

## Prayer

When I call upon You, Lord Almighty, 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'. Be my friend now when I need You most; bring me through my hour of need and lead me safely on, for I have vowed to do Your will O Lord. I long to fulfil Your call. AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*What has God said to you recently through other people? Pray about what He has shown you.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray this week about witness.** Ask the Lord to fill His people with a desire to witness to their faith, and the boldness to declare it
- Pray for those who are exploring the seas in a quest for knowledge
- Give thanks for the fellowship of your church and all it means to you

## Meditation

Lord God Almighty:

If we are troubled,  
    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 Word;

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

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

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## Bible Study - Romans 14:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Accept those who faith is weak, but without disputing motives. <sup>2</sup> On the one hand, one person believes in eating anything, whilst someone who is weak only eats vegetables; <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> We do not live for ourselves, and we do not die for ourselves. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> This

is the reason why Christ died and came back to life, that He might be Lord of both the living and the dead.

## Thought for the day

### **Text**

#### Romans 14:4

<sup>4</sup> 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.

### **Thought**

These sharp words of Paul are given to Christians who were becoming divided, even in his day. Back then, the big issue was that of food. Some would not eat meat sacrificed in pagan temples; others ate any meat saying that everything belonged to God.

It is not hard to find divisions amongst Christians today; over worship, leadership, baptism and much more. Paul's sharp words are aimed at us all when we dispute these things. We are right to seek the truth about any matter, but no issue is greater than the Master, and He is the Judge of us all.

## Review

Most of us express our Christian faith by doing certain things, such as going to church on Sundays, going to prayer meetings, or by making Christmas or Easter special events, for example. By observing these 'religious' activities, people around us see what we are doing and know that we are Christians. Now, it may not be immediately obvious to us, but this passage of Scripture is about what Christian people should or should not do by way of religious observance to demonstrate their faith to the world. The principles by which we live and how we behave towards each other will define how people in the world react to us, and although the world should hold no sway over the church, the job of God's people is to influence the world and win people for the Kingdom, so it matters what people think about us.

In our passage Paul describes some of the practical implications of Christian living in his own day. The trouble is that he describes attitudes towards rituals and religious observance that is part of ancient history, and consequently, most of us find the passage rather remote. However, once we know what is going on, far more emerges from this passage than we might initially expect. The principle of Christian living outlined by Paul here is that of 'deferring to the weaker faith of others'. By suggesting this principle, Paul stands loose towards religious practices in general, and although he makes it clear that there are rights and wrongs to be found within any Christian practice, he appears to stand back from controversy where possible. All this is rather controversial, but this principle is referred to by Paul in a number of his letters (see 1 Corinthians 6) and it is therefore important for us to understand it, however we interpret it in our own church life today.

The problem Paul faced was that many Christians of his day took over Jewish practices derived from traditions built on Old Testament laws. These mostly took the form of ritual laws about clean or unclean foods (e.g. Lev 11:1f.), and the observance of special feast days going back to the time of Moses (Deut 16:10f.). Whilst Paul called upon God's people not to judge each other, there is no doubt that he felt that people of mature faith should be able to distinguish between the importance of such observance and the witness of one who was raised to life in Christ (14:7,8). Certainly, he did not want to see churches split over the trivialities of food or 'special days'! There is much more to the matter of eating food than is immediately obvious here (see 'going deeper'), but we should be able to see that Paul was far more concerned that God's people demonstrate understanding and kindness; characteristics akin to the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal. 5:22f.) than stand on principles of religious observance. All who worked for the Lord should be respected, and in good faith.

The principles of Paul's advice are not easy to apply today. On the one hand, we must assess what is right in matters of faith and practice, but on the other hand, this scripture tells us that we are not to be judgemental towards those whose faith appears 'weaker'. Many different practices are found today amongst the many different churches that exist; so we ask, what is right or wrong and what is weak or mature? We must hear Paul's answer clearly, for he tells us decisively that our witness to the world should derive from the presence of the risen Christ within us, and not from the routines of religious life we practice. God's desire is to see Christ within us, and anything less than this must surely be less than the best. If people ask what this might entail, then Paul has already given a full answer in chapter 12 of Romans. In the light of that great passage, it is obvious that here, Paul is merely trying to help sort out some of the mess that Christians get themselves into when it comes to 'being a Christian'!

### **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.

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## 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?

## Discipleship

### Discipleship issue in this text

- *Relationships between Christians and churches*
- *Eating food and Christian faith*

- *Religious observance and Christian principles*
- *Living in the light of the risen Christ*

### **Personal comment:**

*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.*

## **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

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