

Should I or Shouldn't I ? • Romans 14

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Meat or Not*

1. It's the late 1st Century. The city is Neopolis, with a population of 100,000 in northern Italy.
 2. The church there was started some years before by believers from Rome.
 3. Things have gone well & the church has grown to a couple thousand.
 4. Both Jews & Gentiles worship side by side.
 5. And the distinctions that mark the rest of life in Neopolis, like slave & master, rich & poor, are left at the door when they assemble.
 6. But recently a controversy has erupted that's threatening to tear them apart.
 - a. It has to do with *eating meat*.
 - b. You see, all the meat sold at the market in Neopolis comes either from the temple to Mars, the Roman god of war, or from the temple of Jupiter, chief of the Roman pantheon.
 - c. It was originally the offerings of worshippers.
 - 1) The priests put a part of it on the altars of Mars & Jupiter,
 - 2) But most of it was sold at wholesale prices to the meat-sellers in the marketplace.
 - 3) It was then resold to customers who took it home to use in their meals.
 - d. The Jewish community in Neopolis would have absolutely *nothing* to do with idols so they shunned the meat-market, buying only from the single kosher butcher in town.
 - e. The Jews who'd become believers continued this practice; as Jews they wanted to remain kosher even though they'd come to faith in Jesus as Messiah.
 - f. And this is where the problem began, because Christians love to fellowship with one another.
 - 1) And fellowship usually means sharing a meal.
 - 2) But when Jewish believers went to the homes of their Gentiles brothers & sisters, the meat was from the pagan meat-sellers.
 - 3) The Gentiles had no problem with it because they'd come to see idols as nothing.
 - 4) In their minds, meat was meat; whether it came from a kosher butcher or someone else made no difference.
 - 5) Jewish believers were scandalized! How could Gentiles dally with idols like this.
 - 6) They were so upset, they gave up meat altogether & became vegetarians & convinced several Gentiles to join them in refusing meat.
 - g. Lines were drawn when the vegetarians refused invitations to the homes of meat-eaters.
 - h. They called for the meat eaters to repent & become vegetarians, refusing fellowship with them until they complied.
 7. The Meat-eaters refused, so the vegetarians left to start a new church. They called it, *First Church of Vegetarians*.
 8. The others renamed their church, *Carnivores for Jesus*.
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B. *Today*

1. That's just a story, but not far from what was happening in churches all over the Empire at the time Paul wrote Romans.
2. As we saw in our study last week in Romans 13, being a follower of Christ means being committed to a tough-minded love & devotion to one another
3. Here in ch. 14, Paul applies that call to love to a specific issue – the eating of meat.

II. TEXT

A. V. 1

Receive one who is weak in the faith, *but not to disputes over doubtful things.*

1. The primary way the early church understood the call to love one another was in the realm of *hospitality*.
 - a. They knew they were to be *hospitable*,
 - b. To open their lives, homes, & resources to welcome & bless others.
2. The word *receive* means to greet w/ warm affection.
 - a. It's one thing to *talk* about being friendly, but an altogether different thing *doing it*.
 - b. You've probably heard the little ditty. . .

*To dwell **above** with saints we **love** - O, that will be **glory**.*
*But to dwell **below** with those we **know** - Well, that's a different story!*
3. Paul directs us to show warm, welcoming affection,
 - a. Not just to our pals, those we know & get along with –
 - b. But to those who are a challenge, people we may not really get along with.
4. Specifically, he calls them *weak in the faith*. What he means by that becomes clear as we read on.
5. For now just note that we're not to look at them as standing on the other side of a divide to argue about.
6. He says – “Welcome them with warm affection; don't get embroiled in disputes about opinions.”
7. “Doubtful things” means things that aren't cut & dried; they aren't spelled out in Scripture.
 - a. As much as we'd like everything either black or white, there are many issues in the Christian life that fall somewhere in between - a shade of gray.
 - b. And people have different *opinions* about these things.
 - c. More important, they have *convictions* about them.
8. These personal moral convictions are often called *scruples*.
9. Scruples are what Paul refers to here in v. 1.
10. We each hold different opinions & convictions about things the Bible doesn't give precise instruction on.
 - a. We must make sure we're actively loving & warmly accepting those we differ with on these things.
 - b. When we see them, we must NOT view them as on the other side of the divide and start arguing with them.
11. Now Paul gives an *example* of the kind of debate that should not hinder our affection for one another.

B. Vs. 2-3

For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats *only* vegetables.

1. Here's the debate I described earlier; it revolved around the eating of meat sacrificed to idols.
2. Some wanted nothing to do with idols so they'd forswore all meat.
3. Others realized idols were nothing but hunks of wood & stone, so meat offered to them was just meat.
4. When Paul says the vegetarian is *weak*, it looks back to v. 1 – he's *weak in faith*.
 - a. He's weak in the sense that his conscience would be violated by eating meat.
 - b. He'd feel he'd failed God because he'd be doing something his conscience said was sin.

