

WORRY ABOUT YOURSELF
Romans 14

Dr. Howard K. Batson
First Baptist Church
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Mildred, the church gossip and self-appointed monitor of the church's morals, kept sticking her nose into other people's business. Several members did not approve of her extra-curricular activities, but feared her enough to maintain their silence. She made a mistake, however, when she accused George, a new member, of being a drunk after she saw his old pickup parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She emphatically told George and several others that everyone seeing it there would know what he was doing. George, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and just turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend, or deny. He said nothing. Later that evening, George quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house...walked home...and left it there all night.

There is within each of us an innate desire to direct, correct, and criticize the lives of our family and friends. Overlooking our own faults and foibles, we focus on the flaws found in others. Ignoring the 2x4 in our own eye, we reach out to remove a speck from our neighbor's eye. What's true when Paul penned this epistle to the church in Rome is true 2,000 years later in windy West Texas.

What is Paul saying in Romans 14? To whom is he saying it? And why?

We still have in the background the overarching command of Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."

I. Let God be both judge and jury (vs. 1-6).

Let's look at verses 1-6

"Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God."

Who are the weak? What is this verbiage about eating vegetables? And what does it mean to "observe a day?"

The weakness occurs when something that need not be shunned is shunned by a believer for the sake of his own delicate conscience, without any real restrictions placed upon him by Christ. Look at verse 14 for confirmation of this interpretation. “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”

Some of us – many of us – have intense, persistent, deeply rooted beliefs that regard something as wrong when, actually, it’s neither here nor there. And to break our own self-imposed, or tradition-imposed, taboos is to risk shattering our faith, which is still in formation, finding freedom in Christ.

When those who have found freedom in Christ welcome the sensitive into the fold, they are not to use that welcome as a pretext for hammering the weak, forcing them to act against their own conscience or deep-seated convictions. Welcome the weak, but don’t pass judgment on their opinions.

In verse 2, Paul says, “One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.” Now Paul is certainly not against eating fruits and vegetables. We all know the story about how Daniel, the one delivered from the lion’s den, excels on veggies and water. It’s not a health issue; it’s a scruples concern. In fact, Daniel was held up as a hero precisely because he would not defile himself with the pagan king’s rich food and wine. Instead, he insisted on eating only vegetables and drinking water. Because of Daniel’s faithfulness, consuming only what was allowed by the covenant with God, God delivered Daniel (Daniel 1:8-16).

In the Book of Judith in the Catholic Old Testament, Judith is a heroine because she would not eat or drink the pagan food or wine, lest it be an offense to God. Her victory over the enemy is ascribed to her detailed observance of the dietary laws (Judith 10:5; 12:1-4, 19). Bringing it back to our Bible, Peter declares in his vision in Acts 10 that he himself had never eaten anything impure or ritually unclean (Acts 10:8; 11:8).

There was clearly a Jewish aversion to eating that which was improperly butchered (Leviticus 7:22-27; 17:10-16) or eating meat that had been defiled by being offered to an idol in a pagan sacrifice (Exodus 34:15; 1 Corinthians 10:28). And, the Jews wanted to make sure that the meat they were consuming was not a forbidden animal (Leviticus 11:1-20) and that the animal was not slain in ways that violate ritual restrictions (Exodus 23:19).

Yet Peter, on the rooftop, received a vision from God pronouncing all creatures clean. But, abstaining from certain meat to observe the law’s restrictions had been so deeply ingrained into the Jews from years of practice that their consciences would not allow them to abandon their long-held principles. They felt it necessary to avoid any appearance of supporting idolatry by refusing to eat meat offered to idols. In the various pagan temples, meat was sacrificed to the gods, processed, packaged, and sold at temple restaurants or butcher shops. Pagan worship was just part of the meat market process. Therefore, before a scrupulous Jew could consume a piece of meat, he would ask, “Where did the meat come from? How was it processed? From what animal did it come? How can I be sure it’s not impure?”

Unsure of the Gentile meat markets, many of the Jews had simply just become vegetarians, because they did not know with a clear conscience that the meat available was kosher.

But it wasn't just a matter of mealtime. There were other arguments breaking up this body of Christ. For example (v. 5), "One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind."

Paul is most likely referring to Jewish practices. Some Jewish Christians continued to keep the major Jewish festivals; others would not. For Paul, it was a point of indifference. What mattered most was that whatever they decided, they did it a way to honor the Lord. But somebody lounging in the bed on Sunday morning proclaiming Paul said God's day doesn't matter – you'd find them getting a sharp retort from the Apostle. Paul was not advocating treating the resurrection day like any other. His reference is to a busy Jewish calendar with countless observable occasions.

In the middle of this conversation about conscience in regard to holy days and kosher meat, Paul pens the message. Look at verse 4: "Who are you to judge the servant of another?" In other words, let God be both the judge and jury.

For some reason, we're all way too busy judging other folks and forgetting about our own faults. Paul's primary concern is to impart standards for how fellow believers must treat one another when, in good conscience, they make different lifestyle choices regarding such matters as dietary restrictions or festival day observances.

Now, first of all, Paul is not saying to withhold all moral discernment in regard to a brother's behavior. We may clearly condemn beliefs and practices that do not harmonize with what is known of God through Jesus. He is going to tell us in chapter 15 that the Roman Christians are to admonish one another, which does entail constructive criticism (1 Corinthians 4:14). But, first and foremost, in every case, we would all do well to focus on our own sins and not those of our neighbor.

