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ONE MORE TIME

Romans 14:19-23

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Romans, Lesson 96

One More Time
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I've told you before about my college physics professor who would begin every class by explaining his teaching method. He would say, "Class, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you. Then I'm going to tell you. Then I'll tell you what I told you. Then I'll review." He knew that repetition is the key to teaching well.

The apostle Paul was a master teacher, and so he often follows the method of my physics professor. The verses that we're going to look at today don't say much that is new. Instead, they say one more time what Paul has already said. But since the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to repeat these concepts, rather than tuning out, we need to tune in. Apparently these are things that we may be prone to forget and so we need to hear them again.

The content is arranged in a loose chiasmic (ABCC'B'A') format (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 850, points this out, although I've expanded his analysis somewhat).

- A: 14:5: Be fully convinced in your own mind.
- B: 14:13: Don't put a stumbling block in your brother's way.
- C: 14:14: Nothing (no food) is unclean.
- D: 14:15: Do not destroy your brother.
- E: 14:16: Do not let your good (liberty) be spoken of as evil.
- F: 14:17: The kingdom of God is ... peace.
- F': 14:19: Pursue the things that make for peace.
- E': 14:20: Your clean food becomes evil if you hurt a brother.
- D': 14:20: Do not tear down the work of God.
- C': 14:20: All things indeed are clean.
- B': 14:21: Don't do anything by which your brother stumbles.
- A': 14:22: Have your own conviction before God.

The practical heart of the passage is 14:17, 19: "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.... So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another." There is a textual variant of one letter in verse 19 that changes the sub-

junctive, “let us pursue” (old NASB) into the indicative, “we pursue” (updated NASB). But most commentators argue that the context demands the subjunctive. In other words, Paul is urging us not to put our rights or minor issues in place of the main issue, which is God’s kingdom and the relationships that we are to promote as members of that kingdom. I’d like to go over Paul’s “review” by pointing out four things:

As Christians, we should pursue godly relationships,
preserve godly priorities, develop godly convictions,
and maintain a good conscience.

1. As Christians, we should pursue godly relationships (14:19).

Romans 14:19: “So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” In the context, Paul is mainly addressing the need for Gentile and Jewish believers to get along so that the church would not be fragmented along racial lines. The Jewish believers tended to cling to the Law of Moses, including its regulations about clean and unclean foods. It was difficult for them to let those things go. But the Gentile believers, coming to Christ out of paganism, didn’t understand why there was all the fuss over food. They had no problem eating a steak that had been offered to an idol in the pagan temple before it showed up at the meat market. So the Gentile Christians tended to look with contempt on the Jewish believers for being legalistic, whereas the Jews tended to judge the Gentiles for being licentious.

The problem had two ramifications. First, if a Jewish Christian saw a Gentile Christian eating what to the Jew was “defiled” meat, it could lead to a break in their relationship. The Jew might think, “I’m not going to have anything to do with a so-called Christian who is so licentious!” Or, the Gentile believer might think, “I’m not going to be friends with a person who is hung up over such legalism. He needs to grow up!” And so their personal relationship would be ruptured.

In a worst case scenario, the entire church could be divided along the lines of the meat eater faction and the vegetarian or kosher meat only faction. But for Paul, it was central to the very concept of the church that it was composed of “Greek and Jew, cir-

cumcised and uncumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free-man," with Christ as "all and in all" (Col. 3:11). To divide over secondary matters would send the wrong message about the power of the gospel and the testimony of Christ to the watching world.

By the way, this is one reason that I refuse to divide up the church into a "traditional" (sometimes called, "classic") service and a "contemporary" service. This effectively divides a church along age lines. The older folks were raised on the traditional hymns, accompanied by the organ and piano. It warms their hearts to sing the familiar old hymns. So they all flock to the traditional service. Younger believers who were not raised in the church can't relate to the old hymns. They sound archaic to them. So they flock to the service with newer music. And so the church is divided.

But I think that God wants the church to be like a family, where there are grandparents, parents, and grandkids all coming together to enjoy one another's company and learn from each other. The younger people can benefit by learning some of the great hymns. Granted, some of those old hymns need to be put to rest, but some of them need to be passed on to the next generation. Perhaps the tunes need to be updated, but the words are rich and spiritually nourishing. And the older people should rejoice when they see young people coming to Christ and let their youthful zeal warm their hearts afresh with the power of the gospel. So we need to yield to each other and be committed to preserving "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). But especially the stronger, more mature believers need to yield their rights to the younger saints. That is the thrust of Romans 14:13-23.

The second aspect of the problem was that if a Jewish Christian saw a Gentile Christian eating "defiled" meat and because of this the Jewish Christian went against his conscience and ate the same meat, he would be sinning. Also, the Gentile Christian would be sinning by influencing his weaker brother to violate his conscience. Since sin always has devastating consequences, Paul does not want either side to fall into sin.

