

April 6/7 2013

The Gospel Story: Not For Ourselves

Romans 14: 1-23

Pastor Bryan Clark

Over the last several weeks we've reminded ourselves many times that on the basis of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, we have been set free. But it raises the question: Set free to do what? Set free to do what I want to do? Set free to be selfish? That would simply be another form of bondage. How about set free to be a slave of God, and set free to love my neighbor as myself, and set free to think of others as more important than myself? That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 14.

If you're new with us today, we've been working our way through the book of Romans. We started in September; we're coming down the home stretch here. Two weeks ago, from chapter 13, Paul reminded us that our call is *to love your neighbor as yourself*. By doing that we fulfill all of the law. At the end of chapter 13, he said we should *put on Christ and not give in to the desires of the flesh*. How do we do that in a very practical way? That gets us into chapter 14, dealing with what was obviously a problem in the first century Roman church. But I would suggest to you it's a problem in every church. Verse 1:

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. (*NASB, Roman 14:1-4)

Now most people understand this to be a conflict between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. And because the Jewish Christians had this residue left over from their life in Judaism, there were some areas of conflict. They still weren't sure how to resolve issues like the Sabbath, issues like the dietary laws. So in a city like Rome, there was meat offered in the marketplace, but the Jewish believer would say, "We don't know how it was killed. We don't know if it's kosher. We don't know if it was offered to the pagan temples. Therefore, we don't feel freedom in our conscience to eat it." So they would eat vegetables only, whereas the Gentile believers that didn't have this Jewish residue said, "Hey, it's just a piece of meat! It's fine." But it was causing conflict, and so Paul is trying to resolve the issues.

Now this morning we have a lot of ground to cover, so it would be helpful just to explain a few terms and concepts as we begin, so then we can just kind of fly through the text. Number one, it's helpful to understand this is not a salvation issue; this is a sin issue. What I mean by that is there were Judaizers—Jewish legalists—who preached that, in order to be saved, you had to keep the Sabbath. In order to be saved, you had to keep the dietary laws. In order to be saved, you had to follow the circumcision—other parts of the law. Paul would write to the Galatians and say, "When you add anything—any religious work to the message of grace—it ceases to be grace, and at that point it's a different gospel. And because it's a different gospel, those people are actually false teachers. In the case of the Romans in this text, it's not an issue of salvation. They're not arguing that. What they are arguing is what is right and wrong within the freedom that we now have in Christ. Is this a sin issue or not?"

Second of all, it's very important to remember what we're talking about is what we often refer to as *gray areas*, meaning these are not black and white sin issues. It's really important to understand the text correctly. We're not talking about adultery; we're not talking about lying and cheating and greed. We're not talking about the things that are clearly spelled out as right and wrong in the Scriptures. We're talking about those things that are not clearly spelled out. They land in the area of our freedom, and, "Is this something that for me is right or wrong? Is it a sin issue or not?" Now I don't think any individual believer has personal gray areas. Each one of us as Christians has been given the Holy Spirit, and the role of the Holy Spirit is to convict me of what's right and wrong for me. So, when I look at my own personal life, I don't see areas of gray. I understand my freedoms; I understand my convictions, and I need to live true to that. But there's a reality, for a variety of reasons, that where I have freedom, you may have conviction. And where you have conviction, I may have freedom. So that differs between us for a variety of reasons. Therefore, collectively, there are areas of gray. According to Paul, the problem in the text is the Jewish believers had this conviction because of their background, and that's fine. But the problem is they were saying to the Gentile believers, "What you're doing is sinful!" And they were casting judgment on them. The Gentile believers were saying, "Hey, we don't have that same background; we don't have that same hang-up. As a matter of fact, we resent the fact that you're calling it sin, and we prefer that you just kinda get lost!" So there was a problem on both sides; both sides had attitudes that weren't loving.

When we're talking about the issues being discussed and the way this is playing out, it's also helpful to remember: we're not talking about a difference of opinion. We're not talking about just agreeing to disagree. Sometimes legalists use text like this to control everyone's behavior, because all they say is, "That offends me." Everything you do that the legalist disagrees with, he says, "That offends me." Therefore he's trying to control, or she's trying to control, all your behavior. That's not the point of this text. It's very clear. It's talking about those who are **weak**, and by *weakness* he means these are people that have not yet matured to find freedom in these areas—because of past history, because of background, because of personality, because of issues. It could be any number of things. For some reason, this believer has not yet found freedom in this area. So they are weak. They have an area of vulnerability, and the Holy Spirit has told them they don't yet have freedom in this area. So, it isn't just a disagreement. There's a deeper issue: it's a freedom, and it's a weakness issue, which is how Paul is going to deal with it.

