

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch
Lesson 18 - Romans 14:1-23

Romans 14:1-6

Chapter 14 begins with Paul addressing a particular problem. The problem is how to deal with diversity of views in the Christian community. There was a practice among polytheistic people to offer certain meats in sacrifice to the idols. But not all of the meat was consumed in the sacrifice; some of it was sold in the market place. Some of the Christians refused to buy or eat this meat because it had been part of pagan worship. Other Christians had no problem with buying this meat because these false gods did not even exist. The Roman community was not the only community facing this issue. Paul also deals with this in 1 Corinthians 8.

In 14:1, Paul says that the community should welcome those who are weak in faith. The weak in faith are those who refuse to eat such meat. Paul says that they are weak because they do not yet understand that eating has nothing to do with salvation. Salvation comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. But at the same time, Paul stresses the need for charity. No one should ever be ridiculed for believing or for having a sensitive conscience. In verses 3 and 4, he warns his readers not to pass judgment on one another. God is the only one who has the power to judge, and the only one who knows the hearts of both the weak and the strong.

In verses 5 and 6, Paul raises the issue of observing certain days for religious worship. Some of the early Christians used to fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. Others chose not to do this. Again Paul says that either way is acceptable, but that a person should be convinced that the purpose of a particular practice is to serve and honor the Lord.

In these few verses, Paul speaks to a point which is always in need of balance in the Christian community. There are indeed certain truths which are essential to our faith. These truths are not a matter of opinion. For example, our belief in the Trinity and in the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ are essential. A person who denies these truths cannot be considered a Christian. One of the tasks of the Church is to proclaim the truths of our faith. On the other hand, there are certain issues which are of human origin. These issues may change with the times and the culture. We cannot compromise when it comes to the essentials of the faith. But there should always be room within the Church for diversity of expression in other matters.

Paul says that charity and respect must always be the mark of Christian dialogue. Arrogance or elitism from either the liberal or conservative members can only harm the body of Christ. There have been diverse views within the Church from the beginning. This is not something which started with Vatican II. Our prayer is that all members be open to the presence of the Spirit. The Spirit brings about the unity within the body of Christ. If we pray for the gifts of wisdom and gentleness, then we can respect one another, find unity in our diversity, and truly be a sign of God's love and compassion.

Romans 14:7-12

The verses we will examine in today's commentary complete chapter 14. Recall that Paul is addressing the question of unity. The Christian community should be distinguished by the compassion which the members show to one another. Those who realize their freedom in Christ should not ridicule those with a more sensitive conscience. And those who still feel bound by certain regulations should not condemn those who do not share their scruples. This is still a sensitive issue in our own day.

In verse 7, Paul reminds his readers that it is a fact of life that people are interrelated. As individuals we are related to family, nation, culture and to all of humanity. If Paul was writing today, he would probably make use of the basic concepts of psychology. For example, the development of language took place not only to communicate ideas, but also attitudes and cultural mores. Because we are born and raised in a particular culture, we are already ingrained with certain presuppositions in the way we think and in our view of the world. We do have an impact on one another. But in this verse, Paul is primarily talking about our interrelatedness with God. Whether people are aware of this reality or not, we come from God and we are destined to return to God. A life which is lived in denial of this truth is a life which will necessarily experience a sense of disorientation.

Paul addresses this truth in verse 8. He says that whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. How often we hear people in our society say that life has no meaning. The frustration some people experience is an echo of the sarcasm of Pilate's question to Jesus, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). The frustration exists because people are looking for meaning in the wrong place. Our society constantly fills us with the belief that material possessions will bring happiness. This is a guarantee of failure. St. Augustine expressed this in the famous line from his autobiography, "My heart will never rest, O Lord, until it rests in Thee."

In verse 9, Paul recalls that the death/resurrection of Jesus establishes his kingdom, and therefore, Jesus is Lord of all. In our baptism we are promised a share in divine life, not only after our physical death, but right here and now in our earthly life. Commentators use the term Realized Eschatology to explain this truth, particularly when interpreting the works of John and Paul. This term means that the divine life which God promises us through our baptism is something which is already realized, not yet in its fullness, but indeed present.

This is the meaning of John 4:23, “But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.”

