

Romans 14:13-23 Be considerate to one another

Romans 14 is a difficult part of Scripture to understand because we stand 2000 years and 2000 mile from the original context, in a very different culture. But we can sum it up in one word, "Be considerate to one another" (see Titus 3:2).

An overview of Romans 14:13-23

Romans 14 is preceded by the exhortation, *Let us walk properly as in the daytime* (Romans 13:13). Indeed, this has been a theme throughout Romans (Romans 1:5, 4:2, 6:4, 8:4). In chapter 14 this walk takes on a very practical dimension for the strong (believers): *For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love* (Romans 14:15). *Your brother* is the one *being weak in faith* (Romans 14:1). He is Jewish, and he is *weak* because he lacks assurance of salvation in Jesus. He is inevitably attached to the strict halacha / rules of the synagogue which forbade eating meat which had been bought in Gentile markets, or even handled by Gentiles, because of the risk of contamination by pagan idols. Paul is very concerned that the strong (believers) show consideration towards these Jews who were attending their meetings: *Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God* (Romans 14:20).

I think we need to understand this in the context of Paul's vision of God's work. Have you ever wondered why Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, believed the gospel was *to the Jew first and also to the Greek* (Romans 1:16, 2:9-10)? Paul, in his missionary travels around Asia and southern Europe, put this into practice as he always went first to the synagogues to preach the gospel. We also see from Romans that Paul carried a great burden for the salvation of his brothers according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3, 10:1). But if there is *no distinction between Jew and Greek* (Romans 10:12), why is the gospel for the Jew first? There is no distinction in regard to the way of salvation. But in regard to God's work (God's purposes) for the salvation of the world, indeed the whole creation, there is a distinction. Paul understood the *work of God* as the restoration of Israel *and* the inclusion of the Gentiles.

This vision was set out by James, the half-brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council. Acts 15 is an important Scripture, but I mention it simply to highlight the Apostolic understanding of the *work of God*. James, quoting from the prophet Amos, put it like this:

Act 15:16-18 *'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old.'*

The long hard process of restoration began with Christ's first coming, and it will cumulate with His second coming. Paul was very much aware of the resistance among *his brethren according to the flesh*. This resistance meant riches for the Gentiles, but *how much more will their full inclusion mean?* (Romans 11:12). With this background we have greater insight into Romans 14:20, *Do not, for the sake of food* [which is a secondary matter], *destroy the work of God* [God's work to bring restoration among the Jewish people.]

Paul's main point is that the Gentile Christians should be considerate towards their Jewish brethren. In fact, *It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble* (Romans 14:21). We can imagine that food bought at the Gentile markets would make these Jews feel very uncomfortable. Imagine having friends for a meal, and you served steak. But you didn't know your friends were vegetarian. It could be embarrassing and awkward for your vegetarian friends having to say 'no' to the food you have prepared. But I'm sure they would be forgiving. But, if you knew beforehand they were vegetarian, but thinking all this vegetarian thing is nonsense, you decided to serve steak anyway, then this would be offensive. If you were also trying to win your friends to Christ, this kind of arrogant attitude would easily be a stumbling block and a hindrance to the work of God.

Paul is simply saying, whatever you think about these things, keep between yourself and God (Romans 14:22a). Paul does have an opinion on these matters (Romans 14:14), and in 14:20 he affirms that *everything is*

clean. This means that everything that is clean according to biblical law is clean, and there is no need to worry further about contamination by idolatry (NB this is not a statement to abolish the food laws as Christians often think.)

But whatever your opinion, don't do anything that may cause your brother to stumble. In fact, it's even good to be vegetarian yourself, and to abstain from wine (at your meetings), rather than to cause your brother to stumble. These are secondary issues, and disputable matters compared to the work of God, for, *the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the holy Spirit* (Romans 14:17). The righteousness is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Romans 3:22). The peace is the peace we have with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). The joy is the joy that comes from believing in the God of hope (Romans 15:13). You will be blessed if you don't pass judgment on yourselves by taking advantage of your freedom in Christ (Romans 14:22b). You should not put pressure on others causing them to doubt when they eat, because *whatever does not proceed from faith is sin* (Romans 14:23).

Application for today

Does this have any relevance for us today? Romans 14 has been used by the church as a template for handling controversial issues like Sabbath, spiritual gifts, women in leadership and most recently homosexuality. But there is a difference between a controversial issue and a debatable matter. Ever since the serpent said to Eve, "Hath God said ... " we have had controversy concerning the truth of God's word. We can only rightly apply Romans 14 to matters which lie within the framework of biblical ethics.

But Paul's main concern is the witness of the believers in Jesus (the strong in faith): *Do not, for the sake of food destroy the work of God* (Romans 14:20). Maybe we could fill in the blank: *Do not, for the sake of _____, destroy the work of God* (e.g. clothes, hymns, paint?) We should be considerate, and certainly not deliberately trip others up by our behaviour.

I think Romans 14 has application to cross-cultural mission; we don't have to go far these days to meet others from different cultural backgrounds. If going to the cinema/pub is off limits for a devout Muslim, an invitation to the cinema won't be the best way to befriend them. If we invite them knowing these things are off limits for them, it is putting a stumbling block in their way to faith in Christ. Remember, we will be answerable to God. This isn't difficult, and actually is second nature to most of us anyway.

But, avoiding giving offense doesn't mean having compromising the gospel or allowing the PC brigade to shut down debate. In a free country no-one should have the right not to be offended. But many people think they do have the right not to be offended, and this is why in the last year or so street preachers have been arrested.

To proclaim Jesus as the way to God will cause offense to some, though there will always be those who are open to the message. But even in sharing the gospel we tailor our message depending on the audience, without compromising the gospel. Jesus didn't have an ABC of the gospel. He treated each person he encountered in a personal way, depending on their needs. Peter preached a sermon on the day of Pentecost full of Scriptural references, which only Jews would have understood. On the other hand, when Paul preached the gospel in Athens, he didn't use Scripture at all but quoted from their own poets to help explain the main points of the gospel.

This is the principle of the incarnation.

So, be considerate; remember we are not all the same; seek to be a good witness for Christ, and at all times pursue peace and mutual up building.