

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part fifty-six
Sunday, March 8th, 2020 - 5:30 p.m. - Teaching #2197
Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

EXPLODING THE POSTMODERN MYTH THAT DOCTRINAL CONVICTIONS BREED DIVISION IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Romans 14:5-12 - “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. [6] The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. [7] For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. [8] 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. [9] For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. [10] 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; [11] for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ [12] So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

Again, we are dealing with some of the most interesting and most controversial verses in the whole New Testament. So it's important we establish our bearings again. The issue Paul is dealing with between the “**weak**” and “**strong**” Christians in Rome is the issue of the centrality of the cross and grace in the Christian faith. The “**weak**” aren't weak because they're not as bright. And the “**strong**” aren't strong because they know more about everything than the “**weak**.”

The “**strong**” are those who are strong in their essential understanding of salvation by **grace** through **faith** plus nothing else. The “**weak**,” whether coming recently out of Judaism and the tradition of the law, or coming out of Gentile pagan idol worship with ceremonies and feasts and festivals, tended to attach too much significance to these things. At the very least those with a Jewish background **wrestled** with seeing these things fulfilled and replaced and discarded in Christ Jesus.

So we need to remember a couple of things as we study these verses. Paul **isn't** saying weak Christians care about holiness, while strong Christians can do whatever they please. Paul is dealing with **incidental** religious practices that have been fulfilled and replaced by faith in Christ. **These** are the things we mustn't squabble over. He's not talking here about sexual immorality, or dishonesty, or materialism, or idolatry, or pride, or any other form of sinful behavior.

If you want to see how Paul deals with issues of worldliness and holiness you need to read **1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 11-13** - “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. [2] And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. [3] For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.”

[4] “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, [5] you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.....11-13.... But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. [12] For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? [13] God judges those outside. ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’”

This is the same Paul who wrote Romans 14 and 15. He's absolutely firm on maintaining and observing Biblical holiness. There is no exhortation to be open-minded or tolerant or indifferent to genuinely sinful actions in these chapters in Romans. What Paul **is** doing in Romans is defending the doctrine of **salvation by grace rather than works of any religious system**. Keeping festival days and feasts and ceremonies won't satisfy or appease God's wrath against sin. Only the cross of Christ Jesus does that.

And that leads to another quick reminder about Romans 14 and our opening text. We spent a whole teaching on this, so I'm only recalling it here. Paul was a firm believer in keeping the Lord's Day. When Paul cautions against “**esteeming the day**” in **verse 5**, or “**observing the day**” in **verse 6**, he is not talking about the Lord's Day. He's cautioning against trusting in the days and seasons and festivals of their previous religious associations in Judaism or Gentile idolatrous religions.

He's dealing with the same danger he wrote about in **Galatians 4:9-11** - “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? [10] You observe days and months and seasons and years! [11] I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”

Note the *plural* references here to “*days*” and “*months*” and “*seasons*”(10). Paul’s talking about a whole system that had developed over centuries where the calendar had become plugged with seasons and days, each one accompanied with what could and couldn’t be eaten. And the people were taught that the keeping of these was a means to achieve a standing with God through these rituals.

He talks again about this in **Colssians 2:13-19** - “**And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, [14] by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. [15] He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. [16] Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. [17] These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. [18] Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, [19] and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.**”

Only Christ can deal with sin, says Paul. Now that Christ has accomplished redemption for us on the cross, to rely on any other religious system for deliverance and salvation is an abomination and a return to spiritual slavery.

And here’s the real point in all this that is so tragically missed by multitudes of New Testament Christians. The reason I know Paul *didn’t* mean to downplay the importance of the Lord’s Day in his words in Romans 14 and 15 is Paul understood only too well that the significance of the Lord’s Day - the *reason* for its joyful celebration and remembrance - was its *purpose* to stand as an ongoing, New Testament reminder that God had brought about the final, complete, longed-for deliverance of His people from the bondage of sin and the futility of their own dead religious works. And He did it through Christ and His resurrection from the grave, which we celebrate on the *Lord’s Day*. The Lord’s Day is the bondage *breaker*. Not the bondage *maker*.

Paul knew this was the whole purpose of the reminder of even the Old Testament Sabbath. And he knew it because God made it very clear that the purpose of the keeping of the Sabbath went far beyond a rest from work. There was a *theological* foreshadowing of the ultimate *purpose* of the Sabbath:

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 - “Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. [13] Six days you shall labor and do all your work, [14] but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. [15] You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

Just as the keeping of the *shadow* of the Old Testament Sabbath harkened the people to ponder their deliverance from Egyptian captivity, so the *fulfillment* of the *Lord’s Day* harkened Christians to ponder and reflect on the vast significance of their deliverance from *sin*, and *bondage*, and the emptiness of *ritualistic religion*.

This is so important. It’s the *keeping* of the Lord’s Day - the fulfillment of the Old Testament Sabbath - that reminds Christians of their deliverance in Christ from days and seasons and festivals and food laws. In other words, it’s the *honoring* of the Lord’s Day that celebrates the *deliverance* from the very rituals Paul cautions against in Romans 14 and 15.

