

**TRINITY BIBLE CHURCH  
WHEN CHRISTIANS DIFFER:  
A LESSON ON JUDGMENT FROM ROMANS 14  
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**RAY STEDMAN, THE AUTHOR OF THE GREAT BOOK, "AUTHENTIC CHRISTIANITY", ONCE SAID "THAT THE FAVORITE INDOOR SPORT OF CHRISTIANS IS TRYING TO CHANGE EACH OTHER". WE DO THAT, DON'T WE? WE ARE ALL, AT TIMES, GUILTY OF THIS, AREN'T WE? I KNOW THAT SOMETIMES, I AM. AND THERE ARE EVEN SOME THAT SEEM TO BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE CALLED TO THIS MINISTRY — "THE MINISTRY OF UNRIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT."**

**WHEN WE JUDGE RIGHTEOUSLY, THAT IS ACCORDING TO GOD'S STANDARDS, WE ARE HOPING THAT CHANGE WILL PRODUCE MATURITY AND GOOD FRUIT. BUT WHEN WE USE OUR OWN STANDARDS TO JUDGE OTHERS, IN DEFERENCE TO GOD'S STANDARDS, WE ARE SAYING THAT "MY THOUGHT OR WAY IS RIGHT AND YOURS IS WRONG". AND THAT IS OFTEN DONE WITH TOTAL DISREGARD TO SCRIPTURE OR SIMPLY PREDICATED ON HOW ONE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE. IT ALSO MAY BE BASED ON WHAT HAS BEEN TAUGHT TO US, BUT WITHOUT TAKING A BEREAN APPROACH TO "TEST EVERYTHING". AND THIS IS WHAT WE CALL, UNRIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT!**

**TONIGHT, WE WILL BE LOOKING AT ROMANS 14, WHERE PAUL SAYS WE SHOULD NOT TRY TO CHANGE ONE ANOTHER TO SUIT OUR PREFERENCES, BUT INSTEAD WE SHOULD CHANGE OUR CONDUCT SO AS NOT TO OFFEND THE WEAKER BROTHER. ROMANS 14:1-13A DEALS WITH OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO RESPECT THE CONVICTIONS OF ONE ANOTHER RATHER THAN TO REVISE THEM. VERSES 13B-23 INSTRUCTS US TO REFRAIN FROM EXERCISING OUR LIBERTIES IN CHRIST WHEN HARM TO ANOTHER CHRISTIAN IS IN VIEW. SO LET'S NOW EXAMINE THE PARTICULARS OF PAUL'S EXHORTATION!**

**LET'S BEGIN WITH VERSES 1-13A, AND ASK THE QUESTION, "SO, WHO'S RIGHT?"**

**OFTEN, CHRISTIANS WILL JUDGE ONE ANOTHER CRITICALLY CONCERNING AREAS OF "AMORAL BEHAVIOR," THOSE GRAY, NON-ESSENTIAL AREAS WHERE ONE PERSON REGARDS SOMETHING AS WRONG AND ANOTHER WILL SAY THAT IT IS ALRIGHT. THESE PASSAGES GIVE US SEVERAL REASONS WHY SUCH DISAPPROVING JUDGMENT MUST NOT GO ON AMONG US.**

**IT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT PAUL IS NOT SPEAKING ABOUT THE ESSENTIALS OF OUR CHRISTIAN BELIEF.**

HE IS FOCUSING ON THE NON-ESSENTIALS — THOSE ISSUES THAT DO NOT AFFECT SALVATION — THOSE "GRAY" AREAS; SUCH AS EATING OR NOT EATING CERTAIN FOODS (V. 2), OBSERVING CERTAIN DAYS ABOVE OTHERS (V. 5), DRINKING OR NOT DRINKING WINE OR DOING ANYTHING ELSE THAT DAMAGES OR IMPAIRS THE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF ONE ANOTHER (V. 13, 21). THESE ARE TO BE DISTINGUISHED FROM BIBLICAL, MORAL ESSENTIALS OR ABSOLUTES WHICH, FOR ALL CHRISTIANS, ARE NON-NEGOTIABLE.

