

Liberty, Responsibility, Fraternity

Romans 14: 1 — Romans 15: 7.

Bangor. Tuesday, July 24th.

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We have to remember that there is a very real sense in which the kingdom of God is established today. If we turn to Exodus 19, we find that when God gave His law to Israel through Moses He said, "Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then . . . ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests." Israel did not obey His voice, they broke His covenant and ceased to be a kingdom, which in any sense could be owned as His. God has not given up His thought however, and a day is coming in which His kingdom will be established in glory. It will be placed under the son of Man, and extend beyond Israel to "all people, nations and languages," and be "an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away," as Daniel tells us.

This, I trust, we all believe, as we wait for the appearing of Christ in His glory. What we may overlook is that God has not given up His sovereign place even today; and if we have truly received Jesus as our Saviour and Lord, we have been brought into His kingdom, for He has "translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son." Paul went about amongst all the saints preaching the kingdom of God, as he reminded the Ephesian elders, in Acts 20, that is, he everywhere insisted upon obedience to the will of God, and showed what that will is in its details. This is what he did in the latter part of his epistles, and nowhere more extensively than in the Epistle to the Romans.

Hence in the passage that I have read we find the kingdom of God referred to, and we are told that in its practical details it does not concern itself with "meat and drink, but righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." Righteousness does not consist so much in my enforcing what is due to me, as in my paying to all others what is due to them. We must yield to God all that is His due, and give to Christ the place that is His, and then practise everyday righteousness with all our neighbours, both saved and unsaved. Peace and joy in the Holy Ghost are then the practical outcome. Righteousness is the foundation on which they rest. This fourteenth chapter gives instruction in righteousness to all saints.

Nineteen centuries ago Rome was the great world-metropolis, and to it multitudes of people gravitated, Christians amongst them. Those composing the church in that city would doubtless belong to a variety of races, Jews and Gentiles mixed together. Hence among the brethren were bound to be found men brought up with widely divergent customs and ways, and many occasions would arise provocative of arguments and wranglings, especially between Jew and Gentile. Our chapter opens with the words, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations," or, as the New Translation has it, "not to the determining of questions of reasoning." As we read down the chapter we find that the one "weak in the faith" is the one of Jewish upbringing, who had scruples about matters of meat and a regard for days. Such were to be received, but not in order to argue with them or dictate to them what they should do, or not do. These questions as to meats and days do not agitate us much today, but there are plenty of other questions that do, relating to affairs concerning our daily lives and also our service to the Lord.

We must emphasize that this passage deals with "questions of reasoning," and not matters as to which God has plainly spoken in His Word. Take for example that plain word, "Be ye not unequally

yoked together with unbelievers." No reasoning is necessary when we read that there is only one thing to do — obey it. If we do not obey these definite instructions of Scripture we are sure to come under the direct government of the Lord, to our cost. But, on the other hand there are many details of life and service as to which we have to judge by analogy and by comparing scripture with scripture. Here we may not agree, inasmuch as we vary so much in knowledge of the Word and in spiritual growth, to say nothing of our upbringing and temperaments. Now as to things of this kind, if we are not to argue until all are agreed, we must observe the principles laid down in this chapter.

The principles appear to be three, and each carries with it a corresponding exhortation. The first is that of

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY.

We are set free, as to these matters of reasoning and spiritual judgment, from man's dictation or interference; set free, not to do our own wills, but that our souls may be placed in the presence of the Lord as our Master. This principle is plainly set forth in verse 4, where the question is asked, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?" and the statement is made, "To his own Master he standeth or falleth." The Lord claims absolute right over His servants, and no one has any right to interfere and call them before some little judgment-seat which he has erected.

The exhortation attached to this is found in the end of verse 5: "Let every man be *fully persuaded in his own mind*." Now that evidently infers that to begin with every man must be *fully exercised in his own mind* as to the point in question. He must aim at discovering for himself what is in the mind of his Lord. This, sad to say, is a thing that many of us are inclined to shirk. We would rather that somebody else had the exercise, so that we might do our thinking by proxy, and have an easy time of it. If we take up that attitude we become like some small boy who comes home from school with his sums, and thinks it delightful if father kindly works them out for him. If that becomes a habit, what is going to happen? Why, one of these days, when father is not available, he will run to somebody else who will produce ridiculous answers to his sums, and make him look very foolish at school. In any event he will remain a little dunce in things arithmetical, and be found out when examination day comes.

