

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 14:18-23

Recap: Paul's use of the concept of the "Kingdom of God" in his plea for the stronger to respect the weakness of their brothers in Christ.

Paul has emphasized the word "brother" four times in this section. He wants his readers to keep this in focus. The "weaker" element of the Church is in fact our brother in Christ. If we have love for our brothers, we will not allow matters of conscience to divide us or destroy their faith.

- **Two Principles:**

1. "Anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God."

This is Paul's way of saying, "God knows you are not doing anything wrong by not following the Jewish dietary laws but putting your brothers first is pleasing to Him."

There are times that we are clearly in the right, but there is no advantage to pressing the point. In the case of dietary laws and sabbath worships, the stronger Christian is definitely in the right, but it costs nothing to be gracious to others.

2. "Anyone who serves Christ in this way is ... approved by men." By taking the Kingdom of God approach, we create a climate of peace. Others will approve of our actions since we choose not to ruin the faith of the weaker.

- **Three Points of Application:**

Verses 19-21: "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for

the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.”

Paul’s first argument was, The “strong” are to protect the “weak” (based on personal restraint). The second argument: The “Kingdom Of God” – God’s rule over the lives of his people.

In verses 19–21, Paul repeats these instructions while giving us a path to apply them in our lives. He gives us three points of application.

Application # 1: “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (Note Hebrews 4:11)

The Greek phraseology for “make every effort” is the same in both verses. It speaks of intentionality. There is nothing passive about what the authors are saying. Paul means, “Make a concerted, thoughtful effort” to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”

- **A Twofold Goal Of Our Intentional Activity:**

1. To pursue what will produce “peace” in our spiritual community.

Contention and division are only possible when we insist on our own importance. Peace is possible when we focus on the importance of God’s Kingdom.

2. These efforts will lead to “mutual edification.” There is both an atmosphere of peace and a framework of building up one another in Christ. See: 2 Corinthians 13:10; Ephesians 4:16; Colossians 2:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

Application # 2: (verse 20) “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.”

Paul repeats what he said earlier in verse 15: "Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died." Now he says, "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food."

By the "work of God", does Paul mean the individual believer or the Christian community? While each believer is a "work of God", the Greek word for "destroy" Paul uses leads us to believe he means the Christian community.

The Greek word in verse 20 is, "Katalyooe", which means to "throw down" or "tear down". This word was often used in the construction trade to describe dismantling a building.

Paul is using it as the antithesis to what he previously stated. He told us to pursue those things that would lead to peace and build up the body of Christ. Now, he is warning us against pursuing what would tear down a Christian community.

As one translation puts it, "For the sake of a plate of meat, do not wreck God's work!"

Paul has already used this kind of irony three times in this long passage on matters of conscience: In verse 15 he noted two things: 1. Our freedoms can distress our brothers. 2. Our freedoms can damage our brother's spiritual life. In verse 17 he said the Kingdom of God was more important than eating and drinking.

Now, he is adding a fourth. He's asking, "Will you really destroy the peace and fellowship a local Christian community by insisting on your individual rights?"

Application # 3: "All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall."

Did you notice that Paul just added something to the matters of

conscience he has been describing? So far, he has mentioned dietary laws and sabbath keeping. Now he adds drinking wine.

There is nothing in the Old Testament restricting or forbidding wine. It was part of everyone's daily life and the Jewish celebrations. Most of the 1st-century world drank wine.

Paul is hinting at another debate that must have been present in the churches at Rome. Evidently, some believers also had weak consciences about drinking wine.

Returning to our text, Bible commentators note that the phrase, "All food is clean" was probably something of a slogan among those Paul considers to be the "strong". Paul agrees. He stated that in verse 14, when he wrote, "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself."

Still, Paul saw other factors that should lead the "stronger" to curb the exercise of their freedoms regarding dietary laws. Among them was the goal of not violating "the oversensitive, over-scrupulous conscience, [of those] convinced that not all food was clean."

Verses 22-23:

"So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin."

Was Paul really saying we should keep silent about what we believe about dietary laws, drinking wine, and attending the Jewish Sabbaths? How would that be possible? Sooner or later someone was going to press you on one of those issues.

Here's what I think Paul is really saying: "Don't jump in the fray on these issues. Don't make a big deal about your views. Try to keep matters

of conscience between you and God. Don't feel the need to constrain others to adopt your personal views on these issues."

- **Two Spheres of Activity:**

1. The Private Sphere: Keeping matters of conscience between God and ourselves - as much as possible.

2. The Public Sphere: The dietary issue was a public one. Paul is dealing with a public debate – one taking place within the house churches.

We have two "men" – representing the two groups. Paul says, "Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats..."

Paul is continuing the contrast of the "strong" and the "weak". Paul tells the "strong", "Don't let your liberty to eat whatever you want become a point for others to condemn you for your lack of respect for those who can't."

The condemnation is not going to come from God, because God has made all things clean under grace. The condemnation is going to come from those who are offended because you do not respect their over-sensitive conscience about these things.

The strong Christian is at peace about these things because he has a clear conscience about eating whatever he wants. The weak Christian doesn't have that advantage. When he is faced with the choice of whether or not to eat meats that have been offered to idols, his conscience condemns him.

That is what Paul means by, "everything that does not come from faith is sin." For the weaker believer, eating idol meats creates the context of doing what he believes is wrong.

The point is, when we do what we believe or know to be wrong, for us it is sin. It violates our conscience and makes us feel we have done

something God does not approve of.

- **Striking a Balance:**

The matters of conscience Paul is addressing involve the strong and the weak regarding their consciences about what is and isn't acceptable. But these are matters of conscience, not "black and white" biblical mandates.

Two things are really necessary in these situations:

1. The stronger must respect the weaker.
2. The weaker may need to consider the need to re-educate themselves about what the Bible really requires of them.