HE IS SPEAKING TO BOTH "STRONG" AND "WEAK" CHRISTIANS WHO ARE ACCUSING ONE ANOTHER AND DIVIDING OVER THE ISSUES.

SPEAKING TO THE "STRONG CHRISTIAN", PAUL WRITES IN VERSES 1-3: 1 "ACCEPT THE ONE WHO'S FAITH IS WEAK, WITHOUT QUARRELING OVER DISPUTABLE MATTERS. 2 ONE PERSON'S FAITH ALLOWS THEM TO EAT ANYTHING, BUT ANOTHER, WHOSE FAITH IS WEAK, EATS ONLY VEGETABLES. 3 THE ONE WHO EATS EVERYTHING MUST NOT TREAT WITH CONTEMPT THE ONE WHO DOES NOT, AND THE ONE WHO DOES NOT EAT EVERYTHING MUST NOT JUDGE THE ONE WHO DOES, FOR GOD HAS ACCEPTED THEM."

ACCORDING TO VERSE 3, EVERY TRUE CHRISTIAN HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY GOD. THEREFORE, WE MUST PERSONALLY, VOLUNTARILY AND WILLINGLY ACCEPT THE ONE WHO IS WEAK IN FAITH. PARTICULARLY THOSE WHOSE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OR PRE-CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE FINDS THE NEED FOR CERTAIN REGULATIONS OR PROHIBITIONS — BUT NOT FOR THE PURPOSE OF PASSING JUDGMENT ON THEIR OPINIONS.

THE BELIEVER WHO IS STRONGER (MORE MATURE) IN HIS UNDERSTANDING OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IN CHRIST, SHOULD NOT SIT IN JUDGMENT OF THE ONE WHO IS WEAKER AND FINDS IT NECESSARY FOR CONSCIENCE SAKE TO ABSTAIN FROM CERTAIN THINGS. VERSE 2A SAYS THAT "ONE PERSON'S FAITH ALLOWS THEM TO EAT ANYTHING." THIS IS A DESCRIPTION OF THE STRONGER — THE BELIEVER WHOSE MATURE FAITH ENABLES HIM TO EXERCISE HIS FREEDOM IN CHRIST. HE KNOWS THAT FOOD AND DRINK, IN AND OF THEMSELVES, ARE NOT EVIL AND LIKE PAUL, KNOWS THAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NOT ABOUT EATING AND DRINKING, BUT ABOUT RIGHTEOUSNESS, WHICH IS HOLY SPIRIT INDUCED.

THE SECOND PART OF VERSE 2 SPEAKS OF THE WEAK MAN WHO ONLY EATS VEGETABLES. HE FEELS THAT HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IS NEGATIVELY AFFECTED BY CERTAIN FOOD AND DRINK.

**PAUL GOES ON IN THIS PASSAGE TO MORE CLEARLY DEFINE THE "WEAKER BROTHER" IN THIS CONTEXT: 1) HE EATS ONLY VEGETABLES, NO MEAT (VS. 2, 21); 2) HE REGARDS CERTAIN DAYS AS HAVING SPECIAL RELIGIOUS IMPORTANCE (VS. 5, 6); AND 3) HE DOES NOT DRINK WINE (VS. 17, 21). AND PAUL INSTRUCTS US THAT THERE MUST BE NO BAD WILL BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS: "THE ONE WHO EATS EVERYTHING MUST NOT TREAT WITH CONTEMPT THE ONE WHO DOES NOT."**

**THOSE WHO ARE STRONGER IN THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF FREEDOM IN CHRIST ARE OFTEN TEMPTED TO WONDER WHY THEIR "WEAKER" BROTHER DOESN'T GET IT. WHY DO THEY HAVE TO OBSERVE UNNECESSARY RULES AND REGULATIONS? AND PERHAPS EVEN ASK WHY DO THEY TRY TO IMPOSE THEIR CONVICTIONS ON OTHERS?**

