

Romans: A Warning Against Judging Brothers

Romans 14:1-12

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 14. We started looking at this passage last week, working our way through a marvelous section of the book of Romans. Romans 12 through 15 is a tremendous portion of this great gospel. It spells out the way of the Christian life. It tells us about what life ought to be like with in the body of Christ. How we ought to relate to one another. In Romans 14, verses 1 through 12, Paul is continuing his discussion of Christian living. We noted in Romans 12 and in 13 that he had statements that were directed to Christians about their relating to one another, as well as statements to Christians about how they were to relate to society and government and pagans outside the church. He has talked about relationships in the church and the world and the government.

In Romans 14, verses 1 through 12, he comes back to the specific matter of stronger and weaker Christians in the church. He is addressing the question of how are genuine Christians to get along when they have spiritual and religious and ethical differences and scruples over various matters in the church. Especially, how are those who are more mature in the faith to deal with and treat those who are less mature in the faith when they have particular varying views and scruples and such. Paul is telling us here in this passage. So, let's attend directly God's word in Romans 14 verses 1 through 12:

Romans 16:1-12

Our Lord we thank You for Your word as we seek to do justice to it again tonight, thinking how it applies to our own hearts. Soften our hearts, make our minds fruitful from ways that this word applies to us. Help us to understand it. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

Now, this week I want to spend our time together simply applying this word. We attempted to outline the passage so it is very clear in our minds what Paul was speaking about and the circumstance in which he was giving this counsel. Let's start with that as our first point of application. What is this passage about. It's very clear that whatever difficulties there are in understanding the details that

Paul is talking about more mature Christians being patient with less mature Christians. He has some words in this passage about less mature Christians and the way they relate to more mature Christians, but primarily his concern is how more mature Christians relate to younger Christians in the Lord; those who are less mature, those who are not as well grounded in the teaching in the Scripture and in the practice of the Christian life. How do we deal with them in the Christian church, especially when differences of opinion arise? Paul's first verse addresses this question: "Accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions."

We need to stop right there and say, many people take this passage to mean that Christians should never exercise judgment towards other Christians about anything. Have you ever said, we have a real problem because 'so and so' is teaching something that is out of accord with Scripture, and been met with the words, "Oh well, we can't judge one another." Or maybe there is a Christian who has committed gross immorality and we say, "This is real problem to have a Christian behaving this way," and we are met with a word, "We can't judge one another." Often times this passage is appealed to along with the words that Jesus says, and along with the words that James says, to be an example of why we cannot exercise any discretion or judgment towards fellow believers, or maybe to anybody else for that matter. That cannot be the meaning of this passage, however. It cannot be, that cannot be what this passage means for a variety of reasons.

In this very book, Romans, Paul is going to exercise discretion of judgment in regard to teaching about the doctrine of justification by faith, and if you are teaching the doctrine of justification by works, Paul is definitely going to have a judgment about that. He went on for eleven chapters about that particular point. So, Paul is not saying, "Throw your mind out at the door when you are at the Christian church. Throw your judgment and discretion out the door."

There is another reason why that can't be the meaning. Do you remember Jesus' letters to the seven churches? Why don't you quickly turn there, Revelation 1, 2, and 3. Jesus described in Revelation 1 His communications to the seven churches. Scan those chapters as I tell you something. You will find in those letters from Jesus to His Church, over and over two things. Jesus judging His church because it failed to judge in the areas of doctrine and morality. In other words, Jesus writes words of condemnation warning and exhortation to most of the churches. Not all of them had this problem, but most of them, because they had failed to exercise judgment in doctrine and discretion. In other words, there were people who were being allowed to teach against true biblical doctrine in those churches and nobody in the church had done anything about it. There were people who were actually living and encouraging other people to live in immoral ways, and they weren't being confronted with it in the churches. Jesus judges those churches for not judging. So, this passage and Jesus' words about not judging can't mean that we are never to exercise discretion or judgment about

other Christians.

