

Prayer

When I call upon You, O Lord, hear my voice and deal gently with me, for I am bruised from the journey of life. I am not ashamed to come before You, Lord, for You have called Your people 'friends'; so be my friend now when I need You most, and bring me through my hour of need. Lead me safely on, for I have vowed to do Your will O Lord. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Read through one of the short letters of Paul, for example, Titus, Philemon, or 2 Timothy. Let the points raised in these letters dwell on your mind and see whether they have any bearing on what you are doing today.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those whose lives are threatened by commercial expansion:** *Pray for people in South America whose needs are not accounted for by the rest of the world*
- *Give thanks to God for your safety and everything that contributes to this*
- *Pray for those who are working at this very moment, to bring to justice those who have done heinous crimes. Ask the Lord to bless those who do this good with wisdom, and through the difficulties of their work may they come to the One who is the true judge of all.*

Meditation

If we are troubled, dear God,
lead us into the peace of Your presence;

If our minds are confused,
bring us knowledge and understanding;

If our hearts are broken,
comfort us with Your unsurpassed love;

If our strength is failing,
touch us with Your loving help and healing;

If our feelings are bruised,
pour on us the balm of Your comfort and peace;

If our pathway ahead is puzzling,
guide us by the steady hand of Your Spirit;

For in You, and in Your peace,
we are eternally blessed and forever saved.

Bible passage - Romans 14:1-9

¹ Accept those whose faith is weak, but without disputing motives. ² On the one hand, one person believes in eating anything, whilst someone who is weak only eats vegetables; ³ and the one who eats something should not despise the one who does not, and those who do not eat should not pass judgement on those who do, for God has accepted him.

⁴ Who are you to pass judgement on the servant of someone else? He will stand or fall before his own master, and he will stand because his master is able to make him stand. ⁵ On the one hand, one person thinks of one day as greater than another, whilst someone else thinks of them all as equal. Each must come to their own mind. ⁶ The one who has special regard for a particular day does so to honour the Lord, and the one who eats does so to honour the Lord,

for he gives thanks to God; and the one who abstains from eating does so to honour God, and gives thanks to God.

⁷ We do not live for ourselves, and we do not die for ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ This is the reason why Christ died and came back to life, that He might be Lord of both the living and the dead.

Bible Study

Review

Most of us express our faith by doing things like going to church, going to prayer meetings, or by celebrating the Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter. In this way, we seek not only to honour God, but also to witness to those who live around us. People can be attracted to or put off the Gospel according to what they see of what we do. So the way that we practice our faith is indeed very important.

Now, it may not be immediately obvious to us, but this passage of Scripture is about how people put their faith into action, and how this affects the witness of the Church. Here, Paul describes some of the main contentious issues of Christian 'practice' in his own day, and he begins by talking about the eating of food. Some Christians would eat only vegetables, and this was a source of contention, just as it is today! Paul then insists that God judges people in His own way and not by such things (14:4). It is an important point, which reminds us of what we read earlier in Romans about salvation depending on Christ alone (3:21-26).

Paul then writes about 'days', clearly upset by the division between people who think some days are 'greater than others' (14:5), but without revealing exactly what he is talking about! He appeals to everyone to make their own sober judgements (14:6) before insisting again that the measure of all things is Christ alone (14:7-9). The trouble is that in this passage, Paul is writing about religious observance that is part of ancient history, and consequently, most of us find all this rather remote. However, if we can find out more about what Paul is describing, then we can find the principles at stake and apply them to our own day.

The problem Paul faced was that many Christians had taken over Jewish practices, which themselves derived from traditions built on Old Testament laws. These were mostly laws about clean or unclean foods (e.g. Lev 11:1f.), and the observance of feast days going back to Moses (Deut 16:10f.). Christians converted from Judaism felt quite understandably that these traditions should be honoured by the church. Paul, however, saw how Jewish restrictions were beginning to stifle the church just when it needed to expand away from Judaism into the Gentile world and from there to us, and this is why he wrote about these things.

There were tensions the church about what food should be eaten (14:1-3) and what feast days should be observed, indeed, whether should they be observed as special at all (14:4-6)! The picture is complicated even further by the fact that in the Roman Empire outside Palestine and Israel, most meat was slaughtered in pagan temples and dedicated to pagan gods. It is not surprising therefore that many Christians did not eat meat at all (14:1-3). People had entrenched attitudes towards these things in the early church just as people today have strong feelings about the nature of worship or attitudes towards denominations.