**THE DANGER IS A SPIRIT OF CONTEMPT FROM THE "STRONGER", WHICH PAUL SAYS, "MUST NOT BE". AND THE ONE WHO DOES NOT EAT IS NOT TO CRITICALLY JUDGE THE ONE WHO DOES EAT! IRONICALLY, THE "WEAKER" PERSON OFTEN VIEWS THE "STRONGER" PERSON — THE ONE WHO DOES EAT, AS BEING SINFUL. EVEN THOUGH BY DEFINITION, THE "STRONGER" IS FREE FROM SELF-CONDEMNATION IN ALL THINGS THAT ARE NON-ESSENTIAL. JUST AS THE "STRONGER" MUST NOT JUDGE THE "WEAKER", THE "WEAKER" MUST NOT JUDGE THE "STRONGER".**

**BECAUSE GOD HAS ACCEPTED BOTH INTO HIS KINGDOM AND HOUSEHOLD, THERE SHOULD BE NO REASON FOR EITHER TO TAKE OFFENSE WITH THE OTHER OR REJECT FELLOWSHIP WITH THE OTHER IN THESE AMORAL MATTERS.**

**IN OTHER WORDS, BOTH THE "STRONGER" AND THE "WEAKER" ARE VULNERABLE TO THE SAME DANGER—DIVISIVENESS BY TRYING TO GET THE OTHER TO CONFORM TO HIS VIEWS.**

**PERHAPS PRIDE AND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS IS THE BASIS FOR THINKING AND PROCLAIMING THAT "MY VIEW IS SUPERIOR TO YOURS!" AND THAT, UNTO ITSELF, IS SINFUL! AND, AS WE ALL KNOW, GOD HATES SIN! AND HE HATES IT WHEN UNITY IS BROKEN OVER SUCH THINGS.**

**PAUL CONTINUES IN VERSES 4-9 TO FURTHER DEVELOP THIS, BUT IN A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT WAY. IN THESE VERSES, HE INDICATES THAT EVERY TRUE CHRISTIAN IS OWNED BY GOD. BEGINNING IN VERSE 4: "WHO ARE YOU TO JUDGE SOMEONE ELSE'S SERVANT? TO THEIR OWN MASTER, SERVANTS STAND OR FALL."**

**AND THEY WILL STAND, FOR THE LORD IS ABLE TO MAKE THEM STAND.”**

THE MASTER, NOT US, DETERMINES THE ACCEPTABILITY OF OTHER’S CHOICES IN THE ARENA OF NON-ESSENTIALS, PERSONAL OPINIONS AND PREFERENCES (REMEMBER, WE ARE NOT TALKING ABOUT MORAL OR ESSENTIAL DOCTRINAL ISSUES OF BIBLICAL TRUTH HERE, BUT THE "GRAY AREAS" OF PERSONAL CONSCIENCE AND SCRUPLES).

EACH OF US STANDS OR FALLS BEFORE OUR MASTER, CHRIST JESUS, WHEN IT COMES TO THE CHOICES WE MAKE. BY VIRTUE OF HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION, CHRIST ALONE IS LORD. OUR MOTIVE FOR DESIRING FULL EXPRESSION OF FREEDOM IN CHRIST IS "FOR THE LORD."

ANY BROTHER WHO WANTS TO IMPOSE A STANDARD TO ASSURE THE CORRECT BEHAVIOR — BY HIS STANDARD — THINKS THAT HE, TOO, IS DOING THAT "FOR THE LORD." BUT IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, EACH MUST DO WHAT HIS OWN CONSCIENCE TELLS HIM. PAUL GIVES THE PROPER CRITERIA FOR EACH OF US TO EVALUATE OUR OWN CHOICES AND BEHAVIOR IN VERSES 5-9!

**VERSE 5 “ONE PERSON CONSIDERS ONE DAY MORE SACRED THAN ANOTHER; ANOTHER CONSIDERS EVERY DAY ALIKE. EACH OF THEM SHOULD BE FULLY CONVINCED IN THEIR OWN MIND. 6 WHOEVER REGARDS ONE DAY AS SPECIAL DOES SO TO THE LORD.**

**WHOEVER EATS MEAT DOES SO TO THE LORD, FOR THEY GIVE THANKS TO GOD; AND WHOEVER ABSTAINS DOES SO TO THE LORD AND GIVES THANKS TO GOD. 7 FOR NONE OF US LIVES FOR OURSELVES ALONE, AND NONE OF US DIES FOR OURSELVES ALONE. 8 IF WE LIVE, WE LIVE FOR THE LORD; AND IF WE DIE, WE DIE FOR THE LORD. SO, WHETHER WE LIVE OR DIE, WE BELONG TO THE LORD. 9 FOR THIS VERY REASON, CHRIST DIED AND RETURNED TO LIFE SO THAT HE MIGHT BE THE LORD OF BOTH THE DEAD AND THE LIVING.”**