Verse 10 is an important verse and one which must be carefully interpreted. Paul is addressing both the weak and strong Christians, and he says that they should not judge one another. Remember that this is over the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. What we must distinguish in our own day is how we understand this term “Judgment.” If we are talking about rash or prejudicial judgment, then the answer is clear that this is never permitted. Also, if the issue is one of human preference and does not involve the essentials of the faith, then again judgment is to be avoided. But if we are talking about teachings, beliefs and actions which are in direct contradiction to the Christian faith, then we are called upon to proclaim the truth. This is always to be done with respect and the desired hope of helping people to see the error of their ways. One of the most profound examples today is the killing of unborn children. Christians cannot stand by and fail to confront this atrocity on the premise that we should not judge another. Paul did not hesitate to “judge” in this sense when truth and morality were at issue.

Paul reminds his readers that there will be a final judgment. God is the one who knows the hearts and souls of his people, and in the end, his purifying love will enlighten us as to our sins. More importantly, it will enlighten us to the depth of his mercy.

The quotation in verse 11 is from Isaiah 45:23. Paul also uses this passage in Philippians 2:10-11. He wants to show that the proper stance of a Christian is to confess sins before God. This is expressed in the phrase, “Every knee shall bow to me.” The person of faith realizes that sinfulness is part of everyone’s life. Because we are all sinners, we should be very hesitant to judge another. But the Christian who confesses the need for God is also the one who trusts in God’s forgiveness. James 2:13 is an important passage to remember when we reflect on this issue, “For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”

In verse 12, Paul uses his direct manner. He tells his readers to remember that each one will be judged before God. If Christians are to be the visible presence of God in this world, then this must be seen in their relationships with one another. Respect and compassion should mark the community which is united in Jesus Christ.

Romans 14:13-23

In this present segment, Paul gives words of advice to both the weak and the strong in faith. In verse 13, he asks for acceptance. Christians should not judge one another, and should not scandalize other members of the community. Scandal causes a person to lose faith or to ridicule the Church.

Paul's concern in this issue of eating meat is that this may cause a weak Christian to either go against the dictates of conscience or it may bring criticism upon the whole Church.

We cannot expect Paul to cover every aspect of a topic in a segment such as this. But as we read these verses, many people are probably asking how to understand this passage. Does Paul want us to always accede to the wishes of another? We have discussed this in brief earlier in the commentary with regard to moral issues. We are safe in saying the Paul would never expect us to give approval to immoral behavior. But what are we to do when the issue is one of personal preference? We have all met people who are basically good who have a different understanding of what it means to live the Christian life. If what we are doing is not immoral and does not contradict the teaching of Christianity, must we always follow another's interpretation? Paul does not address this point. What he asks of us is to be sensitive to others and to strive for reasonable unity within the church.

In verse 14, Paul aligns himself with those he considers strong in the faith. In the first half of this verse, he seems to have in mind the Genesis account of creation. God created the world and made it good. Nothing from God is unclean in itself. But in the second half of the verse, he considers the impact of conscience. If a person thinks that something is unclean or sinful, then that person should not act contrary to their conscience. We would not disrupt Paul's thought if we imagine him encouraging the person to have a deeper sense of the goodness of creation and to always remember that salvation comes through Jesus Christ, not by performing certain acts.

Verse 15 shows the intense respect Paul has for each person. He knows that Christ died for each human being and that the goal of God's plan is that each one reach heaven. Anything which may hinder this plan should be avoided. If eating meat which may have been sacrificed to idols is a cause of scandal, then Christian love requires that a sacrifice be made for the sake of another.

The "good" Paul refers to in verse 16 is Christian "Liberty." There is a certain freedom we have because of our baptism in Christ, but this freedom is not license. Paul expresses this clearly in Galatians 5:13, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." As Paul understands Christianity, this is essential – concern for others over personal desires.

In verse 17, Paul describes the essence of the kingdom of God. Christ came to establish righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are the gifts and benefits which come from life in Christ, not just freedom to eat certain foods. These gifts can only come from Christ, but they are then to be shared in the community of faith. True Christian love sums up these gifts, and this love is to be practiced in daily living.

