

Romans 14: The Judgment Seat of Christ

Here Paul teaches us about freedom and responsibility. There are some matters of conscience over which Christians disagree. Paul discusses the eating of meat (which may have been sacrificed to idols), and observance of Jewish feast days, by way of example.

We should not try to force agreement, and so create division. We may feel free to do things that would give a ‘weaker’ Christian a bad conscience – but that is no reason to despise him or her. We are answerable, not to one another, but to God.

It is better to limit our own freedom than to exercise it at the expense of a fellow Christian. Paul gives similar teaching in 1 Corinthians 8...

Our duty to governing authorities (Romans 13 v 1 to 7)

- What do you think can make a person “weak in faith” (v 1)?
- “A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none” (Martin Luther) – what do these verses teach us about Christian freedom?
- “A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all” (Martin Luther) – how should Christian freedom be qualified?
 - (i) Judging fellow Christians is inappropriate because we are not their masters (v 3, 4)
 - (ii) Judging fellow Christians is inappropriate because matters such as eating meat and observing certain days are matters of conscience (v 5, 6)
 - (iii) Judging fellow Christians is inappropriate because we will all face judgment before Jesus (v 10 to 12) – do you think these headings are a fair summary of these verses?
- We are familiar with the famous line “No man is an island, entire of itself” (John Donne), which is a poetic description of the interconnectedness of mankind; but how does Paul take this concept one step further in verses 7 to 9?

“The judgment seat of [Christ]” (v 10) – is NOT to be confused with the judgement of the “great white throne” (Revelation 20 v 11) at the end of time; here Paul is referring to the βῆμα (*bema*) seat, equivalent to the judge’s seat at the ancient Olympic Games (see also 2 Corinthians 5 v 10). After each game the winners came before the judge’s seat to receive crowns for first, second and third places.

In the same way the Christian’s works will be tested by fire (see 1 Corinthians v 11 to 15), and he will be rewarded for those works that remain. The *bema* seat of Christ is concerned only with a believer’s rewards and position in the kingdom, not his salvation.

[MORE OVER...]

Five 'victor's' crowns are promised in the New Testament:

- (i) the 'crown of life' for those who suffer for Jesus (Revelation 2 v 10)
- (ii) the 'crown of righteousness' for those who long for his appearing (2 Timothy 4 v 8)
- (iii) the 'crown of glory' for those who shepherd his flock (1 Peter 5 v 4)
- (iv) the 'crown that lasts forever' for those who run well in his race (1 Corinthians 9 v 25)
- (v) the 'crown of glory and joy' for those who win others to him (1 Thessalonians 2 v 19)...

Do not cause another to stumble (Romans 14 v 13 to 23)

- In what ways might we cause a fellow Christian to stumble (v 13, 20, 21)? What about drinking alcohol in public, or watching certain kinds of films?
- What are the most important things to be preserved at all costs in the Christian community? See verses 15 and 19. What are the priorities in the kingdom of God (v 17)?
- If we're in doubt about the lawfulness of a thing, should we do it because we see other Christians doing it? If not, why not?

Paul provides some principles by which we can judge 'grey areas':

- (i) If we can thank God in what we do, receiving it as his gift, then it is right to do it (v 6)
- (ii) If we can do something with a clear conscience, without feeling troubled, then it is right to do it
- (iii) If we can't do something with faith, then it is sin (v 23)...

Prayer:

Jesus, every knee shall bow to you, for you are Lord.

Help us remember that all of us will give an account of ourselves to you, and that we will all stand before your judgment seat.

Help us to walk in love and to walk by faith.

Help us to live in a way that makes for peace and builds up our brothers and sisters in love and faith.

Amen.