

## The Gospel in Romans: Romans 14:13-21

### INTRODUCTION

1. This section brings us to the meat (pardon the pun) of Paul's instruction regarding differences over eating meat.
2. The first half of Romans 14 contains teaching which is fairly evenly distributed between the weak and the strong.
  - But the latter half of the chapter focuses on the strong, those whose understanding allows them to eat freely.

"In spite of three 'one another' verses (13a, 19 and 15:7), which speak of reciprocal duties between the weak and the strong, the chief emphasis throughout is on the Christian responsibility of the strong towards the weak. The argument moves on, however, from how the strong should regard the weak to how they should treat him, that is, from attitudes (not despising or condemning them) to actions (not causing them to stumble or destroying them)."

(John Stott, *The Message of Romans*, p. 364)

  - Due to their better understanding and greater freedom, the strong have greater responsibility. (cf. Lk. 12:48)
3. In this passage we see two primary rationales or theological bases for Paul's admonition to the strong brothers.
  - 1<sup>st</sup> The theology of the cross: because of Jesus' death, the strong should willingly sacrifice to protect the weak.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> The theology of the kingdom: the kingdom is God's work, a spiritual reality greater than temporal concerns.
  - The third point in our outline of the text will focus on the application of these ideas, giving priority to edification.

### I. THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS (13-15)

#### A. Analyzing the Text

1. There are three important words in this entire section we need to understand, lest we misapply them.
  - πρόσκομμα – *stumbling block* (ESV, NKJV, NIV), *obstacle* (NASB) **13**
  - σκάνδαλον – *hindrance* (ESV), *cause to fall* (NKJV), *stumbling block* (NASB), *obstacle* (NIV) **13**
  - λυπέω – *grieved* (ESV, NKJV), *hurt* (NASB), *distressed* (NIV), *to make sorrowful* (Thayer) **15**
2. These words are easily misunderstood or misapplied by modern English readers.
  - The first two words are largely synonymous; they refer to a *stumbling block* in a brother's way.
    - The verb form of one or both is used in v.21 (both in some Greek manuscripts, cf. KJV, NKJV).
    - This is where the confusion begins because the KJV translates σκανδαλιζεται as *offended*.
  - The idea of *stumbling* or being *offended* is not emotional angst or disapproval of another's behavior.
    - It is the idea of being caused to sin by the example of a brother; it is actually stumbling into error.
    - When believers complain they are "offended" by something they dislike, they rarely use it biblically.
  - The third word *is* used often in the NT to describe deep grief and sorrow, not simple sadness.
    - Paul is not saying the weak brother is sad you do not share his convictions; he is deeply troubled.
    - The temptation presented to the weak by the actions of the strong cause great, spiritual distress.
3. Paul uses a play on words in the Greek text of verse 13 that is not apparent in translation. **13**
  - "...let us not pass judgment (κρίνωμεν)... but rather decide (κρίνατε) never to" be a stumbling block.
  - Rather than judge (i.e. condemn) one another we are to judge (i.e. decide) to protect each other.
4. Paul knows and is convinced "in the Lord Jesus" that eating the meat in question is not wrong. **14**
  - This phrase may be a reference to Jesus' own teaching about the dietary law ending. (Mk. 7:18-19)
  - On the other hand it may refer to revelation Paul has received from God as an apostle of Christ.
  - Less likely is the interpretive text of NIV: "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced..."
5. The word translated *unclean* in most English versions is a Greek word meaning *common* (κοινός). **14**
  - This does not mean meat was viewed as ordinary but as unspiritual and, therefore, corrupt.
  - Like the Pharisees' ritual washing, these brothers believed they might be defiled by unholy meat.
6. The weak brother is just that, weak, not strong or nobly minded. His opinion on the issue is wrong. **14**
  - He is not more holy or more Christ-like by his refusal to eat and drink; he has no moral high ground.
  - There is no blessing in his abstention from food and drink, but there is no curse in it either. **1Co. 8:8**
7. Verse 13 connects seamlessly to verse 15; v. 14 is a parenthetical statement which adds clarity. **13, 15**
  - If we decide never to be a stumbling block, then we must be sensitive to our brother's vulnerability.
  - Walking in love necessarily includes the willingness to deny myself and sacrifice for another's good.
8. Paul's warning not to "destroy the one for whom Christ died" troubles and challenges many readers. **15**
  - Some deny *destroy* is meant of their salvation, but contextual use of the term makes it most likely.
  - We should be willing to use the language of Scripture but be careful to mean what Scripture means.
  - Some may say, "But God's elect cannot be destroyed or fall away." True, but why don't they?

9. The reason for the perseverance of God's elect saints is not their strength but God's preservation.
  - The Bible promises preserving grace against the danger of apostasy. **Jn. 6:37-40; 10:27-30; 17:10-15**
  - But Scripture likewise warns of the very real danger of apostasy. **Heb. 6:4-8; 10:26-39; 2Pet. 2:20-22**

“Believers (the elect) are constantly spoken of as in danger of perdition. They are saved only, if they continue steadfast unto the end. If they apostatize, they perish. If the Scriptures tell the people of God what is the tendency of their sins, as to themselves, they may tell them what is the tendency of such sins as to others. Saints are preserved, not in despite of apostasy, but from apostasy.” (Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p. 657)

#### B. *Applying the Text: Judging Not to Judge*

1. It is crucially important we keep this passage, and all other Scripture passages, in their proper context.
  - The saying “nothing is unclean in itself” is not to be interpreted or applied outside of specific issues.
  - Paul is dealing with a difference among Christians over the continuing use of the ceremonial law.
  - It would be grossly inappropriate to construe Paul's language so as to contradict him elsewhere.
  - Paul is not denying certain things are inherently sinful; he is denying these issues are of such a kind.
2. It is very important to understand the nature of the potential offense; these are sin issues for the weak.
  - I am not *biblically* offended by knowing you do something I disagree with; I am offended by doing it.
  - The issue is the weak being tempted to violate his conscience by the behavior of the strong.
3. Paul instructs the brethren to judge (decide) *not* to judge each other over non-gospel issues.
  - He is not denying there is truth to be known and taught on the issue, but there is a larger issue.
  - The weak brother, if he is led into sin by my carelessness, may not be around to learn and grow!
4. It would be especially tempting for the strong to disdain and dismiss the sincere scruples of the weak.
  - After all, didn't Paul say the strong brothers had the right view of the issue? It is true they did.
  - But there is more to fellowship than right doctrine. There must also be correct attitudes. **1Co. 8:1-13**
5. Doctrine is important. No, it is essential! But brotherly love and kindness is just as essential. **1Co. 13:1-7**
  - If our doctrine does not include sincere concern for *people* (as opposed to positions) then it's wrong!
  - Would we give up our personal liberties to protect a weak brother? If not, do we really know Christ?

“If, Paul implies, Christ has already paid the supreme price for that ‘weak’ Christian, how can the ‘strong’ refuse to pay the quite insignificant price of a minor and occasional restriction in their diet?”

(Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 855)

## II. THE THEOLOGY OF THE KINGDOM (16-18)

### A. *Analyzing the Text*

1. The strong were confident of the goodness and propriety of exercising their freedom in Christ. **16**
  - But if that liberty is exercised in a careless or destructive way, it may be rightly criticized as evil.
  - In other words, the issue is not just the inherent morality of food; it is the spiritual context of its use.
2. The potential error of the strong brother is the exact opposite of the Pharisee, but with the same effect.
  - The Pharisees cherished ritual law even at the expense of righteousness, peace, and joy. (Mk. 7:1-23)  
-Ritual practices and oral tradition were more important to them than people, even their parents!
  - The strong are in danger of neglecting the ritual law at the expense of righteousness, peace, and joy.  
-Personal liberty and freedom from ceremonial law were more important than their weaker brother.
3. The defining characteristic of the kingdom is *not* personal liberty or individual rights but salvation. **17**
  - Righteousness (with God), peace (with God, ourselves, and each other), and joy in the Spirit.
  - These are the basic and essential elements of the kingdom that must be prized and protected.

“*Righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.* These words are to be taken in their scriptural sense. Paul does not mean to say, that Christianity consists in morality; that the man who is just, peaceful, and cheerful, is a true Christian. This would be to contradict the whole argument of this epistle. The righteousness, peace, and joy intended, are those of which the Holy Spirit is the author. Righteousness is that which enables us to stand before God, because it satisfies the demands of the law. It is the righteousness of faith, both objective and subjective; peace is the concord between God and the soul, between reason and conscience, between the heart and our fellow men. And the joy is the joy of salvation; that joy which only those who are in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost ever can experience.” (Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p. 658)

4. Men are accepted by God in Christ by means of the righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. **18**
  - No one is more or less spiritual because of food or wine or keeping the ceremonial law of the OT.
  - The gospel is central; it is defining; the principles of righteousness, peace, and joy are the essence.

### B. *Applying the Text: Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing*

1. Do our priorities and practices in ministry reflect the defining elements and essential priorities of Christ?
  - Are we more concerned with building castles to honor ourselves or with building Christ's kingdom?
  - Paul expected the church to be defined by the work of God in Christ, not unimportant side issues.
2. This is why we have made an intentional decision not to define our fellowship by certain issues.
  - Some churches are defined by and require subscription to sectarian views. (e.g. eschatology, gifts)
  - We believe it is enough to be a penitent, faithful Christian as biblically and historically understood.
3. Let's get specific: I am a Reformed, covenantal, confessional, cessationist, amillennial believer.
  - I believe in unconditional election and definite atonement. I believe in the covenant holiness of a believer's children and that they should be baptized. I personally subscribe to the historic Reformed confessions (e.g. Westminster Standards) and believe in the importance of confessing the ancient faith of the Church (e.g. Apostle's Creed). I believe the miraculous, sign gifts of the NT era such as tongue-speaking have ceased and that Christ reigns right now over all things and that the next event we ought to expect is not an invisible rapture but the return of Christ and judgment of the world.
  - How many of you have I offended? Biblically, none of you. But how many disagree with some or all?
4. None of those positions I just described are part of the essential fabric of salvation in Christ.
  - I believe every one is taught in Scripture and is correct, but you don't have to agree to be saved.
  - You do have to believe the gospel, know your sin, trust in Christ, and surrender to Him as Lord.
5. We do not have to agree on every issue to have fellowship in the church. We do have to know Christ.
  - Sadly many churches and professing Christians have abandoned the gospel itself and love the world.
  - We need more unity in the Body, not less, because faithful churches are few and far between.

