

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part 57

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MAKING RIGHT CHOICES WHEN THE BIBLE DOESN'T TALK ABOUT YOUR OPTIONS

Romans 14:13-23 - "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. [14] 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. [15] 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. [16] So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. [17] For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. [18] Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. [19] So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. [20] 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. [21] It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. [22] 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. [23] 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."

There is a sense in which the governing principle for today's text is found, not *in* today's text, but back in the last phrase of **verse 5** - **"....Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind."** Here Paul makes it clear that, in *disputable matters* (not matters clearly defined Biblically as sin) the important issue is a ***pure undivided mind and quiet conscience before God.***

And just to make his meaning perfectly clear, Paul expands and illustrates this principle in the words immediately following - **Romans 14:6-7** - **"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."**

These are amazing verses. They actually teach that in ***disputable matters*** a particular action may be righteous for ***one*** person but not for ***another***. And the determining factor is the way each person sustains his conscience before God. Two people may choose totally opposite paths of action. Yet, each one can please God as measured by the ***aim of his heart*** in what he does or doesn't do.

This is such an important, over-riding principle for abiding holiness and love in the body of Christ that Paul, in today's text, refines it even more diligently. He has opened up a nugget of golden truth and he's not ready to let go of it. Consider these truths with me carefully and prayerfully:

1) **UNITY IN CHRIST JESUS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN DISPLAYING MY FREEDOM IN CHRIST JESUS**

Romans 14:13 - "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."

There are only ***two options*** held out by Paul in this verse. This sentence sets the tone for everything else Paul will stress in the remaining verses of this chapter. The first option Paul lists is a restless, strained, mutually judgmental community where people are more naturally tuned into assessing and measuring and criticizing each other than helping each other grow in holiness - "***passing judgment***" is the way Paul describes it.

In this option each group ***assumes*** a stance of superior spirituality. Each one, with not one shred of Biblical support, passes a measure of judgment on the other. Each group grieves the Holy Spirit.

In the second option Paul lays particular responsibility on the **strong**. That he makes abundantly clear in **verses 14-17**. And, in the opening verse of our text, Paul finishes his sentence very deliberately on the word he wants to emphasize - **“brother.” “Never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.”** Act like those watching you are **brothers and sisters**. Remember that they’re all family. And family members aren’t all on the same level. They don’t all possess the same maturity.

The family of God is **real**. And it requires great care and love. It must be handled with delicacy. Just as you don’t necessarily expose your **children** to everything **you** encounter in life, you **cater** and **adjust** your freedoms to others who don’t yet appreciate them. You don’t just **have** brothers and sisters in those pews near you, you **attend** to them with sensitivity and devotion.

It’s as though Paul knows it’s the **big** concepts that even strong Christians are likely to take for granted and overlook. So Paul calls even the strongest and most mature of us to retrace our steps back to our family roots. We have brothers and sisters in the body of Christ because Jesus Christ sacrificed **all** His rights to redeem them. That’s the path we’re called to walk in the body of Christ.

2) **IN DISPUTABLE MATTERS IT IS SHORT-SIGHTED AND WRONG TO REGULATE MY ACTIONS MERELY BY MY FREEDOM IN CHRIST JESUS**

Romans 14:14-18 - “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. [15] 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. [16] So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. [17] For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness

and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. [18] Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”

The really fascinating revelation of this passage centers around some of the most famous words in the New Testament. There’s something almost melodious about the way Paul’s words in **verse 17** roll off the tongue - **“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** It’s just one sentence, but it seems to carry its load of truth with such majesty.

Because the words are so beautiful they are usually quoted ***alone***, so as not to burden us with their context. But that misses the most important point of the text. The words usually ***aren’t*** quoted today with the same intent with which they were originally penned by Paul.

Paul isn’t using these words to fight small-minded legalism - though other portions of the New Testament certainly do that. He’s not actually directing these words at those weaker brothers and sisters who are offended by those expressing their freedom in Christ. No, the context is very clear. These words are directed at those who ***flaunt their freedom at the expense of those who will be offended by their actions.***

It’s as though Paul were saying to these strong Christians, “Why are you so bent on continuing with disputable activities when you ***know*** others are going to be offended? What is so important in your eating and drinking habits that it’s worth tearing down the kingdom of God? Don’t you yet realize the ***“...kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit?”***”

“You’re here to promote **righteousness** in your brothers and sisters, not judgmentalism and criticism. You’re here to promote **peace** with your brothers and sisters - especially with the **weaker** ones - not inner questioning and division. And you’re here to promote **joy** in your brothers and sisters, not worry and stress.

