

The Nature of the Kingdom

Shontal had just finished placing brightly colored gift Sbags in front of the three other table settings at the restaurant booth, when her text alert went off. They were 10 minutes away.

Tonight, was the second get-together for this new group of friends which formed because of Shontal's neighbor, Takira. The women were coming from an R rated movie, which is why Shontal didn't go.

Lacresha insinuated she didn't want to hang out with the group, but Shontal explained she didn't watch R rated movies. Catrina said she understood.

The trio arrived right on time and were escorted to the table. The conversation for the night included work, children, husbands/boyfriends and the current struggles of the day. Shontal, who joined the conversation for all the subjects, brought up the current cultural climate. As with any subject, Shontal brought in the Lord and her faith with ease.

"Can we open our gift bags now?" asked Takira impatiently.

Takira's bag had her favorite shade of lipstick. Catrina's had a skinny scarf that she could add to her collection. Lacresha's had costume big hoop earrings, which were her signature. All the bags had a free ticket to a Women's Day Retreat and Spa being given by Shontal's church.

"This is one of the nicest things anyone has done for me," said Lacresha. "Thank you so much."

- 1.** *When have you seen Christians demonstrate attitudes or actions that were out of sync with God's heart?*
- 2.** *What attitudes and actions represent a proper demonstration of Christian faith?*
- 3.** *What hinders us from showing God in our actions?*

Don't Judge Others

Romans 14:10-12, KJV

10 But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

11 For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.

12 So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.

Romans 14:10-12, NIV

¹⁰You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹It is written:

“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.’”

¹²So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

A conflict existed in the church in Rome between those Paul called “weak” in faith (Rom. 14:1-2) and those whose faith he said was “strong” (15:1). The weak were those who had strong convictions about needing to conform to rules and regulations they thought a Christian ought to follow. In Paul's day, they were typically Jewish-background believers who felt that Christians were still required to follow all the rules of the Jewish law.

Paul was concerned that those whose views differed on what he earlier called “disputable matters” (Rom. 14:1) were not only judging each other but were treating with contempt those whose personal convictions on these matters didn't match their own. He reminded those caught up in these types of disputes of a principle found in Isaiah 45:23—that everyone will eventually be judged by God individually. Since God alone is the final arbiter of right and wrong, no one should try to rule on matters that in God's eyes are a matter of personal conviction.

4. *What issue was Paul addressing in this passage?*

5. *What principle did Paul want believers to keep in mind as they responded to this?*

Let Love Be Your Guide

Romans 14:13-18, KJV

13 Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.

14 I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

15 But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.

16 Let not then your good be evil spoken of:

17 For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

18 For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men.

Romans 14:13-18, NIV

¹³Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. ¹⁵If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

Instead of judging one another in disputable matters, Paul urged believers to focus on the effect exercising their personal freedom or adhering to more restrictive guidelines was having on fellow believers. A Christian should not exercise their faith in ways that could cause another believer to violate their personal convictions. The choice one makes in matters like this can be neutral if it is not explicitly prohibited by Scripture. But it can be personally wrong for an individual or as Paul said, unclean, if one

considers it so or if it causes another believer to stumble.

A key principle guiding how one responds to disputable matters is love. Paul said that if what a believer is doing causes another believer distress, then it is not being done in love. If love is your guide, it should result in a willingness to set aside what you feel free to do for the sake of someone whose personal convictions are different. Paul warned that if you fail to do so, what God considers a matter of personal conviction can, in effect, become evil (vs. 16).

Paul noted that what characterizes the kingdom of God are traits that include righteousness, peace and joy—attitudes and action that come from faith and from the Holy Spirit, not from an emphasis on rules.

6. *What are believers to do in lieu of judging each other?*

7. *What can happen if this is not done?*

8. *What characterizes the kingdom of God and by extension, should characterize Christian faith and the churches believers gather in?*

Do What Edifies Others

Romans 14:19-23, KJV

19 Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things where-with one may edify another.

20 For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.

21 It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.

22 Hast thou faith? have it

Romans 14:19-23, NIV

¹⁹Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

²²So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.

to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.

23 And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Paul continued by giving additional instructions to those whose views differed on issues that are a matter of personal conviction. He said that believers are to focus on what edifies, or builds up, one another and what leads to peace.

How believers exercise their personal convictions should not result in causing another believer to fall. Paul warned that even if someone is personally convicted that something is acceptable (and Scripture doesn't say otherwise) that it can be considered wrong if it causes someone else to stumble. It is better to refrain from doing something you feel free to do than to do so at the expense of others.

To avoid contention, Paul said that whatever a person believes about these matters should be kept between them and God. It should not be flaunted or advertised. Believers are at risk of condemnation if they don't keep their views on these to themselves; their words might cause another believer to falter. Whereas verse 22 represents Paul's conclusion and final word for the strong, verse 23 represents the same for the weak. The believer who still "has doubts" should not eat. While eating would not be wrong, to violate one's conscience is wrong. The weak believer would not be eating "from faith." Such eating would be sin, since "everything that does not come from faith is sin."

9. *What should a proper exercise of one's convictions on disputable matters result in? What should it not result in?*

10. *What other advice did Paul give regarding disputable matters?*

Faith Properly Demonstrated

When it comes to my attitudes and actions, I often find myself experiencing the same battle Paul described in Romans 7:14-25. I know what my attitude is supposed to be. I know what I'm supposed to do. But sometimes my heart is not aligned with God's, and I'm more inclined to do the very opposite of what God wants me to do.

When I am in the midst of a struggle to keep my attitudes and actions aligned with God's heart, I try to keep in mind how faith is properly demonstrated when what's in our hearts is out of sync with His. Faith is not exhibited by doing what we are naturally inclined to do. It is typically in fact the very opposite. It is not always exhibited by acting on our feelings. Once again, it is frequently the opposite.

The true meaning of faith may be doing what's right in God's eyes in spite of any resistance we may have to do so. It is walking in God's ways even if the path He is leading us on runs counter to our natural inclinations. It is trusting that if we do what's right in God's eyes in spite of how we feel, we are in fact demonstrating one attitude that a proper exercise of faith should result in. And it's knowing that if we continue to do what's right in spite of how we feel, our heart will eventually change as well.

There is no rule book that tells us what to do in every situation, except for perhaps the rule to consider how our actions or attitudes affect others, or the one to make sure that both are always aligned with God's heart and the nature of His kingdom.

11. *In what situations do you sometimes find your attitudes or actions not aligned with God's heart?*

12. *How do you typically respond to this? Do you for example always do what's right even though you are reluctant to do so? Explain your answer.*

13. *How is faith in Jesus best demonstrated in situations like this?*

Align Yourself with God's Heart

There are probably situations every day where we struggle to keep our attitudes or actions aligned with God's heart. What can help us to keep them aligned with God and the nature of His kingdom is to consider in advance how He wants us to respond to these challenges. Our goal should be for both our actions and attitudes to properly represent what God and His kingdom are like.

► *What can you do this week to align your attitudes or actions more closely with God's heart and the nature of His kingdom?*

KEY VERSE

Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another. —Romans 14:19, KJV

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. —Romans 14:19, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of August 14 through August 20

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Isaiah 41:1-14—Fear Not; God Is with You.
- Tues.** Romans 8:1-17—No More Condemnation.
- Wed.** Romans 8:18-25—Wait for Redemption with Patience.
- Thurs.** Romans 8:26-39—The Spirit Helps in Our Weakness.
- Fri.** Psalm 82—Rescue the Weak and Needy.
- Sat.** 1 Corinthians 4:1-6—Stewards of God's Mysteries.
- Sun.** 1 Corinthians 4:7-21—God's Power Exhibited in Weakness.