

Peace and edification

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[0 : 00] We're going to look together now in Romans 14, which Ray read for us.!

And we've already prayed. I will remind us that this section entitled in the New International Version, The Weak and the Strong, is about the relations between the two different segments of the church there at Rome.

And he's very concerned for the unity of the church. And we looked at it last week. And I hope I made a presentation that wasn't complicated.

But on the other hand, the issues that are raised are not simple. They require us to think quite hard. So I'm going to try and follow that on today.

And we're going to come in at verse 13 and go through to the end of the chapter. And if you would like to focus on a particular verse, it would be verse 19 where he says, Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.

[1 : 35] So as God helps us, let's look together at this part of the Bible. So it's part two of a long section on togetherness.

Because that's what it's about, isn't it? I was going to put unity, but that sounds rather abstract. It's really togetherness. He spends a chapter, about a chapter and a half, on the togetherness of the church.

And I think that in itself is significant. It's countercultural because we think that the church is something that we pop into and pop out of and maybe we get something and maybe we don't. But he says it's not like that. It's not like a supermarket. It's like a family. And the togetherness is so important. And that is a precious thing.

Not only there in Rome in those 2,000 years ago, but in every church, in our church, in all churches. So I've been thinking about this and I would like to offer to you this morning five sections.

[2 : 46] And the first section is the context. So the context is that we have two groups of people. Excuse me.

And I think roughly we could say that they correspond to the Gentile Christians who became Christians from a pagan background and the Jewish Christians who become Jews knowing their Old Testament, knowing all about being Jewish, kosher food, all that sort of thing.

It may be more complicated than that, but that's not such a bad way to start thinking about it. And the Gentile Christian, whom I'm putting on this side, is able to eat, believes he's able to eat, all sorts of food, in particular as the reading says he eats meat.

And we'll say more about that in a moment. And he is tempted to look across at his Jewish brother or sister and say, look at me. I'm eating and doing all sorts of things like this.

I'm free. And to look down on the Jewish brother or sister who has some problems with this and say, you are inferior.

[4 : 00] You haven't really understood what it is to be a Christian. And the Jewish believer might be thinking something like this. Well, I'm being obedient because it says in the Bible, it's got that about food laws as part of the Bible, isn't it?

And you, my friend, and it's taken me a little while to realize how strongly these things are felt, but I think he's saying, you are unacceptable.

Your attitude, your behavior is unacceptable in the church of Jesus Christ. And more than that, I worry about you. I am so upset by the way you live and by the things that you seem to carry on doing.

It gives me sleepless nights. It churns me up inside. I'm really, really you know, at the edge, really. I'm on the edge about you lot in the church.

And I think as we go through, we'll see that it is as strong as that or as intense as that. And these two groups of people, Paul characterizes as the strong, the person who eats the meat, and the weak.

[5 : 18] And I'm sorry, I should have mentioned that the Jewish, another issue which is mentioned in passing is Jewish days and the calendar. So I put a calendar there. Strong and the weak.

Weak, well, in chapter 14, verse 1, Paul describes the Jewish type as being weak in faith.

I don't think this, I don't think Paul means that they're not saved, that they don't have saving faith, but I think he means that they haven't worked through the implications of their faith.

They're a little bit, they're still on a journey in that. They haven't got it all settled. And he says that they are weak in faith. And I think he might also say from verse 5 that their judgment is weak because verse 5, he does a thing with words.

One man considers a day more sacred than another, another man considers every day alike. Well, the word in the original is to judge and he talks quite a bit about judgment and he says one person judges a day more sacred than another and another person judges everyone alike.

[6 : 35] And so I think we could say that their faculty of judgment is not, well, is weak. that's a suggestion rather than an assertion.

And this leads to huge problems and in particular chapter 15 verse 6 he says that what he really wants is a church that with one heart and mouth may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He's saying that these tensions in relationship within the church produces a problem in the area of glorifying God which is a big problem.

If God is not glorified that is a big problem and he says this is what I'm aiming for and this is why I'm giving you this teaching because as things stand God is not being glorified as he should.

