

Our Fragile Fellowship

Romans 14 – Serving Christ in These Things

Text: Romans 14

Introduction: Sadly, one of the favorite indoor sports for Christians is trying to change each other. The history of the church is filled with internal problems caused by one member working overtime to change the mind of other members on issues that are not doctrinal in nature. Fellowship, like fine china, is a very fragile thing, and should be handled with care. It can be easily fractured or totally shattered by brethren who do not use wisdom wrapped in a care-package with a bow made of brotherly love.

Jesus so often spoke of brotherly love being the very foundation of His kingdom. John's gospel repeatedly finds our Lord commanding (not suggesting) that in His church every member should take care to love one another.

John 13:34-35 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 15:12-13 "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends."

John 15:17 "These things I command you, that you love one another."

The apostle Paul took that theme of brotherly love and expanded on it throughout the last 5 chapters of the book of Romans. Observe carefully what he does in chapters 12-15.

1. ***Love must be always serving.*** In Romans 12:1-8 God gives every member a gift and he is required to use that gift to serve others in the church. After telling Christians to give their bodies a living sacrifice Paul then says these words:

3 For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.

2. ***Love must be always genuine.*** Romans 12:9-21 tells us "no hypocrisy allowed":

"9 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. 10 Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another ... 13 distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality ... 16 Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion ... 18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men."

3. **Love must be always submissive.** Romans 13:1-7 shows us what love looks like even when the powers over us are abusive and intolerant of our faith:

1 ¶ Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. ... 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake.

4. **Love must be always universal.** Romans 13:8-14 takes love beyond the boundary of the church and out into the world. Love is truly a universal rule of life:

8 Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. ... and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

5. **Love must be always patient and tolerant.** Romans 14-15 puts the icing on the cake by describing how far love must go when dealing with those we disagree with. Paul summarizes verses 1-13 with these powerful words:

13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

Then he goes into further instruction to brothers who could not seem to find a common ground for understanding one another in verses 14-23. He beautifully describes the tolerance we should give to each other with this thought:

17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. 19 Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.

In Romans 15:1-13 he builds on that theme of brotherly love by saying:

5 ¶ Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, 6 that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The necessary inference is that God is patient with me, so it should follow that I must be patient with my brothers, even when I strongly disagree with an opinion they hold.

Let us use this time together to study how Paul learned to be so patient and tolerant of so many young, immature, ignorant and intolerant Christians he came to know all over the Romans world.

Keeping The Main Thing The Main Thing

A number of years ago Stephen Covey, along with Roger and Rebecca Merrill, authored a book on time management. They titled it: *First Things First*. This title was taken from a chapter in Covey's #1 best-seller *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In it they used a famous quote that we should remember even in our fellowship among brethren. That quote said: "**The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.**" That catchy phrase is a powerful reminder of how so often we lose sight of the main thing by focusing our attention on lesser things. Another way of saying that is: "The enemy of the best is the good." When we give too much of our attention and time to the "good" we then fail to give the majority of our attention and time to the "best." In other words, we fail to keep the main thing as the main thing.

Sometimes the Lord's church is notoriously bad at failing to keep the main thing the main thing. For instance, while it is certainly a "good" thing to want to be blessed and edified by coming together this morning in this assembly of saints, that is not the "best" thing we are here for. We are here primarily to praise and worship God, and then to bless and edify others. The main thing we are doing here is being givers, not takers. "*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*"

Paul is discussing how we practice brotherly love when one brother strongly disagrees with another brother on a principle that pricks his conscience. The church of the first century, like the church of the twenty-first century, was made up of a melting pot of every kind of Christian. It was a hodge-podge that covered the entire spectrum of believers: From newborn babe to aged wise men. From life-long keepers of the Jewish traditions to the converted idolaters among the Gentiles. From masters who owned large house-holds and ran businesses to slaves and bond-servants who owned nothing. From males who held honor in the world to woman who had no voice that counted for anything. From blacks of Ethiopia to whites of Europe to browns of the middle east. From languages and cultures from the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe.

It should be little wonder that Paul spent so much time writing about the need for brotherly love among believers. He wrote the many churches scattered throughout Galatia with these words: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (Gal. 3:28). If the world is to be converted to Christ it must first see unity among believers, thus fulfilling Christ's words: "*By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:35).

How are you doing with keeping the main thing, the main thing? Is the glory of God and the building up of your brothers in Christ the primary focus of your fellowship in this church? If not, perhaps this study of Romans 14 will help us.