### III. THE PRIORITY OF EDIFICATION AND PEACE-MAKING (19-21)

#### A. *Analyzing the Text*

1. In view of the above, the church and everyone in it ought to pursue peace and edification most of all. **19**
  - Edification is a "Bible-word" we may sometimes misunderstand. The ESV is right: *mutual upbuilding*.
  - Edification is not encouragement (though it may include it); it is building believers and the Body.
2. We should be more concerned about each other's spiritual welfare than our own personal liberty.
  - Christianity is a corporate, covenantal experience; we learn, worship, live, and grow in community.
  - Selfishness is ruled out by definition; Jesus did not empty Himself so we could live for ourselves!
3. Paul warns readers not to "destroy the work of God" over food, raising the question, what work? **20**
  - Is it the weaker brother (Schreiner), the church/kingdom (Stott, Moo), or piety itself (Hodge)?
  - The context could support any of these possibilities, but the second seems most persuasive to me.
    - In the immediate context Paul is reasoning on the basis of the kingdom (vv.16-18).
    - Christ has created righteousness (with God), peace, and joy in the Spirit...don't jeopardize that!
    - Not only might weak brothers be led to stumble but our true joy and fellowship in Christ damaged.
  - The big picture of God's work in Christ (individually and corporately) is a major factor in this issue.
4. The ESV is rather interpretive in its translation of v.20b, but in this case it appears to read the text right.
  - If the strong is careless in exercising his liberty, he may tempt the weak to act against his conscience.
  - Violating one's conscience is always wrong, but the weak brother in question is liable to do so.
5. Everything (under consideration here) is clean, but violating one's conscience is always wrong. **20** (cf. 23)
  - A clear conscience doesn't make right something that is wrong, but without it even right is wrong.
  - We are to be people who always live in light of God's truth, seeking at all times to please Him.
6. The strong said, "It is good to eat meat and drink wine." Yes, but not if it causes your brother to sin. **21**
  - Better still is never to do anything that causes a fellow believer to stumble or become weak.
  - Because I am part of a community, I *must* consider the impact of my actions on my brothers.

#### B. *Applying the Text: Working to Promote God's Work*

1. Do our priorities and practices in ministry indicate serious concern for peacemaking and edification?
  - We are not in the business of entertaining people or making people happy, at least, we shouldn't be.
  - The church is for helping each of us be more holy and for worshipping and glorifying God together.
2. We ought to be concerned about more than the basic morality of what we do; consider the implications.
  - We should not judge the propriety of our actions merely on the basis of whether we have the right.
  - Not "Do I have the right?" but "Is it right? Will it help my brother and the gospel or hurt him?"

3. How different might our fellowship be if each of us were considering the other person first? **Php. 2:3-4**
  - What if my brother's spiritual welfare was more important than my personal gratification?
  - What if I was more interested in treating my brother as I would wish to be treated in his shoes?
4. It might be nice to worship in a church where everyone agrees, thinks the same way, never differs at all.
  - But that would not be a growing church; that would not be a church that is reaching its community.
  - In fact, that would not be a church that reflects the gracious work of God in Christ much at all!
5. We are messy. We are broken and sinful but mercifully forgiven in Christ. God loves despite our failings.
  - The Lord did not invite us to His table once we settled all of our issues; He rescued us in them.
  - He continues to shape us, train us, correct us, and use us despite the weakness we all have.
6. Shouldn't the local church reflect that gracious, patient, and persistent divine love and work?
  - If I dismiss you because of your sincere but misguided scruples, I forget my own need for grace.
  - What if God treated us as we treat our brethren, those loved and redeemed by Christ? **Mt. 18:21-35**

#### **PRAYER OF REFLECTION**

Holy Father, it is an awesome privilege and awful responsibility to be part of the Body of Christ, and even more specifically, to be part of the visible, earthly manifestation of Christ's Body in the local church. Father, You know perfectly how our lingering sinfulness corrupts and complicates the relationship among brothers. We fail to love each other as we should. We fail to forgive each other. We fail to remember our own need for grace, and we act carelessly and selfishly too often, in ways that are liable to harm and discourage weaker brothers around us.

Lord, we confess our failings in this regard, and we ask You for the grace not only of forgiveness but of reconciliation. That we might more visibly and socially recognize and demonstrate the peace work You have done in Christ to reconcile us to Yourself and to place us within the larger family and kingdom of Heaven. Help us, O God, that we walk in love, even as Christ has loved us and given Himself for us. Help us to be patient with one another, to keep our priorities aligned with Your priorities as revealed in Scripture, and to work patiently and persistently for the good and growth of Your church here and wherever it may be found.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.