HERE HE SAYS THAT AFTER SERIOUS AND HONEST CONSIDERATION, EACH OF US SHOULD BE CONVINCED THAT THE THING WE ARE DOING IS PLEASING TO THE LORD. IF WE AREN'T SURE, WE SIMPLY SHOULD NOT DO IT! AS VERSE 23 EXPLAINS; **“BUT WHOEVER HAS DOUBTS IS CONDEMNED IF THEY EAT, BECAUSE THEIR EATING IS NOT FROM FAITH; AND EVERYTHING THAT DOES NOT COME FROM FAITH IS SIN.”**

ANOTHER REASON WHY WE MUST NOT JUDGE ONE ANOTHER OR BE CRITICAL IN THESE AMORAL AREAS IS THAT: EVERY TRUE CHRISTIAN, ACCORDING TO VERSES 10-13A, WILL BE JUDGED BY GOD.

**VERSE 10 “YOU, THEN, WHY DO YOU JUDGE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER? OR WHY DO YOU TREAT THEM WITH CONTEMPT? FOR WE WILL ALL STAND BEFORE GOD’S JUDGMENT SEAT. 11 IT IS WRITTEN: “AS SURELY AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE WILL BOW BEFORE ME; EVERY TONGUE WILL ACKNOWLEDGE GOD.” 12 SO THEN, EACH OF US WILL GIVE AN ACCOUNT OF OURSELVES TO GOD. 13 THEREFORE LET US STOP PASSING JUDGMENT ON ONE ANOTHER.”**

**IN THESE VERSES, PAUL AGAIN EXPRESSES HIS CONCERN ABOUT HOW WE TREAT EACH OTHER IN JUDGMENTAL WAYS. HE REMINDS US THAT “WE WILL ALL STAND BEFORE THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF GOD.”**

**THIS IS REMINISCENT OF PAUL’S WORDS TO THE CORINTHIANS AND COLOSSIANS WHERE PAUL CLEARLY TELLS US THAT IN AREAS OF CHOICE AND BEHAVIOR THAT ARE NOT MORAL OR ESSENTIAL DOCTRINAL ISSUES, WE ARE NOT ACCOUNTABLE TO OTHERS WHO WOULD JUDGE US. WE ARE ONLY ACCOUNTABLE TO THE LORD AND WILL GIVE AN ACCOUNT FOR ALL OUR CHOICES AND ALL OUR ACTIONS. WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR EACH OTHER IN AREAS OF MORAL DISOBEDIENCE, BUT IN THESE UNCLEAR AREAS OF CHRISTIAN BEHAVIOR, EACH OF US MUST LOOK ONLY TO OURSELVES AND MAINTAIN A CLEAR CONSCIENCE BEFORE GOD. SO, PEOPLE, LET’S STOP JUDGING ONE ANOTHER, AMEN?**

**CONTINUING ON TO VERSES 13B-23, PAUL DIRECTS HIS ATTENTION TO THE GOVERNING PRINCIPAL OF “WALKING IN LOVE.” THIS RECURRING THEME RESOUNDS THROUGHOUT THESE PASSAGES WHERE PAUL COMMANDS US, AS CHRISTIANS, TO “WALK IN LOVE”, REGARDLESS OF OUR DIFFERENCES.**

**WITH REFERENCE TO THE "STRONG" IN FAITH, THE APOSTLE PAUL AFFIRMS THAT WE ARE FREE IN CHRIST, BUT OUR FREEDOM SHOULD NOT HURT ANOTHER BELIEVER!**

**IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTERS, 12 AND 13 OF ROMANS, PAUL ESTABLISHED THAT THE SUPREME COMMAND FOR ALL CHRISTIAN RELATIONSHIPS IS “LOVE”. HE NOW APPLIES THIS PRINCIPAL TO THE SUBJECT OF CONSUMING OR ABSTAINING FROM CERTAIN FOOD AND DRINK.**