When will you learn that this is what the kingdom of God is all about. Not the display of your freedom in disputable matters such as eating and drinking? You can’t build the kingdom of God around issues of eating and drinking. But you can destroy it with those disputable issues! Be more mature than that!”

That’s Paul’s message in these verses. And I’ll tell you why I think it’s so important we remind ourselves of it. I’ve observed something over and over again in the actions of some Christians and it troubles me greatly.

First of all, if you’re dining with me, I no more care whether you have alcohol with your meal than I care whether you put cream in your coffee or milk in your tea. I’m only using this as one example of Paul’s principle, and I surely do have bigger things to give my attention to.

But having said that, there is something that happens often enough - usually in more seasoned Christians - that I’m growing less patient with it. I know of several Christians - Christians of some **name** in our circles - who don’t just have a drink with their meal, but seem proudly preoccupied with **making a point** with their drink. They’re **proud** to make a statement. They’re proud to expose the small-minded legalism of other Christians.

But why is Paul so adamant about this point? What is really at stake? That’s the

case Paul closes this passage with:

3) **THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS WE ARE NEVER TO ACT AGAINST OUR CONSCIENCE OR ENCOURAGE OTHERS TO ACT AGAINST THEIRS**

Romans 14:19-23 - “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. [20] 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. [21] It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. [22] 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. [23] 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.”

It’s at this point that Paul lays his heart bare. We finally see the big principle behind all of his previous cautions and instructions. In fact, he hinted at where he was going earlier in this passage - **Romans 14:15b** - “....**By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.**”

That’s quite a verse. It begs the question: “Is it really possible to **destroy** the one for whom Christ died? Surely Paul exaggerates. Surely he means we might destroy his **peace of mind** until he sees we were right all along. But Paul **can’t** mean we can destroy the weaker brother in the sense of **costing him his soul**. Surely my actions can’t **destroy** him in **that** sense.

Or consider the same painful thought expressed in **verse 23** - “**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.”

Again, this doesn't seem quite right. I thought we were dealing with **disputable** matters in these verses. I thought we already laid it down that Paul wasn't dealing with legally defined obedience or disobedience. I thought we were dealing with issues not covered in Scripture - areas where people formed their own opinions and practices.

And we were - up until now. But now Paul is laying down a **Scriptural** command. And the command is this - in **any** activity - any activity whatsoever - I must not violate **my own** conscience or encourage anyone else to violate **his or hers**. That's a command from the Spirit of God. And when that command is broken, **lives are destroyed**. Real, genuine **sin is committed**.

I hope we can digest the magnitude of this truth. Even in small incidental matters - matters left to personal preference - we can still commit **massive sins**. We can violate our faith and we can cause others to violate theirs. There is more at stake than the action considered by itself. And only weak-minded Christians don't ponder this.

Here's why it all matters so much. There are other issues that will come along to every Christian's life. There are bigger issues than cultic regulations about sabbaths, seasons, and food and drink laws. These, taken by themselves, are small potatoes.

But here's what **can** happen, even in the practice of these small disputable actions. I can, by my carelessness, **train others to act against their conscience**. I can offer clever arguments. I can outwit the weaker brother. I can proof-text him into doing something of which he doesn't fully approve.

“Well, is that such a big deal, Pastor Don?” Yes. It’s a **huge** deal. It’s a huge deal for which I’m held eternally accountable. It’s a huge deal because there will be some **other** issue that will tempt him down the road. And that issue may be one that is genuinely dangerous to his eternal well-being.

And here’s the point. He may face that issue with far less strength because, on a much **smaller** issue, I had already trained him to **ignore his conscience**. And, if I hadn’t done that, he may have been much stronger when he needed inward strength the most.

No wonder Paul addresses so many of his cautions to the **strong**, rather than the **weak**. No wonder he tells the strong brother in **verse 22** - “**The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.**” You have nothing to **prove** with your freedom. God already knows about it. Don’t let it hinder others from holiness and heaven. Hide it under a bushel more often than not.