3 • Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.

1. One these issues of scruples, where our *conscience rather than the Word* directs us, we have to stop judging each other!
2. The tendency is for those who have liberty to do something to *look down on* those who don't.

- a. They call them *immature* or *legalistic*.
- b. But when we stick labels on others it hinders the tight fellowship that ought to mark us.
3. Those who *lack* liberty often label those with it as *immoral & carnal*.
 - a. They may even doubt their salvation!
 - b. In their commitment to holiness, they break fellowship with those who don't agree with their scruples.

C. *Who's Weak?*

1. There's an important lesson to be gleaned from these first 3 vs.
2. Though Paul hasn't used that term, the *strong* are those who *have liberty* to eat meat while the weak are those who don't because they're stumbled by it.
3. If we follow the thinking of most, we'd assume the *strong* are those whose moral convictions place a *tight rein* on them.
 - a. They live by a strict set of rules & have narrowly defined lives.
 - b. Many have this idea because they view holiness as living by the Code.
 - c. "I don't smoke—I don't chew, and I don't go with those who do."
4. But here we find that the one who's *weak* refuses meat.
 - a. It's the *strong in faith* who has the *liberty* to eat meat w/o defiling their conscience
 - b. The *weak* can't eat w/o a sense of doing something wrong – *they lack liberty*.
5. Spiritual maturity is seen in one's *increasing sense of liberty in Christ*, not in regard to the clear cut issues of biblical morality, but in the *multitude of gray* areas in life.

D. *Today's Scruples*

1. Paul uses the example of eating meat in regard to these *gray areas*.
2. What are some of the *scruples* Christians have debated more recently?
 - a. Movies; ratings, going at all
 - b. TV
 - c. Makeup
 - d. Dress
 - e. Tobacco
 - f. Alcohol
 - g. Cards & dice
 - h. Dancing
 - i. Bible translations
 - j. Sports
 - k. Music
3. In the book *Great Church Fights* Leslie Flynn writes -

Wide disagreements exist today in our churches over certain practices. A Christian from the South may be repelled by a swimming party for both men and women, then offend his Northern brother by lighting up a cigarette. At an international conference for missionaries, a woman from the Orient could not wear sandals with a clear conscience. A Christian from western Canada thought it worldly for a Christian acquaintance to wear a wedding ring, and a woman from Europe thought it immoral for a wife not to wear a ring that signaled her status. A man from Denmark was pained to even watch British Bible school students play football, while the British students shrank from his pipe smoking.
4. With all these various scruples & issues of conscience –
 - a. While we can enjoy spirited discussions about them
 - b. We must never *divide* over them or allow our disagreements to define our relationship with one another.

E. V. 4

Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

1. This is a *rebuke* and best read this way,
"Who do you think you are to judge another's servant?"
2. I don't answer to you & you don't answer to me.
3. While we serve God by serving one another, we answer for our service to Him alone!
4. So reserve your judgment on the *scruples* of others, because quite frankly, it's none of your business!
5. Since your brother & sister belong to God, let Him deal with them about those things.
6. Now Paul moves on to another issue that had proven to be a source of tension . . .

F. Vs. 5-6

5 • One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 • He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.

1. Another issue that was hotly contested in the early church was what days should be reserved for worship.
2. Paul doesn't resolve the debate by giving a day, which seems like an easy way to settle it.
3. Notice that, because it's an important point: With neither the issue of eating meat or which day Christians should worship did Paul use his apostolic authority to settle the issue.
4. *Why* he doesn't is right here.
5. Because these aren't issues the Word speaks to, they're matters of personal conscience.
6. And what's important is that in these gray areas, a person live by the dictates of their conscience.
7. That's why he says: **Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.**
 - a. If you violate your conscience, it's sin for you.
 - b. Because if what you do is *not from faith*, then it is sin.
 - c. Look at v. 23 -

But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

8. Look again at the end of v. 5 = **Let each be FULLY convinced in his own mind**
 - a. Our scruples have to be the result of serious study & reflection.
 - b. They mustn't be mere prejudice or what others have put on us.
 - c. We must be diligent to bring our scruples before the Spirit for His review.
 9. Then, having done that, we must be careful not to judge others because they don't share our opinions.
 10. While it might have been easier for Paul to settle the disputes about meat & days by giving one rule for all,
 - a. It would not have provided for *us wisdom* in *how* to deal with the endless *other scruples* believers have debated over the centuries.
 - b. The Christian life can't be reduced to a set of rules.
 - c. It's a living, dynamic relationship with God.
 - d. We walk in the Spirit, not rules.**
 - e. It's a lot harder – but it's that difficulty that keeps us *ever dependent on Him.*
 11. *Charles Spurgeon* is one of my favorite preachers from yesteryear.
 - a. There was another man of God named *Joseph Parker* who ministered at the same time as Spurgeon in another church in London.
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- b. Early in their ministries the 2 were friends & occasionally exchanged pulpits.
- c. But a disagreement broke out between them that divided them.
- d. It was so great it was reported in the papers!
- e. Spurgeon accused Parker of being unspiritual because he attended the theater.
- f. Parker harangued Spurgeon because he smoked cigars.
- g. Someone once asked Spurgeon if it was okay for a Christian to smoke.
 - 1) Spurgeon replied, "As long as one does not smoke to excess."
 - 2) When asked what excess might be, he said, "Why, I suppose 2 cigars at a time."

