

Rev Joe Barnard: Romans 14

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Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] If you have a Bible, let's open up to Romans chapter 14. I sometimes have this really kind of strange daydream.

I kind of imagine that the current church in Kiltarletti, which is where I minister, one day something really strange happens. You need to understand that the church in Kiltarletti has changed a lot over recent years.

People, they dress fairly casually. There are hymns that are sung. There's instruments. People, they tend to talk before and after the service.

And I sometimes have this thought, what would happen if the congregation from the 1960s? I know this sounds really strange, if they didn't actually pass away, but they just went on a 50-year holiday. I sometimes have this thought, what would happen if right before worship on Sunday morning, the free church of Kiltarletti from 1960 suddenly walked in and saw the free church in Kiltarletti from 2016?

[1 : 12] I have this image of all of a sudden seeing these people in the same room. Now the one hand you've got, the people from the 1960s who are glaring over at these new people that don't at all look like the Christians that they knew that they respect.

And then at the very same time I imagine the people who are in the church right now glaring over at the free church Christians from the 1960s saying that's not the way that we think Christianity ought to be lived.

And I have this thought, if that happened, right before there was some sort of revolt and some sort of turmoil and brawl that just broke out in the start of worship, what would I do?

You know what I would do? As quick as I could, I would run to Romans 14 and I would preach on this text. I'll tell you why.

Sometimes a little background history is useful as we think about the Scriptures. It's interesting to think about the church in Rome. The best that we can reconstruct it, more than likely the first Christians in Rome they would have been Jewish converts, Jewish Christians.

[2 : 23] The early apostles they would have gone to Rome which was a hub for Jews. And as happened in many of the cities around the Roman Empire, the earliest converts were often Jews.

So you can imagine that the first church in Rome was a very Jewish church that no doubt these Christians, they kept the kosher laws of the Old Testament.

They would have emphasized the importance of circumcision. That a lot of the things that culturally Jewish would have been the very part even of their Christian faith.

Now we know historically that in 49 AD something very interesting happened. All of the Jews were expelled from Rome. They all had to leave.

Now here's the interesting thing. That means all of the Jewish Christians had to leave Rome that didn't mean that the church ceased to exist. But it would have meant that the church would have changed pretty dramatically.

[3 : 25] And it would have gone from a primarily Jewish community, the very Jewish culture, to a very Gentile Christian community with a very non-Jewish Christian culture.

Now eventually those Jews were allowed to come back to Rome. Can you imagine what they thought when they got back? And all of a sudden they looked and there were Christians.

There were people that worshiped the God of Israel who were eating meat that had been bought at Butchers and the meat had come though from the pagan temples and had been offered in pagan rituals to false gods and idols.

And there they are eating it. And there they are drinking wine that had been purchased and had religious rituals from pagan temples done with it.

And here were Christians that didn't follow the same kind of structure of time in worship that the Jewish community had valued and cherished for very long ago.

[4 : 44] Do you realize that is the messy pastoral situation that Paul is writing into with Romans chapter 14?

Now we can't cover the whole of this chapter, so what I hope to do is I just want to show you three big truths that are embedded in this chapter and then show you three applications that come from those three fundamental truths.

Here's the first truth that Paul communicates in this chapter. He wants us to know that there will always be two types of Christians in every church congregation.

What he calls weak, what he calls strong. Now those sound kind of loaded to us, so let me say sensitive and confident.

Now the sensitive, and this is who he starts out in verse 1, as for the one who is weak, the thing about the weak or the sensitive Christians, they latch on to a very fundamental Christian gospel truth.

[5 : 51] They grab hold of the gospel from the end of the stick of God's holiness and of his law, and they value these things, and they prioritize these things.

But the problem with these weak or these sensitive Christians is they tend to be judgmental and critical of Christians that don't follow God's law or respect his holiness in the way that they think it ought to be done.

You're always going to find this type of Christian in every church. Now there's another type of Christian in every congregation which we might call strong and that we might call confident.

They too latch hold, latch on to, a fundamental gospel truth. They grab the gospel from the other end of the stick. That of freedom.

And they love to celebrate the freedom. You can think of Galatians where Paul talks about the Christian being freed through the Spirit, freed through the work of Christ. They grab hold of that.

[6 : 54] And the problem is that these Christians also tend to be critical and judgmental of everyone that isn't freed up in precisely the way that they think they ought to be freed.

And Paul, he wants us to understand that these two types of Christians are always going to be a part of every church. Now the second fundamental truth that we see in this passage is that there will never be a time when every Christian agrees on everything.

At least not until Jesus comes again and tells us the way it ought to be. And there were issues in Paul's day that were deeply divisive. Now maybe to us they seem as if they're not all that important. Look at verse 2. We might wonder, you know, why is this person so caught up with being a vegetarian? Remember what I told you a moment ago?

Pretty much all meat in Rome came from one place, pagan temples. And so if you went to the butcher, it wasn't just butcher from some man's farm, it came from a temple and had been sacrificed to some idol.

[8 : 04] And you can understand why someone with the Old Testament, if they knew that that was the source of this meat, that they would have a deep sense that that in some way was contaminated, it shouldn't be touched.

And that was a big issue in Paul's day. You know, another big issue was how the Sabbath was observed. See this verse 6.

The one who observes the day observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord. That time was an issue, how to honor God, not just with food, but with our time.

What it looked like to respect God with time, to respect the commandment of the Sabbath. This too was a pressing issue of Paul's day that Christians were divided about.

You know, we could think of issues from our day, couldn't we? I mean, all you got to do is look at a church building, you can think of countless issues that are divisive in the church today.

[9 : 07] You know, should we sit in seats, should we sit in pews? You can think of what should we worship God with, is it the Psalms, is it hymns? How should we do church, is it house groups, is it big gatherings?

You know, these are divisive issues that Christians find it difficult to agree upon. What Paul wants us to know in this passage is again, there will not come a day where we all agree on every issue.

Now, the most important truth in this passage is that the truth that unites Christians that keeps us together, it's not most fundamentally holiness, it's not most fundamentally freedom, most

fundamentally it's lordship.

You know the difficulty of holiness? Because you've always got to ask the question, who's holiness? And usually people that are promoting holiness and purity, they're not just promoting what the Bible says, but their own interpretation of what the Bible says.

And so it leaves you in that really difficult place of how do you really get to the very heart of the matter? It's the same problem when you have Christians promoting freedom. You have the question, who's freedom?

[10:24] And it's usually not just freedom as it's articulated by Paul and by John and by Jesus, but it's this person's take on Jesus' teaching. So again, you're left, how do you get to rock bottom what freedom is?

Well notice Paul, in this passage, he doesn't point to purity, he doesn't point to freedom. What does he call our attention to? To lordship.

This is the truth that can unite people who are divided on different opinions. Look at what he says. Verse 7, none of us lives to himself. None of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, if we die, we die to the Lord.

And he goes on and he reminds us that each one of us, verse 12, will one day give an account of himself before Christ, before God.

[11:30] So how does this work? You know what every Christian shares? It's the deep conviction that the only thing that ultimately matters is pleasing the Lord Jesus.

Right, once we've professed faith that our sins have been forgiven, at the same time we profess that Jesus is Lord. From that moment on, the only idea or the only set of opinions that really ultimately matter are those of Jesus.

So the one thing that every Christian ought to hold in common is that all I want is for my life to be pleasing to Jesus. All you want is for your life to be pleasing before Jesus.

And if every Christian lives with that basic conviction, then guess what? Look at verse 1. We don't have to quarrel about opinions.

We don't have to play the role of Jesus. We can let Jesus be Jesus because we don't have to pretend like we're Lords over one another.

[12:38] He can be Lord. He can straighten us out. He can straighten his church out. And so these are three truths Paul wants us to know. There's two types of Christians in every congregation.

There's never a time when all Christians will agree on everything. But the truth that will unite us is our conviction that Jesus is Lord. And that each person must live out his or her life as a wholehearted disciple before Jesus.