Then what does it mean? Well, actually Revelation 2 and 3 helps us as does James. Turn back just a few pages from the book of Revelation to James. James is one of the books in the Bible that gives us that dominical phrase, *do not judge one another*. James is also concerned about quarrels in the church as well. Notice what he says in James chapter 3 verse 1, "Let not many of you become teachers my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment." Now it is interesting that if you read Paul's letter to Timothy, I Timothy, Paul is much harder on teachers than he is on baby Christians. He is ready to give young Christians, immature Christians, Christians who are not in a position of authority, responsibility, accountability, creedal commitment, and so on, he is ready to give them a lot more latitude. He is ready to give them more slack, more patience than to teachers who ought to know better, to people who claim to be mature in the faith. Those who have the responsibility of the eldership, those who have the responsibility of teaching in the church, they are held to a higher standard.

There was an article in the newspaper not long ago, in the wake of several prominent falls in pastoral morality, and it asked, "Should we hold our preachers to a higher standard?" In a sort of hand ringing, "Oh, aren't we being unfair to preachers?" You better believe you ought to hold them to a higher standard. God says you ought to hold them to a higher standard. James says that we shall incur a stricter judgment. Yes, preachers should be held to a higher standard. So, I think that there is a wonderful hint at how we ought to apply I Corinthians 14 in light of that. Clearly Paul is concerned in I Corinthians 14 about our being too hard on those who are younger and more immature in the faith. They ought not be expected to think and act like extremely mature Christians who have been walking with the Lord for years and years and have been studying His word for years and years; they ought to be given room to grow. They ought to be given patience and encouragement and not harsh and censorious judgment from the people of God. Once again we see the principle here that Paul is not saying, "Don't exercise any discretion in regard to other Christians." Be very, very, very careful before you come in and treat a young Christian as if that Christian ought to know and be like a Christian who has been walking with the Lord for many years. It's just common sense.

Let's go back to the Romans chapter 14 and let me go back to this point one more time. More mature Christians ought to be more patient with less mature Christians. The context of Romans 14 is this. Paul has a church of mixed Jews and Christians, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians still are having a hard time making that transition. The ceremonial law is gone, the rituals of the Old Testament are gone, the various ritual practices of the Old Testament are gone, numerous requirements of the Old Testament are gone and the Gentile Christians who have never been under that are exalting in that freedom. They realize the reality of that freedom. Some of the Jewish Christians

are having a hard time letting it go. Paul refers to them as the weaker brethren. They are having a struggle coming along understanding some of the new freedoms of being a Christian in the time of the new covenant. They are wrestling and struggling with it. Let me tell you, Calvin has a beautiful brief description of the problem that is going on here. Let me just read it to you. "Paul passes on now to lay down a precept, especially for the instruction of the church, that they who have made the most progress in Christian doctrine should accommodate themselves to the more ignorant, and employ their own strength to sustain their weakness, for among the people of God there are some weaker than others, who except they are treated with great tenderness and kindness will be discouraged and become at length alienated from religion."

It is very probable that this happened, especially at that time, for the churches were formed of both Jews and Gentiles. Some of whom having been long accustomed to the rights of the Mosaic Law, having been brought up in them from their childhood, were not easily drawn away from them. There were others who, having never learned such things, refused a yolk to which they had not been accustomed. Now, as man's disposition is to slide from a difference of opinion to quarrels and contentions, the apostle shows us how they, who thus vary in their options, may live together without any discord. He prescribes this as the best mode. They who are strong should spend their labor in assisting the weak. They who have made the greatest advances should bare with the more ignorant, for God, by making us stronger than others, does not bestow strength that we may oppresses the weak, nor is it the part of Christian wisdom to be above measure insolent and to despise others. The import then, of what he addresses to the more intelligent and the already confirmed is this: the ampler grace which they have received from the Lord, the more bound they are to help their neighbors. It's a glorious principle here. The more grace God has given you, the more light God has given you, the more wisdom God has given you, the more maturity God has given you is there not to be stridently harsh with younger Christians, but to help them along. To nurture them, to be tender with them. To be patient with them like parents. To aid them, to woo them into the walk of the Christian faith. This is what Paul is talking about in Romans 14.

