

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 14:10-13

Study Notes:

A Continuation of Contrasts:

In verse 10, Paul moves from a general discussion to some specific questions, as he asks: “Why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother?”

Paul is repeating two verbs from Romans 14:3:

“The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.”

These are extremely subjective issues – even if those who hold differing opinions don't see it that way.

Eating meat offered to idols was not clearly acceptable or unacceptable; it all depended on the people involved. The same is true of Sabbath or extra-Sabbath worship. While some insisted on maintain the Jewish festivals and sabbaths, others felt no compulsion to do so.

“Who Are You To Judge?”

All too often, because a Christian has a strong leaning towards something, he or she feels others should have to keep step. In the process, they become unresponsive to others, insisting there is only one answer to these questions.

Paul obviously understood this danger. That is why he suddenly presents these two questions: "Why do you judge your brother?" "Why do you look down on your brother?"

Back in verse 3, Paul asked, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?" Now he asks, "Why do you judge your brother?" This time, however, he appeals to something different:

For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. - verses 10-12

Paul's previous warning was that those we judged over issues of conscience would be judged by God. This time, we are being judged as, "each of us will give an account of himself to God."

Paul is linking the two ideas: We should not judge others because we will one day stand before God's judgment seat.

Jesus gave us the same instructions in Matthew 7:1-2: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Jesus was not, as some insist, telling us to suspend all critical evaluation and disregard other people's actions, however egregious they are. If that were the case, he could not go on to tell us to "watch out for false prophets."

What Jesus is prohibiting what we might call, "censorious judging".

Paul goes on to quote Isaiah 45:23: "I have sworn by my own name; I have spoken the truth, and I will never go back on my word: Every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will declare allegiance to me."

In the original context, God is warning Israel of the ultimate judgment of their sins of idolatry. He goes on to remind them that He is not only the true Judge of His chosen people, but the nations. He's declaring his jurisdiction over all humans.

Paul is applying this in a different context, but the outcome is the same. Every human ever born will one day acknowledge God – whether freely or forcibly. Likewise, each human will give account to God – not to other humans.

James says something similar in James 5:9: "... Stop complaining about each other, or you will be condemned. Realize that the judge is standing at the door." – James 5:9

When we judge and condemn others on issues of conscience, we are usurping God's role. We are sitting at his judgment bench, alleging that we have the authority to pass His judgment.

"If The Roles Were Reversed":

What will happen when the roles are reversed, and the True Judge is at the bench and we are in the dock? James also gives us that answer in his epistle. He writes, "... Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful." – James 2:13

Paul puts all of this in context as he goes on to say, "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."

• Four Reasons Not To Practice "Censorious Judgment":

Keeping the contrast of the "strong" and the "weak" in focus, we can summarize Paul's four reasons for not foolishly assuming God's role in judging others: 1. He has accepted them. 2. Christ died for them. 3. All are our brothers and sisters. 4. God will ultimately judge everyone.

At this point, Paul changes the language from our finding fault with others on matters of conscience to our own responsibilities in such circumstances. Instead of passing down judgment, he says,

“Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”

He’s clearly changed the weight of responsibility from those who feel the need to follow dietary and sabbath laws to those who don’t. What is the responsibility of the “strong” towards the “weak”? It’s to avoid putting stumbling blocks or obstacles in their paths.

While Paul has suggested there are reciprocal attitudes that must be held by the “strong” and the “weak”, these instructions clearly put the “strong” in focus.

Paul is using one of the oldest principles of the Bible: The strong are to protect the weak. In the case of dietary laws and Jewish calendar observance, the “strong” are to consider how their “freedoms” may negatively affect the “weak”.

In the original Greek manuscripts, Paul uses a “play on words” to make his point. It literally reads, “Stop judging one another, but rather make this simple judgment ... not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”

Instead of judging others in Christ’s body, we are to make a judgment or decision to protect them. The Greek wording says we are to not put a hindrance or “snare” in their path.

As we will see, Paul states some reasons for this decision. That’s what we will look at next time.