

Sermon 188: Romans 14:6: Freedom and Worship

OUTLINE

Differentiating between public and private worship
Distinguishing good practice through worship

INTRODUCTION

Whenever we are critical of others we tend to demonise those to the left or right of us. We are so assured of our own correctness that anyone who is different from us gets a severe verbal critique from us. Think of some of the classic divides between Christians. Calvinists have looked at their Arminian brethren and accused them of Pelagian idolatry; Arminians have looked at Reformed Christians and called them blasphemous fatalists. Cessationists have looked at Charismatics and critiqued them as irreverent experience chasers, and Charismatics have labelled Cessationists as quenchers and blasphemers of the Spirit.

Something like this is going on in the Roman church. It is not over something so central as election or the gifts of the Spirit, but over the continuity of various practices. The temperature of the debate has risen so much that Paul is using the words, 'despising' and 'judging' to record their attitudes towards each other. Paul has been pouring cold water on this heated debate reminding the Romans of certain principles. He has reminded these parties that the other is 'in the faith'; that God has welcomed both; that we are all servants before one master; and last week how certain consciences are bound and should not be forced. We continue with Paul pouring cold water on this fire looking at Romans 14:6, 'The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.' Here Paul reminds the critics that their enemy is doing it out of the sincerity of their hearts to the glory of God. In other words, the person being criticised is not some person out there, but one of the family of faith; the issue is not one of criticising an obvious sin, but pouring scorn on another's worship. In the same way that people are more hesitant to swear in a church, so Paul wants to remind the Romans that their opponents are not demons but worshippers and their faults are not crimes but acts of praise.

Today then as we look at Romans 14:6 and the topic of freedom and worship we want to do two things. Firstly, we want to note the limits of Paul's point. In other words, is everything done in the name of worship correct? Obviously not! Added to that we need to discuss whether worship like taste in food is something so subject to personal whim. Secondly, we want to explore Paul's emphasis on worship as an ethical compass.

Differentiating between public and private worship

Before we get at what Paul is saying here we need to remove two wrong ideas that we could possibly derive from Paul's approach here. The first is the wrong way someone in our pluralist society would read this. Today we are surrounded by many different religions and truth claims. The modern approach to this diversity is 'live and let live.' With our modern aversion to external authority and each one determining their own paths, Paul's approach might seem to endorse the pluralist notion that 'every road leads to Rome', so let each person worship whoever they want however they want, sincerity justifies everything, everyone will come out at the same place in the end.

When a person says that sincerity is enough, please recognise that they are making a judgement based on a particular worldview which says that truth is unknowable and so the best we can ask for is sincerity. This view that says sincere people will find their way to God is missing two key biblical truths. Firstly, there is no one who sincerely seeks after God, but every sinful heart is suppressing the truth, Rom. 3:9-19. And secondly, sincerity does not cleanse us from sin and fit us for fellowship with a holy God. To claim sincerity is enough is to claim a salvation by the work of sincerity and not through faith in Christ's work for us.

The second view that we want to shut the door on is the view that the public worship of God's people is a wax nose that we can shape anyway we want. Some might get the impression that Paul is opening a door here for each one to whimsically shape the worship of God in church as they see fit. We must recognise that if we make this verse apply to the public worship of God's people we will be denying the freedom Paul is advocating. To make everyone's preference the rule in public worship is to make everyone's will the conscience binding rule over everyone else. Paul is making application here to private matters of worship not the public meeting of God's people.

At the time of the Reformation this was articulated in what is called the Regulative Principle. The Roman Catholic church had invented all sorts of innovations and subjected God's people to them. Holy days, praying practices, forced fasts, worshipping the host, confessionals, candles, icons, etc. God alone can determine how we ought to worship, and He has outlined what worship looks like in His word. We see local churches gathered under the scriptural leadership of the elders on the first day of the week where the word is taught, prayer is engaged in by all, psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are sung, money is collected for gospel work, and where baptism and the Lord's Supper are also observed. To make up stuff to add to public worship is to do two things. On the one hand you are innovating in how you approach a holy God, and this is not safe; and secondly, you are forcing others to engage in activities that the bible does not sanction, and this would violate the freedom Paul is here trying to protect. You would bind consciences with something other than God's word. Let me give you an example, our church has a Christmas day service, but I do try to make clear every year that this day is not commanded by God. We encourage Christians to gather for worship, not because it is commanded; but as an evangelistic opportunity and another opportunity to reflect on the incarnation of Christ. To Roman Catholic practice of forbidding meat during Lent is a binding of the conscience. The difference between those who don't eat in Romans 14:6 and the practice of Lent is that in Romans 14:6 this is an individual who is abstaining, where the Catholic Church abuses its authority to impose this restriction on all. Paul allows for the private abstaining but would speak out against the Catholic imposition.

So we have made the distinction between public and private worship but let us not think that private worship is not subject to God's word, it is, all of our lives are. All that we do is subject to the Lordship of Christ, this is Paul's point in v7-9. Even in private matters it is not a case of one person doing what God wants, and the other doing whatever they like, rather we have a case of two people seeking to do God's will as they understand it. Paul is advising service and love when there are differences on non-clear matters.