Now, what are some of the specific applications? This passage reminds us that there is a diversity of spiritual and doctrinal maturity in the church. There will always be a range of levels of spiritual maturity and doctrinal maturity in the church. That impacts our approach to discipleship. One size does not fit all. That's why one-to-one ministry is absolutely essential in the church. That's why fellowship is absolutely essential in the church. There is not just one program that can help everybody because we are all at different levels of maturity . We all have different life backgrounds. We all have different experiences. We all have our own gaps, our own weaknesses, our own strengths, and our own abilities. So, in our discipleship, one size does not fit all. We must be ready to be patient in the Christian nurture of disciples and, listen to this friends, and churches, not just patient in dealing with individuals, but patient in dealing with whole congregations

of individuals. Even churches are different. There is a corporate personality that attends to churches as well as personalities that attend to individuals. There are some churches that are strong on doctrine and weak on mercy. There are some churches that are strong on mercy and weak on doctrine. There are some churches that are strong on mutual care in the fellowship and sort of flabby when it comes to thinking and to worldview. On and on and on you can go. Churches are different and Paul is reminding us here that we must be ready to be patient in our Christian nurture of disciples and churches.

Let's go on to the third thing. Notice, here is a controversial statement. Listen to it. Young converts in young churches aren't not be equally pressed with all the truths of scripture. What do you mean, "It's all the Bible, it's all God's word." True. It's all true. True. It's all important. True. Young converts in young churches ought not to be equally pressed with all the truths of Scripture at the same time. You don't come in to the guy that professed faith in Jesus Christ and say, "By the way I have a copy of Francis Turretin's Institutes of Elenctic Theology we are going to work through the section on epistemology and then we are going to move on to the doctrine of the decrees and deal with infralapsarianism tomorrow. That's not what you do, wrong move, bad move. There is milk and there is meat. You attend to the maturity of the Christian when you discern what you're going to deal with. That difference in the church, that diversity in the church, and that diversity in that teaching in the word, need to be attended to. Listen to what William Plummer, the great Southern Presbyterian Bible commentator says, "It is not wise to equally press among young converts and newly formed churches all the truths of Scripture. There is an order in divine instruction. Milk for babes, strong meat for men. Let that order be observed. At all events let us keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The inspired rule is, 'let us therefore as many be perfect be thus minded. If in anything you be otherwise minded, God will reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereunto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule. Let us mind the same thing.'" Very wise counsel. Young converts in young churches ought not to be equally pressed with all the truths of Scriptures.

Number four, those who are called weak in the faith are thereby encouraged to not stay that way, but to grow. Paul is looking out for those who are younger and more immature in the congregation, but by gently prodding them and labeling them with the title *weak*, he is pressing them not to be comfortable with that. Who wants to be called a weakling? You know the little cartoons with the bully on the beach kicking sand on the little scrawny weakling. It made you want to go get the Charles Atlas Bodybuilding Program and get strong. That's what Paul's doing. See, you don't want to be weak forever, do you? You want to grow up, you want to get strong. You want to grow in the Lord. Paul is subtly prodding us encouraging us not to stay this way, but to grow.

Fifth, we ought to aim to prevent divisions and schisms in the body of Christ. Notice Paul's language, "accept one another." Don't accept one another for the purpose of judging one another's opinions. Don't despise one another. Don't

condemn one another. Why does he use this language? We ought to aim to prevent division and schism.

Sixth, we should discourage doubtful disputations. In other words we should discourage strife about words about secondary matters. Thomas Chalmers, the great Scottish minister said this, "Instead of contentious argumentation and vexatious controversies, at one endless and unfruitful, Paul inculcates here a discrete silence. Meanwhile a respectful toleration in the confidence we have no doubt that with mind and patient forbearance, all will come right at the last." So there is a time to simply not open our mouths, not to encourage a dispute to develop, and thus to be edifying to the body of Christ. This isn't just a counsel to pick your fights carefully, it's a counsel to just forbear from time to time for the sake of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We should discourage doubtful disputations.