So Paul gives this exhortation (14:19): "So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another." "Pursue" is not a passive concept. You don't pursue something accidentally. It takes deliberate effort and persistence. "Pur-

sue" is the same word that is sometimes translated "persecute." We saw the word used in the two senses in Romans 12:13-14, where Paul said (literally), "*pursuing* hospitality," and then, "Bless those who *persecute* you." We are to go after hospitality with the same determination that a persecutor goes after his victim. Here (14:19) we should determine to go after the things that make for peace and the building up of one another. We aren't to be laid back about it, thinking, "Well, if it happens, that's cool!" Rather, we are to go after these things with determined zeal.

A mother with a scout troop said to her son, "I will not take any of you to the zoo if you don't forgive Billy for stealing your candy bar."

"But Billy doesn't want to be forgiven," her son complained. "He won't even listen."

"Then make him," his irate mother demanded.

Suddenly, her son chased Billy, knocked him to the ground, sat on him, and yelled, "I forgive you for stealing my candy bar, but I'd sure find it easier to forget if you'd wipe the chocolate off your face!" (Josephine Ligon, "Your Daffodils are Pretty," *Christianity Today* [3/2/1979], p. 18)

Well, we aren't to be *that* aggressive in pursuing peace, but we are to pursue it! *Do you do this?* Do you do all that you can to try to make peace with your brother or sister in Christ when you're at odds? Before you speak, do you pause to consider, "What will build him (or her) up in Christ?" As Paul says (Eph. 4:29), "Let no unwholesome [lit., *rotten*] word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear." What about with your mate? If husbands and wives would pursue the things that make for peace and the building up of one another, the air in our homes would be filled with the fragrant peace of Christ!

You may be thinking, "Yeah, but if you only knew how rude he was to me!" "If you had heard what he said to me!" "If you knew how she nags me and snaps at me!" "Don't I have a right to be treated with some kindness and love?"

But the Bible doesn't give us those kinds of loopholes: "Pursue peace and building up one another, except when you've been

treated wrongly!!” “Go after peace and building up the other person except when he deserves the silent treatment!”

Maybe you’re thinking, “Am I just supposed to be a doormat? Am I just supposed to absorb his abusive speech? If I don’t fight back, I’ll get trampled!” The biblical answer is that sometimes you are supposed to just absorb it. I’m not talking about physical abuse, but about times when someone is rude or mean or insensitive. At other times, especially in marriage, you should try to talk about it in a way that will not lead to more conflict. Approach it from the standpoint of, “I love you and I want our relationship to be all that God wants it to be. But when you say such and such or you treat me like that, it makes me want to pull away from you. So could we communicate in a way that builds up one another?” Here are God’s inspired commands (1 Pet. 3:8-12):

To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. For, ‘The one who desires life, to live and see good days, must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. He must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and His ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’”

In other words, if you seek peace and pursue it when you’re wronged, the Lord notices. He will listen to your prayers. He will take up your cause against those who have wronged you. But your job is to pursue peace and the things that build up the other person. This does not mean “peace at any cost,” because often that does not build up the other person. If the other person is sinning or is embracing seriously wrong doctrine, you are not building him up to ignore his behavior. But, our aim should be to pursue godly relationships. Love for one another is the second greatest command in God’s kingdom.

2. As Christians, we should preserve godly priorities (14:20-21).

Romans 14:20-21: "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."

Paul is repeating here that the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking (14:17). Also, he is repeating that all foods are clean (14:14), as Jesus said (Mark 7:18-23). But that doesn't mean that the stronger brother can ignore the scruples of his weaker brother. The priority is not our right to eat or drink whatever we want. The priority is the work of God, His kingdom. If you ignore that and pursue your "rights" to the disregard of your weaker brother, your food or drink becomes evil.

The phrase at the end of verse 20 is ambiguous. It is literally, "but they are evil for the man who eats with offense." Some understand this to refer to the weaker brother, who sins by eating meat against his conscience. But in the context, it refers to the stronger brother who eats and causes his weaker brother to stumble. Eating whatever you want or drinking a glass of wine or a beer is not sin in and of itself. But if a weaker brother sees you doing what you're at liberty to do and he is led to violate his conscience by doing the same, your eating and drinking becomes sin for you. As Paul said (14:15), "you are no longer walking according to love."

The phrase "the work of God" is unusual. It's only found one other place in the New Testament (John 6:29), and then with a different sense. Scholars are divided here over whether it refers to tearing down an individual Christian or to damaging the church. In the context, Paul has been emphasizing that we are not to do anything to cause a brother to stumble, so it must refer on a primary level to the individual. But hurting a brother can also lead to damaging the entire church. His friends will take up his cause and your friends take up your cause, and soon the church is at war, leading to divisions over secondary matters. It's frightening to realize that by our selfish behavior, we can damage a brother who is a work of God, a new creation in Christ (Eph. 2:10; 2 Cor. 5:17). And our selfishness could ultimately damage the church for which Christ died (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

So Paul's point in these verses is that if we selfishly put our rights above a brother's spiritual growth and above God's king-

dom, relationships will suffer and God's work will be damaged. People will speak evil of what for us is a good thing (14:16). And so we need to preserve the godly priority of His kingdom, which focuses on our relationship with Him and with others, rather than on our rights with regard to secondary issues.

