

Arguing Over Nothing: Romans 14:1-12, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

Once upon a time, I was walking across a bridge and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. I immediately ran over and said, "*Stop! Don't jump!*" "Why shouldn't I?" he said. I said, "*because, there's so much to live for!*" "Like what?"

- "*Well ... are you religious or atheist?*" "Religious." "*Me too!*"
- "*Are you Christian or Jewish?*" "Christian." "*Me too!*"
- "*Are you Catholic or Protestant?*" "Protestant." "Me too!"
- "*Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?*" "Baptist." "Wow! Me too!"
- "*Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?*" "Baptist Church of God." "Me too!"
- "*Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?*" "Reformed Baptist Church of God." "Me too!"
- "*Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?*" "Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!"
- To which I said, "*Die, you heretic scum!*" and pushed him off.

You laugh, but there was a time that I really did think this way. And there are still plenty of both individuals and whole denominations who hold the firm conviction that if you don't believe exactly as they believe then you won't make it to heaven.

Today's portion of Romans was written just for such people, and for all of us who to a lesser extent are guilty of sinning against our fellow servants of Jesus Christ by passing judgment on their differing convictions. The lesson from this passage is quite clear, regarding matters of "conscience,"

Let all be fully convinced in their own minds ... (<i>without passing judgment on another</i>) For each one of us will be accountable to God Romans 14: 5-12

But working out of this truth in our daily lives – that's where the struggle comes in. How do we distinguish between an unquestionable Biblical truth, on which we should never compromise, and other beliefs that are just a matter of personal opinion.

That's the answer we will try to tease out of today's scripture, but just for a moment, let's back up in order to remember again where we are in Romans.

(please take the outline from your bulletin to help you follow along with this portion of today's message)

The largest portion of Paul's letter to the Roman Church is a very carefully crafted argument on why those who would be righteous before God must come to him by faith

Romans 1-8 explains "The Gospel:"

*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
and are justified by His grace as a gift,
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

Romans 3:23.

That is why Paul opened his letter with this earth shaking declaration

The one who by faith
is righteous, will live.

Romans 1:17

Then in **Romans 9-11** Paul takes a brief detour to defend Israel's continuing national relationship with God even in their failure to comprehend "*that salvation has always been by faith, not works.*" The short answer here is that having made a covenant with Abraham, God will always keep His promise to both bless Abraham's children and the world through them.

Now in **Romans 12-15** Paul returns to the idea of our salvation by grace through faith to answer the question: **How should we – who have put our faith in Christ – now be living?"**

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters,
In view this salvation that God has gifted to you,
**give yourself completely back to Him,
living the holy life that He wants you to live.**

This is your only reasonable way to serve God.

Romans 12:1 (*paraphrased*)

This then is the thought which dominates and directs the rest of his letter to Romans: **Having trusted Christ as our savior, How do we now live out the rest of our lives honoring God ?** In answer to this question, Paul offers plenty of guidance. From chapters 12-15 he lists out 11 practices which we should adopt

1. No longer live by the fallen world's values but be transformed – live a different life – by renewing your mind, So you can know God's will for your life. (12:1-2)
2. Know your abilities and humbly use them for building up fellow believers in the body of Christ, the "church" (12:3-8).
3. Live in genuine zealous love towards all: hating what's evil, clinging to what's good (12:9-13).
4. Blessing those who persecute you – overcoming evil with good (12:14-21).
5. Being both subject to and respectful of all earthly authorities – paying your taxes (13:1-7)
6. Living completely by Jesus' command to: *Love your neighbor as yourself* (13:8-10)
7. Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ (*thinking with the mind of Christ*): living through him and for him, leaving no room for fleshly temptations (13:11-14).

----- and now today -----

8. In matters of conscience, being fully convinced in your own mind while continuing to accept without judgment those who differ from you.

Let all be fully convinced in their own minds ... (<i>without passing judgment on another</i>) For each one of us will be accountable to God Romans 14: 5-12

----- then also -----

9. Resolving not to let your "freedoms in Christ" cause your neighbor's stumbling Pursuing what makes for peace and mutual strengthening of one another (14:19).
10. Looking for ways to build up those who are of weaker faith (15:2).
11. Welcoming and serving each other the way Christ has welcomed you (15:7).