And if you have any knowledge of a Christian scene over any number of years you will know that problems like this not exactly this but like this Satan uses these in many occasions Christians and there are churches where relationships are strained where there's two or more factions pulling against one another and God is not glorified and this is the sort of thing that Paul is addressing and last time I tried to isolate some principles and these principles seems to me is where Paul is going he himself agrees with the strong person his conviction is that he could eat meat not a problem but he doesn't just say well you're right and you're wrong he's got deeper things that he's concerned about and I tried to bring out some principles for example the principle of acceptance that if God has accepted somebody and God has put his hand into the hand of this person so in principle we should be accepting one another and then there's a principle of liberty because rather surprisingly

[9 : 11] Paul said each one should be fully convinced in his own mind so the sense that we he actually encourages people to have firm views and there's a certain liberty about that and then he referred to motivation and he seems confident to say that whatever these people are doing these different sectors of the church at Rome they're doing it for the Lord and that counts for something and then he also said it's not our job to write people off it's not our job to condemn people he says in verse 13 stop passing judgment on one another and he makes the point that we're not the judge we don't know the ins and outs of everything but God alone does so there are some principles there so that was my first point to give us the context now my second point is the more tricky question of relevance the issues in let's be quite clear about what the issues were there in Rome the food that he's referring to just look at chapter 14 verse 1 one man's faith allows him to eat everything but another man whose faith is weak eats only vegetables now I wouldn't want you to think that this was to do with animal welfare now for us vegetarianism is quite possibly a matter of animal welfare but for them that was not the issue the issue was a religious one this food this meat which would have been bought in the pagan market would possibly in fact almost certainly have been involved in some ritual a little bit like the halal thing you know where a blessing is said by a

Muslim cleric over the meat something like that would have happened to this meat so it's a religious issue not to do with animal welfare and the issue of days would have been to do with the Jewish Sabbath the Saturday Jewish and Jewish festivals so strictly speaking it's nothing to do with Sunday the Christian festival so specifically those were the things that they were debating about and the question is in what way is that relevant to us is that relevant to us with today's issues and I've got three options here option one that how many how many of our issues is this relevant to and the answer is option one none and to say option one our issues are completely different because I could not think of a single church where the issue of pagan offering of food is an issue certainly not

in the UK and I can't think of a single church where what you do on Saturday is an issue so you might say really and truly this is not relevant to us at all but

I think it would be very odd to have a chapter and a half of scripture that is not relevant because we're told about scripture that it is useful and what does it say good for profitable for instruction in righteousness it would be a very strange thing if of all the Bible we have one and a half chapters that has no relevance to us and I think we have seen some transferable principles so I don't agree with option one option two Romans 14 you just take it and apply it to all issues you apply it to everything so you go from issues like how churches choose the songs they're going to sing right through to the doctrine of the atonement and whether Christ suffered wrath or whether he just merely set an example and everything in between you apply Romans 14 to all of that and you say everybody be persuaded in their own mind we all have liberty in these things and who are you to judge somebody else on what they believe on something like that so that's option two it applies to all issues but the but is this that Paul himself does not treat all issues the same as he does in Romans 14 if you turn across please to 1 Corinthians 5 verse 1 please notice the different tone of voice when he addresses the Corinthians and this is on the matter of sexual ethics he says it is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans a man has his father's wife and you are proud shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and put out of your fellowship the man who did this so it's a very different approach isn't it he's not saying let each be you know incest not incest let each be persuaded in his own mind you know people have different views on this he certainly doesn't tackle that in that way he says absolutely not there is a something which is not negotiable in this realm of sexual ethics and what you should do is have a church meeting and you should expel the person who is not living according to the ethics of the bible or if you go to 1 Corinthians 11 verse 17 which is about the lord's supper and without going into great detail they're being selfish they are showing off not waiting for one another not caring and not sharing and he doesn't say well you know each one has his own approach let everybody be fully persuaded in your own mind who are you to judge somebody else he says things like this in 1 Corinthians 11 17 in the following directives

I have no praise for you for your meetings do more harm than good in the first place I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you and to some extent I believe it you see he doesn't say each be persuaded in their own mind this is wrong you can't do this I've got no time for it you need to put it right so this is my option two all issues are treated like Romans 14 no I don't agree with that either so option three some issues in some ways are treated like Romans 14 and I think that is nearer the mark we take the principles and the commands and we apply them to each situation with wisdom and with the leading of the Holy Spirit and this seems to me to be what God has been doing through the church for 2000 years as each new situation comes up and sometimes some very tricky situations the churches and the teachers and leaders have prayed and have thought and have discussed and debated and prayed again and by exercising wisdom have formed a judgment this is the way we deal with this particular problem this is the way we deal with this one this one is very significant and very important this one we deal with in a much more flexible way and so on and I don't think there's any option but to do number three it's not irrelevant it's not relevant to absolutely everything but to some issues and some ways and I made a list of the issues and I stopped making the list because I was depressing myself after a while the issues that we could debate and that churches disagree over so believers baptism versus infant baptism music and different styles of worship different bible versions speaking in tongues spiritual gifts baptism in the holy spirit the place of Israel in God's purposes the second coming in the millennium church government whether you have bishops and archdeacons or whether you have independent churches association with less gospel and non-gospel churches women preachers and at this point I stopped making the list because I was just making myself downcast so I thought well how do we practically apply the principles of the bible when there are differences like this and for what it's worth [19:08] I would myself work on a grid something like this because I think it depends on the purpose for which you are trying to have an agreement or a relationship and I think it works something like this so I put a list of different possible situations so working from the bottom to the question of whether one accepts such and such another person as a fellow Christian and then working up a stage whether you accept such and such a church as a genuine church and then working up a stage whether you say they're a genuine church and we could work with them and then going up a stage again this is a church of which I could thoroughly join in and become a church member and then going up another stage this is a church in which I could hold office as a teacher