So he reminds them that both sides have a problem with their attitude and then, at the end of verse 3, he tells them **God has accepted him**. He's reminding them that when you look at your fellow believers in Christ, you should look at them through the lens of how God sees them. And if God has accepted them, why can't you accept them? Certainly your standard is not higher than God's! And if God has saved them and God has accepted them, then shouldn't you view them through the eyes of God and stop judging them, calling your conviction sin for them and stop rejecting them, saying, "Just because you don't see it like me, you should go away," because that is not how God views them. Now people often refer to the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have others do unto you*. But when you listen to that, there is still a threat of selfishness in that. My motivation is because this is how "I" want to be treated. The text is going one beyond that and saying the motivation should be: You treat others because that's how God treats them, and if that's how God treats them, that's the right way to treat them. And so we should treat them accordingly. And he reminds them at the end of verse 4: by the way, they are accepted by God. At the end of the day, God is the Master; the believer is the slave, and God has accepted them because they have been justified by the blood of Jesus.

Now in verse 4 he uses an illustration of a master and a slave, and he reminds them that you have no business judging the slave of another master. Maybe in modern-day terminology we would say, “It’s not my responsibility to discipline somebody else’s children.” I may go to the store and I may look at the way some children are acting and I may think, “*I would do that differently*”. But I do not have the authority to discipline somebody else’s children. It’s not my business. And in the same way, we are the children of God. He’s the master; we’re the slaves. It’s not my job to judge His slaves. He’ll do that—and let’s trust Him with that. Verse 5:

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

The topic changes just a little bit, but it’s very similar. It still has this Jewish residue of holy days, and probably most specifically the Sabbath—the weekly Sabbath—which would probably have brought up this issue on a weekly basis. The Jewish Christians, coming out of their Judaism, are still struggling with what to do with the Sabbath. They still feel like one day in seven—and for them the Sabbath day—should be kept holy. The Gentile believers, who did not come out of that background, believe every day is the same.

Now it’s worth noting that Paul is putting the Sabbath in the category of a gray area. That’s very helpful to understand. He is saying: this is not a black and white issue. But rather he is saying: this is an issue of gray and, what he’s ultimately saying is: you have to be true to your own conscience. You have to be fully convinced. If you believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath, and every day I rest in what Jesus has done on the cross; every day I rest in the fulfillment of the Sabbath; therefore I keep it every day and I see no difference between a Saturday and a Sunday, a Tuesday and a Friday, then I should be true to that conviction. But if you come from a background where that doesn’t make sense to you, you still have a conviction and you feel like one day should be set apart as special from the other, then you need to be true to *that* conviction. You need to follow how the Holy Spirit leads *you*. That’s basically what he is saying. Then he’s going to expand on that.

He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Vs. 6-9)

Well, there you go, that just cleared it all up, didn’t it? (laughter) It kind of feels like it’s just going in circles there. Basically, start with verse 9: There is a reminder that Jesus is the One who died for sins, was buried and rose again. Jesus is the Savior, and so the reminder is that if Jesus is the Savior, you’re not! That’s the whole point there. You’re not the one that died for their sins. You’re not the one that was buried. You’re not the one that rose again, so it’s not your job to be their judge. Now again, we’re not talking about black and white sin issues. We’re talking about these issues of gray. And if each of us is a child of God, if each of us has the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, if each of us is a slave of the Master, then can’t we trust God to take care of His children, the Master to take care of His slaves? He died for us; He saved us; it’s His life in us.

So what the text is saying—and this I find to be very helpful—is: when you’re thinking about areas of freedom, rather than thinking about, “I have the freedom now in Christ to do as I please!” it’s

rather thinking through the grid of these two questions that he raises. “Is this something I’m doing unto the Lord?” Second question is, “Is this something I am giving thanks to the Lord for?” There are lots of things that I can do in my freedom, but would I really say what’s motivating me is I’m doing this unto the Lord because I think it pleases Him? Or am I simply exercising my freedom because I’m living it up? Now on the basis of grace, I can do as I please! It’s very helpful to ask yourself when you’re exercising your freedom in Christ, “Why am I doing this? Am I doing this just because of the pressures around me or because now I can do it and before maybe I thought I couldn’t?” Or am I really saying, “God, I’m doing this because I think it pleases You and, because I think it pleases You, I’m giving You thanks that I can do this today?” It’s the same when people struggle in their areas of weakness, thinking through that: Am I doing this out of a legalistic structure, thinking somehow it makes me more spiritual or more acceptable to God? Or am I doing this because I think this pleases God? And, “God, I’m doing this for You.” That’s my motive, and this is something I can be thankful for. So from both sides, it’s very helpful to think through that grid when we exercise our freedom. So what he’s saying is that, at the end of the day, we should do this as unto the Lord. We should be true to our own convictions. Just because the people around me have different convictions doesn’t mean I should change mine. Ultimately, I should be true to how the Holy Spirit convicts *me*, how the Holy Spirit leads *me*, and I do it with a happy heart; I do it with a thankful heart, and I stay true to how God has convicted *me*. In keeping with what he said in verse 9, that since we’re not the Messiah, we’re not the Savior, then we’ll leave the judging to God. Verse 10:

But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

For it is written,

**“AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME,
AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.”**

So then each one of us will give account of himself to God. (Vs. 10-12)

Now he opens the verse with, **Why do you judge your brother?** I want to say again, we’re talking about gray issues. There are many Christians in our culture today that have taken statements like this and translated them to mean that I can’t judge anyone for any behavior. That’s just not simply, biblically, correct. As a matter of fact, God specifically says, “This is right; this is wrong; this is good; this is evil.” Let’s take the case of adultery—that’s not a gray area. It’s a black and white area. If someone is involved in adultery, it’s not *me* judging *them*. It’s God judging them, but God, through His Word, has said, “This is My judgment” —and I simply agree with that. And I should agree with that as a Christian. But when we’re talking about areas of gray, what we’re saying is: just because I have a certain conviction doesn’t mean you should have that same conviction. Just because I have freedom doesn’t mean you should have freedom in the same areas of life. And on that basis I shouldn’t judge somebody else.

But there’s a reminder that, at the end of the day, we’re all accountable to the Master. We’re all accountable to God. He’s referring to what we call the *Bema Seat*, or the judgment seat of Christ. All unbelievers ultimately appear before the *Great White Throne* judgment, Revelation chapter 20. All of those people will be unbelievers. Believers don’t appear before that judgment, because that judgment is a judgment of salvation. We as believers appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Our salvation is not what’s being judged, but we are being judged, held accountable, for how we lived out our Christian faith. I think, weekly, we celebrate the realities of grace, but we have to understand that within the text of grace, if we have communicated to you that that means you can live as you please as a Christian and there’s no accountability because grace makes it all go away,

then we have misinformed you. Just because grace is true doesn't mean there isn't accountability. As your pastor, it is my responsibility to tell you—you're still going to stand before Jesus, the One who gave His life to save you, and there is accountability for how you lived out your faith in Christ. I don't understand exactly how all of this works. I do think it's relevant to rewards, and I don't understand exactly how all of that works. But I do believe it's true that, at the end of your story, there is accountability. And that is what the text is saying: I don't need to be your judge. Jesus will hold you accountable. I can trust Him with that; that's not really my responsibility. Verse 13, the text changes a little bit, in terms of the focus:

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. (Vs. 13-14)

The discussion changes now to an issue related to putting **an obstacle or a stumbling block in somebody's pathway**. It's understanding that people have areas of weakness, areas of vulnerability—this might be because of past habits, past patterns, past abuses, past experiences—a personality that leans one way or another. There could be many reasons why this is true, but somebody has a particular area of weakness and my exercising of my freedom actually becomes an obstacle to their relationship with Christ—or a stumbling block, which is even worse—the two terms are progressive. A stumbling block is actually a snare or a trap. I have actually led them into a trap that causes them to compromise their own convictions, and actually leads them into behavior that's going to be destructive to them. So I have to be aware of how I exercise my freedom. My freedom in Christ is not freedom to do as I please. It's not a freedom to be selfish. It's a freedom to *love my neighbor as myself*. It's a freedom to *think of others as more important than myself*. So he starts from a very important doctrinal point: no *thing* is unclean. So in other words, what he's saying is: no piece of meat is good or evil; it's just a piece of meat. No particular day of the week is good or evil; it's just a day of the week. We would say no style of music is good or evil; it's just a style of music. No instrument on the stage is good or evil; it's just an instrument. Years ago there were lots of those debates.