What Romans 14 is NOT Teaching

Please read the text carefully. You will note that this discussion has nothing to do with matters of doctrinal importance. This is not talking about accepting someone into our fellowship who has never obeyed the gospel plan of salvation. There is not even a hint of any false teachers teaching false doctrines. This entire chapter has nothing at all to do with doctrinal issues or compromising with false teaching.

A rule of Bible interpretation is to always interpret difficult verses with scriptures that are clear and unmistakable. This scripture in Romans 14 cannot possibly be talking about false teaching or doctrinal errors. The reason is that the Bible says things like:

*“finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And **have no fellowship** with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret.”*

(Ephesians 5:10-12)

*“Now **the works of the flesh** are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that **those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**”*

(Galatians 5:19-21)

*“**Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ** does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, **do not receive him into your house nor greet him;** for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.”*

(2 John 9-11)

Fellowship and Unity at the price of doctrinal compromise and looking the other way at sinful behavior is NOT Bible teaching! What Paul told the Jewish Christians in the book of Galatians who were teaching that Gentiles had to be circumcised and keep the Old Testament law to be saved was that they were sinning and in danger of falling from grace (Galatians 5:1-4). What he told the Jewish Christians here in the book of Romans was that keeping their Jewish traditions (eating kosher foods and keeping traditional feast days), while not insisting that Gentiles keep the Law of Moses, was perfectly okay with God. Paul was not contradicting Himself, but teaching two different issues.

What Romans 14 IS Teaching (Looking at Paul’s Chiasm)

If you have never heard of a method of teaching called a chiasm (kai-ism), it could be diagramed like this: A-B-C-D = D-C-B-A. It’s an effective way of repeating yourself in order to emphasize your main points. It is a mirror effect, seeing things in reverse order. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going” or “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail” are modern day examples. Or Jesus stating “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Paul is doing that here in

Romans 14. Read each “A” then each “B” then each “C” and so forth. Do you see a trend? That’s a chiasm.

- A) vs. 5 “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.”
- B) vs. 13 “not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.”
- C) vs. 14 “I know and am convinced ... there is nothing unclean of itself”
- D) vs. 15 “Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.”
- E) vs. 16 “do not let your good be spoken of as evil”
- F) vs. 17 “the kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy”

- F) vs. 19 “let us pursue the things which make for peace”
- E) vs. 20 “it is evil for the man who eats with offense.”
- D) vs. 20 “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.”
- C) vs. 20 “All things indeed are pure (i.e. clean)”
- B) vs. 21 “nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended...”
- A) vs. 22 “Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God.”

The Main Thing About Romans 14 (An Illustration)

Before we dig in to the “meat” (pun intended) of this issue, let me illustrate what I think Paul is saying by examining a modern day application. Suppose one of our brothers here was just converted out of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and had believed all his life that working on Saturday was sinful. He has learned from the scriptures that the Sabbath (what we call Saturday) was not part of the New Testament and therefore there is no such thing called “The Christian Sabbath.” In his head he has the knowledge that this is true, but in his heart (his conscience) he has not yet arrived at believing it is okay with God to work on Saturday. His head says one thing, but his heart says another. In time that may change, but right now he just can’t bring himself to mow the grass on that day.

How are we who never observed the “Sabbath” (kept Saturday “holy”) to look at this new convert? Do we shake our head and just tell him to get over it? Do we invite him over to our house on Saturday to help us with our yard work or harvest our garden? Or do we practice loving patience with him while he struggles to align his head with his heart? Do we treat him with respect and give him the hand of fellowship while he comes to terms with his conscience?

If you can understand the dilemma in that simple illustration then you can understand what Paul is saying in Romans 14. The Roman church was dividing over basic common courtesy of treating your brother with respect and love while he works through various issues in his head and heart.

The Romans Had Lost Sight Of The Main Thing

Romans 14 reveals that trouble was brewing in the church in Rome. Jews and Gentiles were not mixing well together. The stronger, older Christians were not mixing well with the weaker, newer Christians. The Jewish Christians were not understanding the Gentiles peculiar ways (“why won’t they eat kosher / clean foods like us?”). The Gentile Christians were confused as to why these Jews were always in a huff about what you could or could not eat, or what was all the fuss about keeping certain days.