**VERSE 13 SAYS: “INSTEAD, MAKE UP YOUR MIND NOT TO PUT ANY STUMBLING BLOCK OR OBSTACLE IN THE WAY OF A BROTHER OR SISTER” THE ACTIONS OF THE STRONG IN FAITH MUST NOT BE GOVERNED BY SELF-INTEREST.**

**RATHER HE MUST TAKE CARE NOT TO PLACE ANYTHING IN THE WAY OF THE WEAKER THAT WOULD UNDERMINE HIS FAITH AND TEMPT HIM TO SIN.**

**PAUL CONTINUES IN VERSE 14, SAYING; “I AM CONVINCED, BEING FULLY PERSUADED IN THE LORD JESUS, THAT NOTHING IS UNCLEAN IN ITSELF. BUT IF ANYONE REGARDS SOMETHING AS UNCLEAN, THEN FOR THAT PERSON IT IS UNCLEAN.” THIS IS CRUCIAL TO UNDERSTANDING HIS ENTIRE ARGUMENT.**

**PAUL DOGMATICALLY ASSERTS THE PRINCIPLE OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM! THE WORDS, “IN THE LORD JESUS” IS A FORMULA THAT SHOWS THAT HIS POSITION IS DETERMINED BY WHAT JESUS TAUGHT AND WHAT THE UNION WITH CHRIST MEANS. NO THING (LIKE FOOD OR WINE, FOR INSTANCE) IS INTRINSICALLY EVIL, BUT RATHER WHAT ONE DOES WITH IT.**

**YET THERE ARE CHRISTIANS WHO REGARD CERTAIN THINGS AS WRONG AND OFFENSIVE TO GOD — CERTAIN ACTIVITIES ON SUNDAY, CERTAIN KINDS OF SOCIAL FUNCTIONS, A CAN OF BEER, A GLASS OF WINE, CERTAIN TYPES OF MUSIC, ENTERTAINMENT, ETC., ETC.**

**THE FACT IS THAT THESE THINGS OFFEND THEIR CONSCIENCE. THEY CAN'T DO THESE THINGS WITHOUT A SENSE OF GUILT. BUT, YOU SEE, IF YOU HAVE DOUBTS ABOUT ANYTHING IN YOUR LIFESTYLE — IF THERE IS ANY BEHAVIOR, ATTITUDE, OR WHATEVER ABOUT WHICH YOU ARE NOT CERTAIN YOU HAVE GOD'S APPROVAL, DON'T DO IT! THE ITEMS UNDER SCRUTINY, CERTAIN FOOD AND DRINK ARE NOT, IN AND OF THEMSELVES, PROFANE OR EVIL.**

**THEREFORE, THEIR CONSUMPTION (MODERATION IS ALWAYS UNDERSTOOD) WOULD NOT CONSTITUTE WRONG-DOING. AGAIN, VERSE 14 REMINDS US THAT “IF ANYONE REGARDS SOMETHING AS UNCLEAN, THEN FOR THAT PERSON IT IS UNCLEAN”**

**IN OTHER WORDS, ONE CAN SIN SIMPLY BY VIOLATING THEIR OWN CONSCIENCE, EVEN IF THE THING ITSELF IS NOT WRONG, BUT YOU BELIEVE IT TO BE AND DO IT ANYWAY.**

**THIS LEADS PAUL TO THIS CONCLUSION — “IF YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER IS DISTRESSED BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU EAT, YOU ARE NO LONGER ACTING IN LOVE. DO NOT BY YOUR EATING DESTROY SOMEONE FOR WHOM CHRIST DIED.” — VERSE 15.**

**IN THIS CONTEXT, THE WORD “DESTROY” MEANS TO DEVASTATE THE FAITH OF THE WEAKER BROTHER WHO SEES THE STRONGER DOING SOMETHING THAT HE, THE WEAKER, REGARDS AS WRONG, EVEN THOUGH IT ISN'T.**

