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## KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING

Romans 14:17-18

By

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Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing  
Romans 14:17-18

Stephen Covey and Roger and Rebecca Merrill begin their book on time management, *First Things First* [Fireside/Simon & Schuster], with a chapter titled, "How Many People on Their Deathbed Wish They'd Spent More Time at the Office?" The subtitle is, "The enemy of the 'best' is the 'good'" (p. 17). Toward the end of the book (p. 301, italics his), Mr. Covey writes, "*I deeply believe that if we attend to all other duties and responsibilities in life and neglect the family it would be analogous to straightening deck chairs on the Titanic.*"

One of the most poignant books that I have read is *Days of Glory, Seasons of Night* [Zondervan, 1984], by Marilee Pierce Dunker. It's the story of her father, Bob Pierce, who founded the well-known Christian relief organization, World Vision. He was a successful evangelist, seeing thousands make professions of faith at crusades that he held in the Far East. He was highly respected in Christian circles as a great leader. He raised millions to help the needy in Asia. And yet he abandoned his family for the ministry. One daughter committed suicide. He and his wife eventually divorced. And World Vision, the organization that he founded, had to fire him because of his explosive temper and his refusal to work well with others. He was very successful at some good things, but he failed at the main thing.

Many other Christians have done the same thing: succeeded in their careers, only to fail at home. Some have built hugely successful ministries, only to succumb to pride or immorality. They failed to keep their relationship with God as the main thing. Even in less dramatic ways, it's easy in the local church to get enamored with numbers, but to run roughshod over people. It's easy to get into a battle over some minor issue and forget the cause of the gospel.

In the Roman church, some were flaunting their liberty in Christ to eat whatever they wanted to eat, but they were not sensitive about how their actions affected their weaker brothers, who had not let go of the food regulations in the Law of Moses. The

stronger brothers were putting their liberty above love, which should have been the main thing.

So Paul appealed to the stronger brothers not to hurt their weaker brothers by causing them to violate their consciences by eating food that they believed was wrong to eat. In Romans 14:16, he says, "Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil." In other words, don't let your liberty in Christ (a good thing) be the cause of your brother's spiritual downfall. Then (14:17-18), he explains, "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 to God and approved by men." He's saying,

God's kingdom is the main thing and it centers not on external matters, but on our relationship with God and with others.

Paul is saying, "Keep the main thing as your main thing." He gives us this warning because ...

1. It's easy to focus on external matters and neglect the main thing.

Ray Stedman in one of his books said that he once heard of a church that got into an argument over whether they ought to have a Christmas tree at their Christmas programs. Some thought a tree was fine and they understood it in a Christian sense. Others thought no, Christmas trees are of pagan origin and you should not have any Christmas trees. And so when the time came for the party, one group brought in a Christmas tree. The other group dragged the tree out. The first group dragged it back in again. They got into a squabble and finally actually some fist fights broke out at the Christmas party over the Christmas tree. Eventually, the whole thing was in the newspapers because they ended up suing each other. Ray said, "What else could non-Christians conclude but that the gospel consists in whether you have a Christmas tree or not?" (From a sermon by S. Lewis Johnson, "No Stumbling Blocks," on Romans 14:13-23, sljinstitute.net)

The Pharisees in Jesus' time are a classic example of focusing on secondary matters and missing the main thing. Jesus reamed them out (Matt. 23:23-24), "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have ne-

glected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" The law commanded tithing, but these men had gotten so carried away with tithing that they even counted out a tenth of their table spices! All the while, Jesus says, they neglected the heart of the law, which was justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

The apostle John brings out the same contradiction with exquisite irony when he points out (John 18:28) that when the Jewish leaders led Jesus to Pilate so that they could crucify Him, they would not go into the Praetorium so that they would not be defiled, because they wanted to eat the Passover! Here they were, crucifying the sinless Son of God, but they didn't want to defile themselves by walking on Gentile ground so that they could observe their religious ritual!

Of course, Paul himself had been the same way. He was so zealous for the Law that he was persecuting anyone who was a Jewish follower of Jesus. He was imprisoning and even killing Christians in the name of religion, but he had missed the main thing, which is to know Jesus Christ (see Phil. 3:4-11).

What are some ways that we're prone to focus on secondary matters and neglect the main thing? I've seen some who are at church every time the door is open. They give hours every week to serving, which is a good thing. But their personal walk with God is virtually non-existent. Often there are serious problems in their families, which they dodge by serving at church.

Others are hung up on external matters to the neglect of a person's relationship with God. I read of a father who would brag to his friends about how his three daughters didn't drink, smoke, dance, play cards, or go to movies. But there was severe conflict between the man and his daughters, because they felt like he was forcing them to be freaks. They weren't abstaining from these things because they loved God and wanted to honor Him. That dad was majoring on the minors, but missing the main thing. As soon as the girls were old enough, they rebelled and left the church.

