



Paul's Letter to The Romans

No Man is an Island Romans 14:1-12

^{ESV} **Romans 14:1**...As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. ¹⁰ 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; ¹¹ for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." ¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

I had spent the whole morning sitting on the floor in a Hare Krishna temple listening to a Hare Krishna philosopher go on and on about the wonders of Krishna and the Bhagvad Gita. Now, before you get worried, I have to tell you I wasn't there by choice but rather because my foreign mission's professor at

Dallas Seminary, a wonderful man named Ron Blue, had decided our class needed to go out on a field trip to reacquaint ourselves with the lost.

He was right about that by the way.

Anyway, Professor Blue met our class out on the parking lot at DTS one morning and we drove in formation over to a Hare Krishna temple just east of downtown Dallas to try to renew our sense of purpose in calling the lost to repentance.

Now I am guessing that Prof. Blue intended to accomplish that by just having us sit there and listen to this Krishna philosopher teach his people. I am not really sure if Prof. Blue knew exactly what would happen but I have to tell you after an hour or so I was beginning to lose confidence and I was beginning to get pretty irritated and not just at the guy up front with the microphone. I was thinking something like this, **“You know I am paying three hundred dollars a semester hour to sit here cross-legged on the hardwood floor of a Krishna temple to listen to a pagan that I wouldn’t otherwise give the time of day.”**

But I stayed and listened to this Krishna philosopher drone on and on. I sat and I listened and I sat and I listened and I sat and I listened. And after awhile, and I know this never ever happens to any of you, I began to drift off and when I did I began to turn my attention to the little Krishna kids laying there around me on the hardwood floor, coloring in what I soon realized were Hare Krishna coloring books. Up until that time I had no idea there was any such thing.

They were lying around me there on the hardwood floor, ignoring their teacher, ignoring me and the other seminarians, all dressed up in their Krishna clothes,

with their Krishna haircuts, coloring pictures of Krishna and some of the celebrities off the Krishna faith and it absolutely broke my heart. I began to think to myself, **“Now these kids ought not be coloring pictures of Krishna and stuff like that...they ought to be coloring pictures of Paul and the apostles or of Moses and the 10 plagues or of David and Goliath. They ought be in a class someone learning their catechism questions and answers or saying memory verses or learning the books of the Bible or learning to sing songs like *Jesus Loves Me.*”**

And you know it struck me as so sad that I began to cry...quietly at first and then out loud. After a while, some of the other guys began to cry out loud too. So we sat there a bunch of seminarian eggheads, crying out loud in a Hare Krishna Temple for these poor, precious lost souls...watching their mothers and fathers do every thing in their power to bring them up in the doctrine of demons when all of a sudden this Krishna philosopher up at the front of the auditorium and his fellow worshippers decided it was time to unveil their Krishna deities.

Well I have to tell you, being from East Texas, I was not quite sure what to expect. I wasn't quite sure what it meant to unveil a deity, so I wasn't quite sure whether it was something I wanted to watch or not and then they pulled back a velvet curtain there on a stage behind their teacher to show us a couple manikins with blue skin dressed in wildly exotic Indian and eastern attire. Now I have to tell you, I quit crying almost immediately and sat there cross-legged with an enormously stupid expression on my face, you know like when a calf runs across a new gate, not knowing whether to laugh out loud or to start swinging when our Krishna hosts began to whirl and dance and beat their tambourines and ring their chimes and work themselves up to state of ecstatic frenzy.

While they were doing that, I kept thinking of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel.

Anyway, they closed the curtain after a few minutes and stowed away their deities and began to calm down and we realized they were wrapping things up and we began to stand up and put on our shoes and exit the temple. At the door, there was a young Krishna man who thanked each of us for coming, blessed each of us and handed us a little paper cup (kind of like you sometimes find on cupcakes) with a piece of candy in it, a piece of handmade, homemade Krishna candy...as sort of a token of their affection or good will.

I took my little paper cup and walked out the door. Now, I had been pretty much at the end of the line so most of the other guys had gone out before me. As I stepped out the door and down the step I noticed there on the ground, not five or six feet out the door, an enormous pile of paper cups and in each paper cup was an untouched, handmade, homemade piece of Krishna candy.

