

LESSON 11 • AUGUST 13, 2023

THE NATURE OF THE KINGDOM

Lesson Scripture: Romans 14:10-23

Focus Scripture: Romans 14:10-23

Key Verse: Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Romans 14:19 (NRSV)

ROMANS 14:10-23 (NRSV)

- 10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.
- 11 For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God."
- 12 So then, each of us will be accountable to God.
- 13 Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.
- 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.
- 15 If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.
- 16 So do not let your good be spoken of as evil.
- 17 For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
- 18 The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.
- 19 Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.
- 20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat;

- 21 it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.
- 22 The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve.
- 23 But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

ROMANS 14:10-23 (KJV)

- 10 But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.
- 11 For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.
- 12 So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.
- 13 Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.
- 14 I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.
- 15 But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.
- 16 Let not then your good be evil spoken of:
- 17 For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.
- 18 For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men.
- 19 Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.
- 20 For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.
- 21 It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any

thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.

22 Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.

23 And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

KEY TERMS

- **Conscience** – An innate awareness of wrongness.
- **Intolerance** – Unwillingness to accept views, beliefs, or behavior that differ from one's own.
- **Polytheism** – The belief in or worship of more than one god.

INTRODUCTION

Our **Focus Scripture** today is part of a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Rome. Paul was a Roman citizen. Although he had strong desires to do so, he had not visited Rome at the time of this letter. However, he was aware of the different “house churches” where the believers gathered as Christians. Paul was also aware of emerging conflicts and divisions among the members. The church was comprised of Jews and Gentiles. Unity that would typically promote peace and mutual support among the membership was being seriously challenged. Since he could not visit Rome at this time, Paul wrote the letter that we know as the book of Romans.

TELLING THE BIBLE STORY

Rome was a powerful city, with great wealth and

influence. Polytheism was pervasive! The variety of religious backgrounds, that also included Judaism and Christianity along with diverse cultural and societal norms, all intersected within the church. Consequently, intolerance and disrespect for the diversity among the members was becoming a major stumbling block. In this section of his letter (Romans 14:10-23), Paul focuses on teaching members how to treat each other.

Refrain from Judging Each Other, Romans 14:10-13

Like a skillful lawyer, Paul argued his case for unity. He unequivocally established the fact that God is the only qualified arbiter to make judgements about such matters as righteousness, peace, and joy, with the Holy Spirit. All are justified through the blood of Jesus Christ, and God welcomes all. He uses the example of a household servant and his master to convince the church of the serious inappropriateness of judging each other. The master had exclusive rights to establish rules and restrictions for his servant, determine what his duties should be, and to decide whether the servant should be retained or dismissed. Since God is the Christian's master, the right to judge is exclusively his. Therefore, no Christian has the right to judge another for all will stand before God's judgment seat. In matters of acceptable consciousness, Paul asserts that God has exclusive rights to judge.

Build One Another Up, Romans 14:14-23

Paul's discussion of judgments regarding dietary habits infer that the Jewish Christians were arguing vociferously that all should adopt the same dietary practices. To resolve disputes of this type, Paul introduced the conscience as an internal monitor

for determining what is appropriate and what is not. In other words, all have been accepted by God, and each Christian is to listen to his or own conscience to determine what is or is not acceptable. Paul focused on food, but other scriptures clearly indicate we should use this metric with all decisions. To act in ways that are contrary to the conscience is sinful. As Christians mature with the Holy Spirit's guidance, we are still commanded to refrain from doing or eating what we believe to be acceptable if doing so will cause someone else to stumble.

Paul further explains the futility of focusing on mundane issues such as food. The kingdom of heaven, the promotion of peace among ourselves and edification of each other, should be our focus. Evidence of this kind of focus is manifested in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Again, we find strong support for the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself."

SANKOFA

Intolerance among Christians did not begin with the church at Rome. Unfortunately, Old and New Testament scriptures cite instances of this phenomenon among believers. For example, Moses saw first-hand examples from his own family. His brother and sister, Aaron and Miriam, "spoke against" Moses because he had married a Cushite (black) woman (Numbers 12:1). We can surmise, from the scriptures, that the Roman church would have known how God punished Aaron and Miriam for their sinful behavior (Numbers 12:10-15).

Jesus obviously believed intolerance to be a serious challenge to the unity among Christians that kingdom living requires.

Jesus' *Parable of the Net* (Matthew 13:47-50) provides a vivid portrait of diversity among believers as well as the source. Jesus said, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). Yet, intolerance among believers, who gave strong allegiance to Jewish laws and rites, perpetuated intolerance among the body of believers.