The clash was centering around two issues. One was about **diet**, the other was about **days**. Until these arguments were settled there was going to be a lack of peace in the assemblies. The pursuit of unity would come to a grinding halt. So Paul addresses this head-on by appealing to the brethren to:

DIET

1 ¶ Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. 2 For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. 3 Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.

DAYS

5 One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.

What Paul is teaching here should not be a surprise to us. The entire Roman epistle has been about Jewish and Gentile relations. He spent many chapters teaching the Jews that they are not saved by the works of the Law of Moses, which included feast days, Sabbath keeping, and eating clean and unclean foods. The tension could be cut with a knife if you were to enter an assembly in Rome to worship on the first day of the week. Likely the Jews sat on one side of the aisle and the Gentiles on the other.

Then, if they happen to enter one another’s home for hospitality it would have been very stressful if a Jew sat down to an entrée of ham, bacon, BBQ pork and other “unclean” foods. The Greek/Roman world loved swine. Were they to give up their favorite dishes when their Jewish brothers came over?

NOTE: Read Peter’s struggles with this very issue even 10 years after the church began (Acts 10 “*rise Peter, kill and eat... not so Lord, I have never eaten unclean foods*”). Read Peter’s continuing struggle in Galatians 2 regarding eating with Gentiles. Even the conscience of an apostle like Peter found it very hard to overcome lifetime habits.

Summarizing Romans 14

Verses 1-12

This section is promoting unity among ALL classes and cultures. Division is totally unacceptable in the Lord's church when it comes to personal actions that are not sinful. Please, note carefully these facts concerning everyone Paul is addressing:

Vs. 3 "...for God has received him" (the meat eater and vegetarian)

Vs. 4 "...for God is able to make him stand" (God is our judge, not any man)

Vs. 8 "...whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (each lives for God, not man)

Vs. 9 "For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again" (to save each man)

Vs. 10 "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ" (not man's judgment)

Vs. 12 "So then each of us shall give account of himself to God" (not to man)

This paragraph by Paul is incredibly powerful! Knowing that Christ, who died for us, will also be the judge of us, we should be extremely careful about pronouncing judgment on a brother (whether Jew or Gentile) who is trying hard to live within their own conscience.

Not everyone is at the same stage of growth and knowledge. That is why Paul calls some of them "weak." They are "*weak in the faith*" only because they come from a background that trained their conscience in a certain way. The "strong" man (Paul puts himself in this category) "*believes he may eat all things*" (meats or foods that are "unclean"). Paul, being a very strict Pharisee, would have at one time right after his baptism been considered a "weak" brother who only ate clean foods (kosher – meaning the animal was killed and prepared in a proscribed way). Only after many months or years would he have graduated to the category of "strong."

This teaches there has to be a lot of room for tolerance as men go through the transition from Jew to Christian, or from Gentile to Christian. The same holds true in our world today. Those who come out of the world will bring with them all kinds of beliefs and customs. Those who come out of religious backgrounds different than that found in the New Testament will need time to learn and grow and adjust.

For example, a former worldly man will find it hard to reset his mind to worshipping "all the time" (meaning, twice on Sunday, on Wednesday, and on other special assemblies). He might think we are a bit fanatical by all these gatherings. We might have to be patient as he learns that these assemblies are a blessing to his life, and an honor to God. In time, if we are patient, he will "see the light" and willingly reset his schedule for God.

One coming out of a different religion might think it strange we don't celebrate Christmas or Easter in our yearly plans. Those were "holy" and very special in their former church life. Even though they learn the Bible says nothing about celebrating the birth of Jesus or making one special day to remember His resurrection, it pains their conscience not to observe it. If their conscience dictates they should "do something" to keep those days special, then we should never judge them for doing so. It's not sinful.

Verses 13-23 Principles Every Christian Must Live By

Paul is teaching us principles to live by:

1. Don't judge a brother's personal conscience (vs. 13)
2. Don't walk selfishly, but in sacrificial love (vs. 14-15)
3. Don't let your good be spoken of as evil (vs. 16-19)

Now that Paul has laid the foundation for Christian relationships, insisting that we all be patient and tolerant of one another's consciences, knowing we all come from different backgrounds and cultures, he now turns to the subject of "*stumbling blocks*." Instead of making a New Year's Resolution, we should:

Vs. 13 "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way."

The words "*judge*" and "*resolve*" are both from the Greek word *KRINO*. It means to pronounce an opinion, to announce a verdict. So Paul says that Christians, in matters of individual conscience, should NOT pronounce opinions publicly about another's personal life (NOTE: we are not talking about any sinful behavior, but personal issues like eating foods or observing days in their private homes). However, if they do insist on passing judgment then judge to never cause a brother to stumble or fall! That is judging that God happily permits!

Vs. 14-15 "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died."

The apostle Paul, by the Spirit's inspiration, pronounces all foods clean. I Timothy 4:3-5 he had written that God created all foods, including all meats ("creatures"), to be good and to be received with thanksgiving. This had been hard for Paul, but he had changed. His conscience had been fully converted, but other Jews had not yet reached that level of maturity. The Gentiles had to learn patience with their Jewish brothers. If a brother is grieved by your actions, then love is no longer motivating your fellowship. You have become selfish to insist on your rights above your brother's conscience. Your selfishness can "destroy" (cause to be lost in hell) one for whom Christ lovingly died.

Vs. 16-19 "Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another."

The context seems to suggest the main idea is how the rest of the church (my brethren) talk about me. If I am selfish and demand my "rights" of freedom of speech, to the grief and hurt conscience of a fellow brother in Christ, my good becomes evil. When

fellowship in the kingdom should be resulting in our righteousness, peace and joy together, it turns instead into my personal rights to eat and drink what pleases me. My rights override your conscience.

Remember what Paul said on a similar issue in I Corinthians 8:13 *“if food makes my brother stumble, **I will never again eat meat**, lest I make my brother stumble.”* That kind of attitude leads to righteousness, peace and joy.

“These things” (Greek *TOUTOIS*) of the kingdom (i.e. righteousness, peace and joy) drive us to *“pursue the things that make for peace”* and to edify (spiritually build up) the church. Paul commands that I **pursue** (Greek *DIOKO* “to run swiftly toward”) only those things that make for peace, not division. My fellowship with my brother is far more important to me than having my own way in matters that are merely my opinions or preferences. I will gladly give up my personal rights in order to have peace in the kingdom of Christ.

How do we pursue these things together? I know of only one way --- be together! Study the Bible together. Pray together. Talk together. Eat together. Play together. And do it without our brothers and sisters feeling threatened that we are putting them under a microscope with everything they say or do. We need to feel open and free around each other, casting away all prejudices in matters of individual conscience. Remember, all of us are at different levels of our growth in Christ. We must make room in our hearts for where others are in their walk of faith. We must be tolerant. We must be patient.

Vs. 20-23 “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.”

Whether it's food, or days, or other matters of personal conscience, *“the work of God”* is in progress with each brother and sister in Christ. We are all under construction, so don't destroy this fragile fellowship for insignificant things. Give up your rights, gladly. Take your “weak” brother and determine to help him be “strong.”

In matters of personal rights (what Paul here calls *“faith”*) we are to keep them as personal (*“have it to yourself before God”*). Don't aggressively push your personal opinions onto another's faith, leading to their violating their conscience by doing what you think is right instead of what they feel is right. A brother who insists on his own way in such private matters “condemns himself” and then “condemns” the one who violates his conscience. To violate our conscience, even when we are technically right, is called a sin. Our conscience has been trained or conditioned by a lifetime of habits. To encourage one to violate his conscience brings guilt. It is sinful to do that.

CONCLUSION:

We here at the Northwest church have an amazing opportunity to show God how this fragile fellowship works according to Romans 14. We have people from all walks of life, from many countries, many cultures, many levels of our walk of faith.

What a beautiful thing it would be to show the world, and more importantly Christ who died to make all men “one,” how fellowship was meant to be. We want the phrase, “Let brotherly love continue” (Hebrews 13:1) to be the motto of this church.

Think of it. We have Christians here from America who have lived in the north, south, east and west. We have Christians who have come from South America (Columbia and Peru), Africa (Kenya and Liberia), and Mexico. We have older Christians, middle age Christians and younger Christians. We have white collar workers and blue collar workers. We have men, women and children.

With all of this variety of people from all walks of life it must make Christ smile from ear to ear to see Christians pursue the things that make for peace. We do not demand our own rights over the hurt feelings of others. We don't tread on the conscience of those who are “weak” and don't yet have the level of maturity to reach where we might be now.

The Northwest church is in a unique position to practice what Jesus' preached, and what Paul taught. With a humble spirit of patience and tolerance, let us embrace ALL of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

God bless each and every one of you.

Sermon by Rick Lanning