

Investigating Personal Freedom

Message Magazine's Online Devotional for Thursday, March 12, 2015

Based Upon Romans 14

I absolutely love the Bible! It has been the subject of much debate and scrutiny for more years than I can count, but our God has made certain that the power of His words, and the certainty of the truth they indicate will stand the test of time. The valued principles that are resident within its pages, along with the power and presence of His blessed Holy Spirit, have changed the lives of countless millions of people who have encountered God Himself there. As a result, they have been transformed from hopeless wretches, speeding down the highway to eternal death, to blessed men and women whose characters are being transformed into the very image of Jesus Christ as we await His arrival to eradicate all sin and death forever. In light of this I need to highlight a very important principle, which will inform our brief devotional thought for today. The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah taught, "Whom shall he teach knowledge? And whom shall he make to understand doctrine? Them that are weaned from the milk, And drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; Line upon line, line upon line; Here a little, and there a little:" (Isaiah 28:9-10). That is to say that if we are ever to arrive at an understanding of truth as it is in Jesus from God's Word, we must allow the Scriptures to inform our understanding. We must compare Scripture with Scripture. Let me share just one more principle directly from the mouth of Jesus before we tackle today's theme: "If any man desires to do His will (God's pleasure), he will know (have the needed illumination to recognize, and can tell for himself) whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking from Myself and of My own accord and on My own authority." (John 7:17, AMP). Indeed there was a direct context in play here, but the principle remains consistent, nonetheless in Scripture: Those who are willing to submit to God's revelations will always grow to fully understand them. Now ask yourself, "Am I willing to do God's will and grow?"

Romans 14 seems to be a massive plot full of land mines awaiting one false move that will blow off a spiritual body part if we are not careful. Let's make this real easy at the onset here. The chapter is not about eating pork or poison. It is not about self-sanctifying Sunday or even Thursday above the only day God made holy, the seventh-day Sabbath. The focus of the chapter is much simpler and clearer than all of that. It is two-fold: First, Jesus, the Lord of us all, and the One who gave Himself for us is the only qualified Judge (John 5:22). He knows and sees all, not us. It is to Him that we owe homage, not any of us. Therefore, since we all are subject to Him, we must put away our blasphemous, uneven scales of injustice, and allow our God to do what only He can do in each of our lives. The second general theme of the chapter is that those who claim to follow Christ, must not only choose against judgementalism, but also choose to protect the consciences of our brothers and sisters who are weaker in the faith, by not doing things, even lawful things, around them, which could be confusing to them. These would become stumbling blocks to them. It does not get much simpler or clearer than that.

Now, many of you may be thinking that I danced all around the points of

contention here. Never fear, my friends. It is time to employ Isaiah's principle now. Can we find any Scripture that gives context to Paul saying that some eat meats and others eat veggies, but it's all good? Absolutely. There is no way in the world that Paul was in any way attempting to assert that only weak individuals would continue to keep the biblical dietary laws of clean and unclean. God was very clear that certain things should never pass our lips. They are harmful and unclean. Consuming scavenging creatures of all kinds will always be unclean. Consuming certain animal fats and all blood will always be unclean. Consuming even clean animals that are diseased and ready to die, or were injured or killed by other animals will always be harmful and thus unsanctioned by Scripture (Please refer to the website www.amazingdiscoveries.org and type "unclean meats" into the search box for in-depth study on this subject).

So what was Paul saying then? "Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that "we all have knowledge" about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church. Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. But the person who loves God is the one whom God recognizes. So, what about eating meat that has been offered to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God. There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many lords. But for us, There is one God, the Father, by whom all things were created, and for whom we live. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created, and through whom we live. However, not all believers know this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. It's true that we can't win God's approval by what we eat. We don't lose anything if we don't eat it, and we don't gain anything if we do. But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble. For if others see you—with your "superior knowledge"—eating in the temple of an idol, won't they be encouraged to violate their conscience by eating food that has been offered to an idol? So because of your superior knowledge, a weak believer for whom Christ died will be destroyed. And when you sin against other believers by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong, you are sinning against Christ. So if what I eat causes another believer to sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live—for I don't want to cause another believer to stumble." (1 Corinthians 8, NLT).

Simply stated, there were Gentile and Jewish converts to the newfound Christian faith. Jewish converts, who obviously ate only clean meats, would get their meats from marketplaces where the Gentile converts knew the false-god worshippers would get their meats for sacrifice. That was exceedingly troubling to them. In their early conversion, they were too weak to understand that a false god could not make clean meat become unclean. So they abstained. Paul taught the Jewish converts to stop using their liberty (to eat clean meats that were sacrificed to impotent idols) as a stumbling block to their Gentile brothers and sisters. He said, "Let not then your good be evil spoken of:" (Romans 14:16).

The issue of holy days was very similar. There is no way Paul was in any way abrogating the Holy Law of God, which enjoins all to keep holy the Seventh-

day Sabbath. Please refer to the website www.amazingdiscoveries.org and type "Sabbath" into the search box for in-depth study on this subject.

So what was Paul saying then? "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ."

(Colossians 2:16–17). If I were to paraphrase these two verses, I would say, "Do not allow anyone to condemn you regarding Old Testament meat and drink offerings (Leviticus 2:1; Numbers 15:4-5; Joel 1:9), or with regard to ceremonial holy days like Passover, Rosh Hashanah, or the Feast of Tabernacles. These all pointed forward to Jesus Christ who has already come!"

Were I to further paraphrase Romans 14:5-6 to continue the thought I would say, "So, if you are fully persuaded that God still requires us to observe these Old Testament feast days, you had better do it. If you believe that Jesus fulfilled all of those, and thus you no longer esteem them, you must not observe them." For the Scripture says, "Your personal convictions [on such matters]—exercise [them] as in God's presence, keeping them to yourself [striving only to know the truth and obey His will]. Blessed (happy, to be envied) is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves [who does not convict himself by what he chooses to do]. But the man who has doubts (misgivings, an uneasy conscience) about eating, and then eats [perhaps because of you], stands condemned [before God], because he is not true to his convictions and he does not act from faith. For whatever does not originate and proceed from faith is sin [whatever is done without a conviction of its approval by God is sinful]." (Romans 14:22–23, AMP).

Click here to visit the Thoughts in Worship archive: <http://goo.gl/SlsVnS>