

## PROLOGUE TO PRISON

### Paul's Epistle to the ROMANS

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### Chapter 22 -

### OUR DUTY TO THOSE WHO DISAGREE

Romans 14:1-12

Remember that this passage which has to do with another phase of Christian ethics is to be taken in the light of the 36th verse of Romans 11, and the first two verses of the 12th chapter. These are the fountainhead and foundation of all Christian ethics. In this particular instruction we see the realism of Christian faith, the realism of the Apostle Paul. ***Christianity is not emotionalism, not sentimentalism; nor is it emotionally or sentimentally idealistic, but always realistic.*** Christianity is the faith in things as they are.

Paul speaks with great plainness of speech. We should have no difficulty in ascertaining what the Lord is saying to us as members of His Church in this particular passage; yet ironically the ethics herein set forth, including the first part of the 15th chapter, are disregarded or disobeyed as much as or more than any other in the Word of GOD. This is one of the very interesting phenomenon in the Church. People will defend the inerrancy and infallibility of the Scriptures at the drop of a hat but totally disregard clear Scriptural teaching. They believe the Bible is the Word of GOD but so often fail to take it seriously in their own lives.

The Apostle is dealing here with the problem of differences or disagreements among Christians, and the first thing to note is the most obvious: there are differences, there are disagreements among Christians. It is wrong to allow these disagreements to become issues which divide the body. I suppose if we would really probe into many of the divisive movements in the Church, we would discover the issue is not doctrinal at all, but that about which Paul speaks very plainly in the 14th chapter of Romans. In other words, the body of CHRIST is divided unnecessarily because we insist on making issues which ought not to be issues.

Differences are to be expected in the Church of JESUS CHRIST. As a matter of fact, the Word of GOD clearly teaches that diversity is of the very essence of the Church; diversity is of the very essence of Christian community; it takes all kinds of people to make a Church. Paul argues this very interestingly in another context, "**If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing?**" If all were a single organ, where would the body be? Quite explicitly in the 4th chapter of Ephesians, the 12th chapter of Romans and the 12th chapter of 1st Corinthians, the SPIRIT of GOD through the Apostle sets forth clearly this essential diversity which is the Church, the Christian community.

There are ecclesiastical differences. Some cannot worship in an informal atmosphere; others cannot worship in a formal atmosphere. There are those who like liturgy; there are those who like free worship. There are those who are more comfortable in a church which has a hierarchical form of government, such as the Episcopalian; there are others who are comfortable only in a completely democratic church such as the Baptist or the Congregational, and then there are others who are right in between, such as the Presbyterian and the Reformed. There are these differences in the body of CHRIST.

The differences with which Paul deals in Romans 14 are matters of conscience. There are certain things in the Christian life which, according to the Word of GOD, are clearly wrong. It is wrong to tell a lie. It is wrong to commit adultery. There are certain things in the Word of GOD which are clearly right. It is right to tell the truth. It is right for husband and wife to be faithful. This is not debatable. But in between the white of the right and the black of the wrong, there is a great area of gray, which we call in theology the "adiaphora," the amoral. There are matters of conscience about which there are great differences among Christians.

Paul is not exhaustive here, but he illustrates by referring to the matter of eating. One believes he may eat anything; another who is weak is a vegetarian. He refers to special days. One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. You can carry these out into many different areas of life.

I think of a young minister who was reared in a church which took a strong stand against smoking, and the first parish he had was literally in the center of a tobacco field. Every family head in that church was a tobacco farmer; the money given to the church came from the profits of the tobacco industry.

These are matters of conscience. We do not understand why the SPIRIT of GOD convicts one that a thing is wrong and leaves another undisturbed, but it is a fact of Christian experience. These differences need not constitute disunity in the body. Unity does not mean uniformity. Getting all Christians into the same organization will not guarantee unity and might aggravate disunity. Christians may be institutionally diverse and enjoy a basic unity, for it is our Lord JESUS CHRIST who unites us.

Now Paul suggests seven things we are to do about our differences.

