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Romans

So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Romans 14:12

The word "so" is given as a confirming note concerning the previous thought. Paul has been extremely clear in our responsibilities to those who are weaker in the faith. If they, because of their weakness in the faith, abstain from meats then we are to accept that. If someone who is deeply grounded in Christ esteems every day the same (meaning he doesn't have a particular day of worship set aside), then we are not to judge him for his freedom. We are not the judge of biblically non-stated matters. We have no authority to point accusing fingers at the freedom exercised by others which has been granted by Christ.

This has been the context of the entire chapter so far, including verse 11. Though verse 11 made a true statement about all humanities' acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord, that is not the intent of that verse as regards the surrounding context. Rather, the intent is the responsibility of all believers to Jesus, not to the external pressures or whims of other believers. In such non-defined matters then "each of us shall give account of himself to God."

Those things that we do with freedom of conscience will be accepted. But there are those things which we did apart from a good conscience. Paul will sum those things up in the last verse of this chapter with the words "for whatever is not from faith is sin." Sin can come from acting in a manner contrary to our own lack of faith. And that can easily come from external pressure as he tells us in 1 Corinthians 8:9-13 -

"But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."

As you can see from these verses, sin isn't just working against our own conscience, but it is also sin to make another work against their conscience. God wants us to live in faith and to teach others to live in faith. When we violate this, we sin.

Life application: Let us consider that Paul's words in Romans 14 do not cover the judging of actual violations of Scripture. We are obligated to judge such matters. But judging doubtful matters not defined in the Bible is wrong. If we don't know our Bibles, then how can we make or withhold judgment? Know your Bible!

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. Romans 14:13

Verse 13 begins with "therefore" to tie us back to the previous instruction. In the end, Paul says that we are accountable to Christ, not others, where "doubtful matters" are concerned. As this is so, "Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore." One can almost hear the backbiting which precipitated Paul's letter, backbiting which continues on to this day. People were certainly pointing fingers and accusing one another of not being true "Christians" because of their diet or their timing or mode of worship.

What is sad is that since the letter of Romans, along with all of the other epistles, has been written we now have these surer guidelines than before that time. And yet there continues to be the same argumentation almost 2000 years later. Churches divide over petty issues and strong heads argue over matters which

should be laid to rest by merely opening the word, accepting what is written, and then exercising love along with adhering to the instruction.

But there are constants which never seem to go away - conscience, knowledge, and stubborn pride. Some are weak in the faith and lack knowledge and so they live moment by moment holding on to what their conscience dictates. Others are stronger in the faith and possess right knowledge and so they conduct their actions in accord with proper doctrine. In either case though, rather than pursuing harmony, stubborn pride often rules the heart.

Rather than this, the successful believer (whether possessing little or much knowledge) is he who lives in love concerning disputable matters. The weak without love may become an accusing fool; the strong without love may become haughty and self-righteous; but the Christian who exercises love in the treatment of others in these doubtful matters is the one who is on sound footing. This is the one who determines not to judge what they have no right to judge. In order to be one such as this, Paul says that we should "rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way."

A stumbling block is something that one can easily trip over. For example, if a person doesn't want to eat meat for a particular reason (such as that given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8) and another Christian coerces them to work against their conscience, they have now placed a stumbling block in front of their weaker brother. This is because anything which is not of faith is sin. A "cause to fall" would be a stumbling block which actually trips up the faith of a person so that they then sin, possibly violating their conscience to the point where they walk away from the faith... and that over food! Imagine how displeased the Lord will be when we face Him and receive our judgment concerning things we unrightfully judged.

Life application: Our freedoms in Christ do not include the freedom to coerce others to violate their conscience. Proper instruction is necessary. After that, let the believer decide how they will conduct their affairs on their own.

