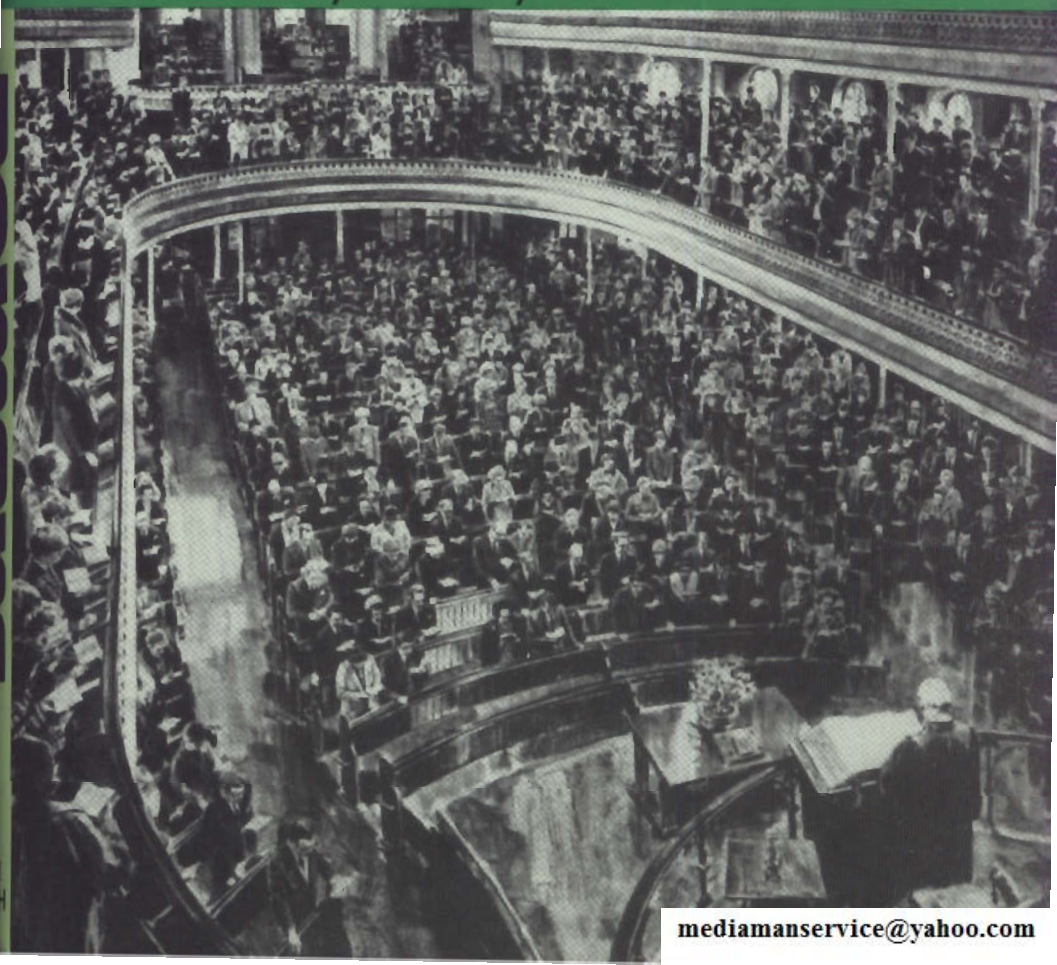


Exposition of Chapter 14: 1-17
Liberty and Conscience

ROMANS

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Romans

An Exposition of Chapter 14:1–17
Liberty and Conscience

D. M. Lloyd-Jones

THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

*The sermons in this volume were
originally preached at Westminster Chapel
between October 1967 and March 1968*

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The back endpapers show the corresponding page from the notes for the final sermon on Romans on 1 March 1968, with a transcription on the right-hand page.

Preface

On Friday evening, 1 March 1968, at the age of sixty-eight, Martyn Lloyd-Jones went into his pulpit as usual at Westminster Chapel, London, to preach on the Epistle to the Romans. The few sides of notes he took with him were numbered as his 372nd sermon in the Romans series which had begun twelve and a half years earlier on 7 October 1955. He had now reached chapter 14, verse 17, 'For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost', and, though he did not know it, that night, on the word 'peace' he was to conclude his thirty-years' ministry in the heart of London.

For many among his thousand or more hearers on Friday nights that ministry had been longer than their lifetime, and that it might suddenly end was far from their thoughts. But what he so often said of our 'short, uncertain, earthly life and pilgrimage' was true; before he could return to the pulpit on the following Sunday morning he was diagnosed with a condition that led to surgery and then, two months later in May, to the decision to retire. It would be hard to think of words more characteristic of his own life and ministry than the text on that first Friday in March 1968. Certainly that would not have been his own estimate; in all seriousness he was later to tell a group of ministers that he had been stopped before completing verse 17 because he was not yet ready to preach on 'joy in the Holy Ghost'.

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In his abiding belief in the overruling providence of God, Dr Lloyd-Jones was not discouraged by the sudden conclusion at Westminster. For several years it had been his concern that he might be given time to prepare some of his sermons on 'Paul's greatest epistle' for publication, and he looked upon the conclusion of his pastoral ministry as the God-given opportunity for the fulfilment of that desire. But there was no modern precedent to indicate how the Christian public would react to a *magnum opus* on Romans running into very many volumes. Indeed the preacher never anticipated the whole going into print. His initial proposal to his publishers was a first volume, beginning at Romans 3:20, with the title, 'The Heart of Romans', in part to test the market. We argued against that title on the grounds that it would look like an announcement that the publication of his whole series was not in view. As a compromise, that title was dropped but the first volume was on Romans 3:20–4:25, and titled, *Atonement and Justification*. In his Preface of July 1970, the year of publication, the author spoke of his hope of 'several volumes'.

That hope has been so far exceeded that now, with the present volume, the whole of his work on Romans is available from chapter one, verse one. It would be stretching the records that survive to say how many copies of the individual volumes have been sold to date; the million mark was passed many years ago, and a number of the volumes have also had a separate American publisher.¹

Just as Lloyd-Jones' public ministry stood out as widely different from most contemporary preaching, so his *Romans* came into bookshops with an appeal that took many by surprise. Not a few thought that the nature of his pulpit ministry would inhibit its continuance on paper – 'He needed to be heard, not read.' But those of that opinion were mistaking where his real strength lay. First of all, it lay in the truth he was speaking, not in its delivery. Further, his whole view of

¹ Baker Book House was the U.S. publisher from 1970 to 1997. From the volume on Romans 10 (*Saving Faith*, 1997), the original publishers have been responsible for the world market.

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preaching meant that he addressed himself to the heart and conscience, as well as to the mind, and sermonic material of that kind has never failed to hold readers as well as hearers. Time was to prove that his message would reach far larger numbers by his books than had ever been possible even in his widespread ministry. The books would also go into many languages and his *Romans* would be read by thousands, in nations from Brazil to Korea.

When the first of the Romans series came out in 1970, a reviewer in *Christianity Today* wrote: 'This is no average book. Nor will you read it indifferently. It is the kind of book that will grip your mind and heart . . . it has been a long time since I have read a book I have enjoyed so thoroughly as this.' For some, volumes in the Romans series have literally been the means of leading them into the kingdom of God. For others, the teaching has revolutionized thinking and changed ministries.

As an Appendix to this volume, there will be found a list of the fourteen volumes making up the series and the dates of their first publication. None of this material would have been available had it not been for the tape recordings, for the preacher's own notes consisted of little more than headings and main thoughts. The contents of all the volumes thus came into manuscript form as they were taken down from the tapes. Dr Lloyd-Jones, until his death in 1981, then took the main share in the editing and his was always the final word. This process he undertook with much thought and care, with assistance from Mrs Lloyd-Jones, his elder daughter, Lady Catherwood, and Mr S. M. Houghton (who died in 1987). Mrs Lloyd-Jones remained involved in the editing before her death in 1991, since which time Lady Catherwood has had the sole responsibility, with the invaluable co-operation of Mrs Rhona Pipe of Watermark. The principles on which the editing has been undertaken have remained the same throughout.

On behalf of the publishers, I would like to express our thankfulness to Dr Lloyd-Jones's daughters, Lady Catherwood

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and Mrs Ann Beatt, and their families, for the happy relationship in which we have so long shared. Above all, we join with all who thank God for his servant's ministry. That glory should go to God alone was the chief concern of the author, who has now entered into joy in all its fullness.

IAIN H. MURRAY
Edinburgh
August 2003

One

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Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.

Romans 14:1

We arrive now at the beginning of chapter 14 and here we come to another subdivision of this second major section of the Epistle to the Romans. The big division in this Epistle, you remember, is this: the first eleven chapters deal with doctrinal matters, then, at the start of chapter 12, the Apostle turns to consider the application of the doctrine in practice and in daily living.

It is very important that we should understand the Apostle's method, not only that we may understand the context of the verses we are studying, but also in order that we may have a due appreciation of the marvel and the wonder of the Scriptures. I am fascinated by the mind of this great Apostle. I like his way of thinking. He always proceeds in his own given manner. Because of this, it is important that we should realize something of Paul's argument at this point.

You remember how, in the first two verses of the twelfth chapter, he introduces the whole practical section with the words, 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable,

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and perfect, will of God.' And we must start with those two verses because everything in the fourteenth chapter is really covered by that introduction.

What does the Apostle do in this practical section? Well, let me give you a hurried summary of chapters 12 and 13. He first of all deals with our relationship with other members of the church in the matter of our spiritual gifts, showing how trouble and disharmony can arise through a failure to realize the truth concerning this teaching. And then he goes on to deal with other aspects of our relationships with other Christians, before widening the discussion out a bit to deal with our personal relationships with people who are not Christians. The Scriptures are very practical. Becoming a Christian does not solve all your problems. You still have to live in this world and with people as they are. And so the Apostle considers all these subjects.¹

Then at the beginning of chapter 13, the Apostle gives valuable advice and teaching with regard to the important question of the relationship of the Christian believer to 'the powers that be' – kings, princes, magistrates, presidents, governors, all that is involved in the conception of the state.² And he makes a great appeal to us in terms of the law. 'Love is the fulfilling of the law,' he says [13:10]. So keep the law, do these things, and thereby you will be fulfilling the law of love.

And, finally, the Apostle drives his teaching home and enforces it upon us by reminding us that our time in this world is very limited, very short. Indeed, the time of the whole world is limited: 'The night is far spent, the day is at hand' [verse 12], and we of all people should realize that. All our activities and all our conduct should always be viewed in the light of eternity, in the light of this glorious hope to which we are looking and towards which we are working.

But now, in chapter 14, the Apostle takes up another matter; that is why I say that there is a new subsection here.

¹ See *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 12: Christian Conduct*, 2000.

² See *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 13: Life in Two Kingdoms*, 2002.

Remember, it is still under the general heading of behaviour, and our relationship with other people, whether within or outside the church, and here he is back again to our relationship with people inside the church.

You see Paul's method? He has dealt with the big, the major, problems and relationships, and, having done that, he comes to more particular matters, and they are definitely more particular. But they are still problems that tend to trouble Christian people, problems that tend to upset us, and, above all, they are problems that tend to divide us; so he considers them. He takes them up, of course, because they were actually creating trouble in the church at Rome, but we know that they have given rise to difficulties throughout the centuries, right up to the present time.

So what are these problems? Well, Paul is here primarily concerned with what have been called 'matters of indifference'. This is a very important subject. There are issues in connection with the Christian life that are absolutely essential. There are other matters, however, that are quite important but are not essential, and it is conceivable that Christians may hold different points of view about them, as we shall see. That is why these questions are generally referred to as 'matters of indifference'. The ones that the Apostle takes up in particular are issues concerning food and drink, and the question of setting apart particular days as 'holy days'.

That, then, is the theme of this subsection. It is interesting to ask: Has the issue of 'matters of indifference' any connection at all with what has just gone before? Well, I think it may have. I do not want to be too dogmatic, but you remember how Paul ended the previous section: 'Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof' [Rom. 13:13-14].

Now I think it is just possible that in referring to 'rioting and drunkenness' and the danger of giving way to licence and lust and excess, the Apostle thinks immediately of the

opposite of that, which is a kind of morbid scrupulosity with regard to conduct. Of course, we cannot prove this, but it does seem to me that the discussion in chapter 14 does follow on logically from chapter 13. There are some people whose danger is a kind of excess, but there are others who tend to swing right over to the other extreme, and here Paul takes up the case of such people.

Now I remind you again that the division of the Scriptures into verses and chapters is not divinely inspired. It is only comparatively recently that the Scriptures were divided up like this, and we do not of necessity have to agree with the division that has been made. Those who made it were only men like ourselves, and I think that at this point they went astray. I suggest that the natural division comes not at the end of chapter 13, but at the end of the fourth verse of the fifteenth chapter.

Now there are some who would say that this section goes on to the end of the twelfth or even the thirteenth verse of chapter 15. But I disagree with that. It seems to me that in verse 5 of chapter 15 the Apostle broadens out, widens out, a principle that he has been laying down, showing that it has an application beyond the realm of food and drink and days and extends to larger matters and larger causes of division and trouble. None of these points, of course, is essential, but I do think that, for the sake of orderly thinking and understanding of the teaching, it is good that we should have some kind of classification in our minds. It is always good to think in an orderly manner. So I suggest that the section starts at verse 1 of chapter 14, and ends at verse 4 of chapter 15.

Now this is not the only place in the Scriptures where the problem of food and drink is discussed. You will find something very similar in 1 Corinthians 8, where Paul is dealing with a problem that had arisen over the question of eating meats that had been offered to idols. I am not going into this now, because I think that there is a slight difference between the Apostle's purpose here and his purpose in 1 Corinthians 8, but he does deal with the same principle.

This subject is also dealt with in 1 Corinthians 10 and in 1 Timothy 4. I think that the closest parallel to Romans 14 is to be found in the passage in 1 Timothy, and I am interested to notice how most of the commentators seem to have missed that. This was obviously an issue that caused difficulty in the early church, and that is why the Apostle deals with it more than once, and that is why it is important that we also should consider it.

I think that when you are starting with a new section, it is always a good procedure to have a bird's eye view of the argument. So the next step is to look at the structure of this section. When we analyse it, we see that there is a progression in the thought, and that the Apostle advances from stage to stage. I am therefore proposing to divide this section into five subsections. The first goes from verse 1 to verse 12, the second from verse 13 to verse 16, the third from verse 17 to the first part of verse 20 [verse 20a] – I am even disagreeing with the scholars' division into verses, as well as with their division into chapters! Then the fourth section is from verse 20b to verse 23, and the final subsection is the first four verses of chapter 15.

Now what does Paul do in these subsections? Well, here it is:

1. *14:1–12* Verse 1 is the statement of the case, the statement of the governing principle of the argument. This is what the Apostle always does. He starts with a kind of proposition – 'Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.' There, if you like, is the text that is going to lead to the sermon, though I prefer to put it in terms of 'a statement of the case to be considered, and the general principle that will govern the treatment of it'.

Then, having stated the matter in general, Paul now comes to his particulars. I hope we are learning from this as we continue. You never start with details, or at least, if you do, you are making a big mistake and will soon be muddled in your thinking. Start, rather, with a principle, and then give illustrations or examples of this principle. So Paul does that.

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In verses 2 to 4 we see this principle applied to the matter of eating certain foods.

Verse 5 and the first half of verse 6 deal with the same principle applied to the observance of days.

Verses 6b to 12 show the way in which both these matters, and all other matters, should always be considered, which is in the light of our relationship to the Lord, and especially, as we remind ourselves, in the light of the fact that He is the Judge before whom we will all have to appear.

2. 14:13–16 In verses 13 to 16, the Apostle reminds us that we must never consider these matters without remembering that we are 'brothers', that we are all together the children of God. We must not discuss these things theoretically, in the abstract, but must always remember who we are and always be governed by that consideration. If we do not, all our opinions will be of no value and we will do more harm than good.

3. 14:17–20a We must also always remember the nature of the Christian church, the nature of the kingdom of God. It is amazing how easily, in our discussion of details and minutiae, we forget the greater whole. I believe that that is what is happening in the church at the present time. With all this talk about ecumenism, and all this discussion about bishops and forms of ordination, and all the arguments about the details of what should be done in the church, people have forgotten what the church is – and there was the same tendency in some parts of the early church. So the Apostle says: Never forget what the church to which you belong is, never forget that you are all citizens together in the kingdom of God, for if you do forget, you will be arguing in the abstract, and you will be all wrong in your spirit, whatever you may be like in your intellects and understanding.

4. 14:20b–23 Then Paul sums up the argument about these matters and reminds us that though we must always bear in mind the fact that we are brothers and sisters, nevertheless, each one of us is an individual and each of us is responsible to

our own conscience, and we must be very careful that we never violate the dictates of the conscience.

5. 15:1-4 Then, having done all this, the Apostle makes a great final appeal to us – an appeal again to the spirit in which we carry out the teaching. It is an appeal that, as always with Paul's final appeals, lifts us right up to the Lord Himself, to our whole relationship to Him and especially to what He has already done for us.

There, then, is the general analysis of the section. I think you will see at once that this is a most practical section, and that it is most important, especially at this present time. The problem dealt with here is one that, in its various manifestations, has so often caused trouble in the church, and it is doing so today.

There are always two dangers, two extremes, into which we tend to fall. The one, as I have already said, is a kind of morbid scrupulosity, which means that we are in a constant spirit of fear, always wondering what we should be doing, or constantly getting into great trouble, because it leads us to criticize and condemn others. People who suffer from a morbid scrupulosity are always trying to lay down rules and regulations as to how everybody else should behave, and are always in trouble about this with regard to themselves and others. The other danger, which is at the opposite extreme, is the danger of anti-nomianism. This refers to the type of Christian who brushes all rules aside and more or less says that it does not matter what you do now that you are a Christian.

Licence and legalism! These two attitudes have always tended to cause trouble in the Christian church, and it is remarkable to see how common they still are. It is therefore very important that we should consider this issue, and it is dealt with perfectly in this passage that we are now studying.

We must start with the first verse: 'Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.' This is the problem that is before us, and at once Paul gives us a hint as to how we are to deal with it. But first, let us look at the terms,

which are most interesting and important. 'Him that is weak in the faith,' the Apostle says. What does this mean?

To begin with, notice that Paul does not say, 'weak in faith'. There is a difference between the two phrases. Being weak in faith means that you do not have power in your faith. You believe things but you are not so ready to trust yourself to them. A man like George Müller had a very strong faith. He could believe and trust God in spite of all appearances. There are others, however, who have weak faith.

But here in verse 1 Paul is not talking about weak faith, but about being weak 'in the faith', which is very different. It means being weak with respect to the faith, having a weak understanding of the teaching concerning Christian salvation. The Apostle is referring to men and women who get into trouble and are confused and in a muddle over the outworking of their faith.

Then what is the meaning of the term 'weak'? Here again, it is very important that our translation should be correct. The Apostle is thinking of a person who is weak for the time being. Not permanently. He is saying, 'Now you must deal with people who, at the moment, or up to this present point, have been rather weak or feeble in the faith. They may become strong, and so they should, let us hope they will, but the point is that at the moment they are weak in the faith.' The way in which the Apostle puts it in the Greek compels us to interpret his meaning in that way. He does not use an adjective, he does not say the believers are weak. They are weak at the moment, they are in difficulties, and are somewhat feeble in this matter of the faith.

Looking now at the whole phrase, 'weak in the faith', we see that Paul means that these people are truly Christian – there is no doubt about that. They are in the faith; they are born again; they are members of the church, and have every right to be. They are quite clear as to their own guilt and their own sinfulness; they have repented; they have understood the way of salvation; and they are, furthermore, quite clear that they are justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you question them on all these matters, you will get the correct answers. They

would not have been admitted to the church had they not been clear about these things.

Where, then, have these people gone wrong? In this way: though they have clearly seen the great central matter of salvation, when it comes to particular details of life and living, quite unconsciously, they have dropped back from the faith position into an old legalistic, pre-Christian way of thinking, and have begun to think in terms of justification by works.

Now the Jews had been brought up under the law, and one of their great problems when they became Christians was the failure to think in a consistently Christian manner, the failure to think right through in terms of faith. It was the difference between believing the truth about salvation, and applying that truth all along the line in all their conduct and in all their daily life and living as they met particular questions and problems.

I hope this is quite plain to you. It is surely true of every Christian. We must have often caught ourselves falling into this error, and we must have seen others doing the selfsame thing. It does not follow that if you are right on the main principle, then you will always be right in your application of that to the various details and problems with which you are confronted.

Now that is the kind of problem with which the Apostle is dealing. It is the danger that, though you believe you are justified by faith, when it comes to particular issues, you fall back on to works. Or, as Paul puts it to the Galatians, having started in the Spirit, you tend to go on in the flesh [*Gal. 3:3*]. That is what is meant by 'him that is weak in the faith'. Here are people in the church, they are all Christians together, and yet some of them are in difficulties with regard to certain problems, and because of this difference they are tending to judge one another, and to quarrel with one another, and some are even despised by others.

So here we are again face to face with one of the basic principles in connection with the Christian life. Let us therefore look at it for a moment. How does this distinction between 'weak' and 'strong' become possible at all in the Christian life?

'Him that is weak in the faith,' Paul says here. Then at the beginning of chapter 15, he says, 'We then that are strong . . .' In other words, it is obvious that Christians can be classified into 'weak' and 'strong', or, at any rate, into those who are weak and those who are strong 'in the faith'. Do we recognize this?

As we consider this most important matter, we are again helped by the fact that Romans 14 is not the only place in the teaching of the great Apostle where we come across this distinction. In 1 Corinthians Paul again shows that there was a division into two types of people and that this caused trouble in the church. Some Christians in Corinth said that they had 'knowledge', and this led Paul to write, 'Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know' [1 Cor. 8:1-2]. So we see that in this matter of the faith, the church in Corinth was divided between the strong and the weak, between those who understood and those who did not, and Paul deals with the problem in his letter to the Corinthians in very much the same manner as he does here. So I trust we are all perfectly clear that it is right to divide Christians up in this way.

Let me, then, put to you certain implications of just this one remark, 'him that is weak in the faith'. First, since some Christians are described as weak in the faith, and some are described as strong, it must be true that all Christians are not identical, all Christians are not equal. That is a general proposition, and it is a most important principle. It is something that is never said about members of a cult, who are always told they are equal. All false teachings go astray at this point; they make all people equal in a wrong way. But Scripture recognizes the division into weak and strong.

So my second point is that being a Christian is not something magical; it is not something that happens automatically. There are many people who seem to think that it is magical in that they think every Christian receives a direct illumination from

the Spirit. And as it is direct, and as it does not depend upon human ability, then, they say, every Christian must be in exactly the same position as every other Christian, and be equal with all other Christians.

The argument goes like this: 'You always teach that we do not come into the Christian life as the result of our own understanding; we do not come into the Christian life as the result of anything that we do. But if it is all of God, then we are all given the same immediate understanding. If it is all the work of the Spirit, then we all have this "inner light", this "inner illumination", we all get the same direct inspiration on every matter and question.'

You are familiar with that position. It is virtually the teaching of the Quakers, and that is why, over the years, the Quakers paid less and less attention to the Scriptures. You do not need the Scriptures if you are given direct light and illumination on all subjects.

This teaching has always been a problem. I remember once listening to a discussion on certain matters in a church meeting. Somebody had been quoting the Apostle Paul, while another quoted the teaching of the Apostle Peter. Then a man got up and said, 'I don't care what Paul and Peter say, either of them, or both of them: I know.' He had been given direct inspiration – or so he thought. I have often heard young Christians say something like that, and it is very dangerous. But the obvious conclusion from Paul's words here is that if Christians can be divided into weak and strong in the faith, then being a Christian is not something automatic or magical. It is not something that happens apart from us.

But how do we reconcile this division into weak and strong with the teaching that our salvation is altogether and entirely by the grace of God and is through faith? Here is the answer. Regeneration is entirely and exclusively the act of God; we play no part whatsoever in our regeneration. Consequently, it makes not the slightest difference who we are, and what gifts we have. The lives we have lived and the deeds we have performed do not matter at all. We are all equal in the matter of regeneration;

we are all equal in the matter of justification. All of us become Christians in the same way. I do not, of course, mean that the particular manifestations of the experience are identical, but that there is only one way to become a Christian: it is justification by faith only, it is regeneration, and, as that is the act of God, it is always the same.

But regeneration is only the beginning. From there on, the difference to which the Apostle is drawing attention becomes evident. What happens is this: in our regeneration a seed of life is put into us, and a seed is a seed; it is not fully developed. It is something that will grow – and that is where the difference comes in. There is no difference in the seed, the difference is in what happens to the seed.

And so you will find that in the Scriptures distinctions are drawn. 'You are behaving as if you are carnal,' says Paul, in effect, to the Corinthians, 'and you should not' [1 Cor. 3:1]. You will find John classifying people into 'babes', 'children in Christ', 'young men', 'old men' – these are all differences, and he addresses the Christians in different terms. It is only the planting of the seed, it is only the giving of new life, that is the same; from there on, you and I are involved and the differences become manifest. So some of us may be weak in the faith while some of us may be strong.

What causes the differences? How do they come in? I suggest that some of the following factors have a part to play. First – and I start with this because I am not quite sure of it. I think it is a factor, and yet I am not quite sure! What do you think about this? Does natural ability make any difference?

Now I repeat that natural ability does not make any difference in your becoming a Christian, but does it make any difference after you have become a Christian? I suggest to you that it does. This is no reflection on men and women who have less ability, but it is important that they should realize that they have. So the Apostle, for example, talks about men who are 'apt to teach'. Not all people are able to teach, and not all Christians are meant to preach and teach – they cannot, they do not have the natural ability.

Now there is a teaching that seems to say that the moment we become Christians we all can, and all ought, to be doing the same things. But that teaching is very wrong and is a violation of what the Apostle has already taught us in the twelfth chapter of Romans. But I am suggesting that in addition to that, the question of natural gifts and abilities comes in, and we discount it only to our danger.

Second: temperament! Now it does not matter what your temperament is with regard to your becoming a Christian. Christianity, thank God, is not only a way of salvation for a certain type of personality. Here is a gospel that can save any kind of person. But always remember that in your regeneration, your temperament is not changed, and it will show itself.

There are some people who by nature tend to be nervous, worried, always troubled. They are born like that – we are all born with some particular temperament and it is for none of us to judge others. And some people are natural worriers. Now all I am saying is that when a natural worrier becomes a Christian, he or she does not cease to be a worrier. And worriers are the people who tend to get into trouble at the point the Apostle is dealing with here.

Now I hope you are examining yourselves. Do you agree with this? Or have you always thought that the moment we become Christians, what we were before does not matter, that if I was a worrier, I am no longer a worrier? But that is not Christianity, that is 'Christian Science'. Here in Scripture we are told that our essential personality – our temperament – is not changed. The Apostle Paul is a perfect instance of this. He was a violent persecutor, and he became a forceful preacher. He was more zealous than anybody in persecuting the Christians, and he became more zealous than anybody in preaching. That is the sort of thing I mean.

So you would expect that when certain people become Christians, they will have a certain type of problem. And, indeed, they do, and that is why the Apostle has to deal with it. Other people, not understanding this very fundamental point,

tend to criticize them and ask, 'Are they Christians at all? Look at them worrying about these things! There should not be any worry in the Christian life.' Now it is because of their own ignorance that they tend to take that attitude.

A third factor that tends to make a difference between Christians is this: our diligence and application when we come into the Christian life. We are given the life, the seed is put within us; we are given a new spirit, the spirit of our minds is renewed. Ah, yes, but if you neglect your Scriptures, if you do not listen to teaching and preaching, you will not grow, and as a result, you will be involved in difficulties. I need not keep you over this. The Apostle says in 1 Corinthians 3:1, 'I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal.' He says: You have made it impossible for me. Because you have not developed and grown I cannot give you the teaching I want to give.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is still more explicit. At the end of chapter 5, he tells his readers, in effect, 'I wanted to tell you a lot about our Lord as our High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, but I cannot do it; you have not exercised your senses. If only you had,' he says, 'I could have dealt with this and I would have given you wonderful comfort and consolation, but you have not and I must start again with the first principles of the gospel of Christ. I must feed you with milk; I cannot give you strong meat because you are not able to take it' [*Heb.* 5:11–14].

Then Peter, referring to these epistles of Paul, says, 'In which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction' [*2 Pet.* 3:16].

So if we neglect the means of grace, if we fail to use, and to be engaged in, all the things that are going to make us strong, then we are bound to remain weak. This is a most important matter. I believe it is one of the major problems in the Christian church at the present time. Foolish people – evangelical people – say, 'But I cannot see anything wrong in Roman Catholicism. We are all one now.' But this is just sheer ignorance. Such people

are untaught, they have not 'exercised their senses', they do not know their Scriptures or their history. That is why they are weak, and, because they are weak, they are liable to be deluded by false teachers and to be 'carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness' [Eph. 4:14].

A fourth factor is the length of time we have been in the Christian life. You are born a babe and a babe does not know everything. The babe has to grow and develop, he needs to be taught and instructed. That is the whole meaning of these epistles, that is why they are given to us. There are people in the church who are called presbyters, elders, and appointment to that office involves age and experience. I am not saying that you should never have a young elder, but I am saying that he must give proof of the fact that he has matured in knowledge and in experience, otherwise he should not be elected. Presbyters are deliberately called 'elders': they are men of experience.

I could illustrate all these points. I remember being at an international conference of evangelical students at which delegates were deciding that every country should be represented, and that every country should have virtually the same voting power. And I had to get up at a certain stage in these discussions to point out – very tenderly, I trust – to some of our friends who came from countries that had not long had the gospel but who were speaking as if they were of equal standing with those who had been in the Christian life for a very long time and lived in countries with many centuries of Christian tradition and experience, that they must not assume that because they were Christians, they had complete understanding. I had to instruct them, and I thank God they were able to see this principle. We learn as we go on. Experience does count. So we are told in the pastoral epistles that we must never ordain a novice.

But novices are ordained, are they not? The tendency today is to take the raw convert and put him up to preach the very next day. But we are not to do things like that with novices.

Liberty and Conscience

People are to be tried, they are to be tested, they must grow, they must have experience. All this is Christian teaching. Do you regard this as carnal? Is this reverting to the flesh? It is not, it is spiritual teaching, and what is carnal is to fail to realize this and to think that all Christians are equal. They are not. Young people are told to listen to their elders, and to treat them with respect. If they do not do this, then to that extent they are very weak and poor Christians.

The world, of course, does not like this teaching: young people are to be the leaders; they alone are right. But once you come into the Christian faith, you have a new mind; you are not conformed to this world but have been 'transformed by the renewing of your mind' [*Rom. 12:2*] and you think in a Christian way. This is God's way: all living things, flowers, trees, animals, begin to grow and go on growing, they develop and become mature. So that is another factor in this whole matter.

The fifth point is the teaching that we have received. Some people are weak in the faith because they have never been taught. That is not their fault. There are many untaught Christians in this country today. They have been truly converted, they are born again, but unfortunately there is not an evangelical church in their neighbourhood. I knew many people converted in the Welsh Revival of 1904 and 1905 who never had any teaching. And it is important to remember this, because if you do not, you can handle them unfairly. I think I have had to advise young ministers on this point more than on any other.

Here is a minister who is going to a church where there is a nucleus of believing people but they have never had any teaching. At such times I always have to say, 'Remember that if those people are weak in the faith, it is not their own fault, they have never been instructed. Be patient with them. Do not suddenly expect perfection, do not expect that they will be where you are. You have been reading; you have had instruction. You must take them as they are, as people who have never had a chance. If you do not do that, you will be unfair to them and

you will not help them, indeed, you will be a hindrance to them.' And it is very necessary advice. So weakness in the faith may be due to lack of teaching.

And, lastly, I would comment on the variations in the manifestation of weakness in the faith. The Jews were obviously weak at certain points because of their background, and the Gentiles were weak at different points. Can you imagine what it was like for a Jew who had been brought up under the law suddenly to come into a position of liberty? It is not surprising that they were in trouble! Ancestry, nationality, background, all these things come in. And we find this at the present time. Equally good evangelical Christian people have very different views about Sabbath observance, about smoking and about drinking.

Now these are the kinds of things we shall have to go on to consider together. I shall never forget the time when I first met some Christians from the continent of Europe. They were very strong Christians, indeed, they were being trained for the mission field. I and others were shocked by their behaviour on the Sabbath: they went shopping! They thought that this was perfectly all right. And they were equally surprised at things that were done by Christians in this country.

Did you know that it was only in the 1830s that ministers and leaders in the church began to become teetotallers? Prior to that, ministers, all Christians, took alcoholic beverages and they did not think that there was anything wrong in it. And most of them smoked. You can find old church records – I have often seen them – with items like this in the budget: a shilling for hay for the preacher's horse, so much for the tobacco for the preacher, and so much for the beer for the preacher! Today, we find this appalling – but would you say that these men were not Christians? Some of them were powerful revivalists, great evangelists, men mightily used of God.

When the temperance movement first came in, it was opposed by many of the great old saints. They said it was violating the principle of Christian liberty.

Liberty and Conscience

I must not go on: these are the kinds of problems that the Apostle is now going to open out for us. Here is a man who has been enlightened directly and immediately by the Holy Spirit. He speaks with the authority, the unique authority, of an Apostle, and it is our privilege to follow his inspired teaching, to work it out and to put it into practice.

Two

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Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.

Romans 14:1-4

We have begun our consideration of this new section and I have pointed out that here the Apostle, having dealt in chapter 13 with our more general relationship to the powers that be, and having given us the two grand motives for Christian living, comes now to another problem that arises in the realm of the church. That problem, as we have seen, concerns issues that are 'matters of indifference'.

It is, let me emphasize again, essential that we should be clear in our minds as to what is meant by 'matters of indifference'. The Apostle is dealing here with our attitude, as Christian believers and as members of the church, to things that are not definitely prohibited in the New Testament. That is why we call them things 'indifferent'. If a thing is prohibited, then there is no need to discuss it, there is no argument. If it is prohibited, it is prohibited; if it is commanded, it is commanded. But there are matters in connection with the Christian life concerning which we do not have a clear commandment,

and about which there is no definite prohibition. And, as we have seen, though they are indifferent, they often lead to considerable trouble, as was clearly the case in the church at Rome and also in the church at Corinth. So that is why the Apostle had to deal with these matters, and that is why we also must not ignore them. Though they are not essential to salvation, it is important that we should be right and clear in our thinking with respect to them.

We have seen, too, that the Apostle works this out in terms of what he calls those who are 'weak in the faith', and those who are strong in the faith. And we pointed out that he is not talking about whether we have a strong or a weak faith but about the strength of our understanding of the faith, which is very different. What Paul is dealing with, therefore, is our working out of the implications of our position as Christians and of the teaching of the Christian gospel in terms of daily, regular life and living.

So we start with the realization that there are differences between Christians: some are strong in their understanding, some are not, and that is where difficulties come in. And the Apostle now goes on to show us how we are to handle these matters.

Verse 1, as I have shown in our overall analysis, simply lays down the general principle – the particulars will come in the following verses. And in verse 1, the first thing the Apostle tells us is that we must realize that we have a duty towards all our fellow members of the church. The fact that some people may be weaker in the faith than we are, or may be weaker than we think we are, must not lead us to feel that we are independent of them, or that we are unconcerned about them, or that we cannot be bothered with them. That is, obviously, the very first point that Paul makes here. We must do something about weaker Christians because we cannot divorce ourselves from them.

I start with this because it was quite clear that in Corinth, the church was divided partly into weaker and stronger Christians. Some brethren who said and felt that they had

knowledge had become puffed up, and were segregating themselves off into a little select company of those who had advanced knowledge and understanding and did not waste their time with the other people.

That was actually the position in Corinth and there are hints that it was similar in the church at Colosse, and in that whole group of churches round Colosse. Furthermore, this has certainly been the case many a time since then, in the long history of the church. So we start with the very broad statement that in the church it is always wrong to have factions, groups or divisions based on knowledge. Whatever may be our position, we must never feel that we are independent of others and unconcerned about them. That is where Paul starts.

But then the Apostle puts a very definite negative: 'but not to doubtful disputations'. So we take that negative first. We are not to receive a weaker brother or sister to 'doubtful disputations'. There has been a great deal of argument about the meaning of this phrase, so let us look at the words. The root meaning of the word translated 'disputation' is 'thinking deliberately with oneself about a given question'. It is, in other words, a term that covers a process of inward reasoning or questioning. We all reason with ourselves, do we not? Paul, for example, in his address before Agrippa and Festus, says, 'I verily thought with myself' [Acts 26:9]. You are up against a problem, and so you deliberately have a discussion with yourself.

Then the Greek word translated 'doubtful' simply means the power of distinguishing between right and wrong, between good, better and best. It refers to a process of discerning or of judging.

So there are some who say that this phrase should be translated: 'Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to judgment of thoughts.' Here is this weaker brother with his thoughts, and he is in a bit of perplexity. Now you must not meet him with the purpose of sitting in judgment upon his opinions.

This brings us to the very essence of this matter. This weaker brother is aware of these various points of view. He is thinking

with himself, and trying to arrive at a judgment, and as a result his mind is somewhat troubled. He has a fearful spirit. He is anxious to do the right thing, but he has doubts and hesitations. We are all familiar, are we not, with people – indeed, it may be true of ourselves – who are perpetually worried about these things. They ask, ‘Should I or shouldn’t I do this? Is this right for me, or is it wrong?’ They have a hyper-sensitive, almost morbid, conscience. They have what I have described as a morbid scrupulosity. They are in a state of agitation. That is the picture we have here, and the Apostle is saying that the stronger brother must never aggravate the weaker brother’s condition.

You can aggravate the troubles of weaker Christians simply by constantly raising the very issue that is agitating them, and arguing with them about it or perhaps asking about it in a jocular way. You are aware of the fact that they have this trouble, and a temptation always comes to you to fix on it, and say, ‘Well, now, what about it, are you still worried?’ But the Apostle says you must not be always harping on in that way. If you know something is a problem to other Christians, then do not always raise it, and do not give them the feeling that every time they meet you or come to your meetings, you will constantly refer to it. If you do, you will only end by making them even more agitated than they were at the beginning.

Another way you can make things worse for people in this condition is, of course, by making fun of them: ‘Fancy being bothered about this!’ But to them it is a very important and serious matter, and though to you it is not, if you ridicule them, you will increase their troubles and aggravate the agitation that they are already feeling.

And then the third way, and this happens frequently, is that you try to dragoon weaker people, or try to foist your opinions upon them. You are clear about this matter and they are not, you feel that you have liberty, while they are in bondage, and the temptation is to try to force them to see how wrong they are. But you must not do this, says Paul. You must not so deal with them that you increase their problem rather than diminish

it. And if you try to bring pressure upon them, and to foist your clarity of understanding upon them, you will do them much more harm than good.

It is important that we should be clear about this and safeguard this exposition from being misunderstood. It does not follow from what I have been saying that these matters should never be discussed at all. Paul is not saying that because a matter is difficult to some people, you must never mention it, and never deal with it. Obviously he cannot mean that because if these issues are not discussed, these people can never be helped, and they need help. Paul himself gives teaching both here and in other places. So it is not a total ban. What the Apostle is concerned about is the way in which we try to give help.

Now there are people who do adopt the attitude that it is best to say nothing. They do so not only with regard to the matters raised in Romans 14, but with regard to other issues, too – prophetic interpretation, for example, or the doctrine of the church, or baptism. I have pointed out before that this, perhaps, has been one of the weaknesses of many evangelical movements and churches at the present time. If they feel that a subject is going to upset anybody, they avoid it altogether. For that very reason, there has been a very serious failure during this present century to consider the whole doctrine of the church in interdenominational movements. And that is surely wrong. That is not what the Apostle is saying. I say again that his concern is entirely about the way in which we raise these subjects.

There, then, is the negative injunction. So, positively, what are we to do? And the answer the Apostle gives is, 'Receive him.' Not only do not ostracize weaker Christians, or treat them with indifference, but, positively, you must receive them. And the word that the Apostle uses indicates how they should be received. It carries the whole notion of giving a cordial welcome. You are not to be grudging. It is not that you say, 'Of course, I must put up with this, but it's a nuisance. It's holding me back. It's annoying.' Quite the opposite. You give weaker Christians

a warm welcome and show that you are deeply concerned about them.

Notice how the Apostle puts this. He lifts it up to a level that makes it quite clear. In the third verse, he says, 'Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth' – why not? – 'for God hath received him.' God has *received* him – the very word that is used in the first verse. We are to receive this weaker brother in exactly the same way that God has already received him, and in the same way that we also have been received by God.

Paul is so concerned about this that he repeats it in the seventh verse of the next chapter: 'Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.' That is the way in which we must look at and receive this brother or sister who does not agree with us about these particular matters of indifference. We must receive them with the same cordiality, the same love, the same delight that the Lord has shown him and us and all of us together. So Paul at once lifts this whole matter into this wonderful realm.

Here, then, is the Apostle's general ruling, and this first verse covers everything that he argues during the remainder of this chapter and, indeed, his summary at the beginning of the next chapter. Already, it seems to me, Paul has indicated to us certain general principles, which are of the greatest practical importance to all of us at the present time. Now let me make clear what I hope to do. I shall not immediately give the Apostle's final answer about these matters of indifference. I cannot do that because he himself does not do so until the end of the chapter. He works his way through and I must do the same. But I am saying that already, even in the first verse, before we come to the answer, he has shown us certain principles that I think you will agree with me are of the greatest possible importance for us in our conduct towards one another in the realm of the church.

I want to emphasize that we are dealing with this matter primarily in the realm of the church. I say that because, of course, not only are we involved in the church, but, in addition,

we all know, and are perhaps active in, certain interdenominational organizations – missionary societies, for example, or Christian Unions, whether in business, or in a profession, or among students. Now I am not at the moment concerned with what may be done in such societies. I am only dealing with what the Apostle says here in terms of our behaviour within the church. So here are the principles as I see them.

First: these indifferent matters are not central, and they do not determine whether or not we are Christians. This is important because there are some people who would make them essential to our salvation. There are those who judge whether or not we are Christians by what we do with regard to these indifferent matters. I have, for example, known many Christian people who would not hesitate to say that anyone who smokes cannot be a Christian. But the Apostle is clearly already telling us that that is not the case.

Whatever their views, we are to receive other Christians. And, remember, Paul is dealing not only with the weak, but also with the strong; not only with the attitude of the strong towards the weak, but equally with the attitude of the weak towards the strong. This injunction applies to both sides. These matters, whatever else may be true about them, are not central, and they do not determine whether or not we are Christians.

Secondly: these 'indifferent' matters, therefore, are not the grounds on which we admit someone to church membership. I have to say this because there are some religious denominations that definitely make a person's opinion on these matters a condition of church membership. But the Apostle has told us in the first verse that this is patently wrong. Whatever the point of view, he says, about these issues, receive one another, regard one another, as children together in the church of God.

The third point, therefore, is that we must all always remember that at our best we are still imperfect. We all err in some respect, every one of us. It is amazing to see how ready people are to condemn certain things that they see in others, while being quite blind to things in themselves that others condemn in them.

Then, fourthly, our knowledge of the faith is never complete. I have to put it like that because the danger with the strong brother is always to think that he has encompassed all knowledge, that there is nothing further for him to learn. But we must all remember that our understanding of the faith is never perfect. This, too, is very important. The Apostle, in writing to the Ephesians – and this is very relevant to our present discussion – talks about the ascended Christ. He writes, ‘When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men ... He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.’ What for? Well, ‘For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’ [*Eph.* 4:8, 11–13].

You see what that means? We have not yet come unto this ‘unity of the faith’. Obviously, Paul is not dealing there with saving faith because we have already come to the knowledge of that. This is why we must hold on to the idea that ‘the faith’ in Romans 14:1 does not mean saving or justifying faith, but its outworking, that is, the application of the whole truth of salvation to particular details. And here in Ephesians 4, the Apostle indicates very clearly that this knowledge is to go on and to increase and develop. There are not only differences of opinion on questions of food and drink and the observance of special days, but, as I was indicating, on matters of prophecy, matters of baptism and so on. There will be a great day when we will all see these things absolutely clearly, a day when all Christians will think in exactly the same way with regard to these questions, but it has not yet arrived and we are pressing on.

Or take another statement, which is perhaps still clearer. In his second letter, Peter, having reminded the people that God has already provided for us ‘all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue’, goes on to say this: ‘Beside this, giving all

diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge' [2 *Pet.* 1:3, 5]. That is the very principle with which we are dealing. You already have justifying, saving faith – you cannot be a Christian without it. You have seen the way of salvation. You have believed it and have committed yourself to it. You have knowledge at that point. But, says Peter, 'add to your faith' – and what you must add to your faith, among other things, is 'knowledge'.

Now I emphasize this in order to show again that if we imagine that we are all in exactly the same position with regard to our knowledge of the faith, then there is something radically wrong with our knowledge. The Scripture teaches us that there are people at different levels in their attainment of knowledge with regard to this faith. None of us has arrived, none of us has perfect or complete knowledge. Some have added a little, some have added more, some have added even more still. So you go on with all diligence, adding to your faith this knowledge. And this, of course, explains why we have these New Testament epistles. This is what they are for. Our understanding is incomplete. We study them together to add knowledge to the faith and understanding that we already have. So we must all come now, being ready to learn and to go on, the weak brother and the strong brother: the Apostle is laying this down as a general principle covering the entire matter of how we are to handle and regard these matters that are indifferent.

So, then, I come to the fifth principle, which really encompasses all the others. We must remember that we are members of the same family, the family of God, and that we are to help one another as members of that family. What would you think of the members of a family who despised or ignored or neglected a child in their own family who happened to be not quite as developed as the others, who was perhaps slightly defective?

No, says the Apostle, you must realize that you are all one, you have all been received by the same Christ and the same God. You must love one another, and your greatest concern should be to help one another. That is the great principle.

Liberty and Conscience

That fifth principle leads to the next matter that we must consider. There are those who would argue that all the Apostle is saying in the first verse is that the strong brother must never sit in judgment on the scruples of the weaker brother. But I do not agree that that is all he is saying. As I have already indicated and as the Apostle goes on to show very clearly, he is not only dealing with the strong brother but also with the weaker brother, and he has things to say to the weak brother exactly as he has to the one who is strong. I take the view that the Apostle is here instructing the strong and the weak for, as he will show us, they both fall into error at this point.

So I would defend the translation of our Authorized translators: 'Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.' It is not only that we must not express judgment upon the weak brother's scruples. We start there, but we must not stop at that first point because Paul really does raise here in principle the whole question of the place of discussion in the Christian life, and especially the discussion of these matters that are indifferent.

What, then, are the rules about discussions among Christians in the life of the church? I shall give you what I understand to be the general teaching of the whole of the New Testament on this matter, summarized, I feel, in this one big injunction of the Apostle. Receive weaker Christians: receive them with cordiality, receive them as brethren, receive them with grace, 'but not to doubtful disputations'. So I would indicate that there are certain rules that we must always bear in mind with regard to the discussion of any subject, any question, in the realm of the church.

First: never have a discussion for the sake of a discussion. The world does that, does it not? The world enjoys debates; it sets up its debating societies just for the sake of having a debate. This must never be done in the realm of the church. We are not in the world, we are out of it, and to have a discussion merely for its own sake is something that seems to me to be entirely foreign to the whole of the New Testament.

Second: it obviously follows that you must never have a discussion about anything in the Christian life merely for the

sake of entertainment and pleasure. Now you may say that these injunctions are unnecessary but I can assure you they are not, and as one who in the past has been guilty in this very area, I find this second injunction to be most important. There are some people to whom there is no greater form of entertainment than a discussion about religion. It is one of the most interesting, fascinating things that people can ever be engaged in. There have been famous disputations in the history of the church that have often been nothing but entertainment. But we must always be very careful to avoid such discussions.

Third: never enter into a discussion for the sake of displaying yourself. There are some people who are fond of hearing their own voices, are there not? They are always itching to speak and to voice their opinions. They like to display their knowledge, and show how clever they are, and how skilled at arguing, but this is quite foreign to the whole atmosphere of the New Testament and must not happen in the church.

Do not forget the point I was making in our last study – that though you are born again, you still have your old temperament. Each of us has our own particular battles to fight. I know that what I am saying about enjoying discussions does not apply to some of you. As natural men and women, you always hated discussions, you never had an argument, even about politics, with anybody, and would walk out when a discussion started. All right, but you, too, have something special that troubles you. And for some of us, though we are born again, unless we are very careful, the moment we begin on a discussion, the old nature asserts itself.

My fourth injunction is that these matters must never be discussed in a bad-tempered or an uncontrolled manner. This, too, is most important. I have seen people lose their tempers when discussing religious questions, Christian questions, and matters such as those raised here. I was brought up in Wales at a time when not only the children, but everybody, went to Sunday school. I belonged to a Sunday school in which there was a class for men over seventy and another for women over seventy. And every Sunday at the end of the Sunday school there

was a general kind of catechizing meeting. All the classes came together and one man was appointed to put questions. Somebody would give an opinion on a question and he would say, 'Does everybody agree with this?', and somebody else would give another opinion. I always carry with me the picture of one occasion when the Sunday school ended with three men on their feet speaking at the same time, each of them having lost his temper! That is the sort of thing I am saying should never happen.

The moment you have lost your temper in a discussion, then whatever the rights or the wrongs of the matter you are discussing, you are patently in the wrong. Christians who cannot control themselves should not give their opinions on anything. The first thing they must learn is self-control, and then, and then only, are they entitled to go on to discuss these issues. Now this needs to be said in the church.

Spurgeon constantly used to warn his students about the trouble caused by arguments. He would say, 'Now when you go out into churches, you will find that there are people who in a prayer meeting pray like angels, but the moment they go to a church meeting and discuss the affairs of the church, those same people suddenly become devils.' And it is very true, is it not? Think of the quarrels in churches, and the harm they have done to the Christian cause. It is all because people have never truly learned how to discuss these matters together.

We must learn, in the fifth place, always to draw a distinction between a discussion and an argument. Discussions are essential, as long as we are careful – they are a good way of teaching – but arguments are wrong. What, then, is the difference between a discussion and an argument? Well, there is a word that is being used very much at the present time, especially among people interested in ecumenism, a word that I confess I do not like because I think it tends to confuse issues: it is the word 'dialogue'. By 'dialogue' people mean that you must not have the old wranglings we used to have, but you must come and exchange opinions and try to see the other person's point of view.

Now 'dialogue' is exactly what I think the Apostle is here telling us to engage in. But where our friends of the ecumenical movement go so wrong is that they encourage dialogue with Roman Catholics, for instance, or with people who deny the very elements of the Christian faith. And my reply is that you must not, and you cannot, have a dialogue with people who either deny the faith altogether or so add to it that they deny it. A dialogue means, as we have here, that there is something in common, that you are all Christians together. And you must not regard as a Christian a man or woman who denies the very elements of the Christian faith, and says, for example, that you must go to God through the Virgin Mary and the saints, or that you are saved by baptism. There is no basis there for dialogue. A discussion, a dialogue, presumes a common basis, a common foundation, and the Apostle is saying that as you have all been received together by the Lord, as you are all Christians and fellow members of the same family, then, on that basis, look at these questions.

The essential difference, then, between a discussion and an argument is this: if you are in an argument you are generally just out to win, and to prove that you are right, and that is why argumentation is generally bad. It is not much use anywhere, but it is very bad in the realm of the Christian church. You must not be concerned solely to defend your own position, and to win over others, or to beat them down. Why not? Because that always has the effect of antagonizing the other. The trouble with an argument is that at the end you are more certain of your own position, but so is the other person. You have hardened his position and have probably made him more obstinate. He sees that you are trying to put him down, and that makes him determined to defend his position at all costs, and so any agreement is ruled out. The spirit on both sides is wrong, and the result is that an argument always does more harm than good.

So I would put my sixth rule about discussions like this: our desire should always be to gain a better understanding of the truth and to help one another. Robert Haldane, in his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, virtually says that discussion

never does any good at all, and that nobody has ever been persuaded by a discussion. But I think he goes much too far. I am asserting that there is a real place for discussion, on condition that we observe the rules I am giving, on condition that the discussion is handled carefully and that it is carried on in a spiritual and a Christian manner. I think that the so-called Socratic method of discussion has justified itself throughout the centuries, though, of course, it, too, has its dangers: everything has its dangers. Preaching has its dangers, and so does teaching, and if the discussion cannot be carried out properly, or if it always tends to degenerate into an argument, do not engage in it at all. But I think it is going much too far to rule out discussion altogether on the grounds that it is never of any value.

How do we handle a discussion? The conclusion I come to is this: the Apostle is really telling us here that we must all of us learn the art of teaching. We are to teach one another, we are to help one another. Oh, how we all need to learn this! I sometimes think that young pastors need above everything else to learn how to teach. I have so often seen excellent young men get into trouble in churches because they have never understood this point. Their motives have been excellent, and what they have wanted to do has been right, but their way of doing it has been so wrong. They have so forgotten all that the Apostle teaches here that, instead of teaching their people, they have divided their churches, and sometimes have even had to leave them.

But this failure is not only confined to pastors. Some of you may have been involved in this very matter. I have often met this problem in the case of young Christian people getting married, especially those who have been converted out of an irreligious or perhaps even a godless family. Now the problem has often arisen in this way: the arrangements have been made for the wedding and for the reception afterwards, but there is a difficulty. The bride says, 'My people are not Christians and they are very anxious to have wine at the wedding reception. But we have decided that, as Christians, it is absolutely wrong

for us to have wine at the wedding reception.' And they are determined to take a stand on this and to bear their witness – their motives are excellent.

Now whether I shock you or not, I do not know, but my advice has always been that there should be wine. I say this for several reasons. One reason is that it is not the young couple's reception, the reception is given by the parents of the bride. Secondly, if they really do want to influence these unbelieving parents to Christianity, then they must not behave as they are proposing to do. The reception is not their responsibility, they are not doing anything wrong, and they will certainly end by giving a completely false impression of the Christian faith to these unbelieving parents and the unbelieving guests.

The position of a young pastor is often this: he is called to a church where it is the custom to have bazaars, and similar money-raising activities, and he does not believe in bazaars. So he takes a stand, not only ruling against bazaars but banning various other things that unfortunately happen in churches at the present time. In such cases, what is the rule, what is the essence of the art of teaching? I think it is something like this.

First: it is the business of the teacher always to realize the position of those who are being taught. The first thing a teacher must do is make an assessment of the people he is teaching, whether it be children or adults. The good teacher does not just come out of his study with his lesson all prepared, underlined and double underlined, and hold forth. If he does, he is not fit to teach,

Second: the teacher must learn not to expect too much from children and babes. If you expect too much from a child you can be very cruel to that child. What do you think of the sort of teacher who punishes a child because it cannot follow something that has been said? You would agree that he is not fit to teach. But many people do this with adults. They are 'babes in Christ', they are 'weak in the faith', they do not understand – and yet these impatient teachers dragoon them, they slash them, they denounce them, and they antagonize

them. Why? Because they have never taken the trouble to realize the position of these people.

Now I could give you personal stories about this The first church of which I was the minister was the kind of church I am describing, and the first thing I saw was that these people were ignorant – I mean, ignorant spiritually – about these matters. They had never been taught, not at all. It was not so much that they were deliberately wrong as that they had never really been made to face these issues. So if you start with a child, remember that he is a child, and if you start with a child in the faith, remember that he is a child. So therefore do not be cruel to him. Do not expect from him what he has never been in a position to be or to have.

So a third great factor is the need for patience. You must be ready to answer questions, you must be ready to repeat yourself, you must be ready to face difficulties. Of course, you will find, as a teacher, that some of the clever people feel you are wasting time. They know all that already. 'Fancy going over that again!' they say. You must know how to deal with these people, too. You can do something with them, in passing, now and again, and show them their conceit, and help them to understand that they do not always know quite as much as they think they know. They will be most impatient with you, but take no notice, just you be patient.

Be patient with the people who are struggling along, with the children in the faith. Deal with their questions, answer them patiently, be prepared to demonstrate to them out of the Scriptures. What the teacher must never do is just stand up and announce, 'I say.' No, you must demonstrate the point you are making, you must take your Scriptures, you must consider the possibilities, and you must work it out – all that needs great patience. Above all other qualities, a teacher needs patience.

And then, fourthly, never forget, or depreciate, the value of example. Here is a man who is in genuine difficulty about something; very well, we think he is wrong, and that we are right. Show that to him, show that in your life, show it by your example, show him a better way. So often young pastors start

by laying down a law. Now I have always said that I have had to learn this lesson for myself. Remembering that these people do not know any better, do not lay down the law too much, but reason with them and say, 'My friends, are you prepared to try another way? Are you prepared to give another way an opportunity? Let me show it to you.' And they will generally be led by you. When you give your explanations, they are generally amazed. They had never thought of this and they are prepared to give it a trial.

So often I have known it happen that where a young minister has had to deal with a question like having a bazaar to raise money and has said, 'Now let us try this just for once, let us ask the people to come and bring their gifts', then the people have accepted it. And as a result, they have had perhaps two or three times as much money as they ever had out of their wretched bazaars! That is the way to do it. Not to stand, as it were, on your hind legs and lay down the law.

So, fifthly, and above all, the essence of teaching is that you manifest a loving interest in those whom you are teaching. This approach will achieve infinitely more than all your arguments. I repeat that I am not ruling out the discussions – they are essential – but if they are not done in this spirit of loving concern, they are useless. Once people get the impression that you are really concerned to help them and not to denounce them or to despise them, the moment they feel that you have a loving concern for them, they will listen to you, and then you will be able to help them, and together you will be able to arrive at a common opinion with regard to all these matters that are indifferent.

So there it is as I see it. The Apostle here, remember, is dealing only with conduct in the realm of the church, where all are members together, having all been received by God. So we are to receive one another in this same way, and help one another.

Three

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Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things; another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not, judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.

Romans 14:1-4

We have considered the first verse and have seen there that the Apostle not only introduces the discussion of these matters that we described as 'matters of indifference', but he also lays down the controlling and guiding principle that governs the whole of his discussion. And now, having done that, we are able to consider the first case that he puts before us, and that is the whole question of eating particular foods, especially the question of eating or not eating meats.

Again, it is very important that we should carry in our minds the fact that Paul is not dealing here with subjects about which there is a clear commandment. He is dealing, rather, with things about which we are meant to apply the general teaching of the gospel in order to come to a decision with respect to them. If we do not remember that, then the whole argument of the Apostle will convey nothing to us.

Secondly, we must remember that I have not yet reached the stage of arriving at any conclusions. We are still in the stage of

exposition. We are showing exactly how the Apostle deals with these questions. Of course, in doing that, in order to make my point clear, I used an illustration about people getting married and the use of drink, and so on, but do not draw any conclusions from that. I was simply illustrating the danger of doing the very thing about which the Apostle is talking here. So I have not yet pronounced any opinion of my own on any one of these particular matters, and I am still not going to do so, because our business is to see exactly what the Apostle is saying. After that we will draw our conclusions.

Let me further emphasize this: half our troubles in the Christian life are due to the fact that we tend to draw conclusions before we are in a position to do so. There are people who do that in every walk of life. But in a court of law, it is a very bad judge on the bench who decides exactly what his verdict is going to be before he has heard the two sides of the case; equally bad is the member of the jury who does the same thing.

Listen to the facts. Get the exposition clear first. The Apostle does this himself; this is the whole point of his teaching. So many of us like a kind of ready-reckoner Christianity. We have a problem, we turn to our ready-reckoner – immediate answer! But there is nothing like that in the New Testament – never. The Apostle takes a whole chapter to deal with this question, so at this stage we are in no position to say what we think. You should not jump to a conclusion, you should arrive at it. You jump in other respects but not to conclusions!

So let us now consider Paul's first case: 'One believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.' We are considering here the question of eating, and later on in the chapter the Apostle deals with the question of drinking in exactly the same way. So here, in verse 2, he says that the weaker brother does not eat meat at all, but only eats herbs.

What does Paul have in mind here? Now he is not writing to the world, he is writing to the members of a church, and the church included Jews who had become Christians. As I have pointed out, our Christian life is affected by what we were

before we became Christians. We all tend to carry certain things with us. Though we are born again, we are not all in the same position and it is quite obvious from the New Testament teaching that in the early church Christians who had been Jews had problems that differed from those of Christians who had been Gentiles.

Christian Jews were in trouble in this way: every Jew had been brought up to regard certain foods, particularly certain types of meat, like pork, and certain types of fish, as prohibited. There are lists of these forbidden foods in the ceremonial law in the Old Testament, in the book of Leviticus, in particular. In addition, according to that same ceremonial law, on certain special days, no meat could be eaten at all. That was the background, and though the Jews had come into the Christian life, some were still troubled about whether these laws still applied to them.

Then there was a further problem. The Christian church also included ex-pagans. These pagans, of course, had been in the habit of going to their pagan temples, where they gave offerings of meat to their idols. After it had been presented in the temple, some of this meat would be sold in the 'shambles', as it is described, that is, the public meat market. The Jews felt that it was wrong to eat that meat, that it had been polluted, somehow, by being associated with idolatry. So for those reasons they abstained from eating meat.

The Gentiles, too, were in two minds about eating meat that had been offered to idols. Once meat had been offered to an idol, it was regarded as sacred meat, and some Gentile Christians felt that to eat it was once more to take part in idolatrous worship. So, not knowing which meats had come from the pagan temples, they abstained from all meat.

But, in addition to all that, it seems to me to be abundantly clear that there was still another element in this matter of refraining from eating meats, and that is a general one, which must simply be described as vegetarianism. 'One believeth that he may eat all things' – every kind of food – 'another, who is weak, eateth herbs', and he eats only herbs. The word 'herbs' is

a generic term and includes not only what we call herbs, but anything that grows out of the ground – vegetables, fruit, and so on. That, then, was obviously an element. I am emphasizing this because some of the commentators would confine Paul's teaching here only to the question of the Jews and their Old Testament law, and the pagans with their idolatrous sacrifices. But I think the emphasis on herbs insists upon our interpreting it also in a wider sense.

The kind of thing that I have in mind is something that the Apostle deals with in his first letter to Timothy, and it is astonishing to me that so many commentators seem to have missed this completely. Paul says:

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained. But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise – *which does not mean physical exercise, it means this great attention to the physical aspect* – profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come [1 Tim. 4:1-8].

Now there Paul is dealing with a teaching that prohibited marriage and also commanded people to abstain from meats. This was all a part of what he calls 'seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils'. He is referring there to those odd mixtures of

ideas that were popular in the first-century world, as they are today – a kind of ‘mystery religion’, as some of them were called. They were a curious mixture of religion and philosophy, magic, in a sense, and mysticism and a kind of asceticism, all jumbled up together. It is a kind of religion but it is a false religion, which pays great attention to the cultivation of the body and in those days, as now, its adherents tended to be vegetarians. These ideas have always been popular in Eastern countries, and have a following today, even in the West.

That sort of teaching had filtered into Palestine itself, and it was certain to be popular in a place like Rome, which was the metropolis and the centre of the empire. So it is necessary that along with the particular problems of the Jews and the Gentiles who had become Christians, we should include this cultic teaching that is liable to affect every kind of Christian.

So let us be clear that the Apostle is not discussing vegetarianism as such at this point, and therefore neither shall we. Now some of you may be vegetarians. That is all right, as long as you are a vegetarian for health or medical reasons. This is a subject for discussion by dieticians and physiologists. It is a matter of what is best for the body. But the Apostle is concerned about it when people make it a religious matter, a matter of conscience, and insists that it is absolutely vital.

Now this must be clear. I repeat that the Apostle has no complaint against the vegetarian who is a medical vegetarian. So those of you who are in that position need not feel condemned. But if it is a part of your whole Christian faith, and if you make it obligatory, and begin to say that we are not Christians unless we are vegetarians, then you are in trouble. As I said, that parallel in 1 Timothy 4 is very germane to this matter. As Paul makes clear in his letter to Timothy, abstaining from meat was being made a matter of conscience, and the moment you do that, you are falling into this error about which he is concerned.

So Paul’s case is that there is a difference between strong Christians – those who are strong in their understanding of the faith, remember – and those who are weaker, for the time being,

in their understanding of the faith. And the difference, says the Apostle, between the two is that the people who are strong have come to see that the entire distinction between meats, which had been taught to the Jews under the old dispensation, no longer applies.

Christians who were strong in the faith could also see that there was nothing wrong whatsoever in eating meat offered to idols because there is no such thing as an idol, there is no such thing as another god, there is only one God. 1 Corinthians 8 deals with that in detail. Since there are no other gods, when people go to a heathen temple and offer meat, nothing at all happens to the meat. It does not become sacred. So stronger Christians were perfectly happy to eat all kinds of meat. And they were equally clear about the folly of those mystery religions and cults, with all their foolish teaching about prohibiting the eating of meat, and so on.

Now it is probably the case that many Christians 'weak in the faith' had decided to refrain from eating meat because they were in a little bit of doubt about this, and, being weak, were so afraid of doing something that was wrong, that they said the only safe course was not to eat any meat at all. If you do not touch any meat of any description, you cannot go wrong. So they had become vegetarians and they were eating nothing but herbs for this purely religious reason. And that is the position with which the Apostle is dealing.

The stronger Christians had understood the teaching given by our Lord Himself. Our Lord had said:

There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man ... Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats? [*Mark 7:15, 18-19*].

This was where our Lord always shocked the Pharisees. They

said that He was a law-breaker, a man who was flouting the laws given by Moses. They could not see that He was the fulfilment of the law, and that His coming and His perfect work in our salvation had done away with the ceremonial law.

In the third verse of Romans 14, the Apostle says that two main dangers arise from this matter, and he deals with both of them: 'Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth.' Notice that the two types of Christian face different dangers. The danger for more enlightened Christians is to despise their weaker brothers and sisters. I do not think there is any difficulty about understanding this. Intellectual understanding tends to produce arrogance, and the danger, always, for the more intellectual kind of person is to despise those who are not intellectual or not so intellectual. Intellectual pride is a terrible sin and it is the sin that is always most ready to overcome those who have understanding.

Of course, this danger of arrogance is seen on the natural level; we are all familiar with it. The Greeks, who were a very intellectual, learned people, divided the whole world up into 'Greeks' and 'Barbarians', 'wise' and 'unwise', and they looked with disdain upon people who lacked knowledge. 'These people,' says the man or woman of learning, 'are ignorant. They have not read. What do they know? Who are they?'

And in the church, the arrogant say, 'These people know no theology. All they've got is a bit of experience.' And they thank God that they are 'not as these other people are', especially the more emotional type of Christian. The Apostle knows his people, he knows human nature, and he knows that pride is the particular danger, the besetting sin, of people who can see things more clearly. 'Do not despise the others,' he says. And let those of us who belong to this group always beware of falling into this sin.

The danger with the weaker brother is quite different. Paul writes, 'Let not him which eateth not, judge him that eateth.' Does this come to you unexpectedly? Are you surprised that it is this way round? Would you not have perhaps thought that

the stronger man was in danger of judging the weaker? But the Apostle knows what he is talking about. This is absolutely right: it is the weak brother who is always guilty of being judgmental. He has nothing to be proud of and he does not, therefore, despise others. His great danger is to judge the stronger.

By 'judging', Paul means that the great danger facing the weaker brother when he sees his stronger brother eating all kinds of foods and meats, is the danger of saying, 'That man isn't a Christian because if he were, he wouldn't be eating those things.'

Now you notice that the stronger brother does not tend to say that the weaker brother is not a Christian. 'Of course, he is a Christian,' he says, 'I suppose I've got to admit that, but ...' and so he despises him. But the trouble with the weaker brother is that his temptation is to say that the other man is not a Christian at all. He judges him, he passes a final verdict upon him. And if he does not go the whole way in his condemnation, he is very ready to say that at any rate the other man is very lacking in faithfulness to the truth and in earnestness as a Christian.

It is most interesting that the tendency to sit in judgment upon other Christians in terms of their conduct and to query whether they are Christians at all should be the particular failing of the weak brother, and I want to show you this in order that we may be perfectly clear about it. The tendency is almost invariably a sign of weakness, not of strength. What is the explanation for this? I do not think there is much difficulty about supplying the answer. It is solely due to the spirit of fear. The trouble with the weak brother is always that he is the slave of the spirit of fear. Because he is not clear about things and because he is, by definition, a fearful kind of person, he is always anxious to safeguard his position, he wants to make sure that he is right. And because his thinking is controlled not so much by the teaching as by this spirit of fear and the need to guard himself, he very naturally tends to multiply rules and regulations.

But the weaker Christian is not content with drawing up lists for himself. Because he does it for himself, he thinks everybody should be doing it. So he gets his list and applies it not only to himself, but to everybody else as well, and he wants everybody to conform to his idea and to his pattern. This insistence is entirely due to the fact that he is of a fearful spirit. He is so terrified that he will go wrong about eating meat, that he tends to say, 'The only safe thing to do is to cut out the lot. You can't go wrong if you eat nothing but herbs.'

So because of his weakness in understanding the Christian faith, the tendency of the weaker brother is to become a legalist. In the end, he judges the standing and the Christian position of others in terms of these matters, and of these matters alone. And this is what the Apostle is dealing with.

Let me give you some parallels to show you the importance of this issue. Take, for instance, the account that we are given in Acts 15 of the great council that was held in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas had gone up from Antioch to consult their brethren, the Apostles and the elders and the church at Jerusalem, concerning what exactly should be demanded of Gentile Christians. It was not only a discussion about circumcision. There were a group of people, called Judaizers, who said that Gentiles who had become Christians should come under the entire Jewish ceremonial law, that they must adopt it all. That was the question at issue.

For a time, there was 'much disputing', and then we are told that Peter stood up to speak. He started by reminding the council of what God Himself had done: 'And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith' [Acts 15:8-9]. Now some people seem to think that that is the text for entire sanctification or sinless perfection. But it has nothing to do with that. The words 'purifying their hearts' just mean that God had enabled the Gentiles to believe the truth unto salvation in exactly the same way as the Jews.

Then Peter continued, 'Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our

fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they' [verses 10-11].

Now I repeat that these Judaizers were insisting that you really must not say that people are truly Christian unless they have put themselves under the Jewish law. 'Oh, yes,' they said, 'you must have faith in Jesus Christ, but that is not enough, you must take on these other rules as well.' But the council members said that this was sheer legalism. And so they arrived at their great and famous decision, which was given by James. 'But that we write unto them,' said James, 'that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood' [Acts 15:20]. That was all.

I must not go into that now, tempting though it is to do so. You may say, 'Wasn't that decision a compromise in and of itself?' No, it was not, because the council had established the principle, and the principle was that the Gentile convert does not have to become a Jew, as it were. But at the same time, to avoid trouble and to avoid offending the Jews, and to work through this period of transition, the council recommended that Gentile Christians did not do certain things. I hope to expound that later on, when we go into the body of this fourteenth chapter, because people seem to think that the Apostle Paul is inconsistent, even here. And I will be able to show you that the Apostle Paul, too, was not inconsistent. He stood on what is essential, but he was ready to be charitable about things that are not essential.

We find a second, and very interesting, example in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Galatians. Peter had come to see these things quite clearly, but in Galatians 2, the Apostle Paul tells us:

But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And

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the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation. But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all ...' [Gal. 2:11-14].

Now that really is the same issue. This Galatian heresy was the heresy of saying that to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is not enough, that justification by faith alone is not sufficient, and you must add to it. And 'the men from James' even persuaded Peter, for a while, that it was wrong for him, as an ex-Jew, now a Christian, to be eating with ex-Gentiles who were now Christians. And Paul shows very plainly that by doing that Peter was unconsciously denying the very centre of the gospel. That is why Paul had to withstand Peter to the face, in public, even though Peter was an Apostle. Paul was fighting for the very essence of the Christian faith. And he goes on, therefore, to say this: 'Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage' [Gal. 5:1].

And then the same teaching comes in Colossians 2, where the Apostle says:

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding the Head, from which all the body ... increaseth with the increase of God. Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world – *he puts all these scrupulosities into that category* – why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; which are all to perish with the using,) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew

of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh [Col. 2:16-23].

Notice the words, 'a voluntary humility ... neglecting the body'. Some of these people went in for strict ascetic practices under the impression that it made them more holy. And that is why some of the cults today still advocate similar practices. But they had a wrong view of the body, regarding it as sinful and evil, and that is heresy. Christian teaching does not say that. This involved system of what you eat, and what you touch, and what you do, is a denial of the gospel, says Paul. You are being robbed of the liberty you have received as Christian people. And that is what the Apostle has in mind here in Romans 14.

So let us now see the relevance of all this to us today, lest somebody may think, 'Oh, well, that's all right. Those were the problems of the first century, but they have nothing to do with us.' But they have, and let me show you how. This is the error of Roman Catholic teaching at this point. Take, for instance, the rule that no meat must be eaten on Fridays. That is a human invention; it is not in the Scriptures at all. But that is only one example of a whole system that the Roman Catholic Church has introduced: rules and regulations that have been brought in telling people what to do and what not to do. The whole idea behind Lent is also just this very issue with which we are dealing.

Now it is not merely that Roman Catholics suggest that these regulations might be good and helpful. No, the trouble is that they are made obligatory. It is when people regard you as defective in your Christian discipleship if you do not keep these rules that they fall into the category the Apostle is dealing with here. And that is true not only of Roman Catholicism, but of Anglo-Catholicism, also, and of every other kind of pseudo or imitation Roman Catholicism, of which there is so much at the present time.

But let us not think that we are guiltless, we who do not subscribe to these Roman Catholic traditions in the church. I

personally would not hesitate to say that the temperance movement, when it was presented as a part of Christian teaching, fell into precisely that same error. This is why I have never spoken at a temperance meeting held under the auspices of the church. This movement appeared in the 1830s and began to be taken up by Christian preachers. Temperance preaching! Preaching against drink! Then there was preaching against tobacco and various other things – afterwards the cinema, then the television – and this is the main staple, as it were, of some preaching. Now to me, those who preach in this way are guilty of exactly the error referred to in Romans 14 and I will show you why.

Now I want it to be quite clear that I think any movement or any society has a perfect right to draw up its own rules and regulations, and if you join a society or a club or an institution or a movement, it is your duty to abide by its regulations. If you do not agree with them, you should not belong to the society. But if these rules are made a vital part of discipleship, if it is in any way suggested that they are an essential part of the Christian profession, then those who suggest this fall into the category condemned by Paul. It is legalism.

Now some of you, I know, are going to think that I do not believe in temperance. Well, you are the jumpers to conclusions that I referred to earlier, and I am afraid I have no more to add except to appeal to you once more to remember that I am not stating any conclusions at this point, but am simply putting the matter before you so that you may see what the Apostle is saying. The moment you begin to make these stipulations, you are in danger of introducing legalism, and this, of course, has happened very often.

I myself was brought up in a legalistic atmosphere. The impression I had of Christianity in my youth was that a Christian was someone who did not do certain things. He did not drink, he did not smoke, he did not do other things that were done by people of the world. The inevitable result of such an attitude is that when you see a man who does those things, you say, 'That man can't be a Christian.' These rules have become the standard by which a Christian is evaluated.

Can you not see the error in this position? You are back under the law; you have moved from the position of justification by faith only, or, as Paul puts it in Galatians 5:4, 'Ye are fallen from grace.' Now that, again, is a phrase that is frequently misunderstood. Paul is not referring to the view that a man who is born again can fall into sin and cease to be born again, and then come back and be born again, and fall again. He is not touching on that. All he is saying is that you have departed from the position that teaches that salvation is solely and entirely of grace by faith. And that is precisely what had happened to these Christians in Rome, and that is why Paul is so concerned. He is saying: When you judge your brother in terms of whether or not he eats these meats, you have left the grace position; you are denying the doctrine of justification by faith only because you are virtually saying that it is what people do or do not do that determines whether or not they are Christians. And this is something that you must never do.

We must all examine ourselves. Are we guilty or have we been guilty of a legalistic attitude? As I have indicated, even though you are a Christian, you may at times, and quite unconsciously, fall back to the position of justification by works. You may not always be consistent in your application and in your working out of the doctrine. This kind of nervous apprehension, this tendency to judge, this tendency to exalt these secondary issues into a central position and make them determinative of a person's whole standing and status with regard to his relationship to God is always a sign of weakness. It is sheer legalism, and when it leads you to judge your brother or sister, it does indeed become a very serious and dangerous position to be in.

That, then, is the case, and as we will go on to see in the last phrase of the third verse, and in the fourth verse, the Apostle gives the temporary answer. Before he gives his opinion about the things in and of themselves, he says: Listen! You must not judge your brother.

Why not?

First, because 'God hath received him.' Secondly, because you have no right to judge another man's servant. And, thirdly,

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because you need not be worried about this stronger man. There is a way whereby he is kept, and this nervous apprehension of yours, this spirit of fear, is wrong. You are not enjoying the liberty of the children of God, you are not standing fast 'in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free'.

Four

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Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.

Romans 14:1-4

We have been considering the dangers, the besetting sins, of both the strong and the weak brothers in the application of the Christian faith to our lives. And we ended our last study by showing that the difficulty with the weaker type of brother is that though he has believed the central truth as regards salvation, when he comes to work it out in various details, he unconsciously denies the things that he has already believed. This is why, of course, we all have to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of the Lord. This is why we need to be taught. This is why the Lord, when He ascended up on high, gave not only apostles and prophets and evangelists, but also pastors and teachers.

And we have seen that the question of whether or not to eat meat is not only some first-century problem, and that our interest in it is not merely theoretical and academic. This and similar problems – ‘matters indifferent’ – are still with us, and I gave some examples of ways in which they can become too

central in the life of the church. Whether, indeed, they are admissible at all is a matter that is worth considering; but when they are made central, then certainly we have crossed the line and are in the wrong.

And I also pointed out how, in many evangelical circles and societies, there is a tendency to impose a pattern of conduct upon converts. The moment someone is converted, he or she is told, 'Now you must do this, that and the other.' At the close of last Friday's study, a member of the congregation was telling me that she used to attend such a church, and she said that when she became a Christian, she was told that the first thing she had to do was buy an alarm clock. The moment you are converted, you buy an alarm clock so that you get up and have your time of prayer and read your portion of Scripture at a given hour. The teaching is, virtually, that if you do not have a quiet time at a particular hour in the morning, then it is doubtful whether you have become a Christian at all. You are familiar with this kind of tendency, these little legalisms that come in. The motive is always very good, of course, as was the motive of these weaker brethren in Rome, but the question is: Is the teaching in accord with the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith?

Now the first answer the Apostle gives to that question is, as we have seen, at the end of the third verse – 'God hath received him.' This is what decides whether or not a person is a Christian, says the Apostle. It is not decided by whether a man eats meats or herbs. It is God who decides.

This is important because, as I have indicated, there is always the danger, the tendency, indeed, in some people in the church, to go beyond the Lord Himself, and to invent rules and regulations and tests that cannot be justified by the Scripture. They become legalists without knowing it, and as a result make themselves and others very unhappy. Grave injustices have often been done, great trouble has often entered into the life of the church, because of such people. So I want to open this out just a little for you.

I was once told by one of the most godly men I have ever known, a principal of a very fine evangelical theological

seminary, and a man with an unusually brilliant intellect, that in his younger days, as a young Christian, he had passed through a stage of legalism, though he had not realized at the time that that is what it was. He said he had been deeply concerned about keeping the Lord's day, and not violating it in any way. He felt it was essential to his whole Christian position that no work must be done on a Sunday that could be done on a Saturday or on a Monday. In order, as he then saw it, to keep the Lord's day, he would actually put on his boots and tie them up on Saturday night in order that he should not do so on Sunday morning. He did that for some time, and then, suddenly, he realized that this was sheer legalism, that this was, as it were, making the teaching of the Scripture ridiculous, and he was emancipated from it.

Now I give you just that one example to show you how we can give preeminence to certain details that are not specified in the Scriptures. Indeed, that man found, of course, that he was guilty of the very things of which the Pharisees were guilty. The Pharisees were always challenging our Lord about His failure to keep their rules. He had healed a man on a Sabbath and they said He should not have done that because that was work; or they objected when they saw the disciples picking and eating ears of corn as they passed through a cornfield on the Sabbath because that, too, was work.

As we have seen, we ourselves have to beware of the tendency to judge others by standards that we ourselves have set up. There is a famous example in the case of the disciples. We read in Luke's Gospel: 'And John answered and said, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbade him, because he followeth not with us. And Jesus said unto him, Forbid him not: for he that is not against us is for us' [Luke 9:49-50].

Because that man was not one of their group, and was not like them in every respect, the disciples felt he was not a follower at all and had no right to be casting out devils. But they had omitted to notice that this man was casting out devils in the name of the Lord, and that, according to the Lord, is what mattered. The disciples were wrong, and our Lord refused to accept the standard they were setting up.

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The incident we have just considered is of particular interest to us today, when the whole question of church unity is so much before us. Of course, we should all be interested in church unity, but on condition that we know what a church is and do not believe merely in institutions and some mechanical organization; as long, also, as we agree that Luther was right in what he did with respect to Rome. But we should all be anxious to be 'one'. Our Lord Himself has taught us this in John 17.

The history of the church shows that people have often divided for wrong reasons. They have been guilty of schism because they have exalted a secondary teaching to a central position. So the subject we are now considering really is of very practical importance at the present time. Some of us hold the view that there is only one great division of what is called the church: there is the world church that the ecumenical people talk so much about and that will include the Roman Catholic Church, and there is the church of those who are Evangelicals.

Now it is the business of Evangelicals to come together. But there are difficulties because, as things are now, Christian people are divided at the Lord's table. Some people are not allowed to take the bread and the wine together in memory of our Lord's death for them. Some churches exclude people from that sacrament purely on the grounds of conduct. I remember being at a Communion service in which the man who was to administer the sacraments laid it down quite plainly that anybody who possessed a television set had no right to take of the bread and the wine. Now from where did he get his authority for saying that? He had no authority whatsoever from the Scripture. He and the others who agreed with him had drawn up their own regulations.

Then there are others who are very glad to welcome you to a service in their church but when you come to the Communion service they will not allow you to take the bread and the wine unless you have been baptized by immersion as an adult. They know that you believe in our Lord's death, as they do, that you believe in justification by faith, and so on, but you are not

allowed to declare the Lord's death with them because on confession of faith you were not baptized by immersion.

And then there are others who ask: Have you been confirmed by a bishop? That is their test. If you have not, they, too, will not allow you to come to the Communion table.

Now these are facts and they are all but examples of man-made regulations that cannot in any way be justified in the Scriptures. They are divisive; they separate Christian people who, as a result, are refused access at one of the most sensitive and glorious points in the whole of the Christian economy.

Now this attitude can even be quite ridiculous. A book has recently been published entitled *Power without Glory*. This book, which is written by Professor Henderson of Glasgow University, gives one of the most notable attacks upon the ecumenical movement that has ever appeared. Professor Henderson tells how he was asked to be a guest teacher at a school for army chaplains, and he was the chief lecturer for a week. There were chaplains there who were exclusively Anglican – this was the point – and he was a lecturer at their invitation, yet the ludicrous thing was that when they held a Communion service at the end of the week he was not allowed to take part with them.

But there was something even more ridiculous than that: among these chaplains there was a Norwegian, and the professor noticed that the Norwegian had attended this Communion service. Obviously he had been invited, and Professor Henderson felt that this was odd because he happened to know that the Norwegian Church is not recognized by the Church of England in this matter of Communion. So he went to this man and said, 'How is it that you were allowed to attend the Communion service? I was not, of course, and I did not expect it for I am Church of Scotland, but how is it that you were allowed to be there?'

The Norwegian laughed and replied, 'It is extraordinary and it is purely an accident.' And this is the story he told. He had been trained in a theological seminary in Norway, but in 1940, just before he was due to be ordained, the Germans had

occupied Norway. He had managed to escape to Sweden, and, as he had gone through all his training and was ready to be ordained, he submitted to ordination by a Swedish bishop who belonged to the Lutheran Church. So, entirely as the result of the accident of war, he was ordained by a Swedish bishop, though he was a Norwegian, and because of that accident he was allowed to come to the Communion service. But if he had been ordained by a Norwegian bishop he would not have been allowed!

Now I tell you this story for one reason only, to show you the ridiculous position in which we arrive when we elevate human regulations and make them central. And men and women who believe in the same Lord are divided by these regulations. That is the very thing with which the Apostle is dealing.

'But,' asks someone, 'is it as simple as that? Isn't all this the result of the problem of discipline?'

In a sense, it is, and we must believe in discipline; and yet it is very interesting to observe the way in which the New Testament teaching deals with these issues. What the Apostle says about people coming to the Lord's table is this: 'But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat ...' [1 Cor. 11:28]. That is where Paul puts the onus.

But we have to go a little beyond this. The teaching of the Scripture is clearly that if a man or woman is guilty of some flagrant sin, if they are living in sin, then the church has to discipline them, and they are not allowed to take part in the Communion service. That is perfectly clear. But having said that, surely the whole emphasis of the Scripture is upon the spirit, and the teaching is that our object should not be to exclude people but to invite them and to rejoice in their coming. Everything must be done in a spirit of love.

So the Apostle says, in effect, 'Who are you to say that that man is not a Christian because he eats meat? Who are you to exclude him? Who are you to say that he is not fit to come to the Communion table and to partake of the Lord's Supper? You know,' says Paul, 'God has received him, and if God has received him, what right have you to refuse him?' That was the

argument, and it is still the argument; it is the teaching of the whole of the New Testament.

But there is a problem that comes in at this point, and again, it is most interesting and fascinating. Some people think that the Apostle Paul is guilty of contradicting himself at this point. He seems to say here, and we shall see it more clearly as we go on, that these matters are indifferent – that is his whole argument – and he appeals for charity. But when you read what he says in Galatians chapter 4, you may at first think that there is a contradiction. This is what he writes:

Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain [*Gal.* 4:7-11].

Here Paul is strongly condemning the Christians in Galatia who wanted to observe 'days, and months, and times, and years'. And he also condemns them for saying that Christians must be circumcised. Or again, take Paul's words at the end of Colossians chapter 2:

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward – *Paul is telling them: Do not listen to these people. Again, it is condemnation* – in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels ... why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? [*Col.* 2:16-18, 20-22].

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So is the Apostle contradicting himself? Here in Romans 14, apparent leniency, toleration, a refusal to take sides, and in these other places, strong, almost stern condemnation. And the answer, of course, is that he is not. In this matter here before the church at Rome, Paul is dealing with weakness and scrupulosity. These people were unhappy because of their weak understanding of the faith, and they had hyper-sensitive consciences. So when the Apostle finds that, he is lenient and bears with them. But when their rules were made absolutely essential, as they were particularly in the case of the Galatians, then he condemns them root and branch and will have nothing at all to do with them. When the weaker brethren became law-makers and laid down conditions and said you were not a true Christian unless you did what they said, then there is nothing but sheer condemnation.

Now this is so interesting that I want to give you another example of an apparent contradiction in the Apostle's teaching. In the sixteenth chapter of Acts, we read this:

Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek [*Acts* 16:1-3].

But then in Galatians 2, the Apostle says this:

But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: and that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you [*Gal.* 2:3-5].

Paul circumcises Timothy, yet he absolutely refuses to allow Titus to be circumcised. But that, again, is still not a contradiction: the Apostle is operating on exactly the same principle.

But let me remind you of one further piece of evidence before I state the principle quite boldly and baldly. As we have seen in the account of the council that was held at Jerusalem, there was difficulty over the Gentile converts: should they be made to submit entirely to the Jewish law? And the conclusion that the council arrived at was that they should not. 'But,' they said, in effect, 'though we say that they do not have to submit to the law and do everything as if they were Jews, there are certain things that ought to be observed.'

James, who was presiding, said, 'My sentence is, that we trouble not them which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: but that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood' [Acts 15:19-20]. And this was not a compromise but a decision taken in terms that I will point out to you.

Then, again, in Acts 21, we read of the Apostle Paul, of all people, this Apostle to the Gentiles, this man who of all others was given to preach the doctrine of justification by faith only, that when he went up to Jerusalem, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem took him aside and told him that there was a lot of trouble because the Jews did not understand what he was doing, and a rumour was going around about him. They said, 'They are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs [of the Jews]' [Acts 21:21].

So James and the church elders made this suggestion to Paul: 'We have four men which have a vow on them; them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law' [Acts 21:23-24]. Then they quoted the decision reached by the council, described in Acts 15.

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So we read: 'Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification ...' [verse 26]. Was the Apostle acting inconsistently here? No, there is a principle that governs Paul's actions in the cases I have cited as well as in his teaching in Romans 14 as in contra-distinction to Galatians 4.

The principle is this: Christians must do everything they can to avoid giving offence. This seems to have been the teaching of the early church. Here were these Jews, they had become Christians, yes, but, as we have already seen, they were not clear about these things. And the Apostle and the whole council in Jerusalem say: We must not offend them.

Because of this principle, Paul acceded to the church's request. When the nervous Christians said, 'Do you mind joining these men who have taken this vow? Do you mind shaving your head?', the Apostle said, 'I am perfectly ready to do this.' And he did it. What is shaving the head? What is taking a vow? He was a Jew himself. He would not allow the Gentiles ever to be forced into obeying the ceremonial law, but if it was going to help the Jews to come to a full understanding of the faith, then he was prepared to keep rules that he regarded as quite indifferent in and of themselves.

Paul was not forsaking any principles, he was still standing absolutely on his gospel, on his own belief and on what he taught the Gentiles, but in order to avoid a scandal and a row, in order to avoid trouble and misunderstanding in Jerusalem, he was prepared to take the vow. He did it for the sake of peace and for the sake of the spread of the gospel and to help those who were in a genuine difficulty.

It is perfectly clear that the early church, with the wisdom that was given to it by the Holy Spirit, saw that it was in a period of transition and moved slowly, therefore. It laid down the great, obvious principles, and when somebody came along and said, 'Look here, all the Gentiles must be circumcised and go right under the law', they said, 'Not at all! We will not have that!' But at the same time, they said, 'Avoid giving offence as

far as you can, and if there are certain things that are indifferent, then let us just ask the people to observe them.'

And the great Apostle obviously reasoned on those premises and principles. Help the weak as much as you can, but never allow the weak to become dictators. Avoid causing offence to people, try to enlighten them and be patient with them. Be longsuffering. Show people that you are prepared to go as far as you can in order to placate them and help them. But never forsake principles, never go back on something that is absolute, and never allow their weaknesses to become the guiding principles of church government and church order. And, above all, never allow 'matters of indifference' to be used to decide who is and who is not a Christian.

So there was no contradiction at all either in the teaching or the practice of the Apostle. He had the interest of the gospel at heart. He was the great Apostle to the Gentiles and everybody knew that [and it was a tremendous thing that Jews, and a man like Paul, especially, were even prepared to receive Gentiles and to see the possibility of a Gentile ever being right with God].

If only the church had always held to this teaching! But she has not. She has so often departed from it. 'I stand on this,' says a man, but has he a right to stand on it? Take the illustrations I have been giving you: where is the justification for dividing Christian brethren on these various issues? Surely it is wrong. The very spirit is wrong. And here in Romans 14:3 the Apostle puts it all in this one phrase: 'God hath received him.' And if God has received him, who are you to refuse him?

Yes, but that leaves us with a final question. It is all very well to say, 'God hath received him', but how do we know that God has received him? This is the point at issue. The weaker brother tends to say, 'I am only happy to believe that God has received a man if he eats nothing but herbs.' What is our answer to that?

And surely the answer is that there are certain statements in the Scripture that entitle us to know whether God has received someone. For instance:

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God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God [*John* 3:16–18].

So if a man or woman professes this faith, and says, 'I see that I am a sinner, that I am completely hopeless, that my works are useless. I rely only on the fact that the Son of God has died for me and for my sins, I have nothing else to rely upon at all' – then God has received him or her.

But we must add to that. This is what people say, this is their profession, and it gives us strong presumptive evidence that they are Christians, but if, in addition to that, they express a desire to join a Christian church, and to leave the company of the world, and to become part of the company of God's people, this surely, again, is evidence that God has received them.

And then you add to that their general conduct and behaviour. Now notice that I am putting it in terms of their general conduct and behaviour. They may do certain things that I am not quite happy about, but that is not the question at issue. If these people are, in general, living lives that are consistent with their profession, and conform to the teaching of the New Testament, then we are entitled to say that God has received them. We may be wrong; we may be misled. They may be like the people described in the beginning of Hebrews chapter 6, but that does not matter. What we are to be concerned about is that we do not exclude people wrongly. If, in charity, and as far as we can tell by these scriptural tests, they seem to us to be indicating that they are Christians and that therefore God has received them, we must not reject them.

