

Bible Study Romans 14

We have seen that in most of Paul's epistles, the first part mostly focuses on theology, while the second part focuses mostly on living out theology. We are now in that second part.

“^{14:1}Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to dispute over doubtful things.”

When we receive converts into the Orthodox Church, they are usually very zealous. (I know: I was one of them!). They usually want to know everything there is to know about Orthodoxy and want to practice it perfectly in every way. This zeal is a great blessing to both the convert and the Church. The convert is blessed because he/she can say the words from the Liturgy: *“We have seen the true light; we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity, Who has saved us.”* Christ describes the joy of converts: *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field... “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:44-46).*

The Church is blessed because a new sheep has been added to the flock. Christ describes it this way: *“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’ I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:4-7).*

Converts to Orthodoxy bring zeal and joy with them, but they still have much to learn. They often have difficulty distinguishing between what is more important and what is less important. They can focus on a small issue and turn it into a big one, and become frustrated if their fellow Orthodox don't see it as important as they do. This leads to unnecessary arguments that only lead to division. Examples include arguing whether fasting from oil means all oil or just olive oil, or scouring ingredient labels for the slightest traces of dairy products, or whether it is correct to enter the Church through chrismation only, or the Old vs New Calendar and which is better, or whether all men must grow a beard or all women must cover their head, or carrying large and conspicuous prayer ropes, or whether chairs should be allowed in the sanctuary, or which ministries of the church are more important than others, how much Greek or English should there be in our services. I have seen major divisions in churches over each of these issues.

What are examples of minor issues that led to contention that you have seen?

These are the kinds things that Paul means when he writes, *“^{14:1}Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to dispute over doubtful things.”*

Even though Orthodoxy has many rules and customs, there is tremendous freedom for individuals to practice their faith according to their own conscience. How individual Orthodox keep the fast is a perfect example. Some Orthodox strictly follow the fast to the finest detail, which is extremely commendable. However, some strict fasters can sometimes be judgmental of those who do not keep the fast as strictly as they do. Paul addresses this phenomenon:

“²For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. ³Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.”

Judgement of other people is usually the result of latent pride.

“⁴Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand... ⁶He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.”

If a person is not following of the less important standards of Orthodox practice, it is not the job of their fellow Orthodox to judge them. If there is judgement to be meted out, it is up to God to give it. Christ warned against judgmentalism among believers:

“And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove the speck from your eye’; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:3-5)

Compliance with the fasting rules is only one area where judgmentalism and disharmony can arise. Paul lists more:

“⁵One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it.”

Religious observing of certain days was a contentious issue in Paul’s day. Jewish converts to Christianity were raised from childhood to observing many Jewish holy days, like Passover, Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashanah, the Feast of Tabernacles, and several others. To the contrary, Gentile Christians had no personal connections to these Jewish holy days, and therefore had no inclination to observe them. Paul is saying that converts from Judaism had freedom to continue their old traditions as long as they did not try to impose it on others. And Gentile Christians were free not to observe Jewish holy days as long as they did not judge their Jewish brothers and sisters for doing so.

“⁷For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.”

Orthodoxy is a faith that emphasizes the communal nature of salvation as expressed here in Romans. At all our litanies we pray, *“Commemorating our most holy, pure, blessed and glorious lady the Theotokos and ever-Virgin Mary, with all the saints, let us commend ourselves and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.”* When we commend ourselves to Christ our God, we do so in spiritual connection with Mary and all the saints that have gone before us. Our salvation is interwoven and dependent on with theirs.

The 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews famously lists a number of Old Testament saints:

“⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain...

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death...

⁷ By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household...

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance...

¹¹ By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she^d bore a child when she was past the age...

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son...

²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped...

²² By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel...

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter,

²⁵ choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin...

³² And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: ³³ who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. ³⁵ Women received their dead raised to life again...”

With all the Old Testament saints, and all their heroism in faith, and all they accomplished, how can any of us add to their legacy? This chapter ends with an astounding message:

“And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Hebrews 11:39-40).