My grandfather was a godly man and I loved him with all of my heart, but he had a strong conviction about playing pool—to the degree that not only did he think it was wrong to go to a pool hall, he thought it was wrong for a Christian to own a pool table. It went back to the fact that when he was growing up, there was a pool hall and the pool hall was a bad place, and bad things happened there—and he got caught up in that. And so, for him, he associated that game with that place and past behaviors, and he just never had freedom in that area. Now do I understand that? Absolutely not! It makes no sense to me. I can't process that. Do I have a problem with pool? No. I would own a pool table, but just because I don't have his experience, I don't have his past, I don't have whatever it is that made that so problematic to him, I can still respect that. There's no need to reject him or push him away just because we see that issue differently. What the text is saying is: there's nothing good or evil about a pool table or a pool hall. Now I'm using a bit of an extreme example just to make a point. But if my grandpa, in his conscience, believed it was unclean—to him it is unclean. It comes back to the fact that you need to be true to your own conscience. You need to be true to your own convictions. You need to be true to how God is leading you. There might be reasons why the Holy Spirit has not given you freedom in a particular area. You shouldn't violate your conscience just because people around you are doing that. You shouldn't be pressured into doing or not doing a certain behavior because of the people around you. And we all need to understand that and support and respect one another. He says:

For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; (Vs. 15-16)

In other words, if in the exercising of my freedom, I cause a fellow brother or sister in Christ to violate his or her own conscience and participate in a behavior that ultimately becomes destructive—maybe it starts that person back down a very destructive path—I have actually hurt that person. I have actually done damage to a person that Jesus died for. There is never a case where my freedom is more important than loving a brother or sister in Christ. It's not freedom to do as I please. It's the freedom to love and think of others as more important than myself. So I never just have a blank check; I'm always aware of how my behavior affects someone else's behavior.

Now the most obvious illustration is probably the illustration of alcohol. A cup of alcohol is not good or evil in itself—it's a cup of alcohol—and I think Christians within their freedom have the freedom to responsibly consume alcohol. But what if I'm with someone who, in the past, has had a drinking problem? And even in Christ, they don't feel the freedom to consume alcohol, and I know that. I should respect that conviction enough not to make the situation uncomfortable, and certainly not to exercise my freedom in a way that it tempts that person to violate his or her own conscience to participate in something that may send them back down a path of destruction. That person matters to me more than my freedom! And that's what he's talking about. At the end of the day, people matter more than my freedom. I just need to be aware of how my behavior affects the people around me.

When I am doing something that for me is free and good, but it actually starts to affect the fellow brother or sister in Christ, that good thing has actually become an evil thing. And I'm actually guilty of sin, not because it wasn't within my freedom, but because my attitude was sinful in the destruction I have done to the fellow believer. Verse 17:

...for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable (*the word means well-pleasing*) **to God and approved by men.** (Vs. 17-18)

So, in other words, this is the behavior that is pleasing to God and that others would see as right is: when I do what is good for the kingdom. I do what is good for the family, and we're all working together for the common good to accomplish God's desire in all of this. Verse 19:

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. (Vs. 19-21)

At the end of the day, our love for one another—at the end of the day, the values we have for joy and safety and happiness and encouragement together are more important than my freedom. So we all work together on this. Now he talks about *stumbling and offense*—and I want to say it one more time—this passage is not a passage that legalists can use to control everyone's behavior. There are legalists who are not struggling with their weakness. They are simply legalists, and they try to control everyone else's behavior by saying, "That offends me." Every time somebody does something they disagree with, they say, "That offends me." They are not meaning that they're vulnerable or they are weak—as a matter of fact it's usually said in a self-righteous way, that

somehow they are more spiritual. It is not necessary for the Christian to cave into every legalist that wants to control your behavior. It's an issue of a weaker brother that legitimately is struggling and needs some help, needs some encouragement, wants you to partner with him or her in the journey. That's the point of the text. It's important to understand that. But it's also important for us that have freedom to understand: I can't just exercise my freedom without an awareness of how it affects the people around me. Sometimes when people grow up in very conservative environments, and then they get a sense of the freedom they have in Christ, they go freedom to the extreme. And the attitude is kind of, "Hey, this is my freedom! I'm gonna do it whether you like it or not!" That is not right; at that point that's become sin. I have to be aware of how my behavior affects the people around me. I am free to love and I will gladly give up those freedoms that I need to give up, if that's in the best interest of brothers and sisters around me who maybe don't experience the same level of freedom. Verse 22:

The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin. (Vs. 22-23)

The last two verses summarize what he has been talking about. You have tremendous freedom in Christ, and that's what the text is saying. Enjoy that freedom! Celebrate that freedom! You should be thankful for what God has given you and run it through the two questions that we talked about: "God, I do this because I think it's well pleasing to You." "I do this because it's something You have given me, and I give You thanks for it." That's a really helpful way to create a grid: Why am I doing this? Am I doing this because I have permission to become more like the world, or am I doing this because, in my heart, I really think this pleases God, and I'm going to enjoy this, and I'm going to celebrate this, and be thankful for this before God. Those that don't have such freedoms in their areas of weakness, should not judge other believers because other believers don't share the same convictions. They don't have your background; they don't have your story. They don't have your areas of vulnerability. It's okay to let them be free. You should celebrate that. But you need to be true to your own conviction. The Holy Spirit is convicting you for a reason. You need to be true to that. You shouldn't be unnecessarily influenced by others who don't share the same conviction. So, at the end of the day, we look out for one another. We celebrate one another. We encourage one another in order to make this work.