A further scriptural test is given by the Apostle John: 'We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. [*1 John* 3:14].

Then if people are also anxious to learn, and to enter into a deeper knowledge of the truth; if they have a concern about the lost; if they are interested in the propagation of the gospel and the spread of the Christian church, I say God has received them, and we must not refuse them.

And, of course, it is quite clear that in the New Testament – and I would say today also – there is yet a further test, and we are told about this in the book of Acts. The Apostle Peter was a Jew and he was in trouble in his early Christian life about these very matters. You remember how he had a vision – it is described in the tenth chapter of Acts – in which he saw a sheet coming down from heaven containing various kinds of beasts. We are told:

Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice... Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean ... [*Acts 10:12-17*].

Then came the men from Cornelius with the invitation for Peter to go to Cornelius' home in Caesarea. So he went, and preached the gospel there. Then we read this:

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord [*Acts 10:44-48*].

Peter is saying there, in effect, 'It is evident that God has received these people, and if God has received them, who am I to refuse to baptize them?' It is the Apostle Paul's argument: 'God hath received them.' Peter will receive them because the Holy Spirit has fallen upon them. Their appearance, their manner, their speaking in tongues, are some of the evidences.

There are many, many evidences of the descent of the Holy Spirit – the baptism of the Holy Spirit upon a man or woman. It is not necessarily speaking in tongues: people can be baptized with the Holy Spirit who never speak in tongues. But it is obvious that they have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, you can see the difference in them. And so the Apostle Peter argues, 'Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized?'

And then you find in Acts 11 that Peter is more or less taken to task for accepting these Gentiles. But he says to the people of Jerusalem, 'Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?' [Acts 11:17].

Now those are some of the ways in which we can be sure that God has received someone. And the Apostle is therefore saying here to the weaker brother: Do not refuse to receive that man. Do not judge that man. Do not say that he is not a Christian because he eats meat. God has received him, and if God has received him, you must do the same.

So you see the importance of this argument and its particular relevance and urgency at this present time? We are all inheritors of traditions, and this is always one of the great problems in the life of the church. If evangelical people are going to continue in a condition of separation and division and refusal to come together at the Lord's table, though they know that they are all equally the children of God and that God has equally received them – if they, because of positions they have inherited, which they have often never even thought through at all but simply stand on a tradition and say, 'It has always been like this' – if they are going to do that, then they richly deserve to go down in utter defeat and to be completely forgotten.

Romans 14:1-4

My friends, let us be careful that we do not refuse people whom God has received. May God give us all grace to examine ourselves in the light of these great principles.

Five

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Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Romans 14:1-4

The Apostle here is concerned to plead for toleration in 'matters indifferent' and for understanding and mutual trust. We have seen the danger of divisions arising between Christians over matters like these, and especially the danger of exalting them to such a position that they even divide people who should be meeting together at the Lord's table. We have also begun to consider how the Apostle deals with people who tend to fall into this danger and we saw that his first answer is this: 'God hath received him.' If God has received someone, who are you to reject that person?

So we move on now to the Apostle's second answer: 'Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.' This is a double statement. In the first part of this fourth verse, the Apostle takes up and uses an

illustration – an illustration that was quite familiar to people at that time, and that has been familiar throughout the centuries, though perhaps less so today. It is the illustration of the relationship between employers and servants.

Imagine, Paul says, that you are paying a visit to a friend, and the friend who is entertaining you has servants.

The rich had many servants in New Testament times, many of them slaves, of course, and the meal would have been prepared by some of these slaves, while others would be attending at the table, and so on. So Paul, in effect, says, 'What would you think of a visitor who took it upon himself or herself to criticize and to judge and to correct the servants of the host? You know that that sort of thing is not done. It would be very rude of you to correct another man's servant. Anybody with a sense of delicacy or of appropriateness would not dream of doing such a thing. It is an uncouth person who tells off or openly criticizes the servants of another person in that person's house.'

Now the same principle is involved in the case of parents and children. There are some people who do not hesitate to criticize other people's children, and who are even ready to do so in the presence of the parents and in the parents' own home. Some people are ready to criticize anybody or anything. Of course, we know the temptation is very great at times, but that is not the point. The question is whether under any circumstances this is right and allowable, and the Apostle lays down what has always been the universal opinion with regard to this question – that it contravenes all the canons that govern social behaviour.

So the Apostle says: 'Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?' You are criticizing these fellow Christians of yours, he says; you are doubting whether they are Christians at all. And even if you do not go that far, you are loud in your condemnation of the way in which they are behaving. Do you not realize that this is sheer presumption and you have no right at all to behave in this way?

Then the Apostle comes to his application. First, he refers to the natural realm: 'To his own master he standeth or falleth.' It is the master who has the right and the prerogative of deciding

what the conduct of his own servants should be. When you are in another man's house, you are not in charge. He is the one who decides what happens there. It does not matter what you may think about it. You may mention your complaint to him, if you like, and discuss it with him, but you must certainly not correct his servants, his employees, his children in his presence.

By using this illustration, Paul is lifting the argument to a higher level. He is saying that not only has God received us, but we belong to Him, we are His children, we are His servants. Or, to use the favourite expression of the Apostle Paul, we are 'the bondslaves of the Lord Jesus Christ'. He is our owner, our master; it is before Him that we stand or fall. It is He who has the right to tell us what to do and who has the right to judge us. It is He, and He alone, who has the right to chastise us.

So if we set ourselves up in judgment upon our fellow members of the Christian church, we are usurping the authority of God, and we are usurping, in particular, the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, because, as we are reminded so constantly, particularly in the writings of this particular Apostle, He is 'the head over all things to the church' [*Eph.* 1:22]. He is in control. He alone has the authority. He is the Lord, and judgment belongs to Him, and to Him alone. But let me remind you that this does not do away with the whole question of discipline in the church. Our Lord Himself has taught us about church discipline. He has indicated what we are to do, and how we are to do it, and it is our duty to carry out His instructions.

As we have seen, however, Paul is here dealing with things that our Lord has not laid down, and when dealing with these, he is scrupulously careful. Take, for instance, what he says in 1 Corinthians, where he is considering very vexed and difficult questions about marriage and the children of unbelievers. Paul draws a very sharp distinction. He has been laying down what he regards as the rule, and then he suddenly says, in effect, 'Now from here on I have no commandment of the Lord, but I am giving you my opinion, for what it is worth' [*1 Cor.* 7:6, 25, 40]. That is precisely the distinction that he is drawing here in Romans 14. When you have a commandment of the Lord, there

is no discussion. If you have not, then, says the Apostle, be very careful about expressing judgments, because He is the Judge. You may have your views but do not condemn one another – that is certainly not your prerogative.

So I would sum up by saying that we must always remember that we are not called upon to be spiritual detectives, still less to be spiritual judges. And it is a very real danger, a danger that our Lord Himself dealt with in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said:

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye [Matt. 7:1-5].

The great commandment is, 'Judge not, that ye be not judged.' It is a very solemn warning, and one that we should all heed.

James echoes this warning: 'My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.' If you set yourself up as a master over others, and take it upon yourself to criticize and condemn them, be careful. 'For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body' [James 3:1-2]. The warning is: Be careful what you are doing, it will come back upon you. If you set yourself up as a judge, then you will be judged according to your own standard. And remember, says James, that not one of us is in a position to set himself up as judge or as ruler or as master, deciding what other people must do.

That is precisely what the Apostle is dealing with here in Romans 14. But he does not leave it at that, you notice, he goes

beyond it. That is the first part of the fourth verse, and that is enough in and of itself. But having said, 'To his own master he standeth or falleth', Paul says, 'Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.'

There are those who think that this important statement is a reference to the final judgment. Their minds turn immediately to the first psalm: 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the council of the ungodly', and to the description of the ungodly: 'The ungodly are ... like the chaff which the wind driveth away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous' [verses 1, 4-5]. And thinking of that, and the use of the word 'stand', they come to the conclusion that Paul is saying, 'Don't you worry, you are not the masters and you are not to express your judgments. God alone is the Lord. He is the Master, and it is He who has the prerogative and the right, which He will exercise, of making a final pronouncement at the last judgment concerning these people.'

At this point Charles Hodge and Robert Haldane are in disagreement, and I am most definitely on the side of Robert Haldane and the majority of the commentators, as against Charles Hodge. Charles Hodge decides that these words in Romans 14:4 are a reference to the last judgment, and yet he himself points out something that, to me, at any rate, puts that out as a possible explanation. Here the whole emphasis is on power: 'He shall be holden up: for God' – or the Lord – 'is able' – has the power – 'to make him stand.' Nowhere is it taught in the Scriptures that it is the power of God that enables us to stand in the last judgment. It is the grace of God that does that; it is the mercy of God, the forgiveness of God. So I do not think that Paul's words here refer to the last judgment.

What, then, do these words mean? Well, again, I entirely disagree with Charles Hodge here. He rejects what I am going to say on the grounds that it is not congruous with the whole argument at this point. But it is because I think that what I am going to say is alone congruous with the argument that I think Hodge must be wrong. I think that Paul's phrase is a reply to

the brother who is weak in the faith, and is so worried about the stronger brother that, in the end, he really doubts whether the man is a Christian at all, or is fearful for the stronger brother and says, 'That's an extremely dangerous thing to do.'

You remember that the weaker brother is governed by the spirit of fear – that is why he multiplies rules and regulations. He is so anxious to hedge himself in, and to prevent himself from falling, that he gets to the point at which he is a legalist, falling back on justification by works, and denying justification by faith only. It is all because of this nervous apprehension. He says, 'To eat these meats offered to idols, or to eat meats forbidden by the law of Moses, is terribly dangerous. A man who does that is bound to fall. He will make shipwreck of the faith.' So he is terrified.

Now that is the issue with which the Apostle has already been dealing and I think that he is still dealing with it. And what he is really saying to the weaker brother is this: You are apprehensive about your brethren, and you are quite convinced that they are going to fall and perhaps finally be lost. But you are defective in your understanding of this Christian salvation. It is God who has called us, it is God who has received us, and God knows what He is doing with us. He has delivered us from being under the ceremonial law that is followed by the Jews; He has entirely delivered us from the thralldom of the pagan religions to which some of you once belonged. He has delivered us out of all that into liberty.

This liberty is, of course, the great and central argument of the Christian faith. Paul is really saying the same thing at the beginning of Galatians 5: 'Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.' He says: The Lord who has called us to liberty will maintain us in that liberty. Do not be worried, you weaker people, about that man who is strong in his understanding of the faith, and who is practising this Christian liberty, you need have no fear about him. Do not vex your souls over him. Do not lose sleep at night. Do not hold up your hands in horror. You say, 'He's going to fall, he's going to fail, he will

bring the whole church down with him.' You are nervous because you do not understand the full nature of this salvation into which you have been brought by the grace of God.

Now this is an exhortation that is greatly needed. As I have already been reminding you, there are people today who hedge others round with rules and regulations. Their motive is excellent. They say, 'You are certain to fall into temptation, you are certain to go wrong, if you don't keep these rules.' So they bring in their regulations. 'We will make them a condition of membership,' they say.

And not only that. It is interesting to notice the ways in which each of us tends to safeguard our own lives as Christians. It can be done in a mild way as well as in the more open and forcible manner of prohibiting people from the Lord's table, and so on. Examples of the milder ways to which I am referring are these: some people are quite convinced that the way to live the Christian life and to withstand the temptations of the world and the flesh and the devil, is to wear a badge or a special tie, or to sign a pledge declaring that henceforth they are not going to do this, that or the other.

The whole argument behind badges, ties, pledges, and so on, is that they strengthen you. When you are on the verge of falling, you remember that you have signed the pledge, or you look at your badge, or see the tie, and this holds you. That has often been done in the church, and at one time it was very much more popular than it is at the present time. All I am anxious to show you is that the principle behind all that is being raised here in Romans 14. Am I condemning that kind of procedure altogether? I would hesitate to go as far as that, but I certainly condemn it in principle. I suggest that it falls well below Paul's exhortation here. Indeed, I will go further and say that there is a sense in which all that does not belong to the Christian realm. That is the way in which the world, at its best, thinks.

Now if you ask me whether badges, ties and pledges are good psychology, I would have to say that they are, and that is why I am a little hesitant. Here is a question, a problem for you to work out together and discuss in your Christian circles. To what

extent are things that are good and helpful, in and of themselves, to be used in the Christian life? I will put it in a different way: Does the Christian still use means and methods that are employed by the world, or does he say, 'As a Christian, I don't need them at all; I'll have nothing to do with them because they are a sign of weakness'? It is an interesting and a somewhat difficult question, and I would hesitate to condemn these things root and branch and to say that they should never be used at all.

Paul says: Do not be worried about a man who is exercising his Christian liberty because 'he shall be holden up', he shall be upheld. Then the Apostle goes beyond that: The Lord has the power, the ability and the strength to make him stand.

This is undoubtedly the teaching of the New Testament. At the end of Ephesians 6, the Apostle, reminding these Christian people of the powers they are standing against, says, 'Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God' – the armour that He provides' [Eph. 6:10-11]. And it is in that kind of context that I would query the necessity for badges or ties or pledges. To use them is to fall to a lower level. But if you find that you are so weak that you need these aids, then I would not condemn you altogether. But it is my business as a teacher to encourage you in terms of this great exhortation and to say, 'Get out of that. Stand fast. Grow up. Put away childish things.'

Men and women need to realize that they must not have a fearful spirit. They must not be frightened, whatever is set against them – and in Ephesians 6 they are reminded very forcibly of what is set against them. They are told that they shall be 'holden up', that the Lord has power to make them stand. So there is no need for the weaker brother to be nervous and apprehensive concerning the stronger.

So Paul's words at the end of verse 4 are just another way of putting the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints – and what a doctrine it is, and how important it is for us! I would go so far as to say that, were it not for the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints, nobody would ever be saved; we should all fail completely. My dear friends, we are not depending

on badges and ties and resolutions and pledges! The world is, because it has nothing better and it has to fool itself in all sorts of ways. Many things help people. But Christians are in a different realm, and should not need those aids. They must understand the truth, and a part of the truth is that the Lord not only saves us, He keeps us, and if He did not keep us not one of us would ever be saved.

This important doctrine is taught extensively in the Scriptures. Let me give you some examples. There is something sinful about the nervous apprehensiveness of the weaker brother. Even David could see beyond that. He says, 'The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the LORD upholdeth him with his hand' [*Psa. 37:23-24*]. And again in Psalm 40: 'I waited patiently for the LORD; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings' [*Psa. 40:1-2*]. *He* did it. It is the Lord alone who can do this. David knew that he would be finished if he had to rely upon himself and these expedients and methods and devices. They really do not belong to the realm of the children of God. We must realize the tremendous and blessed truth of God's help.

There this teaching is, then, in the Old Testament. This great doctrine also runs through the New Testament. I will just select a few examples. In the first chapter of Ephesians, Paul writes that he is praying: 'That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened' – what for? – 'that ye may know what is the hope of his calling' – then, secondly – 'and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints' – and, thirdly, and here is the point – 'and what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places ...' [*Eph. 1:17-20*].

If only you knew this, Paul says, and realized it! This is the power that raised Christ from the dead. It has raised us up with Him and it will hold us and keep us on our feet. The Apostle comes back to this teaching at the end of the third chapter of Ephesians: 'Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us' [*Eph.* 3:20]. This power that works in us is what will keep us.

Then Paul writes to the Philippians: 'Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ' [*Phil.* 1:6]. This is an astounding statement. The background to it, let me remind you, is the Apostle's imprisonment in Rome. Not only is he sick, but he has been hearing rumours that he may be put to death at any moment. He is in the hands of this capricious ruler, the emperor Nero, and you never know what Nero will do next.

Paul knows that his time in this world is very limited. But he has had messages to say that there is trouble in the church at Philippi: two women, Euodias and Syntyche, are quarrelling and people are forming factions round them. And there are other troubles in the church because the Judaizers are threatening to press in upon them. Here he is, a prisoner and in bad health, with death close at hand, and he thinks about these far away churches that God has used him in establishing. He knows that the world, the flesh and the devil, and all the principalities and powers, are set against them, and yet he is able to say to the Philippians that God will finish the work that He has started in them.

So Paul is quite happy about the Christians in Philippi. On what grounds is he happy? Because they have signed pledges? Of course not! He could not feel or write like this if he were simply relying upon their pledged word, or all the various devices that people employ. He is able to write as he does for one reason only, and that is: 'He which hath begun a good work in you ...' Who had ever called them? Who had ever convicted them? Who had ever regenerated them? Who had ever made

them Christians? It is God. '*He which hath begun ...*' This is the confidence.

I know, says Paul, that He will perform His work in you, He will carry on with it, until the day of Jesus Christ, until the final judgment. I am dying, he says. I know I am going, and I know all about the difficulties, but you are not in my hands, you are not dependent upon me, you are not dependent upon yourselves. God has started this, and I know, says Paul, that He never starts a work and then leaves it incomplete.

God is eternally different from human beings. Our great characteristic is that we are always starting things and then getting tired of them. We are all like that, are we not? Start a new year, start a new season in the church – wonderful! We have such plans – but they soon fade. We lose interest, lose power. But here we are not in the human realm at all, we are in the realm of God. He sees the end from the beginning, and what He has purposed to do He certainly will do, and nothing and nobody can stop Him. Yes, says Paul to these weaker brethren in Rome. Do not worry about the stronger brother. God has started the work and will hold him. He will bring him through to the end.

But this teaching is not confined to the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Peter teaches exactly the same thing. He writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you – who are you? – who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time [1 *Pet.* 1:3–5]. Kept! By the power of God! I say again that if this were not true, we would none of us arrive at the inheritance. But the God who has begotten us again is the God who will keep us. He not only saves us, He keeps us, and will keep us to the very end.

Yes, says Jude, it is quite right. This is how Jude puts it: 'Now unto him that is able' – it is the same expression; He has the power, and the ability, and the might – 'to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen' [Jude 24–25].

But let the Lord Himself in the Gospels have the last word about this matter, and this is how He puts it: 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me' [John 10:27]. That does not just mean that He knows about us but that He knows us in the sense that He has a personal interest in us. The word 'know' is used with the meaning that it has in Amos 3:2: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth.' So our Lord says, 'My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. I and my Father are one' [John 10:27–30]. It is exactly the same teaching. The Lord has power to hold him up. And because He is able to, He will.

Many of the writers of the hymns rejoice in this great doctrine. For some amazing reason – perhaps not amazing – the hymn-book that is here before you has excluded most of the hymns I am about to quote to you. You see, people no longer believe these things, and that is why the church is as she is. Christian people are relying upon themselves and their pledges and their societies and their badges. No, no!

*Bring near Thy great salvation,
Thou Lamb for sinners slain,
Fill up the roll of Thine elect
Then take Thy power, and reign.*

Henry Alford

*Loved with everlasting love,
Led by grace that love to know:*

Liberty and Conscience

*Spirit breathing from above,
Thou hast taught me it is so!
Oh, this full, this perfect peace!
Oh, this transport all divine!
In a love which cannot cease,
I am His, and He is mine.*

*His for ever, only His:
Who the Lord and me shall part?
Ah, with what a rest of bliss
Christ can fill the loving heart!
Heaven and earth may fade and flee,
First-born light in gloom decline;
But, while God and I shall be,
I am His and He is mine.*

George Wade Robinson

*Now let my soul arise
And tread the tempter down;
My Captain leads me forth
To conquest and a crown.
A feeble saint shall win the day,
Though death and hell obstruct the way.*

Isaac Watts

The saint is feeble, but he is relying upon this all-powerful Captain. Toplady, too, is able to put it in his own way:

*The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen,
And never was forfeited yet.
Things future, nor things that are now,
Nor all things below or above,
Can make Him His purpose forego,
Or sever my soul from His love.*

Augustus M. Toplady

Do not worry, says Paul to these weak Christians in Rome. Do not be apprehensive. Do not say, 'He is certain to fall and to fail.' Try to understand this great salvation more thoroughly. You seem to think that it is a salvation into which someone can enter today and go out tomorrow, that it is a man coming out to the penitent form and being saved – regenerated today, but lost, unregenerate tomorrow, and back and forth and perhaps lost in the end. Nonsense! To think like that is not to know how God works. Do not be nervous, 'He shall be holden up.' The One who has brought him into the liberty will keep him in the liberty.

*Stand then in His great might,
With all His strength endued;
And take, to arm you for the fight,*

– not the means and methods of the world, but:

The panoply of God.

Charles Wesley

Six

★

Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.

Romans 14:1-6

In our consideration of 'matters indifferent', we have now come to the fifth and sixth verses of Romans 14. Let me remind you that in these opening verses, Paul has used the example of eating meats, and he has shown what our attitude must be. Now he comes, in verse 5, to a second example: 'One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike.'

It is interesting to ask: What is the connection between the two illustrations? And there is no doubt that an adequate explanation for Paul's use of the two examples is that they were both problems in the church at Rome at that time. They were also problems in other churches, as we can see from the Epistles to the Galatians and to the Colossians. So it may be that Paul

is just taking up what he knows to be a difficulty in the churches.

But I think there is also a further and more intimate connection between these two illustrations. It is that, in connection with the observation of days and festivals, there were generally instructions under the Levitical ceremonial law with regard to foods that should be eaten on such occasions. The people were told that on these special days they were not to eat certain foods that were allowed on other days. So it is quite likely that the mention of foods leads Paul on quite naturally to the question of days. I imagine that both these reasons were operating in Paul's mind.

It is important that we should be clear in our minds as to just what the Apostle is referring to when he says: 'One man esteemeth one day above another: another man esteemeth every day alike.' The first question that arises is this: Is he writing about the question of Sabbath observance? Many have assumed that he is, and that some were not as punctilious as others in this matter.

Now I think we must say at once that here Paul is not referring to the question of observing the Sabbath. And I say this because this subject is not a matter of indifference but a matter of law. Sabbath observance is a part of the moral law in contradistinction to the ceremonial law. The moral law, the Ten Commandments in particular, has been laid down for all time. But the ceremonial law was given only for the time being and applied only to the Jews in the Old Testament era.

Not only was there a special ceremonial law, but there were other laws, more general in character, that the Jews as a nation had to observe. Now the ceremonial law and the more general political law were abrogated by the coming of our Lord and His completed work. But the moral law has never been abrogated, and is to be perpetually observed.

So we must never discuss the keeping of the moral law. It is not to be discussed: it is to be kept; it is to be obeyed; it is to be observed. So I say again that as Sabbath observance is a part of the moral law, it cannot be the matter that the Apostle is dealing with here.

Liberty and Conscience

Not only that, the question of keeping the Sabbath day holy is even anterior to the law. At the beginning of the second chapter of Genesis, we read,

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made [*Gen.* 1:2–3].

Now that is something of which we are reminded in several places in the Old Testament and it is important that we should bear it in mind. Indeed, most of the references to the keeping of the Sabbath remind us of those words in Genesis 2:2–3. The law, the Ten Commandments – the law as given through Moses – did not originate the keeping of the Sabbath; it only confirmed it. And unlike the ceremonial law, the moral law does not only apply to the Jews but is obligatory upon the whole of human-kind.

You may remember that in the second chapter of this Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle makes the universality of the moral law very plain and clear when he says that though the Gentiles do not have the law in the external objective manner in which the Jews have it, this same law is ‘written in their hearts’ [*Rom.* 2:15]. When God gave the moral law through Moses, He put in an external form what is already written in the hearts of the entire human race. So I say again that the Apostle is not dealing here with the question of Sabbath observance.

But then there is a second question, and that is whether the Apostle is concerned here with the question of which day should be observed as the Sabbath. Should it be observed on the seventh day or on the first day of the week? We must just glance at this matter, because some people in their interpretation of Romans 14:5 have got into trouble at this point.

Now it is quite clear from the Scriptures that in the first century a change took place in the early church with regard to this very matter. For instance, we read these words in Acts 20: 'And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight' [verse 7]. That is a clear indication, is it not, that it was the custom of the members of the early church to meet together, not on the seventh day, but on the first day, to have what we would call a Communion service and to remind themselves of the death and resurrection of our Lord.

There is similar evidence in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where Paul writes: 'Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come' [1 Cor. 16:1-2].

There is similar evidence in the book of Revelation. In chapter 1, the Apostle John tells us this: 'I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet ...' [Rev. 1:9-10]. In other words, the great revelation that was given to the Apostle John was given to him on the Lord's day, which is the first day of the week.

Evidence has also come down to us from contemporary non-biblical documents and this shows quite plainly that for the first three centuries some Christians still went on observing the seventh day, while others observed the first day, and others observed both days. The Seventh Day Adventists say that the change to the first day was made in the fourth century by a pope. That, of course, is not true historically. What is true, however, is that the observance of the first day of the week was made obligatory by a pope, and by the emperor Constantine, in the fourth century. But that is not when it began, that is

only the regularizing of the custom. For the first three centuries there was liberty concerning this subject.

So how do we come to a decision? Well, it seems to me that the only way to argue is to ask: Why did the early Christians meet together on the first day of the week? Now godly Christian people, especially those who were Jews and had been brought up in the Jewish tradition, would surely never have taken it upon themselves to make this change in an arbitrary manner – they would not have dared. Their Lord Himself had taught them that he had not come to destroy the law or the prophets, and that not one jot or tittle should be lost from the law until all had been fulfilled. They were the last people in the world to make such a change of their own volition.

In other words, it seems perfectly clear to me that the first Christians only changed to the first day of the week because they had received some supernatural illumination, some guidance. But whatever the case, the change is perfectly natural. What is more natural than that they should have decided that the great day for them to celebrate should be the first day of the week, the day when our Lord had risen from the dead?

There is an obvious parallel: in the first creation, on the seventh day, when God had completed His work, He rested. Now our Lord had completed the work, as it were, of the new creation. He had introduced a new start, this 'new creation', and His resurrection was the sign of His completion of that work. So the first day of the week, the day on which our Lord rose from the dead, is the day that corresponds to the seventh day in the first creation. This seem to me to be a more than sufficient reason for saying that the day for Christians to observe as their holy day should be the first day of the week, the Lord's day. And I have no doubt whatsoever that that was the reason why this change was immediately made by the early church.

The only conceivable reason for Paul to have been discussing the observance of the Sabbath day would have been if people in the church at Rome had been quarrelling about it, either insisting that it must be the seventh, or that it must be the

first, day of the week. But as I say, the practice of the church was to allow both. So it is clear that here Paul is not dealing with the question of when to observe the Sabbath. All we can be absolutely certain of is that this is not a matter on which the church should divide.

Some churches have divided on this issue. There was a sect – I believe it is still in existence in the United States of America – formed of people who broke away from the Baptists on this one matter and started a new denomination – Seventh Day Baptists. It was not enough to be Baptists, even, you had to be Seventh Day Baptists.

Whatever view you may take of the Seventh Day Adventists, it can certainly be stated that to name a division of the church in terms of this one issue is to contravene the Apostle's instruction at this point. If that is the name you give to your church, if you make it so important that you put it in your heading, as it were, then you are going against the clear teaching of the Scriptures.

So I say again that the Apostle is not dealing with the question of Sabbath observance, or the question of which day should be observed as the Sabbath. After all, what the commandment tells us to do is to keep one day a week as a holy day, and if we have reasons for thinking that our Lord Himself instituted the change from the seventh day to the first, the important point is that we should keep that day. It is not a grievous sin to observe the seventh day or the first day. But it is a grievous sin to make a person's view on this matter the test of whether or not that person is a Christian.

One further principle comes out here that is of some value to us. It is, I think, that this teaching has something to tell us about what we may call 'extreme Sabbatarianism'. There are people who, in their observance of the Sabbath, whether it be the seventh day or the first day, have gone to extremes beyond anything that is taught in the Scriptures. Our Lord had to reprimand the Pharisees and scribes more than once on this issue and he told them: 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath' [*Mark 2:27*]. Many people have

forgotten that: over-zealous and strict and rigorous Sabbatarians have often made the Sabbath a burden and a yoke on the shoulders of Christian people.

Let me give you an example. I remember in my youth hearing that if any members of the Presbyterian Church of Wales walked on the promenade at Aberystwyth on a Sunday, they would be disciplined before their church. Now this has often been regarded, of course, as nothing but extreme Puritanism, but I was interested to discover, in my reading, that there was a fourteenth-century bishop of a place called Aviron, who thought that it was a grievous sin to walk more than a few yards on a Sunday! I tell you this in order that you may reply to people who just try to dismiss these things as Puritanism. These days, every stipulation that people do not like is called Puritanism. Puritanism is regarded as that which is against everything, as a negative, narrow and prohibitive outlook. But exactly the same attitude may be seen in the Middle Ages and in the Roman Catholic Church.

The principle is that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day that we set apart in order that we may give ourselves to the worship of God and to a knowledge of Him. I think it is important that we should just glance at this in passing. There are errors, it seems to me, on both sides with regard to this matter. There are some who make too much of it and some who make too little. There are some, as I said, who make it a real burden, so that it becomes a problem. It was never meant to be like that. It was meant to help us. The Sabbath was made to give us an opportunity to consider the state of our souls, and an opportunity to meet together in worship and praise. If that is your great desire in your observance of the Sabbath, you are in the right position. But if it is a matter of law to you, and a constant source of trouble, you are not following our Lord's own teaching, nor the teaching of the Apostle Paul here.

And then there are people who go into error on the other side. For example, I am told that it is the custom in evangelical circles for people to write their family letters on Sunday

afternoons. That is breaking the Sabbath. You can write your letters some other day. You do not have to go to your office or to your shop or to your farm or whatever it may be on the Sabbath: this is recognized by the law of the land. Why? In order that you may give yourself to the things of God. So you do not write family letters, even, because that means you are taking up time with your own affairs when you should be giving that time to the Lord.

Life is so full and so busy and people are always in a rush and complaining of lack of time. So take advantage of the day that God has ordained for you to give it to Him. Do not spend so much time in worrying about details – whether you should be doing this or that – it is your total attitude to the day that matters. 'The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.'

You may regard all that as somewhat of a digression, but as so many have wrongly interpreted these verses as a reference to the Sabbath, I had to deal with this question, and it is a convenient point at which to say these things that are, I trust, of value to all of us.

So if the Apostle is not thinking of the Sabbath, then what is he thinking of? I think that Galatians 4 and Colossians 2 cast considerable light on this whole matter. Paul says in Galatians 4:10: 'Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years.' In Colossians 2:16, he is still more specific: 'Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days.' When people have taken the statement in Romans 14 and have deduced from it that Paul is referring to the question of the Sabbath, quoting Colossians 2:16 as a similar passage, they have failed to notice that in Colossians Paul talks of 'Sabbath *days*'.

There can be no question at all as to Paul's meaning. The Jews had made many sabbaths for themselves. If you read the books of Leviticus and Numbers, you will find that in the ceremonial law certain special days and seasons were to be kept as holy days, as feasts and festivals. But then over the centuries further days had been added by the Jews themselves. The

prophet Zechariah takes up this very matter. He writes, 'And the word of the LORD of hosts came unto me, saying, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts; therefore love the truth and peace' [Zech. 8:18-19].

Now I will give you some homework! Try to find out, if you can, from the Old Testament, when the fast of the fourth month, and the fifth month, and the seventh month, and the tenth month, were introduced. They are not a part of the ceremonial law, but because of various events that had happened in their history, successes, victories in battle, and so on, the Israelites themselves had appointed some further days as feast days, and others as fast days. And Zechariah is prophesying that when the great gospel is come, these days of fasting will be turned into days of feasting and rejoicing. It is just what the Apostle is saying here. The ceremonial law was temporary, and its regulations have been set aside.

But now the 'Sabbath days' came in in this way. The Jewish religious authorities themselves decided that when a certain great festival was coming, it would be good if the people prepared for it. So they appointed a 'sabbath', the day before the festival, as a means of preparation. So quite literally, from their standpoint, they did have sabbath 'days'; not only the seventh day of every week, but other holy days that they themselves had introduced in order that their observance of the fast or the festival might be more effective.

Now that is what the Apostle is dealing with here when he writes, 'One man esteemeth one day above another' – not the Sabbath as such, but certain fast days, certain feast days, certain festival days, that had now become a part of the life of the Jews. And, at the same time, similar observances were being carried out by the devotees of the pagan mystery religions.

The celebration of special 'holy days' is something that the church knows about even today. In some sections of the church saints' days are observed – All Saints' Day on 1 November, and many others. Luther nailed up his 95 Theses in Wittenberg

because he knew that on that All Saints' Day there would be a gathering in that town.

Not only that, fast days have often been appointed in the church. There are people today who observe Friday in a special way by eating fish rather than meat. The whole notion of Lent may also be included here. And you may even include the observance of Christmas day, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The Puritans did not observe any one of these days because to them these observances were a part of Roman Catholicism. They wanted to do away with the mass, so, to be certain and consistent, they did away with 'Christ-mass'.

It is certainly true that there are no regulations in the Scriptures about observing these days. But it is not my purpose at the moment to consider whether it was ever right to introduce these customs. All I am saying is that these days, times and seasons exist, and some people think it is important to observe them while others think they are unimportant.

So as the Apostle is dealing with this matter, and as it is clearly something about which we must have an opinion, let me ask you: Do you believe in observing Christmas day – in a religious sense? It is a public holiday but we are talking about the religious observance. And what about Good Friday and Easter Sunday? Were the Puritans right? Or were they wrong? What should we do about these days?

Well, I think we shall find that the Apostle continues to deal with this matter in exactly the same way as he dealt with the question of eating meats or only eating herbs. His ruling, as we shall see, is that the danger is always to go to extremes on these matters. Some people feel that these days are essential and if you do not observe them you are sinning. Then others go to the other extreme and regard it almost as sinful to observe them.

Let me give you a personal illustration. I have been taken to task more than once for having a service on Christmas morning, the argument being that this day is a human creation. There is nothing special about it and we cannot even be sure of the exact date of the birth of our Lord. Similarly, I have been told I should not observe Good Friday or Easter Sunday or Whit Sunday. All

days are equal and I should therefore preach in exactly the same way on all days, and not make these distinctions.

Now I think, again, that that is an extreme view because you can use these occasions to preach the gospel. Without saying they are essential, and without making a religious festival out of them, we can take advantage of them and use them as an opportunity for preaching the gospel. As they are public holidays, why not preach the gospel on them? And it is good that at times we should specially remind ourselves of the birth of our Lord, of His crucifixion and His resurrection. These days can, therefore, be used for edification and to the glory of God.

In other words, we come back again to the principle that the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So I would say that people at both extremes are wrong – those who almost worship the days and regard them as essential, and those who are violently opposed, and think they accrue extra merit if they refuse to observe these days. Both, it seems to me, are adopting a legalistic attitude.

And so let us now see how the Apostle actually deals with this issue. What is his ruling? First, he tells us: 'Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.' These words are most important, so let us see how Paul introduces them. He says, 'One man esteemeth one day above another.' This word 'esteemeth' is interesting. It means to judge, and is the word that is used in the fourth verse: 'Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?' In verse 5, Paul is not using 'judge' in the sense of condemnation, but in the sense of thinking about a subject and arriving at a conclusion or making an estimate.

So Paul says that one man, having thought about it, puts one day above another. He regards certain days – feast days or fast days – as sabbaths, as special and exceptional. Then, 'another esteemeth every day alike', which means that he subjects every day to a moral scrutiny and comes to the conclusion that these special days no longer exist. That is the man who corresponds to the man who has the liberty to eat meats. He has worked out his faith, he has such an understanding of the faith, that he now sees that these special arrangements were all a part of the

ceremonial law that has come to an end. So he refuses to say that one day is more special than another. But we exclude the Sabbath here, you remember, we are thinking about these other types of days.

Now it is again interesting to observe that Paul does not give us his own opinion. He simply says: 'Let every man be fully persuaded' – convinced – 'in his own mind.' This is his ruling up to this point, so we must follow him and not try to anticipate him but give value to every statement that he makes. Now by these words Paul means that we must think these things through carefully and thoroughly. We must not act mechanically in this matter, nor must we act ignorantly. I will go further: we must not act on the verdict of somebody else, but must determine this issue for ourselves.

We are once more faced with the whole matter of conforming thoughtlessly to a pattern. This often happens as people come into the Christian life, and generally it is through no fault of their own. When they become Christians, a whole pattern is imposed upon them, and they just accept it. It is not, perhaps, until years later, when they meet somebody who queries what they are doing, that they realize they cannot give an explanation. But the Apostle tells us that we must not act without thinking. We must know and understand exactly what we are doing, and must be able to give reasons for our actions. Each Christian must be 'fully persuaded in his own mind'.

The danger is that, having had a pattern imposed upon you, you then stand and fight for this pattern. You cannot offer reasons, so you do nothing but shout while the other person shouts on the other side. Then you both lose your tempers and you end up doing much more harm than good. That is what happens, is it not? Now, says Paul, it must not be like that. It is of no value at all just to say, 'I don't believe in this', or, 'I do believe in doing that.' Each Christian must be 'fully persuaded in his own mind.'

In other words, you must study the Scriptures. You must say, 'It's not a question of what I think or of what people have told

Liberty and Conscience

me. I'm not a slave. I'm no longer under law. I've been given understanding, the Holy Spirit is here, and I have the Scriptures.' So you take this problem and you work it out in terms of the Scriptures until you understand what your position is. Then you are able to discuss it with others, and produce your reasons. So we can put it like this: 'Let every man act according to his own conscience in these matters.'

Let me underline this principle because it is most important. The clear teaching of the Scripture is that each of us must always obey our conscience – always. At the end of this chapter, the Apostle takes that up and makes it abundantly plain and clear, but it is already implicit here. Being 'fully persuaded' in your own mind means that you always act according to your conscience and never against it. It does not matter how plausible other people may be, and however great the appeal may be to you, if you do not understand their point of view and you cannot conscientiously do it, do not do it. Do not be persuaded in that wrong way. Do not be dragooned; do not be forced. Understand what you are doing.

Now I must add something to that: we must always realize that the conscience needs to be educated and enlightened. The conscience can actually be wrong. Nevertheless, I still say that you must never disobey it. The Apostle Paul said to King Agrippa, 'I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth' [Acts 26:9]. Before his conversion, he had thought he was pleasing God by persecuting Christians. At that time he had acted according to his conscience.

The conscience is not infallible, and that is where this 'fully persuaded' is so important. You do not, of necessity, remain perpetually in the same position. The weaker brother must be open to teaching, he must be open to enlightenment, he must be open to instruction. If he just stands back on his hind legs, as we say, and announces, 'I insist on observing these days. Say what you like, I believe this; this is where I stand', if he does that, he is contravening the Apostle's teaching. He must be ready to listen.

We must never be bigots. Bigotry is always bad and it is generally caused by the spirit of fear. The Apostle condemns the unreasonable attitude that says, 'I stand here because this is where I've always stood, and my people have always stood before me, and I am not prepared to listen.' That is where division and trouble and quarrelling come in. Act on your conscience until it is demonstrated to you clearly from the Scriptures that you have been wrong; then act equally conscientiously in the other way. As long as he is doing it out of a good conscience, the man who observes these special days should continue to do so. Do not condemn him, but bear with him, as you do with the man who only eats herbs.

So the first ruling of the Apostle is that you should know exactly why you are acting as you are. You should have your reasons and be able to show them from the Scriptures. It is your business to do this. You must not be a lazy Christian – you must not take your opinions ready-made; you must not be a sort of automaton, like an engine on the rails that can go no other way. No, you are an adult, you are born again, you are given an understanding and you have the Spirit. So be fully persuaded in your own mind.

Seven

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One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. 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. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.

Romans 14:5-9

Paul's first answer to the problem of 'matters indifferent' or things that are inessential, you remember, was this: 'Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.' Do not be mechanical over these matters, and do not allow people to impose forms upon you. Have reasons for what you are doing, and have an intelligent understanding. Listen to your conscience – recognize that it needs to be enlightened but always listen to it and never act against it.

Paul also has a second answer, which is to be found in the sixth verse: 'He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.'

Now in other translations, the words, 'He that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it', are not included. The reason for that is that some of the best manuscripts do not include that negative. This does not make any difference, of course, to the meaning; it is purely a question of textual criticism. As Christians, we must recognize textual criticism, which is very different from higher criticism. We do not recognize higher criticism because it is simply the introduction of man's mind and opinion and philosophy; man deciding whether a thing should or should not be there according to whether or not he agrees with it. But textual criticism is another matter. We do know that there were many early texts of the New Testament. Though some translations do not contain this negative statement, however, the meaning is exactly the same.

The important thing to grasp is the principle that the Apostle is putting before us here, and it is this: we must not only be clear in our own minds and know what we are doing, but we must also understand that there is a higher motive for toleration and understanding in this matter, and that is the relationship of both these subjects to the Lord.

Again, the Apostle is raising this issue up to the highest level. The spirit in which we decide one way or the other is, in a sense, even more important than the decision itself. So Paul is saying here that we must not decide this solely in intellectual terms. We start with that but do not stop with it. We must not come to a decision coldly and objectively. Now that is the old danger again and we always need to be reminded of it. The devil always tempts us to become academic or theoretical. This is one of the greatest dangers confronting any Christian, but particularly those who are more intelligent. It applies to all areas of our lives, including our study of theology. We can be interested in a doctrine in a purely theoretical manner and almost forget that we are dealing with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and these great doctrines of salvation. We can be handling them as if we were studying science or any other secular subject – and that is a terrible thing. We must never forget the spirit.

So when considering these matters that are indifferent, we must think them out, if you like, discuss them together, but never in a detached, theoretical or cold manner. The spirit is all-important. Paul says, in effect, 'Above everything else, your controlling consideration must be that you are doing everything for the glory of the Lord and with a desire to please Him.' You notice how Paul keeps on repeating this point. 'He that regardeth the day regardeth it unto the Lord.' And even if the negative is left out, there is still the repetition: 'He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.' Paul repeats these words in order to emphasize them and to bring his point out very, very clearly.

Now take the important word 'regard': 'He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord.' It is very similar to the word 'esteemeth' in verse 5. It means 'thinking about', 'understanding', it refers to your way of thinking and the results of your way of thinking. It is the word that the Apostle used in verses 5 and 6 of the eighth chapter: 'They that are after the flesh do *mind* the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.' So Paul says that though there are some people who regard certain days as being more important, while others do not, the point is that in both cases they are governed by the consideration that they belong to the Lord and they are concerned about pleasing Him and doing what is right in His sight.

The Apostle makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 10:31: 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.' That is the principle. So here in Romans 14, Paul is bringing out his ultimate and most important argument. We must not be primarily concerned about our own liberty. We do have liberty, a liberty 'wherewith Christ hath set us free' [*Gal.* 5:1], and this is most important. But as you notice, from the beginning of this chapter, Paul has not been coming down on one side or the other, and here he is telling us not to be concerned only about our liberty or our views or our

arguments, but primarily and above all to be concerned with the glory of the Lord.

If, therefore, you are talking with a man who regards a day as special, then look to see if he regards it 'unto the Lord', or is merely someone who is opinionated. If you see clearly that the man is really concerned about glorifying the Lord, and honouring Him, and is demonstrating what it means to be a Christian, then, says Paul, you must be very careful how you handle him. Though you do not agree with him, you must recognize the rightness of his motive, and recognize that he is not just asserting himself and his own opinions and ideas. As long as both of you are concerned with God's glory rather than with yourselves and your own liberty and ideas, then you must get on together. In this way you will learn to help one another and to discuss the matter together in a Christian way in order to arrive at a common opinion.

And then Paul elaborates this further by bringing the argument back again to this question of meats. It is the same point. 'He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks.' In other words, here is a man who is eating meat that has been offered to idols, but as a Christian he now sees that there is nothing in this, that the idols are not gods. When he realizes that there is nothing there at all and that the 'gods' are purely a figment of man's imagination, this man in his liberty eats these meats. But, says Paul, addressing the weaker brother at this point, do not condemn him, but watch him and see what he does. Does he give God thanks for this meat? If he does, you have very good presumptive evidence that he is eating to the glory of God and that his motive, again, is to show the liberty wherewith Christ has set him free. He is giving proof of that, says Paul, because he is giving God thanks for this meat that he is eating. If that were not his motive, he would not thank God for the food. Pay very close attention to this, therefore, and let it determine your judgment concerning this man.

Then Paul takes up the man who is weaker in the faith. Paul says, 'He that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks', and shows that the same principle applies. Some

people have misunderstood this verse and think the Apostle means that the weaker brother gives God thanks for the fact that he does not eat meat. They suggest that the weaker brother is saying, 'I thank God that I'm not like that other fellow who is eating those meats prohibited to Jews', or, 'I thank God that I'm not like that other man who is eating meat that has been offered to idols.' Of course, people are capable of thinking like that. But that interpretation is quite wrong here. It is foreign to the whole argument of this passage, and, in any case, it would be sheer pharisaism. No, Paul means that this man gives God thanks for the vegetables that he eats.

So there is an exact parallel. Here are two Christians in the same church disagreeing about these matters. But you notice the things that are common to them. They are both concerned with showing the glory of the Lord; they are both anxious to behave as Christians; they are both eating 'to the Lord', for the Lord's sake; and they are both giving God thanks – one for meat, one for vegetables.

So the Apostle's argument is that no one must divide on whether or not to eat meat. The stronger brother must not despise the weaker and the weaker must not judge the stronger because the way in which we do these things is more important than the thing itself, and that is what we must look for. We must be concerned with our brother's motive and his reason for acting as he does. Much more important than the question of meat and vegetables is the fact that both men are concerned to serve the same Lord, the same Master. They are both equally conscious of the fact that God is the giver of every good and every perfect gift and all food comes ultimately from Him.

That is just another way of saying that, as we have seen, this question of eating or not eating meat belongs to the category of 'matters indifferent'. It is not an issue that is essential for salvation. If it were, both parties could not possibly be eating to the glory of the Lord and giving Him thanks. But, by showing that they do this, Paul is bringing in a further argument. He says: Can you not see that this problem cannot be as important as you are tending to regard it? The really big issue is loyalty to

the Lord, concern about keeping His commandments, concern about manifesting His glory and His praise, and a spirit that in humility and thankfulness offers praise to Him. Hold on to that, says Paul, and see therefore that you have been exaggerating the importance of these meats and days.

