

Romans **14:19-15:13**

Introduction

This is a continuation of the discussion beginning in 14:1 and is a continuation of the larger discussion of the whole letter, especially that of chapters 9-11. Paul was instructing Christ-followers, particularly Gentiles, about their role in God's continuing work with hardened Israel. They were to stay connected to the synagogue and live in such a way that hardened Israel might be brought to emulative jealousy.

The temptation was for these Gentile Christ-followers to become arrogant about their covenant status and their "enlightened" understanding of what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. They understood, even as Jesus' word were understood (Mark 7:19), that all foods are clean. However, because hardened Israel was not able to recognize Jesus as Messiah and correspondingly unable to understand what God had done through the Christ event, Israel still held onto their traditions concerning table fellowship and things clean or unclean. In order to have the positive influence on hardened Israel that God desired, Gentile Christ-followers were called to set aside their "enlightened" understanding for the sake of Israel and God's purposes for them.

God's Work: 14:19-23

The Christ event was about reconciliation and Christ-followers are called to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Our calling is to pursue peace (12:18) and to build others up. The phrase we translate "mutual upbuilding" is difficult for those who believe there was a clean separation between the church and the synagogue from Acts 2 on. As has been stated earlier, that was not the case. James and others of the apostles who stayed in Jerusalem continued to be connected to the synagogue, as did the church in many places for a long time. If the same was true in Rome, this idea of mutual building up applies to the relationship between Christ-followers (in and out of the synagogue) and Jews who do not yet consider Jesus to be the Messiah. Although hardened Israel was earlier spoken of as having been pruned, they were originally part of the same root into which Gentile Christ-followers had been grafted. The more recent history of antagonism between Christians and Jews makes Paul's words more difficult for contemporary Christ-followers to embrace.

Israel had misunderstood the intent of many of the teachings in Torah. Christ-followers were not to repeat the same mistake. Freedom around food issues ("everything is indeed clean") or anything of the kind should never be a point of conflict and separation. To make it such is to destroy the work of God, His work of reconciliation. God has the prerogative of causing Israel to temporarily stumble (11:9), but no one else has that right. God did not throw a stumbling stone in Israel's path so as to cause them to permanently fall (11:11) and neither should anyone else. The word translated "wrong" in verse 20 may be stronger than we might naturally understand. It can also be translated "wicked."

Just because one believes in their freedom from kosher food prohibitions does not mean they must exercise that freedom at every turn. They do not have to publically exercise that freedom (i.e., you don't have to eat everything just to prove you have the right). You can keep that conviction that Jesus is Messiah and that all foods are clean between you and God without the public demonstration (i.e., not eat everything if it causes another to fall). It is a blessing to be able to limit one's freedom, for the sake of another's relationship with God, without having thoughts of self-condemnation for not publically expressing the freedom God gives.

The translations on 14:23 are very likely incorrect. The word translated "doubt" comes from the same root word translated, "quarrelling" in 14:1. Its primary meaning is to judge, dispute, or quarrel.¹ As with 14:1 it is referring to those who dispute with or judge the "weak." Such behavior brings condemnation to the one doing the judging because such action does not grow out of their understanding of the faithfulness of God toward all peoples, which in this context has to do with hardened Israel embracing Jesus Messiah.

Emulate Christ: 15:1-6

Our translations may give a misleading understanding of the words translated "strong" and "weak," which are the same Greek words except for a change in form that puts one in the negative. This is not the same Greek word translated "weak" in 14:1. The primary meaning of the word is to be able (or not able) to do something.² To be empowered or not empowered to do something. The "unable" are synonymous with those who have stumbled or who have been hardened. Paul's focus here is on the sovereignty of God and he has little to say about free will. That is not to say he did not believe in free will but it is not his primary focus in Romans. One who claims to have freedom in Christ (those enabled through the Spirit to see Jesus as Messiah and to understand that all food is clean) is not to base his/her behaviors on their own personal pleasures (Phil 2:1-10).

Instead, as living sacrifices they are to be motivated by the desire to please and build up the neighbor (i.e., the "weak," those who have not yet come believe in Christ), the one that is to be welcomed (14:1). The example to follow is that of Christ. The quote in 15:3 comes from Psalm 69:9. The psalmist David was being afflicted at the hands of his own people (69:8) because of his devotion to God. David was willing to take upon himself the insults being directed toward God because of David's devotion. Paul applied this text to Jesus. Jesus suffered the insults that came from his own people (those who were hardened), which were really insults directed toward God, and went to the cross for the purpose of reconciling them (those hardened) to God. Christ-followers should do no different.

¹ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, pg. 452.

² Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, pg. 260.

If giving up of one's freedom seems difficult and even questionable, encouragement comes from the instruction found in scripture, which teaches that a sacrificial life is in line with God's purpose in salvation-history. There is hope in the midst of a sacrificial life because it looks beyond the immediate struggle trusting that God will complete the reconciliation of His cosmos.

The ability for two groups who are in conflict, particularly as divided as were Gentile Christ-followers and hardened Israel, to live in harmony can only come from God. As stated in 12:1-2, it requires a change of mind (and heart) that comes through God's transforming power. When people move from a relationship of conflict to one of harmony such a transition is in line with the Christ event, which occurred for the purpose of reconciliation. The overarching purpose of harmonious living is so that current Christ-followers and current hardened Israel will "with one voice" glorify God. By placing the emphasis on God, Paul made it more palatable for currently hardened Israel. By including Jesus as the Son of God he was stating the understanding Christ-followers had regarding Jesus and the understanding he hoped hardened Israel would one day have. God is glorified when His creation reflects His nature of steadfast love and forgiveness toward one another.