I knew another father who forced his adopted teenage daughter to have a daily quiet time. It's a good thing to have a daily quiet

time, if you're motivated by the desire to know Christ better. The dad meant well, but in effect, he was making a secondary thing the main thing. The daughter hated being forced to have a quiet time, along with all the other rules that her parents laid on her. Eventually she sued her parents and the state took her away from them. The parents were on a Focus on the Family program telling of how the state was usurping parental rights. I think that the crisis could have been averted if they had kept the main thing as the main thing. So, what *is* the main thing?

2. The main thing is God's kingdom, which centers on our relationship to God and to others.

This is Paul's only reference to God's "kingdom" in Romans. He only uses the word 14 times in all of his letters (here; 1 Cor. 4:20; 6:9, 10; 15:24, 50; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5; Col. 1:13, 4:11; 1 Thess. 2:12; 2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:1, 18). Here Paul is saying that the main thing is not exercising your liberty in Christ or your rights. The main thing is God's kingdom. But what does he mean by "the kingdom of God"?

A. God's kingdom is the realm where He rules and I submit.

George Ladd wrote (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Baker], ed. by Walter Elwell, p. 608), "The 'kingdom of God' means primarily the rule of God, the divine kingly authority." In the New Testament, he explains (*ibid.*), "The kingdom of God is the divine authority and rule given by the Father to the Son (Luke 22:29). Christ will exercise this rule until he has subdued all that is hostile to God. When he has put all enemies under his feet, he will return the kingdom—his messianic authority—to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24-28)."

A kingdom has a king, and Jesus is God's anointed King (Ps. 2:6-7). We are either in Satan's domain of darkness (Matt. 4:8; 12:26) or in God's kingdom, subject to His King. Paul said (Col. 1:13), "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Jesus said that we can only enter God's kingdom through the new birth (John 3:3, 5). Thus He preached (Mark 1:15), "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." The gospel

(good news) is that God sent His only Son to bear the punishment that we deserve for our sins. He forgives all our sins and imputes the righteousness of Jesus Christ to those who believe in Him. As we've seen, the gospel of God is the main theme of the book of Romans (1:1, 16, 17). So God's kingdom exists now wherever Jesus reigns in the hearts of His people who submit to His rule.

But Jesus also spoke about His kingdom that would come in fullness in the future when He returns. He taught us to pray (Matt. 6:10), "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." As He gave them the cup, Jesus told the disciples at the last supper (Matt. 26:29), "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." That kingdom will come when Jesus comes again bodily, in His glory. Some (amillennialists) believe that Jesus' Second Coming will usher in the new heavens and new earth, also called the eternal state. They view the 1,000 years in Revelation 20:1-10 as symbolic for this age when Christ reigns over the church. Others (premillennialists, I am of this persuasion) believe that Jesus will reign on earth for a thousand years in fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

So I understand God's kingdom to be an already, but not yet, sort of thing. It already exists wherever people surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord. We experience a taste of His kingdom rule now. But when He returns in power and glory, He will subdue all of His enemies, including Satan, who will be bound and cast into a pit for the 1,000 years (Rev. 20:2). During that time, Jesus will rule the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15). God's kingdom will then reign on earth through Jesus in its fullness. At the end of the 1,000 years, Satan will be released for a final rebellion. He will then be finally defeated and thrown into the lake of fire, along with all who have not submitted to Christ (Rev. 20:7-10). Then will come the new heavens and earth, in which righteousness dwells (Rev. 21:1; 2 Pet. 3:13).

So the crucial question is, "Are you in God's kingdom right now?" Have you trusted in Jesus Christ as your Savior? Are you in submission to Him as your King, or Lord? That's the main thing! Don't major on the minors. Keep the main thing as the main thing.

Make sure that your life, beginning on the thought level, is subject to Jesus Christ as your King!

B. God's kingdom centers on our relationship with Him and with others.

Romans 14:17, "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Godly scholars divide into two camps over the interpretation of these three qualities, righteousness, peace, and joy. Is Paul describing our standing or position in Christ, or is he describing practical righteousness, relational peace, and the joy we experience with one another as we live in harmony? I agree with Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 489) who writes, "It seems likely that Paul is not differentiating sharply between these two views and that he is using the expression in a way that suggests both." He also thinks that the concluding words, "in the Holy Spirit," apply to all three qualities, not just to "joy."

Here's why I agree with Morris: First, earlier in Romans, Paul emphasizes that the gospel is all about the righteousness of God being imputed to those who believe in Jesus as the sacrifice for their sins (1:16-17; 3:21-26; 4:1-25). In 5:1-2, Paul mentions these three qualities: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God." To be "justified by faith" is to be declared righteous by God. This brings us into peace with God, leading to our exulting ("joy") in the hope of the glory of God. Since all three qualities are produced by (or in the sphere of) the Holy Spirit and are characteristic of God's kingdom, they must at least in part refer to our relationship with God.