and then

I think the most sensitive issue would be the role of a leader or a teaching elder and as you go up that list you need more and more agreement and you're less and less in the territory of saying let each be fully persuaded in his own mind you're getting more and more into the issue we really need to be agreed over spiritual gifts or over the place of Israel in redemption and so on and as you come down the list we get more and more to the area in which Romans 14 is sufficient and that's the main way you approach it so for example accepting as a fellow Christian so there's a lady at the end of our road who's her own Catholic but I think she believes in the Lord Jesus and I think she knows and loves the Lord Jesus and I went round and prayed with her when her husband died but that doesn't mean

I would accept Roman Catholic church as a genuine church because there are things you wish to have in a church you wish to have the gospel preached clearly and I am not persuaded that the official teaching of Roman Catholicism gets the gospel right so I would just go this far but not that far in that particular situation and let's go up a little bit so in Brighton and Hove there are a good number of churches that we would say genuine churches they preach the gospel and if a church member from our church left to join that church we wouldn't discipline them and say you're apostatizing we'd say God bless you you're going to join another church but we might say do we have enough agreement to work together on such and such a thing and that would perhaps certainly be something we would need to look at carefully so I'm trying to approach number two the question of relevance and saying does Romans 14 give us the total answer to every question where people

Christians differ and I'm saying it gives us helpful principles but different situations will need other principles to be brought in as well so you have a pause for thought while I find my I've got my sheets in a muddle anybody want to ask a question about that you could ask a question later if you wanted to so that was number two the question of relevance so coming to the passage now what is the danger that we're trying to avoid so please look with me through this through the passage what is the danger we're trying to avoid and as I went through this I was more and more surprised by the extremity of the danger verse 13 make up your mind or judge this not to put a stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way so here's a church in which people are actually putting stumbling blocks and obstacles in each other's way so they're making it more difficult for one another to live the

Christian life verse 15 if your brother is distressed by what you eat and I suspect that that translation is rather weak for what's involved your brother is given a headache and a heartache over how you behave your brother or sister stays up at night worrying about you if you are behaving in that way well this is the danger to avoid and look at what it says in verse 15 do not buy your eating destroy your brother do not buy your behavior destroy your brother for whom Christ died that's very very strong isn't it and he talks about being spoken of as evil which is strong as well and then I went to verse 20 do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food and then he comes back in verse 20 to the idea of stumbling something that causes other people to stumble and then verse 21 to cause your brother to fall so what is the danger to avoid the danger is of behavior by which other people say if that's how Christians behave

[25 : 29] I don't want anything to do with Christianity and I don't want anything to do with them and you may say well that would never happen but I want to say I think Brighton and Hove must contain scores if not hundreds of people who no longer go to church because of things that happened in the church that they went to and they said if that's how Christians behave I don't want anything more to do with it so this is the danger to avoid and I wonder what was going on in Rome were people walking out of the service were people saying I'm not coming any longer were people saying if we're having a bring and share lunch I'm not staying I mean what was going on the more you think about it the more serious it is and the more you realize

Paul really does have something that he feels very strongly about so I think he's not talking about Christians having different preferences he's not saying you know that's the danger I don't think he's saying you know you can you can like such and such a song and such but somebody else likes such and such a song and somebody else likes he's not talking about that and I don't think he's talking about cultural variety in the church my friend pastor Stuart McNary from Holland Road who was very very good to me when I started off working for the church here he said you know Phil when I was first converted I went to the church where Ian Paisley was the minister and all the

people there used to have a long black coat so I got myself a long black coat too and you don't want to offend you know these people this is their view you should wear if you're a Christian wear a long black coat well I'll wear a long black coat too he's saying don't worry about that sort of thing that's not what I'm talking about he's talking about damaging the damage that can be inflicted on other Christians the serious damage and he says that's why he says in verse 19 let us make every effort for the opposite to do what leads to peace and not to destroying but building up to building one another up and you see how wide ranging this is he says the Christian life isn't just about you and your liberty the Christian life is about how you help or hinder other people the Christian life is about what you do to encourage the peace of the church and what you do to contribute to the up building of the church what you do to bring the church together as opposed to fragmenting it and scattering it into pieces you see how strongly he feels about this that was point number three the danger to avoid somewhere in here so my point number four is how it all goes wrong because he explains how it goes wrong so here's the situation here's the believer who is happily and cheerfully munching on the beef burger which he's got from the pagan market and he's happy about that and here are the Jewish believers who are scandalized what he's just eating that they're absolutely scandalized and there's another believer there with a beef burger too which we'll come to in a moment so let's just take us through this blow by blow

