

# Living out God's Kingdom

## Romans 14:13-15:2

There's a story told by a favourite author of mine, N.T. Wright, that provides a window into Paul's words in Romans 14.

The snow was heavy that night — so heavy that by the time they opened the curtains they could only just see the top of the garden gate. There must have been at least three feet of the stuff.

At the breakfast table, the son reminded his father that he'd promised to give him some work to do around the place to earn some extra pocket money.

"All right," said his father. "We're going to have to get out of the front gate. I think you could start by digging out the path."

The son, eager for his pay, put on his boots and coat, grabbed the shovel, and began to work. He was fit and strong and soon got into the swing of it, Shovelfuls of snow flew this way and that. He kept his head down, concentrating on making a good, complete job of it. Eventually he stood up, drew breath and looked with satisfaction down the length of the path. You could now walk all the way from the house to the gate. You wouldn't even slip.

His father came out.

"Well done," he said. Come and have a cup of coffee and get your pay."

But as they were going inside they heard a voice.

"Then will you come and clear away all the extra snow you've put on *my* path?"

It was the next-door neighbour, standing at his door, looking not only at his snowy front garden but at all the snow that had been shovelled so energetically, and that had flown so gracefully off one path and onto another.

Father and son looked at each other. The neighbour wasn't cross, indeed he was amused, but clearly something had to be done.

"I think this looks like a two-man job," said the father.

Paul main point in this chapter is this: don't shovel the snow off your path in such a way so as to make your neighbour's path impossible to walk down (Wright, 105-6).

The first part of this chapter, the part we looked at two weeks ago, taught us to welcome each other with open arms despite having differences on non-essential aspects of faith. We are to be clear in our own mind what we believe on these things, but leave room for others who haven't yet come to that understanding or see it differently than we do. Each of us is personally accountable to our Lord Jesus, and he'll be the one doing the judging, not us. We need to stop judging fellow believers who make different lifestyle choices than we do, and we need to stop looking down on those we feel are still immature.

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Now clearly, Paul isn't leaving the door wide open for Christians to make any lifestyle choices they want. The ten commandments — respect God and honour his name, set a day a week aside to worship him, honour your parents, enable people to thrive in life, keep sex for marriage alone, respect other people's property, speak the truth, be content with what you have — these are not up for negotiation. And Paul has already spelled out how he expects us to live in chapters 12 and 13. Within the Christian community we are to love and forgive one another as Jesus loves and forgives us - and out in the wider world - we live to demonstrate the truth of the gospel.

In fact Paul's list of commandments in 12:9-21 paint quite the picture as well.

Love must be real. Hate what is evil, stick fast to what is good. Be truly affectionate in showing love for one another; compete with each other in giving mutual respect. Don't get tired of working hard. Be on fire with the spirit. Work as slaves for the Lord. Celebrate your hope; be patient in suffering; give constant energy to prayer; contribute to the needs of God's people; make sure you are hospitable to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless them, don't curse them. Celebrate with those who are celebrating, mourn with the mourners. Come to the same mind with one another. Don't give yourselves airs, but associate with the humble. Don't get too clever for yourselves.

Never repay anyone evil for evil; think through what will seem good to everyone who is watching. If it's possible, as far as you can, live at peace with all people. Don't take revenge, my dear people, but allow God's anger room to work. The Bible says, after all, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.' No: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. If you do this, you will pile up burning coals on his head.' Don't let evil conquer you. Rather, conquer evil with good.

So if we're doing all that, there might still be some time left over for activities which Christians evaluate differently. On those issues Paul says make up your own mind and live by your conscience, but make sure not to make life difficult for those who think differently than you.

In verses 13 and on in Romans chapter 14 Paul addresses this issue.

<sup>13</sup>Do not, then, pass judgment on one another any longer. If you want to exercise your judgment, do so on this question: how to avoid placing obstacles or stumbling blocks in front of a fellow family member.