Now that is the argument up to the end of the sixth verse, but the Apostle has here said something that he feels is so important that he has to emphasize it, and elaborate upon it. And he does this because his words in verses 1 to 6 are part of a larger principle. And in verses 7 to 9 he goes on to open out this bigger truth. The word, 'For', of course, reminds us at once that Paul's words in verses 7 to 9 follow on from what he has just been saying.

Paul's big point in verse 6 is that herbs and meat are eaten 'unto the Lord'. But this principle is also true about the whole of our lives: 'For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. 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.'

You see what Paul is doing? He has started with particulars, but now he rises from that level and is going to show that this is true in the general realm as well. And if it is therefore true in general, then how much more must it, of necessity, be true in the realm of the particular. So he is not forsaking his argument, he is just underlining it, as it were, and showing why this principle that he has been teaching in verses 5 and 6 must of necessity be the truth.

And in this way Paul is introducing us to one of the most important things we can ever learn as Christian people. Let us take the seventh verse first; here we have a negative statement: 'None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself', which might be translated: 'Not one of us lives to himself, and not one of us, when he dies, dies to himself.'

Here again, people tend to go astray in their interpretation. Some think that Paul is merely making a general statement of the truth that anything that any one of us does in this life is bound to affect other people. They say that here we are given the principle of the solidarity of the human race – the fact that

no one can act in isolation, and we cannot divorce ourselves from the rest of humanity or from society. It is no use my going off into a corner and saying, 'This is what I want to do and this is what I believe I should do, and after all it doesn't concern anybody else.'

But that is not the point the Apostle is concerned to make. I can easily prove that to you because when we come to the positive aspect of the same statement in the next verse, he says that all we do is to be seen in terms of 'living unto the Lord', that we do not live to ourselves because we live to the Lord. So in verse 7, he is not simply making a general statement about our relationship with other people, because that has nothing to do with his purpose in this passage. Paul's purpose is to enlarge upon his teaching in verse 6, which is about our relationship to the Lord. That is the context of the negative statement in verse 7.

In addition to that, the Apostle is not dealing here with the whole of humanity. He is not writing about unbelievers at all. From the very beginning of the first verse, the discussion has been only about Christian people. Non-Christians are not concerned about these points, they are not interested, and do not know what the Apostle is talking about. So it is not a general statement, though, of course, incidentally, the universal statement is true.

Nor does Paul just mean that all human life and death are in the hands of the Lord, as if he were saying, 'Whether you like it or not, we are all in God's hands.' It does not mean that because, again, that statement is true of all people, unbelievers as well as believers, whereas the Apostle is only concerned here to deal with believers, among whom alone this problem arises.

No, Paul's words, 'None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself', mean that no Christian, not one of us, should serve his own ends in life, not one of us should assert his own will or live according to his own understanding, or his own inclination. The Christian is always governed by his relationship to the Lord. So we can put it like this: No Christian lives or dies for his own benefit or for his own pleasure.

Now this is fundamental to Christian living. The trouble with us, so often, is that we get so immersed in details that we forget the biggest principle of all, which is that we are to live entirely to His glory and to His praise, not for ourselves, and that this must govern the whole of our life. Obviously that is one of the basic differences between the Christian and the non-Christian. Every other person, all non-Christians, are living to please themselves, and they live according to their own ideas and theories. But the first thing that is true of Christians is that they cease to do that; they now live to the Lord.

And Paul points out that this principle is to govern our dying also. We are, perhaps, even more likely to forget this second aspect than the first. Christians are prepared to say, 'Of course, my life should be in the hands of God.' But what about our dying? I am sure that many of us do not often think about that. As Christians, we should not want to decide when we die, or how we die, or where we die. The Christian says, 'None of us dieth to himself': he is not in control.

That is why, to a Christian, suicide should always be unthinkable. It is not so much that the thing itself is wrong, as that it means that the Christian himself is taking the decision. The suicide is a man who decides to put an end to his life. But Paul is saying here that whatever a Christian's feelings may be, he does not decide about his death. Moreover, he should not even really be concerned about it – it goes as far as that.

The Apostle says this selfsame thing, perhaps in a slightly fuller manner, in 2 Corinthians 5. At the end of chapter 4, he has been describing the terrible trials and tribulations through which he is passing, and he says:

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Then at the beginning of chapter 5, the Apostle says:

For we know – *we know as Christians* – that if our earthly house of this tabernacle – *body* – were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven [2 Cor. 4:17–5:2].

Christians know that they are going to be glorified, that their very bodies will be glorified, and this, to them, is ‘the blessed hope’. They look forward to this grand regeneration, this great age that is coming, when, as Paul puts it at the end of Philippians chapter 3, Christ shall come, this great Saviour, ‘Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able, even to subdue all things unto himself’ [Phil. 3:21]. So, says Paul in 2 Corinthians 5, ‘earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked’ [verses 2–3].

Then Paul continues: ‘For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened’ – now watch! – ‘not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life’ [verse 4]. And by that Paul means that a Christian never says, ‘I wish I were dead!’ People often say that, do they not, though, of course, they do not mean it. They are in trouble and things are going wrong, so they say, ‘I wish I could get out of it all!’ They want to be free of their troubles and cares and problems. But, says the Apostle here, a Christian should never speak like that. It is a sort of defeatism, sheer selfishness. It is despair and hopelessness and a lack of faith in the Lord.

But we must even go beyond that and say that even our ‘earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven’, must not trap us or entice us into desiring to be dead and to be there. There is all the difference in the world between looking forward to this as the great hope that is set

before us, something that we know is going to happen to us, between that, and desiring to get it at once. That is what we must not do.

Let me tell you something that I think will help to make this point clear. A story is told of the visit of George Whitefield to the great family of the Tennents in America. When Whitefield met old William Tennent, the father of those brilliant sons, Gilbert, and William Jnr, and others, they had a most happy time of Christian fellowship together. Whitefield was a very young man at that time, only about twenty-five years old, but he was a highly spiritual, heavenly-minded young man, who experienced marvellous manifestations of the love of God, and an unusual communion with God. Further, he was preaching hard and probably working beyond his own strength, but he was enjoying it, even revelling in it.

One day, when the Tennents and Whitefield were having a meal together, Whitefield, in a kind of ecstasy, told the company that he wished that he could go immediately and be with the Lord, that that was his greatest desire. Now there is an aspect of that which is good and right and other saints have expressed the same desire. Whitefield knew his Lord, he knew what it was like to be bathed with the love of God, and that frequently. All fear of death or the grave had long since gone. The heavenly realm was so real to him that he longed to go there.

But old William gave Whitefield a very sharp rebuke. 'Young man,' he said, 'your business is to preach the gospel and not to be concerned as to when you are going to die. You should not even be interested in it. You should just go on serving the Lord, preaching this glorious gospel, enjoying this privilege, and you should leave this other question entirely to Him. What right have you to say, "I wish I were there!"? How do you know what He wants you to do? What right have you to insinuate your own desires into the mind and the thinking of the Lord?'

And William Tennent was undoubtedly right. That is what Paul is saying here: 'Not one of us lives to himself, not one of us dies to himself.' We should not be interested in our death. It

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should be left entirely in the hands of the Lord. No Christian should ever desire to end his life.

Now I am not only thinking of suicide here. I am taking Paul's words, 'not for that we would be unclothed' in a more general sense. Of course, we all know, do we not, what it is like to feel discouraged, if we are overtired or things are difficult? The psalmist puts it in this way: 'Oh that I had wings like a dove!' [Psa. 55:6]. Oh, that I could get out of it all. But we must never say that sort of thing, either in terms of moving somewhere else in this world, or of moving out of the world altogether.

I repeat that such a desire is very natural, and, of course, there is an aspect of this longing that is glorious and wonderful. It means that we know where we are going and have no fears and look forward to being with the Lord. But Christians must not desire to end their lives.

But at the same time, we must also always be ready to die whenever it is His will. It is entirely in His hands. We do not decide it in the matter of desiring to go and we do not decide it in the matter of desiring not to go. Now we tend to neglect this, but it is the truly Christian position, and it solves so many of our problems, does it not? Our death is His decision.

It may be that He will call you to a martyr's death. You must not shrink from it. You must not deny the gospel in order to save your life. If that is His will and His decision for you, do not hold back. This is the balance of the other attitude – you must not desire to go, but you must not shrink from going. He knows His plan for you; He knows how He will glorify Himself through you. You may have a long, lingering death; you may die suddenly. To the Christian it should not matter.

We often talk lightly and loosely about our death, do we not? We say, 'I hope that when my time comes I die suddenly.' You should not say that. Do not let the fear of the physical enter into this at all. This is not for you to decide, it is for Him.

*My times are in Thy hands,
My God, I wish them there.*

William Freeman Lloyd

Or, as Richard Baxter puts it so perfectly and so gloriously:

*Lord, it belongs not to my care
Whether I die or live.
– ‘None of us liveth to himself,
and no man dieth to himself’ –
To love and serve Thee is my share;
And this Thy grace must give.*

*If life be long, I will be glad
That I may long obey;
If short, yet why should I be sad
To soar to endless day!*

*Christ leads me through no darker rooms
Than He went through before;
He that into God’s kingdom comes
Must enter by this door.*

*Come, Lord, when grace hath made me meet
Thy blessed face to see;
For if Thy work on earth be sweet,
What will Thy glory be!*

*Then shall I end my sad complaints
And weary, sinful days,
And join with the triumphant saints
That sing Jehovah’s praise.*

*My knowledge of that life is small;
The eye of faith is dim;
But ’tis enough that Christ knows all,
And I shall be with Him.*

Richard Baxter

Baxter knows about the ‘weary, sinful days’, and the ‘complaints’,

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but still, he does not, because of that, say, 'I wish I were dead! Oh, that I could get out of it all.' No, no:

*It belongs not to my care
Whether I die or live.*

And you find this balance right through the hymn. 'If life be long' – well, I still have more opportunity for obeying; if short, I am not complaining, quite the reverse – it means that I should 'soar to endless day' and be with Him.

So in Romans 14:7, Paul condenses all this as a negative, and then in the eighth verse the same thought is given positively. The Apostle uses these two methods, negative and positive, for emphasis, because he wants to drive home the principle he is putting forward.

Christians are entirely in the hands of the Lord in every respect – not only about eating meat or vegetables, not only about observing or not observing days, but in everything. This is the principle that governs the whole of their lives.

Paul makes this same point in 1 Corinthians 9. He is talking about preaching to Jews and to Gentiles and he says,

For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ)' [1 Cor. 9:19–21]. That is the point – we are 'under the law to Christ'. Whatever we do, living or dying, we are always the Lord's.

There is another way in which Paul expresses this truth. Watch how he starts his Epistle to the Romans: 'Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ'. And he writes in a similar way to the Philippians and to Titus. Now 'servant' translates a Greek word that means 'the bonds slave'. Paul is a 'bonds slave' of the Lord, and here in

Romans 14 he emphasizes that by using this expression 'the Lord' three times over: 'In everything we are the Lord's.' This is the most important fact about us as Christians and it is something that we must never forget. Are you looking at life? Very well, 'Look at life,' says Paul, 'in that way.'

The Apostle puts this at greater length in the first chapter of Philippians. Here he is, in prison, and he hears rumours that he may be put to death at any moment, but he says:

According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better [*Phil.* 1:20-23].

Yes, the poor man, he was old and sick and he was in prison. His natural desire was 'to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better': 'Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; that your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again' [*Phil.* 1:24-26].

Again, the Apostle holds this same balance: to live is Christ; to die is again Christ. Everything is Christ. Or, as he puts it in Galatians 2: 'I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me' [*Gal.* 2:20]. This is 'living'. 'None of us liveth to himself ... For whether we live, we live unto the Lord.'

The Christian lives in the Lord, and for the Lord, and exactly the same thing applies to death. Death is 'gain'. If I am in this world it is Christ, if I die – well, it is 'to be with Christ; which is far better'. So if I am alive it is Christ, if I am dead I am with Christ. It is Christ always, in life and in death. Christ governs

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everything. He is 'the Lord', and what matters above everything else is my relationship to Him.

If we only grasped this as we should it would revolutionize not only our lives but still more our thoughts of death. Alas, many Christian people dishonour their Lord and bring dishonour upon His name in their dying. So many of us tend to do this when we are ill, or when we come to face death. It is tragic and it is all due to ignorance, to our failure to realize this great teaching. As a Christian you are always with Him and you are always in His hands and He governs this. Do not be frightened, do not let any of your own thoughts intrude either in life or in death. Submit yourself utterly to Him and to His way, and He transforms everything. 'Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints' [*Psa.* 116:15]. Do not forget that He is controlling death as well as life.

Now as we have said, Christians have always found this view of death a little bit difficult to grasp and to understand. There is a very interesting commentary on it in the last chapter of John's Gospel. Our Lord, having restored Peter, said to him:

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest: but when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee whither thou wouldest not. This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God [*John* 21:18-19].

Why did our Lord say that to Peter? This is the context. Peter, you remember, in order to save his life, has denied his Lord three times over and our Lord is now saying to him: Peter, you wanted to decide the way you were going to die, the mode of death and the place and the time and other things concerning death, but you must not do that.

Our Lord then makes a prophecy about Peter's death [verse 18]. And in verse 19, John writes: 'This spake he, signifying by what death he should glorify God.' Our Lord's words were fulfilled when Peter was martyred during the reign of Nero.

According to tradition, he was crucified, and crucified upside down.

Verse 19 concludes: 'And when he had spoken this, he saith unto him, Follow me.' In other words, our Lord is saying: Peter, don't you worry about this, leave this to me. You are going to glorify God in your death.

Now that was not Peter's idea; Peter did not want it. Peter's idea was escape or death in some other way. But *this* was the way; it was going to be a terrible, horrible way, but he would glorify God by his death, the thing he was most afraid of.

But still Peter does not quite understand. We read:

Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following; which also leaned on his breast at supper, and said, Lord, which is he that betrayeth thee? Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me [*John 21:20-22*].

Peter is not only anxious to control his own death; he is also a bit concerned as to how John is going to die. If he, Peter, is going to die a terrible death to glorify God, what is going to happen to John?

That is not your business, says our Lord. Leave your own death to me, leave his death to me as well: 'If I will that he tarry till I come ...' If he is not going to die at all but still be on earth when I come, what is it to do with you? 'Follow thou me.' And this is the very teaching that the Apostle is giving us here.

Our Lord Himself taught that we need not be in any way concerned about this matter of death. In His parable of Dives and Lazarus, He tells us, 'The beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom' [*Luke 16:22*]. That is how the Christian dies! You have nothing to fear. You must not begin to think of how you will die; you must not lay down your postulates and your desires and your demands. Leave it all to Him. He is in charge, and you will be carried on angels' wings into the very presence of God in heaven. And, thank God, this

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is something that the saints have proved. Read again the famous story of the martyrdom of Stephen.

When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God ... And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep [Acts 7:54-56, 59-60].

That is the death of the saints! It is glorious, it is wonderful – and it is one of the most amazing things about Stephen. You and I would think that he was cut down at the beginning of his career as a preacher. But we do not know, we do not understand about Stephen, nor about ourselves. It is His matter, it is His business, leave all to Him. ‘Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord ... that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them’ [Rev. 14:13].

So, says the Apostle, it is not only a question of what meat you eat or whether you eat herbs. It is not a question of whether you observe days or do not observe them. What matters is this: the Lord. As long as you can say that you are in His hands, that you have submitted yourself, mind, heart, will, everything, to Him, and that you are not concerned about yourself and do not put yourself in the centre, it is all right, says Paul, all is well. And as long as those other people who do not eat the meat or observe the days, are animated by this, be careful what you say to them, and let them be equally careful what they say to you. The Christian always is entirely submitted unto the Lord, and His will and His way.

May God open our eyes to this! It transforms life, it transforms death. As Christians we are always in His hands; we are always safe.

Eight

★

For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.

Romans 14:9

We are now dealing in particular with the ninth verse. As we have already seen, it is very important that we should bear in mind the connection between the verses. In verses 6 to 12 we see another interesting example of the Apostle's method. We have often pointed out that in this Epistle there is an obvious division into two main sections, the doctrinal portion – which, as always, comes first – and then the application, when Paul deals with the outworking of Christian truth and with the practicalities of daily life and living. But with this Apostle we must never fall into the error of thinking that in the second section he has finished with the doctrine. That is never the case. It does not matter what subject he deals with, he is always concerned, sooner or later, to link it up with doctrine.

In other words, if we learn nothing else, we must learn the great lesson that the whole of the Christian life derives from the truth that we have believed. Christians are not interested in morality and conduct in and of itself. The world is interested in ethics, or in a morality that is isolated from anything else, but that is never the case with Paul. Christian behaviour is deduced or derived from the great teaching. And so if he starts with doctrine, Paul goes on to practical living, and if he starts with a practical issue, he turns to doctrine. Each one leads to the other, so that you go round in a circle.

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Now there is a perfect example of this unity of doctrine and practice here in Romans 14. The theme, as we have seen, is the very practical question of the rightness of eating certain meats, and of observing certain particular festival days. And in the sixth verse, Paul lifts his argument up to a higher level when he says that what really matters is your motive, your objective – whether your actions are done ‘unto the Lord’. And this leads Paul on to the consideration of one of the highest and deepest doctrines of the whole of the Christian life. ‘Whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.’

But Paul cannot leave it even at that; he must establish this point, and he does so in the ninth verse: ‘For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.’ This is how Paul substantiates his statement that the Lord is Lord of the totality of our being, whether it be in life or in death. So, once more, he gives us an exposition of one of these profound doctrines that we have been studying in connection with the whole of the Christian life.

‘For to this end’, Paul says, that is, ‘for this purpose’ or ‘this is why’, ‘Christ both died, and rose ...’ Now many translations do not have the word ‘rose’. They read, ‘For to this end Christ both died, and lives’, or, ‘died, and lived again’. Once more, that is purely a question of textual criticism. Some of the best old manuscripts omit the word ‘rose’. It does not matter; the statement that He ‘revived’ or ‘lived again’ includes the rising. What is clear is that the Apostle is referring to the resurrection.

So Paul is telling us here that as the result of Christ’s death and resurrection, He is Lord of His people, whether they are alive or dead. He is always their Lord. He not only determines all that happens, but guides them and takes them through everything. This is a great New Testament truth and there are many statements of it. One of the best is found in Philippians chapter 2, where Paul writes:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation,

and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore – *here it is, because of that, as the result of that* – God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father [*Phil. 2:5–11*].

Then there is a similar statement at the end of Ephesians chapter 1 where the Apostle has three requests to make in his prayers for the members of the church at Ephesus. The first is: ‘The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling’; the second: ‘and what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints’; and the third: ‘and what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet ...’ [*Eph. 1:18–22*].

Our Lord Himself stated His eternal authority when He said, after His resurrection, ‘All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth’ [*Matt. 28:18*]. And similarly, we read in the book of Revelation, ‘I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death’ [*Rev. 1:18*]. In each case, the important thing to notice is that this position that He now occupies – and it is a position of lordship – is the result of His death and His resurrection. We must examine this because the Apostle feels that it is essential that we should grasp this principle. He is not content with merely saying, ‘He is the Lord of your life whether it be in life or in death’; he says, in effect, ‘Realize that this is because of

what He has done.' 'For to this end' – for this object and purpose – 'Christ both died, and rose.' So our Lord is in this position solely as the result of His death and resurrection – and the implication is that He could not have been in this position were it not for that. And this is the lesson we must learn. Now this is an astonishing fact. As the eternal Son of God, He is not only co-equal with God but equally omnipotent, and so on, and yet it is quite clear that He would not be the Lord of death if He had not come into this world, and especially if He had not died and risen again.

While our Lord was here in the days of His flesh, He was not the Lord of death. Paul says that He was 'made of a woman, made under the law to redeem them that were under the law' [Gal. 4:4-5]. Now to be 'under the law' means to be under death, subject to it. So this is really a very important doctrine.

The thrust of the passage in Philippians 2 is that while our Lord was here, though He is the eternal Son of God, He deliberately and voluntarily passed through a period of humiliation. An essential part of the salvation that He came to give us was that he should be subject to death. The very law itself commands death and brings it to pass, and He, being 'under the law', was, temporarily, not the Lord of death but under it. But now, by dying – and this is why He died – and by rising again, the position has been changed. I wonder whether you have ever considered this great salvation from this standpoint?

People have often asked the question: Why couldn't God give us salvation as a gift by just saying so, by just doing so? God is omnipotent and all-powerful, so why was all that necessary – the incarnation and the temptations and the suffering and especially the death, the burial and the rising? Why did our Lord have to die before we could be saved?

And here is a part of the answer: Our Lord could not have delivered us from the thralldom of death if He had not died Himself. 'For to this end ...' So the teaching, clearly, is that the problem of death, and death as related to us, the fallen race of Adam, could not be dealt with by a mere *fiat*, by a mere statement of God. Something had to be done about it and our

Lord did that by dying. His teaching could not save us from death; we are only saved from death by His death. That is the teaching.

How, then, did our Lord's death save us? First, when He died and rose again, He defeated the grave and He defeated death itself. That is the great theme of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul works it out. 'The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death' [1 Cor. 15:26]. It is 'the last enemy' but it is an enemy. Death is there, set against us all; it is an enemy to the human race. And the great claim of the Christian gospel is that our Lord has conquered the last enemy. So the Christian is able to turn to death and the grave and say, 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? ... Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' [1 Cor. 15:55, 57].

So we must realize that until our Lord died and rose again, death had held all humanity in the grave. There is no question about this. You may say that the cases of Elijah and Enoch are exceptions, and I grant you that in a way they are. But apart from them, it is a fact that death has 'passed upon all men' [Rom. 5:12].

We considered this doctrine when we studied chapter 5.¹ In verse 12 of that chapter, Paul writes, 'Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.' And, as the result of that sin, the grave has held the whole of humanity in its thralldom, and in its power, and under its tyranny. As we have seen, there was not a single man or woman who could defeat death and the grave. This was universal defeat for the whole of humanity.

But then our Lord came and here is the wonderful thing that He did; and it is so interesting to me that Peter, in his sermon on the day of Pentecost, immediately fastened upon this and made a point of it. The first thing that these people in Acts chapter 2 were given to realize was the significance of the resurrection. The Apostles preached 'Jesus and the resurrection'

¹ See *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 5: Assurance*, 1971.

[Acts 17:18], and this was the source of their great joy and happiness. Peter said:

Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it [Acts 2:22–24].

But everybody else was held by death, and Peter there refers to ‘the pains of death’, to the bondage and the captivity that death produces and that holds humanity in the grave. ‘It was not possible’, says Peter, ‘that he should be holden of it.’ Peter goes on to explain what he means, beginning with a quotation from Scripture:

For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope – *in the grave; David was given to see it prophetically. Why could David rest in hope?* – because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance [Acts 2:25–28].

Then Peter goes on to expound these words:

Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day [verse 29].

Do not imagine, says Peter, that David was writing there about himself; he was writing prophetically about the Son of God who was to come. He is the 'Holy One'. God will not suffer His Holy One 'to see corruption'. That is why it is impossible that He should be held by death.

The same point is elaborated in chapter 7 of the Epistle to the Hebrews – all these writers were illuminated by the Holy Spirit to understand this. The author of Hebrews was writing to a number of Christians who were having a very difficult time. They were being persecuted and tried, they were being robbed, misunderstood and molested in every conceivable way, and they were tempted to discouragement, to despondency and almost to despair. So now we see the kind of comfort that the author of this Epistle gives them.

In chapter 5, the writer tells these discouraged Christians that he has much to teach about Jesus Christ our Lord, 'an high priest after the order of Melchisedec' [*Heb.* 5:10], but, he says, in effect, 'I am in trouble – I cannot do this very well because you have been so negligent in your study of these things; you have not exercised your senses' [verse 11]. But he does tell them something, all the same: 'And it is yet far more evident: for that after the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest, who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment' – after what, then? – 'after the power of an endless life' [*Heb.* 7:15–16]. The only one who can save us, finally, is one who has an 'endless life'. We have a last enemy to meet, so a priest who is 'after the law of a carnal commandment' is of no value to us.

The writer continues: 'For he testifieth, Thou art a priest for ever' – here is the point, '*for ever*' – 'after the order of Melchisedec. For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof. For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did' [*Heb.* 7:17–19]. This means that though 'the law made nothing perfect', it did introduce 'a better hope'. There is prophecy in the law, prophecy of the coming of Christ. And verse 19 continues:

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by the which we draw nigh unto God. And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: [For those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec:] by so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament – *covenant*. And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: but this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them [*Heb. 7:19–25*].

Now that is exactly the same argument. And this teaching is put in a much simpler way in many of the statements that we have in the Scriptures. Paul makes the same point to Agrippa and Festus when he says:

Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision – *on the road to Damascus* – but shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judæa, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance. For these causes the Jews caught me in the temple, and went about to kill me. Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead ... [*Acts 26:19–23*].

Notice Paul's words, 'the *first* that should rise from the dead'. And He is: no one had ever risen from the dead before. That is a partial explanation of the cases of Enoch and Elijah. They did not rise from the dead, they were taken without going through death, as far as we can understand what happened to them. But

here is, 'The first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles' [verse 23]. That is why our Lord is also called, 'the first begotten of the dead' [Rev. 1:5].

Or, again, our Lord is called, in 1 Corinthians 15:23, 'Christ the firstfruits' of them that rise from the dead. And the firstfruit, of course, was the first picking of the fruit. Nobody tasted anything of the harvest until the firstfruit was collected, that was the very first tasting, and a feast was held as a celebration. 'Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming.'

And so our Lord was not held by death: He has conquered it, He went through it. And the result – and this is what the Apostle is saying here in Romans 14, and in this we should glory – is that not only could He not be held by death, but we cannot be held by it either. We already have victory over death. We are already able to use the language of 1 Corinthians 15:55: 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' We can say that before we pass through it. It is certain. He, having conquered death, has conquered it for us. So, because of His death and resurrection, death cannot hold us any longer, we who belong to Him. That is the first great teaching of Romans 14:9.

Then there is a second aspect of Paul's words here, and this is equally important. He is the Lord over the dead and the living because He has also conquered the devil, and he has done that, ultimately, by His death and resurrection.

Again, this is expounded for us by the author of Hebrews, who writes, 'Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage' [Heb. 2:14–15].

Now this is an additional victory. In Hebrews 2, the writer is not dealing with the conquest of death itself but with the conquest of the devil. 'For to this end', Paul says in Romans 14, 'Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord

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...' and this comes partly, as we have just seen, by His immediate and direct conquest over death, but also – and this is equally important – by His victory over the devil, who had the power of death.

Then along with that second chapter of Hebrews, take Paul's words in the second chapter of Colossians:

And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it – *by it* [Col. 2:13–15].

It is exactly the same teaching. In and by the cross, by death, our Lord had a victory over the principalities and powers, of whom the head is the devil. But what does the writer of Hebrews mean when he says that the devil has 'the power of death'? These words do not mean that the devil determines when we die. They cannot mean that because the whole of the Scripture teaches that it is God who decides the time of our death.

The devil does not control death in the sense of having power over death. Our times are in the hands of God. There is an absolute proof of this in the book of Job when the devil comes back to God for a second time. We read: 'The LORD said unto Satan, Behold, he is in thine hand' – God is giving permission to the devil to test Job, going beyond what He has said in the first chapter – 'but save his life' [Job 2:6]. The devil cannot touch life without the permission of God. It seems quite clear to me from certain passages of Scripture that God sometimes uses the devil to produce death and to bring it to pass, but it is God who uses him to do that. The devil does not have any inherent power to decide whether we live or die.

In what sense, then, has the devil 'the power of death'? Well, this word 'power' means 'influence' and 'authority'. And it does

seem to me that the only adequate explanation that we can find is this: it is the devil, in a sense, who has brought death upon us and put us into the position in which we are under its thralldom and dominion. He did that by persuading humanity to sin. This, again, is the teaching of Romans 5:12. So you can say that the devil, in that sense only, is the author of death.

But I say again that the devil is not the ultimate author of death. God had already said to Adam, 'In the day that thou eatest thereof' – of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – 'thou shalt surely die' [*Gen. 2:17*]. Death is God's punishment of sin. Yes, but if Adam and Eve had not sinned at the instigation of the devil, sin would never have come in. So death has come in as the result of sin, and the devil persuaded man to sin. Therefore, in that derived sense, he has this kind of authority. That is why the Scripture says that the devil was 'a murderer from the beginning' [*John 8:44*] – a murderer in the sense that he produced the death of all humanity because of its sin, but only in that sense. The devil has introduced the sting into death, the thing about death that damages us and hurts us.

Now it is arguable as to what would have happened if man had not sinned. I take the view that there would never have been death but for sin. Not that man was originally created immortal, but that if he had lived as he should have lived in his time of probation, he would have been given the gift of immortality. But he did not, so death came in.

Then I think you can look at this phrase 'the power of death' in another way. All commentators are agreed that it is a very difficult phrase to expound, but the more I have thought about it, the more I have come to think that the most satisfactory explanation is as follows. The Apostle John writes that 'the whole world lieth in wickedness' – or 'in the evil one' [*1 John 5:19*]. Now by 'lieth in' John means, 'lies in the grip of', 'under the power of', 'under the authority of' the evil one. He is the lord of the whole of humanity. He is called 'the god of this world' [*2 Cor. 4:4*] and 'the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience'

[Eph. 2:2]. So it is true to say that the devil has authority, power, over the whole of humanity as it is by nature.

We are all under the dominion of sin and of Satan. He is the lord of the lives of men and women. And in exactly the same way, therefore, he is the lord, or has authority and power, over death. In other words, everything that happens to the unregenerate is under the power of the devil. It is as the result of his influence and the fact that they belong to him, that death is their last enemy, the thing that holds them. It is in that indirect way that the devil has power or authority over death.

Now when the writer of Hebrews tells us that Christ came to 'destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil', we must not be put off by the word 'destroy'. It does not mean that Christ has annihilated the devil, it does not mean that the devil is no longer in existence, because we know that he is. We know that his ultimate fate yet awaits him and that he will never be annihilated. He will be thrown into a lake of destruction where he will go on bearing his punishment for ever and for ever. And we are told by Jude and Peter that the fallen angels are being reserved for that same final punishment.

No, the word 'destroy' means that, in the case of all those who believe in Him, our Lord, by His death and resurrection has robbed the devil of that particular power that he has over death. In other words, 'the whole world lieth in wickedness [the evil one]' but 'that wicked one toucheth him not' [1 John 5:19, 18]. He is not our lord, he has no authority or power over us. He cannot really touch us; he cannot hold us. That is our position as the redeemed. This applies to all the devil's activities in life and in death. All that he was able to do to us by nature and in our unregenerate state has been made quite ineffective by the death and resurrection of our Lord.

Our Lord has delivered us, therefore, from not only the thralldom of death itself but also from the tyranny of the devil who holds us, as it were, under death. The devil has been robbed of his power. And that is the exposition of Colossians 2:15. These principalities and powers thought they had triumphed over Him, that they had got Him under the power of death.

They did not know their Scriptures, the Scriptures quoted by Peter in the sermon on the day of Pentecost, and that is where they were finally defeated and, indeed, put to ridicule – to ‘an open shame’. They thought they had got Him, but the last instrument by which the devil tyrannizes over us, as it were, was taken out of his hands. And so he has been robbed even of that derived power that he has exercised for so long over the whole of humanity. He no longer exercises it over those who are redeemed and who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what is the result? The author of Hebrews tells us: ‘And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage’ [*Heb.* 2:15]. And that just means that anybody who realizes the truth of salvation, anybody who realizes what the Lord Jesus Christ has actually done, will have been delivered, not only from the power of death, but even from the fear of death; not only from the devil, but from all the fear that the devil can raise, and has raised, in the minds of all of us. This is where it is so important for us to understand this great salvation.

Some people seem to think that the whole of salvation is just that our sins are forgiven, but then, when they come to die, the devil tempts them and they do not know quite where they are, and they are trembling, afraid of death. These early Christians were like that and they were given this teaching in order that they might be delivered from this fear. But we have to work it out.

How does Christ deliver us from this fear of death? In this way. Christ, by dying for us, has delivered us from the curse of the law. ‘The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law’ [*1 Cor.* 15:56]. That is what frightens the whole human race with regard to death. They sometimes do not realize this, but the fear is there; that is where death has such terrors for everybody. What is going to happen after we die? There is a law written in our hearts that tells us that condemnation awaits us because of what we have done and not done, and because of this the fear of death exercises a tyranny and a bondage over humanity. But our Lord has dealt with it. He has delivered us

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from the curse of the law. It is the law that is the condemnation. Yes, but Christ has satisfied the law; and in that way, He has taken the sting out of death. Death should have no terrors for the Christian.

*The terrors of law and of God
With me can have nothing to do;
My Saviour's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view.*

Augustus Toplady

The author of Hebrews says, 'And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment' [*Heb. 9:27*]. Yes, and it is the judgment that produces the fear of death. But there is no longer any need for that fear. We know that we are clear, that we have 'passed from death unto life' [*1 John 3:14*]. The judgment does not terrorize us, and as the judgment does not terrorize us, there is no terror in death.

Another way in which our Lord has delivered us from the fear of death is this: He has 'brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' [*2 Tim. 1:10*]. If you read your Old Testament, you will find that here the whole idea of life beyond the grave was vague, shadowy and indeterminate. Ah! There was a glimmer there, but there was not very much. Go to paganism; it is all still more nebulous and vague and eerie and odd. It is Christ who has brought life and immortality to light – a glory that awaits us. So the Christian does not go out of this life uncertainly or doubtfully, wondering what is going to happen. He does not understand it all because it is so glorious, but he knows it is to be with Christ 'which is far better' [*Phil. 1:23*]. He knows that it is to be a life of glory and of unmixed joy and happiness.

So our Lord has complete control over death and hell, over everything. He is the victor; He is the conqueror. And by His death and His resurrection, He has purchased all this for us and has given it to us. So it is in this sense that Paul says that 'Christ both died, and rose, and revived, [in order] that he might

be Lord both of the dead and living.' He is the Lord of the living: 'Know ye not that ... ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price' [1 Cor. 6:19-20]. We belong to Him; He has purchased us; He has ransomed us; we have no rights of our own. He is the Lord of the living – yes, but He is also the Lord of the dead. He owns us right the way through.

But there is still one other thing, which is even more wonderful – I wonder whether you have ever thought of it. Did you know that, because you believe in Christ, you yourself have also become the lord of death and of life? I find that in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23: 'Therefore let no man glory in men.' Why not? 'For all things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.' You notice what the Apostle is telling you – death is yours, your own death.

Now this is the very acme of this astounding teaching. Far from being in the thralldom or under the tyranny or the dominion of death, far from death being something that can hold you and therefore frighten you, you now hold death. Death is your possession, it is yours, because you are Christ's and because Christ is God's. In other words, if you and I only understood these things as we should, we would regard death as our servant.

I have sometimes put it like this: 'All things are yours,' Paul says. Do not glory in men, all men are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas. Look at us, the Apostles, he says; we are not your masters, we are your servants. Paul repeats that in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: 'For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake' [2 Cor. 4:5]. That is why I am the servant of this church. I am the minister, working for this church.

This is the wonderful thing about the Christian: All things are yours. All the great men of the world are all my servants. Shakespeare is my servant. Shakespeare is not my master. I use him sometimes. I quote him now and again. When I want him, I use him; and when I do not want him, I put him back.

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And it is the same with all the world and all its great men and women and all its learning and its knowledge – all these people are servants. The tragedy of unbelievers is that they are slaves of these people, and they listen with eyes and mouths wide open and are governed by them. They glory in people, poor things. They do not realize that the great ones are all their servants, all given to them by the Lord.

And this is true of death. Death is to be used as our servant. And what is he? Let the Heidelberg Catechism answer that: 'Death for the Christian is not a payment for sin, but an entrance into life.' Death is just the servant that opens the door for us to go from this land of sin and woe to that 'land of pure delight, where saints immortal reign' [Isaac Watts]. So from now on think of death like that. He is just a door-keeper; he sees you coming and he opens the door and you are ushered into glory.

That should be your view of death: no terror, no fear. Christ has taken away the fear of death that has held all humanity in bondage. There are some who do not realize this, the people who say, 'I'm not afraid of death.' They speak like this out of ignorance. That is the tragedy with the drunken man. Because he is drunk, he says he is afraid of nothing. And those who say they are not afraid of death, say this because they are blind, they are ignorant, they are lunatic. Anyone who stops to consider what death really is and what it leads to, is not only afraid but is terrified of it.

But I say again that Christians are not afraid, because death has become their servant. Let me give you one or two quotations from people who have come to see this. Here is one:

*With patient mind thy course of duty run,
God nothing does or suffers to be done
But thou wouldst do thyself if thou couldst see
The end of all events as well as He.*

John Byrom

God sees the end as well as everything else.

I remember reading of the death of a Christian – I cannot even recall his name. Though he was in terrible pain, this was his experience: ‘My pain has been extreme, but I feel the presence of God continually, and I sensibly know He is as near to me as I am to myself. Whether I die at this time or recover, my will is wholly resigned. But I know if He calls me now I shall go to Glory.’ To the doctor who was attending him, he said, ‘It is of more consequence that you should repent than that I should recover. For if I die I shall go to God, but if you do not repent you will perish. You must be born again.’ He was able to say that as he was dying.

And then this Christian man said, ‘I’m going to the heavenly Canaan, the Promised Land, for which I set out long ago.’

On being asked by somebody, ‘Do you feel God graciously near?’ he said, ‘His spiritual presence is here.’ And then, weeping with joy, ‘I am full of God, His glory fills my soul. I have not the least doubt upon my mind that I shall reign with Him in glory.’

That is a man who has not only lost the fear of death but who realizes that death has become his servant: he is possessing death. Death has become his, and that is what he looks forward to.

The same is true of the dying D. L. Moody, who suddenly fell ill in 1899. When he realized he was dying, he said, ‘This is my triumph, this is my coronation day. I have been looking forward to it for years.’ And he said that for many years he had been ‘homesick for heaven’.

So – ‘For this end, Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.’ And He is. He has conquered death, He has conquered the devil who had that strange power over death, and still has it over all who do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and who are not regenerate. But for those who believe in Him, death has lost its sting, its terror, because it is but the servant that opens the door that admits us to the vision of God – ‘to be with Christ, which is far better’ – and to the glory everlasting.

Have you been delivered from the thralldom and the agony and the fear of death? The fear of death should not hold you in

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bondage. Work it out! Work out the meaning of our Lord's death and resurrection; See what it has done, what it has accomplished.

Do not let the devil frighten you. That is the trouble, as I have often pointed out. Though he cannot touch us, we allow him to frighten us with death. But you must not let him! Turn on him and say, 'You are defeated, all your control over death has gone, it has been taken away. You have been destroyed. All your power has been undone, you cannot do anything.' Say, 'I am in the hands of this blessed Lord who has conquered you and death, and who has "brought life and immortality to light through the gospel".'

Nine

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But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Romans 14:10-12

Verses 10 to 12 are a deduction, a conclusion, drawn from verses 6 to 9, and in these verses the Apostle carries his great argument a step further. As we have seen, it is important to watch him, to realize what he is doing, and to see how he advances the argument from step to step. We have studied his great teaching in verse 9: 'For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.' And now we come to his question: 'But' – in the light of all I have been saying – 'why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.'

Now let us see what Paul is saying here. You notice that he has two main points in his argument. The first is that we are all brothers together. 'Why dost thou judge thy *brother*?' The Apostle has not used that term before in this chapter, but has simply said, 'Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.' That tells us in very general terms how we are to behave with respect to one another as members of the church, but here the Apostle reminds us that, incidentally, we are brothers.

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This, again, is a deduction from the lordship of Christ. He, having died and risen again, is not only Lord over life and death, He is also Lord over His people, and this has come into being as the result of His life and death and resurrection. He has purchased us by His death and by His resurrection, and we who have been purchased by Him are all brethren together.

This is perhaps put at its best by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

For it became him (*God*), for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one – *that is the relationship between the Lord and ourselves, one nature, one type* – ... for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren ... I will put my trust in him. And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given me [*Heb. 2:10, 11–12, 13*].

God has given to the Son a people, but they are not only a people, they are children, they are brethren, they are all related. So as He purchases us, one by one, by His life, death and resurrection, particularly by His death, we become children. You cannot be a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you cannot be a saved person, a Christian, without being a child of God. We have already had the same argument in the eighth chapter of this great Epistle to the Romans, where the Apostle says, 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God' [verse 14]. This is the inevitable logic.

The Christian is a person who is 'led by the Spirit of God'. Paul has been saying all this in the earlier part of that eighth chapter, showing that those who are Christian no longer 'mind the things of the flesh', but 'the things of the Spirit'. They belong to the realm of the Spirit. It is through the Spirit that they 'mortify the deeds of the body', And then he goes on to say, 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the

sons of God.' And because of that, 'Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father' [*Rom. 8:5, 13, 14, 15*].

Now this is all implicit in what Paul is saying at this point in Romans 14, and it is very important from the standpoint of his argument concerning our attitude, not so much towards things indifferent, as towards other people who take a different view from ours with respect to these matters. Though we may differ in our opinion, in our judgment, on some issues – 'One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike' – the Apostle says, and this is what he really is concerned about, that much more important than our opinions about these matters is our understanding of our relationship to one another.

Nothing is more important than that we should realize that we are brethren together. What a difference there would have been if this principle had always been observed. But this is where the church has always tended to go astray, and this is what has made the story of the church so tragic throughout the running centuries. The danger, always, is that we so elevate these matters of opinion that we regard people who disagree with us almost as enemies, hatred may even come in, and that is what is so deplorable.

Hatred, if it comes in, is infinitely more important than the particular opinions we may happen to hold on things offered to idols or on particular days. This is now really serious, and that is why Paul puts so much stress on our attitude to our brethren. The people who disagree with us are not to be regarded as enemies; they are not to be regarded as members of rival factions or of rival parties. The church should not divide on matters that are non-essential. That is the principle that Paul is laying down. Though the members of a family may disagree over things that are indifferent, the family is not divided. So Paul introduces the term 'brother' to show exactly how we should be facing these issues.

Now in Rome, and undoubtedly in Corinth, Christians really were dividing over these matters. They were separating,

quarrelling and regarding one another as enemies. How easily people lose their tempers over matters indifferent! I say again that this should never happen. Whatever disagreement there may be in the church, we should always remember that we are brothers and sisters. So instead of despising the one I disagree with, or denouncing him, or proving that he is wrong, my concern should be to win him to that which is right. All along, the spirit in which these things are dealt with is much more important than the matter itself. You love your brother, you are concerned about him, and therefore you will do anything you can in order to help him. That is implicit in the mere use of the word 'brother'.

But then Paul carries that a step further. Because we are brothers, none of us is a judge. In a family, brothers do not judge one another. They take their problems to their father, who sorts out their disputes. He is the one who lays down the rules for the family. It is a misunderstanding of the relationship of brothers that one should be judging the other. That is the father's prerogative. This is how, from step to step, Paul moves from principle to principle. So we, he says, must realize, all of us, that in these indifferent matters we are all as brothers together and subject to the same Lord.

Now the Apostle applies this principle to the two sides in the dispute. He first of all addresses the weaker brother: 'Why dost thou judge thy brother?' You notice that Paul is still carrying on the teaching he gave us earlier in the chapter about the weaker brother. This is such an important point that it really must become fixed in our minds. It is always the weak brother who is most guilty of judging others. It is not what one would expect, but it is what actually happens. The Apostle always teaches it and we certainly find it to be true in practice.

So Paul first addresses the weaker brother: 'Why do you judge your brother?' And then he turns to the other and says, in effect, 'Or why do you, who are stronger in the understanding of the faith, despise your brother? Why do you set your brother at nought? You are both guilty. That is not a brotherly spirit. It is not brotherly either to judge or to despise. What is characteristic

of true brotherhood is love for one another, concern about one another, a resolve to help one another and to get one another right. That is the spirit in which you should approach all these problems.'

So what Paul is concerned to do here, right the way through, as we have been seeing, is to set these problems in the right context – and we must lay hold of this principle. This has a very general application. If you are satisfied that you are dealing with Christian brothers and sisters, do not let anything destroy your fellowship. There will be differences in many areas – prophecy, baptism, and so on. Now, says Paul, handle all subjects, especially these 'matters indifferent', in the realization that you are all brothers together, not attempting to prove that you are right and the other is wrong, but endeavouring to help and understand, and in order to arrive at a common conclusion, if that is possible.

There, then, is the first new element that is introduced by these three verses. But Paul does not leave it at that. The second main point comes at the end of the tenth verse: 'For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.' Once more, Paul is taking the concrete situation as it existed in the church at Rome and is showing how everything that is done by the Christian is always related to the fundamental principles governing the life of the church. The Apostle has already established that we cannot live to ourselves, that Christ is our Lord. Very well, he says, now here is another all-important principle, remember that as Lord, he is Judge. Paul is thus drawing a further deduction out of the lordship of Christ.

Now this is something that, to Paul, is inevitable and he is always drawing attention to it. One of the results of our Lord's work in His life, death and resurrection is that He has become the Judge. You will find that some Bible versions read like this: 'For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God.' Now this, again, is a matter of textual criticism, a matter of examining the ancient documents, and it is a point that really cannot be decided. I would say myself, having read the evidence again, that I would have to come down on the side of the Authorized

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Version and say that it is undoubtedly right to say 'the judgment seat of Christ'.

Does this make any difference? Is it a vital matter? And the answer is, of course, that it is not, but it does open out for us a point that is taught us in the New Testament itself and that is of very great interest. In the Old Testament, the emphasis, generally, is that God is the Judge – God the Father. 'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' asks Abraham [*Gen. 18:25*]. God is the one who will judge the whole world in righteousness. But the fact is – and this is where the New Testament opens out this matter and makes it so interesting for us – that God has handed over the judgment of the world to His Son.

Our Lord Himself taught this. He said:

For the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel. For as the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son quickeneth whom he will. For the Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son [*John 5:20-22*].

Now nothing could be clearer than that. God is the Judge, but it has pleased Him to hand over this question of the judgment, in addition to other things, to the Son. The Apostle Paul said the same thing as he preached in Athens. He put it like this:

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead [*Acts 17:30-31*].