I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

Romans 14:14

Paul's thought today takes us right back to what was analyzed in verses 2 and 3. They state, "For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him." At that time, it was noted that, "If Paul says, 'one believes he may eat all things' and he doesn't later correct this during his discussion (which he will not), then it shows definitively that a believer can, in fact, eat all things."

Today confirms that analysis. In an emphatic way, he gives two affirmations of the thought:

- 1) I know
- 2) And am convinced by the Lord Jesus

Paul's understanding of the gospel, combined with his own personal instruction from the Lord, showed him (and thus he to us) "that there is nothing unclean of itself." He is speaking of food in this passage and so states, as clearly as could possibly be stated, that any and all food is clean. There is no other way to interpret this without abusing the text, and yet denominations and cults are lined up to speak contrary to what is stated here, forbidding foods which God has ordained for us to eat. Again, "nothing is unclean of itself."

However, something can be unclean, despite it being clean. And that is "to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." By stating this, he has resolved two key points:

- 1) Nothing is unclean in and of itself
- 2) Violating one's conscience will defile something that is clean

Therefore,

3) If the conscience is what defiles something, then if that conscience accepts that thing as clean, it remains clean.

That which is unclean is that which is received without faith. Should someone have a conscience about eating an animal because they feel bad for the animal (or for whatever reason), then that animal is to them unclean.

Through understanding Paul's words today that nothing is unclean of itself, it then becomes incumbent on teachers of doctrine to properly teach that precept. To teach that any particular type of animal isn't to be eaten because it is unclean becomes a violation of doctrine. The animal is clean; the conscience defiles. Personal conscience is not a reason to teach doctrine contrary to what the Bible states; it is sin.

Life application: If someone teaches a precept based on emotion or personal likes or dislikes rather than as the Bible instructs, they have sinned against God who gave the Bible. Be aware of such teachers and find other avenues of instruction for your doctrine and practice.

Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.

Romans 14:15

We've been given instructions on our liberties in Christ, but those freedoms need to be exercised carefully in both directions. Just as one "weak in the faith" shouldn't be accusing another who eats whatever they wish, the opposite is true too. The person who understands their freedoms needs to not attempt to impose them in a haughty manner over the weaker in the faith. When a Jewish person comes to Christ, they may have spent their entire life refraining from foods forbidden under the law. Even if they understand their freedoms, they may be so fixed in their dietary restrictions that they don't want to change.

It would be wholly unreasonable to try to get them to indulge in something they are not prepared to eat. In having them work against their own conscience, you will grieve them. In so doing, "you are no longer walking in love." The same is true with vegetarians. Whose stomach are they filling? If they wish to eat only vegetables, is that truly any business of another? Let people choose what they wish to eat and "do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died."

If they are believers, He has already accepted them. Will another's attempts to change their dietary habits change their position in Christ? No. So let them be, let them partake as they wish, and don't force your freedoms on them. By doing so, they are no longer freedoms. Love is the key and one cannot be forceful about "doubtful things" and still be acting in love.

On the other hand, one cannot be acting in love while tolerating that which is clearly forbidden. God has decided what is and what is not acceptable. It is incumbent on us to be firm in that which He is firm in and to allow freedom in that which He has allowed freedom. To go too far in one direction or another leads to either license or legalism; both of which are poison to the faith and practice necessary to have a sound relationship with the Lord.

Life application: By knowing what is allowed and what is forbidden, we can know how to handle each situation as it arises within the context of our Christian faith. And the only way to know these things is to... to... to know your Bible. Never stop reading, studying, and memorizing this precious word.

Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; Romans 14:16

With the use of the word "therefore" we are asked to refer to what was just said in order to grab Paul's intended meaning. The previous two verses stated, "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died."

Because "nothing is unclean of itself" we may feel that we have liberty to partake of anything at any time without harm. This is not the case. It would be entirely inappropriate to invite a known Christian vegetarian over to your house and then serve only dishes with meat. In fact, knowingly doing this would be evil. And the good you intended by the invitation for dining will only be "spoken of as evil."