**PAUL IS REALLY SAYING THAT IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE STRONGER, MORE MATURE CHRISTIAN TO PROTECT THE "WEAKER BROTHER" WHO'S FAITH AND BEHAVIOR COULD BE TERRIBLY AND NEGATIVELY AFFECTED. PAUL WRITES IN 1 COR. 8:9 THAT WE MUST "BE CAREFUL, HOWEVER, THAT THE EXERCISE OF YOUR RIGHTS DOES NOT BECOME A STUMBLING BLOCK TO THE WEAK."**

**I THINK THAT WE CAN ALL AGREE THAT THERE IS NO FREEDOM WORTH THAT KIND OF DEVASTATION! AMEN? RATHER, CHRIST,-LIKE LOVE, MUST PREVAIL. THE ONLY WAY CHRIST-LIKE UNITY WILL BE MAINTAINED IN THE CHURCH IS WHEN ALL OF US CAREFULLY CONSIDER HOW EVERYTHING WE DO AFFECTS OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS. PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT PAUL IS NOT REFERRING TO THE EMOTIONAL FEELING OF "BEING HURT" OUT OF ONE'S DISPLEASURE OR DISAPPROVAL — BUT THE IMPACT ON THEIR SPIRITUAL PROGRESS—ARE THEY IN JEOPARDY OF BEING SPIRITUALLY HINDERED OR DAMAGED?**

**THEN IN VERSES 16-18, PAUL ISSUES A STERN WARNING — HE SAYS THAT OUR FREEDOM SHOULD NOT FALL INTO DISREPUTE.**

**WHEN OUR PERSONAL PREFERENCES, JUDGMENTS AND NEGATIVE ATTITUDES CAUSE HURT, DISSENSION AND DISUNITY IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH, IT GIVES AMMUNITION TO THE NON-BELIEVER AND HURTS THE REPUTATION OF CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY, ITSELF. EVEN THOUGH THE WORLD DOES NOT EMBRACE OUR VALUES, THEY SCRUTINIZE EVERYTHING WE DO. THINK ABOUT HOW THE LIBERAL MEDIA REPORTS THE DISPUTES IN DENOMINATIONS AND THE ERRANT BEHAVIOR OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS.**

**WE MUST CONTINUALLY DISPLAY THE THREE EVIDENCES THAT VALIDATE CHRISTIANITY BEFORE A WATCHING WORLD — OUR UNCOMMON LOVE, OUR UNCANNY UNITY, AND OUR DEEDS OF KINDNESS AND GOODNESS. VERSE 16; "THEREFORE DO NOT LET WHAT YOU KNOW IS GOOD BE SPOKEN OF AS EVIL." PLEASE REALIZE THAT CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IS A GOOD THING AND IT ALLOWS YOU TO ENJOY GOOD THINGS, TOO. BUT TO INSIST ON ONE'S FREEDOM WITHOUT REGARD TO THE SCRUPLES OF OTHERS IS NOT ONLY TO FAIL IN CHRISTIAN LOVE, BUT TO MISUNDERSTAND THE ENTIRE PURPOSE AND BASIS FOR OUR SALVATION!**

**VERSE 17: "FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS NOT A MATTER OF EATING AND DRINKING, BUT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, PEACE AND JOY IN THE HOLY SPIRIT!" THE CAUSE AND PURPOSE OF CHRIST'S KINGDOM IS NOT FOUND IN THE NON-ESSENTIALS AND WHAT ONE BELIEVES OR DOES ABOUT THEM.**

IT IS FOUND IN AN INTERNALLY TRANSFORMED LIFE BY THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT PRODUCES "FRUIT", — "LOVE, JOY, PEACE, FORBEARANCE, KINDNESS, GOODNESS, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS AND SELF-CONTROL"

PAUL THEN EXHORTS IN VERSE 18: "BECAUSE ANYONE WHO SERVES CHRIST IN THIS WAY IS PLEASING TO GOD AND RECEIVES HUMAN APPROVAL." NOT ONLY DOES GOD FIND SUCH A LOVING DISPOSITION ACCEPTABLE, BUT WHEN OTHERS SCRUTINIZE THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, SEEING HOW WE GET ALONG AND TREAT EACH OTHER, THEY WILL COME TO POSITIVE CONCLUSIONS.

