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MINISTRIES INTERNATIONAL

Sermon

The Roman Pilgrimage (Part 19)



Part 19/20

The Roman Pilgrimage
By Derek Prince

This is the third of four sessions in which we are working our way systematically through the last five chapters of Romans, chapters 12–16. In this session we are going to begin at Romans 14. And the first theme that we'll deal with is religious rules about diets, holidays, et cetera. Had I been making this presentation ten years ago, it would have been much less relevant than it is today. Today this is a very current issue. Particularly where we have our home in Jerusalem, as more and more Jewish people are coming to believe in Jesus as their Messiah and identify themselves with Him and His people, this issue of diet and holidays is becoming extremely current. I would say somewhat controversial. I have been involved in more than one controversy, not necessarily directly—well, directly in one, on this particular issue.

Also I find that even in the church which comes from a non-Jewish background, more and more people are becoming concerned about issues of diet and observance of days. For instance, in the meeting this morning there were two ladies that came to consult us about observing the Sabbath, Saturday. Not Jewish but they came from a congregation where then pastor was teaching that this was something important that we ought to observe. I merely mention that to show you that this is not something from the remote past or from the early days of the church; it's an issue which really we're all going to have to face. And it just shows you how up to date the Bible still is.

The real theme of it, I think, is acceptance and harmony. God is more concerned with harmony in the Body of Christ than He is with the exact observance of certain set rules.

So, I'll begin now by reading the first three verses of Romans 14.

> "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions."

I think the key word all through this is accept. Accept one another. Accept the one who is weak in faith, but not to criticize him, not to tear his opinions apart, not to point out to him how incomplete his understanding. Because, that's not a truly spiritual attitude. It may prove how clever you are but it doesn't build the Body of Christ.

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So the two themes, I believe, which Paul is emphasizing are acceptance and building the Body. And then Paul gives this example, the first example deals with food, the next one that we'll deal with deals with observing certain days. Verse 2 and following:

> "One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only."

Now why does he eat vegetables only? Is it because he's a vegetarian? No. It's because he wants to eat kosher. You know what the word kosher means? The way that Orthodox Jews prepare and choose and serve their food. It has to be done very exactly, it has to be on a special kind of plate, it has to be prepared in a special way. You mustn't mix milk with meat or meat products with milk products. If you have consumed milk you have to wait five hours before you can consume meat. And, all sorts of foods are excluded. Part of this is based on the law of Moses; much more of it is based on subsequent religious tradition.

Golda Meir, in her book, My Life—and you know that she was born in Russia—relates how her father was compelled to serve for years in the Russian army, and never ate anything but raw vegetables because anything else he would have eaten would not have been kosher. So, this is not a picture of vegetarianism, although that could be an issue that arises, but the question is "Am I to eat kosher?" And for most of you, I imagine, that's not a burning issue. But it's a very, very current issue in Israel for Jewish believers today. And I've spent several hours debating this issue with responsible leaders there. I've come to appreciate the wisdom of Paul much more since I did that.

Going on then in verse 3:

> "Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him."

There are two wrong attitudes. First of all, there's the brother who's been liberated. "I'm not under the law, brother, that's all to the past. I eat anything I like and you don't understand. You are still in bondage." That's the one who regards with contempt the one who does not eat. But it's not a one way relationship, because the one who does not eat criticizes the one who does eat. "He's not a real Jew any longer. He's not keeping kosher." You see, for the Jewish people, one of the burning issues is maintaining Israel as a separate identity. Because when the laws of kosher [or ?kash a root?] are broken down, and the observance of ?shabbat? or Sabbath, the Jews very quickly mingle and lose their national identity. So it is really an important issue. What we have observed in Israel, if I may say this, is that American Jews or British Jews, Jews from the west, who become believers in Jesus have often been almost totally assimilated and only suddenly discovered the importance of their Jewish identity when they came to believe in Jesus. And when they get to Israel, they're pretty concerned to prove they really are Jews. So, they tend to go back to all sorts of rules and regulations which they never observed before they came to Jesus.