I knew, of course, immediately what had happened. Almost to a man, my seminary brothers had determined they were not going to eat any of the candy made by these pagan idolaters. They were not going to take a chance on being contaminated by Krishna candy. They were not about to let one of those blue skinned manikins get any sort of foothold down in their soul.

And I have to tell you, I was, I was torn about what to do with my own little paper cup, with my own little piece of handmade, homemade Krishna candy. I was not quite as set in my ways then as I am now.

The men were looking back to see what the guys coming out were going to do, so I just stopped and stepped aside and turned and looked back too when Prof. Blue came out with a giant glob of Krishna candy in his mouth. He looked sort of like a hamster with a cheek bulging with candy. He even walked over to where the guys had thrown down there candy, I had a feeling he had done this before, and sort of looked through what they had thrown down to see if anything was salvageable. I do remember that on his way back to the car he asked first one guy and then the next, **“Hey, are gonna eat that...and if you are not...how about...uh...handing it over?”**

I stood there for a moment and finally made my own personal decision about what to do with my piece of candy and...and...and I wanted to tell you that story because it is a great illustration about the difference between what Paul means when he talks about the **“weak”** and the **“strong”**...and because it will help me to further illustrate an important point because unless I miss my guess the only thing you are wondering right now is whether or not I ate that piece of handmade, homemade, Krishna candy. Am I right? Inquiring minds want to know.

You see there is something in the heart of man that cannot help but form an opinion about such things...something that causes a man to more or less make up his mind apart from a rational use of his mind. There is something in man that causes a man to react to such things based on a feeling deep down in his in his gut...to make up his mind from somewhere deep down in his soul. In such cases, a man goes more or less by what he feels and not just by what he knows. Do you know what I mean by that? And you know what, the Apostle Paul writing through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit knew that. He knew perfectly

well that there are some things...some things some believers cannot bring themselves to do.

And here's the funny thing; he didn't disparage that. He didn't put it down at all.

He didn't say, **"Oh for heaven's sake, why don't you guys grow up!"** That's what I expected but that is not what he said. No, what he said was this, **"O.K., if that is the way you feel, that's alright. Just don't be so all-fired judgmental. Whenever you are feeling particularly pompous, just remember that person...that person whose liberty regarding the thing you despise...that person has a master and it's not you."** That's his point. And it's such a simple point that it is easy to read through this and not be quite satisfied with his admonition.

No in verses 1-12 of chapter fourteen, Paul makes the point that we simply must stop judging our brothers and sisters when it comes to issues of conscience. Now that doesn't mean that we ought to turn a blind-eye to gross immorality. Adultery, murder, theft, a scornful and wicked tongue...those are not issues of conscience.

They're not. They're really not.

Those things are issues of sin but...whether a person drinks a glass of wine or eats a piece pork or even eats a piece of handmade, homemade Hare Krishna candy is, in fact, an issue of conscience and ought not simply to be tolerated but rather embraced.

Now I wanted to put that picture in your mind...that tension because it will very much help to understand, I think, the tension going on in the text. You see Paul has been compelling the Romans to live in light of their justification. He has urged them to present their bodies as living sacrifices through the renewing of their minds, and there has been a whole series of imperatives about how to do just that. Paul tells the Romans to:

Stop thinking so highly of themselves and start to thinking rightly about themselves as gifted individuals within the body of Christ. (12:3-8)

He tells them to stop being hypocritical or pretentious in their love for each other but to nurture each other and to treat each other with kindness.

He tells them not to seek revenge when they are persecuted by unbelievers but rather to return good for evil and kindness for unkindness.

He tells them to submit themselves to the authorities appointed by God.

He tells them to do their best to fulfill the royal law of love by loving their neighbors which would mean they were striving to get to the heart of the law of God.

And then finally we saw last week that he tells them to do all of that in light of the historic time in which they live and in light of the imminent return of Christ.

Now what we are going to see in this morning's text is that Paul is simply going to continue and expand that thought. And to do that Paul is going to introduce the contrast between what he calls the weak and the strong. Now in the context, it appears to me and to almost all of the commentators that that the "weak brothers" here in the text are Jewish Christians and the "stronger brothers" here are probably Gentiles.

Not what I think is interesting that today we tend to turn Paul's understanding of what constituted "weakness" and "strength" completely around.