G. Vs. 7-9

⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

1. This sounds heretical to Americans because it's part of our culture to value the rugged individualist who needs no one and resists answering to anyone.
2. We need to realize being a follower of Jesus *trumps* those parts of being an American that conflict with our new life in Christ.
3. And the fact is, the life we've been given is meant to be lived by a daily giving of ourselves to God & one another.
4. What that means in the context here is that we have to hold our scruples in such a way that they don't harm others.

H. Vs. 10-12

¹⁰ But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. ¹¹ For it is written: [Isa 45:23] "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 shall give account of himself to God.

1. While the judgment of our *sins* was satisfied in the Cross, we *will* face a judgment for how we've used our lives in Christ.
2. It's important we each live in the light of a Spirit-informed conscience, but what'll be of *greater importance* when we stand before the Lord is how we've treated one another.

I. Vs. 13-18

¹³ Therefore

1. In light of all that -
let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.
2. The imperative of being one in the Spirit means we must renounce our tendency to camp on the superiority of our personal convictions while seeing those who don't agree as coming up short.
3. But this has to go farther. **Love requires more than just agreeing to disagree agreeably.**
4. Since we're talking about convictions & what that means to our walk with God, we must exercise care in *how we live* so that others aren't harmed.
5. Paul explains what he means . . .
- ¹⁴ I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that *there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.***
6. Paul was convinced he had liberty in Christ in many morally gray issues.
7. But, he knew others didn't share that liberty.

8. If they were to do what he was free to, *their* conscience would *condemn* them; they'd feel unclean & disconnected from God.
- ¹⁵ Yet if your brother is grieved because of *your* food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ For he who serves Christ in these things *is acceptable to God and approved by men.***
9. Back to meat as an example: If I have liberty to eat meat & you don't, but invite you over for dinner & serve steaks, etiquette & good manners requires you to at least make an attempt to eat.
- But it's not just meat for you – putting that in your mouth & swallowing it is *a profoundly spiritual act* for you because of the connection meat has to paganism.
 - So my liberty has become the cause of your *spiritual undoing*.
 - You go home feeling condemned because you've eaten something you believe the Spirit is grieved by.
10. And after feeling guilty & bad about it for a while, you're going to eventually blame *who* for making you feel that way? *Me!*
11. So my liberty, something precious to me because of the freedom I have in Christ, has become the cause of *your* fall & a falling out between us.
12. The Kingdom of God isn't built on issues of conscience; what to eat & drink –
13. It's about the weightier eternal realities of being right with & at peace with one another & *protecting* the joy of being in unhindered fellowship with God.

J. Vs. 19-23

¹⁹ Therefore let us pursue the things *which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.* ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed *are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.* ²¹ It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor *do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.*

- Love demands we lay down our rights to bless & protect others.
 - In another place Paul says while he had liberty to eat all the meat he wanted, if eating even a tiny morsel would cause someone to stumble, then he'd give up meat altogether –
 - Because nothing is more important than one another.
 - 4. My liberty is nothing compared to you!**
 - Indeed, if I *make* my liberty more important, & demand it *to your harm* –it's become *my* sin.
 - In our culture right now, the area that this comes up most often in is drinking.
 - And many, following Paul's counsel here, though they have liberty to have a beer or glass of wine knowing they can do so without getting drunk, have decided to *forego* that liberty.
 - They don't drink because they know some believers struggle with it,
 - If as a mature Christian they were *seen* by one who's weak, & knew that weak brother or sister might be emboldened to drink because of their example – it could lead to serious problems.
 - They won't even drink in the quiet & privacy of their own home because they'd have to buy it somewhere & might be seen.
 - So, for the sake of others, love compels them to forego.
 - Paul then speaks to the one with liberty -

²² Do you have faith? Have *it* to yourself before God. Happy *is* he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.
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8. It is far more rewarding to have a liberty you don't exercise than to have one you *do* use & becomes the cause of someone's spiritual undoing.
9. Love trumps liberty.

²³ **But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.**

III. CONCLUSION

A. Faith

1. That's a good place to end –
2. Listen, in this issue of scruples, of personal convictions –
3. The principle that ought to guide all of us is this – **Love wins out.**
4. When there's a gray issue and you don't know what to do, ask →
What does love for God & others require?