

Romans 14

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[0 : 0 0] Do turn to Romans 14. Romans chapter 14. And it's a large chapter. I'm not going to cover the whole of the chapter.

But I want to focus on the basic idea. And the basic idea is summed up in the first verse. You see at the end of the first verse, in chapter 14, verse 1, it is not to quarrel over opinions.

And so that's saying to you and I that Christians are not to quarrel over opinions. Now if we were to go back to the early church, we would say in the first century there was loads of quarreling. It was not completely peaceful. Christians had disagreements with each other. And often their arguments were pretty intense. And very fierce.

And so Paul is writing this letter from the city of Corinth. And we know from the letters of the Corinthians that in that city, sometimes the arguing amongst Christians was pretty savage.

[1 : 1 2] And there were disagreements. Sharp disagreements with each other. And apparently there are disagreements in the church in Rome. The church is in Rome. To which he's writing. He makes one or two references to quarrels.

He points out, doesn't he, a quarrel between the vegetarians, Christian vegetarians, and the meat eaters. And look at verse 2. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

And there was controversy. There was diversity between them on what they should be eating as Christians. He mentions another one in verse 5.

He says, One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. I don't think he's talking there about the Lord's Day.

Sundays, when you look at the data in the New Testament, there seems to have been pretty much agreement on the Lord's Day. I think he's speaking of those feast days.

[2 : 1 4] I think he's speaking about the feast days of the Old Testament, the Passover. He says in verse 5, One treats one day better than another, another one treats all days alike.

Well, whatever they were arguing about, it was a pretty serious upset. A disagreement. And the disagreement was complicated by the fact that this church was made up of very different people. You had the Jewish people, and the Gentile people. You had the Jewish people who'd known the Bible for hundreds of years.

And you had the Gentile people, who'd just seen the Bible just a few years earlier. You had the Jewish people who had all their history. And the Gentile people who had none of their history. Jewish people who were making their past come to life. And Gentile people who were forgetting their past. And starting a new living. And so it's potentially damaging, isn't it, to the unity and the witness of the church.

[3 : 1 6] And it needed to be dealt with. These disagreements. And of course, it's not just of historical interest, is it? These issues are particular issues and problems that we face today.

There's not a big disagreement in this church between Christian vegetarians and meat eaters, thankfully. But it gets replaced, doesn't it, in church life, by other disagreements. Areas of Christian behavior where the Bible doesn't seem to give clear, unmistakable guidance.

We've been spared over the past two years lots of disagreement in this church. And that is a testimony to God's grace and God's kindness.

But I could tell you horror stories of churches divided. Churches, a really good church, I know, where there was such a disagreement that those who wear masks sit in one room and those who don't wear masks sit in another room.

And the two don't meet. And they are divided. Sometimes it's not easy, is it, to always know right from wrong. Some Christians hold one view and Christians hold another view.

[4 : 35] So, some Christians will go clubbing. Some Christians won't. Some Christians will go out for lunch after the service on a Sunday.

Others won't. I've been at Christian conferences a while back now where Dutch ministers would get together and smoke big cigars. And the rest of the ministers looked very cross and pleased with themselves.

And then there was a little group that were very jealous. Some Christian women, they read 1 Corinthians and they believe that you should cover your head in a place of worship.

Some Christians think that's what's taught of them in the Bible. Others don't think that's what that passage in 1 Corinthians is teaching. Some Christians will watch stuff on the telly on Sundays.

Others won't do that.

Some Christians will use a certain version of the Bible. Others have got a problem with that version of the Bible. What type of hymns should you sing?

[5 : 42] The list is endless, isn't it? All sorts of minor differences. None of them are hugely important. We're not talking, are we, about the Son of God.

And we're not talking about what is sin. We're not talking about faith and heaven and hell and holiness.

And yet, these things can take up a great deal of time and energy and they can create amongst Christians bad feeling, superiority and inferiority and disharmony.

And we should thank God that there is a chapter like this in Romans 14 where Paul takes this issue and addresses it head on. How does Paul approach it? Do you notice that he doesn't approach it in the simplest way?

The simplest way would, for Paul, to have taken sides and for Paul to declare to us once and for all who's right and who's wrong. And that would be the end of the division.

[6 : 48] That would be the end of the discussion. The Apostle Paul says it. The Bible says it. So we've got to do it. But in verse 14, he says, it is often the strong who are in the right.

Look at verse 14. I know and I am persuaded that in the Lord Jesus nothing is unclean in itself. Eat your meat if you want to. He says, I don't disagree.

I don't agree with those people who say that it's unclean. I don't agree with those people who are criticizing. I think they're wrong. I think the other way is right.

I'm with the veggies. But he doesn't do that. That is in his method. His approach at the start is far more complicated.

But it's actually much, much wiser. I had a really great outline for you last week and I've got a really poor outline for you this morning. That's how it works. I want to give you five rules from Romans 14 and then I want to give you three reasons.

[7 : 54] Four rules that Paul states in how we're to live together as Christians and then three reasons why he gives those five rules. I'm really fond of a connected statement by Martin Luther.

Listen to this statement. Martin Luther was the great German reformer and he writes this. A Christian man is most, is a most free lord of all subject to none.

The next sentence is a Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all subject to all. Do you see that?

A Christian man or woman is a most free lord of all subject to none.

A Christian man or woman is a most dutiful servant of all subject to all. Do you see that? The Christian subject to nobody except God.

The Christian person subject to everybody in different ways from different angles. And so let's look at the first of the rules for behaving towards one another in church. Here are five.

[9 : 00] So the first one is this. It's welcome. Look at verse one. As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him. Welcome her. And so Paul's starting point is this.

We are all Christian. We are all brothers and sisters in one family. We have all the same divine nature.

We all belong together. And we will belong together forever to all eternity. And that is who we are. And so we're not to disown one another.

We are not to criticize one another. We are not to separate from one another. We are not to form cliques or parties. There is in the church a total unconditional acceptance.

And if people are Christians, we are to accept them. we may not agree with them. There may be things of great importance that we do not agree with them.

[10 : 04] But nevertheless, we are to welcome them and accept them. Any believer is to be welcomed as someone for whom Christ died. Christ died for that man or woman or boy or girl.

So it's not my task to put him or her right according to my views. It's not my life's task to get them in line with my opinions.

And so Christianity is far richer and far wider than these minor disagreements. Christians, we have eternity in heaven and we will be together in eternity for heaven.

But to get everybody to agree on everything in the 60 or 70 years on earth, it is never going to happen.

it's never going to happen. And so welcome, welcome all who are Christians. One of the things I love about Presbyterianism and you might not want me to talk about this, but I think that one of the best things about Presbyterianism is that to be a member of this church, what do you have to be?

[11 : 21] You have to have a credible profession of faith. That is that you need to be living a life that is showing that you love and follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's it. And to be baptized. The entrance bar to the church of Jesus Christ should be no higher than the entrance bar to heaven. Welcome, welcome all who are Christians.

Secondly, don't despise anybody. Look at verse 3. Look at verse 3. 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.

Don't be scornful. Don't be sarcastic. Don't sit and look at the person who eats a bowl of vegetables every day because they think that's what God commands.

Don't laugh at them. Don't think of them as childish, as a legalist, as unenlightened. Don't say that they're still in bondage to rules which strong Christians should be freed from. and don't do it vice versa he tells them.

[12 : 25] Don't look at all those greedy people eating pork chops and they don't eat nut roast like we do. No, God's son has saved them from their sin and God is going to receive them into heaven and he will receive them with joy and with glory and that is how God is going to welcome them and so it is wrong to despise fellow Christians on these secondary matters.

Don't despise God's children. Thirdly, in the same verse, look at verse 3, don't pass judgment. Don't pass judgment on the one who eats for God has welcomed him.

You've got somebody who's really big into fasting and they're very sincere about fasting. they eat just a little bit of food. They're brutal on their body.

They're very, very disciplined and they're very sarcastic and judgmental about the person who eats all sorts of things. They look at that person and they say, well that person is unspiritual.

They're out of control. They're worldly eaters. Paul says, don't start criticizing each other. The danger is that the whole congregation can be held to ransom by the scoops of the weak.

[13 : 51] And if anybody does something that they think is right, off come the emails and the letters and they shoot them down and they're the only holy ones. And Paul says, verse 3, don't pass judgment over each other.

Let the one who abstains, don't let him pass judgment on the one who eats for God has welcomed him. You might think it would be better if they weren't doing that.