Verse 18 is a logical next step from verse 17, but this may not be obvious on first reading. What we might expect after verse 17 is an explanation of the importance of service to one another. Paul presumes this step and proceeds to the conclusion that to serve one another is to serve Christ. This is what God has planned and this is what God approves. The Christian will also win the esteem of those who are of good will. People who seek truth are able to recognize the goodness of self-sacrificing love. Although a Christian does not act for the purpose of human approval, when the human approval is in accord with God's approval, then it is a grace.

The kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom; it is the reign of God over the minds and hearts of people. God's attitude toward us is one of love and forgiveness. When we are in accord with the mind of Christ, we share this same love and forgiveness with each other. This is what Paul is saying in verse 19. The Christian should pursue what enhances the kingdom of God. When we have compassion for others we are bringing about peace as Christ desires.

In verse 20, Paul repeats the warning of verse 15. The warning is that food should not be a cause for disharmony in the community. He says that the Christian should not "destroy the work of God." This phrase can refer to either the weak Christian or to the unity present within the Church. The Christian is truly the work of God, for in baptism we become a new creation. Christian unity is also the work of God for the Spirit is the binding force within the community of believers. Paul implies that a lack of compassion is a detriment to both the individual and to the Church.

Verse 21 is again a repetition. Paul wants to make certain that his readers know what he is saying. This verse is very similar to Paul's conclusion of this same issue in the community at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 8:13 he says, "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." Paul is willing to live his own advice.

Paul gives one additional thought to this topic in verse 22. His words can be paraphrased in this way, "It is good that you who are strong in faith know the freedom you have in Christ, but do not flaunt it to another's detriment. Keep this conviction between you and God." Paul wants to save the strong Christian from any guilt which may come as a result of exercising a freedom which causes another to fall. The conscience is not always the "voice of God" because conscience can be in error. But when a person's conscience is properly formed, and therefore in accord with God's will, that conscience is indeed a blessing. At the end of earthly life when all the pretense and rationalizations are exposed to the light of truth, then we will finally see ourselves as God sees us. At that time we will know the meaning of merciful and healing love.

In verse 23, Paul makes reference to those who are weak in faith. He says that those who act contrary to their conscience have chosen to sin even if what they are doing is not wrong in itself. This is a basic premise of moral theology. We do have an obligation to try to form a proper conscience, but all things considered, a person must do what the conscience obliges and avoid what the conscience rejects.

Paul uses the word “faith” in a slightly different way in this verse. In most instances in his letter, the word “faith” refers to the justification and righteousness which come through the death/resurrection of Christ. But in this verse, Paul is speaking of conviction with regard to what is right or wrong. If a person does “not act from faith,” that person is going against the convictions which have become part of life.

As we conclude chapter 14, we recall that this entire chapter has revolved around the issue of unity. The particular problem Paul addresses is the eating of meat which may have been offered to an idol, but the issue could have been anything. What Paul stresses is the importance of compassion and self-sacrificing love. This is just as important today as it was in Rome in 58 A.D. If we as the Church are to be the visible presence of Christ in this world, we need to have the same concern for one another. The world will only be drawn to Christ if the world sees a community of people who have something to offer, and what must be offered is the love of God shared in the daily lives of Christian people.

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Side Note: Tiberius Caesar was the Roman Emperor from 14 – 37 A.D. In the year 26 A.D., Aelius Sejanus was second in command. Sejanus thought he would make a better emperor, and so he and several of his friends tried to assassinate Tiberius. Their plot was discovered and they were put to death. Pontius Pilate was a close friend of Sejanus, and even though Pilate was not part of the conspiracy, he was under suspicion. This bit of history comes into play in the account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate during the passion. After interrogating Jesus, Pilate sees that he is an innocent man and he wants to release him. When Pilate tells the Jewish leaders that he wants to release Jesus, they call out, “If you release this man, you are no friend of the emperor.” (John 19:12) Pilate knew what they were saying. Here was someone claiming to be a king and Pilate was going to let him live. All the Jewish leaders had to do was send word to Tiberius that Pilate had allowed this man to live and Pilate would have been called to Rome and executed. After this brief dialogue, we are told that Pilate “handed him over to them to be crucified.” (John 19:16) The little we know of Pilate after he handed Jesus over is that he died in Gaul (France) in 37 A.D.