

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 14:15-17

Study Notes:

Paul's previous statement about not judging others for their preferences: "Stop judging one another, but rather make this simple judgment ... not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."

Paul's first reason for not putting a stumbling block or obstacle in our brother or sister's way was: 1. "Nothing Is Unclean In Itself".

As he continues his instructions, he wants us to consider the question, "What is the right course to take when the conscience of the strong and the weak collide?"

That brings us to verse 15 and Paul's second reason for being cautious about our relationships to the "weak":

2. You Are No Longer Acting In Love:

In verse 15, Paul writes: "If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died."

Paul says if we prefer our freedoms over our brother's and sister's conscience, we are not loving them. In fact, we are putting ourselves first and destroying their faith.

- **Putting Love First:**

That's strong language, but we need to remember that love is the glue that keeps any Christian community together. When love is

discarded, so is unity. See: I Corinthians 13:4-6; Ephesians 5:19-21

There is an emotional aspect to Paul's statement of the issues: He writes, "If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat..."

While the "stronger" Christians have no qualms about eating meats that violate the Old Testament dietary laws or have been offered to idols – the "weaker" believers feel deep emotional grief over it.

Paul is not saying the "weaker" brother or sister is right. He's already stated, "no food is in itself unclean". For Paul it was not a matter of being right or wrong – it was a matter of loving others.

When we force "matters of conscience" into "right and wrong" categories, we lose perspective. We feel the need to defend our rights, rather than making unity the priority.

- **Destroying The Weaker Christian's Faith**

Look at what Paul warns can happen if we don't deal with these things in love: "Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died."

Paul's use of the word "destroy" has generated a lot of discussion among Bible scholars. One commentator insists that Paul means that violating the "weaker" brother's conscience will result in "final eschatological ruin", meaning hell.

That view seems unfounded. I think the Weymouth Translation does a better job explaining Paul's meaning. It says, "Take care lest ... you lead to ruin a man for whom Christ died."

The Greek word Paul uses for "destroy" is "Apollymi". That word can be used in a lot of contexts ranging from "ruining", to "spoiling", to "killing".

Up to this point Paul has been emphasizing the duty of every Christian to build up the body of Christ. Paul's use of the word, "Apollymi", expresses the opposite. Leading or forcing a "weaker" brother or sister to violate their conscience will seriously damage their spiritual growth.

3. The Kingdom Of God Is Greater Than Matters Of Conscience:

In verses 16-18, we find the third argument against leading or forcing a Christian brother or sister to participate in things that violate their conscience. Paul writes:

"Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval."

In the last point, Paul referenced the fact that Christ died for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Now, Paul references the Kingdom of God which Paul defines as God's rule over the body of Christ.

The Kingdom of God is not one of Paul's frequent subjects in his epistles, but it was in Jesus' teaching, including the parables of the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven.

What does Paul mean by, "Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil"?

He's referring to the "strong" believers' freedoms to eat foods that are not considered "clean" by Jews and Gentile proselytes. He's telling the "strong" Christians not to let their freedom – what they know to be good – become something bad.

Again, this is an appeal to the "strong" to consider the faith of the "weak".

For many Jews and Gentile proselytes, Christian freedoms appeared dangerous since the Jewish dietary laws were strict, if not unforgiving.

When a Jewish person became a Christian, they quickly discovered that the majority of Gentile Christians did not share their Old Testament rules and regulations. This is what created the problems in the Church at Rome and elsewhere.

Did the Jewish-Christians resent the freedom their counterparts seemed to possess? It's not hard to believe. That is why Paul is warning the Gentile Christians not to disregard their "weaker" counterparts.

Christian freedoms and Christian love must be practiced side by side: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ..." v. 17

Paul is pointing to both the "strong" and the "weak":

The "weak" are not to make such an issue of dietary laws expressed in the Mosaic Code that they overshadow God's purposes for the New Testament Church. At the same time, the "strong" are not to practice their dietary freedoms at the expense of others' consciences.

Paul says the Kingdom of God exists in three things; "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." As many Bible commentators have pointed out, these three things are unselfish.

First, we have Righteousness. This is a state of being right with God. As applied to Romans 14, it is also being right with other believers. It's a relational term. In the context of Romans 14, it takes on a similar meaning. We are to strive to put the consciences of others first, regardless of our perceived freedoms.

Second, there is Peace. In the New Testament peace does not just mean the absence of trouble. It often means a clarity of heart and mind towards God and the other members of Christ's Body.

If we insist that our Christian freedoms are more important than our brothers' and sisters' consciences, we do not have relational peace. Relationships are hampered, if not destroyed by unnecessary emphasis upon either rules and regulations, or freedom from them.

Third, we have Joy. An old cliché says that joy means, "Jesus, Others, and You." To a degree, this is true. Christian joy is not selfish; it does not find its true expression in you and I making ourselves happy.

What kind of happiness exists when our choices in matters of conscience bring distress to others or causes them to copy our behavior at the expense of their consciences?

As one commentator put it, "Christian joy is not individualistic; it is interdependent. Joy comes to the Christian only when he brings joy to others, even if it costs him personal limitation."

This is why Paul reminds us, "... The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."