What I mean by that is this. Our tendency today is to think of the Jewish Christians of the first century as the "**stronger brothers**" and Gentile believers of the first century as the "**weaker brothers.**" But Paul's thought is the exact opposite of that. Now part of the confusion comes from the fact that we automatically understand "**stronger**" and "**weaker**" to mean "**stronger spiritually**" or "**weaker spiritually.**" And I suppose that the pejorative connotation associated with the word "**weak**" certainly allows for that or maybe even buttresses that idea. But Paul is not talking exclusively of "**spirituality**" here. He is not simply saying, "**It would be far better if all of you would just get over it and be strong.**" Rather, he is talking about sensitivity or scruples with regard to extraneous issues like food and drink and celebration of religious holidays and the like. I like the way N.T. Wright puts it:

By 'weak in faith' he doesn't mean that the religious devotion of this group is thin and watery. Nor does he mean to imply that they have a shaky grasp on the basic points of Christian faith, or a wavering belief in them. His point, rather, is that they have not worked out, or not as fully as he and some others have done, the consequences of believing in God as creator and Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord. For Paul, believing this meant that all foods were now 'clean' (as Mark 7.19 points out that Jesus had implied) and that, though keeping holy days might help devotion, a Christian was free to observe special days or not, provided this was done with a desire to honor the Lord.¹

Now I think that is interesting for a couple of reasons. I came out of a tradition that determined that the more convictions and restrictions a person could impose on himself and on other people, the more spiritual he was. But Paul doesn't seem to think that way at all. In fact, it seems to me that Paul felt an enormous

sense of freedom with regard to these matters of preference. Certainly, Paul identifies himself with the “**stronger brothers**”. You can see that if you look down to chapter 15:1.

^{ESV} **Romans 15:1**...We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.

Notice how he puts it...“**We who are strong**”? You see Paul thought of himself with the group he called the “**strong**”. That means that Paul didn’t have any scruples about food or drink whatsoever. Now you can see, I hope, how remarkable that would have been...how remarkable that a Pharisaical Jewish Rabbi could come to the position that eating a “**ham sandwich**” with a Gentile might be a good thing. That is a gigantic stretch for a Pharisaical Jewish rabbi. But Paul was not content to just leave it there. He was not content to just say, “**Well some of us are strong and some of us are weak and that’s all there is to it.**”

No, Paul determined that since there are those who are “**weak**” and since there are those who are “**strong**” that God, in fact, ordained such things to be and that each group had an obligation to get on with each other group to the mutual edification of both groups. We have an obligation to push each other along in our sanctification.

Now that having been said let’s come at last to the text.

^{ESV} **Romans 14:1**...As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

Now notice what Paul says and how he says it.

He wants the Romans to receive those that are weak in faith which implies that the majority of those at Rome are strong in the faith. You see the way he puts it sort of hints that the **“strong position”** is the majority position and that certainly buttresses the idea that the **“strong in faith”** are predominantly Gentiles. But notice what adds, **“Welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”**

You see Paul wants **“the strong in faith”**...whatever that means to welcome the **“weak in faith”** whatever that means and to so in a particular way and not just for the purpose of straightening them out.²

Now in verse two through five, he identifies in a very broad sort of way the area of contention.

^{ESV} **Romans 14:2**...One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. ⁵ One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Now here's what I think was going on. I suspect there were a number of Jewish Christians in the church at Rome that struggled with regard to eating meat with Gentiles. Now it wasn't the presence of Gentiles in and of themselves that caused the problem. I think rather it was the meat that caused the problem. I think, their concern...their scruple...may have been that the meat being served might not be

Kosher. That is, I think some of the Jewish Christians in Rome may have been worried about whether the meat they were being served had been properly drained of its blood. As a result, they may have preferred simply not to risk defilement and to eat only vegetables whenever they were around their Gentile brothers. It might help to remember the biblical account of Daniel when he and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were taken in captivity.

And it is the same sort of thing with regard to Jewish holidays and holy days. Being raised to celebrate Passover may have been hard to give up especially for those who saw it pointing toward Christ.

So Paul's admonition goes like this, "Now listen those of you that only eat vegetables don't sit in judgment on those that feel free to eat whatever they want. And those of you that are strong don't despise or look with contempt on those that have scruples about such things. And it is the same with the observance of holy days."

He makes his point crystal clear in verse 4.

