

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL OF US

WEEK THREE: Romans 14

Romans Good News for All of Us: A Brief Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans is the most influential of his letters and has had an enormous impact on Christian theology and doctrine. Part of the reason is that it is the most systematic of Paul's letters; outlining as clearly as in any of his writings his understanding of the good news about Jesus. One consequence has been that Romans has been treated like a systematic theology rather than as an occasional document; one written to address a specific pastoral occasion. Romans, like all of Paul's letters, has a concrete situation that he is wanting to address. Scholars agree that there is evidence of division in the Roman church. The upshot of this is that the doctrine which dominates the first two-thirds of the letter is less an overview of Paul's thought and more of a foundation for the exhortations in the final chapters. In order to better understand the doctrine, we will benefit from better understanding the pastoral issues that Paul is hoping to address. To that end, we will be working through Romans backwards; seeking clarity about the concerns Paul has and then exploring the doctrinal foundations.

I have included an outline of the series and a brief bibliography at the end of this document.

Sermon Outline:

A Brief Overview of This Week's Sermon

Key Text(s): Romans 14:1-15:13

By length and location, this section of Romans raises the most contentious issue that Paul wishes to address. To put that in context, submitting to Nero and paying taxes to the Roman Empire are less contentious! And the burning issue? Whether it was permissible for Christians to eat meat.

This may not seem like a particularly big deal for us, but in the early church there were few issues that were more complicated. The crux of the issue was whether Gentile believers in Jesus were also required to submit to the law of Moses. The first church council in Jerusalem was held to address this very issue (see Acts 15). It was decided that Gentiles did not have to submit to the law – they were saved by faith apart from the law. However, the council urged Gentile believers to abstain from sexual immorality and from meat offered to idols, blood, or meat from animals that had been strangled. Most scholars believe that these restrictions on meat were to enable table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

The dietary restrictions in the law of Moses had become religious and cultural identity markers for Jews (somewhat like wearing a hijab for Muslim women). In a city like Rome there was another layer of complication. Most of the meat available in the market was supplied by the temples. This meant that even if the meat was "clean" (e.g., beef) it was defiled because it had been sacrificed to a god or goddess. On top of that there was a socio-economic component. Then, as now, meat was expensive and it was unlikely that the poorer members of the community of faith in Rome ate meat much at all.

When Gentile and Jewish believers sat down to have a meal (which was a standard part of Christian gatherings according to the 2nd century Christian writer Justin Martyr) it was one big opportunity for offense to be given and taken.

Paul addresses this head-on in 14:1-3 where he says, “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters. One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.”

There’s a bit to unpack here. First, note the social problems – quarrelling, holding others in contempt or judging them, and, importantly, an unwillingness to accept one another. For Paul, this behaviour doesn’t match the theological reality of what the gospel has done in uniting them in Christ. They have been made one new family by faith and their inability to even eat together (a central family activity) is a denial of their faith.

Second, Paul identifies two groups of people the weak and the strong in faith. It is unlikely that Paul is referring to saving faith, but to the convictions that come from faith. When it comes to the weak/strong dichotomy I find it helpful to think of Felix and Oscar. The original odd couple, this hit sitcom focused on two men who couldn’t have been more different from one another. Felix was structured. Oscar spontaneous. Felix was neat and tidy. Oscar was more freeform in his organisational style. Even if you’ve never heard of these two you have surely seen the trope at work. The point is that neither of them are “right”. They are just very different. This is not a bad way to think about the weak and strong in Romans 14. Paul primarily appeals to the strong, with whom he identifies. However – and this is important – he does not set out to prove one or the other groups are “right”. Rather, he points out that they are both wrong in how they are behaving towards one another.

Even though Paul sees himself as one of the strong and even though he has the Jesus tradition on his side (see Mark 7:14-23) Paul doesn’t go “apostolic” on the weak. Instead, he urges both groups (but with an emphasis on the strong) to orient their eating practices to God and to others.

In a series of small arguments Paul points them first to God. God has accepted their fellow believers, who are you not to accept them (the theological version of “any friend of yours is a friend of mine”). Each of them belong to God and Christ and are his servants (vv. 4, 7-9) and are not called to judge their fellow servants. In fact, they should each be convinced in their own minds that what they do is justifiable before God (v. 5b) since we will all stand before God’s judgment seat (vv. 10b, 12).