But I'm not called to pass scorn on them. Don't pass judgment. Number 4, each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. Can you see that in verse 5?

Each one at the end should be fully convinced in his own mind. We're servants of God. That's the fourth thing. We're servants of God. And so, I am not your servant. Believe it or not.

And you are not my servants. And you don't have to please me. And I don't have to please you. Because we're servants of God.

[14 : 58] And we are to try and please God. That is the great thing. Not pleasing ourselves. Not pleasing others. So the important thing is, as Christians, we should think. We should really think carefully about what we're doing.

In all sorts of areas, we should search the scriptures to find what the Bible says. To take advice from others.

By all means, that's a wise thing and a good thing. In the multiple of counselors, Proverbs says, there's wisdom. Take advice from people in the church.

Study the scriptures. Read. But then come to a sincere conviction for yourself. So that you can, with a clear conscience and an enlightened conscience, say, I believe that this is right.

And the weak people, in particular, need to be careful and not let discouragement fill you with worry. And not let yourself be pressured by the example of strong and forceful people.

[16:01] They might pressure you into acting in a way that is against your conscience. Don't let them do it. Look at what Paul says in verse 14. He says, I know, and I'm persuading the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in and of itself.

There's nothing wrong with the food. It's good food. But if you genuinely, sincerely, think and believe and are convinced that for you, it would be wrong to eat it, then act in accordance with what you believe to be right.

Look at verse 23. Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Paul is saying, in this secondary matter, the important thing is not what you do, but why and how you're doing it. And if you're doing it because you believe it is God's will and you believe it pleases him and it is right in his view, then that's what you've got to do.

And your brothers and sisters, they have to respect you and support you even if they don't agree with your interpretation. And so I want to say to you, I love people who are as serious as that about God.

[17:22] I love people who I think are wrong on some of these issues. We should honor them. I'm glad to see them in the church.

It's a great thing to have people who disagree on minor issues who are serious about God and want to do God's will. The fact that I may not agree with some of the things they're doing or not doing is really not terribly important.

What is important is that they are doing it for that reason and so we love them and honor them for that. The fifth thing is in verse 13. Second half of verse 13.

He says this, never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. Decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister.

He's writing to people here, he's writing to the strong who have liberty, they've got freedom and they've got a genuine liberty from God and he says God has given you that freedom, that liberty but don't make your liberty a primary value.

[18:40] there are times when you should deny it. There are times when you should forsake it. There are times when you should not practice it. There are times when you should give it up.

If it's going to hurt my brother or sister, don't do it. Does that mean that there's no right in the word of God to do it? Well as far as you're concerned, you've studied, you've taken advice, you've prayed, there is a right that you can do it.

But there is no right to hurt your brother or sister. And the main concern must be the spiritual progress of your fellow believers. And so the main concern of the people we love in this congregation is not do they agree with me on every little detail, on every issue, is every decision in line with my interpretation, but no, do they love Jesus?

Are they putting Jesus first? Are they wanting to serve Jesus and bring him glory? And if that's the case, I love them. I'm one with them because that's what I want.

We might not agree on every secondary issue, but we agree on the great things. Do you see, if we parade our liberty and we impose our liberty on other people, it's our liberty, we may be doing them harm.

[20:05] We may be hurting us. So decide, Paul says in verse 13, make a conscious decision never to put a stumbling block in the way of a brother. Even if he thinks, if he only thinks about what he sees you do, look at verse 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.

Giving a meal with him in your house and Paul is saying you'd be better off not serving what would cause him to stumble.

You'd be better off not serving him what would cause him to go against his conscience. So there's Christians here, you believe you can have a glass of wine or a cigar after supper.

And you maybe have Christians in your home from a completely different background. And it would go against their conscience to touch alcohol.

[21:12] And they believe that the Bible teaches that it's wrong. Well, for the host, it would be better not to serve them alcohol than to cause offense. Not because you think it's wrong, but

because you don't want to offend your brother or sister.

That's the great thing to God. you serve them kind of glass of wine, get that down you. You'd love it. Go on, try it.

Go on. What will God say to you? God is not going to say, oh, that's great, you were really brave today to do that. Well done. No. But you were loving and thoughtful to your brother or sister.