For The Glory of God: 15:7-12

The motivation for Gentile Christ-followers to welcome hardened Israel to their table without letting food or any such things become a point of contention, is because God welcomed Paul's target audience (Gentiles) when they were unclean, weak, and dominated by Sin. In the midst of Israel's rejection, Jesus took their insults and went to the cross so that God would be glorified. Jesus' desire was for God's word of promise given to Israel's patriarchs to come true or to be fulfilled. Not only should the Christ event lead Israel to glorify God for His faithfulness, it was designed to lead Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy (11:30-32), as is frequently witnessed in scripture (Psa. 18:49; Deut. 32:43; Psa. 117:1; Isa. 11:10). Gentiles cannot glorify God unless they welcome hardened Israel, as God welcomed them in the Christ event (even though hardened Israel has not yet come to understand what God has done and has not yet experienced that welcoming).

God's purpose is that all people, Jew and Gentile, would with one mouth give honor to God. Paul's rival teacher had charged Gentiles of not honoring God (1:21). Paul had shown the rival teacher that Jews at times dishonored God as well (2:23). Here, Paul was calling upon the Gentile Christ-followers to live in such a way that might facilitate the possibility of both groups honoring God as God had intended. To do that, they needed to welcome hardened Israel. Paul made a point (15:6) that the focus of honor is toward God, the one that both Gentile Christ-followers and hardened Israel could agree on. Jesus, the one the dispute was over, is described as a son and servant of God ("God and Father of the Lord Jesus").

Jesus had come as a servant to the circumcised in order to guarantee that the promises to the patriarchs would be fulfilled. The completed fulfillment of that promise will not come until the end time, but we have a foretaste of it now and are called to live in such a way that others might get a taste of it as well. The quotes in verses 9-12 show that God's purpose included Jews and Gentiles praising God with one voice. This is the

purpose Paul was calling upon Gentile Christ-followers to pursue by not initiating conflict with hardened Israel around table fellowship.

The “name” of God is mentioned twice in the Psalms quote in 15:9. The default understanding of the name of God should be Exodus 34:6-7.

Blessings From the God of Hope: 15:13

Paul ended the string of OT scriptures who a focus on God, as has been his focus throughout this letter. God is the source and provider of hope, even when living in the midst of conflict. Trust in the God who has demonstrated in the Christ event that he will complete His work of reconciliation (God of hope) is also the source of joy and peace in the midst of conflict. The transforming presence of God’s Spirit working in the here and now as we wait for the completion of God’s work empowers God’s people to not only hope but to abound in that hope.

Conclusion

In the Christ event God welcomed weak, ungodly, disobedient humanity into covenant relationship. Those who have come to recognize what God has done should recognize the implications for their calling. If Christ-followers are to glorify God (living sacrifices) they must seek to welcome the same kind of people into their circle of relationships. In this letter, this specifically refers to Gentile Christ-followers welcoming hardening Israel into their circle of relationships. Even with enlightened understanding on the matter, such things as food should never be cause for those relationships to never exist. The kingdom of God is about reconciliation. It is not about the freedom to eat everything or any other freedom that Christ-followers may even legitimately have. If a welcoming relationship has to be pursued in an atmosphere of conflict, the God who is trusted to complete His work can also give a peace and joy that is beyond human ability or understanding through the transformation of His Spirit.

The application of this text has always been difficult. It needs to be understood that this is a text addressing a particular place in a particular time (Christ-followers and hardened Israel in Rome). Not all such texts have a direct correlation to today. As will be seen in the next lesson, Paul intended to go to Rome within a few months after writing this letter. Although he did not get there that quickly, the letter’s intention was most likely to keep the Gentile Christ-followers from doing something that would destroy the synagogue leaders willingness to listen to Paul when he got there. They were not to engage the synagogue leaders in debate over the identity of Jesus. The Gentile Christ-followers had neither the skills, nor the knowledge needed to teach rabbis.

There are general principles in the text that require us to seek God’s mind so we can know how to apply them to other situations. This text may instruct us as to the posture that should be taken toward hardened Israel of today. We are to live sacrificial lives toward all people so that God might one day be glorified in their lives. We are to never put a stumbling block in anyone’s path that may keep him or her from coming to trust in God. When there are differences regarding teachings in scripture that are even considered foundational truths by some, as Israel regarded table fellowship and circumcision, we are never to approach those who disagree with us with an arrogant judgmental attitude that results in arguing and conflict. We are to act in ways, as far as

it depends upon us that keep the door open to reconciliation and peace. We are to put our own preferences aside for the glory of God and the good of others.

This is not a text to be used by either side of an issue for the purpose of manipulating the other in order to get one's own way. This is not strictly about issues that make somebody mad and lead to their threatening to go to another congregation. This is about how Christ-followers deal with differences in a way that draw people to faith and in a way that avoids behaviors that might keep someone from never coming to embrace God or from losing their faith.

Romans
14:19-15:13

1. Whose work is the reconciliation of all people? How should that affect our lives?

2. Who is the one to be emulated? How is he described and what did he do?

3. What do those who believe there is a great deal of freedom in Christ, in regard to things they can do, learn about their freedom from this text?

4. Even though this text does not relate directly to church life today, what words or phrases stand out to you that should be guiding principles for us as we interact with outsiders or with insiders?

5. From 14:1-15:13, what principles need to be more of a natural response from you as you interact with others?