But our relationship with God necessarily affects our relationship with our fellow members in His kingdom. Because of our new standing as righteous before God, we seek to practice righteousness (Rom. 6:13, 18; 1 John 2:29; 3:7). Because we have peace with God, we are to pursue peace with others (Rom. 14:19; Eph. 2:14-22). Because we know the joy of God's salvation, we love to share our joy with others who enjoy the same blessings. Also, verse 18 argues for these three terms applying both to our standing before God and our relationships with one another: "For he who in this

way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." We are acceptable to God because He has imputed Christ's righteousness to us. We are approved by men as they see our practical righteousness, our desire for peace, and our joy in the Holy Spirit. So I think that Paul is saying that our righteous standing before God through faith in Christ, the peace that we enjoy with God because of being reconciled to Him, and the joy of our salvation are the basis for our righteous deeds, our peace with our brothers and sisters in Christ, and our shared joy in the Lord.

So these three qualities serve as a summary of being in God's kingdom: we are rightly related to God and to one another, which are the two great commandments. These qualities are a benchmark by which you can evaluate whether you are focused on the main thing. Do you know that you are in right standing with God, that all of your sins are forgiven, and that you are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ? Do you know that you are at peace with God? The answer to these questions is another question: Have you let go of the pride of trying to establish your own righteousness and instead trusted in Christ alone (Rom. 9:30-10:4)? As Paul states (10:4), "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

If you have trusted in Christ, then ask yourself, "Am I consistently experiencing the joy of my salvation?" If not, there could be a number of reasons. You may not be spending enough time thinking about God's abundant grace that you received in the gospel. You may not be processing your trials through the lens of the hope of the gospel (Rom. 5:1-5; James 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:3-9). Or, you may be yielding to temptation and sin, which always robs you of joy in your relationship with God. But your relationship with God as a subject of His kingdom is the main thing. Follow the practice of the godly George Muller, who used to make the first business of every day to seek to be truly at rest and happy in God (*George Muller of Bristol*, by A. T. Pierson [Revell], p. 257).

Then evaluate your relationships with others, especially with your brothers and sisters in God's kingdom. Are you practicing righteousness in your relationships? Do you think of others' needs and how you can serve them? Are you at peace with others? If you have offended or wronged someone, have you sought to make it

right? Have you asked forgiveness for your wrongs and granted forgiveness to those who have wronged you? Do you enjoy sharing in the things of God with His people?

All of these qualities grow in us as we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. Righteousness (overcoming sin) is the opposite of the deeds of the flesh and is promised to those who walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-21). Love, joy, and peace are His fruits (Gal. 5:22). All of the fruits of the Spirit have a relational dimension. To walk in the Spirit is to yield to the Spirit on a moment by moment basis. It is to trust in the Spirit's power for victory over sin.

Having healthy, godly relationships that flow from our relationship with God is the main thing. You can win arguments about theology, but shred relationships. You're off track. You can prove that you're right and your mate is wrong, but you're off track. You can take pride in what you do for the Lord, but you're off track. The main thing is God's kingdom, where He rules and you submit. God's kingdom centers on your relationship with Him and with others. Keep that as the main thing!

C. God's kingdom is about serving Christ, having God's acceptance, and man's approval.

Romans 14:18: "For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." "This way" refers to the way that Paul has just described in verse 17: You serve Christ by focusing on righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. To serve in a way that is "acceptable to God" goes back to Romans 12:1-2, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

To be "approved by men" stands in contrast to verse 16, where others speak evil of those who have hurt their brothers by flaunting their liberty. But how can we be approved by men? Jesus said that the world will hate us because we're not like them and because He chose us out of the world (John 15:18-19). He told us

to expect opposition from the world (John 16:2). So how do we harmonize this with being approved by men?

Paul seems to mean here that if we lay aside our rights and demonstrate genuine concern and love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, the world must at least acknowledge that we are genuine. They won't be able to accuse us of being hypocrites. It's the same as Paul said of elders, that they must have a good reputation with those outside of the church (1 Tim. 3:7). If he is a businessman, he must have a reputation for being honest. He must treat others with respect and kindness. Even if they don't agree with your Christian faith, they must admit that you treated them rightly (see 1 Cor. 10:32-33).

Years ago, Donald Grey Barnhouse was teaching about Christians being *in* the world, but not *of* the world. He concluded by saying, "You may be sure that if nobody thinks you are strange and out of step, you are not a good Christian." After the message, a friend who had been present added wisely, "However, you should also say that if *everybody* thinks you are strange and out of step, you are not a good Christian" (told by James Boice, *Romans: The New Humanity* [Baker], 4:1784).

### Conclusion

So don't spend your life arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Keep the main thing as your main thing. God's kingdom is the main thing and it centers not on external matters, but on our relationship with Him and with others.

### Application Questions

1. What are some minor issues that in the past have gotten you distracted from the main issue of God's kingdom?
2. There are well over 20,000 denominations in the Protestant world. Are the matters that divide us major or minor? When (if ever) should churches divide and form new denominations?
3. When is it right to debate secondary theological issues with another Christian? What guidelines apply?
4. Some have used Luke 14:26 to support putting the ministry above commitment to family. Is this right? Why/why not?

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