in bad conscience, whether concerning ourselves or in our duty of love to our neighbour, we are engaging in sin. A question to consider. How do you believe Paul's approach enables us to distinguish between situations where people are genuinely put at risk of stumbling by our behaviour, and situations where people are imposing their scruples upon others as oppressive and illegitimate burdens?