And then in 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul says, 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat [throne] of Christ.' So the New Testament emphasis, generally, is that God is the ultimate Judge but He has delegated the work of judging to the Son. And

that casts a very interesting light upon this particular translation that we are dealing with here. And what makes it still more interesting is the eleventh verse, which is a quotation. Paul says, 'For it is written', and he goes on to quote from Isaiah 45:23.

Now here, as elsewhere, the Apostle gives a very free translation – it is not verbally accurate. Let me again remind you, in passing, about this point, lest it may cause anyone to stumble. The higher critics, of course, tend to make a great deal of this. They say, 'You must not say that the Word of God, the Scripture, is verbally inspired; the Apostle Paul proves that himself because he quotes an Old Testament statement but varies the wording. He seems to have a translation of his own that he applies to a situation with which he is dealing.'

But the simple answer is that the same Spirit who inspired the writers of the Old Testament inspired the Apostle Paul also. So any change is not made by the Apostle, but by the Spirit who is showing a shade of meaning that was not apparent, perhaps, to the Old Testament writer. The Spirit uses His own words to bring out one shade of meaning at one time, and another shade of meaning at another.

Now the whole point about the translation – and this is the point Paul is anxious to emphasize – is that we must all appear before the Judge, who is the Son of God. So, Paul says, 'For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.' That is the emphasis: knees are not to be bowed to one another, they do not bow before men. By bowing down you are recognizing authority; you are recognizing prerogative and power; you are recognizing that He is Judge. And, God says, you do not bow down in that way to men. I am the Judge, you bow your knee to Me, and you make your confession to Me.

This is a very great statement. It is God's assertion of the fact that He is the Judge. But it goes beyond that. Paul is here prophesying that at the final judgment the whole world will have to confess and acknowledge that God is the Judge, that His judgments are righteous and just, and that no one has any grounds

of complaint whatsoever against Him. That is the real meaning of the quotation from Isaiah. And Paul's conclusion is that, in the light of this, nothing could be more monstrous and ridiculous than for any one of us to set ourselves up as a judge over someone else, and particularly, of course, over someone who is a brother.

Now there are certain important principles here that we must work out as we look at this great statement. Paul sums it up in the twelfth verse: 'So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.' Here he has completed the argument of Isaiah 45: the proposition in verse 10, substantiated by the quotation of Scripture in verse 11, then the conclusion in verse 12 – typical of Paul's method.

What, then, do we learn from all this? The first point, obviously, is that the Lord Jesus Christ is God, God the Son, the second Person in the blessed Holy Trinity, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. We deduce this from the fact that the very prophecy that Isaiah made about the Father is now said about the Son.

Elsewhere in the New Testament we again find that the terms applied to the Father can be applied to the Son, and this is, therefore, one of these wonderful proofs that the Lord Jesus Christ is indeed God the Son and that the position of Judge has been given to Him by His Father. Take, for instance, the statement made by Paul in Philippians 2, which is very germane to what we are now considering because it is making the same point. In verses 7 to 8 of that chapter, Paul points out how our Lord, for the purpose of saving us, 'made himself of no reputation', coming in the likeness of man, humbling himself, and becoming obedient even unto death on a cross.

Then Paul continues, 'Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' [verses 9–11].

We have already come across other examples, but in an age like ours, when people query and question the unique deity of

the Lord Jesus Christ, and when people come to your doors and say it is not taught in the Scriptures, we need to be well furnished with arguments. We found one such example in the ninth chapter of Romans. There, too, the teaching appears incidentally, this time in a passage where Paul is talking about the Israelites: 'Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen' [Rom. 9:4-5]. When we were dealing with that passage,¹ I gave you a number of other quotations where the same sort of argument is used, and where the terms 'our blessed God and Saviour', 'our blessed Lord and Saviour', are ascribed to the Son. These are incidental statements of His unique deity and His co-equality with the Father.

Here, in Romans 14, the Apostle's concern is to tell us that the Father has handed over this world and all its affairs to the Son. The Son is the one who has all authority and all power over this world. The Father has given it to Him to save it, and to redeem it, and to restore it as it was at the beginning. That was our Lord's purpose in coming to this world. But He will come again and then He will remove and purge out of the whole universe every remnant and effect of sin. It will all be purified, regenerated. As Paul says in Romans 8:21, 'Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.' Now all this is implicit here in verse 11. Jesus Christ is God, God the Son, and the Father has delegated these functions to Him, including this function of judgment.

That, then, brings me to the second principle that we deduce here. Having asserted that our Lord is the Judge, Paul answers the question: What is to be the character of His judgment?

In the first place, the judgment will be universal. Our Lord will judge everybody. Now He Himself said that explicitly:

¹ See *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 9: God's Sovereign Purpose*, 1991.

'Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation' [*John* 5:28–29]. So He will be the Judge of 'the quick and the dead', the Judge of the whole world, just as Paul told the Athenians [*Acts* 17:31].

We must not lose sight of the universality of the judgment. It is a part of our Christian preaching, and if this preaching were ever needed, it is needed at this present time. Our first message to this arrogant world in which we live should be that it is under judgment. The world cannot see it. The people of the world have never been able to see these movements of judgment that are all adumbrations and suggestions of the final judgment that is to come. But there is judgment abroad in the earth at the present time.

I do not want to particularize, but I have met a lot of friends this week who regard the foot and mouth epidemic as a judgment upon the arrogance of men and women in this country – perhaps, especially, upon the farming community, who, by getting in their harvest or doing other work on a Sunday, have so often flouted the Lord's day in order to make more money. I do not know. But that God's judgments are abroad in the earth should surely be obvious to everyone who has eyes to see. And there is worse to come. It will all head up in the final judgment when the Son shall be manifested. He is coming to judge, and He will judge the whole world in righteousness.

However, that is not the Apostle's particular point here. What he is really concerned about – and it is a subsidiary part of the teaching about judgment – is that there will be a special judgment of believers. As we have been seeing, in all this discussion of 'matters indifferent', Paul is really only looking at the subject from the standpoint of Christian believers. He is saying: Do not judge your brother, do not set your brother at nought, because we all, that is, all Christians, will stand before the judgment throne of Christ.

What, then, is this judgment? People have often been confused about this, and we must be very clear that it is not a

judgment in terms of deciding whether or not we are going to be saved eternally, because as Christians we have already passed through that judgment. John 5 is a most important chapter in this connection. Take verse 24: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath' – he has got it – 'everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation.' Now a better translation is this: 'He that hears my word, and believes on him that sent me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.'

So when discussing Romans 14:10, the question of our salvation should never be raised. We *are* saved, and if we are, then we have passed through the judgment and we can never be judged again. This is one of the great biblical arguments for assurance of salvation and that is our Lord's own clear, specific statement. It is re-echoed by the Apostle Paul in the first verse of Romans 8: 'There is therefore now no condemnation' – no judgment – 'to them which are in Christ Jesus.' Having passed through, we can never pass through that judgment again.

I do hope this is clear. The Roman Catholic Church rejects this teaching. She likes to keep her people in a state of uncertainty. Protestantism, on the contrary, has always asserted, and has attached great significance to, assurance of salvation. That was what gave such joy to Martin Luther – he found grounds of certainty, grounds of assurance. I say again that there is no fear of the judgment as far as the Christian is concerned. We have passed from death into life. Our sins have already been judged: they were judged in the Son, when He died on the cross. That was the judgment of my sins once and for ever.

What, then, is the judgment that Paul is talking about in Romans 14:10? I am afraid that we tend to neglect this teaching – we who are Evangelicals perhaps more than anybody else. And we do this because we are clear about the way of salvation and about the assurance of salvation – therein lies our particular danger. We forget that, though we have passed through the judgment that decides our eternal destiny, we still have to pass through a judgment of rewards. Now this is most important

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and it is what the Apostle is saying here. He says: Be very careful how you express your judgments on one another, because every one of you will have to appear before your Lord in this kind of judgment.

Romans 14:10 is not a solitary statement. Teaching about a judgment of rewards is found elsewhere in the New Testament. We read that our Lord said, 'Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.' This is a servant. 'Of a truth I say unto you, that he will make him ruler over all that he hath.' And our Lord goes on to differentiate between two kinds of servants:

The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder ... And that servant which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes [*Luke 12:43-44, 46-48*].

They are both servants, they are both believers, and they are both going to receive a punishment, but one with 'many' and one with 'few' stripes. There is therefore a difference between believer and believer.

But there is still better evidence. Turn to the third chapter of 1 Corinthians and here you will find the Apostle dealing with himself and Apollos, whom the foolish people at Corinth were comparing and contrasting. By doing this, they were revealing their ignorance and the carnality of their thinking, and Paul brushes such comparisons aside. He says:

For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it – [my work as a preacher and teacher will be scrutinized; all that you people do as believers will be declared] – because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire [1 Cor. 3:9-15].

Here is a man who will arrive ultimately in the Glory but his work is non-existent, it will all be burned up, it was useless. It is not a judgment of salvation, but a judgment of rewards. It does not determine our destiny: 'he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire'. But his work is under judgment, and he suffers loss. Could anything be clearer?

Or again, we read in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians: 'Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him.' That is what was controlling Paul. 'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad. Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men' [2 Cor. 5:9-11]. It is the same argument. That is the judgment of believers.

And this judgment is not a doctrine peculiar to Paul. Listen to the Apostle Peter putting it in his way: 'For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely – with difficulty – 'be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?' [1 Pet. 4:17-18]. And, indeed, the Apostle John has the same thought: 'And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming' [1 John 2:28].

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Now, as I said, this is surely a doctrine that, as Evangelicals, we tend to neglect. We are very interested in salvation and in forgiveness of sins; we are interested in knowing we are not going to hell, and we seem to think that we have finished once and for ever with all kinds of judgment. But we have not. Though we are saved, though we are the children of God, we shall still have to appear before the judgment throne of Christ, and give an account of the deeds done in the body, whether good or bad. It is possible for us to suffer loss, it is possible for us to know shame.

How do I reconcile all this with heaven and glory? I cannot. I do not know. But it is the plain teaching of the Scripture, and we neglect it at our peril. Nothing is more productive of anti-nomianism and loose living than the failure to realize this teaching.

So Paul's final conclusion and deduction is, therefore, that not one of us is in a position to judge anybody else. We must not do it.

'But,' says somebody, 'in 1 Corinthians 5, doesn't the Apostle exhort the Corinthians to judge a man who is guilty of a certain sin and to put him out?'

Of course he does. The church must exercise discipline, but the discipline is not to be with regard to matters indifferent. In Corinth, there was a man who was guilty of flagrant public sin, and he had to be put out of the church. There is a judgment that has been given to the church by the Lord. The church must be kept pure. But that does not apply to matters that are indifferent. In those cases, Christians have no delegated authority to pass judgment, indeed, quite the reverse.

And then, finally, Paul sums it up by saying, 'Every one of us shall give account of himself to God.' You will not have to give an account of anybody else, but you will have to give an account of yourself. And if you think that you are in such a perfect position that you can spend a good deal of your time in pronouncing judgments upon others, then you do not know yourself, and you do not know your Judge, and you do not know your Scriptures.

The Apostle constantly says that the emphasis is upon the account each of us has to give of ourselves. He puts this in a most interesting manner at the beginning of Galatians chapter 6:

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For every man shall bear his own burden [*Gal. 6:1-4*].

We shall have to give an account to Christ of all that we have done and said. You have not a moment to waste; you have not a second to expend in judging your brother.

Paul seems to me to gather all this up in the fourth chapter of 1 Corinthians. He was being judged by the Corinthians and he says:

Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God [*1 Cor. 4:1-5*].

So the final word with regard to this tendency to judge our brother or to despise him is this: 'Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord' [*2 Cor. 5:11*]. I do my work as under His eye,

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knowing that I shall have to render up an account unto Him and that He cannot be deceived. All slackness in Christians is known and it is recorded, all self-satisfaction, all judgments, everything that is wrong and that is a hindrance to the manifestation of the glory of the Lord through the church – it is all known.

I am not judging you. It is not a part of the preacher's business to judge. We are not to judge one another. But it is a part of my business to say that *I* shall be judged, my faithfulness in expounding the truth. If I hold anything back for the sake of popularity or for the sake of applause or for the sake of your good opinion, I shall have to render an account to Him. You are not my judge and I am not yours, but every man and woman shall give an account of themselves unto God, unto the Lord. That is Paul's final word with regard to the spirit in which we approach the whole question of indifferent matters.

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Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.

Romans 14:13-15

We start here a new subsection in the argument that is put before us by the Apostle. So far, in handling the whole problem raised by these 'matters indifferent', the Apostle has been mainly concerned to set the problem in its proper context. And we have taken our time over this because it is so important. But now the Apostle turns and, having made certain that we approach the matter in the right spirit and in the right atmosphere, he comes to grips with the actual problem, with the question itself, and gives us his own ruling.

Again, I would urge you to watch the Apostle's method. If we learn nothing else, let us learn how he tackles these issues. This in itself is a great lesson. I am never tired of pointing out that half our troubles are due to the fact that when we confront a problem, we do not know how to approach it. When we used to have discussion meetings on Friday nights, it was a point I was constantly having to make. When I put a question to the meeting, the mistake most people made was always to attack it too directly, to come straight down on to it, instead of putting

it into its context. But it should be our invariable rule that you do not consider matters in the Christian life in and of themselves. Because everything is related to everything else, it is dangerous to isolate a question.

So let us learn the great lesson of Paul's method. Most of us would not have taken twelve verses to come to the actual question, would we? That is really the great trouble with life today: people no longer believe in introductions. That is why they go wrong so often. There is an approach in these matters, and it is invariably the apostolic approach.

I once heard an old minister give an address in a certain assembly on the question of Sabbath observance, and I never forget the way he began. He did exactly what the Apostle is doing here, but he had his own picturesque way of putting it. He said, 'When you have a question like this, the important thing always to remember is that it belongs to a family, so discuss it in terms of that family.' He meant that you cannot isolate a question like Sabbath observance: it belongs to a whole body of doctrine. So let us always give that advice due weight in all our approaches to particular questions. Put each issue into its family; put it into its context.

Then, having done that, Paul moves on. There were the two groups of people, you remember, those who were weaker in their understanding of the faith and those who were stronger, and now the Apostle gives us his own opinion. But we shall see that he is again very careful and points out that whatever his opinion may be on the merits of the question in itself, there are always other and higher considerations that are to govern our thinking.

So let us see how the Apostle gives us his opinion. Look at verse 13: 'Let us not therefore judge one another any more.' That is a summing up of all he has said in the previous verses, especially verses 6 to 12. Again, do not forget that the essence, the art, of teaching is repetition. So having made it abundantly clear that we have no grounds whatsoever for judging one another, and that we are very foolish if we do so, Paul cannot move on without summing it up once again. Leave it at that.

Do not do that again. Then he turns and says, 'But judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.'

This is very interesting – the Apostle here makes a play on the word 'judge'. He has already done this earlier in the chapter, using exactly the same word in different senses. We ourselves do the same thing, of course. We use the same word in slightly different senses, relying on the context to make our meaning and purpose clear. In other words, you might very loosely paraphrase what Paul is saying here like this: 'Let us not therefore judge one another any more, but if you want to judge, then judge like this ...' And then Paul says, 'that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.'

The Greek word translated here by 'judge' is, as we have seen, a word that is used very commonly in the New Testament. For instance, we find it in 1 Corinthians 2:2 – the famous statement – 'For I *determined* not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.' So 'determined' might be translated: 'I judged', 'I came to the verdict', 'I came to the conclusion'. That is the sense in which Paul is using the word in verse 13. In effect, he says, 'As you seem to be anxious to express your opinions and to be judges, then come to this verdict, come to this conclusion, express this judgment; here is a judgment that is always valid, so hold on to this. This must be the rule of your lives with respect to all questions, no matter what the question may be.' And so Paul says that we must arrive at a solemn decision never to judge one another and act invariably on the principle that we will never do anything that will be a hindrance to our brother or sister. That is always a right decision – there is no question about it.

What does this decision mean in practice? Negatively, as I said, it means that we do not judge our brother or sister, but there is also a positive side. Paul says: Remember that this other Christian with whom you are disagreeing is your brother. The Apostle has already brought that point out, you remember. We emphasized it when we looked at verse 10. But he repeats it because it is the very essence of his argument here. Remember,

Paul says, that he is not a leader of some opposition party, he is not a rival, he is not a contender for something that you have: you are brethren together. So this is the positive teaching.

And then the exhortation is that you must never say or do anything that will be a hindrance to your brother, and Paul uses two words to bring this out. The first is 'stumblingblock', the picture being of a rock or a stone or some obstacle in a man's way. Unaware that there is a stone in the way, he stumbles over it and falls.

Peter uses this same word in his first letter: 'Unto you therefore which believe he is precious.' Then he goes on to deal with other people: 'But unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed' [1 Pet. 2:7-8]. The word 'stumbling' there is the same Greek word as 'stumblingblock' here in Romans 14:13. And it is the same idea exactly.

I believe that Paul uses the two terms, 'stumblingblock' and 'occasion to fall' for emphasis, to stress that we must never be guilty of causing our brother to fall. The expression 'occasion to fall' is interesting. The Greek word is *skandalon* and our word 'scandal' comes from it. The word really means a trap or a snare used to catch animals. A piece of material was placed in the trap, largely concealing it, and when the animal put its foot on this material, immediately the trap sprang and the animal was caught. The idea that is implicit in this word is thus, 'an occasion to be trapped and to be ensnared'.

So Paul is saying that we must not merely consider ourselves and our opinions but before we make any statement and before we act upon what we believe, we must bear in mind the effect that our words and actions may have upon others. And these others, we must remember, are our brethren. They are as Christian as we are. Paul has already made that perfectly plain and clear in the third verse, where he says, 'God hath received him.' And he repeats it still more strongly in verse 9 by saying that Christ died for these people. The emphasis all along is that

we do not consider ourselves only. The failure to think in this way is fatal in the church. I shall have to deal with this more fully later, in the fifteenth verse, and there we shall see the very close parallel with the teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 8, but it is all implicit here.

Paul repeats this teaching in 1 Corinthians 10, when he sums up his argument with these words: 'Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other' [1 Cor. 10:29]. That is what the Apostle is really saying here in Romans 14. Obviously this problem was found not only in Rome, but in Corinth also; indeed, we have very good evidence from Acts that it probably caused trouble in all the churches. In dealing with these different churches or localities, the Apostles had constantly to repeat this point that it is not sufficient for the Christian only to consider what is right for himself, but he must also consider his brother.

Now this, again, is a part of the great New Testament appeal. Our Lord said to His disciples at the very end, before his arrest: 'This is my commandment, That ye love one another' [John 15:12]. And he told them that it would be by their love for one another that the world would know that they were His people [John 13:35]. This should always be the overruling and over-riding consideration in the church. If we depart from this, we are almost certain to go wrong in our decisions. Whatever we are discussing in the church, we should always start with the consideration that we are to love one another because we are brethren together. Whatever differences of opinion may arise, more important than the particular decision is this spirit of love for one another, and I repeat that if we do not have that in the forefront of our minds and hearts and spirits we are bound to go astray.

The Apostles, too, in their various epistles, constantly teach the necessity of love for the brethren. John, in his first letter, makes this, in many ways, the very heart and centre of his great appeal. He says: 'He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?' [1 John 4:20].

So in verse 13, Paul is continuing with the teaching that he has been putting to us in the first twelve verses. We must not

only be governed by a consciousness of the lordship of Christ over the totality of our life, but we must also realize that our relationship to one another is to be one of love. When we studied chapter 13, we considered Paul's teaching on this subject.¹ 'Owe no man anything,' he says, 'but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.' These various commandments, he says, are 'briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law' [Rom. 13:8, 9-10].

And now Paul is simply once more reminding us that love for our fellow-Christians is much more important than our particular opinions. Your opinion may be right but if you have forgotten that you must love your brother, then that right opinion may be a cause of serious trouble. Further on in this chapter, the Apostle puts this teaching in these words: 'Let not then your good be evil spoken of' [verse 16]. It is a terrible thing when a man who is right, is right in such a wrong spirit that he does more harm than good by being right.

So in verse 13, Paul is again just setting the stage. Then, having done that, he gives us his judgment on this particular matter. I would remind you again that it takes him thirteen verses to come to it! I hope this comes as a rebuke to those of us who are too ready to give our opinions and especially the glib opinion that never sees any difficulties at all – the 'ready-reckoner mentality', as I called it earlier. Problem? Here's the answer – no problem, everything is settled! But in the Christian church you do not deal with problems in that reprehensible way. You take your time and you give the context.

But now Paul gives his opinion on the question of eating meat. Now when you remember the antecedents of the Apostle Paul, verse 14 is an astounding statement. When you consider that this man had once upon a time been one of the narrowest, most nationalistic, Jews conceivable, a Pharisee and a legalist of the first order, then there is something really overwhelming

¹ See *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 13: Life in Two Kingdoms*, 2002.

in this tremendous enunciation of a great gospel principle: 'I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself.' That is the difference the gospel has made, and that is particularly the difference the gospel has made to a Jew. There is only one thing that could ever have enabled this man to make such a statement, and that is rebirth. Paul could never have said this as he had been, as the Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus. He really was not the same person. And it is only the Holy Spirit who can change men and women to the extent that they completely reverse their judgment on matters that they used to regard as of vital importance. In Paul's words here we see one of the great illustrations of what the Holy Spirit alone can do.

Paul's words here are an enunciation of the great New Testament ruling that should govern our attitude towards all these 'matters indifferent' that confront us in our Christian pilgrimage. So let us look at how the Apostle puts it. 'I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus Christ, that there is nothing unclean of itself.' First of all, we see that Paul is anxious to impress upon us his absolute certainty. 'I *know*,' he says. It is a very strong term. It means sure and positive knowledge. He is not saying, 'I am of the opinion', but, 'I am completely certain.'

But the Apostle is not content with leaving it at that. He affirms, 'I know, and *am persuaded*.' This is one of Paul's favourite expressions. Strictly speaking, it should be translated: 'I know, and have been persuaded'. I am emphasizing this because Paul has already used exactly the same form of this verb in that mighty asseveration at the end of the eighth chapter of Romans: 'For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities ...'. There again, a literal translation is, 'I have been persuaded'.

But how has Paul been persuaded? It is by the considerations that are presented in the gospel. In other words, the Apostle is not merely giving expression to a prejudice; it is not even an intuition. He is not giving a tentative opinion, but is offering his opinion in as absolute a manner as he is capable of. He has solid reasons. The reasons provided and produced by the gospel

have persuaded him. He needed a lot of persuasion but the arguments could not be countered, they could not be turned back. It is, he says, perfectly plain and clear – ‘I know, and have been persuaded.’

But over and above that, it is a reasonable position: Paul can give reasons. The Apostle Paul, again let me remind you, is never a man who just stands up and says, ‘I can tell you.’ As an Apostle, he has authority to speak in that way, but he never does. He always gives reasons, and he is telling us here: I can demonstrate this to you. I have been persuaded by the logic of the whole position of the gospel, and this is the difference it has made. This is very characteristic of the Apostle Paul, and should ever be characteristic of all of us as Christians.

Then we turn to the phrase, ‘by the Lord Jesus’: ‘I know, and am persuaded *by the Lord Jesus*.’ Now there are those who say that these words should be translated, ‘I know, and have been persuaded *in the Lord Jesus*’, and I think that is probably right. Paul, here, is telling us that he is not merely expressing an opinion that he has arrived at as the result of his own powers of reasoning. He did have a great brain and a natural ability to reason. But he has stopped relying on them, as we see from his words to King Agrippa and Festus on the famous occasion of his trial at Caesarea. In his past life, he says, he ‘thought with himself’. That is always the natural man’s method of arriving at conclusions – he thinks with himself. ‘I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth’ [Acts 26:9]. But the Apostle no longer reasons in that way; he has a new way of thinking. He thinks *in* Christ Jesus; he thinks *under* Christ Jesus; he is dominated and controlled by Christ Jesus. He has seen the danger and the error and the fallacies that result from following one’s own natural reason. So in Romans 14:14, Paul is claiming that he thinks as he does because of the spiritual enlightenment that has resulted from his relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit is in him and the Spirit guides him.

This is a most important matter. There are those who have thought – and some of you may have thought the same thing –

that all Paul is saying here is that he is repeating what the Lord Jesus Christ Himself had taught when he was here on earth. It is true that Paul is saying that, but he does not want to leave it there. The very expression that he uses compels us to conclude that he is saying more than that. He is claiming here to have had a revelation about this issue. The whole of the gospel had been revealed to him – he never tires of telling us that. And this phrase is parallel to the expression that Paul is so fond of using: 'For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you' [1 Cor. 11:23]. That is what he is doing here. He is delivering what he has received. He has been persuaded as the result of the enlightenment that has been given to him. We must not reduce it, we must not make it anything less than that.

This is an interesting point because it helps us to understand, partly, at any rate, the whole question of the authority and the inspiration of the Scriptures. Let me show you a sort of parallel passage in 1 Corinthians 7. In verse 10, where Paul is taking up the whole question of the position of a converted wife with an unconverted husband, and vice versa, the Apostle puts it like this: 'And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband.' That, again, in a sense, is a repetition of what our Lord had taught, but at that time the Apostle was not in the company of the Apostles. He may have received this teaching from others, but he generally goes out of his way to say that what he teaches he has not received from men – it is a part of his position as an Apostle to say that he has received his teaching directly from the Lord just as all the other Apostles who had been with the Lord had received their teaching at first hand.

So in 1 Corinthians 7:10, Paul is claiming special revelation and direct teaching. But then, you notice, to bring this out, as it were, he says in verse 12, 'But to the rest speak I, not the Lord' – and gives his opinion. Now, to me, this is a very powerful argument in favour of believing that the Apostles were uniquely and divinely inspired. The Apostle Paul himself draws that kind of distinction, telling us, later on in 1 Corinthians 7, that he has the Spirit [verse 40]. So Paul draws a distinction between a

revelation that has been given to him and his own spiritual opinion. And this is implicit in what we are dealing with here in Romans 14.

The Apostle's emphasis is that his opinion about eating meat is something that he has been persuaded of by the Lord, by the enlightenment of the Lord given to him through the Holy Spirit. So we have here a very authoritative statement. What, then, is his teaching? It is that nothing is unclean of itself. He has hinted at this already, in the second verse of this chapter: 'For one believeth that he may eat all things.' Paul will give this teaching again in verse 20: 'All things indeed are pure.' So this is his judgment on this matter.

The term 'unclean' is very interesting. It does not mean unclean in the sense in which we normally use the term. It does not, for example, mean something that is dusty, or muddy. It means, primarily, something that is unhallowed. It is the opposite, or the antithesis, of something that is holy.

Here, clearly, the Apostle has the Jews primarily in mind because in the ceremonial law that had been given to them through Moses a division was made, for instance, with regard to animals that they were allowed to eat. Some animals had to be 'clean', some were said to be 'unclean' and they were not to touch the latter. This not only applied to food, it also applied to utensils. Anything that was used in God's work had to be dedicated, and so it became holy – holy vessels in the temple. The very mount on which the law was given through Moses is referred to as 'the holy mount' because it was there that God gave His law to the children of Israel. So there was a distinction between that which was holy and that which was unholy. And that is the real meaning here.

But then another term had come in. The things that were not holy were often referred to as things that were 'common', and that is the better translation here: 'I know ... that there is nothing common of itself.' So you must realize that the word is primarily a ritualistic or a ceremonial word. You find a vestige of that even at the present time. There are some Christians who regard their buildings as holy, consecrated buildings. There are people who

also regard certain plots of ground as holy. Many regard their cemeteries as consecrated ground. And it is in that sense that this term is to be understood; something is no longer common, it has become special because of its relationship to God.

Now it is important that we should understand all this, because, as we have seen, it was a very real problem for Jews who had become Christians. There is an interesting and striking example in connection with the Apostle Peter. It is found in the incident where Peter was used as a means of preaching the gospel to Cornelius, the Roman centurion, and his household. We are told in Acts chapter 10 that Peter would normally have been very reluctant indeed to enter the 'unclean' house of a non-Jew [Acts 10:28]. Moreover, as a typical Jew, Peter had an innate feeling that the gospel was only to be for Jews. It took a vision to convince him that he should travel to Caesarea and preach in Cornelius' home. This is what we are told:

On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city – *these were the people who had gone to fetch Peter* – Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour: and he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, and saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common – *that is it!* – or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common [Acts 10:9-15].

And Peter later explains:

Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another

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nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean [*Acts* 10:28].

It was Peter's forgetfulness that made him stumble, because our Lord Himself had dealt with this issue very plainly and clearly in the incident that is recorded in Mark chapter 7. We read there: 'Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem. And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen hands ...' [*Mark* 7:1-2]. Now 'defiled' is exactly the same word that is translated in Romans 14:14 as 'unclean'. The people thought that our Lord was breaking the law, so he went on to explain what He meant: 'Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him' – make him unclean or common – 'but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man' [*Mark* 7:15].

And as we have seen, our Lord repeated that explanation when He was preparing Peter to go to the house of Cornelius. In answer to Peter's doubts, He said, 'What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common' [*Acts* 10:15]. Something has happened that has changed these ceremonial laws. You must not go on thinking in your old Jewish terms.

This is still more explicit in the teaching of the various epistles of the Apostle Paul. We see it in essence not only in Romans 14, but also in 1 Corinthians 8, where it is presented quite clearly. Furthermore, it comes again in 1 Corinthians 10, especially in verses 26 and 28: 'For the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof... But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof.' That is simply another way of saying that nothing is unclean in and of itself.

Then, in writing to Timothy, Paul says:

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing

spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer [1 Tim. 4:1-5].

That is another way of saying the same thing. And this teaching is again repeated in Paul's words to Titus: 'Unto the pure all things are pure' [Titus 1:15].

So the teaching can be summed up like this: first and foremost we must realize that the distinction that was drawn in the Levitical law was not based on the nature of things in and of themselves, but God had determined and chosen to make this distinction in order that He might discipline and govern His people. In other words, the prohibition against eating pork, for instance, was not because there was anything wrong with pork, but because God had decided that that particular meat should not be eaten by the people.

Now you see the importance of this? God, as Judge and Ruler of the universe, has a perfect right to say that we are not to do certain things. You find that in the Garden of Eden. Why were Adam and Eve commanded not to eat the fruit of that one particular tree? It was not because there was anything wrong with it in itself – any other tree might have been chosen – but God, in order to test Adam and Eve in this period of probation, gave this command. It was his way of governing and proving. So I say again, we must be clear that the things that were prohibited were not prohibited because they were unclean in and of themselves. Go through the list of foods, the division between clean and unclean. You and I today eat all of them. Why? Because we are acting on the principle taught here by the great Apostle.

Second: Christian people are not bound by the ceremonial law that was given by God through Moses to the children of Israel: all that has now ended.

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Third: we must never base our refusal to do certain things on the idea that these things are evil or wrong in and of themselves.

Now at the risk of being misunderstood, I will illustrate that third principle.

Take the whole question of sex. There have been Christian people, and there may still be some, who regard sex as evil. There are, indeed, Christians who seem, at times, to have regarded the very body as evil. But that is wrong. The human body is not evil – it is created by God. Sex is not evil; there is nothing wrong with it in and of itself. It is God-created. If we denounce either the body or sex as being inherently, essentially, wrong, we are being utterly wrong ourselves and we are guilty of heresy.

But let me go further, and here is where misunderstanding comes in. If we, as Christians, do not drink alcoholic beverages, we must not say that it is because all alcoholic drinks are bad. The Scriptures themselves say that wine ‘makes glad the heart of man’ [*Psa.* 104:15]. So we must not say that wine in and of itself is evil. Yet Christians have often said this, and expect a Christian preacher to speak on temperance platforms in terms of the evil effects of alcohol upon the body, and so on. But in the light of biblical teaching, that view is quite wrong. There is a good Christian reason for teaching temperance, but that is not it.

It is exactly the same with tobacco. Tobacco is a plant. It has not been produced by man, it is a part of the earth, and we are told, ‘the earth is the LORD’s, and the fulness thereof’ [*Psa.* 24:1]. ‘There is nothing unclean of itself’, and that is true of nicotine. So we must be clear that if we do not indulge in these things, and if we exhort others not to, we must give the right reasons. It is the abuse of these things that is wrong, not the things themselves: it is the abuse, the inordinate use of sex; it is the abuse of alcohol; it is the abuse of tobacco. That is the principle we must hold on to. So let us be clear in what we say and in the reasons we give. The Apostle himself will do this, as we shall see.

So my final comment now is that when you read the decision of the council at Jerusalem, as it is recorded in Acts 15, you

must realize that it was a temporary concession. If you do not say that, you will have to say that the Apostle Paul is here contradicting the decision of the council. Speaking for the council, James said, 'Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: but that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood' [Acts 15:19-20]. But here Paul is saying that nothing is unclean. Even blood, therefore, is not unclean, and there is nothing wrong in eating it.

You have to say there is a contradiction, unless you notice James' words: 'For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day' [Acts 15:21]. This was a kind of temporary legislation to deal with immaturity and weakness in understanding the faith, especially on the part of Christians who were Jews. There is thus no real contradiction. Here in Romans 14:14, the Apostle is enunciating the great general principle, and this is right: this is what the coming of our Lord has brought about.

But do not jump to the conclusion that you can therefore always eat anything you like, whenever you like, because Paul immediately adds, 'but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.' We will go on in the next study to see why the Apostle makes this addition. But as to the principle itself, I repeat that the Apostle comes down without any hesitation at all. He knows with absolute certainty, and he has been persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself. The stronger brother is actually right, but it does not of necessity follow that he can put that knowledge into practice.

Eleven

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Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of.

Romans 14:13–16

We have seen that Paul is saying in this passage that he is certain that nothing is unclean of itself. I illustrated this by referring to the fact that in the history of the church, some Christians have regarded the body as unclean. But that is pagan, not Christian teaching. Similarly, I said that there is nothing wrong in sex, in and of itself.

Now I trust that nobody misunderstood me. I did not mean that therefore sex is always permissible. All I am saying is that the Christian who thinks that sex is inherently sinful is wrong. As Paul points out to Timothy, there were people who, misunderstanding the teaching of our Lord, said that it was wrong for a Christian ever to get married [1 Tim. 4]. But there is nothing sinful in sex in itself.

There is abundant teaching in the Scriptures, Old Testament and New, that tells us how Christian men and women are to use and to govern and to order their bodies – how they are to eat, how they are to drink, and how they are to use the gift of

sex – all these gifts of God. It is a universal principle that nothing in itself is unclean. But having said that, says the Apostle, I must add this ...

So you see how the argument continues and develops. Here is my governing principle – I must never do anything that is a stumbling block or a hindrance or an offence to my brother. Now let us suppose that I am a strong Christian in the early church, strong in the faith, strong in my understanding, and I say, 'It's quite clear to me that the ceremonial aspect of the Mosaic law has come to an end and there is no reason now why I should not eat pork or ham or any meat that comes from the pig. Moreover, I feel I have a perfect right to eat even this meat that has been offered to idols in the pagan temples. I know that the idol is non-existent. There is only one God, these others are not gods. There is nothing wrong with this meat and therefore I am entitled to eat it.'

Then again, I look at these various days that, according to the law, must be observed, and I say, 'That is part of the old Levitical dispensation and it has come to an end. I am free from all that because my principle is, and I can see it quite clearly, that these were temporary rules and regulations imposed by God on the people to mark them out from every other people. But this has finished. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" [*Gal. 3:28*]. Now I am strong in my understanding of the Christian teaching, and, therefore, I see that the only holy day I have to keep is the seventh day – and I choose to keep the first day of the week, the day our Lord rose from the dead, as the Sabbath.'

But now wait a minute, says Paul. Before you go on to say that you are going to eat all these meats, remember your great principle. You see this issue quite clearly, but does everybody else? Does your brother see it? Now listen: 'I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.'

This is very wonderful, is it not? The Greek word translated 'esteemeth' is often translated as 'reckon'. You find it in the

eighth chapter of this Epistle, in verse 18: 'For I *reckon* that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.' It refers to an opinion at which you arrive as the result of thinking and reasoning. So the Apostle is saying that there are some Christians who have really considered this question; they have thought it out as best they can and they have come to the conclusion that these meats that have been offered in the idol temples are unclean. That is their considered opinion. Now, says the Apostle, all I am saying is that though you who are strong in your understanding know that they are quite wrong, you nevertheless must recognize that this is the conclusion to which they have come. So the emphasis here is this: to those people, the food is unclean.

Let us be clear about this: the Apostle is still saying that actually the meat is not unclean in and of itself, but because this man thinks it is, because that is his opinion, then as far as he is concerned, it is unclean. This is a vital principle. Paul is telling us that the governing factor is not the fact that this man is mistaken. What is to govern us is the fact that he is a brother – a mistaken brother, a defective brother, say what you like – but still a brother. And though we are certain that the man is wrong, we must nevertheless be governed, up to a point, at any rate, by his position.

Paul is thus appealing to us never to coerce this brother, never to ride roughshod over him. Of course, we must do all we can to persuade him, to educate him and to enlighten him, we must do our utmost to bring him to what we regard as the right and true understanding in this matter, but we must recognize that it is not only *our* opinion that is important. I must not only consider what I know, but what my brother knows. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 10:29: 'Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other.'

This is just a continuation and an application of the whole idea of Christian people, the members of the church, being members of a great family together. Paul says: You must not act as isolated individuals – the strong who are despising the

weak, or the weak judging the strong. You are to advance together.

Now that brings us to the end of that fourteenth verse, and then, in verse 15, Paul applies this principle. Is it not wonderful to see how he works it out? He does not just tell us what to do, he always tells us first why we must do it. And there is the reason, it is set out for us quite clearly in that fourteenth verse. So, then, in verse 15, Paul says, 'But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.'

In order to discover what this tremendous statement means, let us first get the terms right. As we have seen, the Jews regarded certain meats as unclean, and so did the pagans. But you, says Paul, do not, and you are now eating these meats. So the words 'with thy meat' mean, 'by your eating of these particular meats that to them are unclean'. That is the first expression.

The second term is 'grieved': 'If thy brother be *grieved* ...' This, I think, has two main meanings, both of which are important. The first is that your brother is made uneasy, he is hurt and troubled, he is confused and distressed by what you are doing. Here is a conscientious Christian, a true Christian, as definitely a Christian as anybody else, one who is received by God, as we are told in the third verse. But his understanding is limited, perhaps because of a lack of teaching or because of one of the other factors that we considered earlier. When he sees you eating these meats, he says, 'I don't understand. How can you do it? It's wrong. It's terrible. I thought you were a Christian, but look what you're doing – you're eating unclean meat!' He suffers not only in his mind, but in his spirit and heart. He is thoroughly unhappy. That is a part of the meaning of the word 'grieved'.

But I have no hesitation in agreeing with those who say that 'grieved' is a strong expression and includes a further element. The weaker brother, seeing that you keep on doing this thing that he regards as wrong, begins to do it himself. Yet, though he does it, he feels condemned for what he is doing.

Now why do I suggest this further meaning? First, I think that we are compelled by the Apostle's words later on in the chapter. Take the twentieth verse, which is, more or less, the fifteenth verse put the other way round: 'For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.' So the grieving must include the fact that the weaker brother, because he sees you doing this thing, begins to say, 'If it's right for him, it's right for me', and yet he knows it is not. He is doubtful and unhappy and has a sense of condemnation.

Then take verse 22: 'Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.' 'He alloweth', as we shall see, means that he does the thing, and yet as he does it, he is under condemnation.

Furthermore, in 1 Corinthians 8 the same statement comes again – and is a further reason for giving this additional interpretation to the meaning of the word 'grieve'. In 1 Corinthians 8:6–7, Paul is once more showing that there is a division or distinction among Christians. He writes, 'To us' – that is, people who understand – 'there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. Howbeit there is not in every man' – here, Paul is only talking about Christians, remember – 'that knowledge.' In other words, there are some Christians who are not yet quite clear in their minds, or fully satisfied, that there is no such thing as an idol god. They know that God is above everybody else and beyond all others, but they have not fully worked it out, they have not yet fully comprehended it, and they still have a kind of feeling that the idols are gods.

Now I take it that none of us is in trouble over this. Very often, you find Christians in this country, and still more, perhaps, in certain other countries where people lack the educational facilities that we have, who, though they have become Christians, may still be very superstitious. I have known many people who are truly converted, truly Christian, who have still taken some time to see through and get rid of

various old superstitions in which they have been brought up. Of course, you must not say that such people are not Christians – they are, they are truly saved – but their understanding is a little bit lacking.

‘Howbeit’, Paul continues, ‘there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled’ [1 Cor. 8:7]. They were eating the meat, but they had a sense of condemnation because they were not clear about it in their minds. As Christian people, we are all guilty, at times, of doing things mainly or chiefly because other people do them. We conform to an established pattern and habit. And that was happening in the early church. The weak were copying the strong, but they were under terrible condemnation.

How important it is that we should have a true understanding of the nature of the Christian life. Nothing is so wrong as to think that all of us, because we are born again, are absolutely equal in every respect. It is not true, and the Scriptures here are proving that to us; and that is what makes the position of the stronger person such a responsible one. He can become a stumbling block or a hindrance to the weaker brother simply by not considering him.

Paul writes in the tenth verse of 1 Corinthians 8: ‘For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol’s temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols?’ That is exactly what I have been trying to say. So I include in this word ‘grieved’ the actual eating of the meats offered to the idols. But let us be clear about this – the grief does not consist in the eating but comes in because the eating is done with a bad conscience and under condemnation.

Here, then, is a stronger Christian doing something that grieves the weaker Christian. What is the Apostle’s verdict on this stronger brother? The first thing he says is this: If you do that, ‘now walkest thou not charitably’. He does not so much say that you are wrong as that you are not being influenced and governed by the great law of love; you are behaving in a selfish manner.

Here are you, says Paul, with your great enlightenment and understanding. You can see that this action is quite all right, but because of that, you say, 'What does it matter what anybody else says? I have a right to do what I want to do and what I am doing is perfectly lawful' – and then you do it. Now look here, you may be strong in doctrine, but you are very weak in love. There is a higher principle even than being right, and that is to be charitable, to be loving. The spirit is always more important than the understanding. The heart, in this sense, is always more important than the understanding. Though a man may have perfect understanding, if he behaves in this matter simply because it is clear to him, he is violating the most important law of all, the law of love, the law of charity, the law of consideration for others.

So that is Paul's first verdict. He says: I do not care how strong you are, all I know is that you are selfish and self-centred. 'We know that we all have knowledge,' he says to the Corinthians. 'Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth' – builds up [1 Cor. 8:1]. Head knowledge 'puffs up'; we are full of knowledge, and we can be a grievous offence to our brother. 'Charity!' This is what matters. It is not puffed up like air in a balloon. It builds up, starts with a good foundation, and continues in the same way. That is Paul's contrast and may God give us to see this so clearly that we shall ever remember it and ever be governed by it.

But there is worse to come. Paul goes on to say that when you ignore your brother's views in this way, you are not only behaving in an uncharitable manner towards your brother, but you are endangering your brother's whole position. 'Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.' This is a most difficult statement, in many ways one of the most difficult we have so far encountered in the whole of this Epistle. What does it mean?

Well, start with this word 'destroy'. Everybody is agreed that this is a very strong word, and this is proved by the ways in which it is used elsewhere in the New Testament. Let me give you a well-known illustration: 'God so loved the world, that

he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not *perish*' – that is exactly the same word [John 3:16].

There is another example in verse 12 of the second chapter of this Epistle to the Romans: 'For as many as have sinned without law shall also *perish* without law' – 'be destroyed without law'. So you see it is a very important word. We have it again in 1 Corinthians 8:11: 'And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother *perish*' – exactly the same Greek word – 'for whom Christ died.' And the final example is in 2 Corinthians 4:3: 'But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are *lost*' – perishing, on the way to destruction.

So what does 'destroy' mean in Romans 14:15? Now I want to try to show you that it obviously cannot mean that your brother is destroyed eternally, in a spiritual sense – it does not mean his everlasting and final perdition and damnation – but it means that you are putting him on the road to ruin, on the road that leads to ruin and destruction. That is the effect you are having upon this weaker brother when, for example, you eat this meat.

It works in this way. The first thing your conduct does is make your brother dispute his conscience. He begins to argue like this: 'Well, they are stronger than I am, they are longer in the Christian life than I am, so if it is right for them, then who am I to say it is not right for me? Now my conscience tells me that it is not but ...' And that is already a very bad position to be in.

But it does not stop at that. The second stage is that this brother begins to tamper with his conscience. You can question your conscience without trying to change it. But this man now argues and reasons with his conscience. He puts up positions that he thinks will satisfy it. He is playing with his conscience, instead of listening to its decrees.

But the descent does not stop even at that. The third step is that the man actually does something against his conscience. Though his conscience tells him that an action is wrong, nevertheless he does it. And this, to the Apostle, is one of the most serious things that you can ever do.

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Have you noticed the emphasis that Paul, in particular, puts upon the conscience? Take, for example, what he says to Timothy. He is giving Timothy instructions on how to handle certain people who were causing great trouble in the early church because they were going round as law-givers, imposing a law upon the people. They were saying, 'It is not enough that you believe the gospel, you must listen to what we are saying and live in the way we decree.' So Paul says, 'From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling; desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm' [1 Tim. 1:6-7]. They do not understand what they are saying.

Then Paul continues: 'But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient' [verses 8-9]. In effect, Paul is saying, 'These people have never understood the meaning and the purpose of the law.' And in verse 5 of the same chapter, Paul tells us what this purpose is – and this is what I particularly wish to draw to your attention.

In verse 5, Paul writes, 'Now the end of the commandment' – the whole object of the commandments, the whole object of all the teaching is – what? Notice what he puts first – 'charity out of a pure heart.' Love! This is what comes first. God's law, properly understood, is never something harsh, legalistic, negative and prohibitive. God's law is essentially positive. Everything that God calls us to do is positive, it is for our benefit. Everything that God does to us, and has done for us in His Son, is for the purpose of bringing us into a condition of love, and of sympathy, and of understanding – 'Charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned.'

The words 'faith unfeigned' mean the very matter that we are dealing with here in these verses in Romans 14. They mean knowledge of the faith, an unadulterated understanding of the faith, a faith that is honest and without pretence. But, you notice, Paul does not start with that – he ends with it. The first great factor is 'charity out of a pure heart', the second is 'a good

conscience', and last comes this true, unfeigned, clear knowledge and understanding of the teaching.