But today, let's stop here at number 8, in order to better understand how we can accept each other even when we hold different beliefs about matters of "conscience".

There is an ancient bit of Christian wisdom that comes out of this passage

*In major things have unity,
in minor things have liberty,
but in all things have love"*

I believe this is Biblically sound advice for us to follow, but how do we determine what is major what is minor? **Paul does not help us much here, he only gives three examples of such minor matters of conscience:**

- eating meat versus veganism,
- designating holy days,
- the use of alcohol (14:21).

The interesting thing is that whatever the arguments were back then, we can still find Christians who reject one another over these same matters today. Of course we can add a lot more items to this list as well; such as ..

- appropriate modesty in clothing
- smoking
- dancing
- going to movies
- playing games of chance (gambling)
- and not associating with Christians who hold lesser convictions (*which is direct opposition to what Paul is telling us to do*).

But, for today, let's stick with Paul's three examples: veganism, designating holy days, and the drinking of wine (alcohol).

Though Paul does not say so specifically, most commentators frame the question here of meat versus vegetables and the designation of holy days, within the context of kosher Jewish Christians having a hard time adjusting to their new liberties in Christ and accepting Gentile Christians never lived under such restrictions or felt such qualms. And this probably is the situation that the Romans Christians were dealing with, because Paul returns to this subject in two of his other letters (1 Corinthians 8 & Colossians 2:16-23).

You should be able to understand the struggle that these Jewish Christians were going through. Having been raised all their life religiously following a dietary code of eating only clean foods, regulating your days by a multitude of rules for what not to do, celebrating all the designated holy days as described in the Old Testament; **all of which they were taught gave them a special relationship with God.** To now be told that neither circumcision nor any of these other distinguishing religious practices

any longer mattered in their relationship to God, and that those who had never striven so hard for holiness were now just as holy, just as loved, without ever having to live under any of those restrictions.... that would be a hard lesson to unlearn. Having spent most of their life shunning filthy Gentiles, how could they now comfortably associate with them?

But there is also something universal about such disagreements over food that have kept Christians arguing along these same lines long after they had forgotten the Jewish basis of such. Noting that Adam and Eve were originally intended to live as Vegans, and applying the commandment: YOU SHALL NOT KILL to all of life. There have always been several Christian groups that promote veganism as a more healthy and holy lifestyle for Christians to live. Of course we could point out that Noah's diet was expanded by God to include meat. And argue that they have not rightly translated or understood the commandment prohibiting murder. But this is their conviction, to which they are welcome as long as they don't think it makes them holier than those who love hamburgers.

Back when I was a student in Minnesota, I experienced just such a situation. My grocery store boss was becoming increasingly vegetarian based on his concern for the environment and "all the starving people around the world." He often quoted a factually questionable factoid *that it takes 2,500 gallons of water, 12 pounds of grain, 35 pounds of topsoil and the energy equivalent of one gallon of gasoline to produce one pound of feedlot beef.* And perhaps there is a good argument for Christians, out of consideration for others, to consider eating lower and lighter on the food chain; but this is definitely a matter of conscience not a Biblical mandate. So when my grocery store boss started challenging my Christianity on the basis of my not becoming a vegan like himself, I just pointed him here to Romans 14; and that pretty much settled the matter.

And regarding proper days of worship, there are several other Christian groups, such as **Seventh Day Adventists** who declare that since God had established the 7th day as the Sabbath, what right had Christians to move it to the first day of the week. That's a good question. The movement of the Christian Sabbath does have some Biblical validation, but you wouldn't want to make a theology out of it.

- Jesus often disregarded Sabbath laws that restricted his ministry, and when challenged about his "disobedience," remarked that *God had made the Sabbath for man not man for the Sabbath* (Mark 2:23-28).
- On the occasion of another challenge over his right to minister on the Sabbath, Jesus had even declared himself "*Lord of the Sabbath*" (Matthew 12:1-14).
- And as Paul has taught here in Romans, Christ - having fulfilled all of its requirements - has brought an end to the Law as binding on human lives (Romans 10.4).

- And now in this section, Paul calls all days equally holy according to one's perception of them.