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), the fiery abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman, condemned Christian values that approved/supported the institution of slavery. Instead, Douglass said, "I love religion ...which makes followers do unto others as they themselves would be done by. If you demand liberty for yourself, it says, grant liberty to your neighbors. If you claim a right to think for yourself, it says, allow your neighbors the same right." This advice, which is quite reflective of Jesus' teachings, is applicable to all relationships, including those within the church.

Of course, we can easily find contemporary cases of intolerance. However, the point with these recollections is to confirm expectations of Christians in all inter-personal interactions. As with the church at Rome, personal attitudes and preferences can lead to biased judgments as everyone comes to the faith with his or her own attitudes and preferences. Membership in God's kingdom is comprised of people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, religious backgrounds, and so forth. All of these differences influence personal beliefs, behavior, values, and attitudes. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, unity is attained as our sovereign God increasingly becomes the center of attention for all.

CASE STUDY

Negative attitudes and perceptions of people who are different often extends beyond the church to every aspect of human life. In her book, *Haben, the Deaf blind woman Who Conquered Harvard Law School*, Girma discusses the unique life-long challenges she has faced as a deaf blind person as well the solutions that propelled her forward. Having successfully navigated her matriculation through Harvard Law School, Ms. Girma has devoted her legal career to advocating for full acceptance and inclusion of people with disabilities. She was a special guest, invited by President Obama in 2015, to the White House's twenty-five-year celebration of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). A year earlier (2014), Girma successfully sued and won a case against Scribd, an online publishing platform and book subscription service. Scribd argued that online services should not be subject to the ADA. The courts ruled in Girma's favor.

Girma is the daughter of parents from two different African countries, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Neither her parents nor she would accept myths or stereotypes that relegated people as victims or less capable of contributing to society in meaningful ways. Girma grew up in California's Bay Area. Disability rights were well established. Yet she was confronted (but overcame) many obvious discriminatory practices, such as having a drop in her academic performance because of a teacher who was making assignments from the back of the room. Also, reading the menu in the school cafeteria was impossible because no braille version was available.

Girma continues to use her law degree for advocacy purposes. According to Girma, “One of the biggest challenges is people’s attitudes. People would say to my parents, ‘Oh, poor thing, she’ll never go to school; she’ll never get a job.’ And that was really hard for my parents to hear. It’s hard for me to hear too. Kids with disabilities want to hear that they’ll be successful. But society often tells us, from very young, that we won’t do anything.”

LIFE APPLICATION

Self-awareness compels us to accept the fact that we all have biases and prejudices of some kind. From birth, we are subjected to certain structures of culture. Those structures inform attitudes that influence our belief systems, and potentially our actions toward other people. Individual backgrounds, cultures, ethnicity, religion, and so forth contribute to beliefs, values, and attitudes. Language- its phrases, words, and gestures- can also impact the way people view things.

Obviously, the controversy in the Roman church centered around traditions and preferences as opposed to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Likewise, as we encounter controversies of this nature, it is imperative that we pray for discerning spirits. Jesus did not describe a “one size fits all” kingdom. In admonishments against judging, Paul asked, “Why do you judge your brother? Or why do you also look down on your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Romans 14:10).

QUESTIONS

1. Consider the source of recent conflicts or disputes in your church or elsewhere! Were they fueled by focuses on traditions and personal values or serious concerns about God's kingdom?
2. How would you deal with a co-laborer whose language does not comport with your belief system or values?
3. How could this lesson be applied to resolve more profound dilemmas, such as who is right about acceptable and unacceptable baptismal procedures?

CLOSING DEVOTIONS

Closing Song: Sing "The Lord's Prayer"

Closing Prayer: Lord, we thank you for this lesson. It is clear that serving you requires openness to developing transformed minds. Please bless us to adhere to Jesus' teachings and the Holy Spirit's guidance. We also ask you to please forgive our sins and bless us to glorify you in all that we do. In the name of Jesus, we pray and thank you. Amen.

HOME DAILY BIBLE READINGS

August 14-August 20

Monday Isaiah 41:1-14 (Fear Not; God Is with You)

Tuesday Romans 8:1-15 (No More Condemnation)

Wednesday Romans 8:16-25 (Wait for Redemption with Patience)

Thursday Romans 8:26-39 (The Spirit Helps in Our Weakness)

Friday Psalm 82 (Rescue the Weak and Needy)

Saturday 1 Corinthians 4:1-6 (Stewards of God's Mysteries)

Sunday 1 Corinthians 4:7-21 (God's Power Exhibited in Weak-

ness)