

## Prayer

We thank You, O Lord, for all the good things in the world. Save us from being ungrateful to You, and save us from making so much of our troubles that we forget our blessings. Give us true strength of spirit, so that we may learn to live as those who trust in Your promises and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Grant us the assurance of faith by which we know that in the end, love conquers all. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*If you have the opportunity to walk somewhere today, then use this time (or some other time) to pray to God about your own future, especially your hopes and dreams*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for those whose lives are threatened by commercial expansion:** pray for the financially underprivileged in your own country
- Continue to pray for the people of Japan as they deal with the aftermath of the earthquake and Tsunami disaster
- Give thanks to God for your safety and everything that contributes to this

## Meditation

I was wondering when the Lord might speak,  
and then He did!

I was working at my desk,  
and He said 'Follow me';

I was in the middle of a meal,  
and He said 'Share with the poor';

I was thinking about myself,  
and He said 'Love your neighbour';

I was checking my bank balance,  
and He said 'Give sacrificially';

I was talking to a friend,  
and He said 'Share the Good News';

I was watching the news,  
and He said 'I am the truth';

I was living life to the full,  
and He said 'I died for you';

Then I came to a stop,  
and He said 'follow me' ... again.

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## Bible passage - Romans 14:10-23

<sup>10</sup> Why do you judge other Christians? Or you, why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgement throne of God. <sup>11</sup> It is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give allegiance to God.' <sup>12</sup> Indeed, each one of us will have to give a personal account to God. <sup>13</sup> So let us stop judging each other, but decide instead that we will not cause offence or make trouble for another Christian.

<sup>14</sup> I am sure and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself; nevertheless it is unclean for someone who thinks it unclean. <sup>15</sup> If your friend in Christ is distressed by what

you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat become the downfall of one for whom Christ died,<sup>16</sup> and do not let a benefit of yours be regarded as a blasphemy.<sup>17</sup> For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup> The one who serves Christ in this way is both acceptable to God and has the approval of others.

<sup>19</sup> So then, let us strive for that which leads to peace and strengthens one another.<sup>20</sup> Do not destroy God's work, for the sake of food. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to cause grave offence to someone else because of what you eat;<sup>21</sup> it is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes grave offence to your friend in Christ.<sup>22</sup> Now, whatever you believe, keep as your own principle before God; and happy are those who do not bring judgement on themselves because of what they think.<sup>23</sup> But those who eat and have doubts about it are condemned, as they do not eat out of faith; and whatever does not come from faith is sin.

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## Bible Study

### Review

After reading the heart warming spiritual guidance found in Romans chapter 12, the contents of chapters 13 and 14 are far more awkward. Here, Paul seems to have heard reports about the church in Rome and had to correct what was wrong. It seems that they were divided over vegetarianism and religious food laws, and over the spiritual significance of feast days (14:1-9). In response to this, Paul urged his readers not to judge each other over such things. Their judgemental attitudes exposed them before God (14:10f.), and he wrote to say that true Christian love should rise above such things; divisions in the church must be overcome by the exercise of practical forgiveness and love.

To this day, Christians argue over all manner of things, and many are quite willing to break fellowship with others when agreement cannot be found. It is therefore important that we should read this passage not just to see how to resolve the question of religious food laws, but also to learn about how to deal with Christian divisions, in principle. The level of strife and discord within the church today is enormous, though largely hidden by the tendency of most Christians to avoid contact with those of other persuasions. The teaching of this passage is that we should deal with these things, and not accept them as a fact of life.

In this light, it is interesting that Paul begins here by reiterating something he wrote about earlier (2:1-11). He pleads with his readers to stand back from judgementalism (14:10-14), and quotes Isaiah 45:23 (14:11) to remind them that all will stand one day before the judgement of God. This fact alone should make the believer cautious about being judgemental, for who knows what God really thinks of everything?

We have already discovered that the food problem was about two things; meat butchered and offered to pagan gods, and Old Testament food purity laws. These issues caused some Christians to be sensitive about what they ate, while others remained unworried. In dealing with this, Paul firstly reflects the same apostolic opinion as that of Peter, to whom it had been revealed that all things were clean and fit to eat (see Acts 10,11).