Paul then addresses their orientation to one another. He calls them to avoid putting stumbling blocks in front of one another (once again relying on the Jesus tradition – see Matthew 18:6-9) but to act in love (v. 15a) and “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (v. 19). In all this we should imitate Jesus who didn’t please himself but God and others (15:3, 5).

The outcome of figuring out how to eat together without quarrelling, judging, or contempt is not unity – it is a demonstration of the unity they already have in Christ. It is aligning their activity to their beliefs.

And this kind of aligned behaviour leads to praise (15:6, 7b, 9-12). He includes four quotations (from all three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures) that pointed to the Gentile inclusion in praising God. The unity of Jew and Gentile in one family praising their Father has been the goal of salvation history from the very beginning! Eating together in peace and love is a small demonstration of the power of the gospel to unite people together in one, new family whose unity leads to praise and gives glory to God!

Questions to Ask

1. The “Readings to Read This Week” includes the various passages Paul uses in this section. If your group is so inclined, read those passages in full and note the possible significance of Paul’s use of them in this case (e.g., note what the texts say about God’s plans for his people and the nations).
2. How does understanding “faith” as conviction rather than saving faith change the way we read this passage?
3. What does it look like today to “avoid putting a stumbling block” in someone else’s way? Can you think of contemporary examples where love and mutual edification should shape our freedoms?
4. Why does Paul focus more on how believers treat one another than on deciding who is “right”? What does this reveal about the relationship between gospel truth and Christian behaviour?
5. In what ways can ordinary, everyday practices become powerful displays of the gospel’s unifying work?

A Prayer to Pray

Pray for the unity of our community of faith (maybe praying some of the prayers you suggested in Q. 4). Pray that we would be a demonstration of the power of God to save everyone who believes and to unite them together in one family. Pray that we might rely on that power as we work out our salvation together.

A Practice to Try

Choose one (or more) of the ideas you came up with in Q. 5 and try it. Pay attention to your intention as you do it..”

Readings to Read This Week

These are the text Paul refers to. As you read them consider what they have to say about God’s plans for his people and the inclusion of the nations.

Isaiah 45 (Paul cites v. 23)

Psalm 69 (Paul cites v. 9b – you may recognise v. 9a from John 2:13-17)

2 Samuel 22 (Paul cites v. 50. This song is also found in Psalm 18)

Deuteronomy 32:1-43 (Paul cites v. 43a)

Psalm 117 (Paul cites v. 2 – there are only two verses)

Isaiah 11 (Paul cites v. 10)

A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

One of our values is to be Others-Focused. The unity of the body of Christ is a mission-critical matter. Putting others first, serving them, and seeking to demonstrate our love for one another are all things we can do to strengthen our unity.

A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. We have been encouraging those who are committed to our community of faith to prayerfully consider their financial commitment. In particular, we are making two requests. First, for those who give regularly to check that their details are still accurate – that periodic payments haven’t lapsed or credit card details haven’t expired. Second, to consider a modest increase in their giving in line with the 5% increase to our Ministry Budget approved by the membership last year. If people have not yet begun to give, the details can be found on our website

Good News For All of Us – Sermon Series outline

Please note that this is subject to change, but as it stands right now...

Term 1 (Romans 12-16)		Term 2 (Romans 9-11)		Term 3 (Romans 1-4)		Term 4 (Romans 5-8)	
15/2	Romans 16	7/6	9:1-29	23/8	TBD	25/10	TBD

22/2	15:14-33	14/6	9:30-10:21	30/8	TBD	1/11	TBD
1/3	14:1-15:13	21/6	11:1-24	6/9	TBD	8/11	TBD
8/3	12:14-13:7	28/6	11:25-36	13/9	TBD	15/11	TBD
15/3	Baptism			20/9	TBD	22/11	TBD
22/3	12:1-13					29/11	TBD
29/3	13:8-14						
5/4	Easter						

A Brief Bibliography

The following commentaries have been utilised in the preparation and delivery of this series.

Bird, Michael, 2016, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Gorman, Michael J., 2022, *Romans: A theological and pastoral commentary*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

McKnight, Scot, 2019, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

Witherington, Ben III, 2004, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan.