

Liberty and the Lordship of Christ

Romans 14:7-12

October 11, 2020
Steve DeWitt

Last week we dove into one of the most misunderstood and misapplied portions of Romans and the Bible. Romans 14 continues Paul's application of the gospel, what he calls, "*the mercies of God*" in Romans 12:1. That verse pivots from the vertical gospel to the horizontal application of the vertical gospel. Our reconciliation with God through justification and union with Christ has huge implications for how we live, and in Romans 14, how we treat each other when we disagree.

Last week's teaching was a bit of a summary introduction to the divisions within the church at Rome in the first century. There were two main factions. One, was the Jewish Christians who were steeped in Old Testament law and Levitical practices who carried into their Christian lives certain Jewish scruples like dietary laws and Sabbath practices. They are Christians, but their background creates issues of conscience on these things. Paul calls this group, the weak in faith.

The other group was the Gentile Christians. They had no Old Testament lifestyle legacy. They had been pagans through and through. The restrictive consciences of the Jewish Christians were bothersome to the Gentile Christians and seemed irrelevant once Christ had come. They looked down on their Jewish brethren as silly and immature. Paul calls this group the strong in faith.

The Jewish Christians were appalled that the Gentile Christians would ignore the Sabbath and treat every day the same. Similarly, at the church potluck they were distressed at all the ham and cheese soups. Could these Gentiles leave pig off the menu, please?

These may sound a bit strange to our modern ears but is it so hard to see why these things could be hard? Imagine if you moved to an area dominated by the Amish or Mennonites. All the churches are filled with Amish believers. You pull up in your Ford F-150 truck, but step through horse manure as you enter church. Perhaps some from that background would be appalled by your truck, and you are distressed by all the manure and judgmentalism. How would you feel?

At Rome, the weak in faith judged the strong. The strong in faith despised the weak. It was a mess. The whole chapter and part of the next is dedicated to this problem, so this was no small division in the church. What should be done about it?

"For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? 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 confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:7-12 ESV).

Is this matter really about carnivores and herbivores? Pork and beans? What's really at stake here? Romans 14 tells us that how we treat each other is a sure indication of who is

Lord of our life. Is it me? Are these non-essential differences and preferences spaces for me to exert what I want or is there something much deeper and meaningful in view?

Whose are We?

"For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14:7).

Living or dying *to* ourselves is another way of saying we don't live *for* ourselves. This is a description of selfish living. My life is mine. I do what I want. I live for my desires first and foremost. My life is my own. I live all about me. *"And none of us dies to himself."* This self-orientation extends even to death as I believe that I am the captain of my destiny. My future is mine to control. In the words of the poem "Invictus,"

*"It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul."¹*

In terms of Romans 14 preferences, what does a professing Christian like this look like in a local church? While they wouldn't admit it, their posture is that the church exists for them. The other members and the leaders must bend to them. The tender consciences of other Christians are there to be trampled upon. I'll eat what I want when I want. I'll drink what I want when I want. I'll Sabbath if I want. How this affects you isn't really my concern because my first priority is how this affects ME.

Friends, unless you are in leadership at a local church, you likely don't realize how rampant this is. This is consumer Christianity at its worst. It says, *I'm here loving and serving with you until I perceive something better. Then I'll quickly jump to the latest fad as I continue to meet MY spiritual needs. Church is about me. I'm the captain of my soul.*

In the church at Rome this was creating chaos and Paul's first point is one of ownership: *"For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's"* (Romans 14:8). You may ask, *how did we become the possession of Christ?* We were bought with the precious blood of Jesus. He died on the cross for our sins and guilt. It was a ransom payment for our redemption. This ransom received by faith places us in a relationship to Jesus where he is our Lord. Jesus is the captain of my soul. The Lord of my life, death, and eternity.

- *"And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised"* (2 Corinthians 5:15).
- *"You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So, glorify God in your body"* (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

The foundation of Christian liberty is not unity nor unanimity, it is Lordship. Who is really enthroned in my life? Do you see his comparison? The self-enthroned professing Christian (I say it that way because such a person is an oxymoron) approaches differences of conscience or lifestyle practice like a hammer approaches a nail—bam! His or her primary concern is that nothing in the church impede their full experience of liberty. Who is their ultimate? Self. At best, this is an incredibly immature Christian. At worst, this is a

¹ William Earnest Henley, "Invictus," 1888.

pretending Christian, but Christ is neither Lord nor Savior of their life. Not everyone wearing a Christian name badge in the local church is actually regenerate, and often, an unwillingness to apply love to liberty is a good indication that they are a pretender.

Whose possession are we? The Lord Jesus Christ.

Who is the Priority?

The mature Christian lives verse 8, "*So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's*" (Romans 14:8).

We could easily call this the *All About Him* approach to Christian liberty. Weak in faith, don't judge the strong because Jesus is judge. Strong in faith, don't despise the weak because Jesus is their Savior, too.

The glory of Jesus Christ is our prime directive, and we must approach these otherwise divisive issues from his perspective. What's best for Jesus' name? Jesus' fame? Jesus' glory? This isn't about me. It's not about bacon or vegetables, Sabbaths or not, wine drinking, or a host of other secondary matters.

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Romans 14:17-19).

