

The Gospel: Our Responses in Matters of Conscience

Romans 14:1-15:7

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down on the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down on the collar of his robes!

It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion!
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing,
life forevermore.

Psalm 133

Here is the problem we face as a people called out of all nations and all cultures. How can we function as one in the midst of our diversity? How were the Christians in Rome, some of whom were converted Jews reared in Judaism and the rest of whom were converted Gentiles reared in Paganism - how are they to sit down together at the Agape Feast? Some would be bringing in pork and some wine to drink - while for others the food should be kosher and wine was forbidden. You see, there is a very practical problem of dealing with issues that weren't doctrinal yet were very difficult practically.

Today, we face many of these same kinds of issues. We call them things that are in gray areas. How do we function as one when some of you really are uncomfortable without a tie at church and some are coming in shorts? How about earrings, ponytails and so on? What about Christmas trees and celebrating mother's day at church? What about serving wine instead of or along-side of grape juice - or just grape-juice?

And we are a relatively mono-culture church - I pray that God would give us the opportunity to more reflect in our membership the scene around heaven's throne - we are not challenged very much as we could be.

Paul has been arguing for the essential oneness of Jew and Gentile - in sin, in salvation, in sanctification, under God's sovereignty, in service - now, it comes to a head in whether they will function according to the doctrine they have learned. How do I know that? Because this long pericope ends in Romans 15:9-12 by celebrating God's purpose of unity for Jew and Gentile in Christ.

One other point - there is a companion text in 1 Corinthians that articulates other principles not given here. So, our study in Romans is not all that is to be said about how we function in liberty - for example, it does not address at all what we do when we are different in our opinions and are in the presence of unbelievers.

PART ONE – EXPLAINING THE TEXT

Its Positive Precepts (14:1-2)

Let's begin by thinking our way through the text with Paul. As I have said, this text addresses a problem in the church at Rome – how are Jews and Gentiles to be one when they are so different in their personal preferences.

¹ As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

What is Required

Those who are weak in faith are to be welcomed or received – accepted. This is the core precept. Differences of opinion about certain lifestyle issues are not to be the grounds for rejection and division. Furthermore, they are to be received but not to quarrel over opinions. In other words, these differences that he will elaborate on are not to be the source of arguments, debates, cliques and so on.

Who are the Weak

The ones who are to be received are those who are weak in faith. Verse 2 tells us that the weak are those who only eat vegetables and do not eat meat. The weak have self-imposed rules for living that the strong do not have *that are not related to moral issues*.

Stott writes, “We are not to envisage a vulnerable Christian easily overcome by temptation but a sensitive Christian full of indecision and scruples. What the weak lack is not strength of self-control but liberty of conscience.” (Stott, *Romans*, p.355). We are to see in this text, primarily Jewish believers whose upbringing in the Law and exposure to Judaistic asceticism meant they had lots of rules and do’s and don’ts. So weak in faith are not weak in doctrine, but whose faith is not strong in Christian liberty. The weak are the ones who have a lot of rules and regulations for their walk with God. Seems backward, doesn’t it. While we must be very careful about sin, we must not elevate our personal preferences to the level of being sin for all.

What it is Not

Now this tells us then that Paul is not creating a refuge for evildoers, legalists, Pharisees who use their narrow views or even this text to require and compel others to agree with their views. In fact, legalism is the clear enemy of liberty of conscience.

It also tells us that Paul is not here talking about liberty in doctrine, per se. Romans 14-15 is not a refuge for those who are a-theological nor for those who hold to error. In the text itself, it is about personal preferences whose practice has some Biblical justification. We will make the broader applications to our day, later.

Its Negative Prohibitions

(14:3-23)

I want to present these as an exquisite piece of jewelry – multiple, linked settings of silver and gold of what we ought to do in which is a centerpiece of why we ought to do it.

Vulnerability to Mutual Disregard

(14:3-12)

Paul begins with the primary problem that plagues our differences.

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. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

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. 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 For 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.