Seventh, every member of the body of Christ, weak or strong, should labor not to despise the brethren. In this passage there are two ways to despise the brethren. There are those who are strong looking down on the weak, condemning them, and then there are those who are weak who are looking at the strong and thinking, that the strong aren't as spiritual as they are because they are not doing these things that they are doing. Despising one another is a two way street and we need to labor in the body of Christ, whether weak or strong, not to despise the brethren. Listen to again to what Plummer says, "Let every member of Christ's Church, whether weak or strong, carefully avoid the sin of despising others. It is a very dangerous sin to set at naught one of those little ones that had believed in Jesus." Do you remember what Jesus said, "Woe unto you who make one of these little ones stumble. It would be better for you if you had a millstone tied around you neck and were thrown into the sea." You couldn't get a more graphic warning about being a stumbling block to a weaker brother than that. Plummer goes on, "It is the duty of parents and older children in a family to be especially careful of younger children of the family and be tender with them. It is hard, if not impossible, to find any case in which contempt of them is a virtue."

Perhaps it is always older children in the family who need to be especially careful of younger children in the family and tender with them. It is hard, if not impossible, to find any case in which contempt of them is a virtue. Perhaps there is haughtiness. Compassion would in every case perhaps be a much more becoming sentiment. Let us indulge contempt. You know that happens from time to time. We have disagreements, we are in meetings we have strong opinions about things and we are tempted to indulge contempt towards one another. "Well, he just doesn't understand. He's just not as committed as I am." And on and on and on. Don't indulge that.

Eighth, we should avoid hasty and harsh denunciations of the brethren. Listen to what Philip Dodderidge said. We sing Philip Dodderidge's hymns from time to time. Listen to what he says, "Let us not add to all the offenses which may justly

cause us to tremble before God's tribunal. The criminal arrogance of you usurping the place and prerogative of our Judge." Charles Hodge goes on to say, "A denunciatory or censorious spirit is hostile to the Spirit of the gospel. If we are quick to denounce, if we are strident and harsh and shrill in that denunciation, we need to do some repenting and some reflection."

Ninth, passing Old Testament rituals were problematic, and that was the problem that was going on in the church here in Romans 14. It was really hard for the people that had been under the Mosaic code to let it go. It was really hard for them to believe that the Gentiles didn't have to do it. It was really hard for them. If that's hard, how much more difficult is the problem of humanly invented ideas in the church. When somebody comes up with the idea that this is really the way to do it. There is no chapter, no verse, that says I need to do this, there is no biblical principle that says I need to do this, but you know, we have been doing it for one hundred and twenty five years. If you don't do it this way, you don't love Jesus as much as I do. That happens in the church today. It happens in the evangelical church. We don't have to point to other places we don't have to point at other places; we can talk about evangelical churches. It happens. Listen again to William Plummer, "Human inventions in religion, however presented, are troublesome even when they are not forced on our brethren." We come upon an idea that is not set forth through the word of God and we decide that is the best way to do it and we foist it on everybody else. We don't help matters. That brings dissension in the church.

Tenth, this passage does not justify you to loathe the Lord's Day. This is very important. Look back in Romans 14, verse 5, "One man regards one day above another. Another regards everyday alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind." We said last time, why do people read that this way, "some people believe in keeping the Lord's Day, others don't. It's up to you, just pick and do one with all your conviction and all your sincerity." That's not what Paul is talking about. Remember, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Guess what the Jewish Christians were doing. They wanted to keep the Shabbat, the seventh day. They wanted to keep the holy days of Israel. They wanted to keep Passover, wanted to keep the various other feast of Israel, and they wanted the Gentiles to do it too. They considered the Gentiles who were not doing it, less spiritual. The Apostle Paul basically says this, "Look, Jewish Christians, if you want to do that, fine, that is great, go ahead and do it. Don't tell the Gentile Christians they have to do it. They don't. They need to meet here on the Lord's Day. That's all they are asked to do. Be here on the Lord's Day, worship the Lord. They don't have to show up on the Seventh day at the Synagogue, they don't have to keep the feast days. They don't have to do it." That's what's going on in Romans 14. Not, whether or not they are going to meet on Sunday.