^{ESV} **Romans 14:4**...Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Do you see what he is saying? He's saying, "Don't be tear your brother down because the Lord is going to make him stand and in your effort to tear him down you mean that you are actually going to wind up fighting against God if you do."

You can see that the implication seems to be that while you might be willing to knock down this person, especially because they have a different view than you, God is not, in fact, willing to do so and actually intends to make that person stand and stand to very end.

Now what we are going to see as chapter 14 unfolds is that Paul is going to give special instruction to the strong.³ He is going to stop addressing the weaker brothers almost altogether and he is going to turn to the strong and say, **“O.K., you guys don’t have any scruples regarding about food or drink or any of this stuff so let me tell you how you have to act toward those that do.”** That is, he is going to address special attention to those whose consciences are not burdened down by self-imposed regulations regarding what they eat or what they drink or what holy day they celebrate.

And here’s what he is going to say. He is going to say, **“If you are strong and not burdened down by all kinds of scruples with regard to these things, then you need to strive to deal gently with those that are...that are sensitive toward those kinds of things...and you need to seek to edify and build up their faith rather than stomping their sensitive faith flat under the guise of liberty. Just because you don’t have any scruples regarding these things doesn’t mean that you can just roll over a sensitive brother that does.”**

Now there is something about that that troubles me. It troubles me because as an American I want to do what I want to do. Let me say it this way, **“As a Texan, I am used to marching to the beat of my own drum. I want to do what I want to do. I want to do that without any regard for how it will impact other people.”**

I want my own personal right of choice and preference and I don't want to have to worry about whether someone's tender conscience is going to get caught up in my wake. The problem is, of course, that is not the Christian way. It's certainly a Texan way of thinking. It may even be an American way of thinking but it is not a Christian way of thinking. The Christian way is to regard others more highly than our self. The Christian way is to be concerned about the good of others more than fulfilling our own personal desires. That is the way of liberation.

I love what F.F. Bruce writes:

Paul enjoyed his Christian liberty to the full. Never was there a Christian more thoroughly emancipated from un-Christian inhibitions and taboos. So completely emancipated was he from spiritual bondage that he was not even in spiritual bondage to his emancipation.⁴

Don't you love that? **"So emancipated that he is not even in bondage to his emancipation."** So free in Christ, that he doesn't spend every single moment wrapped up in trying to exercise his freedom. He is free, free to be free...free to give way to others...free even to submit to others.

I think that is the point Luther is trying to make in the opening paragraph of his great work, *On the Freedom of a Christian Man*. Luther writes this:

To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning the freedom and the bondage of the spirit:

Here's his first proposition.

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

Here's his second.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.⁵

Now you know what, "**Both things are true.**" And the problem is we have to learn to live life in light of that. We are free to do what we please and yet under obligation not to do whatever we please just because it pleases us.

You can see, I think, how Paul hammers that home in verse 5.

^{ESV} **Romans 14:5**...One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶ The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. ¹⁰ 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; ¹¹ for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." ¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Now I have to tell you, I love Paul's conclusion. It goes like this:

"Alright, many of you have your own opinions and scruples about things that are adiaphora or non-essential. Each of you ought to be persuaded in your own mind about what is right. But here's the thing to remember. Your brother does

what he does because he thinks it honors God. You do what you do because you think it honors God. But none of us live in isolation of each other. We live and we die connected at the hip to the Body of Christ. Therefore, this looking down your nose at someone because they have a different view of relatively unimportant matters has got to go. And those of you that despise other's frailties seem to have forgotten that Jesus died for their salvation. So stop all this judgment...judgment is coming soon enough. And when it does we want be judging each other we'll be evaluated by God himself.

This is one of the few places where I think a piece of poetry is helpful. This is, of course, John Donne.

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

Now, we are out of time and must stop. We'll continue our study next week picking up right here where we have left off. But I do have one final word for you before we pray and it has to do with that piece of candy. People always want to know, **"Did you eat it?"**

The answer is, “Yes, yes I did.” But let me hasten to say that if I had it to do over...I’d...I’d...do the same thing you would do. Let’s pray.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans Pt. 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 98.

² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* in the New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 837.

³ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News For the World*, (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 364.

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963), 243.

⁵ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian” taken from *Vol. 31: Luther’s Works, Vol. 31*. Ed. by J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1957).