3. As Christians, we should develop godly convictions (14:22).

Romans 14:22: "The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves." Paul is repeating here what he stated in 14:5b, "Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind." Again, he is not talking about matters where the Bible gives clear moral commands. He is not saying, "If you think that adultery is okay, just be convinced in your own mind." Or, "If you think that stealing is allowed in certain circumstances, just have that as your own conviction before God." Adultery, stealing, and many other things are *always* sin for *all* people in *all* circumstances. Your conviction to the contrary does not make them okay. God's Word, not our opinion, defines what is sinful.

Rather, Paul is talking about developing convictions in areas where the Bible does not give direct commands. The Bible never says, for instance, "You shall not watch movies." It doesn't say, "You shall not play computer games or watch TV for hours every day." It does not say, "All alcoholic beverages are sinful," although it does say that we should not get drunk or depend on alcohol for relief. You have to develop convictions about these and many other things by extrapolating biblical principles that apply.

You will change in your understanding of these things as you grow in Christ. As a newer believer, you may not be bothered by going to movies that are filled with profanity, sexual scenes, or violence. But as you grow in your understanding of God's Word, you will realize that certain kinds of movies are defiling and do not help your growth in Christ. So you develop a conviction that for you, those movies are off limits. As you grow in the Lord, it will dawn on you that you are wasting gobs of time that you could be spending furthering God's kingdom purposes playing computer games. And so you'll limit your time in that activity. It becomes your conviction before God. It isn't a legalistic rule. Rather, you are applying

Paul's counsel (1 Cor. 10:23), "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify."

Paul says that you are happy ("blessed" is a better translation) if you do not condemn yourself in any non-biblical activities that you believe God allows you to do. He means that if you have a conviction that it's okay to do (or not to do) something (in an area where the Bible gives no command), then you're blessed to hold and follow such convictions. It shows that you have thought things through biblically. You're not just following the crowd. And, you're not violating your conscience, which is his last point:

4. As Christians, we should maintain a good conscience (14:23).

Romans 14:23: "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin." Paul refers here to the weak brother, but he's still speaking to the strong brother, showing him why he needs to be careful with his liberty. If by his exercising his liberty, the strong brother causes a weak Christian to go against his conscience, he's influencing the weaker brother to sin. When Paul says, "he who doubts is condemned," I do not agree with those who say that Paul is referring here to eternal condemnation. Rather, Paul means it in the sense that Peter stood condemned (a different Greek word, but the same idea) when he acted with hypocrisy in Antioch (Gal. 2:11; see 1 John 3:20-21). He was guilty of sin. If a weak Christian violates his conscience, he has sinned.

Paul explains that the reason he has sinned is "because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin." While it's a general principle that we sin if we do not trust God in every situation, in this context Paul's meaning is more focused. "Faith" here refers to a person's conviction before God (14:22). As Douglas Moo explains (*ibid.*, p. 863), "What he here labels 'sin,' ... is any act that does not match our sincerely held convictions about what our Christian faith allows us to do and prohibits us from doing." He adds (pp. 863-864), "Violation of the dictates of the conscience, even when the conscience does not conform perfectly with God's will, is sinful."

Over time, you should educate your conscience through a diligent study of God's Word. Your convictions will become progressively conformed to the principles of Scripture. But you should not go against your conscience, even if you see other Christians doing something that you think is wrong or even if they tell you that you're free to do it, because that isn't *your* conviction yet. If you act against your conscience, you're doing something that you think God doesn't want you to do. You're not acting in the faith which you have as your own conviction before God. That, for you, is sin.

Conclusion

Since "Professor" Paul goes over it one more time, let me go over it one more time: First, as Christians, we should pursue godly relationships by diligently working for peace and doing the things that build up one another. Are you doing that, beginning at home? Second, as Christians, we should preserve godly priorities. Keep the main thing as the main thing. Don't tear down the work of God in a brother or in Christ's church over secondary matters. Don't put your rights ahead of helping other Christians grow. Third, as Christians, we should develop godly convictions. Don't go with the flow of our culture, even if it's our Christian culture. Study the Word continually to see how it applies to modern issues. Finally, as Christians we must maintain a good conscience. Don't do anything that you think is wrong. As Paul put it (Acts 24:16), "Do [your] best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men." These four things will appear on the final exam! Class dismissed!

Application Questions

1. How can we know whether to absorb a wrong done to us or to confront it in love? What biblical guidelines apply?
2. Think of a situation where you damaged a relationship over a secondary matter. How should you have dealt with it?
3. What are some areas where the Bible gives no direct commands, but where you need to develop "your own conviction before God"? How can you go about this?
4. Why should we not violate our conscience, even if our conscience is not in line with Scripture?

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