On the other hand, native born Israelis, ?sabras? as we call them, have no identity problem, they know they're Jews. So they're extremely careless about the observance of these rules. So, you get two kinds of people just exactly as Paul describes here. This is just one of those examples of how accurately and up to date the word of God is. After 19 centuries, here it is dealing with an issue that we have to confront.

And I would like to say just by way of example that there are other similar questions which aren't necessarily included in this chapter about which the principles apply; which are, it's more important to maintain harmony than build up the Body of Christ and prove yourself right by the rules you observe. You can prove yourself right and damage the Body of Christ, and damage fellow believers. The same two ladies who came to see us this morning—and they made a special trip to ask us these questions—they asked Ruth, "Why do you have your head covered? Do you believe that's scriptural?" And I answered on behalf of Ruth, being her head, I said, "Personally, we believe that Paul meant what he said exactly in 1 Corinthians 11, 'Every woman praying or prophesying with her head uncovered dishonors her head.'" But we say there are lots of serious committed Christians who don't understand it that way. So, we do what we believe and we leave others free to do what they believe. There's no disharmony. We can harmonize completely with people who have a different understanding of that particular question.

In fact, before Ruth married me she was, for a while, attending a church in the United States where the pastor was against headcoverings. He was not merely neutral but he didn't want women to cover their heads. I understand that because I come from the same background of Pentecostal background. And I can remember the dreary days when every woman had to wear a hat or she couldn't even be accepted as a Christian. Perhaps some of you don't remember those days.

I remember my first wife and I were going to a convention, a Pentecostal convention in the center of London. We didn't know exactly where it was being held so we were walking through the streets and as we walked I noticed more and more women wearing strange hats. I said to Lydia, "We must be getting near the place!" So, I mean, I've been through all this and I understand the attitudes for and against. But our principle is we don't make an issue of it. Let us do what we believe and you do what you believe and we can fellowship with perfect harmony in the Body of Christ.

And so, all through this discussion remember harmony is the goal. So then Paul goes on in verse 4:

> "Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand."

So the real sin is not eating or not eating or observing or not observing the Sabbath. The real sin is criticizing your fellow believers. And that's something that people are very prone to do who are particularly exercised about these issues.

So now we go on in verses 5–6 to the next question which is observing certain days. And the particular day that is perhaps the most controversial is the day I call the Sabbath or Saturday. But bear in mind that it isn't Saturday because the Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday evening at sunset and ends on Saturday evening at sunset. So we're not talking about just Saturday, it's a different concept of measuring the days of the week. It goes back to creation where it was the evening and the morning that was day one. God's day doesn't begin with dawn, it begins with sunset. That's a remarkable thing, we won't go into that because if we get into it we might not get out of it. But now we're dealing with observing certain days, and particularly observing the Sabbath. Verses 5–6:

> "One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind."

And I think it implies "and stop trying to convince other people."

> "He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, do so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who does not eat, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God."

Each one is doing what he believes right in the sight of the Lord. And again, this is a very burning issue because Orthodox Jews do not travel on the Sabbath. They don't use their cars. And there are no public bus services in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. So if you want to get somewhere on the Sabbath, you're in a difficult situation. But lots of non-Orthodox Jews who are the majority, keep and use their cars on the Sabbath. But if you live next to Orthodox Jews and you own a car, you need to be careful. Ruth and I own a car and we use our car. We are very careful not to deliberately flaunt its use before the Orthodox on the Sabbath. Not because we feel under any constraint, but because we don't want to hurt their feelings. We don't want to offend them about a non decisive issue, something that is a matter for each person to decide for himself.

However, it's necessary to look at other passages, particularly Colossians 2:13–16, which deal really with what was accomplished by the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. Colossians 2:13–16:

> "And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he [God] made you alive together with him [Jesus], having forgiven you [or us] all our transgressions. Having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, and which was hostile to us, and he has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When he had disarmed the rulers and authorities [or the principalities and powers], he made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through him [or through it, the cross]."

What Paul is teaching there is that Jesus by his death on the cross took away from Satan every weapon that he could use against us. And his primary weapon is what? In one simple word, guilt, that's right. As long as he can make us feel guilty, he has us where he wants us. But by his death on the cross Jesus made provision for us to be set free from guilt. And he did it in two directions: toward the past and toward the future. He made provision for all our past sinful acts to be forgiven. Do you believe that? Do you believe that all your past sins have been forgiven because

of what Jesus did on the cross. All right. So the past is provided for.