Likewise, if you were to start attending a congregation which consisted of Messianic Jews (Jewish folks who have accepted Christ as Lord) and were to bring a ham sandwich along for a snack, you would more than probably cause a large amount of offense; not because there is anything inherently wrong with a ham sandwich, but because these believers have spent their lives refraining from such food and will probably continue to do so even if they know they now have the freedom to do otherwise.

Having said that, it should be noted that in modern society someone will always find offense at something another does. There must be a point where the offended party has to simply grow up and stop being offended all the time. But tact and diplomacy over these matters comes down to love. And this is true from either angle, by the one exercising their freedom and by the one who is easily offended. In the end, the consideration of the situation from the angle of love will be pleasing to the Lord.

Life application: Use sound judgment towards others. If atheists are offended by a nativity scene, that is their problem, not yours. However, if a fellow believer is offended by your freedom in your style of worship while you are attending their church, then maybe you need to adjust to accommodate them. Make your considerations in such matters with Jesus as the example and love as the guide.

...for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Romans 14:17

Paul has probably used as much ink on the continuing subject as any other in all of his epistles. Since verse 1, he has remained on the same overall concept of

externals in life and how they should not be a distraction in our Christian conduct. In other words, if it is not a specific mandate (either in the positive - "do this," or in the negative - "don't do this") then don't argue over it. This is the source of legalism which poisons so many teachers, pastors, and congregations and it is just as harmful as ignoring mandates through liberalism. Both are to be rejected. Taking from Scripture or adding to it are both violations of what belongs to God alone.

Remembering now the first half of the thought which continues in verse 17, in the previous verse it said, "Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil..." What we do with our diet can certainly affect our Christian testimony, but it shouldn't because "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking."

This is the first time in this conversation that "drinking" has been added into the overall concept of "food." The word used here is *posis* and simply refers to anything that can be consumed. However, it must be implying one of two things to even have been introduced.

The first would be something mandated under the law like not drinking blood or not consuming something at a particular time and for a particular reason, such as when one took a Nazirite vow (see Numbers 6). The second option would be something fermented or distilled - from beer to strong drink. The second is certainly what he is referring to here. Blood is forbidden even in the New Testament context (see Acts 15:20) and the Nazirite vow only pertained to Israel under the law. Therefore, other than blood, there are no drinking restrictions mentioned in the New Testament.

Understanding this, the consumption of drinking alcohol then falls under the "disputable matters" category just like types of foods and days of observance. Hence, to forbid it would be legalism; adding to God's word. However, to promote it to the point where it leads to drunkenness would be going in the opposite direction. Either way, there would be an abuse of what is considered acceptable. Rather than getting into a bad situation over this issue, just like the eating of meat

or the observance of a particular day of worship, we are to not let our "good be spoken of as evil."

And the reason why is given as the final portion of verse 17. Rather than focusing on things which are temporary and passing away, we should be promoting "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Legalism is swept out of the house by proper doctrine when righteousness is pursued. However, the crowd who shout "do" and "don't" over disputable matters do not promote righteousness. Where there is bondage, it is certainly missing.

The same is true with "peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." We cannot live under these precepts if we are attempting to please men. Instead, there is only a violation of the conscience, feelings of guilt, and a lack of being filled with God's perfect presence. And the reason goes back to what being "filled with the Spirit" entails. It is a passive action. A believer is sealed with the Spirit the moment they believe. They can never get more of the Holy Spirit from that moment. But the Spirit can get more of them. Through peace, contentment, and joy, the Spirit will radiate out of them. And this can only occur through obedience to God's word and His precepts, not the precepts of man.

Life application: We have been given the chance for heavenly joy, even in this life. Why would we waste that wondrous opportunity by being brought into captivity and bondage? And why would we ruin it for another by having them violate their own conscience? Let us endeavor to put disputable matters away from our interactions with others.