Its Typical Expression

Those with stronger consciences despise and look down on those with more sensitive consciences. Those are free have a superior attitude and treat others with unloving condescension.

Those with weaker consciences denounce and condemn those with strong consciences. All of their rules for their own personal holiness become the standard by which others are judged.

Therefore, those who are free are to honor and protect the weaker, not looking down on them. Those who are weaker must not impose their rules and regulations on others, evaluating their spirituality on a self-imposed standard.

Its Biblical Correction

Paul supports this with major challenges to way we think and want – areas in which we must examine ourselves and repent. These are not just random thoughts, but rather are a logical development, a progression of ideas.

God has received them and thus He is their master (v.3-4) It is not right to look down on or to judge the performance of another servant over whom you do not have authority. Paul places this in the context of dietary regulations.

We live under the Lordship of Christ to honor and glorify Him, not ourselves (v.5-9). Paul adds the context of celebrating special days (probably, Jewish feast days). Each one is to be firmly convinced in his own mind and thus aims his practice to honor and glorify Christ. Pleasing Christ is each person's aim. And both practices can and do please Christ *even though they are different*. The reason is that our lives are not self-oriented (my individual sanctification) but Christ oriented, pleasing Him in all we do.

We will give an account to Christ (v.10-12). Since this paragraph begins with reminding both parties of their sinful tendencies then this is being addressed to both. There is a very real sense in which Paul points us away from being accountable to one another in these areas.

So, we are not to despise or condemn one another in these areas because we serve and are accountable to God, who is our master, Lord and righteous Judge.

Vulnerability to Mutual Destruction (14:13-23)

The next two paragraphs speak to the practice of our liberty, describing those attitudes and priorities that govern practical choices and conduct.

In our Private Interactions (14:13-19)

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. 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.

In our private relationships, there is the possibility of causing harm to the weak in faith (v.13-19). We must not destroy or grieve others by causing them to actively violate their conscience (stumbling/hindrance) (v.15). Paul, one of those who are strong in faith, says that nothing in and of itself is ceremoniously unclean in Old Testament categories (v.14). For the weak, their conscience renders the thing unclean for them and the strong, they must practice their freedom so as not to cause what is OK to be denounced as evil. Overarching all this, Kingdom priorities of love (v.15), righteousness, peace and joy in the Spirit (v.17-18) motivate us to serve Christ in a way that is acceptable to Him and approved by others. Our primary pursuit is not self-serving insistence on our preferences but on the pursuit of corporate peace and mutual edification.

In our Public Contexts**(14:20-23)**

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.

Second there is the possibility of causing harm to the work of God (v.20-23). In what we do in public ministry contexts must not cause people to violate their consciences. And those with weaker consciences must not violate them. If they doubt, they must not partake and those who have faith, must graciously accept, provide and support them.

This is not to say that what is allowed is sink to the level of the most sensitive conscience in the congregation. What is required of all, however, must not require and force those with sensitive consciences to actively participate. So the Gentile believers are not to make Jewish believers eat pork at the Agape Feast, but pork can be brought to be enjoyed by those who were free to do so.

In all these areas, there is a very simple question that we must ask ourselves: do I question that practice for myself? Do I have doubts? Does it bother me to do that? Then DON'T. When you do, you sin. But if, under instruction, your conscience becomes Biblically taught and you no longer doubt, then you may. And if you have questions, don't condemn others who are free. You who are free, help the weak to please God by encouraging them not to violate their consciences nor putting them in positions where they have to.

In concluding this section, let us remember:

We are God's people seeking to live together in love.

We are God's servants, accountable to Him.

We will have different views about practical Christian living.

We must not look down on others who have weaker consciences thus more restrictions.

We must not judge those who have stronger consciences and thus more freedom.

We must not violate our consciences and be firmly convinced so that we live by faith.

We must be willing to retrain our consciences and be firmly convinced of something different so that we live by faith.

We must not cause people, to stumble, that is to do what they believe is wrong.

We must be sure that in all this we are focusing on the important things.

We must be sure that in all this we are glorifying God.