To make his point, Paul paints a ridiculous picture of one man judging the household servant of another. Behind Paul's position is the clear admonition that Jesus is the *kurios*, the Lord. Throughout this chapter, the lordship of Jesus is emphasized repeatedly and frequently. The word "Lord" is used two times (Greek text) in verse 4, three times in verse 6, three times in verse 8, and also in verses 11 and 14.

Your judgment of Christ's servant is of no consequence. Worse yet, when you judge the Lord's servant, you are infringing on the Lord's authority. In 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, Paul says, "It's a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."

Paul is saying, "It doesn't even matter how I judge myself. That doesn't count either. Only the Lord, the master of the servant, has a say on Judgment Day." Let God discipline His own children.

Don't point your finger and say, "If he were my son, I'd tell you what I'd do." He's not your son. It's not your place to tell anyone else what to do. Do not judge another's servant. Let the Creator be Creator, and you be creation.

II. Recognize that the final judgment is the only one that counts (vs. 7-12).

"For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be both Lord of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God."

Imagine a Christian with a strict conscience whose background, upbringing, and temperament all incline him toward a very serious view of his moral responsibilities. As far as he can see, the church is surrounded by a very wicked, corrupt, pagan world. To him, it is best to eat vegetables rather than risk eating meat that might have been sacrificed to idols.

And then he notices that woman from his church who claims to be a Christian as well. And she is buying meat from the market which is obviously connected to and supplied by the pagan temple. How appalling! She has compromised herself and her family. The strict Christian condemns her in his heart.

And yet the woman has been taught the deep and rich truth that the one true God, the Creator and redeemer of all things – the whole world belongs to Him, including every piece of meat you might ever buy or cook. She knows good and well that outward restrictions about what you can't touch, taste, or handle don't actually go to the heart of genuine holiness. She gets tired of being sniped at and criticized by people who don't seem to have learned what is, for her, one of the most basic, liberating, gospel lessons. She despises people who put their nose in her business.

You see both are natural reactions, each one coming out of a firm grasp of one part of the Christian truth. But found in both of their positions is the fact that there is one Lord and before Him, and Him alone, every Christian lives and dies, stands or falls.

Paul is saying, "Why condemn the brother or sister, when each and every one of us has to stand before God's judgment seat and answer for our own conduct, and not for another. God's not going to ask me why you did what you did; God is going to ask me why I did what I did."

I call it "The Devil's Distraction." The devil never tells you that sin is not sin so much as he tells you, "Look at the sins of others." For if the devil can get me to focus on your sins, your faults and foibles, and get you to focus on my sins and shortcomings, then he has trapped us both. "Oh, focus on sin," the devil says. "But focus on the sins of your neighbor." And then he knows that you will never walk right with God.

Paul concludes this section by pointing to Isaiah 45:23. What will happen at the last judgment? Every knee will bow to God, and every tongue will praise God.

At the very end of verse 12, Paul makes it clear again: Stop judging one another, because each one of us shall give an account of himself to God. “You worry about yourself,” Paul is preaching.

III. Limit your freedom for the good of the group (vs. 13-23).

There are some things that I could do that I should not do because they might hurt you.

“Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

“So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”

You might *could* do it, but you, perhaps, *shouldn't* do it because it might cause your brother to stumble. Are you going to insist on your freedom and rights so much so that you destroy the one for whom Christ died with your food (v. 15)? Why don't you pursue things that make peace and build one another up (v. 19) versus insisting on your own rights in such a way as to cause ruckus in the church.

When Paul says in verse 14 that nothing is, in itself, unclean, that's a stunning about face for a former Pharisee. Pharisees were especially known for their purity rules that classified things, times, and persons as pure and impure. They focused on what could be eaten, couldn't be eaten, how it should be prepared, and with whom one could eat it. Paul knew all the rules and regulations.

But nothing, in itself, is unclean. It's a status imposed only by human tradition. Didn't Peter have a vision, when it was declared from heaven, “What God has made clean, you must not call impure” (Acts 10:15; 11:19)?

But Paul says, “Hold on. If it really bothers someone's conscience to eat a certain food, then, for them, it is a sin, for they do so without a clear conscience.” What Paul is saying is that the Jews don't have to become Gentiles in order to be Christian. They can keep their Jewish scruples if they need to. And the Gentiles, likewise, don't have to become Jews to be accepted by God. But

you should never allow your enlightenment to injure another. Don't do that which tears down; do that which builds up and seeks peace.

So there you have it, Gladys Kravitz. Close the curtains and turn your eyes on your own house. Or social media gossips who gander at everyone's pages, posts, tweets, and pics – searching for a sensational sin. Don't be misled by the devil's distraction, trying to get you to focus on me and me to focus on you. Worry about yourself.

Surprise in Heaven

I dreamed death came the other night,
And heaven's gate swung wide.
An angel with a halo bright
Ushered me inside.

And there, to my astonishment,
Stood folks I'd judged and labeled
As "quite unfit," "of little worth,"
And "spiritually disabled."

Indignant words rose to my lips,
But never were set free.
For every face showed stunned surprise!
None had expected me!

N.T. Wright, Paul for Everyone, Pt. 2

David Garland, forthcoming commentary on Romans