

The Christian Diet

Romans 14:14

Matthew 5:13-26

Hebrews 11:1-16

Responsive psalm 89:1-9

This morning we are going to pick back up in chapter 14 looking at the last half of this chapter. As we read this passage this morning I want us to keep in mind something that Paul wrote in verse 7 of this chapter because it is through the lens of this verse that I think the rest of this chapter is understood as Paul is merely unpacking this principle that he sets for there. In verse 7 he says, "None of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord, therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lords. None of us in this life, are an island. We are influenced by others around us, and we influence others. We all have responsibilities to someone else, A husband has a responsibilities to his wife, a wife has responsibilities to her husband, a parent to a child, and a child to a parent, an employee to his employer, and employer to his employee. No life is in a vacuum, no one lives to themselves but we are all interconnected, woven together in this life.

It is human nature to self centered, and much of our society pushes us in that direction. You have to look out for number 1, no one else is going to take care of you, Do what feels right to you, that is your truth, be your true self, love yourself. This worship of self is the antithesis, complete opposite of what scripture calls for Christians to be. We are to be a people involved in the lives of others, not shut out, separated hiding in our own little communes and corners. We are to be a light to the world, a beacon of hope in the dark world of despair surrounding us. Its easy, and the temptation flares up to corner ourselves off and live in our own little corner, but Jesus said we are to go into this world with this message of hope, this message of the risen messiah who has come to take away the sin of the world. In Matthew Jesus likens the believer as a city on a hill, a light to the world that can not be hidden. He goes on and says, no one lights a lamp and hides it under a basket, but rather they put it on a lampstand so the light may shine and give light to all around, so to we are to let our light in Jesus Christ shine before the world around us, so that those who see it, those who witness the good works that are done in Christ, may come to believe and glorify God also.

We are not only responsible to each other, we are more importantly all responsible to God. As Paul wrote, if we live or if we die, we do so unto the Lord. Our lives and our deaths are important to God, all has meaning, and all has purpose within his glorious will. We live to serve him, we strive to live our lives as a reflection of Christ, who is this light shining within that must be elevated and shared. He came and died for this express purpose, so that we may be united together in our death as well, in a moment, in our last breath to be caught up with him and brought to the very presence of the father. He died to save us, and in our death is the final culmination of our Christian life and walk, as we cast off this sinful flesh, and rise as a child of God, pure and undefiled to live forever in the place he has prepared before hand for us. That is God's promise to us, that he has defeated death, and that is our hope in him, that through the work of Christ on the cross, we can likewise be victorious over death, and enter into that true life, free from sin and guilt, to live eternally in the promised land. Our life, and our death belong to him, and this reality is true likewise for those who do not believe. No matter how much we may want to fight against it, or deny it. God's will and purpose will stand both in the lives and death of the believer, and the unbeliever.

Paul had already brought up this truth back in chapter 9, this world, and all that is in it serves God, and finds its purpose in his perfect will, whether we believe that or not makes no difference of the truth, that God is sovereign, and he is not limited, nor bound by man, but rather uses man, both believers and unbelievers alike for his express purpose and will. Both serve God's purpose. Let's go back real quick to chapter 9, look what Paul writes here. Starting in verse 8. "For this is the word of promise, At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son. And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of him who calls) it was said to her. The older shall serve the younger. As it is written, Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated. What shall we say then, Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For he says to Moses I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion. So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. And this is the verse I want to focus on here, verse 17. "For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "for this very reason I have raised you up, that I may show my power in you, and that my name may be declared in all the earth. Therefore he has mercy on whom he wills, and whom he wills he hardens.

Our entire life belongs to God, He uses circumstances throughout our life to bring us closer to him, and to further our understanding and belief in him. Trials, temptations, are allowed so we may grow in our faith, learn to trust him all the more for his provision, for his grace, and for his mercy. In times of peace, and joy recognizing his grace and mercy, and in times of trials and difficulty, we recognize his grace and mercy knowing that our lives are complete in him, secure in the hands of the father and no matter these outward circumstances that we may face, we are secure in him, so that neither life, nor death may separate us from the love of the Father. We are, all together bound in him, through Christ with a sure guarantee of our salvation. Just as he is sovereign over the world, so to his is sovereign over our salvation, and there is nothing that can change our status before God if we are indeed his children. Therefore we are called to live as those who are worthy of such a calling, as the children of God, to be a light in this world, expressing and showing the love that he has first shown us to all he has put before us. And again, this sort of Christian duty, to be light and a witness to world, can not be done in isolation, but we must be involved in the lives of those around us, encouraging, exhorting, praying, teaching, and admonishing one another so that Christ may be glorified in our conduct, and in our belief so the world may see this hope we have in him.

So I think that understanding this, that we all have a responsibility to each other in some form or fashion, just as we have a responsibility to God, helps to give purpose and understanding to this exhortation of Paul's on how we are to conduct ourselves toward one another. Which brings us to our passage this morning, as we read this morning, keep in mind what Paul had previously wrote, how our lives are intertwined, and connected in Christ, together seeking unity of faith, in love. Verse 14. (Read 14-23) We must also understand that these issues that Paul is addressing, are not core issues of faith, these are areas of cultural, and practical differences between people who are all believers in Christ. The point being, that we are Christ's first, before we are our own, and in these matters of indifference, that is things that are not core or central doctrines of the faith, there is room for leeway and grace. We know this because of Paul's sort of posture in his writing. Previously he had been very clear, and even harsh at times when dealing with the law minded individual, those seeking to bring in those rituals as a means of righteousness. But that is not what Paul is talking about here, but rather as we discussed last week it is the cultural, or interpersonal understandings if what it means to walk in righteousness before God.

Many things in this world exist, and their existence itself is not wrong, or bad, but rather it is our usage, or intention which taints that which God has created. For instance, there is nothing wrong with food, in fact it is necessary and was given to us not only to sustain life, but for enjoyment. But the Bible warns of gluttony, making food an idol, becoming addicted to where it controls our life. That thing which was given for us to enjoy, becomes sinful. And this principle can be applied to pretty much every aspect of life. It is not the thing itself that is sin, but our relationship toward it, that is why Paul can say here in verse 14, "I know, and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself. But to him who considers it unclean, to him it is unclean." Because it is our relationship with that thing that determines it to be so. As I stated last week, we all have our weaknesses, we all have our struggles of temptation and sin that we must fight daily in our hearts and minds, and sometimes these outward things may be triggers which threaten us to fall into those weaknesses. So those things become an area of sin for the individual who struggles. Last week I used the example of the alcoholic, the core issue of the alcoholic is their addictive nature, the sin isn't the alcohol itself, it is the obsession, the lust and desire for it. This is an area of weakness for that person, which threatens to cause them to fall, so an individual knowing themselves, and their weakness chooses to abstain from something that in and of itself is not sin, but because of their relationship with that thing, the obsession, desire, and lust after it, and its control over their life, it may become an area of sin for them.

So then, we take the principle that Paul previously laid out, that no one lives to themselves, but we are all interwoven and a part of each other's lives, how then do we deal with such convictions and differences. Well, Paul says to give preference to one another, respect those convictions and differences. In seeing one another as the weaker, we each give room for grace, and understanding toward each other, and it is this grace and understanding that we have with one another, through Christ that builds up unity together as we worship and as we pursue to reflect Christ to each other, and all those around. But we must understand that these issues that Paul is addressing here are not issues of the gospel, of the authority of the apostles, or of the deity and humanity of Christ, or the sovereignty of God, all of which are core tenets of the gospel which must be believed and defended. We see Paul in other writings vehemently defending the gospel, and we even see him in the letter to the Galatians recount a time he confronted Peter for his hypocrisy, living among the gentiles, but acting as a Jew when Jewish men arrived, fearing those men, instead of being steadfast in his conviction and ministry to the gentiles. I want to just quickly read of that account here, so we can see the different tone that Paul takes in that matter as opposed to what he is writing to the Roman believers about.

Galatians 2, starting in verse 11. "Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed. For before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles, but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. So again, we are likely seeing an issue of food, for the Gentiles did not observe the same dietary restrictions that the Jews did. But in this case, it is not like in Rome for it becomes a gospel issue, a ministry issue as we will see continuing on. Verse 13, "And the rest of the Jews also play the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of the Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

Peter in his example was sending mixed messages that were an issue of the gospel message. Paul gets in his face about living as though he is under the law, when those who are under the law come to visit, though he himself understands and believes that he is not under the law, but under grace. Paul said he was now compelling the gentiles to also live as Jews and observe the law even though he himself understood that new one is justified by the law. So as you can see, this is not the same type of issue Paul is dealing with, with the Romans...it is not an issue of the gospel, or the ministry itself, but over disputes and differences of things perceived to be sinful. So he instructs in grace, and understanding that those who are new, or weaker in the faith have not fully embraced and understood the freedom they have in Christ. So we, as their brothers and sisters are to come along side of them, in grace and understanding so that we do not cause them to stumble into a perceived sinful behavior.