<sup>14</sup>I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself, except that some things do become unclean for the person who regards them as such. <sup>15</sup>For if your brother or sister is being harmed by what you eat, you are no longer behaving in accordance with love. Don't let your food destroy someone for whom the Messiah died!

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Paul in a deliberate pun says “Okay, so you want to be wise and discerning, like judges, then be wise and discerning about how to avoid making life difficult for those who are also in the family of God. Flaunting our freedom in Jesus could either offend another believer or cause them to do something their conscience still thinks is wrong.

But how could what I choose to eat hurt anybody else?

If Sandra is a Christian who is a recovering alcoholic, she may well feel that drinking any kind of alcohol is harmful, not just for her, but for others. Conversely, if Judy is a Christian who grew up in a home where wine was served Christmas, Easter and Thanksgiving, she may feel free to have a drink with a special meal. Yet if the two of them are dining together, Judy, the one with greater freedom, must limit her actions to those that will build up Sandra, not tear her down. That likely means not having wine at that meal. If, on the other hand, Sandra hears that Judy has some wine occasionally, she must not judge Judy as unspiritual because she has the freedom to have a glass of wine with a meal.

What do we do with activities like this where Scripture is not definitive on an issue? The key principle is this: “things can and do become unclean, or even evil, not because of what they are in themselves but because of how people regard them” (Wright, 107). If Joe sincerely believes that eating french fries is wrong, Joe will sin if he eats some. If Frank is convinced that eating french fries, in moderation, is perfectly okay, he can go ahead and eat them without sin. But if Frank knows how Joe feels about the issue, then goes ahead and orders french fries when the two of them go to McDonalds together, then Frank is sinning too.

Paul continues,

<sup>16</sup>So don't let something that is good for you make other people blaspheme. <sup>17</sup>God's kingdom, you see, isn't about food and drink, but about justice, peace, and joy in the holy spirit. <sup>18</sup>Anyone who serves the Messiah like this pleases God and deserves respect from other people.

The word justice here can be translated either as righteousness or justice - it's the same idea in the original. Paul doesn't write much about God's kingdom. But here he clearly says that God's kingdom is about justice/righteousness, peace and joy. He's picking up a theme that he has sewn into the fabric of the whole of Romans. In chapter 5 he writes,

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in [joyfully celebrate] our hope of sharing the glory of God (1-2).

God's kingdom, the heart of what Christianity is about, is founded on God's grace in Jesus the Messiah that cleanses us from our past sin and presents us as approved before God, not based on our performance, but simply on believing in Jesus. From being enemies and rebels against God we have been reconciled and are now at peace with God and with all those who place their trust in Jesus. The hope that is included in this spiritual reality is that one day what is now spiritual will be our lived experience when Jesus comes to set the world right. This is what unites all believers in joyful worship of our God.

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God's kingdom is about living as justified people, fully aware of God's love and acceptance of us just the way we are. As God's love fills us it overflows to others and we serve God together in peace and unity. The result is that we celebrate with joy the wonder of God's salvation and our adoption into his family.

<sup>19</sup> So, then, let's find and follow the way of peace, and discover how to build each other up. <sup>20</sup> Don't pull down God's work on account of food. Everything is pure, but it becomes evil for anyone who causes offence when they eat. <sup>21</sup> It is good not to eat meat, or drink wine, or anything else which makes your fellow Christian stumble.

Let us find and follow the way of peace. This peace is not just the absence of conflict, but the positive Shalom, the unity of heart and mind that comes as we surrender together to God's bigger agenda and let our petty disputes fade away. In the face of our shared experience of God's saving grace, much that we consider crucial in this life diminishes in importance compared to our fellowship in the family of God. The church was designed by God to be a multi-ethnic, multi-race, multi-colour family where rich and poor, cultured and uncultured, male and female, married and single, educated and uneducated can all come together on one level to worship God. Fads, plagues, wars and disasters have crashed against this bulwark, yet God's vision still stands. Divisions, denominations and even cults have arisen, yet God's vision for his unified people still stands. God knows those in his family and one day all of us will be worshipping together at the feet of Jesus - it wouldn't hurt to get a little practice in that ahead of time.

