

## “The Nature of the Kingdom”

**Devotional Reading:** Proverbs 2:1–11 **Background Scripture:** Romans 14:10–23

### Romans 14:10–23 (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. <sup>11</sup> It is written:

“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’”

<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. <sup>14</sup> I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. <sup>15</sup> If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup> Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, <sup>18</sup> because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

<sup>19</sup> Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. <sup>20</sup> Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. <sup>21</sup> It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

<sup>22</sup> So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. <sup>23</sup> But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

## LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To identify the danger of sitting in judgment of others.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain the concept of mutual edification.
- **Daily Application:** To support and build up those with weaker faith.

## INTRODUCTION

### Something Bigger than Myself

Have you ever had a day to do just what you wanted, only to feel let down afterward? Maybe it was a day off from work. Maybe friends gave you a break from your normal duties. Somehow we often experience disappointment at the end of such times.

Why does that happen so often? Perhaps it is, to some extent, because we long to be part of something bigger than ourselves. “Me time” sounds great, but God has put in us a desire that our lives matter for others.

The church is too often (because even once is too often!) the place where people seem most devoted to their own preferences. Churches have become infamous for the pettiness of their arguments over matters of opinion. We all grieve this fact, but it is likely that we all have been part of the problem at times. The lesson will be the uncomfortable mirror in which we see ourselves in this regard.

## LESSON CONTEXT

The 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, "first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (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?

### **On Inappropriate Judging: Romans 14:10–13**

Paul introduced two disputes at the beginning of Romans 14: one about eating certain foods (Romans 14:2) and the other about the sacredness of certain days (14:5).

In Verse 10, we see him ask pointed questions to clarify what is at stake regarding these issues. Not all believers are mature, and love demands that the mature members of the family defer to the immature. Love protects people and gives them a chance to grow up. People may be difficult, but we must accept them and love for the Lord's sake.

The weak Christian does not yet understand and practice freedom in Jesus Christ. Jewish believers, raised under the law of Moses, had a difficult time adjusting to their new life. Conscience becomes strong as we accept what God says about us in the Word and act on it by faith. However, it takes time for conscience to develop, and we must be patient with one another.

So, Paul asked the weak Christian, "Why are you judging your brother?" Then he asked the strong Christian, "Why are you despising your brother?" Both strong and weak must stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and they will not judge each other—they will be judged by the Lord.

The Judgment Seat of Christ is that place where Christians will have their works judged by the Lord. It has nothing to do with our sins, since Christ has paid for them and they can be held against us no more (Rom. 8:1).

However, if any judging is to be done with regard to practices of dietary choices, that will be Christ's prerogative, not ours. Second, we will be called to account on the last day for all judgments we formulate (see Romans 14:12 and 2 Corinthians 5:10).

### **1. Why is it inappropriate to judge others or treat them as less important than oneself? (Romans 14:10–12)**

#### **What Do You Think?**

God's forthcoming judgment defines our responsibility, and His Word stresses human accountability (Matthew 12:36; Romans 3:19). Popular culture likes to quote Matthew 7:1–2 as a prohibition against any and

all judgments that Christians may express. However, that practice ignores the context in which Jesus uttered that warning. At certain times and in certain situations, making judgment is indeed valid and necessary (examples: Matthew 7:15–20; 1 Corinthians 5), but those cases are not in view here.

How do you decide when, if at all, believers should show judgment?

### **Digging Deeper**

How do Romans 16:17–18; 1 Corinthians 5:11–6:5; 1 Timothy 6:3–5; and Titus 1:10–16 inform your answer?

Verse 13 serves as a transition from what Paul says were no longer to do, to the positive action of what we should do instead. If we stopped with the first admonition, it might give the impression that Christians were to leave each other alone and let the weak remain weak. But this second admonition explains things further. The emphasis is on “brother.” It is the principle of brotherly love. If we love each other, we will seek to edify each other, build each other up in the faith.