But in order to provide for the future, Jesus had to set aside the law of Moses as the requirement for achieving righteousness with God, the certificate of debt consisting in decrees. And He nailed that to His cross. So once you come to the cross and pass the cross in faith, the law is finished. It has no more claims over you, you are not more subject to the law. Through the death of Jesus you have been delivered from the demands of the law.

You see, the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives. But when the law has put you to death, that's the last thing it can do to you. And we in Jesus were put to death and have come back to life beyond the cross free from the demands of the law.

And so, Paul goes on, and this is a very important verse, Colossians 2:16:

> "Therefore, let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect of a festival or a new moon or a sabbath day."

Paul doesn't say don't observe them, but he says don't let anybody judge you about whether you observe them or not. Because, we have been set free from the requirements of the law. So again, the warning is against what? Judging. Also, against being judged.

I have some friends, I've had in the past Seventh Day Adventists. I don't quarrel with them about the observance of Saturday, but I say, "I'm not going to let you judge me. Because if I were to let you judge me I'd be disobeying the New Testament because the New Testament says don't let anybody judge you in respect of the sabbath." See that? So it's a very delicate thing. Don't judge others, don't let anybody judge you; everybody's got to decide for himself how he understands God's will in his life.

Going back now to Romans 14, we go on at verse 7:

> "For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."

So what Paul is saying is what matters is our personal relationship with the Lord. And once we belong to the Lord, He's never going to leave us, we are His for time and for eternity; whether we live, we're living for the Lord; and whether we die, we die for the Lord. The Lord is the one to whom we are finally responsible.

God has been dealing with Ruth about her relationship with me. I'm very personal about these things. Sometimes I have to get Ruth's permission beforehand but this time I didn't. I'm going to say it anyhow! Ruth and I have been through a time of severe testing for nearly three years now, for which we praise God. You remember what James said, if you fall into testing, rejoice. Don't complain, rejoice. But one of the things the Lord has been showing Ruth, because she is a wonderful wife to me, totally committed, trying to do everything she can to support me and uphold my ministry and make it more effective. But the Lord has shown her that her relationship with Him comes first, not her relationship with me. And that's true of every one of us. You may have a wonderful marriage partner but your first relationship is with the Lord. And there's a time coming when all the other relationships will drop off, when you pass out of time into eternity. But the one relationship that will not change is the relationship with Jesus. We need to live our lives now in the life of that awareness. The one thing that's ultimately decisive in time and eternity is my personal relationship with Jesus. When I go through the gates of time and into eternity, there's only one person who will go with me.

I remember a dear saint of God, a lady brigadier in the Salvation Army, a tongue speaking brigadier which was rare in those days. I mean, this is forty years ago. I never knew her husband. She described how her husband had died. That's why she became a brigadier, because a widow automatically takes her husband's rank in the Salvation Army. And she said to her husband as she was by his deathbed—I think she was much the stronger Christian of the two, she said, "This is the place where I can't go with you. You've got to go on your own." And I think Paul is really kindly reminding us we better be aware of that fact. Thank God for wonderful relationships in the Body of Christ with other believers. I thank God for the relationship that I enjoyed for thirty years with my first wife. But there came a time when I had to say good-bye and she passed out of time into eternity. I was no longer her shepherd. There was only one shepherd that could go all the way with her. And her favorite phrase for Jesus always was "The shepherd and bishop of my soul." And that's what He was. And that's what He has to be for each one of us.

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So, going on now further in Romans 14, we come to a very, very important issue which is a warning against judging our fellow believers. I don't believe it was more needed in those days than it is today. And I think many Christians suffer all sorts of things, problems in their lives because they sin by judging their fellow believers. There's only one judge and that's God.

Consider for a moment before we look at this passage, you're sitting in a law court. You're part of the people attending. Up on the raised dais is the judge's seat, but it's vacant because the judge hasn't yet walked in. What would happen to you if you got out of your place, walked up on that platform and sat in the judge's chair? How long would you be allowed to stay there? You'd be thrown out. And that's just taking the place of a human judge. How dare we take the place of God and occupy His chair! What condemnation we bring on ourselves when we judge our fellow believers.

