

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 17, 2017

Romans 14:1-12

(Click on scripture above to link directly to the passage on biblegateway.com. If you aren't familiar with BibleGateway, you should be! It is a free online searchable Bible in a number of different versions. Use the version tab to toggle between any number of different translations. A number of notes from various study Bibles are linked directly from each passage. This could be one of your primary tools for Bible study!)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage in several different translations and/or paraphrases
2. Read the provided commentary below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and "wonderings"

Commentary (From the *Homiletics* archive from "Anywhere Goes" – September 15, 1996)

The "practical" portion of Paul's Roman epistle continues this week. A typical pastoral issue confronts the Jewish-Gentile relationship within these Christian churches.

It is thought that Paul's letter to the Romans was written about 51 A.D., a date corresponding to a significant population shift. In 49 A.D., the emperor Claudius had temporarily banished a large number of Roman Jews, in part because of the considerable disturbances plaguing their synagogues over the issue of one "Chrestus." Historians generally agree that this "Chrestus" was indeed the message of Christ as it rippled through the Jewish community. By 51 A.D., however, Roman Jews were once again invited back into the city. This influx of a strong Jewish presence challenged the Jewish/Gentile identity of the new Christian communities within Rome. The temptation to stress practices unique to Jewish separatism and identity must have been immense and intense.

Paul's message begins by turning the tables on what we might generally interpret as "strong" and "weak." In this case, Paul identifies the "weak" as those who so rigorously adhere to Jewish dietary restrictions that they avoid any possibility of eating non-kosher meat by eating "only vegetables" (v.2). These abstainers, whom Paul brands as "weak," were believers in Christ who remained fiercely dedicated to the traditions that had marked Jewish obedience by upholding the law and its dietary restrictions. In contrast, the "strong" eat anything they want because they understand and stand under the freedom Christ's message of redemption has brought them.

Paul denies these "strong" ones the right to look down and judge the continued abstinence of the "weak"--just as he denies the "weak" the right to pass judgment on the freedom practiced by the "strong." Though the position of these "weak" believers is no longer necessary for faithfulness, Paul refuses to give those who believe as he does some sort of upper hand here. Both groups must admit that the right to judge is not theirs--for both groups are "servants" of the same Master. Since God has seen fit to welcome both types of believers into divine service, they must accept one another's presence without passing judgment. Verse 4 even seems to suggest that God will judge each group according to its own set of standards.

Paul's second example--adherence to or freedom from all the restrictions of traditional Sabbath observances--further emphasizes his point. The behavior of these two different groups must be genuinely dedicated toward honoring the Lord. The main point is, Paul declares, "We do not live to ourselves." All believers, whatever their stance, are accountable to God alone for their actions. Each must act according to the will of God as he or she genuinely understands it. In life, or in death, our relationship to God remains constant. So should our commitments.

Paul stresses that the ongoing power of our life-and-death relationship before Christ, the only true judge, was in fact the "end" of Christ's mission itself. All of humanity--living and dead--are under Christ's authority and judgment. It is therefore emphatically not the responsibility of each believer to be a judge. Judgment will surely come--but Christ will bring it, not the whims of one group of believers or another.

It would also be good to remember at this juncture that the judgment Paul speaks of here is a judgment of works--it is not an issue of salvation. No matter how disparate their personal practices may be, these members of the body of Christ, both "weak" and "strong," have already received redemption. This judgment is over the quality of a believer's life. The questions raised in verse 10 are not issues of salvation but of proper Christian attitude and practice.

The text Paul cites in verse 11 is also quoted in Philippians 2:6-11, where Christ's right to judge is closely related to his obedience to his role as Messiah. But if, as verse 12 suggests, our accountability is before God only, this does not mean that there is a carte blanche in existence concerning acceptable Christian behavior. This is not a case of "anything goes." In Romans 1:29-31, Paul identifies many qualities that are simply anti-Christian and thus not to be tolerated. The task left to individual believers is to discern what behaviors are genuinely against Christ and what behaviors are simply "adiaphora"--that is, indifferent or inconsequential to salvation.

Additional Resources

- [“The Text this Week”](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for this week...not all will relate to the Romans passage we are studying, but many will. You will have to sift!
- [“Mind Your Own Business!”](#) – one example of some food for thought...

Reflection Questions

1. What does Paul really mean in labeling some “weak” in faith? Isn’t it a bit patronizing and/or condescending? Is Paul implying a value judgment on those with religious scruples?
2. What are some of the “disputable matters” over which the church divides into different camps today?
3. We’ve all heard it said “When in Rome, do as the Romans do;” Some advocate adding “...in matter inconsequential.” How can do we determine what is and is not a matter of consequence? To put it even more crassly, where is “the line” between what is right and wrong? (Is there a line?)
4. Paul says in verse 5 “Let all be convinced in their own minds, and in verse 12, “each of us will be accountable to God,” and seems to be implying that the most important thing is sincerity of conviction/belief. Does this mean basically that “anything goes” so long as our consciences are clear before God?
5. What is the most essential thing for Paul in these matters? What is he really trying to get across to his readers in this passage?

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading this passage?