

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 21, 2021
Romans 14:13-23

SCRIPTURE

¹³ Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister. ¹⁴ I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean. ¹⁵ For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and receives human approval.

¹⁹ So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another. ²⁰ Do not tear down God's work because of food. Everything is clean, but it is wrong to make someone fall by what he eats. ²¹ It is a good thing not to eat meat, or drink wine, or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.^[a] ²² Whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But whoever doubts stands condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith,^[b] and everything that is not from faith is sin.

COMMENTARY

14:13. Paul called on mature Christians to lead the way in building unity in the church by refraining from petty criticism of weaker church members. Paul challenged the mature to decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of weaker Christians. The apostle had in mind avoiding any actions that might lead other Christians into sin. Paul urged his readers to always take the path of Christian love over the way of self-interest.

14. Paul felt at this point that he needed to let his readers know his personal view about clean and unclean foods. He wanted them to know that he wasn't urging mature Christians in Rome to follow a principle that he himself didn't follow. He had been persuaded by the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Paul wanted his readers to know where he stood on the question. Yet for Paul, the greater issue was helping those Christians who sincerely believed the clean and unclean regulations were still valid for believers. In other words, the greater issue for the mature believer was caring as much for another believer's conscience to be clear as for one's own.

15. Paul clearly emphasized the importance of striving for peaceful relationships among believers. Mature Christians put the law of love above the law of liberty in situations where their exercise of freedom might hurt or destroy a weaker Christian. Paul reminded his readers that Christ died for weaker Christians too. In light of Christ's redeeming sacrifice, how could mature Christians risk destroying the spiritual growth of another believer over something as inconsequential as what you eat. The apostle emphatically urged his readers not to do that. Paul hoped that all believers would be active peacemakers. When we refrain from criticizing other Christians, we are striving for peace with them.

16. Paul taught that church members needed to take seriously the impact their conduct could have on their reputations as well as on the church's reputation in the community (see 1 Cor. 5:1-3). Paul urged mature Christians to guard their reputations by giving due consideration to how others were impacted by their conduct. Enjoying some good aspect of Christian freedom in a public setting might be desirable, but if our actions cause weaker Christians (or perhaps unbelievers as well) to criticize our lifestyle, we need to be concerned.

17. Thus Paul went on to challenge mature believers to transcend their legitimate Christian privileges, such as the freedom of eating certain foods, in favor of pursuing eternal values. Eating and drinking are necessary human activities, but what we eat and drink should never take priority over the pursuit of the Christian qualities of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit.

18. It was not enough, Paul taught, for Christians to be self-assured that their eating habits were acceptable. He wanted mature Christians to be guided by greater spiritual discernment. By carefully guarding their conduct, willingly foregoing activities that would

draw criticism from weaker Christians, the mature would in fact be serving Christ, would be acceptable to God, and would build their good reputation in the community. God is delighted when He sees His children put priority on His kingdom and its concerns.

19. Continuing to build his case for believers' choosing the path of spiritual maturity, Paul urged his readers to pursue two important lifestyle qualities. One way to intentionally live out salvation in Christ is to pursue what promotes peace. Paul was exhorting mature Christians to diligently strive for attitudes and actions that would result in church unity (see Eph. 4:3). By striving for unity, mature Christians would help their weaker brothers and sisters in Christ grow in the faith too. Likewise, a second way to intentionally live out salvation in Christ is to pursue what builds up other Christians.

20-21. Paul's warning was that choices concerning food should never be a justification for damaging the church's life and fellowship. Paul was clear that Christlike love, not Christian freedom, was to guide believers in their relationships with fellow church members. Paul commended the choice to refrain from doing anything that caused another Christian to stumble as a noble thing.

22-23. Paul called upon stronger Christians to show spiritual discernment about when and when not to display publicly their convictions about these issues. In good conscience they could simply keep quiet about or refrain from doing those things when their actions would cause weaker believers to stumble in their faith. Paul then warned weaker believers, urging them to be sure about their attitudes and actions regarding debatable issues. They too needed to live with a clear conscience and not conduct themselves based on doubts. Paul warned these believers that everything that is not from a conviction is sin.