Now, there are certain areas in which we have to exercise judgment. A father has to exercise judgment in respect to his family. A pastor has to exercise judgment in respect to his congregation. Let me give you this simple principle: where you have responsibility, you have authority to judge. But if you're not responsible, don't judge. You're not responsible for your fellow believer's life, for his family—don't judge him.

Now let's read what Paul says in verse 10:

> "But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt?"

It's the same two issues. Why do you who observe the law judge your brother who doesn't? And you who claim to be so free, why do you treat with contempt your brother who still regards some rules of the law?

> "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God."

The word translated judgment seat there in Greek is bema. And we have to bear in mind that there are two judgment seats, two main judgment seats. The one before the bema and the one before the great white throne. The great white throne judgment is still quite a long way off. That's the judgment of all the finally resurrected dead. But the bema judgment is the judgment in which Christ judges His people. And it's very important to remember there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. This is not a judgment to determine whether you are saved or lost, but this is the judgment to assess your service for Jesus in this life. There every Christian is going to have to stand directly and personally before the Lord Jesus and answer for everything we've done.

Paul says if you realize that, you'd be so busy preparing yourself you wouldn't have time to judge other people. The people who are judging others are almost certainly not preparing themselves for the judgment seat of Jesus.

And then Paul quotes from Isaiah:

> "For it is written, 'AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME...'"

When we come to that bema judgment, we're going to kneel before Jesus.

> "...AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE [is a misleading translation, shall confess] TO GOD."

And as I said, I checked on that Greek word, it means to confess out of the bottom of your heart. I can't explain how I arrived at that meaning. It means you've got to confess everything. There's nothing that's going to be held back. There'll be no secrets, there'll be no covered up corners of your life. The whole truth is going to come out before Jesus. I suppose He may ask each one of us some pretty pertinent questions. "Why did you criticize that preacher? Why did you take communion with that lady and then go on immediately to start criticizing her to your own family?" Do you know one of the reasons why believers have unbelieving children? They spend so much time at home criticizing other believers. And the children listen and think, "Well, if that's what Christians are, why should I be one?" A very good principle is never talk against the members of the Body of Christ in front of your children. If you want your children to respect God and His people, you better do it in front of them.

And so Paul sums it up:

> "So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God."

For whom am I going to give account? I'm not going to give account for Ruth or for Jay Fesperman or for Jim Jackson. They'll be busy doing for themselves. I've just got one person to give account for, me.

Let's look for a moment at a parallel passage in 2 Corinthians 5:9–10. This is Paul speaking about the motivation of his life and ministry.

> "Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to him. [To whom? To Jesus, that's right.] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ..."

That's an appointment none of us is going to miss. You may miss a lot of appointments and turn up late for a lot of situations, but you're going to be there on time for this appointment.

> "We must all appear before the judgment seat [bema] of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for the deeds done in the body..."

We're going to have to answer for everything we've done in this life.

> "...according to what he has done, whether good or bad."

And there are only two categories: good or bad. There's nothing neutral, there's nothing that's neither good or bad. Everything that's done for the glory of God and according to the will of God and the word of God is good. And everything else is not good.

You see, the devil always wants to persuade us there's some kind of spiritual neutrality, and we're in a gray zone. It's not black but it isn't white. That's a lie. Jesus said very plainly, he that is not with me is where? Against me. He that does not gather with me is scattering. There are only two kinds of activity in this life as a believer. You're either gathering, you're doing the positive; or you're scattering, you're wasting. Wasting what? Your time. What about all the hours you've sat in front of the silly television set when you could have been praying or reading your Bible or fellowshiping with believers or edifying your own family. How are you going to answer to God for all that? I don't want to bring you under condemnation because I believe if we truly repent and confess and ask forgiveness, we don't have to answer for those things.

We had a move of God in our local church in l986 for about six weeks. We spent most of the early hours of every day on our faces in the church before the Lord. And I think there was nothing about which the Holy Spirit was more convicting than the idol of television in the home and the hours spent worshiping that idol. I heard person after person, often with sobbing, ask God for forgiveness for the time wasted in front of the television. I'm not saying all television is bad. If you look hard enough you'll find something that's good. But you have to look. I mean, there are purposes for which it is very right to watch television. But remember, from now on you're going to have to answer to Jesus for every hour you spend in front of the television set. A strange silence descends!

