



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 14

Romans chapter fourteen examines how Christians can live in unity despite significant differences in spiritual disciplines among individuals.

The church in Rome was comprised of two different groups of people: Jewish and Gentile Christians. According to St. John Chrysostom, Romans chapter fourteen addresses a significant conflict between these two groups: the Jewish Christians kept to a dietary law that restricted meat and wine (14:21), while the Gentiles kept no specific dietary law. The Jewish Christians therefore viewed the Gentiles as gluttons, while the Gentile Christians viewed the Jews as being weak in their faith for following their dietary law (the groups also clashed over whether to observe certain days as holier than others).

St. Paul begins by encouraging Christians to warmly receive individuals whose faith is weak without arguing with them about matters that are non-essential to the Faith (Romans 14:1). St. Gennadios, bishop of Constantinople in the fifth century, explains that warmly receiving weak Christians demonstrates essential compassion:

Who would be so inhumane as to lay aside any sympathy for the weak and trample on them, not even offering them the help they need in adversity? Paul makes this an absolute command and accompanies it with the teaching that the Law and all the behavior it entailed had been abolished in Christ.

As an example of non-essential matters that are nonetheless important to the weak, St. Paul addresses eating habits: some Christians believe they can eat all things, while others - influenced by such things as the Old Testament prohibition against pork, as well as pursuing ritual cleanliness by avoiding meat that had been sacrificed to idols (see 1 Corinthians 8-10) - eat only vegetables (Romans 14:2). The solution to this dilemma is tolerance: neither group of people should despise the other group, because God accepts both groups (14:3). St. John Chrysostom addresses this point:

Paul does not say that the one who eats should simply ignore the one who abstains, nor does he suggest that the latter should not be blamed and put right. All he is saying is that the stronger ones should not look down on the weak or be contemptuous of them. Likewise, those who abstain are not to pass judgment on those who eat. For just as the strong mocked the weak, claiming that they had no faith, that they were not really saved and that they were Judaizers, so the others thought that the strong ones were lawbreakers and gluttonous. Since these were probably mostly Gentiles, Paul adds that God has welcomed them.

A similar issue divides the strong and weak groups: the issue of believing certain days - most likely the Sabbath and Jewish holy days - to be holier than others and therefore requiring specific religious obligations (Romans 14:5). St. Paul simply advises Christians to accept each other's positions while

“being fully convinced in his own mind” that what he or she does is best in light of the Christian’s relationship with God.

St. John Chrysostom links Romans 14:5 to the spiritual discipline of fasting:

Here it seems to me that Paul is giving a subtle hint about fasting. For it is probable that those who fasted were always passing judgment on those who did not, and it is likely that some of those who fasted did so on particular days...Paul releases those who fasted out of fear from their bondage by saying that it was something which was basically indifferent.

How can St. Paul encourage such tolerance of radically different positions within the Church? He responds in essence that Christians are to avoid judgmentalism - particularly when it involves a servant of God (and, as you can know from the way in which you are addressed by your priest when you receive Holy Communion, every Christian is a servant of God) (Romans 14:4). Each Christian is answerable to God for his or her relationship with Him, and only God can determine and judge the reason for which an Orthodox Christian adheres to a particular approach to food and holy days. Blessed Augustine addresses a similar situation in the Gospel according to St. Matthew: “These men were of a mind to pass judgment with regard to things which may indeed be done with a bad intention but which may also be done with an upright, simple and magnanimous motive. Although they were men, they wanted to judge the secrets of the heart - secrets of which God alone is the judge.”

The issue of motivations occupies Romans 14:5-9. When it comes to non-essential matters, the important thing is not *what* you do, but *the reason* for which you do it. Therefore, a person who abstains from certain foods should do so to grow in his or her relationship with God; likewise, a person who believes that such dietary regulations would constitute an act of self-righteousness should eat all foods with the belief that this approach is most conducive to his or her healthy relationship with God (14:6). You should not live simply to please yourself, but instead should live and die according to your relationship with God (14:7-8). Christ came so that He will be sovereign over all aspects of life, and therefore, as Fr. Lawrence Farley says, “As the Lord over all, obviously *He* must be the reference-point for all of our lives - not our own little rules and preferences. Thus, since He is Lord, if someone does something to honor Him, that act is honorable and may not be judged by us.”

This means that you - and St. Paul actually uses the personal address - should not judge or show contempt for people who differ from you (Romans 14:10). If you judge others, you are forgetting your *real* place in life: as a person who will have to answer to God for your own thoughts and actions (14:10, 12). Since every knee shall bow in obedience and subservience to God (14:11, quoting Isaiah 45:23), you must leave all judging to Him. Instead of focusing on what you believe to be the shortcomings of other Christians, you should focus on your own shortcomings (14:12). St. Maximos the Confessor warns in the seventh century, “He who busies himself with the sins of others, or judges his brother on suspicion, has not yet even begun to repent or to examine himself so as to discover his own sins.”

Furthermore, you should be careful that, in believing yourself to be superior to others, you do not instead damage them with your attitude and behavior toward them (Romans 14:13). St. Paul uses himself as an example of how you should behave: St. Paul believes that Christians should be allowed to

eat all food, but he refuses to force that belief on Jewish Christians who follow strict dietary law (14:14). He knows that attempting to change the way in which they relate to Christ would destroy them, so he chooses instead to “walk in love” and tolerate their position (14:15). As long as the weak Christian is adhering to non-essential practices in an effort to grow in union with Christ, “he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men” (14:18).

St. Paul reinforces in Romans 14:17 that the issues of food and holy days are not essential to the Faith by saying, “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” You must always remember that your relationship with God is the focus and grounding for everything in your life - the blessings of this relationship are so vastly important that they should never be substituted with non-essential matters. Because every Christian is a member of the Body of Christ, the peace and edification of all members must be a priority for you (Romans 14:19). You should never destroy another member of the Body with an inordinate emphasis on such matters as food (14:20-21).

How, you might ask, would forcing a person to follow what you believe to be beneficial spiritual practices - such as taking a specific position regarding your diet - destroy that person? The answer goes back to verse five: “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” The situation can be best understood by reversing the circumstances: imagine that someone is forcing you to follow their dietary practices. Everything you do should be done with faith - you should follow your conscience and do only what you believe is best for your relationship with God (Romans 14:22). If, however, you were to violate your conscience and follow the other person’s dietary practices because of peer pressure, or because you were afraid that rejecting that person’s position would affect your status in the community, then you would no longer be eating with faith: you would be more concerned with status than your relationship with God. God would then condemn your decision, “for whatever is not from faith is from sin” (14:23).

St. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the fourth century Cappadocian Fathers, explains this important point: “Every word or deed or thought which does not look to Christ looks completely to the adversary of Christ. For it is not possible for what is outside of light or life not to be completely in darkness or death...The person outside of Christ rejects Him by what he thinks, does or says.”