There again Paul has shown us the vital place that conscience must always play in these matters. With this great principle of love for one another, you will always be careful not to offend the conscience of another. The conscience must always be a good conscience. You must never produce a bad conscience in your brother.

Then at the end of this same first chapter of 1 Timothy, the Apostle puts this teaching in a still more striking manner. He says: You must hold the faith [verse 19]. Timothy was troubled by people who were teaching false doctrines and denying the faith. So the Apostle says, 'This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare' [verse 18]. How are you to 'war a good warfare'? In this way: 'Holding faith'! Whatever the heretics may say, hold on to the faith. But, he says, that is not enough. Be careful: 'Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith' – in connection with the faith – 'have made shipwreck' [verse 19].

You see the illustration? Paul compares a man or woman in the Christian life to a ship. There is a great engine here, and wonderful furnishings. Here is this ship, so perfectly equipped, steaming across the ocean. But there is one very vital instrument, or one very vital part of this ship – what is that? It is the rudder, and if you ignore the rudder, if you do not keep your rudder in order, the very fact that you have a powerful engine may be a positive danger to you. If the rudder is not working, you will find yourself shipwrecked.

And that is exactly what these people are doing, says Paul. They are putting all their emphasis upon the faith, 'the unfeigned faith'. They are 'holding the faith', certainly, but they have forgotten the conscience; and because they have forgotten the conscience they are in terrible trouble, they have shipwrecked this faith. Now you cannot imagine anything put more strongly than that. Paul actually gives the conscience the dignity – he is talking about Christian people, remember – of

being comparable to the function that is served by a rudder in a ship.

Now I hope to elaborate later upon the place of conscience in the life of the Christian. But for now, let us just complete this particular argument. You have here this great statement that you are not to put a fellow-Christian who is weaker than you in the faith on a course that will lead to shipwreck, and if you do something that makes your weaker brother question, tamper with, or act against his conscience, that is likely to be the result.

Let me read this fifteenth verse again: 'But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.' Paul is ridiculing the position of this stronger brother and this is the supreme argument. The Apostle says: The Lord Jesus Christ thought so much about this brother of yours that He actually sacrificed His life for him. He did not say, 'My life is my own, I am going to hold on to it. Why should I give my life for this man?' Our Lord 'thought it not robbery to be equal with God' [*Phil.* 2:6], and if He had considered Himself only, He would have remained in heaven; He would never have been born as the babe of Bethlehem; the incarnation would never have taken place; there would not be such a thing as Christmas.

Paul says: Your argument is, 'I see these things quite clearly and why shouldn't I do what I see clearly? I have a perfect right to eat this meat, so why shouldn't I?' But thank God that He is not as you are, and that the Son of God is not as you are. The Son of God did not consider Himself and His rights and prerogatives. No, He put them all on one side. He even died, He gave up His life, He sacrificed it, that you and your brother might be saved. Very well then, for the sake of your brother for whom your Lord gave His life, is it asking too much of you to forego the eating of these meats to which you are entitled?

And so Paul shows the absurdity of the stronger Christian's attitude. The Apostle is still arguing from the great principle of love. He says: You are cavilling and hesitating about making a sacrifice of your rights for the sake of your weaker brother. You

do not know how to think straight. You are thinking like an intellectual machine. You have no feeling, no heart; you have no compassion or sympathy; you simply lay down the law as you see it and let the others get on with it. Oh, Paul says, how we should thank God that the Son of God did not think like that or behave like that! If he had, none of us would be Christians. If He gave up His life for this brother, you should give up your meat for your brother, and give up anything else that you can, in order to help him.

So the great Apostle is able to rise almost to the heights of his Lord and Master. Not quite, of course, because nobody ever can. But that is what the Master did, that is what the Son of God did: He considered not Himself. 'He humbled himself' – He took the form of man – 'and was made in the likeness of men'. He humbled Himself still further, 'and took upon him the form of a servant'. He went even beyond that – 'he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross' – for us! [*Phil. 2:7-8*]. He loved us so much that He gave his life for us!

So, says Paul in his letter to the Corinthians – and what a glorious statement it is! – 'Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend' [*1 Cor. 8:13*]. That is it! He is doing his utmost to behave as his blessed Lord and Master had for him, 'who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious' [*1 Tim. 1:13*]. While Paul was like that, Christ died for him! That is why he will eat no meat as long as he lives rather than cause a weaker brother to fall.

Let us remember this as we think of the birth of the Son of God,¹ the incarnation, and all that it involved. This is the supreme illustration of love, and this is the love that we are to apply in our daily lives as we live with our fellow-Christians, brothers and sisters together in the family of God.

¹ This sermon was preached on 15 December 1967.

Twelve

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I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of.

Romans 14:14–16

In these three verses, the Apostle develops the great rule that in the Christian life we must never merely consider ourselves, but also always consider our brother, our fellow-Christian. We must never do anything without bearing in mind the possible effect of our actions upon this other Christian, especially if he happens to be a weak brother – weak, that is, in the sense of his understanding of the Christian faith. Paul has told us that if we do not heed this principle, we are not walking in a charitable manner, we are not walking in love. But more than that, he tells us that we will be doing something that is very dangerous for the weaker brother because we will be doing great harm to his spiritual life and will be putting him on the road to destruction. And above all, the Apostle has reminded us that the Lord Jesus Christ died for the weaker brother. If our Lord gave up His life for him, surely we can afford to be loving and charitable with regard to these matters that are entirely indifferent.

We now come to the final point in the development of this particular argument, and that is the statement in the sixteenth verse: ‘Let not then your good be evil spoken of.’ By ‘good’,

Paul means something that is right, in and of itself, and, specifically, something that is good for the stronger brother. It is good for him both to eat these meats that have been offered to idols, and no longer to observe the special religious days.

But Paul does not confine his argument only to rules about food and holy days. He is making a comprehensive statement with regard to anything in the Christian life, and in connection with the Christian teaching, about which we have been enlightened, and understand to be good. If it seems good to us, then it is good, and we must never allow what we do to be spoken of in an evil manner. So this verse is a summary, a kind of conclusion to this bit of argumentation.

Paul is, however, referring to actions that, though good in themselves, and good for you, lead to harm in others, and lead them to say that you are guilty of sin and wrongdoing. This exhortation means that the fact that an action is not bad, or may even be good in itself, is not a reason for saying that it is therefore always right for us to do it. This is very important. The danger – and the devil always encourages it – is that the stronger brother will say, ‘This whole matter is quite ridiculous! There’s nothing wrong with all this, and if there’s nothing wrong, am I to be held back by these stupid people?’ And he will then feel that he has a right to ignore these particular rules.

But the Apostle says you must not do that, you must not act simply for yourself in this intensely personal manner; you must bring in these further considerations. If you go ahead, you will cause talk and gossip and scandal, and your fellow-members of the church will say, ‘Look at him – he’s not living the true Christian life. He’s guilty of licence.’ In other words, because of your actions, confusion will be introduced, and something that is excellent and right in itself will become a means of harm not only to your weaker brother, but to the whole church and to the cause of our blessed Lord and Saviour.

Perhaps I can best illustrate this principle by showing its importance for anybody engaged in foreign mission work. Here they are, missionaries in an alien culture that is entirely different from everything that they have ever known. They are

preaching the gospel and under their ministrations people are converted and join the church. But as we have been seeing in the case of the early church, the new converts are not immediately free from their cultural background and outlook. Now the danger is that the missionaries, who have probably been Christians for many years, will seek to impose western ideas upon this other culture. They may try to press upon people who are just entering the Christian life the customs and habits of people who have been brought up in a country where the gospel has been preached for years, and where there is a general Christian tradition.

Now this is a very great temptation and danger. It is the business of every missionary to learn about the local conditions and the local culture, because – I am speaking in a non-Christian manner for a moment – there are many practices that are perfectly harmless and legitimate in this country, and in western nations, that are regarded as simply terrible by people brought up in other traditions and cultures. In the same way, some of the things that people in other countries regard as of value, we think of as being almost ridiculous.

Now it is not for the one to judge the other; what is important is that we should recognize that there is a difference. You may have heard missionaries on furlough telling stories about differing cultural expectations. For example, in some countries, your host or hostess will feel very insulted, and lose face, if you start drinking your tea or begin to speak before they do. As a result, it may lead to trouble in their Christian lives.

That is the kind of thing that the Apostle has in his mind here. It is always the business of the Christian – and especially the stronger Christian – to discover the outlook and the mentality and the attitude of others and never to do anything that puts them in difficulties. If he does not, he is causing his good to be evil spoken of. It becomes a cause of scandal and difficulty, and leads to much talking and disputation, actually doing positive harm.

That, therefore, is the first great principle. But we do not leave it at that. That is, in a sense, negative – ‘Let not then your good

be evil spoken of.' We must go beyond this. And the ultimate, the final summing up, of this teaching is given in 1 Corinthians 10. Here the Apostle is dealing with exactly the same question, only he goes into it in yet greater thoroughness. He says, in verse 29, 'Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?' That statement means: Do not exercise your liberty in such a way that it comes under the condemnation of this other man's conscience. To the other man your action is wrong, and he condemns it.

Now people have sometimes misunderstood that statement, seeing it as a kind of protest. They think that the strong brother is protesting and saying, 'But surely this man has no right to condemn my liberty. Am I to be held down?' But Paul does not mean that at all. He is saying: It is all right for you, and you are at liberty to do it, but do not do it if it means that this other weaker brother's conscience is going to condemn it.

Verse 30 repeats the same point: 'For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?' I must not do it, if it leads to my being 'evil spoken of'. When Paul says, 'I take it by grace', he means, 'I give thanks for it', and he repeats this: 'for that which I give thanks'. This is the whole thrust of his argument. So there, in 1 Corinthians 10:29-30, he is elaborating what we have here in Romans 14:16.

And then in verse 31, Paul sums up his argument: 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.' That is the secret, that is the principle. Do not think so much in terms of right and wrong, even, but, 'Do all to the glory of God.' Do not stand on your rights. These matters are all indifferent, you should never make them more important than they are, so as to turn them into matters of contention and striving.

Then, negatively, in verse 32: 'Give none offence, neither to the Jews nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.' The world outside is divided into Jew and Gentile – do not offend any of them – and do not offend anyone in the church.

And Paul ends with his own personal example: 'Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but

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the profit of many, that they may be saved' [verse 33]. This is one of the Apostle's magnificent statements. There is a parallel to this verse, as we have seen, in the last verse of 1 Corinthians 8: 'Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.' But here in 1 Corinthians 10 this principle is expressed in a much more glorious way: 'Do all to the glory of God. Give none offence ... not seeking mine own profit' – that is what is so wrong, this selfish, self-centredness, this self-interest – 'but the profit of many, that they may be saved.'

Verse 16 in Romans 14 brings us to the end of this particular section of Paul's argument, but before we go on to the seventeenth verse, we must turn to certain vital matters that are raised here in this subsection [verses 14–16]. This teaching is most important, as you can see. The Roman Catholic Church was in trouble, as other Churches were, because of the failure of Christian people, particularly stronger Christians, to understand the meaning of this teaching here.

So, first of all, we must note the importance that the Apostle attaches to the conscience in the Christian life both here and, still more clearly, in 1 Corinthians 10. Paul's whole case, in a sense, has rested on this premise: 'To him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.' In other words, if a man's conscience tells him that a thing is unclean, then to him it is unclean and he must always listen to his conscience. That is basic.

Now I want to show you the importance of this teaching about conscience, because, very often, it comes as a great surprise to people. They can understand non-Christian men and women being governed by the conscience but are often surprised that the same thing is said about the Christian.

What is the conscience? Well, the very word tells us what it is: 'con' means 'together with', and 'science' means 'knowing'. So the word 'conscience' means 'a knowing together or along with', 'understanding, knowing, together with something else'. In all languages – take Greek, Latin, or any other language – the word always has this same basic idea. Now there has been

great discussion about this 'something else'. Of course, your opinion will depend ultimately upon whether or not you believe the Scriptures and their teaching, and whether or not you believe in God. It is quite clear from the teaching of Scripture that 'conscience' means 'knowing together with God', or 'knowing together with the teaching given to us by God'.

We have already come across this definition in the second chapter of Romans, where the Apostle says, 'For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another' [verses 14-15]. God has put His law into the hearts of all men and women. It does not matter whether or not they recognize it, it is there. So you really can describe and define the obedience to the conscience as a man or woman going along with what God has implanted within them.

In Romans 2, Paul is saying that in the case of the Jews, God gave this law in an explicit manner in the Ten Commandments. He did not do that for the Gentiles, but the Gentiles, like the Jews, had the law in their hearts. That, then, is the essential meaning of conscience and the Apostle shows us very plainly that he regards listening to the conscience as being most vital in the Christian life. He has a number of terms that he uses with regard to the conscience, and it is very important that we pay attention to every one.

First, the Apostle talks about a 'good' conscience. You will find this in Acts 23:1, where Paul is defending himself before a court: 'And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day'; and this phrase appears in many other places.

Paul also talks about a conscience 'void of offence': 'Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men' [Acts 24:16]. He means that a good conscience is a condition in which people are not condemned by their conscience, because they are acting

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according to it. And Paul is claiming that even before his conversion he always obeyed his conscience – he was not unhappy, his conscience was not troubling him.

We have already come across another term linked with the conscience, and that is in Romans 9: 'I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost' [verse 1]. The conscience 'bears witness'. You think, and your conscience says, 'Yes.' Or you think, and your conscience may say, 'No.'

Then we have a number of very interesting statements about the conscience in the First Epistle to the Corinthians where Paul constantly talks about a weak conscience:

But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled [1 Cor. 8:6–7].

This comes again in the tenth and the twelfth verses:

For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols ... But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.

And the same expression is repeated in that tenth chapter of 1 Corinthians.

Then the Apostle refers to the conscience twice in 1 Timothy 1: 'Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned' [verse 5]; 'Holding faith, and a good conscience', and we have already explained what the Apostle means when he says, 'which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck' [verse 19].

But there is another interesting reference in 1 Timothy 3:9: 'Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.' That is a fascinating expression. It is as if the Apostle is referring to the conscience as a sort of chalice in which this precious, wonderful thing, 'the mystery of the faith', is held and protected and carried. The expression 'a pure conscience' means, again, a conscience that has not in any way been tampered with.

Then take 1 Timothy 4:1-2: 'Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron.' In Titus 1:15, Paul talks about people having their consciences 'defiled'. And, finally, we find a reference in Hebrews 10:22 to 'an evil conscience': 'having our hearts sprinkled' – and cleansed – 'from an evil conscience'.

You can see, then, the significance and importance that the New Testament attaches to the conscience in the life of the Christian. What do these various references tell us? Let me give you a kind of summary of the teaching. Everybody born into this world has a conscience. It is something which, in a sense, is independent of us and speaks independently of us. That is why our consciences can be a great nuisance and a great annoyance to us. We would all be much happier if we did not have consciences. We decide something and conscience says, 'No'; but we do it and conscience condemns us; and the terrible problem is how to silence it.

It is quite clear that we can act against the conscience. It cannot force us to listen to it. It gives its verdict but it cannot coerce us. When we act against our conscience, we have what Paul calls a 'bad' conscience. A fight then goes on because, whether we like it or not, the conscience will condemn us.

But – and this is where the serious aspect of this whole matter comes in – it is possible for you and me to 'defile' the conscience. And that means that, by maltreating it, we can lessen its acuteness, its sensitivity. This is most terrible, but it is true. We do have an influence upon the conscience and if we persist in disobeying it, and in filling our minds and our thoughts with

that which is condemned by the conscience, we can cause it to become defiled.

Now, unfortunately, we can see this illustrated very clearly in the lives of men and women. In the biographies we read of people who started out with sensitive consciences, high moral concepts of life and of living, and then we see how such people, perhaps as the result of drink or drugs, gradually defile their consciences. There is no doubt at all about this. They are not aware that they are doing this, but their actions cause their moral judgments to change. That is what I meant by the expression a 'defiled' conscience. It is there, as I pointed out, particularly in the Epistle to Titus: 'Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled' [*Titus* 1:15]. It is very mysterious, but it is true. This most wonderful thing that is in the natural man or woman can be defiled in that way.

But that is not all, as we see in that extraordinary image in 1 Timothy 4: 'Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron' [*1 Tim.* 4:2]. This no longer happens, now that we have asepsis and various disinfectants, but in times past when an operation was performed on an animal or, indeed, on a person, the surgeon or vet would often avoid infection by heating an iron on the fire, and then using the hot iron to seal up open blood vessels, arteries and veins – in this way, the wound was 'seared'.

But, of course, at the same time, this hot iron also killed the nerves and rendered that part of the body insensitive, and it is this idea in particular that the Apostle has in mind here. Imagine a sensitive surface with nerves and nerve endings responsive to the slightest touch and feeling a sensation of pain. Then you bring this hot iron and seal off these nerve roots so that the area becomes hard and calloused, and you can even pinch it and feel nothing; stick a pin into it and you feel nothing. And, says the Apostle, there are people who have done that with their consciences. They no longer feel anything; they can do anything. They can do the most terrible things and they are

not aware that they are doing any wrong at all. They have seared their consciences with a hot iron.

This is the result of a conscious effort, and there are such people, alas, who deliberately defy God and man. They say, 'Evil be thou my good'; they recognize no moral standards whatsoever. That is how modern men and women sear their consciences with a hot iron, and in the end they reach a stage in which they really cannot help it. At first, the conscience went on speaking and they had a fight but they persisted with the application of the hot iron until the conscience became so calloused that they felt nothing at all and had become amoral.

Now you can see the application of all this to much that is happening at the present time, and there is a sense in which it behoves us all to know something about it. We must realize that some drug addicts get into a condition in which they really are not responsible for what they are doing, and if you treat them as people whom you hold responsible, you can be cruel to them. But if you understand the condition, then you are able to treat them in the appropriate manner. You have to realize that these various drugs and other things can sear the human conscience so that these people arrive in the terrible, tragic state in which they have lost all idea of morality. They cannot think morally; they are utterly debased; they are virtually without a conscience at all.

These are terrible matters but I am putting it all before you in order that you may realize the significance that this Apostle in particular attaches to the conscience in the life of the Christian. Let me put it like this. The conscience serves two exceptionally vital functions. First, it is the greatest safeguard possible against mere theoretical opinions about truth, and a mere intellectual interest in truth. We must always be on our guard against the danger of being a theoretical or an intellectual Christian. Of course, such persons are really not Christians at all, but they think they are. And the danger of veering on to this purely intellectual side and forgetting the wholeness of the Christian life is a danger that besets true Christians.

Liberty and Conscience

Here is one way in which this danger manifests itself: it is possible to make a wrong use of the doctrine of justification by faith only. Christians do something that they should not do, and their consciences speak to them. But immediately they reply, 'Yes, yes, but it's all right, my sins are covered. I'm justified by faith, you know. You're trying to make me think that I'm going to justify myself by works again.' So they use the doctrine of justification by faith to give themselves peace and ease, almost to justify what they have done, or, at any rate, to say that it does not matter very much because they are standing in grace and by faith.

But our conscience will not let us do that, and we must avoid the danger of arguing with the conscience. You should never argue with your conscience in terms of justification by faith only. Now let us be clear about this. You should never allow yourself to get into condemnation – that is, you should never doubt whether you are a Christian at all, you should never let the fact that you have sinned make you doubt whether you are saved. That is always wrong. But I am not talking about that. I am talking about people who heal themselves a little bit too easily and quickly when they fall into sin by immediately bringing in the doctrine of justification by faith without allowing conscience to do its real work in them. That is one of the dangers.

Conscience will always act and that is why we should always pay careful attention to it. It will safeguard you against invoking justification, as if it were a legal matter pure and simple to put yourself right and at ease. Do not do that; listen to the conscience.

The theoretical Christian is also in danger of indolence but the conscience is a great safeguard against laziness in the Christian life. The theoretical attitude always tries to get us to be satisfied with an intellectual understanding and enjoyment of the truth – enjoying reading books about it, enjoying listening to expositions of the Scripture, and so on – without applying that truth. Now conscience will come in at that point and it will upbraid; conscience will attack and say, 'You must not be

so easily satisfied, you must not be content only to know the theory, there is another side. What are you doing in practice? You are a Christian – what are you doing with your life in this world? Your conscience will upbraid you. In this way, it is of inestimable value. It will keep you right on the doctrines of justification and sanctification, and it will see to it that your whole self is always engaged – not only the mind but also the heart and the will.

So conscience is here in the Christian, and that is why the Apostle uses these different terms with respect to it. All these people who have been abusing their consciences, or have a bad conscience, or have become amoral, are like that because they have not been listening to their consciences. They have not been ‘holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience’. Or, as Paul puts it in that first chapter of 1 Timothy: ‘Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck’ [verse 19].

That, then, is the first great work that the conscience does in the Christian, and the second is this: conscience is the greatest safeguard of all against a false spirituality. Now this is really what Paul is saying when he writes to Timothy:

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron – *so what do they do?* – forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth [1 Tim. 4:1-3].

Paul is dealing here with a heresy that began to creep into the early church, a heresy that I would describe as a false spirituality. It was known as Gnosticism and those who succumbed to it claimed that they were unusually spiritual. Now Gnostics said that to the truly spiritual man the body was evil, but they differed in their explanation of what this meant for daily life.

Liberty and Conscience

There were two main views. One group said that because the body was evil, sex was evil, and marriage was therefore forbidden. Everything that belonged to the flesh, to the body, was evil and all bodily pleasures should be denied and avoided like the plague. They also said that the bodies of animals were evil, so no meat could be eaten: Christians were to be pure vegetarians.

The second group carried out their belief in a very different manner. They said that the body was evil, so the thing to do was to insult it. And you insulted it and despised it by using it as much as you could. So they were guilty of all sorts of excesses. Peter says of such people:

But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall utterly perish in their own corruption; and shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you; having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin, beguiling unstable souls ... following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness [2 *Pet.* 2:12-15].

You see what they were saying? It does not matter what you do with the body because it is only the body. It does not affect the spirit. All bodily activity is irrelevant. You will find that in his Epistle, Jude deals with exactly the same problem, and it is also referred to in the phrase 'the deeds of the Nicolaitanes' in Revelation 2:6. The people who belonged to this sect practised all kinds of foulness and excess.

So there were two extreme ways of approaching the body, and it was all done in terms of a very exalted and pure spirituality. This teaching played great havoc in the early church and it is a danger that has persisted in the church up to the present time, in the East in particular.

Now the point I am making is that the greatest safeguard against this terrible danger is the conscience. You can listen to people and they will speak in a highly spiritual and devotional manner, and give you the impression that it is wrong to get married. But your conscience will say at once, 'That is not so. God made woman for man. He said, "They shall be one flesh" [Gen. 2:25]. So this view must be wrong.'

If you listen to your conscience, then, you will never be carried away by this specious teaching. And it is exactly the same with regard to eating meat. It is God who has provided it all for us, so that teaching must be wrong. It appears to be so wonderful, so correct, so ultra-spiritual, but your conscience will always guide you.

Or take that other extreme manifestation of spirituality that leads people to say that since the body is not important, it does not matter what you do with it. If you were to listen to these people, your conscience would at once condemn you, and if you did what they told you, it would condemn you still more. Then you would only be able to continue by defiling your conscience, and you would finally have a conscience 'seared with a hot iron'.

So you see what a wonderful thing conscience is. The devil is so subtle that he comes as an angel of light bringing this exalted, ultra-pure, spiritual kind of teaching that makes us say, 'Ah, here are the topmost heights of Christianity!' But if you listen to your conscience whenever you hear such teaching, you will soon discover the specious character of this false teaching.

Thirteen

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I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of.

Romans 14:14–16

We are considering a number of general points that are taught in Paul's argument here, the first of which is the place and the vital importance of the conscience in the life of the Christian. The conscience is our greatest safeguard against error and against a false spirituality, and we must remember that some of the early Christians, because they had forgotten the importance of conscience in connection with faith, had, according to the Apostle, 'made shipwreck' of their faith [1 Tim. 1:19]. That is the first great lesson.

But now we come on to a second matter that is forced upon our consideration, and that is the whole question of the final perseverance of the saints. Or, to put it another way, the possibility of falling from grace. This, again, is an important subject and it is raised acutely by the Apostle's statement at the end of the fifteenth verse: 'Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.' You remember that in our last study we saw that the Apostle puts the same thought in a slightly different form in 1 Corinthians 8:11: 'And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?'

If we look at these statements superficially, the Apostle seems to be saying that by failing to observe what he teaches us about our attitude towards indifferent matters – eating meats offered to idols and the observation of certain days, for example – it is possible for us to cause a man for whom Christ has died to be finally lost. Now that very definitely raises the question: Is it possible for one for whom Christ has died, and who has been born again, to be destroyed and to be finally lost?

Now as we examine this together, let me first get rid of a statement that is very often adduced in connection with this subject but that I suggest to you has nothing at all to do with it. I am referring to a statement in Galatians 5, where the Apostle is again dealing with the question of the Judaizers, who were saying that it was not enough for a man to be a Christian and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, but he had to be circumcised as well. In response, Paul says:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace [*Gal. 5:1-4*].

But to cite Galatians 5:4 in connection with the final destruction of believers is to have a very grievous misunderstanding of Paul's meaning here. The Authorized Version says, 'ye are fallen from grace', but a better translation is, 'ye are fallen away from grace' and the Apostle means that the Judaizers were abandoning the faith position. The message of the gospel is that no one is justified by works, by the deeds of the law. We are justified by faith only. So anybody who tells us that we cannot be a Christian unless we 'add on' something to our belief and final trust and reliance upon the Lord Jesus Christ, is going back under law.

Paul is thus not saying that a man or woman who has been 'in grace' can fall out of it. No, he is saying that as regards your thinking, you have abandoned, 'fallen away from', the grace position, and the grace teaching. And there are many who are still doing this. They say that it is not enough that you should be a believer and trust entirely to Him. They add some of their own regulations and insist that these are essential. But if you take that position, then you must not talk any longer about grace, you are under works, you are under law.

The misunderstanding about Galatians 5:4 is easily cleared up. A seemingly much more difficult type of statement is found in the famous sixth chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame [*Heb. 6:4-6*].

And there is a similar statement in Hebrews 10:26.

Now I do not want to spend time over this, but it seems to me that the only adequate way of dealing with Hebrews 6:4-6 is as follows. First, we must understand that the writer is dealing with a hypothetical position, an 'if' - 'if they shall fall away'. I do not want to put too much weight on that, yet it is in itself an almost sufficient answer.

But, secondly, the really important thing about that passage is that the writer nowhere says that those people had been born again. It is possible for us to have 'tasted of the heavenly gift' and to have experienced 'the powers of the world to come' without being regenerate. This is a phenomenon that happens almost invariably at a time of revival. I have even known such people personally, people who, during the last revival in Wales in 1904/5, came under what I would call 'a general influence of the Spirit' and seemed for the time being to be true and genuine

Christians but who later made it quite obvious that they had only been experiencing some temporary influence of the Spirit, because they went right back and not only showed in their lives that they had never been Christians, but denied the truth entirely.

We must remember that when the Spirit comes in power, He carries a certain number of people with the tide, as it were, and for the time being you cannot tell the difference, but later it is obvious. So I say that it is possible for a person to have many experiences produced by the Holy Spirit without being regenerate, and nowhere are we told in that passage in Hebrews 6 that those people had actually been regenerate.

Let us now pass on to certain other issues. First, how do we deal with apparent contradictions in the Scriptures? The answer is always that the Scripture never contradicts itself – never! It is all of the Spirit. We do not have here the writings and opinions of different men, but one Author throughout. So not only is there no contradiction, there can be no contradiction. It is for us to reconcile the passages that appear on the surface to be contradicting one another.

How do we do that? Now there is an important rule in this matter, which is that whenever you come across a difficulty, you must always start with certainties, with great, explicit, certain statements, and any particular statement must always be considered in relation to them. And even before that, you take what I would call the general tenor, the overwhelming teaching of the whole of Scripture. A great message runs right through from beginning to end of the Scripture and any particular teaching must never contradict that. So you consider your difficulties in the light of these two principles.

So here we are in an apparent difficulty in Romans 14 – how do we deal with it? Well, we must go back to Romans 8, where we find statements like this: ‘And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose’ [verse 28]. Now remember that ‘all things’: it is an absolutely comprehensive term, nothing is left out. Then: ‘For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he

might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified' [verses 29–30]. He *has done it*. The tenses are aorist [past], not future. In the mind and purpose of God this has already happened.

And then the Apostle does what he always does. Having put down this great proposition, he takes it up and works it out in detail: 'What shall we then say to these things?' And the answer is: 'If God be for us, who can be against us?' [verse 31] – and on and on it goes. 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?' [verse 32].

And the Apostle rises to that tremendous conclusion in the last two verses: 'For I am persuaded' – which means, I am certain, it is an absolute certainty – 'that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' [verses 38–39]. Now that is the great statement on this doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints, this doctrine that teaches the absolute assurance of the ultimate arrival in Glory of all who are 'the called according to his purpose'.

There is another great statement also, made by our blessed Lord Himself: 'And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand' [John 10:28].

All that is enough, is it not, to answer those who say, 'But it says here, "Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died." You must take words as they are. It says that by not behaving as we should to our weaker brother, we can destroy him.' All right, take words as they are and here is our Lord saying, 'They shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.' And our Lord continues, 'My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand' [verse 29].

So in Romans 8 and in John 10 we have two controlling statements, which affirm that it is impossible for any child of God ever to perish or to be separated from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord. We have these overwhelming, over-arching statements about the final perseverance of the saints, and the impossibility of their ever falling away or perishing.

Now I have already shown you that you must not take the word 'destroy' in Romans 14:15 and press its meaning too far. Like the word 'perish' in 1 Corinthians 8, it means that you put your brother on the road that eventually leads to destruction. But come, let us work it out further that we may be clear about all this. Why is it impossible that any one of us should be responsible for the everlasting destruction of any one of God's people? Why must we, of necessity, submit to the great assertions, asseverations, of the doctrine of final perseverance?

The main reason is that the ultimate destiny of a soul can never be in your hands and mine. The Scripture everywhere teaches us that the soul is most important of all. Our Lord asks: 'For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' [Matt. 16:26]. And yet if you misinterpret this statement in Romans 14:15, you will have to put yourself into the position of saying that the ultimate destiny of souls is in your hands and mine. Not only is that inconceivable, if it were true, I suggest to you that life would be impossible. If I believed that, I would certainly never have entered into a pulpit and would almost be afraid to live in contact with men and women. I would isolate myself in some kind of glass case lest I inadvertently caused the destruction of a soul. Is it conceivable that God should ever have allowed a matter such as this to be dependent upon our understanding of this particular teaching?

Because a second conclusion follows: this teaching means that our power is greater than the power of God. God has taken all this great action in His Son for our salvation, He has sent the Spirit, and the Spirit does His convicting and converting work in us, and yet, if this teaching is believed, men and women have the power to undo all that.

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In the third place, if that were true, then ultimately, no one would ever be finally saved. If it were possible for men and women to fall and finally perish, then they would fall. We all fall into sin, we are all disobedient, we all misunderstand teaching, we are all prone to error – ‘Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it’ – and if our final salvation were ultimately in our hands, I say the only conclusion is that no one would be saved, none at all. Thank God, that is not the position! The position is, ‘O Love, that wilt not let me go.’

Another very important argument in this connection is this: If the ultimate falling away of some of God’s children were possible, then it would mean that the devil had, after all, defeated God and become the victor. The great message of the Bible, is it not, is that God made the world, and then made man in His own image, but the devil came in and tempted man, and man listened and fell. All the troubles have eventuated from that. Now I say that if it were possible for any of God’s children finally to perish, it would mean that the devil had ultimately defeated God and was therefore stronger than God. But that is impossible.

But then consider another argument. That teaching that says that it is possible for a true child of God to fall away, would, if it were true, mean that one day someone could be regenerate, but then, owing to the action of somebody else who does not understand, or something that the Christian himself has done, could fall away, only to realize his error and come back, and be regenerate again, and then perhaps fall again and then come back once more, and so on. Now this is quite impossible. Regeneration is not the action of man; it is the action of God. Of course, you can go in and out of your decision; you and I can go in and out of many things. But regeneration is the action of God and it is inconceivable that we can pass in and out of that.

And it is just at this point, of course, that the doctrine of backsliding is so important. We do not hear enough about this at the present time – the church does not deal with it as often as it used to. What is backsliding? It occurs when a child of

God is disobedient. As children in a family can disobey their human parents, and do things that disgrace the family, and besmirch the name of the family, so children of God can disobey their heavenly Father, even to the extent that you would think they are not Christians at all, and never had been. I have unfortunately seen that many times.

'So how do you know they are Christians?' asks someone. And the answer is that backsliders always return. Because they are children of God, however far they may have gone away, they are bound to come back and they invariably will. They are even miserable while they are sinning. They get a kind of enjoyment, but they also have a sense of condemnation.

But let me lift this subject to a still higher level. To say that it is possible for a child of God, a regenerate person, finally to fall away, is, it seems to me, to misunderstand why God ever sent His Son into the world. It is like this. I have already reminded you of what happened in the first creation. God made man in His own image and He gave him free will. Man was given, therefore, the power of determining his immediate destiny. And we are familiar with the way he used that power.

What, then, is the difference between the first creation and the new creation? Or, to put it another way: What is the difference between Adam, and 'the new man', the new creature in Christ Jesus? Or, to put it in a still higher way, as we saw when we studied the fifth chapter of this great Epistle: What is the difference between Adam and the Lord Jesus Christ as the representative man? You are familiar with this teaching, are you not? 'For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive' [1 Cor. 15:22]. And the great difference is that Adam could fall and did fall; Adam could fail as our representative and he did; and we all bear the consequences. But what God has done in His Son is entirely different. Here is something that cannot fail. That is why God ever sent His Son into the world.

Failure had been the possibility, had it not? The first man had been put on probation, as it were, and had failed. Now if

you and I had the power of suggesting to God what He should do about it, we would undoubtedly have suggested that he make another man who surely would learn the lesson and would not fall.

But God knows better than we do, and He did not act according to our wisdom but according to His own wisdom, for if God had just created another Adam, that Adam would have repeated the first Adam's sin. There could never have been a man who was more perfect than Adam. Yet he fell. No, God did not take the risk, if I may so phrase it, of a second failure. God did something that could not fail – He sent His own Son and the Son took human nature. Here is the firstborn of many brethren; here is the head of a new humanity; here is something that could not and did not fail.

Let me give you a quotation to prove this: 'Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace' – here is the statement – 'to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all' [*Rom. 4:16*]. You see what Paul is saying? He has been contrasting the attempt to justify by works, with justification by grace through faith. Now he says, 'to the end that the promise might be *sure*'. It is of grace, it is of God only, in order that it might be 'sure'. If man comes in at all, salvation will fail, it will not be sure, it will be uncertain, and it will be final disaster. So God brought about salvation in this way, in His Son – by grace and through faith in Christ Jesus – in order that it cannot and shall not fail. The honour of God is involved.

So the promise is made sure to all the descendants. Nothing – '... neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' [*Rom. 8:38–39*].

People sometimes foolishly say, 'Ah, yes, but he does not say that you yourself cannot do it.'

I see, you are the great exception, are you? You are the one

in the universe who is stronger than God and stronger than the principalities and powers, and the height and depth, or any other creature! My dear friends, you are included. Nothing, not even you yourself, can separate you finally from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thank God for this! If we could do it, we would all have done it long ago, and none would ever arrive in the Glory. Do not take credit to yourself. When you arrive in the Glory you will not say, 'I'm here because I held steadfastly while others fell.' Not at all! You will say:

*A debtor to mercy alone,
Of covenant mercy I sing.
Augustus Toplady.*

'By the grace of God I am what I am' [1 Cor. 15:10], and nothing else. This is the way to deal with this matter. It is inconceivable that the eternal destiny of a soul should be dependent either upon the man himself or upon any one of us, and that we should have the power to cause a soul to perish. Thank God that this is impossible.

So I am left with a final question: What is the meaning of these statements in Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8, Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10? I entirely accept the traditional view that it is through teaching like this, through these tremendous warnings, that God preserves His people and keeps them from that fate. This is the very method that He employs.

Someone once made a comparison – and I think it is a good one – between this and what happened in connection with the shipwreck of St Paul, recorded in Acts 27. During the storm, Paul was given a vision in which he was told that none of the crew or passengers would perish. We read:

For there stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee.

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So Paul addressed the captain of the ship and said:

Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me. Howbeit we must be cast upon a certain island ...

Then there is this interesting statement:

As the shipmen were about to flee out of the ship, when they had let down the boat into the sea, under colour as though they would have cast anchors out of the foreship, Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved [Acts 27:23-31].

Now on the face of it, the Apostle is saying to the centurion and to the soldiers, 'If these men escape and just save their lives and abandon us, you will be drowned and your lives will be lost.' But God has already assured the Apostle that not one of them will be lost, so there seems to be a contradiction. The explanation is that this is Paul's way of getting the centurion and the soldiers to prevent the others from escaping. He knows that they cannot all die, he has had the assurance from God that they will all be saved, but he puts it in this strong form in order to make certain that the will of God will be done.

In a similar way, these threatening, minatory, alarming passages are the very means that God uses to preserve the saints. Now there is not a saint who is not terrified by this kind of statement. But nobody else is. The unbeliever is not alarmed – he laughs at the threat. No, this is God's way of keeping His people. He has many ways: He showers blessings upon us; He gives us teaching; and sometimes He threatens us by giving us a glimpse of perdition and thereby making it impossible for us to be lost.

There, then, is this great matter that we had to consider because of this statement that seems, on the surface, to suggest that it is possible for us to destroy the soul of one of God's children. So we leave that and go on to what I regard as the

final problem in connection with this matter. Does not the teaching of the Apostle here in verse 15 make the weaker brother a tyrant? Does Paul not make growth in the church impossible? Is he not levelling everybody down to the position of the weaker brother?

The argument, you remember, is that though it is perfectly right for those who are enlightened, those who are stronger in their understanding of the faith, to eat these meats and to observe these days, yet they must not do so because of offending the conscience of the weaker brother and putting him into this terribly dangerous position.

'Well,' says somebody, 'at that rate, the weaker brother is the one who can control the church and the entire teaching of the church, so you will never have any growth, you will never have any development.'

What answer do we give? Again, it is a very important question to ask, but surely there should be no difficulty about answering it. First of all, it is the simple truth that historically this teaching did not have that effect. The church did grow, and the church and Christian people became enlightened on these matters. I have already reminded you of this. You need look no further than the next century after Paul to find that this problem of eating meats and observing days had disappeared out of the life of the church.

Secondly, it is essential that we should realize that Paul was giving temporary, interim teaching and not laying down permanent legislation. All he was doing, as I have shown you on several occasions, was dealing with the situation as it then confronted him and Christian people. Here were people who had just come out of Judaism and paganism and Paul was helping them through a period of transition and crisis.

Thirdly, you must remember that we are only dealing with matters that are indifferent. These are not matters that are essential to salvation, though some people, of course, fall into the error of making them that.

Then another answer to the problem is that the weaker brother is to be teachable – he is to be taught and he is to grow

in knowledge as well as in grace. The Apostle is only dealing with him as he is at the moment, but the Scriptures are to be worked out with him and it is his business to accept them. If the weaker brother refuses to be taught, and says that he is not interested, and will not listen, then he becomes a sinner who is no longer acting according to his conscience. His trouble now is that he is guilty of obstinacy, that he has become unteachable.

When the problem is no longer that of a Christian with a sensitive, a genuinely troubled, conscience, but a Christian refusing to learn, then, of course, a different approach is required. The Christian is now to be told very plainly that he is wrong. We have borne with him hitherto, we did not want to offend his weak conscience, we wanted to help him, but if he sets himself up as the master and the dictator, we then point out to him that he is not, that he is ignorant and that he must now bear the consequences and the punishment of refusing to be teachable.

So I would end this matter by putting it to you like this: What are the kinds of rules or principles by which we govern our conduct with respect to the weaker brother, or with regard to anybody whom we are trying to help? I would suggest the following.

First: let us be careful that we do not misunderstand Paul's teaching when he says, 'I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some' [1 Cor. 9:22]. That is his teaching in this connection, but it has often been misunderstood. There are some people who say, 'In order to help these people we must come down to their level, as it were, and we must do what they do.' And so they do things that are actually wrong and try to justify themselves in terms of helping people. This very specious and subtle argument is used by people who give themselves licence at certain points. They say, 'Of course, I don't really want to do this but I'm out to help this man. I don't want to make him feel awkward so I'm doing it with him.' You are familiar with that kind of attempt to excuse things that your conscience condemns you for doing.

Now there is a classic example of this type of argument. There was a man who went by the name of Woodbine Willie, who

was an army chaplain in the First World War. He said he wanted to evangelize the men in the trenches, and he observed that these men did not smoke a more expensive brand of cigarettes but smoked very cheap cigarettes known as 'Woodbines', which were obtainable at five for a penny. So he said that to win these men he would not smoke Gold Flake cigarettes any longer, but would smoke Woodbines. Not only that, these men swore a good deal and used language that he did not use himself, so he said, 'Of course, if I'm going to evangelize these men, I must speak their language.' So you see, by smoking Woodbines, drinking beer, swearing, using oaths and curses, being one of the crowd, he was going to win them!

Of course, Woodbine Willie soon discovered that acting in this way did not win these soldiers; it was a foolish phase and it soon passed. Being 'all things to all men' does not mean doing the wrong things that other people are doing – never! People say, 'But our Lord was the friend of publicans and sinners.' Yes, but He never sinned. He could mix with sinners without becoming defiled Himself.

Second: and this is important, some people say that in order to help these weak brethren, or those who seem to be under conviction – in order, perhaps, to make it easier for them to go to church – the church should adopt some of their practices. But that must never happen. Now this is something that the Roman Catholic Church has actually done as a principle, and still does when she goes to a pagan country and evangelizes the people. Her argument has always been this: 'We must not condemn their practices. Instead, we must 'baptize' those practices into the Church.' And that is what she thinks she has done. The Roman Church throughout the centuries has deliberately taken over the practices of pagan religions and false kinds of worship – she admits this – and has made them a part of the life and ritual of the Church. So, for example, strange vestments are worn. Now you do not find such practices in the Scriptures; indeed, there is not only no justification for them in the teaching of Paul, or the other Apostles, but the Scriptures are against them.

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Third: the liberty that the Apostle allows with regard to things that are indifferent ceases the moment they are regarded as essential. The proof of that is to be found in 1 Corinthians 10:27–28:

If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake. But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake.

In other words, if you go into the house of one of these men and they put meat before you and say nothing, then eat it. But if anyone attributes a religious significance to the food, you must not touch it. There you can see the principle that Paul introduces, and as we have seen, it is a principle that Paul often acted on. People think he contradicts himself, but he does not. We read in Acts 16 that Paul agreed to have Timothy circumcised. But we find in Galatians 2 that Paul refused to have Titus circumcised. Was he being inconsistent? Not at all! Paul had Timothy circumcised in order not to cause offence – the same principle that we have in this chapter. But he refused to circumcise Titus when he met the Judaizers, because they said that circumcision was essential.

These are very important points and they lead to the next point, which is this: the truth itself should never be accommodated. The truth is eternal, it is fixed, it is static; there is no accommodation there. Accommodation only comes in in the way in which we present it, and when we are dealing with things that are indifferent.

In other words, we end again on the great controlling principle: all things must be done to the glory of God. This must be supreme. 'Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God' [1 Cor. 10:31]. Keep that first. Secondly, 'Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God' [1 Cor. 10:32]. And thirdly, 'Even as I please all men in all things, not

seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved' [1 Cor. 10:33]. 'The glory of God!' – being concerned not to offend, and desiring supremely the salvation of the souls of men and women.

May God grant us wisdom to work out these things, comparing scripture with scripture, and submitting ourselves always to our only authority, which is the Word of God in the power of the Spirit.

Fourteen

★

I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of: For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

Romans 14:14–17

In our division of this great chapter and its argumentation, you will remember that in verse 17 we come to a new subsection, which runs from this verse to verse 19. These three verses form a kind of subsection on their own, as a part of the one big argument that runs, as we have seen, right through the chapter and, indeed, on into the next. But this, again, is a fresh point and the Apostle introduces verse 17 with the word ‘for’. In other words, this verse is connected with what he has been saying, it is a continuation of the same general theme, but he is introducing something fresh and new.

I have often before used the analogy of a musical composition to show you the Apostle’s style and his method of construction. His way of writing may be compared to the way in which a musician has a theme and then plays variations on it; then he wants to leave it, and yet does not leave it entirely, but deals with the theme of his whole composition in a new way. So here, the word ‘for’, while connecting with what

has gone before, does so in order to introduce us to another kind of emphasis. But all of it, remember, is part of one great theme.

For the time being, therefore, the Apostle interrupts what I would describe as his pure bit of argument. We have already seen him breaking up his discussion of this issue into subsidiary arguments – looking at the question of eating meats offered to idols, and observation of days from different aspects and angles, bringing arguments to bear that apply to the brother who is stronger in the faith and to the one who is weaker. And we have just seen him dealing especially with the stronger brother, pointing out the results of riding roughshod over the susceptibilities, even the foibles or the weaknesses, of his weaker brother in this matter of conscience. And in so doing, Paul has been saying tremendous things. He has been telling us, ‘Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.’

However, the Apostle has now finished with that, and he comes here, in verse 17, to a more general conclusion, a more general way of looking at the whole matter. So you might very well translate the word rendered here by ‘for’ with the words ‘for after all’, or ‘but after all’, because the Apostle is now lifting up this subject from the realm of particular arguments to the whole position and condition of the Christian. In other words, he is putting it into its true context.

Now in verse 17 we have another of the Apostle’s great resounding statements. It is very characteristic of his method that in the midst of some exhortation or appeal he should suddenly throw out a mighty and magnificent statement that seems to be a perfect summary of the essence of the gospel and of the nature of the Christian life. That is what makes him so fascinating to read. Suddenly, and sometimes when you least expect it, when you have been almost trudging along in a bit of argument, you stumble across a nugget; there it is and you are charmed and fascinated. But it is not accidental, it is a part of the whole subject that he has had in hand.

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And that is what the Apostle does here. Having been on the ground, as it were, he suddenly takes wings and lifts us up to the heavens, raising the argument out of the realm of particularities and helping us to see it in the context of the whole Christian life.