I would use the analogy of a family. I think a lot of parents make a strategic error in thinking, "*I need to treat all my children the same.*" It usually goes under the umbrella of fairness. Hey, I've got news for you: they're not the same—and they shouldn't be treated the same! That's a strategic mistake in my mind. Your children are very different. They have different personalities. They'll have different experiences. They have different areas of vulnerability. They have different weaknesses. They have different temperaments. Each child needs to be parented differently. A good parent is very strategic with that. But I understand, within the context of the family, this is going to be different because the members of the family are different. It's equally true within the body of Christ. We're a family, and you can't just have a set of rules that apply to everyone. We're very different. Some will experience great freedom in areas where others will struggle. Others will struggle in areas where others have freedoms. It has to do with you; it has to do with your experiences, your background, your personality, your vulnerabilities—it has to do with a whole number of things. If you have freedom, celebrate that freedom. Do it unto the Lord. Do what's pleasing to Him. Be true to your convictions. But be aware of the fact that there may be people around you that don't have the same freedoms. And when you're aware of that, you need to be

careful that you don't become an obstacle; you don't cause them to stumble. You don't say to them, "Hey, get over it or go away," which sometimes is the temptation.

But together we create an environment where we can both celebrate the freedom that we have in Christ, but also we create an environment that feels safe and secure and encouraging, where we come together and try to understand one another and encourage one another, and celebrate one another—that we all, together, would experience the life that God intended for His church to experience together.

Father, we're thankful this morning that You love us. You gave Jesus to die for us that we might be set free from our sin. Lord, I pray that each of us as believers would not use our freedom as a selfish thing, to just do as we please, but rather we would be driven by a desire to do what's pleasing to You, to do what's right before You, to do what we can give thanks for in Your presence. Lord, we also understand that sometimes there are areas of weakness and struggle and vulnerability where we don't feel the same freedom. Lord, help us to be sensitive to the voice of the Holy Spirit, to be true to our convictions, that we too might walk in a way that's pleasing to You and that's upright. And then, Lord, that together we would love and respect one another, that we would encourage one another, that we would lead one another to be more like Jesus, not lead one another farther away from Jesus. Lord, help us to understand what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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The Gospel Story: Not For Ourselves

A Study of Romans

Romans 14:1-23

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. How would you define a “grey area”? What are some examples? What’s the difference between a grey area and something that’s black and white?
2. What experiences have you had with people judging you for doing something you believed you had freedom in Christ to do? Was the issue resolved or not?
3. What experiences have you had with other people exercising their freedoms in such a way it was hurtful to you? What was the result? Did you try to talk to them about the issue? What was the result?

Bible Study

1. Read Romans 12:1-3, 21; 13:8-14. How are we to live “in Christ”?
2. Read Romans 14:1-4. Specifically how are we to “put on Christ” according to these verses? What is the problem? Who is at fault? Give a modern day example of an issue that might create this same problem?
3. What is meant by “weak in faith”? Is this a difference of opinion or something more?
4. What are the reasons Paul gives for responding rightly?
5. Read Romans 14:5-12. What are the differences between something the bible states is clearly a sin issue and the issues discussed in this text? Could people on both sides of the issue be sincere and seeking God’s best?
6. According to this text why should we not judge one another in these “grey” matters?

7. Read Romans 14:13-23. How can something that is good become evil? What is the guiding principle in such matters?
8. How do you define a brother or sister “stumbling?” How do you define “gives offense”? Does this text mean that every time someone disagrees with how you exercise your freedom you have to give up that freedom? Why or why not?
9. Summarize this whole chapter. What does it mean to “put on Christ” according to this chapter?

Application

1. Each Christian may find himself/herself on both sides of this principle. At times your freedom may negatively affect another Christian causing him/her to stumble. At other times you may be the one offended and stumbling because of someone else’s freedom. What’s the key to managing ourselves through these type of situations?
2. Is freedom in Christ a freedom to do as we please or does it have limitations? What are those limitations? What are some things we can do to help the weaker Christians around us?
3. What would be the main thing that you personally take away from this text?