Perhaps it was at first, more a matter of convenience for Jewish Christians, who originally scheduled their gatherings on the first day of the week, so as not to conflict with their Jewish Sabbath obligations. But eventually as the faith moved into a Gentile world having no concept at all of a Sabbath rest, it made sense to keep the Christian Sabbath worship on the first day of the week in remembrance of their savior rising from the dead on this day – which is the very proof of the Gospel – thus making every Sunday worship another Resurrection Day celebration.

So now you can understand why some people feel strongly about Saturday Sabbath, and others feeling the same about Sunday worship being only at eleven a.m. I can still remember the feeling that somehow the Catholics were cheating by going to midnight mass so they could sleep in on Sunday. **So there is no longer a Biblical mandate for keeping THE Sabbath, but plenty of biblical teaching on the benefits of Sabbath keeping wherever you can find it in the week..**

Alcohol is a more slippery topic, because the Bible is ambivalent about it; both praising the appropriate use of alcohol while condemning those who abuse drink.

[God] gives wine to gladden the human heart
Psalm 104:15

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler,
and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.
Proverbs 20.1

While praising the appropriate use of alcohol, the Bible also laid down certain restrictions: Levites were to abstain from wine while in temple service, and certain "holy" men such as John the Baptist were never to touch wine. And yet Jesus, the holiest of all, displayed no aversion to wine. He even made gallons of it, at his mother's request, for an unsuspecting wedding banquet. But when American Christians got into their temperance mindset, and started preaching against alcohol in any form, they could not have the Bible undercutting their message, so they had to ignore or gloss those passages that put Jesus and wine together (Mark 5:37-39, Luke 7:33-34, John 2:9-11). That is why to this day, in spite of solid Biblical evidence to the contrary, there are still some who teach and preach that Jesus never touched wine and only made grape juice for the wedding feast in Canaan. But, of course if you or a loved one has had struggles with alcoholism then you have plenty of practical reasons to want to stay away alcohol for your conscience and health's sake.

So Paul's three examples of food, holidays, and alcohol stand to this day as good examples of the differing convictions about holiness and lifestyle that Christians still might hold; those things Paul calls a matter of their conscience, which he says each should be fully convinced of in their own minds without passing judgment on others.

And that's really the hard part isn't it. **How does one balance "being fully convinced in their own mind" with not judging people who come to a different conclusion?**

For this question Paul has some very clear answers. Rather than trying to draw up a complete list of "minor" conscience based convictions – which I am sure would be an unending task – Paul gives us a set of three principles to cover and give guidance for all our convictions:

1. We are not to judge each others,
Because we each individually serve Christ.
And **he will help us in our efforts and
according to our convictions.**

Romans 14:4

Paul phrases it: *who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?* (14:4). What he means is that **each one of us is responsible only for ourselves and the life we live for God. And since God lives in each of us, through the Holy Spirit, He knows the reasoning behind our individually held convictions and will help us live according to them.** As a good example of this individualized responsibility that we carry before God, remember when Jesus, post-resurrection, had Peter and the other disciples down by the seashore. Working to restore guilt-ridden Peter, three times Jesus told him to "feed my sheep." But rather than accepting this loving but painful restoration just for himself, Peter looks around and seeing John nearby asks Jesus "*what about him?*" To which Jesus replied: *What about him, Peter, I am talking to you now; you follow me.* (John 21:20-22). So we each individually must follow Christ and he will help us do so with whatever personal convictions we bring along. Which brings up the second principle

2. Be convinced in your own mind
and live out your **convictions** to honor God

Romans 14:5-6

If we have unique convictions in how we should follow Christ, and feel that we are honoring God with our lives, then Paul says do so without wavering. If we are convinced don't let anyone quilt trip us into living another way, because the nature of faith is such that if we think something is a sin, then it is a sin to us; *because whatever does not proceed from faith is a sin* (Romans 14:23). So to quote Jiminy Cricket, ***let your conscience be your guide***, especially if it is a Holy Spirit guided conscience.

And lastly

**3. Each one of us will give an
Individual accounting of our own life to Jesus.**
(we are not responsible for anyone else)
Romans 14:10-12

We are individually saved

We individually serve Jesus,

And one day we will individually stand before him as he takes an accounting of the life that we lived for him. Paul says this is all the judging that anyone needs in their life. So be the God-honoring servant the way you think you should be and trust Jesus to take care of everyone else. If we do that, then all of God's servants will get along just fine.