

UNASHAMED

A study of the book of Romans

I am not ashamed of the **GOSPEL**, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Romans 1:16

November 14, 2021

Romans 14:1-12

SCRIPTURE

¹ Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. ³ One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him. ⁴ Who are you to judge another's household servant? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And he will stand, because the Lord is able^[a] to make him stand.

⁵ One person judges one day to be more important than another day. Someone else judges every day to be the same. Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ Whoever observes the day, observes it for the honor of the Lord.^[b] Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and he gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. ⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ Christ died and returned to life for this: that he might be Lord over both the dead and the living. ¹⁰ But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.^[c] ¹¹ For it is written,

As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God.

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

COMMENTARY

14:1–4 Paul's letters were not intended as abstract treatises on matters ethical and theological but pastoral notes addressed to real life situations in first-century churches. At Rome there were Jewish Christians who were reluctant to give up certain ceremonial aspects of their religious heritage. They were uncertain about how faith in Christ affected the status of Old Testament regulations.⁹³ Others embraced the new freedom in Christ unencumbered by an overly sensitive regard for the past. Paul referred to the first group as "weak" (Rom 14:1) and the latter as "strong" (Rom 15:1). The terms are descriptive rather than judgmental, although as Stuhlmacher says, "the designation 'weak in faith' is based on the presupposition that strength of faith is the attitude which is really to be desired."

The church at Rome was to welcome into its fellowship those Jewish believers who were finding it difficult to let go of their religious past, but not "for the purpose of passing judgment on their scruples" (TCNT). That would be an unworthy motive for bringing them into the fellowship. The church does not exist as a judiciary body to make pronouncements on issues that in the long run will prove to be of no real consequence. Those things are *adiaphora*, things that do not really matter.

Paul identified two classes of believers in Rome: the "strong," whose faith allowed them to eat whatever they wanted, and the "weak" (the overscrupulous), who ate nothing but vegetables. The tendency of those who eat whatever they want is to look down on those who for reasons of conscience are unable to exercise the same freedom. Freedom in such matters tends to create an attitude of superiority. It is tempting to hold up for ridicule those whose lifestyle is more restricted than one's own. In the broad spectrum of Christianity those to the right are often caricatured as hopelessly fundamental. The problem is that one person's "overly scrupulous neighbor" is another person's "libertarian." It all depends upon where you happen to stand along the spectrum. The Christian is not to despise or treat with contempt those who are still working through the relationship between their new faith in Christ and the psychological and emotional pressures of a previous orientation.

On the other hand, the person who does not eat everything must not sit in judgment upon the one who does (cf. Matt 7:1). A natural consequence of the more restricted perspective is to condemn those who are enjoying greater freedom.⁹⁶ What is wrong for me translates easily into what is wrong for everyone. But the fact that God has received them ought to temper one's tendency to criticize. Since God has found room for them in the fellowship, any attempt on our part to exclude them will fail to meet with

God's approval. It is not up to us to judge the servant of another (cf. Jas 4:12). That prerogative belongs exclusively to that person's own master. And that master is God. The strong as well as the weak will stand because the Lord is able to make them stand.

14:5–8 There was considerable diversity in the early church. Some believers regarded certain days as more sacred than others. Old Testament law had declared that feast days were consecrated to God in a special way. The Sabbath, for instance, had its own set of regulations. Other believers, however, regarded all days alike. After all, all life belongs to God, and every day offers unique opportunities for worship and service.

More important is that each person be fully persuaded in his own mind. What the other person does is a matter of that person's conscience. Each believer must be convinced for himself or herself whether or not to regard some days as more sacred than others. Those who observe special days do it to honor the Lord (v. 6). Those who eat meat do it in honor of the Lord. They bless the Lord for the provisions he supplies. At the same time, those who abstain from eating meat also do it in honor of the Lord. They too give thanks to the Lord. There is no difference in their motivation. Both conduct themselves in such a way as to please their Master.

"None of us lives to himself alone" (v. 7) often has been understood in the sense of John Donne's "No man is an island." Paul's statement, however, is not a sociological observation regarding the unity of the human race. What he was saying was that all believers live out their lives accountable to God. Decisions about such matters as special days and eating meat are not made in isolation but in accordance with the will of God as understood by the individual. Even in death believers maintain their relationship to God. To live means to honor the Lord. To die is no different. Whether we live or die we belong to the Lord (cf. 1 Thess 5:10). Since each believer belongs to God, it is out of place for any to question the decisions of another in matters not central to the faith.

14:9–12 "For this very reason" (v. 9) looks forward and is explained by the final clause of the verse. The purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection was "that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living." His lordship is universal. His subjects are not merely those who are alive at the present time. All who have died previously are subject to his authority. Therefore he is the judge of all. Why then, asked Paul, do you weak believers (the abstainers) pass judgment on your brothers in Christ (those who do not abstain for the sake of conscience)? God is their judge, not you. And turning to the strong believers, Paul asked why they held the weaker Christians in contempt. It was wrong for them to look down on their fellow believers who were not as yet able to set aside the regulations that previously controlled their religious life. Each and every believer will stand before the judgment seat of God. Barclay writes, "We stand before God in the awful loneliness of our own souls; to him we can take nothing but the character which in life we have been building up."

