

FPFWC Christian Development



God's Eternal Reign

August 2023

Summer Quarter

August 12, 2023

The Nature of the Kingdom

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Romans 14:10-23

ICE BREAKER –

1. What steps can you take to avoid being a “stumbling-block to others?”

Key Verse: “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.”—Romans 14:19

LESSON BACKGROUND

Our text comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans. The letter addresses a church divided between Jewish and non-Jewish (Gentile) followers of Jesus. While we cannot know the exact circumstances, it appears that each group looked down on the other for the way it practiced life in God’s kingdom.

Paul wrote the letter to show each group that they belong to God’s kingdom on the same terms: faith in Jesus in response to God’s good news about Him (Romans 1:5; 10:5–17). So Paul says “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (1:16) that each group has the same status (3:9; 10:12). All have sinned, both Jews and Gentiles (3:22–23). Paul’s addressees belong to God’s kingdom not by observances of the Law of Moses, which defined the Jewish people. Rather, they belong by faith in Jesus, who died that all might live eternally.

This equality of status must be practiced. Jews were accustomed to keeping the laws of clean and unclean laid out in the Law of Moses (see Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14:3–20). In a city like Rome, finding meat that was ceremonially clean was probably difficult. Add to that the fact that much meat had been offered in sacrifice to pagan idols, and it appears that many Jews in Rome had simply given up meat altogether.

Meanwhile, Christians from a Gentile background had been brought into God’s kingdom by their faith in Jesus, being formerly excluded because they did not belong to the people of Israel (compare Ephesians 2:11–13). They had never been subject to the laws of clean and unclean. For Jewish followers of Jesus, dietary restrictions had always been a sign of devotion to God. But for Gentile followers of Jesus, these rules seemed strange and unnecessary.

Different practices with food matter little when we are with our own group. But the fellowship of the church brought these two groups together, and shared meals were a vital part of that fellowship. Whose rules should prevail?

LESSON COMMENTARY

14:10–12. Paul reiterated the directives from vv. 3–4 (cf. “judge” and “regard with contempt”). Judgment seat (bema) was the raised platform where secular authorities rendered verdicts in criminal cases (e.g., Mt 27:19; Jn 19:13; Ac 18:12; 25:6). It never refers to the place where awards were given to the victors in athletic contests. Rewards are given following the bema judgment and are dependent upon God’s evaluation of the believer there, but the judgment and the

giving of rewards are distinct both in terms of what transpires and the time at which they take place. There is, in fact, no mention of the assigning of eternal rewards in 14:10–12, only an accounting of each believer to God. Some day, possibly following the rapture of the church, each believer will give an account of his life to God (cf. the comments on 2Co 5:10 and 1Co 3:10–17). The implication is that believers should not denounce one another when their opinions differ. God can be trusted to deal with them if they have done something wrong, and it should be left to Him. This judgment does not pertain to a believer's eternal destiny, but it certainly will affect his rewards (see the comments on 1Co 4:1–5). Give praise (exomologeō, v. 11) would be better translated “admit doing wrong” (cf. LXX 2Ch 6:24; Mt 3:6; Jms 5:16). Paul cited Is 45:23, which affirms that God alone judges on the last day.

14:13–23. In vv. 1–12, Paul addressed both the weak and strong, but here the stronger Gentile believers are primarily in view. The stumbling block (v. 13) is sometimes understood as the anger that the weaker brother feels when a stronger brother legitimately exercises his liberty. This is possible, but a better understanding is that the stumbling block is the pressure a Gentile believer puts on a Jewish believer to violate his standards and sin against his conscience (cf. vv. 22–23). In v. 14, Paul sided with the strong, but made it clear that the actions of the strong could harm the weak (Jewish believers) (v. 15). Hurt means “to be distressed, saddened,” possibly even “outraged.” Destroy (apollumi) here does not mean “to send one to hell for eternal ruin,” for no believer could do this to another. It often means “to damage,” “ruin,” or “harm” (Mt 9:17; Lk 21:18; Jms 1:11), and when the stronger brother cajoles the weaker to violate his standards, the weaker brother is harmed. Romans 14:13–23 (MBC): Therefore (v. 16) introduces Paul's conclusion to vv. 14–15. It was a good thing for a Gentile Christian to eat meat, but if he insisted that a Jewish believer should eat contrary to the dictates of his conscience, then that good thing took an evil turn. The kingdom of God (v. 17) is manifested in and through the Church, but the Church cannot be equated with the kingdom. Righteousness has a horizontal, social sense, “upright actions.” Drinking anticipates drinking wine in v. 21. Wine was used as libations in the temples, and Jewish believers refused to purchase and drink wine just as they did meat. All things indeed are clean (v. 20) indicates that Jewish and Gentile believers alike were allowed to eat meat, just as Paul did. In v. 22, Paul urged the stronger brothers not to bully the weak into doing something that would violate their conscience. He who doubts is condemned (v. 23; also v. 22) does not mean that God will send this Christian to hell. As in v. 22, the weaker brother's conscience will experience guilt because he or she ate not from faith, i.e., because the weak did not have the conviction that it was permissible to eat. If one engages in some practice not clearly forbidden by Scripture, no sin has been committed. But if a believer violates his conscience, that constitutes sin. God wants His people to have sensitive consciences in order to avoid sin (1Tm 1:5, 19; Heb 5:14).

LESSON NUGGET – Our desire must not be to get everybody to agree with us; our desire must be to pursue peace, not cause others to stumble, and help others to mature in Christ. What starts as grieving (v.15) can become offending (v.21), causing the weak to fall (vv.13-21). The result might be destroying a brother's or sister's faith (vv.15,20). Is destroying another just to have your own way worth it?

Sources: *Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, The Handbook of Bible Application and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary*