

Our Christian Witness Romans 14:16-19

We have been going through this kind of odd but really fascinating section of Paul's letter to the Romans. In one way, it seems to be so odd because we do not squabble about what foods we should eat and what we should abstain from as far as our worship to God. We do not fight over holy days and the need to observe them or not observe them. So it is a fascinating look into the early church at Rome. But at the same time we can relate, because we live in our context where we want a specific list of do and don't. We want to have clear perimeters about what God allows and does not allow. And certainly there are universal laws in his Word. It is always wrong to lie or fornicate for example. But there are other things: should I have Netflix subscription? Or should I have the occasional glass of Alcohol? Should I homeschool my children or send them to a Christian school or public school. What makes these decisions tough is not only do believers disagree on them, but for some, it would be sin if they had a certain internet subscription where for another believer it would be perfectly legitimate.

God has given us wonderful liberty today. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. We are free to serve and love and follow God, and enjoy many of the things that he has given us. But when it came to the exercise of that liberty as far as eating food in the ancient world, look at what Paul says, "**For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.**" Out of love for other believers who struggle with certain things in their lives we curtail our behaviour. How could we ever think that we are living for Christ when we never consider in how exercising my freedom in Christ might effect another believer? This is the one that Jesus died for, and I am called to love in the same sacrificial love.

Now what this is not saying is that we have to be controlled every time another person says, "that offends me, and on the basis of Romans 14 you have to stop." That is not what the passage is saying. Let me give you an example. Someone says, "I am offended that you drink coffee. No Christian should drink coffee because it has caffeine in it." That is great that you believe that. But I am going to keep drinking coffee, maybe not in the presence of my brother. But here is the key: I am not causing him to stumble. And some individuals can use this passage as trying to control others. But the overriding theme is my love for the other person - how can I love them? Will giving up coffee really love them? Will it cause them to sin if I continue or struggle with their faith, or will it challenge them that they cannot control others? Is this simply an area that they need to grow? But I need to use my mind, and humbly seek to be the greatest blessing in their lives. Again - what will help my brother or sister in Christ?

And now there is another element that we have to think about when exercising our Christian liberty, and that is not only how it will affect my brother but how it will affect the witness of the church? How will it affect the witness of the church to the lost and dying world outside? Look at verse 16, "**So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.**" Imagine the good of our behaviour being spoken of as evil. If my behaviour, even if allowable creates tension and discord in the church then I ought not to practice it. There is an amazing illustration of this over in 1 Corinthians 10:23-30,

“All things are lawful,’ but not all things are helpful. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.’ If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, ‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?”

You are over at a non-Christian’s home having a meal, and the meat has been offered to idols, and the immature or weak brother that is there protests, let me ask you: what are you to do? Paul says don’t eat. Even if it offends the host. Your brother is more important. Maybe the solidarity in the testimony will aide in your testimony, but it is so easy to let the world think that believers are always fighting and are unloving even to one another. But this is how far our love for others goes, and how solidified our witness should be in the world. Our testimony is to be not only a united testimony but so completely different because of our love and care for those who make up the household of faith.

That is tough stuff. Living that kind of other-centred life will bring restrictions and also differing kinds of trials in our lives because we are always living with people at different points in their Christian walk. Not everyone is at the same maturity level. Also because of background, disposition and upbringing individuals will have their own unique struggles. And we often wonder why should I even bother? This is a lot of work if we understand it right. But what is at stake is our witness of Christ. How do we show our Christian witness by this kind of love to our fellow believer? Paul shows two ways.

1. We seek to be a witness to the world by showing the nature of his kingdom. V. 17.

We realize that many new Jewish converts would really struggle with meat that was strangled and still had the blood in it. And the Gentile believer, because of the weak conscience and love for his new brother in Christ would abstain from eating that meat especially in his presence. And carefully thinking through how we live and function is so vital to our unity and love for one another but also our corporate witness in Jesus Christ. It is amazing what the church sees as primary issues. Many churches argue about what Bible translation to use in the pulpit. Or they might fight about whether to have chairs or pews. They might argue about whether to have television monitors or whatever. And I am not saying that none of these decisions are unimportant, but so often we do not ask: what is the witness that we need to give to the world? What does the world need to see as far as our gospel testimony? Do they really care about what translation we use? Are they really in awe and wonder about the glory of God because we have a certain shade of paint on the walls? And in the end does a certain cut of meat of a certain bottle of wine add anything to our lives?

Look at what Paul says here, **“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”**

The phrase “kingdom of God” is an interesting phrase because it is used in a number of different ways. Certainly all the cosmos and the universe is under the rulership and direction of God. He is sovereign, and there is a sense where everything is his kingdom. We also realize that there is coming a time where Jesus will reign and rule and the kingdom of God will be visible under the millennial rule of Christ. A Christmas text that we often use brings out the truth about the coming rule and ruler in Isaiah 9:6-7, **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”**

But the way that this verse is being used here is God’s reign and rule of his people in the here and now. It is Jesus Christ’s rulership over the church of Jesus Christ and over his people. Speaking of this rulership given by the Father to the Son in Ephesians 1:22, **“And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church.”** Jesus is the head, the sovereign, the ruler of the church. This is his kingdom. But what is the nature of this kingdom? He indicates what it is not, **“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking.”** It is incredible what Christians get excited about, that in the end make no difference whatsoever. Don’t make this the central tenant of your Christian faith. But some will get frustrated, all food is clean. Those other believers are just have to grow up! Unfortunately, that attitude is alive and well. And you might want certain things and even think of good reasons to have them. It might be better to eat all foods. The Gentiles would realize all things are clean. But this is not your kingdom. The church is not primarily for you and your desires and for others to serve you. This is Christ’s realm and to witness his character and his glory the way he has decided.