There is no room in the family of God for one group to pass judgment on another (v. 10). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus settled the matter once and for all: “Do not judge, or you too will be judged” (Matt 7:1). This admonition, however, has often been misinterpreted to mean that we are not to disapprove of anything another person does. But how, then, would we be able to follow through on Jesus’ later instruction that “by their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt 7:16)? It is harsh and censorious criticism that Jesus opposed, not insight conditioned and made possible by biblical truth.

Verse 10 states without equivocation that all believers will be judged. The judgment will not entail a decision regarding one’s salvation because according to John 5:24 the believer has already crossed over from death to life. Eternal life is a present possession (cf. 1 Cor 3:10–15). There will, however, be for every believer a judgment of the quality of his or her life. In 2 Cor 5:10 Paul said, “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” This will be a judgment based on works (cf. Matt 16:27; Rom 2:6; Rev 22:12). In the long run the validity of faith is established by the quality of life it produces. What people do is the most accurate indicator of what they really believe.

Paul quoted Isa 45:23 in support of the validity of universal judgment (v. 11). Every knee will bow before God, and every tongue will acknowledge him as God. The same passage is quoted in Phil 2:6–11, where Christ’s elevation to honor comes as a result of his obedience to the messianic mission. Verse 12 serves as an emphatic summary of the previous paragraph. “Each of us then will have to answer for himself to God” (Moffatt). Since that is true, it is highly questionable, to say the least, for us to be involved in judging one another. Judging is a divine prerogative. To take up that role is to usurp the place of God himself.

MAIN POINT

Freedom in Christ grants us the ability to make our own decisions and the freedom to not judge others for theirs.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What does it mean to have freedom? What are some of the freedoms that we enjoy?

What are some of the challenges that come with living with others in a free society?

Freedom is a marvelous thing. We are free to worship where we want. We are free to live where we want. We are free to marry who we want. We are free to work where we want. Our society affords us freedoms of which many of our ancestors could never have dreamt.

But freedom isn't always easy. What happens when your spouse decides to take a job you wish that he/she wouldn't? Or what if your child wants to marry someone of whom you do not approve? One of the challenges of the Christian walk is understanding that there are times when the decisions of others aren't wrong, even though they aren't choices we would make. We must learn to be affirming of these choices if we want to maintain unity and love in the body of Christ.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

- HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 14:1-4.

What kind of doubtful issues might we be tempted to argue over in the church?

Do you think people look down on someone who chooses to eat vegan? Why might we get agitated about such personal choices?

There is nothing wrong with eating a nice, juicy steak that is received with thanksgiving to God. And there is nothing wrong with eating only vegetables if they are received with thanksgiving. If we are not careful, personal choices like these can cause division in church fellowship. Instead of looking down on one another due to personal choices, we ought to affirm the liberty we have in Christ to make such decisions for ourselves. As long as no one is forcing such personal choices on others or making them a litmus test for salvation and/or sanctification, then we have great freedom in Christ to enjoy or abstain from certain things as we please.

- HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 14:5-6.

Why do you think celebrating days might have been a big issue in the church in Paul's day? Why would what someone ate make a big difference to people in the church?

How can either eating or not eating something give glory to God?

Paul is most likely talking of Old Testament feast days and Sabbaths. You can imagine that for a Jewish convert, keeping the family traditions on feast days that had been

handed down for millennia would be a very big deal. There was no harm in celebrating these days, and in fact, by observing them through their newfound faith in Christ, they could glorify God through these things. Likewise, a Gentile convert might have little to no interest in celebrating these feast days. They knew that all these things were shadows of Christ. Instead of observing feast days and special Sabbaths, Gentile Christians might spend each day thanking God for sending Christ as a fulfillment to these promises.

The same could be said of the food choices people made. Jews might have had a hard time getting past the cultural “grossness” of eating pork, much like someone in the United States might be repulsed by eating dog or squirrel. Gentiles, who grew up eating pork and other “unclean” foods, would have had no problem enjoying these things.

Paul’s point is that each believer ought to encourage and celebrate the other’s freedom in Christ. However, no one is allowed to impose personal choices on another as a requirement for “right living.” These are individual choices, and ought to be celebrated as such.

- HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 14:7-12.

What do you think Paul means by “none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself”? How does that make a difference in how we treat one another?

How can being aware of our own accountability to God help temper our judgments against our brothers and sisters?

Paul reminds the Roman Christians that every one of them will stand in judgment before the Lord. If we are humble and realize all the difficult decisions we have to navigate each day, then we will be more understanding toward our brothers and sisters who are also trying their best to do what pleases the Lord. Understanding that we will give an account of our actions before the Lord is sobering enough; we do not need a bunch of other brothers and sisters nit-picking our decisions along the way as well.

As much as we can, we ought to encourage one another in our day to day decisions. If something isn’t sinful, and our brothers and sisters enjoy it and give God glory through it, then we ought to affirm them in their decisions.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How can we guard ourselves against being judgmental of others in their personal decisions?

What are some modern-day choices that divide fellowships?

How can we be affirming of others in our fellowship who may not make the same life decisions as we do?

PRAYER

During a time of group prayer, ask the Father to help us be encouraging to those around us. Pray that the Holy Spirit will convict us of our own sin so that we might be humble towards others because we are aware of our own faults. Ask the Lord to bless our churches with the fellowship of unity as we treat others with a welcoming and inclusive love that only comes from Christ.