

BIBLE STUDY: ROMANS #14

Scripture of Lesson: Romans 14: 1~23

Having definitely explained his doctrine of salvation, Paul wished to provide clear guidelines for the Christians' moral life. In addition to issues of sexual immorality, a number of other issues were hampering the spiritual progress of the Christians in the first century, such as judging people from diverse backgrounds, keeping the Jewish days and seasons, and prohibition of certain foods and drinks. Paul's goal in this chapter is to help the Christians enjoy the freedom gained through Christ and yet fulfill the law of love through due consideration of others and being mindful of one's own actions rather than judging others. Let us consider how these teachings apply to us today.

1. Do not judge others but consider others: v. 1~13

In any community of people there is bound to be an effort to establish a set of norms for its members. In the Christian church of the first century where the believers came from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, sharing the same faith in Jesus Christ and yet having propensities for different traditional cultures and traditions. Some of the Jews, in particular, had strong feelings about foods that are prohibited [v. 2-3] and the Jewish holidays to keep [v. 6]. Some of the Gentiles tended to discriminate those who were slaves [v. 4].

About judging others Jesus taught His disciples not to judge:

Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. [Luke 6: 37]

We might protest to this teaching saying "How can we live daily without making some sort of judgments on diverse issues; between right and wrong, between what is moral and what is immoral, between what is desirable and what is to be avoided." So, we need to study other teachings of Jesus to better understand His teaching:

Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment. [John 7: 24]

In this verse Jesus is teaching us not to discriminate people based on their outward appearance such as color, clothing, stature etc. Rather, we should discern people with the heart and mind of God, which is always righteous. How would God view people? We can understand this by studying the way Jesus treated the people of different backgrounds, social strata and races. He accepted all those who came to Him with their needs. However, when the religious leaders came to Him to ensnare Him with tricky questions or to criticize Him, He knew of their motives and offered harsh criticisms about them. And this is how He explained His own judgments:

I can of Myself do nothing. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is righteous, because I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me. [John 5: 30]

To such hypocritical religious leaders the Spirit of God felt indignation. Therefore, the judgments coming out of Jesus' lips reflected God's righteous indignation and criticism. Yet, Jesus had in His heart a yearning that some of them would be converted and come to know Him as their Messiah and God. Withholding judgement against these wrongful religious leaders was not God's desire but by convicting with righteous judgment God desired them to be made right.

I have come as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness. And if anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day. [John 12: 46-48]

If our Lord Jesus does not judge those who hear the word of God and do not believe or live truly as Christians, who are we to judge others. They will be judged by the Son of God on the final Day of Judgment in accordance with the Scripture. While He was on the earth, Jesus the Evangelist focused on 'saving souls' and not judging because that was the purpose of His mission on the earth. Apostle Paul realized this also and wanted to teach the Christians in Rome to edify one another and not to judge one another.

In verse 9 Paul states this point in his own expression:

For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. [v 14:9]

Paul wanted the Christians to understand that the work of Christian sanctification was the Lord's work so that Christ might become the Lord and King in each of their lives [v. 9]. The church of Christ is not a human organization where its members are bound by the rules and standards set forth through human efforts. It is rather a community of believers where the Holy Spirit works in each and in all of their hearts and lives so that Christ is the Lord and King in each and over all of them. Therefore, Christians need to consider others in the church so that they do not become hindrances to the spiritual progress of others.

Discussion topic: Jesus taught His disciples not to judge and yet He judged the religious people of the day harshly. What is the guiding principle of this teaching for us today?

2. Fulfill the law of love in food and drink: v. 14~23

The matter of food and drink came about because the Christian worship service included a common supper together in the pattern of the last supper. So the Sunday worship meeting was called "Lord's Supper" or "Love Feast." People brought foods, much like potluck meals of this day, and shared food together. For this reason the Sunday feasts were often held in later afternoon or early evening. Although sharing of the communion and spiritual gifts should be the focus, eating and drinking tended to take an important part of the Sunday worship gathering.

In the second part of Chapter 14, therefore, Paul is teaching them "the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost [v. 17]." Paul further teaches in verse 19, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." In later years in the 1st century, we note the worship gatherings tended to stay focused on the

spiritual aspects rather than having a meal together, although post-worship meals are still practiced in many churches.

Apparently certain offenses arose from foods and drinks. Some believers tended to have a meal by themselves before other believers—more like a social club within a church. Jews favored eating kosher foods together by themselves. Some people were vegetarians and did not favor having meat. Some did not believe in having wine while others enjoyed them. And then there was the issue of foods offered to idols that were brought to love feasts. So foods and drinks became a source of hindrance to certain believers' spiritual progress and marred the fellowship in the church. Paul wanted this phenomenon to be eliminated. He did not wish the meat to destroy the work of God [v. 20]. Thus, he is exhorting them to fulfill the law of love by being considerate of others in this matter of having meals together.

Discussion topic: Let us examine what things we might be doing that can offend other Christian brothers and sisters. How can we be more considerate of others when having fellowship with others?