Paul believed that people of mature faith should be able to accept differing views on such things, whilst still honouring Christ (14:7,8). He did not want to see churches split over the trivialities of food or 'special days'! Now the main Christian principle outlined here is that of 'the stronger deferring to the weaker' in matters of faith. He clearly believed that those who would only eat vegetables and those who found some feast days 'special' did not have the faith to fully trust in Christ, but he did not want this stance to bind those who had strong opinions, considering that everyone wanted to honour God by what they did.

Each of us must be careful to apply this principle today, and remember that the intention of this passage is to uphold Christian characteristics akin to the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5:22f.), of kindness and love towards others. We also need to remember that the arguments for vegetarianism and for religious feast days are very different today than they were in Paul's day. But we should not defer from the scriptural guidance that we must exercise love in dealing with such matters.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The eating of foods and other religious practices
- How Paul deals with difficult issues

Going Deeper

We will now look further at issues of food and eating which were current in the days of the early church. They are not what we might expect. Secondly, we will explore the apparent conundrum within Paul's advice; how can we assess what is mature and good practice within the church when he asks us 'not to judge' the practice of others?

The eating of foods and other religious practices.

The problems that early Christians had about food were not simple (see 14:2,3,6). Certainly, they inherited the Jewish ritual laws about eating food that was 'clean' and not 'unclean', but many Christians had been emancipated from these taboos. Acts 10 and 11 tells us that they were a major issue in the life of the early church, because the first preaching of the Gospel amongst the Gentiles happened after Peter was led by the Spirit to visit a gentile, Cornelius, after a vision in which the Lord challenged him personally about being prepared to eat every kind of food, without distinction. Peter understood the message, and missionary work amongst gentiles was begun (Acts 11:18).

In following years, the problem about food arose in the Gentile churches in a different way, and it was all about the manner in which cattle was slaughtered for meat. In Israel, all animals were slaughtered in a way that offered them to God (by removing all the blood), before the meat was made available for consumption (Lev 3:1f., Deut 16:1f.). For most people including Christians, this was an acceptable way of obtaining meat. In the rest of the Roman world, virtually all animals were slaughtered in temples dedicated to other gods. These were the only places from which meat was available, and the temples acted in the economy like meat wholesalers.

Now then, imagine the position of a Christian church made up mostly of gentiles, who had been forced to separate themselves from the local Jewish community because of animosities about the acceptance of Christ as Messiah (which is what happened to most churches in the first century). They would then find themselves unable to access meat at the local Jewish outlets, and if they wished to eat meat, would have to obtain it from sources associated with a pagan temple. You can see the dilemma! Some Christians preferred to become vegetarian rather than eat meat that had been dedicated to Diana of Ephesus, for example, or Zeus, or any other of the range of gods worshipped in those days. Some Christian communities were torn apart by arguments about whether such meat should be eaten by Christians or not, when the only option was vegetarianism. You will see that the reasons given for vegetarianism in this passage are completely different from those given today!

The other divisive issue mentioned in this text is that of the honouring of special festival days (14:5,6). These had been part of Jewish tradition for centuries, but it appears from the letters of Paul that a number of churches had arguments about 'sabbaths' and 'new moon' festivals (see Colossians 2:16) for example, or the 'observing of special days' (Galatians 4:10), and Paul took exception to all these, including 'sabbaths'. All his comments upon such matters in his letters emphasise that each day is God's and to be honoured as such. Perhaps it is because of this powerful argument by Paul that Christians have never had a formal 'sabbath' day. Sunday, of course, is the first day of the week, and is the Christian day of worship chosen because it was the day of Resurrection! The Christian practice of equating 'the sabbath' with Sunday is relatively recent, and a little deceptive. The Sabbath was always Saturday! Paul would undoubtedly have viewed arguments about these things between Christians today as examples of 'weaker faith'. In his own day, some gentiles persisted in keeping pagan celebrations of days and seasons for social and agricultural reasons, and this passage is clear that Paul regarded all such things as a distraction from the purpose of the church, which was to pursue the Kingdom of God through the preaching of the Gospel.

How Paul deals with difficult issues

The first thing Paul writes in this text is that some people's faith is 'weak' (14:1). For Paul, Christians were free in God's world to take authority and use it all for His purposes. This meant that if meat had been purchased from a pagan temple, then it would be blessed (to dedicate it to God) and then the Lord would be thanked for His provision of food. It was then fit to eat. Why should a Christian feel that just because someone had incanted a pagan god over the meat that this meant anything? In his letter to the Corinthians, you can read more about how Paul dealt with this subject (1 Corinthians 8), but it is interesting to note that the blessing and thanksgiving said over all food became the origins of what we call 'grace', said at meal-times.