Let me prove that. When Paul speaks of the Lord's Day, he speaks of it in terms of the normal directive of Christian worship. Not only was Jesus raised on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, but on the first day of the second week of

the resurrection, He assembled with His disciples and they continued to meet on that week thereafter, we are told in the book of Acts. Further more, Paul will say in I Corinthians 16 verses 1 and 2, that the people were together when? On the first day of the week. To do what? To give their tithes and offerings as an act of worship. It is the normal pattern in the New Testament for the people of God to gather on the Lord's Day. By Revelation chapter 1 verse 10, at the end of the New Testament period when John was carried up into the heavens to see the vision of the book of Revelation, we are told that he was what - in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. By John's time, that phrase was the standard for the Christian Sabbath, *the Lord's Day*. Paul is not undercutting the Christian Sabbath. There is a different debate going on here in Romans 14.

Eleventh, we are not our own. We are not our own, and rather belong to God, and we need to live like it. That is one of Paul's big points right here. If God has given you maturity, do you know why He's given you that maturity? He's given you that maturity for your brethren who are less mature. Not so you can lord it over them, but so that you can help them. We are for one another. What God has given to me belongs to you. What God has given to you belongs to me. We are here for one another. Why? Because we belong to the Lord. So he says we need to live like that. Look, if we just did that, if we just did that, most of the problems that arise relating to issues like Paul is dealing with in Romans 14 would be taken care of. If we just did that.

Twelfth, Jesus is not merely our gracious friend and redeemer, He is the judge of the quick and the dead. We need to remember that. Paul pauses, look at what he says, verse 9, " Christ died and lived again." Why? So that He might be Lord of the living and the dead, or of the dead and the living. What is Paul doing? He's saying Jesus is the Judge, He is the Lord, He is coming to judge the quick and the dead. Remember that He is your gracious friend and redeemer. Remember that He is the friend of sinners. Remember that He is your brother. Remember that He is God's precious son, but remember that He is the Lord and will be the Judge of the quick and the dead.

Thirteenth, Paul wants us to remember the reality of our mortality in the coming judgment. We will die and we will give an account. That is Paul's emphasis in verses 9 through 12. One day we will die and we will give an account. Remember Jesus' parable of the rich fool, "Fool, do you not realize tonight your soul is required of you." Paul is saying that we need to live in the reality that we are going to be judged. How does that help us? When I am struggling with having contempt for my brethren, I need to pause and remind myself that even though nobody else in the church may know that I have contempt for one of my brothers and sisters, Jesus knows. I will give account of that. Let me tell you my friends. That helps me, that helps me to deal with that kind of contempt. I know there is going to be one day when that contempt is going to be unveiled. Frankly I'd rather handle that here by repentance before it gets to be unveiled so I can at least say, "Ok, I repented of that. I did that, I know it, I did it for twelve weeks, but

then I repented of it.”

Fourteen, we can never be too accountable to God in our conduct towards one another. Could you be too accountable to God in the way you relate to one another? No! God wants us to be accountable to Him in the way we relate to one another.

Finally, the truths of this passage ought to temper out relations with Christians of other denominational backgrounds as well. I am often asked this with some suspicion. “Why do you have so many Baptist friends?” I’m not a crypto- Baptist. I’m the real thing, the knuckle dragging Presbyterian. I really believe this stuff. I am not friends with Baptists because I don’t think baptism matters. I don’t want them to be friends with me because they think baptism doesn’t matter. I think we ought to both think it matters a whole lot because the Bible says it does. We may not, on this side of glory, have any agreement on that issue. We will on the other side of glory. In the mean time, the things that I share in common with many of those brethren right here in our midst, cause my soul to delight in them. I fellowship with them not because our differences don’t matter, but because I love them and I am committed to the things they are committed to and we are working toward the same great ends. In fact, we are the only people left on earth who can have an honest disagreement. So it’s not because these things don’t matter that we are able to work across differences like that. It’s because of the great and grand commonalities that we share in the gospel. Let’s pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word. It is practical as the day is long. We haven’t done near justice to it. Bless us as we attempt to walk and live in it. In Jesus name. Amen.

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