

Build Up One Another

Lesson for August 13, 2023

Unit III: God's Eternal Reign

Scriptural Background: Romans 14:10-23

Printed Text: Romans 14:10-23

Key verse: “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” Romans 14:19, NIV)

Before we are too harsh in judging those scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day, let's stop and look at ourselves. All too many Christians today go to church to find fault, to gossip, and to criticize. Warren Wiersbe, in his book *Angry People*, wrote, "An incident in the life of Joseph Parker, the great British preacher, illustrates this tragic truth. He was preaching at the City Temple in London. After the service one of the listeners came up to him and said, 'Dr. Parker, you made a grammatical error in your sermon.' He then proceeded to point out the error to the pastor. Joseph Parker looked at the man and said, 'And what else did you get out of the message?' What a fitting rebuke!"

Warren Wiersbe.

In this week's lesson, Paul teaches us about criticism and rebuke.

Key Terms

1. **Judge** (verse 10) – To form an opinion about through careful weighing of evidence and testing of premises. To decide, whether privately or in court; condemn; conclude.
2. **Stumble** (verse 20, NIV; verse 21, KJV) – To fall into sin or waywardness. Undergo moral embarrassment.

Lesson Background

In the verses preceding this week's lesson, Paul admonishes the Jewish and the Gentile Christians not to pass judgement on one another. There were two main groups of Christians in Rome: a Jewish Christian group which may have included proselytes and God-fearers with Jews who observed Jewish ceremonial laws, and which is a religio-cultural-ethnic group rather than a strictly ethnic group; and a Gentile Christian group which may have included Jews who did not maintain the observance of the Jewish ceremonial laws. They were organized into different house churches when the Jewish Christians returned to Rome after the death of Claudius. Since the Jewish Christians maintained their observance of Jewish ceremonial laws, they would probably have no difficulty in building up their relationship with the synagogues of the Roman Jewish community. However, the bitter experience of the Jewish Christians who had participated in the communal meal held in the Gentile Christian house had caused a tense relationship between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians.

Paul understood the situation and wrote the letter to both the Jewish and the Gentile Christians in Rome in order to persuade them to build up a peaceful and close relationship between their house churches. Paul admonished both groups to change their attitude towards one another, but explicitly asked the Gentile Christians to consider the dilemma faced by the Jewish Christians.

Paul admonished the Gentile Christians to change their practice in the communal meal and to follow the Jewish way of eating a meal whenever Jewish Christians were present. Paul desired that the Gentile Christians would welcome the Jewish Christians to participate in the communal meals held in their house churches, thus recognizing the significance of the ministry of Christ among the Jews. On the other hand, Paul wished the Jewish Christians to welcome the Gentile Christians to the communal meals held in their house churches, thus recognizing the legitimacy of the Gentile mission and the ministry of Christ among the Gentiles.

Lesson in Depth

I. Judge Self (Romans 14:10-13)

But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? According to this verse, every believer will give an account of himself, and the Lord will judge the decisions he made, including those concerning issues of conscience. That verdict is the only one that matters.

Probably, the use of both **judge** and **show contempt** is meant to have application to both the “strict” and the “free” individuals. In either case, the attitude is wrong because **we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.**

The *strict* Christian found it easy to **judge** his brother, writing him off as an unspiritual meat-eater-compromiser. The *free* Christian found it easy to **show contempt** against his brother, regarding him as a uptight-legalistic-goody-good. Essentially, Paul’s answer is “Stop worrying about your brother. You have enough to answer for before Jesus.”

The judgment seat of Christ: “This is the *bema* seat, equivalent to the judge’s seat in the Olympic Games. After each game, the winners came before the judge’s seat to receive crowns for first, second, and third places. Likewise, the Christian’s works will be tested by fire, and he’ll be rewarded for those which remain... The judgment seat of Christ is only concerned with a Christian’s rewards and position in the kingdom, not with his salvation.” (Smith)

Every knee shall bow: The quotation from Isaiah 45:23 emphasizes the fact that all will have to appear before God in humility, and **give account of himself before God.** If this is the case, we should let God deal with our brother.

Let us not judge one another: It does no good at all for us to try to judge another, because we are not the Judge, Jesus is. We are told to judge not, lest ye be judged and, also, with whatever judgment we judge another we will be judged. We find a very good Scripture covering this in (James 4:11).

James 4:11 “*Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of [his] brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.*”

The Greek word translated “judge” is here translated “determine”. (In verses 3, 10 and 13a), the meaning is negative: to condemn. (In 13b), the meaning is positive: to determine or make a careful decision.

The point of Paul’s play on words is that instead of passing judgment on their brothers, they should use their best judgment to help fellow believers. Anything a believer does, even though Scripture may permit it, that causes another to fall into sin by his going against his conscience, puts a stumbling block in his brother’s way.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus helped us to understand what this means – it means judging others according to a standard that we would not want to have applied to ourselves.

This does not take away the need and the responsibility for admonishment (Romans 15:14) or rebuke (2 Timothy 4:2). When we admonish or rebuke, we do it over *clear Scriptural principles*, not over *doubtful things*. We may offer *advice* to others about doubtful things, but should never judge them.

Not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way: We might stumble or cause our brother to fall in two ways. We can discourage or beat them down through our legalism against them, or we can do it by enticing them to sin through an unwise use of our liberty.