Going back then to Romans 14:13. And this is a therefore. You remember what I said about therefore? You begin to find out why it's there. Well, this therefore is there because we're all going to have to stand before the judgment seat of Jesus.

> "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way."

I've written in my little outline, "Criticizing can be an addiction." We're familiar with a number of addictions: tobacco, alcohol, drugs... Television is another addiction. There are lots of people who are so addicted if they have to stop for one day watching television, they have withdrawal symptoms. This has been stated in magazines like Time and Newsweek. It's an objective fact.

But I want to suggest to you another addiction, it's criticizing people. And if you're going to stop, you're going to need God's supernatural grace to stop. Because, you're addicted. And it's a destructive addiction. It destroys you and it destroys the people you criticize. It disrupts the Body of Christ. I can't go on because we have to move on in this study. I just sense God urging me to warn you. Live your life in view of the fact you're going to have to account for everything you say and do to Jesus.

I had the impression some little while ago that I needed to be sure that I wouldn't have to answer any embarrassing questions in front of Jesus. So I asked the Holy Spirit to show me if there were things that I needed to confess that I had not confessed. And believe me, He showed me. I would recommend that to each of you. Not right here and now but as the Lord leads you. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, "If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged by God." God gives us the opportunity to judge ourself, check our behavior against the word of God. And once we say, "I was

guilty, I did wrong. Lord, I'm sorry, I repent. Forgive me," it's erased. We don't have to answer for that. Isn't that wonderful?

You see, I see it like this. It's like making recording tapes. If you want a clean tape to start with—and I used to do this many years ago, I recorded my own radio program at one time. I can't believe it, but I did. You start with a bulk erasure and you get the tape completely clean. Well, when you come to the Lord Jesus the first time as a sinner, He uses His bulk erasure. And everything you've ever done that was evil is just erased, it's just as if you've never done it.

Well, as you go alone you may say and do things that are wrong. And it's all right if you repent, if you confess; Jesus just erases that little piece of tape. You see, you never need the whole bulk erasure again but you do need to keep the tape clean.

All right, we must go on. Romans 14:13:

> "Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way."

I've pointed out to you that all through these chapters of Romans the guiding principle is love. And from time to time Paul goes back and points out love is what guides you to do the right thing. So he says here:

> "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Nothing being unclean of itself, I think we need to look because it's very important. We need to know what the New Testament says. Let's look at two scriptures. Mark 7. Paul says there's no food that in itself is unclean. But, if a person thinks something is unclean and eats it or consumes it on that basis, it's unclean to him, it defiles him. So here in Mark 7:15–19, Jesus is talking about the question of what we eat. He says:

> "There is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him. But the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man."

So nothing we take in through the mouth can defile us. But what comes out of our mouth is what defiles us. The disciples didn't understand that so they questioned him. Verse 17:

> "When leaving the multitude, he had entered the house, his disciples questioned him about the parable. And he said to them, 'Are you too so uncomprehending. Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach and is eliminated.' Thus he declared all food is clean."

That's a very important statement, we must lay hold of that. From that time onwards, on the authority of Jesus, there is no such thing as an unclean food in itself. But subjectively, a food may be unclean.

I don't know, do American people eat eels? You do. I mean, I know some people that shudder at the thought of eating eels. But my first wife was Danish, and for the Danes, the number one delicacy is an eel. My first wife went right across town to get eels. Well, if you don't feel good about eating eels, you don't have to. But don't criticize the Danes who eat eels. See what I'm saying? I mean, those things that look rather like snakes—I won't say anything about snakes but lots of Africans eat snakes and consider them a delicacy. I don't think I'll even comment on that because some of you would begin to feel indigestion.

And then in 1 Timothy 4:4–5. Paul is talking about certain error that will creep into the church and he talks about "men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth." But you have to believe and know the truth.

> "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it was received with gratitude and thanksgiving..."

He's talking about food. Nothing is to be rejected.