Our salvation is interwoven with them, but this passage says that the salvation of these heroes of faith is actually dependent and interwoven with ours! This is what Paul means when he writes:

“⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself.”

This interrelatedness of salvation between us and the saints of the past extends into future and beyond the grave. In our funerals and memorial services, our prayers can help those who have gone before us. We pray:

“Again we pray for the repose of the departed servants of God _____, who has/have fallen asleep, and for the forgiveness of all his/her/their sins, both voluntary and involuntary. Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy.

May the Lord grant his/her/their soul(s) rest where the righteous repose, let us ask for the mercies of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the forgiveness of his/her/their sins, from Christ our immortal King and God. Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy.

Give rest to the soul(s) of Your departed servant(s) _____ who has/have fallen asleep, in a place of light, in a place of green pasture, in a place of refreshment, where pain, sorrow, and sighing have fled away. As a good and loving God, forgive every sin he/she/they has/have committed in deed, word or thought, for there is no one who lives and does not sin. You alone are without sin. Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and Your word is truth.”

We pray for the departed that they may find rest, forgiveness of their sins, and entrance into paradise. We do this because we have the hope of helping them, and influencing their trajectory if they need it. By our prayers we are still connected to them in some way.

“⁸ For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Now Paul returns to his rebuke of judgmentalism among Christians. If we judge our brothers and sisters, we will be held accountable for it someday. *“And let us ask for a Christian end to our life, peaceful, without shame and suffering, and for a good defense before the awesome judgment seat of Christ.”*

“¹⁰ But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. ¹¹ For it is written:

*‘As I live, says the LORD,
Every knee shall bow to Me,
And ever tongue shall confess to God.’”*

“¹² So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. ¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way.”

Judgmentalism is just one of the sins we will answer for on that fearful day. Paul now commands us not to give offense to others. Most of us have a personal code of what we believe is right and what is wrong, but our idea of right and wrong may differ from person

to person. Again he is addressing the different dietary beliefs among the Jewish and Gentile Christians in his day. The Jewish converts spent their prior lives keeping Jewish dietary laws. The Jewish Christians had never been allowed to eat pork, shellfish, or animals which did not ruminate (heavily chew their food) or did not have cloven hooves. God abolished the kosher laws in Acts 10:

“Then he [Peter] became very hungry and wanted to eat; but while they made ready, he fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and an object like a great sheet bound at the four corners, descending to him and let down to the earth. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” But Peter said, “Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” And a voice spoke to him again the second time, “What God has cleansed you must not call common.” This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again” (verses 10-16).

Many Jewish Christians chose to continue to follow kosher laws, even though to do so was unnecessary. By contrast, Gentile Christians had never followed Jewish food laws, and were not expected to start. This led to conflict, as the Jewish Christians were offended at Gentile Christians for ignoring kosher laws, and Gentile Christians resented being pressured to keep kosher by their misguided brothers and sisters. Paul gives excellent advice on this issue which applies to other differing matters of conscience.

Kosher vs non-kosher is not a matter of morality but a matter of conscience and free will.

“¹⁴ I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”

This being said, Paul says if you are a Christian and you know that doing something is offensive to others even if you think it is okay, then don't do it. It is more important to maintain peace than to be right in your own eyes.

“¹⁵ Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.”

“⁹ Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. ²¹ It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. ²² Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.”

This principle has many applications today. For example, if it is a fast day but you are drinking wine, and you are invited to dinner at an Orthodox home where they are abstaining from wine, then don't bring wine or ask for wine. Respect their conscience and therefore maintain harmony.

Another example is the use of masks in this post-Covid era. Most of us no longer wear masks, but a few of us still do. The people who do not wear masks should not judge those that do. We should respect their conscience and their free will, and not judge or criticize them. They may have a very good reason. They may be living with a loved one who is going through chemotherapy and has a compromised immune system. They might be afraid of catching a disease that is a nuisance to them but life-threatening to their loved one.

What other examples of respecting others consciences and choices on morally neutral matters instead of judging them?