Paul then used the Christian 'trump card' of love, urging Christians to be generous hearted, not to allow such things to give anyone a reason to walk away from faith. Unfortunately, people have always shown a propensity to walk away from the church and the Faith once offended! Not surprisingly, Paul calls everyone to hold on to the highest of principles, saying, '*for the Kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit!*' (14:17). He then mentions his principle again of deferring to the sensibilities of a weaker brother or sister; '*it is wrong for you to cause offence to someone else because of what you eat*' (14:20). Paul urges Christians to keep their principles 'before God', and all times maintain faith in Christ for salvation (14:22,23).

Now the trouble with this is that it is virtually impossible to be magnanimous all the time and to every sensibility, for we would thereby fail to live by any effective principles! There are all manner of people with all manner of sensibilities within the church, so how can anyone live without stepping on someone else's toes? This is an important objection, but we should not allow ourselves the luxury of imagining that we can avoid scripture's call here. Firstly, we do not have to deal with everyone's sensibilities all the time; we each deal with individuals and circumstances as we find them, and must do so 'in love' (14:15), whilst holding our own principles secure. It is obviously right that despite our own religious principles we should seek to be understanding of others, for if everyone was as sensitive as this we might even find solutions to Christian disputes rather than perpetuate them!

In this fascinating passage of scripture, Paul makes the thorny issue of eating meat into an opportunity to explain the importance of living by the golden Christian rule of love. We should not try to avoid this by 'standing on principle' instead of 'trusting in God'!

### ***Going Deeper***

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

- Judgement
- Walking in fellowship
- The Kingdom of God in our midst
- Final warnings

## Going Deeper

The further study of this passage will entail an assessment of these themes which Paul added to the issue of 'eating food'. Each subject is important in its own right, and will help us obtain a Christ-like focus which will help us deal with difficult issues in the life of the church today.

### ***Judgement***

If you read verses 10 to 13, you will notice that Paul commented on two things which were happening in the church. Some were holding others in contempt, and some were judging others. If we go back to verse 3, it is clear who was doing what. The Christians who took the mainstream line that all foods could be eaten when blessed and offered to God 'despised' those of weaker faith who had scruples about doing this. Those who would not eat meat because it was all slaughtered in the pagan temples of the Roman Empire, 'judged' other Christians. They presumably felt that those who did eat meat were acting in an impure manner and were therefore unworthy of the name of Christ.

Enough, says Paul (14:10) 'we all stand before the judgement throne of God'! He quotes Isaiah 49:18 and 45:23 to refocus God's people on God's judgement rather than the judgements of individuals. The passage is well known, but I have translated it 'every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give allegiance to God' (14:10). Paul used a similar phrase in Philippians 2:10-11, and it also crops up in a number of hymns and songs. You may have heard it in the form 'every tongue will confess ...' I have chosen not to use the word 'confess' because the Greek word means 'to agree with' or 'to give allegiance to', and we tend to think of confession as something very dour and demanding. The point Paul is making is straightforward. Every one of us will have to account to God for any judgements we make which affect how we live our lives; and certainly, the strong opinions we express about our fellow Christians will all come under the spotlight of God's judgement. If we do not believe this will happen, then we are far from the historic understanding of the Christian faith!

Paul was in the 'camp' of those who might be accused of 'despising' those of weaker faith. He acted to counter this impression by writing about reconciliation, rather than by trying to persuade people to change their minds. He was wise enough to know that God was the One who changed people's hearts and minds, and that people's opinions are rarely be changed by others!

### ***Walking in fellowship***

There are some very strong words used in verses 15 and 16. Paul took the example of two people who disagreed about the 'food' issue, and commented upon the breakdown in fellowship that can occur when people disagree in church. He said in very strong Greek words; 'do not let what you eat become the downfall of one for whom Christ died'.

You may well have come across instances of disagreements in church which have led to one person or another leaving the fellowship, sometimes leaving Christian faith altogether. I have certainly know those who have abandoned Christian faith because they have fallen into disagreeable contention about music, or worship styles, or youth work in a church, for example. In each case it is tragic that the issue has led to the loss of faith of an individual, and in each case, the Christian who remained has insisted they were right about something which few would accept as central to the life of faith. This has been going on for centuries, and Satan uses every opportunity to use personal disagreements to disrupt the growth of the Kingdom.

Every believer should be wary of this; none of us should let some opinion of ours 'be regarded as blasphemy' by others, or be the means of the 'downfall of one for whom Christ died'. These are strong words, and they should remind us of our primary obligation to Christ.