Paul said that judging fellow believers is to give way to caring for them. Paul uses figures of speech to describe such caring: not to be a *stumbling block* (something in a roadway that can make someone trip, see also 1 Corinthians 8:9); an *obstacle* is something that blocks a path or causes a misstep. The two may be seen as synonyms. Paul uses similar figures of speech in Romans 9:33, reflecting the Hebrew parallelism of Isaiah 8:14. Paul further discusses this in Romans 14:20.

## **2. What did Paul say we as believers should do for our brothers and sisters in Christ? (Romans 14:13)**

### **On Personal Convictions: Romans 14:14–18**

The phrase *nothing is unclean in itself* points to the issue of eating food, which Paul introduced in Romans 14:2. Now he reaffirms the new distinction between clean and unclean foods: there is no distinction. This reflects what *the Lord Jesus* declared in Mark 7:14–23: purity is not about food but about a person’s inner character (compare Matthew 15:11). God always intended that Israel’s rules regarding clean and unclean food were not definitions of right and wrong behavior for all people but cultural boundaries that defined Israel as a distinct nation. Good and evil have always been about our inner dispositions that drive our actions.

Paul goes on to say in verse 15 of today’s lesson that believers must not insist on their liberty in the presence of those whose conscience would be offended. To do so is not to walk in love under the lordship of Christ, who died for them as well!

Years or decades of avoiding unclean foods can be a practice that is hard to let go of! If such a person’s conscience still considers a food unclean, then *for that person it [still] is unclean*. To the strong in faith Paul admonishes us to live a life of consideration for our neighbor. To do that then we must learn that even though there are things we feel we biblically may do, many of those same things, for the sake of others we should not do.

There is no virtue in flaunting Christian liberty. What something does to a person determines its quality. One man may be able to read certain books and not be bothered by them, while a weaker Christian reading the same books might be tempted to sin. But the issue is not, “How does it affect me?” so much as, “If I do this, how will it affect my brother?” Will it make him stumble? Will it grieve him or even destroy him by encouraging him to sin? Is it really worth it to harm a brother or sister just so I can enjoy some food? No!

## **3. What did Paul teach regarding personal convictions about clean and unclean foods? (Romans 14:14–15)**

### **What Do You Think?**

How will you show love toward believers who may have a stricter conscience than yours regarding behavior not prohibited by Scripture?

### **Digging Deeper**

How will you decide to forgo something in consideration for that believer?

Paul reaffirms that the position of the strong is right and good, but advises them not to let what is good for them become the object of misunderstanding.

The Kingdom of God does not consist in observing or not observing days, eating or not eating meats, or any other secondary issues of religious scruples, but in “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Not the *externals*, but the *eternals* must be first in our lives: righteousness, peace, and joy. Where do they come from? The Holy Spirit of God at work in our lives (see Rom. 5:1-2). If each believer would yield to the Spirit and major in a godly life, we would not have Christians fighting with each other over minor matters. Spiritual priorities are essential to harmony in the church.

In verse 18 of today’s lesson, Paul ascribes that the Spirit’s presence, not our adherence to food laws, marks us as belonging to God’s people (compare Ephesians 1:13). In identifying us as God’s righteous people, the Spirit empowers us to love others and so to surrender our own preferences. Life in the Spirit is better than even your favorite food!

#### **4. Instead of practices regarding food, what terms did Paul use to characterize God’s kingdom? (Romans 14:16-18)**

##### **What Do You Think?**

How should a believer respond to rules or preferences that seem uncomfortable, but not against Scripture?

##### **Digging Deeper**

How will you live with righteousness, peace, and joy in your above response?

#### **On Vital Imperatives: Romans 14:19–23**

The peace of God’s kingdom is a gift of God. But putting peace into practice is not automatic. Returning to stating imperatives, Paul tells his readers to *do what leads to peace* (compare 1 Peter 3:11). They must apply diligent effort to make sure that everyone in Christ’s body is respected, included, and loved. Conflict will be necessary when confronting doctrinal defection, moral defection, or divisiveness (see Romans 16:17–18; 1 Corinthians 5:11–6:5; 1 Timothy 6:3–5; Titus 1:10–16; 3:10). But such conflict should serve the greater good in protecting the integrity of the church.