> "...for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer."

And in a lot of parts of the world, when you pray over your food, it's not a mere formality because you don't know what you're eating. But if you have the faith it can be sanctified by your prayer—it's already sanctified by the word of God. When your prayer is united it will stop you getting all sorts of food poisoning and other things. But you better be sure you have the faith. And I've been in situations where I didn't have the faith. I just said, "No thank you, I'll pass." Not because I thought it would defile me but because I wanted to preserve my health.

All right, going back then in Romans 14.

> "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love."

You see, the central principle is love. You don't abstain from food because you feel it's forbidden, but in certain circumstances if you were to eat in front of your brother, it would offend him. If I were to go out with a new Jewish believer in Jerusalem, I would probably be pretty careful not to eat anything that he still regards with abhorrence. Because, you must know for an Orthodox Jew there are some kinds of food which absolutely appall them. I would never eat bacon in front of an Orthodox Jewish believer. Not because I think there's anything wrong with bacon but because he thinks there's something wrong with bacon.

Years and years ago I led a Jewish young man to the Lord, many years ago, he had been brought up fairly Orthodox and had become totally assimilated. He said the first time he dared to eat a ration of bacon he said he closed his eyes and put it into his mouth and wondered if he'd still be alive at the end! Well, he was. And after that he came to like bacon. But what I'm saying is I don't personally think bacon is very healthy, that's another issue. And also salt is not good for me. But I have no scruples religiously about eating bacon. But, in the presence of certain people I wouldn't eat bacon because it's more important to keep my brother in the faith than it is to prove I'm right.

Going on then, the latter part of verse 15:

> "Do not destroy with your food him for who Christ died."

You see, when Paul looked out on humanity, whether it was Jewish or Gentile, he saw people for whom Jesus died. That's the way he looked at people. And his whole dealing with people was on that basis. We need to have the same vision. Verse 16:

> "Therefore, do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil..."

Don't expose yourself to unnecessary criticism. That's wise also merely from the point of view that when you're criticized, negative forces are released against you. Why expose yourself to those forces unnecessarily?

Verse 17, this is a wonderful verse:

> "...for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

So being in the kingdom of God isn't a question of what we eat or drink. There are three things that are essentially the kingdom of God. Righteousness, peace and joy. And they're in the Holy Spirit. In this age in which we live, the kingdom of God is only a reality where the Holy Spirit is at work. The boundaries of the kingdom on earth at this time are determined by the area where the Holy Spirit operates. Outside of the Holy Spirit, all you have is law and rules and religion. It takes the Holy Spirit to bring the kingdom of God into a life or a situation. And when the Holy Spirit moves in and is allowed to have His way, He will produce three results: righteousness, peace and joy. But notice that the first result is righteousness. Second, peace. Third, joy.

Now, Jesus said in Matthew 5:6:

> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after [what?] righteousness..."

He didn't say after peace or after joy or after healing or after prosperity. You see, traveling around I meet many Christians who hunger and thirst after healing or prosperity. But I don't meet very many who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness. But the blessing is on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. And once you've entered into righteousness, peace and joy will follow as natural consequences. Don't go for peace, don't go for joy, make righteousness your aim.

You see, today there's a terrific talk in the world about the need for peace—which is very valid. But this cry for peace

is going to become a means of deception in the manipulation of Satan. Because the world is going to seek for peace and maybe even claim it has achieved peace without righteousness. That's a deception. There is no true or permanent peace without righteousness.

Let's look quickly at two passages in Isaiah. Isaiah 48:22, the last verse in the chapter.

> "There is no peace for the wicked, says the Lord."

As long as we tolerate wickedness, there is no possibility of permanent peace. And exactly the same words are found at the end of chapter 57:21:

> "There is no peace for the wicked."

So the essential and primary condition for peace is righteousness. And that's what the kingdom of God is. It's righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let me ask you, and you don't have to answer, are you in the kingdom of God right now? Are you enjoying righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit? If not, you may have religion, you may be Charismatic, you may be Pentecostal, you may be Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian or whatever. But, you're not in the kingdom of God. Because those are the boundaries of the kingdom of God. Righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

And then the next verse is very real for me, verse 18:

> "For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men."