### ***The Kingdom of God in our midst***

Paul says this; 'for the Kingdom of God is not food or drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (14:17), it is arguably the highlight of the chapter. Many of Paul's sentences in Greek are very long, and the shorter ones, like this, are very memorable! We can take out the words 'food or drink' and replace them with almost every other issue that has contributed to the splitting of churches over two thousand years; and the sentence remains true.

In the 1840's, for example, there was a dispute in Manchester, England, about an organ in a Methodist Church. The dispute became so hot and 'political', that it led to a large number of Methodist churches leaving the 'Wesleyan Connexion' as it was then called, to form a new church called the 'Wesleyan Reform Union'. Now, God has fortunately blessed all manner of Methodist churches since then, but the division has left scars which still persist, but splits and divisions are not the stuff of the Church of God, and the Methodist Church in England continues its general decline to this day, despite extraordinary work at reconciliation and reconstruction.

This challenge remains for every believer. In truth, is the Kingdom of God more important to us than everything else? 'Righteousness' (14:17) is a matter of 'being right with God and with others'; 'peace' means wholeness of relationships on earth, and 'joy in the Holy Spirit' (14:17) is exactly what it says. Each of us knows full well whether it is present in our soul! These qualities are integral to the building up the Kingdom of God (14:18,19)

### ***Final warnings***

Paul's conclusion is that whilst we hold Christ above all else, it is not right to knowingly cause offense to others when dealing with some issue of contention within the church (14:20,21). Practically, Paul gives us no advice about how this may be done. This is because there are no rules or regulations about this which we can follow, and then be certain that we have avoided the offense. It is part of our Christian discipleship that we should be seeking to live by the will of God, and knowing that the will of God does not call on us to give offense should be enough. Too often, people act as if they feel they must 'stand up' for principles which 'defend the faith', and this leads to the offense of others of differing opinion. It is better to learn the lesson that God will take care of Himself and does not need us to defend Him; and remember He has given us the specific commission to win people for the Kingdom, not put them off!

Lastly, Paul makes clear what is now obvious. As a general rule, we should maintain a close connection between our own opinions and our Maker, for He is the judge of these things. If He requires us to use them or reveal them, then it must be at His bidding; 'happy are those who do not bring judgement on themselves because of what they think'. Again, these are powerful words which should make us cautious about the gossip of opinion which takes place in most churches.

## Application

All of these messages from Paul are tucked into his discussion of the issue of the eating of meat in the church at Rome. The issue seems unimportant to us, yet the previous study to this brings out some of its significance to the church today. However, within today's passage Paul includes some powerful messages about Christian discipleship. Ultimately, all of them come down to judgement; or, more specifically, discernment. God has called each of us to faith, and the focus of our faith is Jesus Christ who saved us. We can never be reminded sufficiently of this fact, and part of this reminder is to be told that many of the things which we have opinions about, even in our church life and worship, are not central to our faith: Jesus Christ is.

The discernment we need is that which enables us to identify when something appears to be important but is really being used by Satan to distract God's people away from their commission, to preach, teach, heal and baptise (see Matt 28, Mark 16 etc.). As with Paul in this chapter of Romans, we may be able to identify the truth of the matter (Paul clearly felt that all foods, including meat, should be blessed and eaten). With Paul, we should also feel the burden of not allowing the issue to distract us from our mission or bring about the loss of faith of those who may have different opinions. And throughout all of this, our guide must be Jesus Christ, because we are part of His Church.

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## Discipleship

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Which part of this text gives a message that is relevant to your own church, and why?

2. Read through this passage and identify which phrases honour Christ. What does this passage tell us about Christ and the Kingdom?
3. In what ways do Christians give offense to each other? How can this be overcome today without causing great arguments and rifts?

### **Personal comments by author**

*The Scripture today is somewhat judgemental in what it says, and is very blunt. Each of us must assess how we measure up to its call to be centred upon Christ. We are all called to ensure that we live in a manner consistent with our call to be people of the Kingdom of God rather than of this world and its intrigues. The one text that helps me with this is found in verse 17; 'for the Kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'. It is a good text for preaching!*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *If you are in a position so to do, take one of the issues raised in this text and study, and make it into a weekly challenge (see 'discipleship challenge' on this website).*
- *Pray for your own church, and pray about any divisions and difficulties within it. But pray also that the people you know and love will be able to demonstrate the Kingdom in the ways described here in this passage.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Lord, teach us to be wise, knowing that our days are numbered. You are the Author of our lives and our Saviour from death, and in that confidence may we live in peace, reconciled to Your will and untroubled by the cares of this world; through Jesus Christ our Lord, AMEN

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