Now what are the applications in this passage? The first application that Paul wants us to take away is that we need to keep first things first.

We need to be focused upon what God's priorities are. Notice Paul, he specifies, there's a lot of stuff that ultimately it's not the material that God really cares about when it comes to his kingdom. In verse 17, the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking. And couldn't we add a whole lot of things to that? You know, the kingdom of God really has very little to do with the kind of building that we worship in.

[13:53] The kingdom of God is not a fixed liturgy. The kingdom of God is not some contemporary strategy of missional community or of evangelism.

It's not the stuff of the kingdom of God. What is the kingdom of God? We know Paul, he points to some of the things that ultimately matter in verse 17.

Righteousness, peace, joy. You know, we might specify in another way, what is the heart of God? Well, it's worship, right?

He wants Jesus to be first in our life. It's discipleship, right? He wants us to train each other up into full maturity in the Lord. It's community, right?

He wants us to love one another, to be known for the mercy, the compassion that we live out day by day so that the world sees we're different by the way we love one another.

[14:52] It is mission, right? That great commission to go out and make disciples not of foreign nations, but of all people groups, of all villages. That's the stuff that God cares about.

And if it doesn't really fit in those fundamental boxes, it's secondary. It's not primary. And what Paul wants us to know is he wants us to be focused on the priorities of God.

Now, a second application that we see in this passage is that it's not our job to judge one another.

Look at verse four. It's incisive. It'll cut you, it'll make you bleed. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?

How often do we exalt ourselves to a position that Jesus alone holds?

[15:59] Paul says that's not our job to judge. That each one of us aren't servants that belong to the other. We're fundamentally servants that belong to Jesus.

In fact, it expresses a distrust in the Lord Jesus Christ when we judge somebody else. You know what we're really saying when we judge another Christian?

We're saying, Jesus, you know, you're not competent for your job. Clearly, you're not able to manage your flock. So I'm going to do it for you. If you're not willing to straighten this person out, I'll express my criticism.

And maybe you can learn from my example and do a better job in the future. Now, maybe we don't articulate all of that, but is that not what's going on when we criticize and judge other Christians?

Paul believes, look at what Paul says. Paul believes that Jesus is fully competent to do the job that is his, which is to judge his people and the world, which is to work out our salvation and to purify and to make us holy.

[17:02] Look at what he says at the end of verse four. And he, Jesus, or and he, the Christian will be upheld for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Being a member of the church requires believing in the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the Spirit. That the spirit will convict of sin, that the spirit will convict of immaturity, that the spirit will grow us up into the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Now, the third application in this passage, and it really stems from what Paul was saying in chapter 13. And it carries on all the way to what he says in the beginning of chapter 15.

The third application is that we're meant to love one another. That's our calling. Now, do you know what love requires? Well, first of all, love requires sacrifice.

Do you know the sacrifice it was for a Jewish Christian in the day of Paul that had grown up with the kosher laws of Israel? To sit in fellowship with a Gentile that ate meat that they thought was prohibited by the law.

[18:16] Do you realize the sacrifice that that Jewish Christian was making? Do you realize the sacrifice that the Gentile Christian was making who knew that this meat, it was created by God.

It was okay. But who set it aside because they didn't want to offend the weaker Christian. Friends, love takes sacrifice.

It takes giving up freely the things that we hold as dear for the sake of the other. You know what else love requires?

It requires encouragement. How quick we are to forget the breadleness of our own self. How deeply does it hurt you when someone is critical of you?

You know, you can't shake it off for days. And yet how easy is it to be critical of someone else? It's as if we forget that everybody is just as bruised as we are.

[19:18] And one of the things that Paul is trying to get these Christians to do is to recognize they've got to be for one another. They need to be encouraging one another. There's no one in the world that's going to encourage them.

If they're tearing each other down, who is going to build them up? And so the things that tear each other down, they've got to put those aside. And they've got to be able to love one another and be in harmony with one another and to edify one another in their face.