In what way? In the way of righteousness, peace and joy. I was converted to Christ dramatically in the middle of the night in an Army barrack room in the British army after I'd served just under one year. I spend another nearly five years in the British army as a Christian. The army is not one of the easiest places in the world to be a committed Christian. I really felt that God should have taken me out of the army and put me in some nice religious setting where I could wear the appropriate clothes and use the right kind of language. But, He didn't. He left me with my cursing, blaspheming, ungodly British soldiers for nearly five years. And I can say by the grace of God I took my stand for what I believed in and I maintained it.

One of the things I learned was when you move into a new situation, let them know immediately where you stand. So I'm not particularly concerned about kneeling down to pray at night, but I always knelt down in the barrack room to pray in my bed, because then they knew what kind of a person I was. And they did all sorts of things to me. Once I was kneeling on the bed praying and they let the bed down. I just went on praying. But, when I'm saying is this, they respected me. And in times when we were up in the battle line in the desert—if there was a battle line in the desert—these tough ungodly blaspheming soldiers would come up to me and say, "I'm glad you're with us, Corporal Prince." I was their insurance policy. They felt safe as long as I was there. And as a matter of fact, there were no real serious casualties while I was with that particular group.

But what I want to say is this, and I had arguments with the officers. I confronted the officers, the commanding officer, about certain issues. I won't go into them. But when I was discharged, every soldier in the British army gets a certain rate and my rating was exemplary. That's the highest rating the British army gives. I don't say that to boast but I simply say it to prove what Paul said, that you serve God in righteousness, peace and joy. You're accepted by God and approved by men. In the long run, the ungodly know how a Christian should act. I tell you, if I ever said the wrong thing, my fellow soldiers would come up to me and say, "You shouldn't have done that." I won't go into the things I did because they might embarrass you. I mean, they really kept a watch on me.

Going on in Romans 14, we're getting to the application.

> "Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food."

The thing that Paul was concerned with most was the work of God, the Body of Christ. Let's always do what will build up the Body, even if it means personal sacrifice.

> "All things are neither clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense."

So I'm perfectly free to eat bacon but if I eat bacon in front of a new Jewish believer who doesn't know these things, and I offend him, they're evil. You see? I'm guilty of evil.

> "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles."

The issue is are you building up your brother or are you breaking down his faith? I feel perfectly free myself to do all the things listed in that verse, which I won't specify. But I

wouldn't do them in front of people who would be offended by them. Verse 22:

> "The faith which you have, have it as your own conviction before God."

Don't get into arguments about these things. You're convinced about it, all right, be convinced. But let it be between God and you.

> "Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves."

That's a searching statement. You can approve things which are perfectly legitimate, but in approving them you condemn yourself because of the effect you have on your fellow believers.

And then he goes on:

> "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not on the basis of faith; for whatever is not on the basis of faith is sin."

That's a searching statement, isn't it? There's only one basis for righteous living, it's faith. If you're not doing it out of faith, don't do it. Whatever is not based on faith is sin.

I want to go on quickly into the first part of Romans 15 because we've got a long way to go and only one session after this.

> "Now we who are strong [and Paul is talking in relationship to the previous passage] ought to bear the weakness of those without strength and not just please ourselves."

You see, that's the measure of spiritual strength. It's not how much you can do, it's how much you can bear. Strength in this sense is being able to lift others up.

I had a friend in the ministry some time back who came from a background in the Apostolic church in Wales. If you know anything about that, they believe in set apostles and set prophets and they have areas of truth, but they've become extremely legalistic. And growing up as a boy and a young man, he just lost all confidence in these apostles. They were somewhat dictatorial and autocratic and imposed on the people. So he turned away from the whole thing but then he had a meeting with the Lord and came back. And he once made in my hearing this statement which I consider to be classic. He said, "Then I realized that apostles are not people on the top holding you down, they're people on the bottom holding you up." Your strength is not holding people down, it's lifting people up. Of course, you know why he said that? Because you know where the names of the apostles are in the New Jerusalem? They're in the foundation. They're at the bottom.

So, spiritual strength is not holding everybody down and dictating to everybody, it's being able to hold up those who are not as strong as you are.