MAIN POINT

The love of Christ compels us to make personal sacrifices for the faith of our fellow Christians.

INTRODUCTION

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

Have you ever encountered a culture that is strange to your own? How did it make you feel?

Have you ever heard of someone from another culture eating something you would consider "gross"? Would you eat it if it were served to you?

When you think about it, it's amazing how closely our food and our cultures are intertwined. When you think of Italy, you might think of pasta, meatballs, and maybe

pizza. When you think of Greece, you might think of olive oils on salads or delicious bread. If you think of Americans in the south, you might think of fried chicken and mashed potatoes and gravy. Food and culture go hand in hand.

Food was more than just culture for the Jewish people. Certain foods, like pork, catfish, and shrimp, were all forbidden. Imagine how difficult it was for them once all foods were declared “clean”. Not only would they have had the difficulty of thinking it was “gross”, they might have struggled as to whether or not it was sinful for them to partake of it. How should a Gentile believer react to this if invited to dinner?

UNDERSTANDING

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

- HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 14:13-15.

Do you think that criticism is always unhealthy? Explain.

What is the difference between good and bad criticism?

How can love for others help us in disagreement?

Paul was persuaded that nothing was unclean in itself. Paul would have had no qualms eating food sacrificed to idols, pork, or any other kind of food that the Old Testament declared to be “unclean”. Yet, he was adamant that if someone else’s conscience did not allow them to eat such things, we ought not to press the issue with them.

Paul argues here that something minor, like an issue of food, should not be used to drive a wedge in fellowship. We should respect the scruples of others if it is of no real harm to us. Instead, love for others ought to compel us to give others the freedom to partake or not partake in matters of little consequence.

- HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 14:16-21.

Is there ever a time we ought to be vocal about minor issues such as eating and drinking? If so, when, and what might that entail?

What do you think it means to “make your brother stumble”?

When someone has qualms about minor things—food, watching certain television shows, or maybe what kind of activities are acceptable on Sundays—we can navigate these things when people have these convictions as long as they aren’t forcing them upon others. If you know that someone has the conviction that they won’t let their kids

play sports on Sunday, we ought to respect that and just let them live their conscience. Paul says here that “everything is clean,” yet he was not willing to press this with people who still could not get over eating “unclean” foods themselves.

However, if someone begins to say that it is sin for anyone to eat pork chops, or begins to demand that everyone conform to their conscience in such issues, we have to argue for freedom in conscience in these instances. This isn’t easy, and if we aren’t very careful, churches can suffer great division over minor issues. After all, churches have suffered great injury over issues ranging from music worship style to whether or not they ought to build a new building.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ ROMANS 14:22-23.

What do you think Paul meant when he wrote, “Do you have a conviction? Keep it to yourself before God”? What do you think Paul means by a “conviction”?

How could someone condemn themselves by the things they approve?

We need to be careful about disagreeing on minor issues with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. It is easy to get aggravated with someone when they infringe on our liberties through a misinformed conscience. But we are called to be patient with others, and Paul is adamant that we should not allow such things to divide the fellowship. The point of the Christian faith is not in superficial things like what we choose to eat. We are seeking righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. We work for mutual encouragement in Christ, not ways to push the envelope to aggravate our brothers and sisters in Christ in matters of personal conscience.

APPLICATION

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

What are some matters of conscience that may cause division in churches today?

How can we work to make peace when such issues become problems?

Have you ever been involved in a dispute over issues of personal conscience? How might you react now that would be different?

PRAYER

Close your small group time in prayer, asking the Lord to give us unity of Spirit. Pray that the Lord will keep us from petty quarrels over personal issues of conscience that we or others may be working through. Pray that the community will know us as a people who love one another, not as folks who are quarrelsome.