SO PAUL URGES IN VERSE 19, "LET US THEREFORE MAKE EVERY EFFORT TO DO WHAT LEADS TO PEACE AND TO MUTUAL EDIFICATION". WE CANNOT FOCUS ON GETTING OUR OWN WAY AT THE EXPENSE OF LIVING IN LOVE.

THE MENTION OF BUILDING UP ONE ANOTHER — MUTUAL EDIFICATION — BRINGS TO PAUL'S MIND THE DANGER OF THE OPPOSITE EFFECT. IN VERSES 20-23, HE URGES THAT "YOUR FREEDOM SHOULD NOT TEAR DOWN GOD'S WORK".

HE THEN WRITES IN VERSES 20-23:

VERSE 20. DO NOT DESTROY THE WORK OF GOD FOR THE SAKE OF FOOD. ALL FOOD IS CLEAN, BUT IT IS WRONG FOR A PERSON TO EAT ANYTHING THAT CAUSES SOMEONE ELSE TO STUMBLE. 21 IT IS BETTER NOT TO EAT MEAT OR DRINK WINE OR TO DO ANYTHING ELSE THAT WILL CAUSE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER TO FALL. 22 SO WHATEVER YOU BELIEVE ABOUT THESE THINGS KEEP BETWEEN YOURSELF AND GOD. BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO DOES NOT CONDEMN HIMSELF BY WHAT HE APPROVES. 23 BUT WHOEVER HAS DOUBTS IS CONDEMNED IF THEY EAT, BECAUSE THEIR EATING IS NOT FROM FAITH; AND EVERYTHING THAT DOES NOT COME FROM FAITH IS SIN."

PAUL IS REITERATING THAT WE MUST NOT TEAR DOWN THE WORK OF GOD FOR THE SAKE OF FOOD, OR I MIGHT ADD, ANY OTHER NON-ESSENTIAL SELF-SERVING BELIEFS.

IT IS VITAL TO UNDERSTAND THAT UNLOVING, SELF-CENTERED BEHAVIOR OF ANY KIND MAY LEAD TO THE DESTRUCTION OF THINGS GOD HAS ACCOMPLISHED IN HIS CHURCH.

GOD'S WORK IS ONE OF BUILDING UP, OF RE-CREATING, OF CHANGING EACH OF US INTO THE LIKENESS OF HIS SON. NOTHING WE DO SHOULD IMPEDE THE PROGRESS OF THAT WORK. THE STONES OF GOD'S BUILDING ARE INDIVIDUAL BELIEVERS. AND THE MORTAR HE USES IS LOVE.

**IN VERSE 20, PAUL FINDS IT NECESSARY TO RESTATE THE PRINCIPLE THAT "ALL FOOD IS CLEAN." BUT, HE ADDS THAT "IT IS WRONG FOR A PERSON TO EAT ANYTHING THAT CAUSES SOMEONE ELSE TO STUMBLE." THEN, IN VERSE 21, HE STATES THE NEGATIVE POSITIVELY: "IT IS BETTER NOT TO EAT MEAT OR DRINK WINE OR TO DO ANYTHING ELSE THAT WILL CAUSE YOUR BROTHER OR SISTER TO FALL."**

**IN OTHER WORDS, BE WILLING AND READY TO GIVE UP YOUR RIGHTS AND LIBERTY, FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR BROTHER AND GOD'S WORK. YOU SEE, REFRAINING FROM SIN IS OUR DUTY; AND REFRAINING FROM THE GRAY AREAS THAT ARE NOT SIN FOR THE SAKE OF SOMEONE ELSE, IS LOVE.**

**FINALLY, IN VERSE 23, PAUL GIVES US THE BOTTOM LINE: "EVERYTHING THAT DOES NOT COME FROM FAITH IS SIN."**

**IS THERE ANYTHING YOU DO, ANY ATTITUDE YOU HOLD ANY BEHAVIOR TOWARD ANOTHER, THAT YOU ARE NOT SURE HAS GOD'S APPROVAL? THEN DON'T DO IT! BUT WE DO! AND THAT'S WHY THIS TEACHING IS SO IMPORTANT.**