Then Paul goes on:

> "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification."

The key word there is edification, building up.

> "For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED THEE FELL UPON ME.'"

Jesus brought upon Himself the reproaches of those who hated God because He was living for God. And we have to be prepared to bring reproach upon ourselves when we live for God.

And then he says, and this is very important:

> "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, but through perseverance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

Whatever was written, he says, whatever is in the scriptures. Whatever is in the scriptures, it's there for our benefit. For our instruction that through perseverance and the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. It's wonderful to be encouraged but remember that the scripture encourages only those who persevere. It's not enough to believe, you have to keep on believing. Your faith will be tested, you'll go through trials. The scripture will bless you if you persevere. It says of Abraham, "After he had patiently endured he received the promise." You remember how long his faith was tested? Something like 25 years he patiently endured, having the promise of a son

who would be his heir. And then when he had patiently endured, he received the promise.

People tell you that faith is all you need. I don't agree. You need faith and patience. Together they're undefeatable.

And then one final scripture:

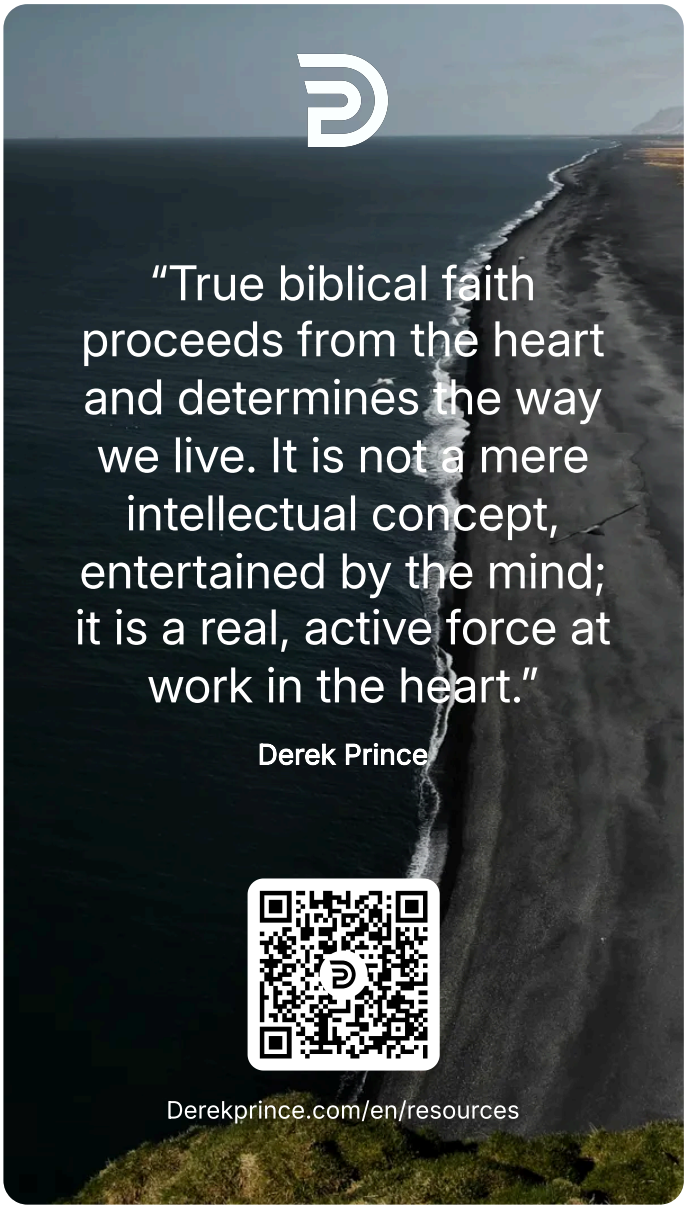
> "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement [or the God of perseverance and encouragement] grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

What is Paul aiming at? Harmony. Harmony between believers so that regardless of their personal differences they may focus on the Lord in His goodness, and together in harmony glorify and praise the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the positive goal of all this teaching. And Paul takes us through various areas which would hinder that and warns us against them. But remember, the positive goal is a harmonizing group of believers who praise God together with one accord and one voice.

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Sermon

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