Summarily – don’t make it an issue of judging, but don’t use your liberty to stumble another brother.

II. Consider Others (Romans 14:14-19)

I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself: We see here another illustration of the sin taking place in the heart and conscience. If we believe something to be sin and go ahead and do it anyway, then regardless of what it is, it is sin to us.

Paul knew that there was nothing intrinsically unclean about meat that was not kosher or sacrificed to an idol. Yet there was *nothing* that could justify the destruction of a Christian brother over food.

I know and am convinced: “Many, on the contrary, are persuaded before they know; and such will not be persuaded to know.” (Trapp)

If your brother or sister is distressed: Paul tells just how important it is not to lead our weak brothers and sisters astray.

1 Corinthians 8:13: *“Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.”*

This is some very good advice from Paul. We must not let our liberty in the Lord cause us to encourage someone else to go against their conscience.

You are no longer walking in love: The issue now is not my personal liberty; it is **walking in love** towards one whom Jesus loves and died for.

Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died: If Jesus was willing to give up His life for the sake of that brother, I can certainly give up my steak dinner.

Do not let your good be spoken of as evil: Our liberty in Jesus and freedom from the law is good, but not if we use it to destroy another brother in Christ. If we do that, then it could rightly be spoken of as evil.

The stronger brother might destroy his testimony. The stronger brother says his liberty comes from God, but the weaker brother says it comes from Satan. True spirituality is not shown in the manifestation of liberty, but in the manifestation of the Spirit. True liberty may be shown by refraining from the exercise of one's liberty. The stronger brother might disrupt the peace of the body, so he should forego his liberty in the interest of peace in the assembly.

The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking: If we place food and drink before righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, then we are hopelessly out of touch with God's priorities and His heart.

Acceptable to God and approved by men: Serving God with a heart for His righteousness and peace and joy is the kind of service that is acceptable in His sight and will be approved by men.

“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.”

III. Focus Faith (Romans 14:20-23)

Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food: If eating or drinking something will stumble another brother, then we are not free to eat or drink in that circumstance. Even if we have the personal liberty, we do not have the liberty to stumble, offend, or weaken a brother.

All things indeed are pure: Paul will concede the point that there is nothing impure in the food itself; but he likewise insists that there is nothing pure in causing a brother to stumble.

Nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak: However, we shouldn't think that Paul would permit this kind of heart to cater to someone's legalism. Paul speaks about the stumbling of a sincere heart, not catering to the whims of someone's legalism.

For example, when some Christians from a Jewish background were offended that Gentile believers were not circumcised, Paul didn't cater to their legalistic demands.

We see again that whatever it takes to set a good example before our weaker brothers and sisters in Christ is what we should do. If they think it is sin to eat something, then in their presence we should not eat it either. Just because they would feel we were sinning and if they end up eating, we are causing them to sin.

Do you have faith? If you have strong faith, and feel liberty to partake of certain things, praise God! But have your strong faith before God, not before a brother who will stumble.

Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves: Not every Christian knows this happiness. There are things God may challenge us to give up, but we go on approving them in our life – thus we condemn ourselves. It may not be that the thing itself is clearly good or bad, but it is enough that God speaks to us about the matter.

Each of us must ask: “God what is there in my life hindering a closer walk with You? I want to know the happiness that comes from not condemning myself by what I approve in my life.” This takes faith, because we often cling to hindering things because we *think* they make us happy. Real happiness is found being closer and closer to Jesus, and by not being condemned by what we approve.

Whatever is not from faith is sin: Paul concludes with another principle by which we can judge “gray areas” – if we can't do it in faith, then it is sin.

This is a wonderful check on our tendency to justify ourselves in the things we permit. If we are troubled by something, it likely isn't **of faith** and likely **is sin** for us.

Lesson Summary

The lesson begins with Paul making two points. First, we should all live according to our faith and consciences, honoring the Lord in all we do. Next, Paul indicates that those living like this are accountable to God, not to other believers, regarding matters of opinion. Their master is God and should work to please Him in their lives.

Disciples who live like this should not judge or criticize other believers and shouldn't do things to “make them stumble” (Romans 14:21, ESV). It is better for a disciple to seek peace and upbuild their brother and sister, even if in the process the disciple needs to curtail their own freedom for the sake of their brother or sister.

If believers will seek to understand that their brothers and sisters are sincerely seeking to honor God, and if they will forgo their own freedom to help others not stumble then God is pleased. Our actions will lead to “peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Romans 14:19, ESV).

Note that primary points of doctrine were not part of this discussion. We're not talking about whether or not Jesus was resurrected or whether or not God is good. These were givens. However, many secondary points, especially of personal practice, were points of contention among the disciples. Secondary matters can be left with the Lord. The well-being of our brothers and sisters is a higher priority than personal claims to freedom or "doing what I want."

The lessons we learn from this passage are:

- Make your decisions by faith with an eye to honor Christ in all and above all else.
- Be as generous with others, as you want them and God to be with you. After all, they are accountable to God not to you.
- Your freedom in Christ is secondary to your fellow Christians' wellbeing.
- The mature should relinquish personal freedom for the sake of the weak.

The often-used acronym for JOY is "Jesus, Others, You." Judging and criticizing can become destructive vices in the body of Christ and should be resisted in favor of building each other up and encouraging each other.