And look at the nature of his kingdom, **“but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** This is what this whole epistle has been about is the gospel of Jesus Christ, and then beginning in chapter 12 was how we live out those truths of this gospel that we believe. Christ’s kingdom is about righteousness. We have seen that Jesus righteousness has been imputed to us as believers in Jesus Christ. What do I need to appear before a holy God? I need perfect righteousness and holiness, and I have that in Jesus Christ. Now the church is called to live out that perfect righteousness. We are to live rightly, do the most honourable thing in the sight of God and others. Therefore an attitude, “I just don’t care what others think or how this will affect other,” is not found in our Christian witness. There is a unity in our witness that speaks of his righteousness - doing the right thing before God and others.

But also peace. The peace that we have with God is based on the perfect righteousness of Christ being imputed to us. Romans 5:1 says, **“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Incredible truth! We have peace with God. The war is over and we are in the closest and most intimate relationships with God. And as his children, called into the same family, the most peaceful place of earth this side of eternity should be the church of Jesus Christ. Peace takes work and humility. Peace will cause me to say no to many

things that I desire and many attitudes that I would take against those who differ from me. Since we have peace we are to be witnesses of this peace in our relations with one another. What a powerful testimony to the world around us.

But not only that - look at the last part of this witness: **“joy in the Holy Spirit.”** Look at that word “joy.” It is incredible that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is joy. The meaning here is the certainty and the joy of our salvation in Christ, which can only be effected and produced by the Holy Spirit of God. There is joy, and the outcome of that joy is coming out and being with believers in Jesus Christ. Church should never be drudgery or I have to. It should be the highlight of our week, because our great hope is not in vacations or marriages and any of the other good things in this life but being with Christ. And the closest we can get to that is the life that we have right here with our fellow believers - singing, fellowshiping, and being encouraged and challenged in his Word with one another.

And you can imagine how powerful a testimony this is to those who are outside of Christ. Here you live out with Christ and others your righteousness and peace with God and one another, and then there is joy. Wait a minute. You don't have to go to church to somehow earn points with God but you choose to go? What you like and enjoy going to church? Wait you come back at night? You can imagine how God uses this testimony. Such is the witness of the church of Jesus Christ to a world that is desperately hopeless and joyless. What is it about Jesus that brings such corporate peace and joy? Now think of that next time we disrupt unity and oneness for the sake of what I want or desire. This is the corporate testimony of the church and it cannot be done individually in our lives.

2. We seek to be a witness to the world by seeking to please God. Vv. 18-19

We are so concerned with having our wills done of earth and God somehow to approve of them, and help us achieve our goals. And we look at the world so often and they might use hard work, business wisdom, education to fulfill their lives and fill it with the things of the world. Believers many times look to God as the one who will do the same. The world uses other means but we use God. But the problem with that philosophy is that it places my dreams and happiness and goals in this present life at the centre of my existence, and not God. There are so many disgruntled and angry and depressed believers who live with the unbiblical philosophy that they are at the centre of their existence. They complain about what they are not getting even though the gospel indicates that we are not getting what we deserve. They are angry at life and the people in their lives, even the church of Christ. And they never seem to realize who they are in Christ, and who Jesus is. He is king. He is ruler. We exist to please him and to do his will. They never consider that he has all wisdom, so his plan in my life really is better than mine. And I can trust him. And what that trust looks like is seeking to follow, obey, and bow to his commands and demands.

Now, look at verse 18, **“Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”** “Whoever thus” does two things. One is that it draws a conclusion from the last verse. And the other is saying that we are not stuck. I can't say whatever circumstances I am in I can't serve and glorify Christ in the church of Jesus Christ; that he somehow has not given me something that I need in order to be his witness. By seeking to live in righteousness and peace and joy with God, I am doing the will of God

in my life. I am as the text says - "serving Christ." He is the king. He is Lord. And remember the whole goal way back in 12:1-2, **"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."** The whole goal of your life and my life is the same even if our stations in life are different, and that is to live a life that is pleasing in his sight. The goal of our salvation is not to make our plans work but seek to magnify and glorify and enjoy the one who gave me life. The kingdom of self has been replaced by a much greater and larger kingdom. The kingdom of self says you must serve me, but the kingdom of Christ says you must serve him and others. You can imagine what an impact this kind of testimony has not only to the world that there is Someone greater to live for, but what an encouragement it is to struggling believers.

He says when we serve the king we are doing what is acceptable to God but also what is approved of man. Now what does this mean? It does not mean that we do what is right in man's eyes. We do what is right in God's eyes. But what this means is that people are watching you. They are looking for inconsistencies or lack of love in your life. They are looking for reasons to mock the church of Jesus Christ. But if you love God you do not want them to mock God but your desire is that they would trust God. And when we do speak we want not only our witness but the corporate witness of the church to validate what he says. 1 Peter 2:12 has both of these aspects in mind, **"Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation."** God has got to be at the centre of our lives and of our church. We will seek to guard our own hearts and live as much as possible at peace with other believers and celebrate our great salvation.

And look how he ends this paragraph, **"So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."** We chase after so many things in life. This verse concludes that there is something worthy to be pursued. We pursue things in our lives that are worthy. How worthy of a goal is peace? How worthy of a goal is building up others and not tearing them down or causing occasion that they might stumble? Paul says there is something to be pursued for the glory of Christ. It is just not about you, just like the eating of meat was not about the Romans. But God's kingdom is about righteousness, peace and joy. Let us seek to be the witnesses of his kingdom in this dark world. Let us make life about his kingdom and not our own.