I referred earlier to an address I once heard by an old preacher who had been asked to preach on the question of Sabbath observance. It was clear that he was reluctant to do this because he was afraid of sabbatarianism, and so on, and his quaint way of putting the matter to us was this: 'The thing to do when you have a subject like this is not so much to consider it in and of itself, but to consider it in terms of the family to which it belongs.' He said, 'There are some people in life who are rather difficult, and the best way of understanding many of them is to get to know their family. That will tell you a great deal about them and help you to deal with them in the right way. Family history can be very important.' That is a very good analogy, I think, and it is one that, in a sense, I am going to work out with you this evening.

Now this moving and resounding statement in verse 17 is one that I like to repeat – I do so quite often. It is a kind of slogan, a kind of battle-cry: 'For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.' Now there is an element of ridicule in Paul's words here. The trouble that has been caused in Rome and in Corinth and in various other places by this question of food and days! The great Apostle is anxious for the believers in Rome to see that they have been rather petty about it all. So he puts the problem into context, and there is a certain amount of sarcasm in the way in which he writes. But it is in order that he may direct attention to the great principle that is involved at this point.

The principle at issue is the vital importance, always, of preserving a sense of balance and proportion in the Christian life. That is the theme the Apostle introduces here. He is showing the Christians in Rome that they are in all this trouble and pother about these matters because they have lost their

balance and have developed a kind of lop-sided Christianity. This is indeed an all-important matter in connection with the Christian life. One of the greatest dangers is to be so absorbed in, and concerned about, particulars and details as to forget the whole.

Of course, this kind of imbalance is not confined to the Christian life nor to the understanding of the Scriptures. We all know the proverb that warns us against the danger of missing the wood for the trees. You are so conscious of particular trees that you miss and forget the wood. And in the same way, you are so concerned about minutiae that you forget the great principles. This has been put, once and for all, by our blessed Lord Himself as part of His castigation of the Pharisees. This was the essential trouble of the Pharisees. This was why they crucified Him; this was why they never understood Him. They were so immersed in the details that they missed Him completely. So He says:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone. Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel [*Matt. 23:23-24*].

What a severe castigation, and yet how true! How true it was of the Pharisees, how true of many in the church at many times in the past and how true of many in the church today!

Now that is the kind of principle that is introduced in this verse, but the Apostle puts it like this: 'The kingdom of God is not meat and drink' – there is the gnat. So what is it? It is 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost'. We cannot exaggerate the importance of this principle of preserving a balance and a right sense of proportion.

I think I could very easily keep you for a long time with illustrations of the importance of this particular point, even in the secular realm. I would suggest to you that this is the real

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explanation of our many multifarious problems in this country at the present time. Why are we in so many difficulties? The response that is being given is that people are investigating various aspects of our problem. Now this approach has been going on throughout this century. One person says, 'It's all due to this', and another says, 'It's due to that.' So you constantly have to create new government departments to deal with particular aspects of the problem. Each aspect then proliferates, and you have to have subdivisions.

So bureaucracy really comes into being because of this very matter that the Apostle is dealing with here, this failure to see the real principle, the centralities, and to become immersed and lost in the details. For, after all, there is only one real problem that needs to be tackled, and that is the problem of human beings themselves. If only every man and woman in this country had the right view of themselves and their duty to God, and their duty to work and to be honest and so on, is it not obvious that most of our problems would vanish like the morning mist? But that is not recognized. The problem is men and women in sin and their consequent selfishness and laziness, and all that results from those two basic positions.

So we see very clearly the tragedy of the world without Christ. It is the ultimate futility of civilization. Civilization is supposed to improve humanity and its whole condition in this world, but it does not do it. It has always failed, it is failing today, and, I repeat, it fails because, instead of getting to the centre of the problem, it always begins and remains on the periphery. There they are, arguing as to which segment is the really important one, and they alter this, and modify that, but this creates a problem there, and that creates another, and the whole time the trouble is in the centre.

I remember once putting it like this: Is it not a sheer waste of money and energy to be pouring chemicals into a polluted stream when the source of infection is in the lake out of which the stream comes? It is mad, is it not? But that is precisely what the secular mind always does, it never gets at basic

principles. And so we see this waste of energy and the multiplication of organizations – that is the great characteristic of the age in which we live. I have often referred to the way in which everything is now being organized in order to try to deal with this problem. Learning is organized, so that you not only get education but what they call ‘further education’ as well, and games are organized, and on and on it goes. But the problem increases at the same time. Well, I believe that this is what is described these days as Parkinson’s Law.

But here we are not concerned with the secular application, although we must not forget it, because as we get opportunities, it is good and right that we should be pointing this out to people. They may say, ‘What’s the point of being a Christian at a time like this? Why do you waste your time? Christianity is irrelevant, it has nothing to say to men and women as they are in the midst of the problems of life today.’ There comes your opportunity. You say, ‘Do you know, it has. If only everybody in this country were a true Christian, we would not have these problems.’ And so, as you show how a great biblical principle like the one we are studying can be applied even in a secular sense, you are given an opportunity for evangelism.

When we turn to Christian witness in the world, I sometimes think that nothing has done more harm than this lack of balance. The harm that unbalanced Christians can do in the realm of evangelism is almost incalculable, because people of the world do not judge Christianity in terms of its teaching, but by what they find in you and in me. They are wrong, of course, but that is what they do, and, in a sense, they are right, for we should always be exemplifying the truth. You must have seen a thousand times the harm that is done when one-sided Christians have ignored our Lord’s exhortation to: ‘Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven’ [*Matt. 5:16*]. You are discussing a principle connected with the Christian faith with someone who is not a Christian, and then he says, ‘But look at so-and-so.’ And the lack of balance and

proportion in that person greatly hinders your work of evangelism.

But I am also anxious to show you that the failure to recognize the all-importance of a sense of proportion in the Christian life has been more prolific than any other single matter in producing troubles and problems and divisions in the long history of the Christian church. This was the case in the churches in Rome and in Corinth. Read again that great first letter to the Corinthians and you will see that Corinth was divided up into sects and groups and divisions and schisms, all because of this very failure, as, indeed, the Apostle shows in the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians.

It is all right, I have not had instructions from some headquarters to preach on Christian unity tonight, because this is the end of this great and much advertised week about Christian unity! No, I am much more concerned about Christian unity than many of those people, but I am concerned about it in a New Testament, a scriptural, way. We should all be concerned about unity. It is a scandal that Christian people should be divided – I am not saying that, our Lord said it. He prayed, ‘That they all may be one ... that the world may believe’ [*John 17:21*]. We have no right to be divided. The church is meant to be one, and the world, by seeing the oneness and the love of Christian people, is to be attracted to the Christian faith; so schism is a sin. Why, therefore, do we have these divisions? Why all these various denominations?

Now I want to say something about church unity in terms of the principle that the Apostle is laying down in this great verse. I shall only deal with this subject in general; there are certain qualifications that have to be made, and, indeed, any particular case must be considered on its merits. But for now, I shall try to give you some rules that govern all this and will help you to decide these matters.

First, there are certain general principles that, in the light of scriptural teaching, can be laid down with regard to denominations. One is that a denomination should never be founded on a man or woman. There is a sense in which it is

quite wrong to speak of the Lutheran Church or the Wesleyan Church. It is still worse, of course, when a Church is based on someone's money. That has happened many a time. Churches have come into being simply because people have happened to be difficult and at the same time wealthy, and have been in a position to start causes of their own and pay for everything – ministers, manses, church buildings. That is always very wrong and all sections of the church have been guilty of it.

I remember when we had a discussion in our Puritan Reformed Conference some years back on the Countess of Huntingdon. I ventured to say that it seemed to me to be quite wrong that that lady, great as she was and great Christian as she was, should be controlling chapels. She had the money and she could build a chapel, and she could determine who the minister was to be. But that seems to me to be utterly in contrast to the New Testament teaching. She should have handed her money over to be used by others who were more competent.

But I will go further: a Church should never be founded on a particular doctrine. Now be careful; when I say 'particular doctrine', I do not mean the doctrine that is particular to the true evangelical faith. I mean one particular subsidiary doctrine in the general doctrines of the faith. At the risk of being misunderstood, I think I can demonstrate what I am saying. I have always said and taught, and still contend, that the church should never have been divided on the question of the mode of baptism – the way in which people are baptized. I am suggesting that it is wrong to speak of a 'Baptist' Church. It is equally wrong to speak of a 'Seventh Day' Church. I am not saying that I regard the Seventh Day Adventists as Christians. But even granting that they were, it would surely be wrong that a Church should announce itself in terms of this one tenet, 'seventh day'. The kingdom of God is not the mode of baptism, nor the day that is observed. It is wrong to take over a particular teaching and then divide on it.

Let us be quite clear about this. There are churches that have

been founded, and founded by good people, on particular holiness teachings – Churches in America and in this country that announce themselves in terms of holiness. And there are other Churches that have been brought into being because of an over-emphasis upon certain spiritual gifts. I think here of the term 'Pentecostal'. What I am criticizing is not so much particular views with regard to these matters, as the formation of a Church on the basis of these particular doctrines. I suggest that to do this is to contravene not only the teaching of Romans 14:17, but, indeed, the general tenor of the whole of the New Testament.

Now do not jump to conclusions; and if any of you are offended at this point, I want to challenge you to listen to the rest of the argument. If you do not, you are not behaving as a Christian, you are behaving as a prejudiced person, like the very people Paul was dealing with. I am simply putting the statements before you and I hope to show you the justification for them.

Let me show you where I stand. I was brought up in a Church that gave itself the name of the Calvinistic Methodist Church. I think that is equally bad. A Church should not be named after John Calvin or founded on Calvinism alone. So you see, I am only giving examples that are most likely to be familiar to you. But the principle is that you must not found or establish a Church either on a man or on a particular doctrine – and I do not care what the doctrine may be.

And I would add, thirdly, that it is equally wrong to found or establish a Church on a particular view of church government.

Now I have chosen these three aspects because, historically, they have been the three commonest causes of division in the church, leading to the formation of denominations that have become hardened and crystallized. And all this, to me, is of very great importance at the present time. This ecumenical movement, to which I do not belong, and in which I do not believe, as I am never tired of saying, does give us a marvellous opportunity of undoing certain things that we Evangelicals have done wrong. It is a time, I think, when we have a great and

glorious opportunity of coming together as Evangelicals, without being bound by the divisions that so often in the past came into being as the result of the failure of good and godly men to remember the teaching of Romans 14:17.

I mean this: if a Church does establish itself in terms of one particular view of church doctrine, it is, I suggest, already in error. Now the problem arises, of course, because you must have discipline and a church polity, and it is extremely difficult to reach agreement on this. All I would say is that anybody who tells me that church government must be episcopal is already wrong, but if someone says that it must be presbyterian, I say he is equally wrong. As Oliver Cromwell discovered, the new presbyter could, at times, be as bad as the old prelate or the old pope. It is the insistence that a church *must* be this or that, that contravenes the principle set out in Romans 14:17. I hope to elaborate further when we come to work out the great principle itself. I am putting it here in a very general form for you to see the scope of the discussion that is raised by the principle of this verse.

Then, having put this general principle in terms of denominations, I now come, in the second place, to put it in terms of movements. If what I have been saying has been true of denominations, how much more is it true of movements. Indeed, I take leave to question the legitimacy of movements at all in the Christian church. I think they can be justified on one ground only, and that is when the church becomes apostate or is failing to perform her functions. That is the justification given in the book of Judges, which describes such a terrible time in the history of Israel, a time when, we read, 'There was no king in Israel: and every man did that which was right in his own eyes' [*Judg.* 21:25]. And God rebuked the nation and its folly and ignorance, by even raising a woman as a leader to ridicule them and to bring them to their senses. But it was an utterly abnormal time, and it is only such times that give any justification at all for movements.

But now, if you do have movements for those reasons, there are certain things that are always wrong and extremely

dangerous with regard to them. There should not, for instance, be a separate evangelistic movement in the church. That is wrong in principle. You must not isolate evangelism and form a movement on that one issue.

In the same way, you must not have a holiness movement: judged by this verse, that is quite wrong. It is particularizing, it is failing to keep your balance. You can see the consequences. The people who are taken up with holiness movements and go to holiness meetings are so often guilty of spiritual pride, and cause divisions in the church. This is all wrong. The mistake was to form a movement to isolate a doctrine, instead of preserving the balance and proportion of which the Apostle speaks. And it is exactly the same with regard to a prophetic movement in the church.

Thirdly, it is equally wrong to regard religion as a subject. Have you ever thought of that? This is the reason why I have never believed in the teaching of religion in schools. There are many other reasons why I do not believe it, but as far as I am concerned, that has always been sufficient in and of itself. Scripture is not a subject for a school syllabus.

I remember once, many years ago, staying in the United States and having to go to speak at a conference – somebody had failed to turn up and I was available, so I went. The origins of this conference went back to 1874, when a bishop had held a religious conference to teach Sunday school teachers. But when I got there I found a great conference that boasted that it could teach you any subject you could conceivably be interested in. I remember seeing the list of subjects that were taught, and I saw Number 16: 'Religion'. So I spent most of my week there pointing out how wrong that was! Religion is not a subject; Scripture is not a subject among subjects. The moment you say that, you have already gone wrong.

But let me go still further: Bible study should never be regarded as an entity in and of itself. This is what I mean. I call our Friday night meeting a *service* and that is what it is. I do not recognize a Bible lecture or anything like that; I do not understand it and I do not believe in it. There is only one way

to expound the Scriptures and it must always be the same way.

Now some people do not agree with that. They say, 'Oh, no, you need Bible lectures and you need Bible instruction; you must not apply it, and you must not preach.' I think that is absolutely fatal. The Bible is always to be preached, and must always be applied.

Still less do I believe in holding examinations on people's knowledge of the Scriptures. To sit an examination on your knowledge of the Bible, in the way you would take an examination in geometry or chemistry or history, is to ask for trouble, it is to ask for antinomianism, and it generally produces it. People have this knowledge, they have it all classified and divided, and it is all purely intellectual, purely academic, purely theoretical, and it is all wrong. People who study the Bible in this way are guilty of the very thing that the Apostle tells us in this verse we should never be guilty of.

And so I come to this: the church has often got into trouble through neglect of this principle in the matter of theological seminaries, or theological colleges. You will often find evangelical people saying that the trouble with the church today stems from the colleges, and, of course, they are perfectly right. But here is the question: Why has there been trouble in the colleges? And the answer is because theology has been taught as a subject.

People in earlier times used to boast that theology was the queen of the sciences. What they really meant was that it was the most interesting and the most profound of all the studies that a person could ever be engaged in, and, of course, that is right. But they should never have put it into competition with the others; it does not belong there. No, we must say that theology is different from every other study.

Why? Because with every other study you can be objective, and the more objective you are the better. You are detached; you look on. But if you study theology like that, it would be better for you never to have started. What is theology? It is the study of God. And can you study God objectively? Can you

just look on intellectually? You cannot, it is impossible. To be strictly accurate, you cannot study God in any sense, but if you are trying to get knowledge about God and to know God, your whole attitude is immediately different because this is worship. When you are studying sciences or history, then you can lounge in an armchair or lie on your back in bed. But you should not study theology like that, because the study of theology always involves a relationship with God. That must never be forgotten. Indeed, if I may use the Apostle's verse, I can put it like this: The kingdom of God is not logic-chopping about particular theological points of view or definitions, but it is my relationship to God – 'righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost'.

It is obviously necessary that the man who is to preach and teach should be rendered capable of doing so. He may be a good Christian man, he may be highly spiritual, but he needs a little more than that in order to be a teacher, and he therefore needs a certain amount of training. That is all right, but the history of this matter shows very clearly that the moment you have a theological college there is danger and all those involved must be watchful and careful.

This is a very difficult subject, and I do not want to go into it in too much detail. But you will find, if you go into the history of these matters, that the people who, say two hundred and three hundred years ago, formed academies and colleges for the training of preachers, always realized the danger of separating theory from worship. So they reduced the course to the minimum, and tried to make it as practical as they could. But – and this was the most important thing of all – it was all in an atmosphere of worship. So the lecturer on theology would never dream of starting his lecture without prayer, without worship, without adoration, without reminding the students that the ultimate object was to bring them to a greater knowledge of God, in order that they might be better able to impart this truth to others; they always kept their teaching 'living'. I am thinking, for example, of the Independents like Philip Doddridge and others, who started their academies; I am thinking of William

Tennent, who started the famous Log College, which later became Princeton University and the Princeton Seminary in America.

These men always safeguarded the study of theology, but the trouble was that as the years passed and as the spirituality of the professors and teachers went down and down, so the element of worship was forgotten and theology became an abstract science to be handled like any other subject. So the colleges became the source of the pollution, and this affected the life of all the churches.

And I am not only talking about past history; you will find that evangelical people in this century have failed to remember this principle. They have become more concerned with academic qualifications and results, with degrees and diplomas awarded by secular universities, than with the spirituality of the men who are being trained. These men are packed with theoretical knowledge, and often a man who goes in with his heart ablaze with the truth and the desire to preach it and to propagate it, comes out as a man whose head is full of knowledge but who has lost the fire, and is neither a preacher nor really an adequate teacher.

So these, it seems to me, are some of the problems and the questions that are raised for us by this great statement of the Apostle Paul. We are dealing with the importance of balance and of a sense of proportion throughout the Christian life – in our personal lives, in our lives together in the church, in our training of men for the ministry, in our whole view of the local church and its relationship to other churches. The need for balance controls, as I hope to show you, all these matters. The troubles that have arisen in all these areas have come because men have forgotten that the kingdom of God is not this, that or the other, but ‘righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost’. Throughout the centuries there has been a divided church and a dead church, a quarrelling church and a scandalous church, simply because this great principle has either been forgotten or has not been implemented.

Liberty and Conscience

Prayer¹

O Lord our God, we come to Thee once more, and oh, we are aware of our smallness and our fallibility and, indeed, of our sinfulness.

O God, have mercy upon us. We see how we all like sheep have gone astray in some respect or other, due to the very thing that we have been discussing together. O God, have mercy upon us. Keep us humble, we pray Thee. Yea, Lord, it may be that some of us need to be humbled. Take from us all arrogance, pride, carnal assurance, reliance upon our own abilities and powers and understanding. O God, help us to see that Thy Word to us at all times is, 'Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God', and we would do that now.

We are grieved, O Lord, at our own condition, and at the condition of Thy church, especially at a time such as this, and we long to do Thy will, to know Thy way clearly, and to walk in it perfectly. O God, keep us humble, we pray Thee, and then show us by Thy Spirit the meaning of the teaching of Thy Word, and give us grace to put it into practice.

Hear us, O Lord, receive our humble praise and thanksgiving for the fact that Thou hast continued Thy church and Thy work in spite of men and women such as we are, and receive our adoration as we realize that this is Thy work, and that nothing can finally spoil it, still less destroy it, but that 'He which hath begun a good work in us, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.'

Lord, receive our praise.

¹ The studies in this series of books are taken from tape-recordings. Every service concluded with a prayer, but these prayers were not usually taped. This prayer, however, was found on the tape.

Fifteen

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*For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness,
and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.*

Romans 14:17

Now we have begun our consideration of this tremendous asseveration on the part of the great Apostle and we have seen how here the Apostle leaves the realm of pure argument and lifts the whole subject of eating meats offered to idols and the observance of particular days up into the realm of ultimate spiritual truth. He puts this issue, as it were, into its family and enables us to see it in the right context. As I pointed out, the Apostle does this frequently – it is characteristic of him – and it is of the very essence of presenting Christian truth.

The great principle that the Apostle asserts here, a principle that we must never forget, is the vital importance of having a sense of proportion and a true perspective. In other words, Paul is saying that most of the troubles in the church arise through our failure to preserve a sense of balance. That was the whole trouble with the Pharisees. These were men who were greatly interested in the kingdom of God, and yet, simply because they lacked this balance, they rejected the King and ultimately brought about His crucifixion. Our Lord said to them, 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone' [Matt. 23:23].

Liberty and Conscience

They were ignoring the things that really count, and that is why they were outside the kingdom, though they had such great interest in it.

And as we have seen, this failure has, throughout the centuries, been the greatest cause of division in the church. Let us remember that schism is a scandal, it is sin. The church is to be one, and she is to be visibly one. That is the meaning of our Lord's prayer as recorded in John 17. And I say again that divisions have come because of the failure of people to realize that some issues are only of relative importance. They have gone astray because they have failed to take things in their right context. We are, however, all liable to fall prey to this lack of balance, be it in doctrine, in church order, or in our daily lives and living.

In the last study, I gave you some examples of the kind of thing I have in mind. And I hinted at the fact that this principle is also very relevant to the whole question of your approach to scriptural truth. I suggested also that it is always wrong to study Scripture as if it were just an academic subject. So the whole question of teaching Scripture in schools needs to be examined.

I believe that some may have partly misunderstood my meaning here. I am talking about the principle itself. People may say, 'Does that mean that those of us who are Christians should never teach Scripture in schools?' Not at all. What I am objecting to is the notion that it is just a subject like other secular subjects. While the law of the land commands the teaching of Scripture, then my argument is that Christians alone should do it; they are the only people who can do it properly! Let it be taught by people who believe and understand the Scriptures. This does not mean, however, that I believe in the system.

So we continue with our consideration of Paul's words, 'For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.' And, having opened the subject out like that, we are now in a position to lay down certain general rules that can govern us in this whole matter.

The first rule is that parts and portions of truth only have importance in their relationship to the whole, not in and of themselves. A great illustration of this point is to be found in 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul reminds us that the church is the body of Christ. Paul's purpose in writing this chapter is to say that we are all members of that body, and he ridicules the notion that you can think of any particular part or portion in isolation. The body is not a mere collection of parts, and the part must never be considered in and of itself but always in relationship to the whole. The failure to remember that has been a prolific cause of trouble in the church.

A corollary of the first point is that individual parts must therefore never be considered in isolation. I showed you that in the case of movements. That is the defect of most movements – the prophetic movement! The holiness movement! They are fundamentally wrong. They are a violation of this teaching. If you isolate any one of these doctrines and consider it on its own, you are bound to go wrong. Whenever people have done this, aberrations have always come into being, whatever the doctrine. That is my second point.

Then the third rule is this: Whatever we may think of any individual aspect of the truth, any particular dogma, it must always be consistent with the other teachings, and, above all, it must be consistent and compatible with the whole. In other words, we must always be careful to compare scripture with scripture. This is one of the first rules of exposition. Heresies have come into being because people have fixed on a particular statement and have elaborated a doctrine based on that without taking the trouble to make sure that it does not contradict other statements in the Scriptures.

There is no contradiction in truth. All the parts of truth form an harmonious whole just as in the human body there is no contradiction between hand and foot or any other individual part of the body. So if we are interpreting one aspect or one facet of truth, we must be very careful that the conclusion at which we arrive, and our dogmatic teaching, do not contradict some other aspect of the whole.

There was a woman who lived, I think, in the early Middle Ages, a very godly and devout woman, whose chief ambition in life was to know God and to serve Him. She believed in service. She had no time for theoretical Christianity but believed that you must put your faith into practice. After a while, she became convinced that she must leave her husband and her children and her home, and go and engage in whole-time service for God, and she was sincere and honest enough to put this conviction into practice. And the record tells us that as she was leaving home amid the wailing and the weeping and the agony of her little children, she found, in her readiness to go through this great sacrifice, a confirmation that she was following the will of God.

The trouble in a case like that is that here was a woman who, because of her interest in one aspect, forgot the other teaching of the Scriptures. What is the prime duty of a mother? It is to look after her family, to look after her children. It is God who has ordained this. It is God who made woman that she might be a helpmeet to man, that they might become one flesh, that they might have children, and that their children might be brought up 'in the nurture and admonition of the Lord'. That is her great and glorious function; there is nothing greater. That is what God had called this woman to do, but she had become persuaded of this other call. It never occurred to her that she was contradicting one of the fundamental laws of nature and of society.

That is an extreme instance, but it is only one of many examples I could give you. Take a modern instance. I remember hearing of a lady who for a number of years had gone round addressing sisterhoods and women's meetings. But then her mother died and her father came to live with her and her husband. Now this constituted a difficulty because her father needed care and attention, and she did not like to leave him alone. She felt, though, that her ministry, her work, was now being hindered. So, in order that she might once more be free to go round lecturing and preaching and speaking, she put her father into a nursing home.

But God does not ask things like that. Children are to care for their parents. I cannot believe that it is well-pleasing in the sight of God that a sick man should be deprived of the loving care of his own daughter and be pushed, as it were, into a home. People who are not Christians know that such behaviour is unnatural, but sometimes Christian people can persuade themselves that they should even act contrary to nature and the fundamental principles of biblical teaching and of life itself on the broadest level. Now this is the sort of thing we must never do. There is a lack of balance here, a lopsidedness.

And, indeed, there are other extreme examples. You have heard of people who, because of what they regard as their loyalty to the truth, refuse to have meals with their own children, or with their own parents, even though they live in the same house. They think they are behaving in this way because they are spiritual, because they are loyal to the truth, but actually it is a blank contradiction of the teaching of the Scriptures, where we are told that the family is a fundamental unit and there is to be no such division. Of course, there are things that Christian and non-Christian members of a family cannot do together, but they are nowhere told that they are not to sit and eat together and not to join in family activities.

I repeat that this kind of imbalance comes in because people take one doctrine or truth in isolation and fail to see that it contradicts some other equally plain, clear teaching, and that in any case it is not consistent with the whole. You remember that our Lord Himself condemns the Pharisees for saying that something is 'Corban', that is, 'dedicated to the Lord', making that an excuse to neglect their primary duties with regard to their parents. Yet good and sincere people – I am not doubting their sincerity – will fix on a particular thing, 'mint or anise or cummin' or the question of eating meats, and become so contrary over that, that they do not compare scripture with scripture or maintain their balance. That is then the kind of appalling error in which they can end, for all their honesty and sincerity.

This leads to the fourth rule, which is this: we must never so emphasize a part as to make it all-important and place it at the

centre. Parts are not to be found at the centre. They have their position, but it is never central. A part must never be so emphasized or concentrated upon, that it detracts from the glory of the centre, the big thing. This comes out in the way that Paul makes his point – there is sarcasm here: ‘The kingdom of God is not meat and drink ...’ Now for some people in the early church, as we have seen, the kingdom of God had gone out of sight, and meat and drink had become the central issue. This had become the kingdom of God to them. And the Apostle is now lifting up this whole argument and showing that these divisions were doing a grave disservice to the kingdom of God itself.

So those are the four general rules I would lay down. But now let us look at the same principle from another angle. We have been considering our handling of the truth, but let us look at ourselves. When we do this, we see that we must never allow only parts of ourselves to be involved in the truth. As it is wrong for me to concentrate overmuch on particular parts or aspects of the truth, so it is wrong for the truth to be engaged with only parts and portions of me. In other words, it is not my mind only that is to be involved and engaged in the truth. You can work this out, can you not? Is there anything more dangerous than a theoretical Christianity, a Christianity that is concerned only with giving assent to propositions, that defends the faith and discipleship, perhaps, but with the intellect only. How often has that led to antinomianism? How often has it led to barrenness and dryness and coldness and hardness in the life and in the ministry?

But, remember, it is equally wrong to have the heart alone engaged – and, oh, how many there are who are guilty of this! They cannot be bothered with truth; they do not want it. There are many Christian people in our churches today who do not want to be taught. They object to teaching and only look to be entertained. They say as much and criticize ministers who are trying to teach them. They insist they want something from the heart, and say they cannot be bothered with doctrine – it demands too much effort on their part. They will not read solid

books, therefore, but only snippets and digests. They do not believe in studying God's Word.

It is terrible to respond in this way to the glorious truth of the Bible, and when there is such good Christian literature available to us. But all that these people want is something to give them a nice feeling or to make them happy or to give them some 'thrill', as they say. Since the last war,¹ we have increasingly seen Christian people wanting entertainment and enjoyment. They have brought the methods of the world into the church, giving less and less content and understanding to their idea of the Christian position.

Then there are others who put the whole of their emphasis upon the will. These are the people who *do* things, the activists. Their Christian life is all a matter of duty and of doing things, and they are busy. They are like the Pharisees, about whom our Lord says they 'compass sea and land to make one proselyte' [Matt. 23:15]; tremendous workers, tremendous activity. But if you go to these people and ask them for a reason for the hope that is in them, they cannot give it to you. Also there is often a coldness and a hardness about them, something mechanical about their great and bustling activity. They may be very good, very active workers, people who would do anything, but not only do they have no understanding, some of them, they have no feeling either, it seems to me.

And the answer to all this is that this is not the kingdom of God! The kingdom of God does not take up only a part of a man or woman, but is concerned with the whole person: that is the glory of it, that is where you see its greatness. So a partial engagement from our side is as reprehensible, as dangerous, as engaging only part of the truth.

So what do we do about all this? I have started with the dangers because the Apostle does. He says here, 'The kingdom of God is not ...' It is not this and that. He has had to work this out in detail, as we have seen. But now he comes to this great and grand corrective – and this is the way in which all

¹ The Second World War

these tendencies are to be corrected. And surely we have all observed them in ourselves. Some of us are more prone to one than another, but every one of us has failed at this point and we must watch ourselves constantly.

In passing, there is one step that we may take as a partial corrective. For some of us, nothing is more important than that we should order and control our reading, that we should balance our reading. If we do not, we will soon be in trouble.

But now let us turn to the grand corrective to this whole problem. It is, as the Apostle says, to remember that we are really concerned about the kingdom of God. That is what matters. But, of course, here, as I said earlier, we find the whole difficulty: we miss the wood because of the trees. We miss the whole object of the law, as the Pharisees did, because we are interested in the minutiae. This is always the danger.

Now the thing to do, says Paul, is to come back to the centre and ask: What is it all about? Keep this in the middle. Start always with centralities, with that which gives being to everything else, and remember that every part and portion must always be considered in the light of this. Never allow your interest in a part to become so great that you have forgotten where it came from. Never get so detached from the point at which you began that you have even forgotten it.

I can illustrate this very simply from church history. There is a little book on Protestantism, the first sentence of which I have never forgotten: 'Every institution tends to produce its opposite.' And the author goes on to show very simply that most of the Protestant Churches today have forgotten their origin. As they have moved along from point to point, they have travelled so far that they are now saying the exact opposite of what the Protestant Reformers said. Is that not what we are faced with at this moment? All this talk about linking up with Rome – it is because people have forgotten what Protestantism is! They have become so immersed in details that they have forgotten the point of origin, they have forgotten the centre. This is fatal. We must always go out of our way to remind ourselves of the centre, the origin, the fount, the source. All

that we consider must always be brought into relationship with this, and, I repeat, must never be considered in isolation.

So then, this is the great question: What is the kingdom of God? The Apostle says it is not meat and drink, so what is it? You must start, of course, by reminding yourself of what the kingdom of God is in general. The great theme of the Bible, ultimately, is the kingdom of God. God made the world, He made the man and woman, and set them in it, and they were meant to live a life of communion with God; yes, and of obedience to Him. And all our troubles have come out of the fact that they rebelled against God and disobeyed Him. The whole message of the Bible, therefore, is the restoration of the kingdom of God. And this, in particular, is the theme of our Lord's own preaching.

How often we forget this! In Mark 1:14–15 we are told, 'Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe the gospel.' The kingdom of God! Take all those parables of the kingdom recorded in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel. 'The kingdom of heaven is like ...' a man who goes out and sows his seed; a man stumbling suddenly across treasure, and all the rest.

We put so much emphasis upon the subjective experience, upon personal salvation, that we tend to forget this teaching, do we not? Our whole error is that we always start with ourselves: 'I want this, that and the other.' It is the wrong way round. We should start with the kingdom of God, for it is what our Lord preached about. All that happens to us is in order to make us citizens of that kingdom. That is the way to look at it. You must start with what God has done, God's plan and purpose, this kingdom that He is establishing.

But what does the kingdom of God mean? Now this follows, of necessity, from what I have just been saying. It means the rule, the reign, of God. And He brings about His reign through the Word, the Word that He has given, and through the Spirit. But the centre, of course, is always the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now our Lord Himself puts this in many interesting ways. One that seems to me to be very notable because it puts it very clearly is recorded in Luke chapter 11. Our Lord had been casting out a devil, and the Pharisees and others had suggested that He was doing this by the power of Beelzebub. This is His reply: 'If I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out? therefore shall they be your judges' [verse 19]. Now verse 20: 'But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you.' That is it. The kingdom of God is the rule of God, the exercise of the authority of God. It is God reigning, commanding and making His will operative.

And God's kingdom has happened supremely in the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot have a kingdom without a King, and He is the King. The kingdom was handed to Him, and everything He did was done in order that this kingdom might ultimately be manifested in all its glorious fulness.

In the Old Testament dispensation, this 'kingdom of God' took the external form of the nation of Israel. They were God's people, they were 'a kingdom of priests', as they were told at Mount Sinai [*Exod.* 19:6.]. But the new form that the kingdom of God takes now is the Christian church. Our Lord's words spoken to the Pharisees and other leaders of the Jews towards the end of His life were true of the whole nation: 'The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof' [*Matt.* 21:43]. This most important statement indicates that the kingdom of God is now to be seen in visible form in the Christian church.

But equally clear and explicit is the teaching that the kingdom of God will be seen, again in visible form, in a still more marvellous and glorious manner, and that will be when our Lord comes back again into this world. That is the great teaching about the second coming of our Lord. At that time He will come riding the clouds of heaven, surrounded by holy angels. Then He will judge the world in righteousness, and will destroy His every enemy, casting them all into the lake of destruction. And then His kingdom will be universal, and the

shout will be heard, 'The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ' [Rev. 11:15].

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Doth his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.*

Isaac Watts

That will be the End. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15, every rule and authority and power shall have been set down, the kingdom shall be fully established everywhere, and then the Son will hand it back to the Father, 'that God may be all in all' [1 Cor. 15:28]. This is the general teaching of the Bible concerning the kingdom of God and we must never forget it.

It is because we forget this teaching that we get into trouble with our subjectivities, and with our little legalisms, and with our emphases. And because we forget it, we do not preach it, and the people do not know about it, and they come to the Christian church as they go to the cults, wanting this, that or the other, and all attention is on these particularities. A man says, 'I'm happy.' Yes, all right, he may be happy – happy and outside the kingdom of God.

The question for you is: Are you in the kingdom of God? Nothing else is going to matter, nothing except this glorious kingdom of God and His Christ. But in order to make the teaching about the kingdom plain and clear, we must also emphasize the fact that the kingdom of God is also within every one of us who is a Christian. It is the reign of God, which means the reign of Christ. Christ is the Mediator and He is the King of the kingdom, for the time being. It is the mediatorial kingdom now and wherever He reigns in a human heart, the kingdom of God is there. That is the sense in which the kingdom of God is within us, all of us who are Christians, and we must never forget it. That is how we must always think of ourselves.

I must not ask myself primarily, 'Am I happy?' Oh, no! I must remind myself that He is my King, and not only am I in Him,

but He dwells within me. My great concern should not be for meat and drink and observation of days, or this, that or the other, but that the King should be enthroned in my heart. It is the failure to be aware of this relationship that is the cause of all these troubles.

In times like these, it is a great source of comfort that the kingdom of God is in you because Christ is in you. But to complete this teaching, let us remind ourselves of something very glorious. A great day is coming when you and I will have an exalted place in this kingdom – and it is when you begin to think of things like this, that you can understand the Apostle's sarcasm when he talks about 'meat and drink'. How pathetic it is! We rob ourselves of the most wonderful things in the Christian faith and the greatest glories when we engage in this minutiae. Do you know that a day is coming when you and I will be reigning in this kingdom? Remember how our Lord puts it in that third parable of Matthew 25. He says:

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world [*Matt.* 25:31–34].

The Apostle Paul gives the same teaching not only in Romans 14, but in 1 Corinthians 6. Here are these members of the church at Corinth, and Paul says to them: 'Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints?' [verse 1]. They were having their quarrels in the church at Corinth, and not only that, they were taking them before the public tribunals. And notice how Paul deals with that. He does not so much reprimand them as show them what utter fools they are for failing to remember the

kingdom to which they belong and their glorious future. This is how he deals with it:

Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? [1 Cor. 6:2-3].

The Apostle is saying: Where is your sense of perspective? Where is your sense of proportion? Where is your sense of balance? Do you not realize who you are and what you are? You are behaving as if you still belonged to the world. Listen, this is what is true of you and what will be true of you.

Now that is the first and the greatest and the fundamental argument: the kingdom of God. You start with that, then all you do and all your thinking and everything else must be governed by that. The moment it is not, you will go off at a tangent and make peripheral things central. You will make yourself miserable, you will divide the church, you will produce chaos and havoc, and do harm to the kingdom of God. That is what Paul is saying, and it remains for us to work these things out in detail.

Sixteen

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For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

Romans 14:17–19

In these verses, as we have seen, the Apostle is saying, in effect, 'You people have been guilty of forgetting all about the kingdom of God', and so he brings them back to this central truth. In our studies, we have therefore been looking at what the kingdom is in general, and we must now go on to apply this teaching a bit further. These principles are important at every single stage, and so the application we must now make is this: the kingdom of God must be our controlling thought.

What does that mean in practice? Well, the apostle is telling the Christians in Rome that they must always remember that they are people who belong to this kingdom. As Paul says to the Colossians, God has 'delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son' [Col. 1:13]. That is what it really means to be a Christian. Christians are not merely men and women who have taken a certain decision. The really important thing about them is what has been done to them, that they have been 'translated', 'moved over' from one kingdom into another and are now citizens of the kingdom of God.

I have indicated how, in our Lord's own teaching and preaching, nothing received greater prominence than His teaching concerning this kingdom of God; and it is a measure of our departure from the New Testament emphasis that we tend to neglect this teaching. That is a part of this subjectivity of ours. We are so concerned about our feelings and states that we forget where we are and who we are as citizens of the kingdom of God. So that is the first great deduction that we draw from this verse.

So, secondly, we must remember that, because we are citizens of the kingdom of God, we are no longer our own. This is very important. The kingdom, any kingdom, means rule, it means government and laws and regulations. The very notion of kingdom carries with it an understanding of a king as the head and ruler and everybody subservient to him and obedient to him. This, again, is a primary point. A kingdom does not consist of a collection of individuals. That is a rabble, not a kingdom. Where you have a kingdom there is a cohesion, a general submission together to certain fundamental laws and rules, and in particular, a submission to the king himself.

Now the Apostle has already really been saying this earlier on, in the seventh verse: 'For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. 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.' That is exactly the same idea. So he is really saying here, 'You are all behaving as if you were kings. But you are not, you are citizens of a kingdom, you belong to the kingdom of God.'

These are the principles that come out of this general statement, and as you see, it covers the problem that the Apostle was also dealing with in the church at Corinth.

So we remind ourselves that a citizen, by virtue of his position as a citizen, does not decide what is right or wrong because it is decided for him. As citizens of England, we do not decide what to do. Parliament enacts laws, and if we break one of those laws, it is no use our saying in a court of law that we do not agree with it. We will be told that it is not our opinion that is

of interest, the question is: What is the law of the land? And we will be judged according to that. And it is exactly the same in the kingdom of God. It is because people do not remember this, that you get the kind of conditions that you read of here in the church at Rome.

So the third step, obviously, is that we must realize and remember the character of this kingdom; and this is the most important aspect of all. It is because we forget that the kingdom of God is entirely different from every other kingdom that we tend to get into trouble. And that is why our Lord gave such emphasis to this matter.

Take our Lord's parable of the workers in the vineyard. It is the story of a master going out and employing men early in the morning, promising to give them a penny a day. Later on, he goes out two more times, and then, finally, he goes out at the eleventh hour, sees men standing by unemployed and sends them into the vineyard. When the time comes to pay them, the last are called in first and they are given a penny. And on he goes through the others until he comes back to the people who went in at the beginning; and we are told that they are not only amazed, they are annoyed that they likewise are only given a penny. They say, 'This is unjust; it's not equitable. These men have only worked for an hour, while we have borne the heat and the burden of the day. Why are you giving us all the same wages?' [Matt. 20:1-16].

And our Lord says that the trouble with those men was that they had not understood the nature and the character of the kingdom but were thinking in worldly, human, legalistic terms. He starts the parable by saying, 'For the kingdom of heaven is like unto ...' This is the sort of thing that only happens in the kingdom of God, and people who think in terms of earthly kingdoms cannot understand and feel it is quite wrong.

And, later, we see the sons of Zebedee likewise thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom, so that our Lord says, 'Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you' [Matt. 20:25-26]. That is how the

world does it, but they are in an entirely different realm. The astounding thing about this kingdom is that even the King Himself 'came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many' [verse 28]. What a kingdom! But this is the kingdom of God and we must realize – and the sooner the better – that everything in this kingdom is different. Indeed, our Lord specifically puts it like that when He says in His statement to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world' [*John* 18:36].

But let us go on to a fourth deduction. Obviously, therefore, in view of the nature of this kingdom, we must learn to think in a new way. This is the great problem of the Christian life, and this is, indeed, the theme of all the New Testament epistles. All these epistles have one great object, and that is to teach us how to think in a Christian manner. The fact that you are born again does not mean that you automatically think as a Christian. If it did, there would have been no problems in the churches at Rome or Corinth or anywhere else; indeed, you would never have needed a New Testament epistle.

Now if you want the classic account of this new way of thinking, you find it in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, especially in chapters 2 and 3. The Apostle puts his whole argument with these people in Corinth in this interesting way: 'And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ... For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?' [*1 Cor.* 3:1, 3]. In effect, Paul is saying, 'Though you are Christians, truly Christian and born again, you are still thinking as you used to think; you are still thinking with that old worldly wisdom. You do not realize that you are in a new realm here.' And earlier in this Epistle, he writes: 'Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?' [*1 Cor.* 1:20]. The whole attitude of the Christians in Corinth is a proof of the fact that they have not spiritualized their thinking, they have not Christianized it, they do not realize the nature of the kingdom to which they belong. But they must not go on thinking in worldly terms.

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All the troubles in Corinth really arose from that one failure. Take the different problems that the Apostle deals with in that great Epistle and you will find that they all go back to this matter of wrong thinking. If they had only thought in a proper way, in the Christian way, the Christians in Corinth would never have got into all their difficulties. Take the way in which they were going to law against one another in the public courts. Paul says: You do not realize what you are doing, you do not realize that you are citizens of the kingdom of God, that the day is coming when you will judge angels [1 Cor. 6:1-3].

The great trouble in the Christian life is ever that we must re-learn how to think. The old way of thinking is of no value here; we are in an entirely new realm. So that is why the Apostle says, at the end of 1 Corinthians 2, 'We have the mind of Christ' [verse 16]. We need this mind, and we must learn to cultivate and to develop it and to let it govern our thinking on all these various problems and difficulties.

Let me show you in detail what I mean by all this. One of the first things we learn in this kingdom is that what matters now is not my opinion. Of course, in the world it is *my* opinion, my political opinion, and so on. We are accustomed to this; it becomes habitual. I take up my position on the basis of what *I* say, what *I* think. That is what they were doing in Rome: my opinion about eating these meats offered to idols; my opinion about these holy days. But Paul says: Do you not realize that you are in the kingdom of God now? You are not in a human society or a political party. That whole attitude, that whole approach, is wrong. It must go.

It is the same with '*my rights*'. This is the way of the world, is it not? Of course. You join societies to safeguard your rights: trade unions, employers' unions, consumers' unions. You stand up for your rights, this is the habitual way of thinking. But the moment you come into the kingdom of God, you see that that is wrong, that that attitude has no place in the kingdom. 'Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus' [Phil. 2:5]. 'Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others' [verse 4]. It is a revolution. And the whole

trouble arises because people, though they are in the kingdom of God, still go on thinking in the old way, as citizens of the old kingdom, and hence there is grievous trouble.

Now this principle is most important in the life of the church. Let me give you one application, on perhaps a slightly bigger scale, that is relevant to this ecumenical age in which we live. The whole question of the conduct of the church, the government of the church, is involved in this issue of the assertion of private opinion and rights. It very quickly caused difficulties in the history of the early church – you find them here in the New Testament – and they were aggravated later by the rise of parties and factions. There is no doubt at all but that this was how the whole idea of bishops came into being. There was such disorder and confusion in the churches that church leaders said they must regularize things, and so they appointed chairmen. Then the powers of chairmen gradually increased until eventually you had bishops; and then archbishops, metropolitans, and so on, and finally, a pope.

And it all arose because of a failure on the part of Christian people to adjust themselves to this new kingdom, so that in the end you get a system, a tyrannical system, that is the exact opposite of what is taught in the New Testament.

Now it is very important that those of us who believe in the right of the individual church member, and who would assert the right of the individual church member to have a place in the life and the government of the church, that even those of us who believe that, should be careful always to show the difference between that and what is commonly called 'democracy'. So often the worldly idea of democracy has come into the church, and people have said, 'We are going to settle this matter by voting.' And so they canvass and get round people, and work up a party, and are concerned about the vote. But that type of thinking is the exact opposite of the kingdom of God.

You see the subtlety of the problem? It is wrong to avoid the danger of divisions by having bishops and archbishops and popes, but it is equally wrong to assert a democracy that thinks

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in terms of taking decisions according to a majority vote. When you do this, you are no longer thinking in terms of truth and brotherhood and unity, and of the whole spirit of the Christian faith and the spirit of the kingdom of God.

There they were in Rome, forming these factions, and some would say, 'When you are dealing with this question of whether or not you should eat meat offered to idols, you state the case and now you vote. Those in favour of eating meat offered to idols ... those against ...'

But that is not the kingdom of God. That is political parties; that is the world's democracy. Christian people do not decide things in that way. We believe in the universal priesthood of all believers, but that does not mean political democracy in the sense in which it is normally understood. The church, in one sense, is not democratic at all, but she is not monarchical either, or oligarchical; she is something entirely different.

I do not want to go too deeply into this; I am only trying to show you some of the implications of this great teaching in Romans 14:17. Let me finish this particular point by reminding you again of that well-known saying of Mr Spurgeon. On one occasion, when he was warning his students about what to expect, at times, in their churches, he said this to them, and how true it is, and how perfectly it brings out this aspect of this teaching: 'Gentlemen, you will sometimes find that in the prayer meeting some of your members are most spiritually-minded people who pray in a most fervent manner.' Then he said, 'Gentlemen, you will sometimes find that these selfsame people, when they come to a church meeting, become devils.' And it is perfectly true.