If I am to be fully persuaded, and in my own mind, and not somebody else's, exercise of mind there must be, and that exercise is spiritually healthful, and productive of spiritual development. Many remain spiritual dwarfs because they shirk this exercise; and if any man undertakes to judge me, and thus interfere between me and the Lord, he is helping to dwarf me. He may say that if he does not interfere with me, I shall make mistakes. No doubt I shall, but the Lord will know how to teach me valuable lessons by my very mistakes, before lesson time is over; and at all events I shall not be wholly ignorant when the examination day comes.

The examination day is certainly coming. This brings us to the second principle; that of

CHRISTIAN RESPONSIBILITY, which is plainly set forth in verses 10-12 of our chapter. We are all going to "stand before the judgment seat of Christ," and "everyone of us shall give account of himself to God." These are very sweeping statements! Christ is Master and Lord to each of us, and He intends to assert His authority. No man ought to call me before his little judgment seat, because the Lord intends me to stand before His judgment seat of Divine power and omniscience. There every knee shall bow to Him. There we shall each render an account to God and get His mind as to all our course, and His approval where He can bestow it.

The exhortation which is based upon this is found in verse 13, and is in two parts — the negative and the positive. The negative side is this: "Let us *not* therefore judge one another any more." There is

no *need* to do so. Our judgments are at best partial and imperfect: His judgment which is to come is complete and perfect. The responsibility of each servant is to Him, and we are entrusted with the liberty, of which I have just been speaking, in full view of that fact. The one is the complement of the other.

The positive side of the exhortation is found in these words: "Judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way." Now this introduces us to the third principle which is so prominent in this chapter; that of

CHRISTIAN BROTHERHOOD or FRATERNITY.

Verse 15 states it very definitely: "If thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died." Each one for whom Christ died is my brother, and I am to act toward him "charitably," or, "according to love." If some action of mine would have a destructive effect upon a brother, wounding him in heart and conscience so as to bring him under a cloud, and put him out of action in his service for our common Lord' then far be it from me to do it.

We have seen that the liberty which is accorded to us must be used in the full light of our responsibility to the Lord, which will reach its termination at the judgment seat. Now we find that the brotherhood which has been established also lays a restraining hand upon our exercise of the liberty with which we are entrusted. In certain matters I may be a 'weak' brother, entertaining scruples, to which you, as a 'strong' brother, are an entire stranger. In such a case I must keep my hands off you, and not drag you before my judgment seat, demanding that you conform to my thoughts. In other matters possibly you may be the weak brother and I the strong. Now again I must be careful, lest I despise you and insist upon going my own way, quite regardless of your feelings and of the spiritual damage I may be inflicting upon you. I may be convinced that the thing in question is according to the will of the Lord, and one that, under *ordinary* circumstances, I should do; but if, under *these* circumstances, my doing it would work damage to you, then it is the will of the Lord that I refrain from doing it.

Hence the third exhortation which we have in this very important chapter is that which is found in verse 19: "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." We are to consider with real sympathy all our brethren, and aim at their spiritual good. A brother may be, in my eyes, a very awkward fellow, but I must never forget this great fact — Christ died for him. We need thus to cultivate, what I may call, the family feeling; for whatever our differences of judgment on these questions of reasoning, we all are brethren.

So the Apostle adds, "For meat destroy not the work of God;" and surely we may say, not only for meat but also for days, and for a good many other things beside. The work of God is by far the greater thing. Do not let us destroy the greater thing for the sake of establishing some lesser detail, as has so often been done, sad to say, in the church's history.

When the French revolution took place one hundred and fifty years ago, the great cry was for, "Liberty, *Equality*, Fraternity." In practice all three were terribly abused, and ultimately entirely denied. Their boasted liberty degenerated into tyranny of the fiercest kind. Their equality became a farce, and upon its ruins strong imperialism was erected with Napoleon at the head of it. Their fraternity turned into fratricidal strife, the guillotine and the chopping off of many heads. The trouble with them lay in the middle term of their three. Now where they put "Equality," the Word of God puts "Responsibility," and that makes all the difference.

Equality means the flattening out of all things in a horizontal direction, whereas Responsibility draws a straight line in a perpendicular direction, lifting our thoughts from where we stand on earth straight to God in heaven. Man was in the centre for them, whereas God is in the centre for us.

Too frequently has the fourteenth of Romans been skipped by us. Let us give it the place which is its due, for the non-observance of the instruction that it gives has often wrought mischief in the past. If we observe the three principles that it establishes, we shall not only avoid doing damage to the work of God, but we shall further the kingdom of God, which is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. And further, serving Christ in these things, we shall be "acceptable to God and approved of men."