All of this to say that, to my mind, the best evidence of the text is that in *all* the issues Paul relates in Romans 14 and 15 are issues of *Old Testament ritual law*, and *how these issues relate to the church of Jesus Christ*. The church in Rome was, like all churches, a mixed bag in terms of background before conversion. And some of the Jewish believers, as well as converts from Gentile pagan religions, had a hard time adjusting to the concept of justification by grace, through faith in Christ’s death and Lord’s Day resurrection, plus nothing else. They were all *Christians*. Paul makes this clear in the closing words of **verse 3** - “**....for the Lord has welcomed him.**” So they were *saved* but divided in their opinion as to the relevancy of the regulations they had been raised in.

That’s where we are in our study so far. And it’s right at this point that Paul says something incredibly strange. He offers some advice - or rather gives a *command* - that one would think could only make the divisions in the church *worse* rather than *better*. This is so significant that it’s the only point we’re going to consider in today’s teaching. A *one point* sermon. And rumor has it that any sermon should contain at least *one* point:

- 1) **PAUL ENCOURAGES DEEPER DOCTRINAL CONVICTIONS, NOT SHALLOWER ONES**

Romans 14:5 - “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.”

This seems odd. One would have thought Paul would say, **“You’re all making a big deal out of nothing. These rituals don’t really effect anything one way or another, so quit this silly squabbling!”** But he doesn’t do that. He calls the people - **all** of them - to make sure their minds are totally convinced of their convictions. Don’t think **less**, but think **more**. Don’t waffle, but be **firm**.

What could Paul be thinking? And the reason I find this so fascinating is Paul’s words fly right in the face of the modern - or more **postmodern** - notion that doctrine divides - that the church would be more loving and Christlike if she just put **away** doctrinal differences and fed the hungry and cared for the poor. After all, it’s **“What Would Jesus Do”** that’s important. **“Red Letter Christians”** don’t worry about doctrinal differences. They just worship and love and serve others. Didn’t Paul know that?

Actually, Paul knew something much **better** and much **deeper**. He knew theological ignorance and laziness divided people far more than doctrinal maturity and stability. Paul knew that doctrinal truth didn’t **divide** the church. It **united** the church as long as the **biggest** doctrines were kept at the **center**. And this is what Paul calls for. **“Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind”**(5b). That’s good, but convinced of **what?** Paul goes on to tell us **two convictions** to keep at the center of all our thinking and discussing:

- a) **Make sure that everything is done to the glory of the Lord.** In non-essential matters, the **motive** is more important than the **deed**. And note that I said in **non-essential** matters. No one can commit adultery to the glory of God, or blaspheme to the glory of God, or commit idolatry to the glory of God, or be materialistic to the glory of God. Where the Bible gives absolutes, we must always contend for obedience to the truth. We’ll see that in just a minute.

But there are all sorts of other issues. There are issues that aren’t essential to salvation or holiness. There are many things that simply are the way we’ve learned to live our lives. We don’t all share exactly the same practices. And in these things, says Paul, we must all seek to honor the Lord in all we do.

It’s the motive that determines the legitimacy of non-essential matters - **Romans 6-7** - **“The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. [7] For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.”**

Both the meat eaters and the vegetable eaters have **God** in their minds in their actions. The same is true of those who kept all of the Old Testament days of celebration and ritual. In their minds, they were trying their best to please and honor God. And, says Paul, that’s the key thing in non-essential matters. God looks at the heart.

Verse 7 has to be the most mis-applied verse in the whole New Testament. Most people read Paul to be saying, “No man is an island. Everyone is effected by each person’s actions.” But that’s not in Paul’s head at all. Clearly, he’s relating to what he has just said about people doing everything they do, not just for **themselves**, but to the **Lord.**” We must all guard against considering our actions, in **all** matters, in a way that leaves God out of the picture.

And that leads to the second conviction we’re to be fully convinced of in our own minds:

- b) **Each person must face the judgment of God at the end of his or her life.** This is Paul’s emphasis - **Romans 14:9-12** - **“For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. [10] 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; [11] for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ [12] So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”**

Paul seems to remind me that my life will be a lot simpler if I don’t have the whole universe to run. All Christians, indeed all people, must stand before God one day - **“We will all stand before the judgment seat of God....”**(10). Paul included himself in that great throng. Christian and atheist, believer and agnostic, great and small will **all** be there.

This is the idea Paul has in his mind when he questions, in **verse 4** - **“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls....”**

But again, Paul isn’t just saying, “Live and let live. Peace and unity above all differences.” Where the issues of the

faith are at stake don't give an inch - **Jude 3-4** - "**Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. [4] For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.**"

Don't let anyone steal away the faith. Don't let holy grace become lazy indifference. We're commanded to "**contend**" against this like a prize fighter in the ring. Unity at the price of compromise is too expensive. That kind of unity is never pleasing to the Holy Spirit.

But there are also non-essential issues - issues where we have no clear instruction from the Lord. In those cases, everyone must keep the big doctrines at the center. We must all be fully convinced of them in our own minds.

Call to mind regularly the **motives** for all that you do. Is self at the center or is the glory of God at the center? Do nothing just to be controversial or contentious. Do all things - Paul says whether you eat or drink - to the glory of God. And remember the day of judgment coming. The constant battle is with the enemy of our souls who would blank our eternal realities with present trivialities. Fight for your faith every day. Fight to keep it front and center. Fight for your faith more than you fight fat in the gym. And the Lord will give you joy as you do.