**PAUL KNOWS THAT 1) THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS LIVED FROM THE INSIDE OUT, 2) THAT EXTERNAL EXTRA-BIBLICAL RULES ARE OF NO AFFECT AGAINST THE DESIRES OF THE FLESH (COL. 2:23), AND 3) ONLY CHOICES MADE BY THE LEADING OF GOD'S SPIRIT THROUGH CONSCIENCE AND THE WORD OF GOD IN THE SPHERE OF LOVE WILL MAKE THE DIFFERENCE.**

**FELLOWSHIP SHOULD NOT BE BROKEN OVER NON-MORAL ISSUES, EVEN IF OPINIONS AND PREFERENCES ARE STRONG. THIS CALLS FOR EACH OF US SUBMITTING TO THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN OUR LIVES WHICH WILL PRECIPITATE ACCEPTANCE AND FORBEARANCE IN SPITE OF DIFFERENCES IN NON-ESSENTIALS.**

**ONLY DIFFERENCES IN MORAL AND ESSENTIAL DOCTRINAL MATTERS CAN BE REASON FOR BREAKING OF FELLOWSHIP. ARE WE WILLING TO COME AT THESE MATTERS WHERE WE DIFFER, THE WAY GOD'S WORD PRESCRIBES? CAN WE TRUST GOD AT WORK, WITHIN US, TO ACHIEVE THE RIGHT OUTCOMES? I PRAY THAT YOU WILL ASK THESE QUESTIONS OF YOURSELF!**

**AS I CLOSE, I WANT TO LEAVE YOU WITH ONE LAST THOUGHT. WHILE PAUL PRIMARILY FOCUS' ON FOOD AND DRINK, THE PRINCIPLE HE SPEAKS OF IS FAR, FAR MORE REACHING THAN JUST THESE ELEMENTS.**

**I WOULD SUGGEST TO YOU THAT THEY ENCOMPASS EVERY AREA OF NON-ESSENTIAL THEOLOGY THAT HAS BEEN DISPUTED, DEBATED, ARGUED AND HAS CAUSED RELATIONAL BREAKS BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND WITHIN CHURCHES FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS. IN MOST OF THESE CASES, THERE IS A SPECTRUM OF BELIEFS, WITH FANATICISM AT BOTH ENDS OF THE CONTINUUM. THE FACT IS THAT AT ONE END, THE NON-ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE MAY BE RIGHT AND THE OTHER WRONG OR THE OTHER RIGHT AND THE FIRST, WRONG. OR THEY MAY BOTH BE WRONG, BUT BOTH CANNOT BE RIGHT — THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUTH!**

**IN THIS CONTEXT, I AM REFERRING TO ISSUES SUCH AS ESCHATOLOGY, WHEN AND HOW THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS WILL OCCUR, FREE WILL VERSES PREDESTINATION, MILLENNIALISM VERSUS AMILLENNIALISM AND SO ON AND SO ON!**

**PAUL’S PRINCIPLE IS SIMPLY THIS — WE CAN BELIEVE AND PRACTICE ANY NON-ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE WE CHOOSE TO, SO LONG AS IT IS BASED ON VALID BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND WE KNOW WHY WE BELIEVE, WHAT WE BELIEVE. BUT WE MUST NOT UNRIGHTEOUSLY JUDGE OTHERS BECAUSE THEIR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION DIFFERS FROM OURS.**

**I MIGHT ADD THAT, IN THESE AREAS OF DISPUTE AMONG MATURE CHRISTIANS, WE SHOULD ALWAYS SEEK TO FIND COMMON GROUND FOR WHICH BOTH SIDES CAN AGREE. FOR EXAMPLE, HOW AND WHEN JESUS WILL RETURN, I.E. THE RAPTURE, ETC., IS DISPUTABLE, BUT THE REALITY IS THAT HE WILL RETURN AND THIS WE CAN ALL AGREE UPON! AMEN?**

**LET ME CLOSE BY ENCOURAGING YOU TO REMEMBER THE WORDS OF PAUL FROM COLOSSIANS 4:6 WHEN DISCUSSING THESE AMORAL ISSUES: “LET YOUR CONVERSATION BE ALWAYS FULL OF GRACE, SEASONED WITH SALT, SO THAT YOU MAY KNOW HOW TO ANSWER EVERYONE.” AMEN AND AMEN!**