More than just absence of conflict, peace means edifying one another, or building one another up. The noun *edification* and the verb *edify* compare human relationships to constructing a building (an edifice). Our aim is to make others stronger, their faith more resilient. Paul has much more to say on this subject in Romans 15:2; 1 Corinthians 14:3–26; 2 Corinthians 12:19; and Ephesians 4:11–13, 29.

#### **5. What things did Paul instruct his readers to pursue? (Romans 14:19)**

##### **What Do You Think?**

Who will you edify through your God-given sense of peace?

##### **Digging Deeper**

What steps will you take to avoid being a “stumblingblock” (Romans 14:13) to that person?

Paul repeats his observations from Romans 14:14, but more forcefully. The opposite of “edification” in 14:19 is *destroy* (v. 20). The idea is to be a cause of spiritual stumbling.

Convictions are fine, says the apostle, but not at the expense of the work of God. The reason simple. All foods are clean in themselves, but they become unclean to the one who eats them when his or her conscience tells them otherwise. For conscience’s sake that person should avoid them.

Paul goes on to reiterate in verse 21 of today's lesson that the best thing one who is strong in the faith can do is to assist one who is weak in the faith to become strong. This will never be accomplished if we parade our liberty in the face of the weak and offend that person.

#### **6. What did Paul say about a person's convictions as it relates to others? (Romans 14:20–21)**

Paul says that *faith* here means a firm conviction before God that what you believe is right (v. 22). Paul remarks that it is proper to have and cherish a conviction.

For those with the *faith* to affirm that all foods are clean, the important matter is not food but conscience. Some whose faith is weaker, who still believe some foods to be unclean, may follow others' examples and eat foods still thought (but wrongly so) to be unclean. And if they act against their own consciences in this way, they have sinned since actions that do not come from faith are *sin* by nature (v. 23).

#### **7. What did Paul mean by “whatever you believe ...keep between yourself and God” (Romans 14:22-23)?**

#### **POINTS TO PONDER**

1. We have no right to judge and condemn one another because the Jesus is the Judge! Each believer will have enough to do in keeping his own account right without interfering with others' accounts! (Romans 14:10-13).
2. 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 to help others mature in Christ. (vs. 14-19).
3. Be strong in your own conviction, yet humble and careful that your liberty doesn't cause others to sin. (vs. 20-23).

#### **CONCLUSION**

##### **Peace, Not Conflict**

Up to the point of the lesson text in Romans, Paul had spent many chapters reminding the Christians in Rome that no group had any preference before God. Faith in Jesus—not being in a certain biological lineage or doing better works—is what brings sinners of every ethnicity into God's kingdom. United with Him in death and resurrection, they are now dead to sin. They live a new life, empowered by God's Spirit, transformed to love and serve one another (Romans 6:1–14).

But can we bring that truth to shared meals? Can we exercise our faith in such a way as to defer to one another on matters of conscience? Can we be patient with one another as we learn to use our freedom for the benefit of others, not ourselves? The concern of those with strong faith should be for the welfare of those with weaker faith. The former must support the latter, both in what consciences direct and in the growth of faith toward greater understanding. Of such love, grace, patience, and edification is the kingdom of God.

##### **What Do You Think?**

Which concept or imperative in the lesson do you have the most trouble coming to grips with? Why?

**Digging Deeper** How will you resolve this problem?

**PRAYER** - Gracious Father, we thank You for our freedom in Christ! Lead us to use that freedom to build up others, never to tear down. May we be instruments of Your peace in the name of Your Son and our Savior, Jesus. Amen.

**THOUGHT TO REMEMBER** - Be strong enough to serve the weak.