Let's turn back to the issue Paul and the Church in Rome are facing, whether Christians ought to obey Jewish food laws, and how scrupulous to be about meat offered to idols. Paul is convinced that all food is clean, but it becomes evil if we eat in such a way as to cause a brother or sister difficulty in their faith. I may be perfectly secure in the knowledge that I have the freedom to do this or that, but if I do it in such a way that another Christian who sees things differently than I do will be discouraged in his or her faith, or tempted to do something their conscience tells them is wrong, then I am the one who is sinning.

But what about my rights, you may say. Well, what did the Son of God do with his 'rights'? He laid them aside to become one of us. What about Jesus' rights as Master and Teacher? He laid them aside to bless and help his disciples learn the lesson of service. Why then be concerned about our rights? I suspect we may have bought into the worldly attitude of 21<sup>st</sup> century North America talking.

Why not ask, "What are my responsibilities?" What are my responsibilities to Christians who think differently than I do? What are my responsibilities to believers who are younger in the faith than I? What are my responsibilities to other believers who cling to traditions I think outdated? What are my responsibilities to brothers and sister who I feel are leaving traditions behind that should be kept?

To alter a quote from John F. Kennedy, "Don't ask what the people of God (the church) can do for me, ask what can I do for the people of God?"

Paul goes on,

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<sup>22</sup>Hold firmly to the faith which you have as a matter between yourself and God. When you've thought something through, and can go ahead without passing judgment on yourself, God's blessing on you! <sup>23</sup>But anyone who doubts is condemned even in the act of eating, because it doesn't spring from faith. Whatever is not of faith is sin.

Where the Bible spells out how we are to live, we accept and obey. But when you have freedom in some non-essential lifestyle choice and you know that other Christians differ from you, don't make a big deal of it. Keep it between yourself and God. If you've thought this through and have freedom in the Holy Spirit to do it without a twinge from your conscience, you're good. But, if you are not convinced of the goodness of an activity, keep away from it. You will not be acting in faith, and not acting in faith is sin.

Paul shifts the focus here from what does the Bible denounce as sin to what the Bible affirms as right. To act in faith means acting on what you know is right. That changes the game from "How close can I get to the edge and still be okay?" to "How close can I get to the centre?" It's like the positive spin I put on the ten commandments earlier. Rather than seeing how close we can get to the "do not" line, we rather envision what Jesus taught about the right way to live and turn our attention there.

It takes a lot of discernment and conversation to wrestle with the question of what is an essential Christian practice and what are the non-essentials. Each generation will need to engage that question. Dealing with pictures on the internet was not a problem when I was a boy, but it's an issue in the face of each of young boys and girls today (not to mention anyone tech savvy enough to surf the internet).

There are dozens of situations where this passage can be applied, where some think Scripture points one way and others see it differently. It could be the way we worship, which political party to vote for, how to dress for church, how closely to follow government guidelines. Often, we have no idea who the weaker and stronger siblings are in these cases. But Paul's focus is on the kingdom of God - the justice, peace and joy that are the core implications of the gospel. He sums up the kingdom attitude in regards to secondary ethical lifestyle choices.

We, the 'strong' ones, should bear with the frailty of the 'weak', and not please ourselves.

And then, just to make sure none of us can get off the hook by playing the "I'm the weaker brother" card, or the "I know better I'm the stronger brother" card he sums it up ...

<sup>2</sup>Each one of us should please our neighbour for his or her good, to build them up.

So if you consider yourself a strong Christian and you have the freedom to engage in an activity not clearly mentioned in Scripture as wrong, don't publicize it. If others differ from you on this, lay your rights down and do what's best for your brother or sister. Make sure you check the Scriptures and elders in the faith to make sure you're discerning rightly, then limit your freedom in such a way that you are not leading others to do something against their conscience.

Our goal is not to put snow on our neighbour's path; to make sure that our lifestyle choices don't make life difficult for a brother or sister in Christ.