Within our whole passage, despite the obviously contentious nature of the issues Paul dealt with, and his obviously libertarian attitude towards them all, he writes to insist that making an issue of these things within the life of the church is unhelpful, particularly when one individual's opinion is set against another (14:3,4,6 etc). Many people complain that Paul 'cannot have his cake and eat it', meaning that he cannot make judgements about faith that is weak on the one hand, and then insist that people should not 'pass judgement

on one another' (14:3). This is an easy criticism of Paul which omits to recognise that Paul's exclusive focus was the proclamation of the Gospel, and the Christian discipleship and church practice that sustained it. For Paul, 'weak faith' meant faith which was distracted from this, and his call to stop judging was another way of calling on God's people to stop pitting themselves against each other in contentious human argument and focus, like him, on the urgent tasks of the Gospel.

This is why his main conclusion is that if the individual disciple does this or that in a way which openly 'honours the Lord (14:6), then things should not be disputed further. God would be the judge (14:4). Then the final three verses of the text (14,7-9) lift the whole matter onto a different plain. As if to try and defuse the contention roused by these issues, and the probably 'oohs' and 'aahs' that his comments would have raised when read in Rome, Paul writes about the true Gospel focus on Christ by which all things in the church should be judged; encapsulated in two famous saying placed side by side. Firstly 'we do not live for ourselves, and we do not die for ourselves' (14:7) and secondly 'if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord' (14:8). The first says that each within the Christian community has a responsibility to their fellow Christian, and the second says that each Christian has a duty an absolute responsibility to God. No-one could argue with this classic expression of Christian responsibility!

Application

Firstly, we should be cautious about making any judgement about the merits or otherwise of vegetarianism today, based upon this text. The background to Paul's thinking in this text is far distant from current concerns about the welfare and wisdom of the farming of animals today, for example. All we can say is that Paul would have probably maintained the line that everything appropriate is given to us by God for our eating, providing we bless it and give thanks (in other words, say grace). However, I reckon he would have sympathised strongly with any who campaigned against the degrading raising and slaughtering of animals of which we see too much in the world today. However, he would have been insistent that any such campaigning was done openly in the name of Christ, and for the glory of God's Kingdom!

The exclusive marker for all Paul's advice about living the Christian life is the presence of the living Lord in the life of the individual. In the light of this, we can only proceed to assess what it is right or wrong to do as Christians today with Christ at the forefront of everything. People in the church today argue about the Sabbath day, but what is important is that we honour Jesus by worshipping Him (usually on Sunday), and I reckon it is wise to follow God's clear intention expressed at the very beginning of Creation that we should rest one day in seven (Genesis 2:1-3). Personally, I suggest that all Christians attempt to make sure they get 24 hours of rest in each week, because that is the principle of this great Old Testament text. It is a good principle for health, as it calls on us to honour God through rest (not activity or other forms of worship), and I remain unconvinced that Scripture gives us any further guidance how it should be done.

Paul's general advice is that we do all to honour Christ, and respect each other for so doing, so that the Gospel is proclaimed in everything we do.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What issues create division and dispute amongst Christians today, and in the light of this text, how might Paul deal with them?
2. Does the eating of food deserve further attention by the Christian community? The saying of 'grace' for example, or issues of animal cruelty?
3. What do you feel about verse 8? Is it easy to talk about 'dying' for the Lord? How can the believer live this scripture?

Personal comments by author

Paul demonstrated an extraordinary liberty of spirit in this passage. It was as if everything was irrelevant to him if the Lord alone was served. Is this a principle with which we can actually live, and can we put it into practice? Most people find it hard to go forward as a Christian unless they address specific issues and make judgements about what is right or wrong for them to do, and this passage may not be helpful in this respect. Nevertheless, Paul's single-mindedness about the presence of Jesus and the urgency of the Gospel can inspire us to get our priorities right.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Do you find this passage helpful or just difficult? Read this text, and check it out by reading other passages such as 1 Corinthians 6, which speak about dealing with difficult issues in the life of the church.*
 - *Make a list of the religious observances that cause the most division amongst Christians and pray about them daily for a period of time, for example, a month. After this time, assess whether your attitude towards them has changed.*
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Final Prayer

Lord, grant me peace this night, I pray. Strengthen my heart so that I trust in your everlasting promises, and confidently defeat all the wiles of the evil one. Glory be to God the Father who is faithful; glory be to God the Son who is compassionate; glory be to God the Spirit who is ever mindful of my soul. AMEN