What is the matter with them? It is that they have not carried through their thinking. In their prayers they are spiritual, but in a church meeting they say, 'This is a matter of business now and I have my rights and my opinion, and I don't see why I should give in.' And so they get excited and they get heated. They become devils because they do not know how to think. They have reverted to the old worldly, carnal way of thinking and they have forgotten that they are citizens of the kingdom

of God and that the church meeting is as much a part of the kingdom of God as is the prayer meeting, or any other aspect of the life and work of the church.

Now these are but illustrations of the way in which we must not only realize what the character of this kingdom is, but see how its character will affect our entire outlook in every single respect. And so we sum it up by saying that everything we do as Christians, particularly in the realm of the church, must be considered in the light of this whole – the kingdom of God. I must say to myself, 'I'm a citizen of the kingdom of God, it's the most amazing thing that could ever have happened to me, it's my highest privilege, this must dominate the whole of my thinking.'

Then, having put it like that in general, the Apostle now takes us a step further in detail. Having reminded us of the whole character and nature of the kingdom, and the immediate results of that, he now wants to help us still further. So he says: Let us remind ourselves of what the kingdom of God is not. 'The kingdom of God is not meat and drink.' We have spent some time considering this. We must never make one aspect of the kingdom central. Indeed, we must not even think of the kingdom as a collection of parts or portions. Now Paul does not say that questions of eating and drinking are not legitimate and right questions for consideration; what he is saying is that the kingdom of God is not only eating and drinking.

What, then, is the Apostle concerned about? It is this great whole, this grand, this glorious, whole. That is what they had forgotten in Rome. They had become petty, and they were giving the impression that the kingdom of God was something small. And the most terrible thing that you and I can ever do is to give the impression that Christianity and the church are small and narrow. That is what makes this verse so vital. I believe that many people are outside the Christian church today because you and I have given the impression that we are petty and negative little people. That is what the Apostle is concerned about. He says, 'Are you saying that the kingdom of God is a matter of eating and drinking? Are you really reducing it to

this?' And you see the relevance of all this to us, not only at the present time, but at all times.

As we have seen, our Lord Himself was constantly having to deal with this whole matter. Much of His time was spent in argument and disputation with the Pharisees and doctors of the law – these little pedants, these little meticulous men with their little bits of detailed knowledge and their microscopic attitude. He was always holding before them the glory and the grandeur and the greatness of this kingdom. Take, for instance, how He puts it in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat' – this is the same principle, meat is everything to these people – 'and the body than raiment?' [Matthew 6:25].

The whole tragedy of the Pharisees was that the raiment had become more important than the body, the meat more important than the life and, as we see in Matthew 23:18–20, the offering on the altar more important than the altar, and so on. That is the whole tragedy of the pharisaical way of thinking. So our Lord continues:

Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?

Here they are with their little questions.

[For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:] for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. And then here it is in principle:

But seek ye first – *what? Well, not what you eat, or drink, or what you put on* – the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you [Matt. 6:26-33].

The Pharisees and scribes were so immersed in details that they could not see the big thing. There it was standing before them, the very Son of God incarnate, everything they needed. The kingdom itself, as it were, in the person of the King, and they could not see it because of subsections of subsections of subsections of the law.

And these people in Rome were guilty of exactly the same thing. Anybody entering into the church at Rome and listening to them would have thought that the kingdom of God was really just a matter of what you do and do not eat and drink and which days you observe as holy. Paul says: What are you talking about? Have you forgotten what the kingdom of God is? It is not *that*! It is not small, it is not mean, it is not narrow, it is not negative.

But this also comes as a question to us, does it not? What impression are we giving of the kingdom of God? What impression do you think you give to others as to what it means to be a Christian, as to what the whole kingdom of God is about? When we talk about these things, what impression are we leaving on others as to what Christianity really is? What makes men and women Christians? What impression do our lives leave upon them? This is what we are concerned about. Is the kingdom of God eating and drinking, or is it something else? This is the issue that Paul puts before us so plainly and so clearly.

Now bear this in mind: the kingdom of God includes many things, there are many parts to it, but are we giving an impression of the whole and the bigness, or merely of parts? For instance, take morality; morality is a part of the kingdom

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of God, but the kingdom of God is not morality only. That is the difference. There are certain things that we as Christian people must never do, there are certain impressions of ourselves as Christians, as members of the Christian church, as citizens of the kingdom of God, that we must never give. Here is one. We must never give the impression that Christians are just men and women who do not do certain things.

Now do not misunderstand this. Christians do not do certain things, but we must never give the impression that, essentially, that is what Christians are. You see the importance of this? Is there not a danger that some of us might give the impression that Christians are just men and women who do not drink, or who do not smoke?

Again, there are certainly many people, and some are considered to be outstanding Christians, who give the impression that essentially a Christian is a pacifist. You are familiar with such people; they are always talking about their pacifist ideals. Listen to them and you get the impression that the kingdom of God is pacifism. If a man does not believe in war, if he is opposed to what is happening in Vietnam, for example, then he is a Christian.

'But,' you say, 'he doesn't believe in the deity of Christ.'

It does not matter; he does not believe in war. This is their argument.

Now these are but illustrations. I am not discussing the question of pacifism. I know Christians who are pacifists; I know equally good Christians who are not. All I am saying is that if a man gives me the impression that what makes him a Christian is the fact that he is a pacifist, then he is wrong. If he gives me the impression that what makes a man a Christian is that he fights for certain principles, then he is equally wrong. They are both wrong. The kingdom of God is not a question of fighting or not fighting, any more than it is a question of eating and drinking.

But let us go on to a further illustration. It is equally right to say that we should never give the impression that Christians, essentially, are people who do good. Now, again, you are familiar

with this idea. There is a certain man who is often described in the papers as the greatest Christian of this present century. Why do they say that of him? Oh, it is because he made a sacrifice and did a lot of good work. That is all right, but they do not worry about what he believed; they do not worry about what he denied; it does not concern them that he made it quite plain that he was not a Christian at all.. Look at the good he did! Look at his desire to help people. This is Christianity – philanthropy, especially if you sacrifice yourself for it. But this is covered by Romans 14:17. The kingdom of God is not doing good. There are many people in the world who are doing great good and are sacrificing themselves for it, but they are deniers of the Christian faith. Doing good is one part of the kingdom, and morality is one part of the kingdom, but you must not identify Christianity or the kingdom of God with just one aspect of it.

Or, to go further – and I am trying to show you how we are all guilty at some point or another – Christians must never give the impression that what makes people Christians is that they believe the doctrine of election.

‘But,’ you ask, ‘is there anybody who gives that impression?’

Well, if you are always talking about election, you must not be surprised if some people think that what makes people Christians is that they believe in it. Now I am not discussing the rightness or the wrongness of this view, all I am saying is that if you are giving the impression that the one thing that matters is that you believe in election, then you come under the ban of the great Apostle.

Others give the impression that essentially what makes people Christians is that they were immersed when they were baptized – this is *the* thing. But that is equally wrong. Again, I have known others who really have given the impression that the essential thing about the kingdom of God is that only psalms are sung, and never hymns. Am I being unfair? This is what they keep talking about; this is what they emphasize; this is what is central to them. As you listen to them, you feel that to them this is the essence of the kingdom of God.

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Then there are others who give the impression that what makes people Christians is essentially that they speak in tongues or believe in healing. Again, I am not discussing the questions, but am saying that the kingdom of God is neither speaking in tongues, nor spiritual healing, nor any one of these other gifts of the Spirit. These are parts of the kingdom, but the kingdom of God does not consist in them.

Or, to put it still more generally – and it is still true, though not, perhaps, as true as it once was – a curse of the last hundred years has been the fact that some have given the impression that a Christian is a person who belongs to a particular denomination, or to a particular organization. Throughout the years, at the end of a service visitors have come to see me in my vestry and I have stood and listened to them telling me everything about themselves in one phrase. Some have come in and said to me, ‘I’m a Methodist.’ Others have said, ‘I’m a Congregationalist’, or, ‘I’m a Salvationist.’ And it is true of practically all of them that, having said this, they feel they have told me everything I need to know about who they are. And I realize that the important thing to them is not the kingdom of God.

How we betray ourselves! We do it by what we emphasize, by what we give prominence to, by what we are always speaking of, by what seems to absorb us and to thrill us and to excite us. In this way we always reveal what is *the* thing to us. This is what the Apostle is saying: ‘The kingdom of God is not meat and drink.’ Now there, in a sense, is the negative aspect of this subject. We must start there. Each of us must ask, ‘What is the kingdom of God to me?’ But above all, let us ask ourselves this question: What impression are we giving of the kingdom? I am so concerned about this because it seems to me that, ultimately, our evangelism should be guided and controlled by the answer we give to that question.

Today there is much interest in evangelism. ‘The people are outside, what can we do to get them in?’ And everyone begins to talk about the details of how to approach those outside, and the methods that must be employed, and the excitement and

the money and the advertising! All the arguments and fuss about methods are, in my opinion, due to the fact that we have not asked the original and preliminary question. It is this: Why are the masses of the people in this country outside the Christian church?

And I have a terrible feeling within me that the real answer to that question is that you and I who are inside have somehow given the impression that this business of the kingdom of God and of Christianity is so small and contemptible that it is not even worthy of their thought and consideration. They want something big, they say, they want real life, not this negative smallness, this finicky little thing, with self-important people concerned here and there about details.

Oh, my dear friend, there is nothing more important for you and for me to answer than this question: What impression are we giving to others as to the nature of the kingdom of God? Let every man examine himself.

Seventeen

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For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.

Romans 14:17–19

‘The kingdom of God’, Paul says in verse 17, ‘is not meat and drink.’ You seem to be reducing it to that, but that is too small, it is too negative.

So, though we must start with that negative, we do not stop with it. ‘The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but ...’ and now we turn to the positive.

What is the kingdom of God? What is it that we must always keep in the forefront of our minds? What is it that must govern and control the whole of our thinking? In verse 17, Paul answers these questions, and we now look at his answer. ‘The kingdom of God is ... righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.’ So the question before us is: What is the meaning of these three terms? How are we to understand them? It is a question that has caused division among the commentators. On the one hand, you have John Calvin, Charles Hodge, Shedd, and people like that; and on the other hand, you have Robert Haldane, and a modern commentator, Professor John Murray.

Now as I have often pointed out as we have been working our way through this Epistle, it is always interesting to come

across a disagreement between Charles Hodge and Robert Haldane. They were contemporaries; they were both great Christian men, great Reformed teachers, men of profound understanding and learning, and generally they were in entire agreement. But now and again we have found that they disagree, and here is another example. At this point, Professor John Murray agrees with Robert Haldane rather than with Charles Hodge.

Here in a nutshell is the question at issue: In this verse, are these terms – and especially the term ‘righteousness’ – to be taken in the way that they have been used right through this Epistle, or do we have to say that at this point they are not to be understood like that? Generally in this Epistle, you remember, the term ‘righteousness’ means ‘the righteousness of God’, the righteousness that is from God, the righteousness that God gives us. That was the whole burden and nerve of the argument in the first three chapters.

The term was introduced in the seventeenth verse of the first chapter, and it comes again in chapter 3, where we find one of the great turning-points of the Epistle: ‘Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ ...’ [*Rom. 3:20–21*]. And from there on, this term ‘righteousness’ is used in that way. And the same applies to the terms ‘peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost’.

Now that is the view that is taken by Calvin and Hodge and others. But then you have Robert Haldane and his followers who say that here the terms do not have the connotation they usually have in this Epistle but have an ethical sense. So the Apostle is saying that the kingdom of God is rectitude, right behaviour, and harmony and joy. Their argument is that in the preceding verses, and also in verses 18 and 19, the Apostle is dealing with conduct and behaviour and, therefore, the context demands that in this verse, too, he should be describing the characteristics of the members of the church.

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This is an interesting and obviously an important matter. So what do we say about it? Which of these two views is right? Well, I have – if I may use such an expression – greatly enjoyed myself as I have looked into this matter, and it seems to me that I have to say that there is a sense in which I agree with both views, and yet, at the same time, say that both are wrong!

Let me expound what I mean. To recapitulate, the argument is that the Apostle is either using the term 'righteousness' in its general objective sense of 'the righteousness of God in Christ', which He puts to our account in justification, or else the Apostle is giving a description of the behaviour of Christian people.

Now it seems to me to be quite clear that Paul is concerned here to remind the Romans that they must not give the impression, or tend to think again, that it is what they do that makes them Christian. I am sure that thought is included. It must be. And it is to that extent that I agree with the teaching of Calvin and Hodge about this statement. As we have seen, Christians in the church at Rome were tending almost to say that it was what you did about eating and drinking and the observation of days that really decided whether or not you were a Christian. You remember how the stronger were despising the weaker, and the weaker were tending to judge the stronger. So I think that is one element in Paul's meaning here: he is reminding them that they must not drop back to that old way of thinking. But I disagree with Calvin and Hodge when they suggest that this is the main emphasis here, or that it is the only emphasis.

But with reference to Professor John Murray's views, and the opinion of Haldane and his followers, that the kingdom of God is 'rectitude' and 'peaceableness' or 'harmony and joy', we can surely lay down the proposition that it cannot be right to say that the kingdom of God consists in our ethical behaviour. After all, the Apostle is here giving one of his definitions of the kingdom of God. Though the citizens of the kingdom should behave in a certain way, to define the kingdom in terms of our ethical behaviour is to move away from the faith position and

to deny the teaching found everywhere in the Scriptures. So there is a sense in which John Murray's view is to be rejected.

Another reason for not wholly accepting the second view is this: you must have noticed the parallel between what we are told here and what we are told in the first two verses of chapter 5 of Romans, where Paul is summing up, as it were, winding up his whole argument, about justification by faith only. There you read this: 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.' 'Justified by faith' – there is your righteousness; then, 'peace with God' – there is the second term; and the third term, 'we rejoice in hope of the glory of God' – there is the 'joy in the Holy Ghost'. Romans 14:17 thus parallels Romans 5:1-2, and that seems to me to be a very important argument in our interpretation of this statement.

So I go on to say that, as I understand it, the eighteenth and nineteenth verses are not, as Haldane and others maintain, just a repetition of the seventeenth verse or a further definition of what the Christian is. I regard verses 18 and 19 as deductions drawn from the seventeenth verse. The seventeenth verse makes the big statement, lays down the big proposition, and then the Apostle draws two deductions out of that. He says that men and women who realize the truth of verse 17, and are governed by this thinking, are those who are acceptable to God and approved of men. And then comes the appeal – 'Let us therefore follow after these things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.'

So to me, this seventeenth verse is a general statement of the character or the characteristics of the kingdom of God and its citizens. In other words, I argue that Paul is not dealing here with ethical relationships, but with personal relationships. Of course, our personal relationships, and our view of them, will be expressed in ethical conduct, but that is not what he is dealing with here. I suggest that he is trying to show that these Romans had forgotten their whole position and their entire relationship to one another, and this was the source of all their

trouble. They were reducing the whole matter of the kingdom of God to attitudes towards certain details and certain practices. They had become so involved in the minutiae that they were missing the whole thing. As I have said, it is the attitude that our Lord condemned in the Pharisees when he said, 'Ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith' [*Matt.* 23:23]. They had forgotten the essential characteristic of the kingdom and of all who belong to it.

In other words, our interpretation here is governed by the fact that the Apostle is ridiculing the attitude of these people, and is, indeed, showing a measure of impatience with it. I again introduce this whole element of sarcasm because I think the Apostle does this quite deliberately. In effect, he says: 'Do you not realize what you are doing? You would not be guilty of behaving in the way that you are doing with regard to these matters of indifference if you always remembered the great characteristics of the kingdom and of the people who belong to it.' That is why I said at the beginning that in a sense I accept both, and reject both, of these alternatives that are put before us by the commentators.

Let me introduce some supporting evidence. I suggest that the Apostle here is really drawing on the argument that he uses twice over in the Epistle to the Galatians: 'Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage' [*Gal.* 5:1]. The Apostle was a preacher and he was a teacher and pastor, and there is an element of feeling here. He continues: 'Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing' [verse 2].

Now remember that, here again, Paul is writing to believers. These Galatians were believers but these false teachers, these Judaizers, had come in and said, 'Yes, it is all right to believe in Christ, but you must be circumcised as well.' They brought in some detail, and said that if the Galatians did not have the detail, they were all wrong. But Paul asks: Do you realize what you are doing? If you do that, 'Christ shall profit you nothing.

For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith' [verses 2-5].

Then here is the pronouncement: 'For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love' [verse 6]. Paul ridicules this great pre-occupation with circumcision. By putting it into its context, he shows how false this teaching is.

And Paul feels so strongly about the harm done by the Judaizers that he comes back to their teaching at the end of the Epistle. So in Galatians 6, he says: 'As many as desire to make a fair shew in the flesh' – these were the circumcision people – 'they constrain you to be circumcised; only lest they should suffer persecution for the cross of Christ.' That is their motive. 'For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh.' Then one of these flights of expression again: 'But God forbid that I should glory' – in circumcision or in the number of people belonging to my party; this ridicule again, and the passion that comes out – 'save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.' And again: 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.' There is a new being, a new creation – something absolutely new. Not an odd detail here or there; the whole thing.

And so the Apostle lifts the argument right up, demonstrates the bigness of it all, and shows, with contempt, the smallness and the pettiness of this wrangling about these details. 'And as many', he says, 'as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.' And then I like this seventeenth verse: 'From henceforth let no man trouble me' – no more of this nonsense, says the great Apostle, no more wasting of my time over this – 'for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus. Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit' [Gal. 6:12-17].

And I think Paul is saying just the same thing here in Romans 14:17. He says: Let us have an end of this nonsense. You seem to be making this the big thing in the church, you seem to be saying that the essence of Christianity is eating and drinking. No more of this. You are in grave danger of forgetting your whole position as Christians because of this preoccupation with details and with these attitudes towards conduct. The kingdom of God is 'righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost'.

I suggest, therefore, that Paul's words in Romans 14:17 are not merely an ethical statement, not merely a description of the kind of life that Christians are to live. They include that but are much more than that. You miss the greatness and the element of sarcasm and of contempt if you say that the kingdom of God is 'rectitude' and 'peaceableness and joy'. Oh, no, the kingdom of God is infinitely bigger than that!

I do not think that there is any suggestion in Paul's words that the strong and weak Christians in Rome were ethically wrong. That was not their trouble at all. Their error was that they were making their attitude towards these detailed questions determinative of their whole position as Christians, and that was what the Apostle could not tolerate.

So in interpreting this word 'righteousness', the deduction that we draw is that the Apostle is, in a sense, giving us a definition of a Christian. He is saying that we must get hold of this whole notion of righteousness. The Christian is not merely someone who is right in certain respects, or here and there. That was the impression they were giving. If you had listened to them, you would have said, 'Ah, well, a Christian is obviously someone who has this or that attitude towards eating meat.' But the Apostle says that that is the old type of thinking. And it is wrong.

Christians, on the other hand, are men and women who have got hold of the teaching concerning righteousness. They think like this: Christians are people who have been declared righteous by God, who know that justification is by faith only, and that God 'justifieth the ungodly' [Rom. 4:5]. They believe all Paul's argument in the first five chapters of Romans. This is

how Christians think of righteousness; not little details here and there, but this whole matter of their standing before God and the declaration of God that He 'accounts' them as righteous.

Not only that, Christians believe that they have been clothed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that God has put this 'robe of righteousness' upon them [*Isa.* 61:10]. They know they have been 'born again', 'born of the Spirit' [*John* 2:3, 5], and, that, because of that, they are in an entirely new realm. They were 'in the flesh'; they are now 'in the Spirit'. They now belong to the realm of righteousness, whereas before they did not.

I want to bring out this point because to me it is the key to the interpretation that I am giving you of this seventeenth verse. So I want to show you how the Apostle has himself defined 'righteousness, and peace, and joy' in chapter 6 of this Epistle, where he says, 'But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin' – that is what you were – 'but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you' [verse 17]. That is a great statement. When we dealt with it,¹ our way of putting it was that now we have been poured into a new mould. Christians have been poured, delivered into, the mould of this teaching so they are new men and women.

And then Paul continues: 'Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.' There is a transformation, a great change. They were 'the servants of sin' but now they have been 'made free' and have become 'the servants of righteousness'. This is just another way of saying that they are now in the kingdom of God. So being in the kingdom is still not a question of detailed behaviour, but of having become 'the servants of righteousness'.

Paul goes on: 'I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh' – this is an apology for using an illustration – 'for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.' Then here is a great statement: 'For when ye were the servants of

¹ See *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 6: The New Man*, 1972.

sin, ye were free from righteousness.' That does not mean that every action they performed was wrong and evil. No, Paul means that they had nothing to do with righteousness; they were not in the realm of righteousness at all; they were outside. Thus, in the way in which the Apostle is using the term, 'righteousness' is not an ethical quality in believers but is a realm to which they belong.

Then Paul writes: 'What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin' – from the realm of sin, from the ultimate control of sin – 'and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord' [*Rom. 6:17-23*]. Now that, to me, is the key to this whole matter. It is in that sense that the kingdom of God is 'righteousness'. The first thing that happens when I become a Christian is that I am put into the realm, the kingdom, of righteousness. It is the kingdom of God that is the sphere and the reign of righteousness. This is the interpretation of Romans 14:17.

Christians, then, are new men and women in this new realm. They have liberty in Christ, a new way of thinking. And now they view all matters of conduct not primarily in terms of particular actions, but rather in terms of their conformity to the kingdom to which they belong and to the King of the kingdom. This is the difference. And this is something that they now work out. They realize now that His fundamental commandment is, 'Be ye holy; for I am holy' [*1 Pet. 1:16*].

The Christians in Rome were tending to forget that there is a great distinction between holiness and morality. They were tending to drop back to the level of thinking in terms of morality. Morality is always concerned about particular actions and about being legally right. All that moral people are concerned about is to be right and not to be wrong in this and that and the other respects. They think in terms of actions; they think that what they are is the summation of what they do and don't do. This is a legalistic conception.

That is not at all the way Christians think about these things. Holiness is always concerned primarily about the whole person. Not the parts, not the details, not the particulars, not merely the actions, but the entire personality – ‘Be ye holy; for I am holy.’ This is what Christians are concerned about. They are not concerned with being right here or there; they want to be right everywhere. There is a hymn by Johann Lavater that puts this perfectly. This is his prayer:

*O Jesus Christ, grow Thou in me,
And all things else recede*

Johann Caspar Lavater
(trans. Elizabeth Lee Smith)

Here is a man who has a conception of righteousness; he wants to be rid of everything that is wrong; he wants to be wholly right; he is interested in holiness. It is a big and a positive matter, and the moment you see this you are no longer interested in these little details. The merely ethical, moral man, of course, says, ‘Oh, I’m right here, I’m right there’, and imagines that he is, therefore, all right. But he is not, and that is always the tragedy.

So I again put it like this to you: that Christian men and women are not primarily concerned about detailed rightness, but are profoundly concerned about being well-pleasing to God and right in His sight. Take the Apostle Paul himself. He had been in that old position in which he did not do this and he did not do that – he tells us about it in that bit of autobiography in Philippians 3. But he is emancipated from all that. What he wants now is this: ‘That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection’, and to be ‘found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith’ [Phil. 3:10, 9].

Or, indeed, it is as our Lord has put it in one of the Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness’ [Matt. 5:6]. You are no longer thinking of these

particular details; you want to be wholly righteous. This is what matters. This is the essence of Christianity. As our Lord puts it in the Beatitudes, this is a portrait of the Christian man and woman.

The kingdom of God is righteousness – yes. Christians realize the truth about the people of God, and, once you begin thinking of yourself in terms of being one of the people of God, you are emancipated out of small, petty, minute arguments. The Apostle Peter puts it in this way:

But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy [1 Pet. 2:9–10].

This is what interests Christian men and women. They are not concerned merely with ethical righteousness, but with the whole concept of themselves as citizens belonging to this great kingdom. And, realizing this, they are primarily concerned about the glory of God, the extension of the kingdom of God and the well-being of all who are its citizens. Christians are not like the Pharisee, who were mainly concerned about ethical conduct and about appearing right outwardly but who were inwardly ‘full of ravening and wickedness’ [Luke 11:39]. Christians are not interested in these appearances and in correctness here and there; they are concerned about being clean within, this total righteousness, this utter purity.

Look at it in the terms our Lord uses in the third of the parables in Matthew 25. This seems to me to put it very well indeed.

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats.

And you remember the division:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me [*Matt. 25:31-40*].

Do you see the point? The righteous are unconscious of their righteousness. That is the glory of their whole position. They are very different from those Christians in Rome, where the strong man says, 'I see through this. I have a right to eat this', and the weak Christian says, 'No, he's wrong to do that', and as a result are self-satisfied and think they can justify themselves.

I trust I am making this clear to you. Christians are righteous in themselves because they have been brought into the kingdom of God, and the realm of righteousness, as the Apostle Paul says in his Epistle to the Ephesians:

This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto

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lasciviousness ... But ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness – or *holiness of the truth* [Eph. 4:17–24].

So, to bring this to a conclusion, I say again that the kingdom of God is righteousness, and Christians, the citizens of the kingdom of God, are righteous people. This means that they are like the Lord Jesus Christ. The Apostle John says, 'My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous' [1 John 2:1]. That is it – 'Jesus Christ the righteous'. He is righteous. So is the Christian.

Then again, John says, 'If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him' [1 John 2:29]. Everyone that is born of him 'doeth righteousness' – because they have been made righteous. John puts this still more plainly in chapter 3: 'Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous' [1 John 3:7]. That is it. You see, Christians 'do righteousness' because they are righteous. That is the right way to put it. You do not make yourself righteous by what you do, but you are first made righteous. And then the appeal comes to you to show your righteousness in your behaviour.

Eighteen

★

*For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness,
and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.*

Romans 14:17

The Apostle here, let me remind you, is showing the members of the church in Rome that their whole trouble is that they have forgotten the real character and the nature of the kingdom of God itself, and of life in the kingdom. It is essential that you should hold that in your mind as we come to consider the second term. We have considered the term 'righteousness' and now we come to the word 'peace', and this, of course, follows directly from 'righteousness'. We have seen¹ that the Apostle has this same order in chapter 5: 'Therefore being justified by faith' – or, being justified by the righteousness of God imputed to us in Jesus Christ – 'we have peace with God' [verse 1]. Righteousness first, and righteousness leading, in the second instance, to peace.

Once more, it is essential that we should realize exactly why the Apostle introduces this term. He is showing that the condition prevailing among the Romans was the exact opposite of what it should be among citizens of the kingdom of God. The atmosphere in the church in Rome was one of contention, of judgment and recrimination, it was one of strife, and the Apostle is setting out to show that this is the very negation of

¹ See *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 5: Assurance*, 1971.

what should be true of citizens of the kingdom of God in their relationships to one another. Paul is taking these Christians as they are and, having reasoned the matter out in detail, he says: You have turned the kingdom of God into a matter of eating and drinking, and because you have done that, you have lost peace, that is your trouble.

Let us, then, work this out together. The Christians in Rome had got into a condition of un-rest in which they were lacking in the manifestation of this great element of peace that is so characteristic of the kingdom. And this showed itself, as it always does, in the state of their minds and their hearts. Both sides were troubled, both those who were stronger in the faith, and those who were weaker. This difficulty and division was constantly a source of anxiety to them. And, as a result, they were also in a state of fear.

Now I remember once describing this kind of condition as one of 'morbid scrupulosity', and I cannot think of a better way of putting it. The Christians in Rome had got into a state in which they were interested in these details, these particulars: Should we eat this? Should we drink that? Should we observe this particular day? The problems had become so exaggerated in their thinking that they had become over-scrupulous, even to the extent of becoming morbid. And this, of course, was all due to the fact that they were ultimately concerned about their reputation and about their being in the right. And the moment you get into this situation you become constantly afraid of making a mistake. You will be familiar with this condition: with every question that arises, you are at once thrown into a kind of pother. You are so terrified of doing the wrong thing that you are always on edge, always restless in the whole of your mind and in the whole of your heart.

And, of course, accompanying this, there is an unusual sensitivity to the opinions and the criticisms of others. You feel you are being watched and you are afraid that you will give grounds for criticism or misunderstanding. As a result, you completely lose your peace. And, on top of all this, and as the result of it all, you are always on the defensive; you are always

concerned about justifying yourself and proving that your opinions are right. And that was the condition of these people on both sides. It was perhaps more true of the weak, but it was also true of those who are described as the stronger since they were only strong in their intellectual understanding. They were all in an inner turmoil that was the very antithesis of being in a state of rest or peace.

Now so far, I have just given a description of the inward state of the Roman Christians, but, of course, it never stops at that – it cannot confine itself to that. We all live in relationship to one another. ‘No man is an island’, and especially not in the Christian church. And if we are in this kind of restless, apprehensive, fearful state, this is bound to manifest itself in our relations with other people. If you are feeling at all insecure, or at all uncertain of yourself, or if your mind is filled with anxieties and worries about your position, you cannot help being on edge. You are not at peace with yourself, so how can you be at peace with other people?

Because you yourself are lacking in peace and in rest, you generally react in the wrong way when you meet others. You are querulous, almost expecting opposition and criticism. You are ready to disagree with anybody you meet, expecting to fight them over some matter or other. You seem to be watching for difficulties, waiting for them, and you are, of course, over-ready to be critical of other people. It is the people who are most uncertain about themselves who are generally most critical of others: criticism is a part of a self-defence mechanism. If you can show others that they are wrong, that means that you are better than you thought you were. So fearfulness and anxiety about your position leads to a censorious attitude and spirit. That, too, was the trouble in Rome. As we have seen in the previous verses, these Christians were all watching one another, the strong despising the weak and the weak judging the strong.

So whenever there is too much preoccupation with details, especially about matters that are ultimately indifferent, people become what we may well describe as ‘spiritual detectives’.

Forgetting the spirit, they are interested in details, almost looking for some defect, for something they can condemn.

I will never forget an experience I had many years ago when I was preaching in a certain place. To illustrate a point I was making, I brought in that incident recorded in Acts 3. It is the account of Peter and John going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, which was the ninth hour, and healing a beggar who was sitting at the Beautiful Gate of the temple.

Now in using this as an illustration, I happened to say that though Peter and John were on their way into the temple to pray, when they saw this man, their attention was immediately engaged and they forgot all about the praying and dealt with the man and with the problem. And I went on to add – as it was evidently the point I was making – that it would not be a bad thing for some of us if now and again we forgot our meetings and behaved in a more practical manner as Christians. I said that there is a danger of Christian people just thinking of themselves and the enjoyment of meetings, and attending meetings, and doing nothing as Christians in the neighbourhood in which they live, or even in the street in which they live, or among people whom they know well and with whom they have to work.

And I will never forget what happened to me at the close of the service. Two young ladies came to me dressed in a kind of uniform. They had their notebooks and they had been taking notes. They said they were students at a Bible college not far away from that place, and they had a question. They said, 'Did we understand you to say that you do not believe in prayer meetings?'

Well, I was able to show these two young ladies not only exactly what I meant, but also what was wrong with them. I said, 'Did you come to this meeting just to listen to see if I should say anything wrong? You probably did.' They belonged to an ultra-rigidly orthodox Bible college that, because it felt that everybody was against it, had in turn become opposed to everybody else, and as a part of its own self-defence had become hyper-critical. I added, 'Far from saying in my sermon that I

did not believe in prayer meetings, I actually said how important prayer meetings are.'

Because I had happened to say that now and again Christians should 'forget the prayer meeting', and 'deal with the problem', did this mean that I was against prayer meetings? The conclusion those two young students had jumped to revealed their spirit. They had become spiritual detectives, ready to condemn a man for a word or a phrase.

This situation is very sad. It is always a sign of a lack of assurance, a lack of certainty, a lack of confidence. There is something wrong with the person who gets into this condition. As I said, it is ultimately a part of a defence mechanism. But the tragedy is, of course, that it leads not only to strife, but also to divisions, to schisms, and so the Christian church gives the impression that she is just a collection of warring groups and divided personalities.

And ultimately this morbid scrupulosity tends to show itself also in our relationship to God. It means that though we still say that we believe in justification by faith only, in practice, we have become so preoccupied with these details, that we are back again in a condition of fear with respect to God. We think of Him in terms of a lawgiver, and a judge who is carefully watching our every single action, ready to pounce on us, as it were, when we do anything wrong. And that in turn leads us to think, unconsciously, that we put ourselves right with God by being right in certain particular details. This raises the whole question of righteousness and so our preoccupation with details also means even a lack of peace between us and God.

And that, I suggest to you, was the state of these people in the church at Rome. What does the Apostle have to say about it all? Here is his answer: 'The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking; it is ... peace ...' Let me work it out with you. He says, in effect, 'Your whole attitude is wrong; you have really forgotten the truth about yourselves as Christians, and the truth about the kingdom to which you belong. You are showing all the characteristics of the old life.'

The Apostle is constantly having to say that though we are Christians, we can slip back into the old way of thinking. He says this at very great length to the church at Corinth: 'And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal' [1 Cor. 3:1]. Though they were truly Christian, they were still thinking in a carnal way. The fact that we are born again Christians does not guarantee that our thinking will always be right. Far from it. We need instruction, we need to be trained and shown how to apply the principles of the kingdom to our thinking about every subject. That is precisely what the Apostle is doing here.

The Apostle says, in effect, 'Can't you see that you have slipped back into thinking in an individualistic manner?' That is always the characteristic of the non-regenerate, the non-Christian, life, and is much of the source of the trouble in the world today. The world is as it is because of individualistic thinking: self is at the centre; man is by nature self-centred. And without realizing it, the Christians at Rome had become self-centred. Those strong in the faith were self-centred, despising the others, not bothering about them; and the weak were self-centred, looking at their brethren and criticizing them.

These people at Rome were now concerned about their reputation, their opinions, their ideas. But that is the world, that is how the world always starts: 'What I say is this; what I think is that.'

'I say,' says one man, 'that there is nothing wrong in eating these meats.'

'I don't agree', says another. 'I say ...'

Peace has gone. There is quarrelling, even a state of war. Each one is concerned about self-protection and self-defence and each one, in the end, is concerned about himself. The argument is all in terms of themselves.

In all Paul's epistles you will find a warning against self-centredness: 'Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others' [Phil. 2:4]. Two women in the church at Philippi – Euodias and Syntyche – formed parties round themselves, and as a result, there was division and strife.

It is this terrible preoccupation with self, its rights, its demands, its pleasure, its happiness, that is the source of all quarrels and disputes, whether it be between husbands and wives, or parents and children, master and workers, or between different countries. It is always 'myself' and a refusal to see the other.

So Paul is saying here: You seem to have forgotten that you are in the kingdom of God. You are behaving exactly as men and women behave out in the world. You are using exactly the same arguments, you are behaving in exactly the same way.

But, positively, the Christians in Rome were forgetting the purpose of the kingdom of God. Why is God introducing his kingdom into the world? Why is there a kingdom of God at all? Start with the question: Why is there such a thing as the Christian church? Why is there such a great salvation? And there is only one answer, an answer that is perfectly clear: It is because God is the God of peace.

There is a great doxology in the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ' [*Heb.* 13:20–21]. Notice how it begins: 'the God of peace'. God is a God of peace, and if He were not, there would be no kingdom of God.

God's whole object is to produce peace. You find this in the very introduction of the Gospels. You remember the lyrical scene in the second chapter of Luke, where the angel makes the great announcement to the shepherds watching their flocks by night: 'And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men' [*Luke* 2:13–14]. Here, in the proclamation at the very beginning, the great thing that is emphasized is this element of peace. The God of peace has taken this action, and the result of this will be 'peace on earth, good will toward men'.

And then the Apostle Paul, in his great statement in Ephesians 2, puts it like this: '(Our Lord) came and preached

peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh' [Eph. 2:17]. Isaiah had prophesied that He would do that – and He did. Why? Because the whole purpose of the kingdom of God is to bring peace. This is why our Lord's coming became necessary.

Sin was the result of rebellion and enmity against God. God had made the man and the woman in His own image, and put them in Paradise where they lived a life of peace and of communion with God. The tempter raised questions and doubt, interfered with the peace and broke the relationship, creating an enmity by suggesting that God was against them.

Now sin always leads to a lack of peace – a lack of peace between man and God, a lack of peace between man and man, a lack of peace everywhere. That is the great point that Paul makes in that second chapter of Ephesians. He comes back to the same thought in the fourth chapter where he says that by nature men and women are 'alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them' [Eph. 4:18]. And we have already seen that Paul says in Romans 8: 'The carnal mind (the natural mind) is enmity against God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be' [verse 7]. And this is a point that Paul constantly makes.

As a result of the original rebellion, the whole world is full of unrest and of war and of enmity between man and God, and man and man. 'There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked' [Isa. 57:21]. There is no peace anywhere, and the world is proving this. What is the object of salvation? I say again that it is to produce peace. God is a God of peace and of order. And what is salvation? It is reconciliation. Here is the great message: 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself' [2 Cor. 5:19]. Reconciliation! Atonement! Bringing two enemies together – making at-one-ment.

Paul is saying to these people: Cannot you see that, in the way you are behaving over these indifferent matters and in the way you have produced these enmities and jealousies and disease and un-rest among yourselves, you are denying the whole object and purpose of the kingdom of God?

If you say that the word 'peace' merely means 'peaceableness', the element of contempt that is in Paul's words does not come out at all, you are missing the very point of what he is saying. No, he says, the way you are behaving among yourselves is a denial of the chief purpose of the kingdom of God. That is where I reject that exposition of Haldane and Professor John Murray. Their explanation does not bring out the tremendous contrast. There is no sense of ridicule if the word 'peace' merely means peaceableness. No, they are forgetting the great characteristic of the kingdom of God. It is a kingdom of peace where a great reconciliation has taken place.

So what is this reconciliation? It is first and foremost peace with God: 'Being justified by faith, we have peace with God' [*Rom. 5:1*], and there is nothing more wonderful than that. The first thing that happens to men and women when they become Christians is that they lose that fear of God that, according to the Apostle John, is a fear that 'hath torment' [*1 John 4:18*]. There is no peace when people are afraid of God in that sense; it is a terrible torment. They feel that God is against them, that God is just a judge, that He is waiting, as it were, to pick up any detail, and to denounce and to punish. That is the attitude of the natural person towards God.

But the moment people become Christians, they are reconciled to God and – this is the marvellous thing – they know that He is their Father. Therefore they know that He is not scrutinizing the details of their lives in order to punish them. The Father has a positive interest. Every human father is anxious for the child to grow and to develop family characteristics. And if a child should fail there is no bitterness, but regret and sorrow. So Christian men and women, knowing that they are children of God, do not think of their Christian lives in terms of details, particularly with regard to things indifferent.

But these people at Rome seem to have forgotten their relationship to God as their loving Father. They had forgotten that they were children of God and members of His household. They had forgotten that the first purpose of the kingdom is to put man at peace with God.

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Then, secondly, salvation gives men and women peace within. Our blessed Lord was very concerned with this inner peace, especially at the end of His life. On the night before He died, He said, 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid' [*John* 14:27]. Those words refer chiefly, I know, to His departure, but they include everything. The world cannot give this peace, and the man or woman of the world knows nothing of it, but Christians have been given it, it is inside them, and it is wonderful.

And the Apostle is really saying the same thing in *Philippians* 4:6-7: 'Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.' And what happens? 'And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.'

'Where is that peace to be seen among you?' says Paul, in effect, to the Romans. 'You seem to think the kingdom of God is a matter of eating and drinking; but it is peace. You do not have it; you have forgotten all about it; you are full of strife and worry, of anxiety and self-concern.'

Or, as Paul tells Timothy, 'For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind' – or, 'of power, and of love, and of discipline' [*2 Tim.* 1:7]. Christians are not always fearful and apprehensive. No, quite the opposite. One of the most marvellous things that happens to people when they become Christians is that they are given 'peace within'. It is the end of struggle, it is the end of perplexity. As Philip Doddridge put it in his hymn, 'Oh, happy day that fixed my choice':

Now rest, my long-divided heart.

And your heart does rest. You are no longer in an apprehensive, nervous, critical state about yourself and others. It is not that you do not realize that you must 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' [*Phil.* 2:12], but you have

lost this un-rest and the 'fear that hath torment'. You realize the greatness and the glory of life and the seriousness of what happens in it, but you are delivered from this constant watching and stress and striving. A rest comes in.

And it goes even further: once you have this inward peace you will be delivered from a constant morbid anxiety about the opinion of others. Paul says to the Corinthians: 'But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self' [1 Cor. 4:3]. That is the ultimate acme of peace, that you are at such rest within yourself that you do not even judge your own self. Still less are you constantly on edge because of your concern about the criticisms and misunderstanding of others. Peace with God! Peace within!

And then 'peace with others', and this is the subject that the Apostle is dealing with in particular in Romans 14:17. He says: Your whole condition of dividing yourselves up over these 'matters indifferent' is tragic. You are denying the kingdom of God, and giving a wrong impression of it to those who are outside. They would think that the kingdom of God is a place in which the one thing that matters is whether or not you eat these meats or observe particular holy days. No, no, he says, the whole business is about peace.

Turn again to that mighty statement in Ephesians 2: 'Ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh ... ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.'

How?

'For he is our peace, who hath made both' – Jew and Gentile – 'one' – this is the great truth – 'and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us' [Eph. 2:11–14].

This is the kingdom of God, it has broken down the middle wall of partition – Jew and Gentile, Barbarian, Scythian, bond and free [see Col. 3:11]. It is gone! 'All one in Christ Jesus'.

But, says Paul to the Romans, you are re-erecting these middle walls in terms of eating and drinking. This is not the kingdom

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of God! The kingdom of God demolishes these walls. Paul continues in Ephesians 2: 'Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby' [verses 15–16].

So then, the effect of truly understanding the message of the kingdom, the Christian gospel, is this: we realize that we are all equally sinners, that we are all saved by nothing but the grace of God, that we all share the same salvation, and the same Saviour, that we are looking forward to the same eternal blessed hope and life together in heaven. People who know this are those who understand the kingdom of God. But in Rome they were judging one another, saying, 'He's down, I'm up' – over trivialities! The kingdom of God is not that, says Paul; it is peace.

But we must go even further. The kingdom of God abolishes enmities, and re-introduction of enmities in any shape or form is a denial of the kingdom. But I rather like the way in which Paul puts it positively, when he makes a great appeal in the Epistle to the Colossians: 'And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body' [Col. 3:15]. This is what was being neglected and forgotten. There are excellent alternative translations of these words: 'Let the peace of God act as umpire in your hearts'; 'Let the peace of God decide all doubts in your hearts'; 'Let the peace of God settle all questions.'

That is it! Is it right to eat meat offered to idols, and to take particular drinks, and to observe certain days? How do you decide?

Look here, says Paul. Let the peace of God arbitrate. Let the peace of God decide. Let the peace of God act as umpire. Not your opinion or mine – let the peace of God settle it.

How does the peace of God settle things? How does the peace of God act as arbitrator or as umpire? Well, negatively like this. We must be unlike the members of the church at Corinth. In

the sixth chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul chides these Christians because they were taking their personal disputes before the public courts. He says: You are denying the whole gospel. Cannot you settle your disputes among yourselves? Don't you know that one day you are going to judge angels and judge the world? Surely you can judge little matters like this among yourselves? Take the meanest person in the church and put him up as judge.

Or look at the description of the Corinthians in the twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians. The church at Corinth was being divided up hopelessly into factions and sections over the spiritual gifts that they possessed; some had one gift, some another, and they were envious and jealous. The whole church was in a state of schism.

Don't be like that, says Paul. Realize that you belong to one body. Is there anything more ridiculous than for the parts of a body to be quarrelling, with the eye saying to the hand, 'I've no need of you', or the stronger parts despising the weaker and the less comely parts? Paul ridicules the idea. He says: If you behave like that, you do not realize the truth about a body, and you do not realize that you are 'the body of Christ, and members in particular' [1 Cor. 12:27]. We are all one. Indeed, in the tenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul makes exactly the same point about the Communion service. He says: You are one loaf. Do not divide yourselves up in the ridiculous way that you are doing.

So we must realize that we belong to one body, and if you keep this in the forefront of your mind you will no longer quarrel about meat and drink. But realize also, Paul says, that you are in one and the same relationship to God. Remember that great verse in Ephesians 2:18: 'For through him' – the Lord Jesus Christ – 'we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.' The next time you feel proud of yourself because you have great understanding and you despise the man who knows less theology than you do, remember that you both have only one way to God: it is through Christ, and by the one and only Spirit. And let the weak brother remember the same thing. The

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moment you remember this, you cannot quarrel and divide over these indifferent matters – it is unthinkable. You have forgotten that the great characteristic of the kingdom is *peace* – the producing and maintaining of *peace*.

In other words, people only behave as the Romans were behaving when they forget that the one thing that matters is the glory of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. People who are so concerned about their own opinions and are so self-centred, have forgotten that everybody in the kingdom is to minister to the glory of God and the glory of His dear Son. What do my opinions matter as long as God and Christ and the Spirit are glorified and honoured? That is Paul's appeal. The kingdom of God is peace, and by breaking peace you are doing dishonour to the great purpose of the God of peace through His Son and through the Spirit.

So, then, positively, what are we to do? We are to remember the words of our Lord in one of the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God' [Matt. 5:9]. Peacemaking is to be the great characteristic of the children of God. Their Father is the God of peace and they, like their Father, are peacemakers. Not only are they not disturbers of the peace, and not people who produce unrest and schisms and divisions, they are positively people who make peace.

How do we do this? Let me finish with some of these great verses out of the third chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Colossians:

Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free – *and I might add, neither those who eat meat offered to idols nor those who do not. All that is finished with* – but Christ is all, and in all. Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering;

forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity – *love* – which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him [Col. 3:9–17].

And when we all do that, what wonderful peace we shall enjoy!

It all means that we realize that the Lord Jesus Christ is not only ‘the King of righteousness’, but He is also ‘The Prince of Peace’. Do you remember the old prophecy of Isaiah? ‘His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace’ [Isa. 9:6]. And you and I are going to give the impression to the world that the chief characteristic of those who belong to the Prince of Peace and rejoice in Him and glory in Him is that they are scarcely speaking to one another because of attitudes towards eating and drinking and observation of days!

‘For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.’