



Quarrels and the Kingdom

Lesson 18 | Romans 14

“Legalist.” “Worldly Christian.” “Holier-than-thou.” “Compromised Believer.” Sadly, the church is often filled with such accusations and cross-accusations from Christians who love God. We all have the tendency to look at the person who has looser standards and think that they are a compromised, worldly believer. At the same, we can look at someone who has stricter personal standards than us and decide that they must be a legalist. Now, some believers really are worldly, and some believers really are legalists. But believers who truly love God and are seeking to obey His Word will often come to different conclusions about what obedience to God should look like. How should we respond when someone else makes a different decision than I have about what they think will most glorify God?

What biblical principles can you think of for how we should respond when we disagree with a fellow Christian on how best to glorify God?

Whatever the Bible says is final, but what about issues that aren’t clearly spelled out for us in Scripture one way or another? What do we do when people who love God and want to do what is right read the Bible and come to different conclusions about what it means for their lives? We are all called to be living sacrifices, but sometimes one living sacrifice looks at other living sacrifices and thinks they should be a little more sacrificed. In this important passage, Paul addresses a few issues like this for the Roman church. Perhaps if we were writing this letter, we would pick a winner and a loser and tell the church who was right and who needed to back down. But Paul didn’t do that, and it’s a good thing because new issues have come up that Paul could never have foreseen. Instead, the principles that we read in Romans 14 are applicable no matter who we are and no matter what issues we face. Two principles stand out in this chapter – 1) don’t judge or look down on another Christian (14:1-12) and 2) don’t trip up another Christian (14:13-23).

Don’t Judge or Look Down on Another Christian (1-12)

Should Christians eat meat or not? Do they need to rest on Saturday or celebrate the Jewish feast days? While these questions might seem strange for us today, they were a hotbed of disagreement for the early church. Many early Christians were Jews, and no doubt they expected that when Gentiles accepted the Jewish Messiah they would start following some of these Jewish expectations. When that didn’t always happen it caused some confusion within the church, confusion Paul felt the need to address.

The Differences Everyone Will Have (1-3)

Christians will not agree on everything. If you are looking to join a church of people who think just like you, unfortunately that church will have just one member – you. The church at Rome had some big

disagreements. There were issues in which Christians simply couldn't believe that another believer would allow this or that someone else would have a problem with that. The issues might look different today, but we still struggle with what to do when other Christians see things differently.

What are some areas where Christians can have disagreement today?

What are some areas where Christians should not have disagreement today?

The specific example that Paul gives here is what you eat. Some believers in the Roman church ate only vegetables. While today people refuse to eat meat due to health concerns or because eating meat is seen as cruel to animals, in Paul's day this was probably due to concerns about idolatry. The ancient church as a general rule didn't eat food sacrificed to idols, but some food had been offered to idols and you didn't know it. As a result, some Christians decided to just never eat meat since you couldn't know for sure where that meat had been. Other Christians felt it was fine to eat meat so long as you didn't know if it had been offered to an idol. Although Paul himself agreed with the second group (cf 1 Corinthians 10:23-33), his bigger concern was how the church was working through this disagreement.

There are two dangers at this point. Some believers might look down on other Christians who have stricter standards than they do. They might think they are better because they don't have pointless scruples about things that really aren't that big a deal. Other believers might judge another Christian. They might think that the other believer is making sinful choices and should repent.

Which do you think is easier, looking down on those with stricter standards or judging those with looser standards?

The Evaluation Everyone Should Make (4-6)

So then how should we evaluate the kinds of things that we should and shouldn't do? Paul gives us a few indications here. First, we must remember that every believer is going to give an account to God, and that includes us! This means we must view ourselves as servants of God, and realize that our Christian neighbor is also a servant of God. You won't give an account to me, but you will give an account to God. Therefore, I need to be very careful that I do not try to play the role of God in your life as if you were my servant and owed me an explanation for your behavior.

What about when a believer is truly in sin and is unrepentant? How do we tell the difference between that kind of situation and what Paul is talking about here?

Second, we must realize the importance of being fully convinced in our own mind, while giving our neighbor the right to come to a different conclusion if they are fully convinced in their mind. Paul gives several examples of the kinds of issues he has in mind. Should certain Jewish holy days be observed? Is it okay to eat meat? These questions are not over clear areas of right and wrong, but are issues of discernment, when we must use principles from God's Word to come to our best conclusion about what would most honor Him.

What kinds of considerations would help us decide what best honors God? Why might believers come to different conclusions about what honors God?

The Focus Everyone Should Have (7-9)

When we start arguing over standards, it can be easy to lose focus on what truly matters and what is truly important. In this section Paul reminds the Romans that whether we live or die, the point of all that we

do is to live for the Lord Jesus. It can be all too easy to become so focused on the details that we lose sight of why we are doing all of this. Christ should be the Lord of our lives, and He should be the Lord of every part of our lives. Every decision made should be made with the thought that we are living in obedience to Christ's commands, even if that looks different for different believers.

This doesn't mean there is no room to talk about disagreements. As we seek to make wise decisions about what best honors the Lord, we won't all think the same way. Talking through what we think and why think that way can be helpful, but expecting that everyone will think exactly like us will not be. Part of studying Scripture is learning to think wisely, and that's something that happens in community. But far too often believers begin to arrogantly think they have everything figured out and the only reason someone would disagree with them is because the other person is wrong.

How can we strike a balance between studying and seeking to apply Scripture together in a healthy manner, and looking down or judging other believers who differ with us?

The Account Everyone Will Give (10-12)

None of this means that the choices we make don't matter. We shouldn't walk away from a discussion like this thinking to ourselves, "Oh, so what I believe on hot button issues doesn't make any difference. In the end everyone is fine." The principle here is that everyone should be seeking to honor Christ's Lordship because everyone must give an account to God, so everyone must be ready to explain to their Lord why they have made the decisions they have made. We should take incredibly seriously the idea that we will stand before God to give an account of what we do and don't do. Far too often the statement that we will give an account to God is understood to mean that we can do whatever we want and in the end God will be fine with that. But that's not how Scripture presents things!

Why do so many people today equate "everyone will give an account to God" with "don't worry about it!"?

Don't Trip up Another Christian (13-23)

The first problem that Romans 14 addresses is believers thinking less of other believers because they thought their personal standards were too strict or too loose. But Paul is also concerned that believers might ignore the thinking of other Christians and so encourage them to do things that would be wrong for the other person to do. If all of us will give an account before God, not only should my goal be getting ready to give that account, but true love for other Christians means that I will do everything I can to make sure you are ready to give that account as well.

The Danger of Offending Another Christian (13-16)

Too often we find ourselves judging another Christian, that is, deciding whether they are making the choice we think they should be making or not. Instead, Paul gives us a different goal to have when interacting with believers: we should never want to do anything that would cause a believer to not be ready to give a good account on judgment day. Paul puts it this way: we should not put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in a fellow Christian's way. Nothing we do should make it easy for another Christian to sin or to make a choice that they believe is wrong.

Paul continues using the illustration of food. Some Christians thought there was certain food that was unclean and that you shouldn't eat. Paul disagreed with them; he thought all food was clean and was firmly convinced that he was right. But he included an exception: if someone thought the food was

unclean, then it was unclean for that person. Later on in this section Paul will call this “offending” another believer (14:21). It’s important to be clear about what “offend” means. Offend here doesn’t mean what we normally mean by the term – “Oh, I really don’t like that.” Rather, the word “offend” here means that someone talks or behaves in such a way that leads another believer to make a sinful choice.

What difference would it make if someone switched up these two different meanings?

Paul states here that he would not eat food that was considered unclean by some if in doing that he was encouraging someone to do something they believed was wrong. Why not? Because that would be unloving. For Paul, this is more than a matter of who’s right and who’s wrong. This is a matter of showing love to another Christian, which cuts to the very core of what the gospel is.

Why would it be unloving to encourage someone to do something they believed was wrong?

The Goal All Christians Should Strive Toward (17-20a)

Too often these discussions that believers can get into detract from what our faith should really be about. Paul put it this way, “the kingdom of God is not meat and drink.” In other words, what we have been called to in the gospel is so much bigger than the petty squabbles that too many believers get lost in. Paul wants his audience to take a step back from these issues and remember what the purpose behind God’s calling in their life should be.

How does Paul sum up the Christian life in 14:17? How does focusing on these things move us away from things that could cause unnecessary division?

Instead we are to live in a way that serves Christ, pleases God, and is acceptable to men. Verse 19 sums this up well by saying that our goal should be to pursue things that produce peace and the building up of the body of Christ. Paul finally gets so blunt that he comes right out and warns that the food we eat shouldn’t tear apart the work that God is doing. The church in Rome was in danger of hurting the work of the ministry by insisting on their right to eat food that caused other Christians to sin because they considered it wrong.

In what ways can our selfish preferences today hurt the work that God is doing?

The Importance of Living out Faith (20b-23)

Everything we do should be practically living out our faith before God. The person who thinks it’s okay to eat meat or non-Kosher food should do so because they are motivated by faith in what God has said. The person who refrains from eating those things should do so because they are motivated by faith in what God has said. Paul says that “whatever is not of faith is of sin.” No one should be making choices that they aren’t convinced are the right choices before God. This doesn’t mean our minds can’t change on issues – but it does mean that before our behavior changes we must be ready to think carefully and be making our change based on faith, not ease or convenience.

Why do people sometimes cave on things they think are wrong before God?

What is the difference between caving and changing your mind on an issue?

Christians are going to disagree on some of the finer points of what living for Jesus looks like. If that was true during the time of the apostles, it will certainly be true today. But Scripture lets us know how such

disagreements should be handled. We should always have a heart of love. We should always be ready to stand by what we believe so that we can give an account with confidence. And we should always be ready to give up our rights if that is what shows the most love to the body of Christ. Disagreeing might inevitable, but division is not. Those who carefully pay attention to the principles listed here will find that our disagreements can sharpen us and give us a chance for greater unity as we show love for one another, rather than becoming a wedge used by Satan to split us.

What is the hardest part about applying these principles in your life?