And I think that this type of attitude toward one another is not only healthy, but necessary. In a faith that is driven by grace, focusing upon the love of each other, there is no need for an agreement on these sort of various secondary issues. Because of this attitude of understanding that Paul instructs the believers in Rome, and us, through this letter we can come from various backgrounds and be unified together in our worship and ministry. In verse 17 Paul tells his readers what truly matters, "The kingdom of God isn't eating or drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." It is the focus upon God, and what he has done for us sinners that is the entire point, we have been saved by grace, should we not also give grace to those around us? And we do this, by giving preference to one another in love, this is the principle that Paul is setting up here. He is using food, or setting aside a holy day in this teaching because it is the issue in the Roman church, but this principle spreads to all aspects of life, with the exception of giving way to false teaching and perversion of the gospel.

This concept challenges our idea of what it means to be a mature Christian. It seems that largely the idea of a mature Christian is someone how sees very pious, strict in their conduct, and knowledgeable in the word. But Paul really is laying out a bit of a different view, he is imploring those who are mature in the faith, who understand their liberty, to be wary that their liberty doesn't cause a weaker brother to fall. This is a call to Christ likeness, Christian maturity is about servanthood, and following Christ in his self denial, It cost Jesus his life to bring people into the faith, should we not be willing and able to put aside our liberties for the sake of that faith? Our guide in this Christian walk is the holy spirit, and we should be driven to a Christlike love for one another. Demanding a certain lifestyle, or practices as a form of piety is not living in such a love, in fact in many cases it is seeking to take the place of the holy spirits conviction and instill a law upon our fellow brothers and sisters. We must trust, and believe that the holy spirit is at work in one another to convict and to guide, and each of us are on our own path to maturity and understanding all at various different points. We must remember it is the spirit indwelling in each and every one of us that guides our conduct, and drives us toward this Christlike love, and self sacrifice.

Paul goes on in verse 16 with a warning, saying "Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil." And the reason, in verse 17, is because "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the holy spirit." Often times we as believers are to short sighted, we are only looking at what is directly in front of our noses without a view and understanding of the larger picture. We focus on the individual actions, our individual conduct, but it should all be seen through the larger scheme of the ministry of God's kingdom. As Tom Holland wrote in his commentary. "This exhortation to not allow what we consider good to be spoken of as evil, should be heard and obeyed by all people today.

Christian communities are often divided over matters that are of little significance when in the light of the issues about which God is concerned. Personal preferences and prejudices can be dressed up as the most spiritual of arguments to justify pressuring others into accepting them. Such attempts to so call, defend the truth actually demonstrate a lack of spirituality, for the love that pervades Paul's appeal here in this text is missing. The absence of love is not rectified by a blind devotion to a doctrinal system, no matter how correct and orthodox it may be. A Christian life should not be one defined by fighting for rights and freedoms, but rather a striving for unity. We must respect the uncertainties and fears of others, and our concern should be of a higher purpose, to see each other grow in Christ. IT can be all too easy to think that we are serving Christ when motivated by our own prejudices and understanding and now allowing the spirit which indwells in the children of God to do its work. There have been many horrible things done in the name of God in the history of mankind, driven by this idea of suppressing, or correcting those who are seen as wrong, thinking it is God's will that is being accomplished all the while it is a hinder, or down right detrimental to the gospel message, the larger picture of the ministry of the kingdom of God.

A small example I have of this, is years ago I had a coworker who believed himself a mature pious Christian, walking around as if he was just a bit better than everyone else. Well, one day I saw him working off in a corner by himself, they had put him away from everyone to do some odd inspection job at the far end of the building. When I inquired why he was put over there the answer I got was that he told the gay guy that he worked next to that he hated him, because God hates him. This statement, and this attitude ruined his ministry capabilities, and he became a mockery and his faith was mocked because of it. Now of course there are times where the mockery of our faith is unavoidable, and there are times that we are to defend ourselves, but this kids conduct, imposing his bias and prejudice was detrimental to the larger picture. Any ministry capabilities, any chance he had of discussions and witnessing was thrown out the window from that one statement. There was a lack of caring and understanding in his heart, and he instead saw himself as God's judge, not much different than pre conversion Paul, in his zealous pursuit of what he believed was God's mission for him, he destroyed families, imprisoned and killed God's people.

When we serve Christ out of a compassion and motive for caring for one another, we bring delight to God and open up opportunities for the ministry. We need to be focused upon this bigger picture in our daily walk, though there is an element of truth in what my coworker proclaimed, God hates sin, and says he will bring punishment and condemnation upon the heads of each and every person who lives in rebellion and has not turned from their sin, coming at a person with the full brunt force of God's wrath and judgment is not the message of repentance and hope that we have been given. Ours is not the place to write off people as being too far gone for the grace and mercy of God, we are to be faithful in season and out of season to preach this word of hope and light. And our conduct, is a part of that ministry.