And friends, one other thing that we see, and we see this most clearly with the example of Christ, is love means prioritizing you before me.

For each one of us, prioritizing the other. You know, one day I'm going to know when I step into the perfect church. Do you know how I'm going to know that this church is perfect?

Because this church is going to be debating the whole topic of praise, the whole question, Psalms hymns. And on one side there are going to be these Christians that long to sing the hymns.

[20:26] And they're going to be pleading with their brothers and going to say, No, no, no, no, no, we don't want to sing the hymns. We want to bless you. We want to do what you think is right. And then on the other hand, there's going to be the Psalms singing Christians and they're going to say, No, no, no, no, we want to sing the hymns. We want to give up what we hold dear.

We want to prioritize you. And that is going to be the way that the gospel conversation is going to happen. Not me over you, but you over me. Your priorities before mine.

Let me bless you before you bless me. That's the spirit of Christ that relinquishes what we think are our rights. For the sake of the love of the other.

And that's the kind of gospel love that Paul is calling us to look at chapter 15. Let me just read to you verse five. This is the church that Paul longs to see, not just in Rome, but here in Lewis.

May the God of endurance and encouragement notice God encourages us grant you to live in such harmony with one another. In accord with Christ Jesus that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 42] The church coming together with one heart, one voice to praise God. I want to leave you with a question.

My question is, are you wasting your spiritual zeal?

It's entirely possible that your spiritual fervor is being misdirected toward things that will not ultimately matter.

1657, the wealthiest man in France was a guy named Nicholas Fouquet. He was the minister of finance. He decided that he wanted to build the most sumptuous palace in the whole of France. He got the best architects. He got the best builders. They constructed a house that no one had ever seen before. He decided he'd have the greatest opening party for his new residence.

[22 : 47] He invited a thousand people, the best chefs from all of France. He had Moliere, the greatest writer in the world at the time, write a play just for the evening. There were going to be fireworks, there were champagne.

There was going to be something people would remember for the rest of their lives. Now as the guests streamed in, everybody was pleased, everyone was happy, and then all of a sudden Louis XIV, the king of France, showed up.

He wasn't happy. He wasn't happy because the costume of Fouquet was actually more beautiful than his own. He wasn't pleased because the palace actually outshone his own residence.

That night, Fouquet had to enjoy his own party. He ended up in jail, where he died 19 years later, never having enjoyed the house that he'd spent so much time building.

Now, I don't want to compare the Lord Jesus Christ to Louis XIV, who is selfish, who had a big ego. That's nothing like the Lord Jesus Christ.

[23 : 52] But isn't it true that so often we can invest such energy into doing things, and promoting things, and protecting things, that one day when Jesus stands before us, honestly, he's going to be frustrated and displeased?

Because maybe we're going to say, you know what, we changed the culture of the church. Or maybe we'll say, no, we preserved the culture of the church.

Jesus is going to ask, but did you make disciples? But did you live out a life of community with real love, with real mercy?

Did you fulfill the Great Commission? It's entirely possible that even we who are Christians can focus our spiritual zeal on things that ultimately won't matter.

What Paul's calling us to in this passage is a focus on what will matter. The focus on that day where each one of us will give an account of ourselves before the Lord Jesus Christ.

[25 : 02] To focus on the call for righteousness, for peace, for joy, for unity. For us to focus on the mission of God.

You know, this morning we thought about signing the Pharisee. And isn't it incredible to think about the Pharisees? How zealous they were, but how misdirected their zeal was.

And so as we search the scriptures, the task for every Christian, whether we view ourselves as progressive, whether we view ourselves as conservative, these things are irrelevant. The question we all have to ask is, God, are your priorities my priorities?

Am I facilitating the building up of your people in your church? Or am I a hindrance? And we need to trust that as Christians ask that question.

That as Paul tells us that we don't need to quarrel over opinions. We don't need to judge one another. We can live lives edifying one another.

[26 : 14] Live lives serving Jesus. And trusting that in the end, Jesus will straighten out his church. Let's pray.