When people elevate eating and drinking to some kind of measure of maturity or spirituality, the wrong thing is in the wrong place. What does maturity look like in these non-essential issues? Is it the freedom to do something that makes you mature? Listen dear church family, this is another legalism trap, particularly for weaker-conscience Christians who find some freedom in an area. They discover freedom and begin to bask in it, then look down on others from their background who still don't enjoy this thing, and think, *I am more enlightened and godlier than they are.*

There are two kinds of legalists: those who think they are godly because they don't, and those who think they are more spiritual because they do. Both are in bondage. **True freedom is when you are free NOT to express your freedom for the sake of peace and unity.**

I'm going to sit on this because I have seen this over and over. I have preached this type of message many times and we have often said we want the Bible to draw the lifestyle lines for us. Many of us, myself included, came out of a Christian background where the lines were drawn more conservatively than the Bible and consciences are often aligned with the man-made lines more than the Bible-made lines.

So, people with a weaker conscience come to our church and some of these lines are challenged and perhaps even changed. This is good, except when it isn't. I have observed the swing to the other side where there easily is a kind of pride in their freedom and even a flaunting of it. Some become obnoxious about it to the annoyance and hurt of their legacy family and friends. They will post on social media their participation in this new freedom. They insist on their new freedom at the family Thanksgiving meal. They talk about it openly. It takes mature eyes to see what is happening. They have traded one false measure of godliness for another.

What is true Christian maturity? What is true freedom? It's not the freedom to do something or not do something, but the freedom to do it or not is based on what is in the best interest of Jesus' church and his people.

What am I really saying? This:

Jesus ≠ Me
Me Others

Jesus = Others
Me Me

The question is not first, *do I have liberty? but rather who is my Lord?* Who is the functional priority for the choices I make in community with other Christians? We can't say Jesus is our Lord and trash the church for the sake of our preference! The kingdom of God isn't about the preferences! When we go to war over a preference or some secondary matter, we are placing ourselves on the throne and denying Jesus his rightful place as Lord of the church.

Are we thinking about that when we argue about eating meat or vegetables? No. We turn insignificant things into ultra-significant things and these matters easily take on a life and urgency of their own.

I used the analogy of the Beirut warehouse that blew up last week. That stockpile of ammonium nitrate blew up the city because it was allowed to be stored in the harbor. All it took was a spark to blow it up.

There is ammonium nitrate laying all over any local church. Unfortunately, every local church has pyromaniacs too. They don't carry blowtorches, they carry Bibles, but they love to light things on fire and see them go boom! Lest we treat unity and love in the church as sport...

To Whom Will We Give an Account?

Paul hastens to warn us that we will give an account for our lives at the Judgment Seat of Christ:

"Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? 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 confess to God.' So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:10-12).

The context for Jesus' evaluation of our lives here in Romans 14 is how we treat each other, particularly in areas we don't agree. Do we judge each other? Despise each other? But Paul, how do we keep from these sins?

Christian love. Love as displayed by Jesus when he put our needs ahead of his own. This same love for my brother or sister in Christ compels me to put their best interests ahead of my own. In love to think about *"So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Romans 14:19).* As 1 Corinthians 13:5 reminds us, *"[Love] does not insist on its own way."*

Here is the order of operations in Christian liberty:

- 1. What would please the Lord?**
- 2. What would edify others?**
- 3. What promotes peace and advances the gospel?**
- 4. What does my freedom enjoy?**

If everything's aligned and the final question is clear, then green light. Enjoy that freedom. How to do so faithfully is the rest of the chapter and our next three messages or so.

Is this relevant for today's church? More relevant than any year of my nearly 30 years of pastoring. There is more ammonium nitrate around the church these days than any I can remember.

I appeal especially to those of you who may want to turn culture wars into church wars or perhaps have taken a strong personal position on COVID-19 matters or politics or racial tensions. Have you elevated your personal opinion above what leads to peace and mutual edification? Are you possibly sowing division for the sake of vegetables or masks? Someday, when all this settles down and society moves on, I think you will look back on divisive attitudes with regret. If not, certainly at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The world will fight over anything and everything because all they have is this world. But in the church, we have Christ, and he is Lord of our lives and our eternities. I urge you not to use the church as your battlefield for non-essential, non-gospel issues.

As an example, I read one seminary professor and theologian apply Romans 14 to the debate about masks:

*"This is not a plea for Christians to disengage with the culture. Rather, it is a plea for Christians on both sides to stop trying to use the visible church as a lever in the culture war. The visible church, the institutional church, is not a soldier in the culture war for the right or the left. It is Christ's embassy to the world, whose ministers and ambassadors are charged with three essential functions: 1. Preach the gospel purely; 2. Administer the sacraments (holy baptism and holy supper) purely; 3. Administer church discipline faithfully.... We do not confess a position about masks and viruses. This means that Christians are free to take different positions on the question... They are not, however, entitled to draft the visible church into their army. They are not free to revile those in the church that disagree with them nor are they free to split the church over such questions."*² (Professor R. Scott Clark)

If you want to debate Dr. Fauci, fine. Don't bring it into the church. If you want your Aunt Lulu to win the presidency, fine. Don't bring it into the church. If your passion is the Asian snail, that's great. Don't bring that crusade into the church. We aren't here to decide what's a pandemic or an endangered species. Advocate for those things elsewhere. We are the church of Jesus Christ. We were bought with his blood. We live to him. We die to him. We restrain freedom if it helps his church. We refrain from condescension and judgmentalism for his sake. We love each other in spite of differences and unify around his gospel, which we mutually believe, treasure, and worship. Jesus is our Lord, and we do what we do because he is who he is.

That is to say, even in areas of disagreement, we must be *all about him*.

² R. Scott Clark, "Of Masks and the Weaker Brothers," *The Heidelbergblog*, heidelbergblog.net, July 30, 2020.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*.
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© 2020 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.