First, we welcome each other. We welcome into fellowship those who differ. Occasionally it happens in the Church that a few who agree become a little mutual-admiration society, never disagreeing (openly, at least) as a result of which they begin to assume everything they believe is right (after all, nobody disagrees with them); and they invariably become ingrown, self-righteous and sterile because they are never exposed to those who hold contrary convictions. Like the familiar story about the man who went to heaven and was being oriented by Peter. The new arrival came to a high wall, on the other side of which there was singing. Upon inquiring as to who was behind the wall, he was told that it was a certain group who thought they were the only ones in heaven! This is not a Christian attitude, to exclude those who disagree. Paul says welcome them in the name of CHRIST. He is not insisting on fellowship with those who deny the deity of our LORD but with those who worship JESUS CHRIST as LORD and love Him but who disagree in some matters with us.

Secondly, he says we are not to despise one another's convictions. If you think it is wrong to eat meat, that is your prerogative; stand by it, but do not condemn the one who does. You approve the eating of meat, GOD bless you, but do not tempt the one who feels it is wrong.

Thirdly, he says we are not to pass judgment upon one another. To his own master each of us stands or falls! For "**we shall all stand before the judgment seat of CHRIST,**" to give an account.

Fourth, let each man be convinced in his own mind. Be sure if you take liberty in a certain area that it is the liberty of the SPIRIT of GOD, not license. If the LORD convicts you that something is wrong in your life, you had better stop it though everybody else is doing it; no matter how right others may think it is. If the SPIRIT of GOD speaks to you about a matter, you had better obey. To him who knows it to be sin, to him it is sin. "**Whatever is not of faith is sin,**" Paul says. Do not let your good be evil spoken of; be convinced in your mind. Obey your conscience in the Lord.

There is a little rule which I think it is safe to follow here, that is, "if in doubt, don't." The minute somebody comes to me and asks "What's wrong with this?" I have an idea the Lord is dealing with him about it; he is probably seeking approval, not an honest answer. If the Spirit was not dealing with him, why should he bring it up?

Have you heard about the little boy in his room upstairs who called down, "Mother is this shirt clean enough to wear once more?"

She said, "No!"

When he came downstairs he said, "Mother, how did you know that collar wasn't clean enough to wear again."

She said, "You wouldn't have asked if it were clean enough."

If there is doubt, don't. Be convinced in your own mind.

Next Paul says all that we do is unto the Lord. "**For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.**" In another context Paul admonishes, "**Do all to the glory of GOD,**" eating or whatever you do; do it to the glory of GOD. Then he says, we are not to cause another to stumble. This is one way to view true personal liberty: I have the right to relinquish my right. This is freedom too - the right to forego my liberty out of love for and interest in another. This is the freedom involved when a young man unites with the armed forces, the freedom a mother forsakes when she cares for a child. This is the freedom at the heart of the marriage vows. When a man and woman are united in marriage, they give up their right to themselves to each other.

I suppose that most of the problems in marriage derive from the fact that the average man, the average woman, has some sort of an illusion that though married, one retains his individual rights. On the contrary, you forsake your rights and submit yourself to each other in the Lord.

That is the very essence of Christian marriage. I have no rights as a husband. I forsook them in self-giving to my wife, and whenever I try to take them back, there is trouble in our house.

This is our Christian obligation to one another in the Lord; do not cause another to stumble. You are free to eat meat; but if it offends someone, weakens him, if it tempts a brother who is not at liberty to eat meat, then one must forego this liberty.

Finally, he says, pursue righteousness and peace unto edification of the whole church, the whole Christian community. Pursue righteousness, for the kingdom of GOD is not eating and drinking; the kingdom of GOD is righteousness and peace. Pursue righteousness. Pursue peace. That is, do not make an issue of every little thing. Do not wear a chip on your shoulder about these things; you are disrupting the body. You are injuring CHRIST with petty little grievances. Pursue righteousness and peace unto edification.

The Word of GOD is very plain, is it not? So plain that we leave such specific passages as Romans 14 and get interested in Revelation, or in the 3rd chapter of Romans, or the 5th. Paul instructs the weak not to condemn the strong, and the strong not to tempt the weak. Paul says, do not judge one another; encourage one another in the LORD, unto growth and maturity. Paul says, love one another, have care one for the other. GOD grant that we will love each other as the Father loves us so that we will not let petty little differences build walls between us. A church like this would be a novelty in our modern world, a church that radiated the love of GOD because its members were so filled with the love of GOD that no matter how you hurt them - even crushed them - the perfume, the fragrance of the love of GOD would exude from them. This is the pattern. This is the kind of unity our LORD prayed for in the Garden, in His high priestly prayer, and GOD grant that each of us shall heed this clear, plain, explicit teaching of the Word of GOD, and obey it.

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