And when we grumble at constraints, we've got a wrong perspective on the kingdom of God. Look at verse 17. For the kingdom of God, it's not a matter of eating and drinking. You could put all sorts of things in that, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

That's the thing. That's what we're about. That's the important thing. They're really simple rules, aren't they? They're really easy to understand, and yet they're often disregarded.

[22 : 19] What a tremendous difference it would have made to the Christian church in the UK in the last year and a half if things had been obeyed. And we were not to fight over smaller, uncertain things.

And that brings me, secondly, to the three reasons why we should treat one another like this. So the first reason is verse one. The one who eats and the one who abstains, God has welcomed.

The one who eats and the one who abstains, God has welcomed. He welcomes the one who eats. He welcomes the one who abstains. And so if God in heaven has received this person, you and I are to receive them.

Have I got higher standards than God? God says, I have chosen that person. I have set my love upon that person. I have saved that person.

He loves them. He honors them. And we can never bring glory to God by disowning them or attacking them or casting a question mark over someone that God has welcomed.

[23 : 32] If God has accepted them, you and I can accept them. Secondly, Paul says in verses six to nine, that the person who has come to a different conclusion than you, observes it in the honor of the Lord.

He observes it in the honor of the Lord. So both parties in the disagreement between honest, godly Christians, both parties are acting honestly and they're acting consciously.

Look what he says in verse six. He says in verse six, the one who observes the day, he observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord since he gives thanks to God.

Well, the one who abstains, what's his motive? He abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. one eats, one doesn't eat, but they're both doing it for the honor of the Lord.

Most people, the vast majority of people in this city have got no interest in pleasing God. And yet here are people, and how encouraging it is to find people who honor the Lord.

[24 : 42] And even if I don't agree with their minor viewpoint, they want to honor the Lord. Should that not please you? Should that not delight you?

Should that not want you to put your arms around them and say, here is my brother and here is my sister, and they want to honor the Lord. And so one thing I give thanks for again and again is that over the years I've seen people with different views holding to different things on minor issues living together in church life and loving one another.

And they respect each other. I do think that is one of the reasons why God has blessed us. And that is what Paul is saying, isn't it? Even if we don't agree with someone's viewpoint, we should honor them and we should love them.

We're wanting to obey God. And we should love and be proud of our fellow Christians with whom we have minor differences with. And the third reason as we finish is verses 10 to 12. Because in verses 10 to 12 we're told we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.

We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. He's touched on it in verse 4. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It's before his own master that he stands or fall and he will be upheld for the Lord is able to make him stand.

[26 : 08] And then he re-emphasizes it in verse 9. For to this end Christ died and lived again that he might be both Lord of the dead and of the living. For 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, every tongue shall confess to God, so then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

God will judge. And I won't judge you. And you won't judge me. And in the matter of a minor conscience, no believer is answerable to another.

We're not talking about a major massive doctrine or sin or the duties of the Christian life. That is a different issue altogether. There's a great deal in the Bible where the church has got to say about those things.

And we're to discuss them and teach them. And there's to be church discipline and rebuking and dealing with sin. But we're talking about in Romans 14, a different category in which Christians differ.

[27 : 23] And we dare not presume to take God's place. We dare not presume to claim his authority over another Christian. He will bring in the sentence on you and on me.

And so can you see, no rule book could ever cover every case. Our actions, our views, so complex, so different. We're so different, I mean, our temperaments, so different in our situations, in our families, in our work.

So many differences. And so what we do is we take the general principles of the Christian life and we seek to live them out. And God's great concern with us is inward reality, not outward conformity. Inward reality, in our hearts, do we love him? In our minds, do we believe his word and seek to obey it? The basic problem is not differences of opinion or differences in activity.

Verse 12, Paul says, each one of us will give an account of himself. The great thing that separates is a lack of love. And the great thing that unifies is love.

[28 : 38] So if a man or a woman or a young person or a boy or a girl loves the Lord Jesus and trusts him, and is living a life seeking to follow him, then I am to love them and accept them.

And they may be wrong in a whole load of ways. I am almost certainly wrong in a whole load of ways. But it will all be clarified, won't it?

And it will all be settled on the day of days. And so love the Lord your God. With all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, with all your strength.

And love your neighbor as yourself. Let's pray.