I think I'm probably stating the obvious but this is what happens so verse 13 make up your mind not to put a stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way as one who is in the Lord Jesus I'm fully convinced that no food is unclean so I'm totally with you eating meat totally with you on that but if anyone reckons something is unclean then for him it is unclean so he thinks it's clean but these guys say no no it isn't that's unclean and for them in so far as their conscience and their relationship with the Lord those things count and for them it's unclean and if your brother is distressed because of what you eat you are no longer acting in love do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil so this person says it's clean and I'm going to munch away at it and these people say it's unclean and they're distressed and there's a second possibility that one of these believers who is unhappy about this says well I've seen them do it I'll try it myself so they go away and get a beef burger but for them this is a very dangerous and destructive exercise and that's what Paul is referring to when he says things like things like verse 23 the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats because his eating does not come from faith and everything that doesn't come from faith is sin so what you're actually doing is you're encouraging this brother to do something that he's not convinced of that will in him he's guilty at doing this and for him it is sin because he can't draw a straight line between the Lord Jesus and looking into the face of the Lord

[32 : 12] Jesus and the sort of behaviour that he's doing and you did that to him you made him do that because of your showing off your liberty your insensitivity for the effect it would have on other people and you have caused him to stumble and you have caused him damage now the person who ate the meat he was perfectly correct in his verdict on food because the food wasn't unclean really and truly but the person who ate the food failed radically in practical love if your brother verse 15 is distressed if you put him through this because of what you eat you are no longer acting in love you are not walking in love and that's what Christians are meant to do to walk in love so not just thinking just of how it works for themselves but how it affects the people around how it builds them up how it helps them and this is what

Paul is keen to avoid so let me that was point number four and let me close with point number five assuming I can find it point number five I'd like to draw from this passage the positive beautiful principles because in a way it describes a situation that is the more you think about it the more unpleasant it is but Paul doesn't want us to think about it in a negative way he says there's some very beautiful principles that should fill us and motivate us and correct us and be the remedy for anything like that so verse 15 let us walk in love towards our brothers and sisters let us walk in love let's practically let's think about how we can help one another how we can build one another up how we can encourage one another in spiritual things texting!

seems to be a good technology way of saying thank you to somebody or well done to somebody or I appreciated something I think that's a good way to encourage one another in love verse 17 get a grasp of what is important and what is less important the Bible doesn't give us this as a list of do's and don'ts it gives it it gives us a way of forming a scale of values and which is more important that you have your beef burger or that other people rejoice in the Lord and he says verse 17 the

kingdom of God the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness been talking all about righteousness all the way through and peace we have peace with God and joy in the Holy Spirit he says that's those are the things that will last those are the things of weightiness and if you were to compare them well here's the opportunity of having a beef burger and here's the opportunity of glorifying the righteousness of Christ and making peace in the church and giving people joy in the Holy Spirit which of those two do you think well I'll have the beef burger he says you know get a grasp of what really matters and it isn't the steak and chips that really matters and then a rather beautiful description in verse 18 see the genuine value of living like this because anyone who serves Christ in this way okay anybody who's learnt this mindset who's learnt this way of dealing with people and dealing with issues and constraining their lives anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men I think that's very high praise don't you you could say of such and such an attitude or such and such a way of life it's serving Christ and it's pleasing to God and it's practically useful and positive and appreciated by people and that's what he says see the genuine value what a wonderful thing to have a church full of people that think this way that react this way this is pleasing to God and it's useful and practical and it works and it's praiseworthy and it's approved by men and then I've only got one other comment and I didn't quite manage to put it on that sheet verse 19 think seriously about how to produce peace in the community and build one another up which is the sentence

[38 : 14] I began with in verse 19 therefore let us make every effort let us pursue let us be full on in going for whatever leads to peace and mutual edification makes the peace of the church so we're peacemakers rather than peace breakers it's not that difficult to break the peace of the church it's not that difficult to have a tantrum or be selfish or say something out of place or give vent to your feelings in the wrong way it's not that difficult to break the peace of the church but he says make every effort to do the things that make the peace of the church and that build up one another and that whole mindset there is not myself it's not building me up it's building up one another it's not saying look at me how good

I am everybody gather around me it's saying how can I help this person how can I help that person how can I build up the community need