I would also like to point out that this particular matter of difference arose out the fact that God's people were transitioning from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The Gentiles were doing what they understood God to be requiring of them in the NT, but those Jewish converts were unclear of what God required of them now that Christ had come and so continued doing many things not required in the NT. Paul allows for some latitude and tolerance when you have people in this position of being convinced, because forcing them

against conscience would be to force them into sin. Paul's own practice is diverse and might help shed light on the tolerance he emulates here.

Let us take the practice of circumcision. In the Galatian church, there was a group called the Judaizers who were saying that salvation depended upon getting circumcised as a sign of being submitted to the Mosaic law. Circumcision, not for health reasons but for religious reasons, was being put forward as a way to get into heaven. Paul has no tolerance for this practice, Gal. 5:2-4, 'Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.' Here we see Paul against circumcision as a practice, because it is for salvation. But we also see that Paul was willing to circumcise when it would help open doors for the gospel Acts 16:3, 'Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.' For the purpose of being all things to all men he accepted a questionable practice. Timothy was half Jewish and the Jews would not have listened to him otherwise, so this roadblock to the gospel was removed by submitting to a law God did not require. Yet when pressure was applied upon Titus, a full Gentile to get circumcised, Paul agreed that he should not, as once again the gospel would be overshadowed. A one size fits all rule is not Paul's method for determining how to know what the right thing to do is.

Or take the matter with abstaining from food. Here in Romans 14 Paul allows these Jews who if forced to eat would be sinning. And compare this with when Paul rebukes Peter for removing himself from eating with Gentiles. In the first instance not eating is allowed because forcing the issue would cause sin, but Peter, as an apostle and leader, by not eating with Gentiles out of deference to the Jews was wrong and was rebuked.

No top of that Paul for his own private purposes availed himself of certain OT practices as a way to worship God. Acts 18:18, 'After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.' This practice of shaving the head was part of the Nazirite vow of the OT.

What do we derive from this varied practice? Some might look at Paul and accuse him of confusion and hypocrisy, but rather we discern how he makes ethical choices. When the bible is not clear on a matter, the motive of the heart determines the rightness or wrongness of an activity. This is the difference between legalism and Christian liberty.

Whether women can wear pants or make up; whether we are allowed to get tattoos; whether we are allowed to own and watch TV; can we listen to non-Christian music; or read non-Christian books; can a Christian drink alcohol? These and many other matters would fall into the category of things the bible does not forbid and it will have to be left to individual conscience. Those with a legalistic bent will be unsatisfied with this, they need everything to be black and white, but Paul did not always feel it necessary to straighten out everyone's ideas, at least when it was not a clear case of a command. Instead he taught other important principles like serving one another in love even when you are theologically correct, and seeing your brethren through the grace of God's acceptance not by your own standards. There will be times when this could serve as a convenient excuse for those who are seeking to abuse grace, but the point still remains. Let us take one of these matters and think through it. Think with me about tattoos.

The verse that is said to forbid tattoos is Lev. 19:28, 'You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.' Now the word tattoo is a word made up in the 1700s, so the word 'mark' should be understood under the word tattoo. What is meant by 'mark'/tattoo leaves the impression that our present practice of ink under the skin was the intended thing being forbidden. 'Recent archeology indicates that, while Egypt did tattoo, it was limited to women. Evidence suggests that tattooing the body parts of women associated with fertility (breasts, thighs and abdomen) was believed to be a good luck charm to protect the birthing process. In Canaan, evidence indicates that instead of marking the body with ink, more extreme scarification measures, like branding, slashing or gashing the skin were used. Archeology, backed by biblical texts, indicates the Canaanites would customarily slash their bodies for ritualistic purposes (1 Kings 18:28), especially to mourn their dead and honor their gods. Leviticus 19:28 seems to imply this when it says, "you will not make cuttings in your flesh, for the dead, nor print marks on you."¹ Another theory says that tattoos were marks of slavery, "Tattooing, an insignia of ownership, was perhaps condemned in Leviticus because it reminded them [the Israelites] of their past. After all, they had just spent the last four centuries as slaves in Egypt, where tattooing was also used as a sign of slavery. No longer considered slaves, the Israelites now were prohibited to mark their bodies with permanent signs of servitude to former masters. This did not have to be explicitly articulated to them; no one need ask prison inmates why they shed their orange jumpsuits when they are no longer incarcerated."²

The lack of certainty is part of the problem. The original hearers would have seen the logic of the prohibition, it did not even have to be spelled out. We are at a distance to the original context. Into this vacuum many have willingly gone with rules about not getting any markings on your skin, even temporary henna tattoos. Appeal is made to all sorts of principles and texts that are not mentioned in the context like our bodies being temples of the Spirit. It is a leap to automatically equate the modern day practice with the OT prohibition.

So let me ask you then? Can a person get a tattoo today to the glory of God? Let me answer that question this way. You can get a tattoo for sinful reasons or to the glory of God; and you can not get a tattoo for sinful reasons and to the glory of God. If a mother has had a miscarriage, and in the spirit of God not forgetting us and engraving us on the palms of His hands, gets a tattoo to remember her dead child. Is that a sin? I say no. Or if a Christian has been struggling with deep trials and temptations and has a major life breakthrough that is grounded in a particular promise or portion of scripture, is it sinful to write that promise on their skin? Once again no. But if a Christian is merely following culture and is willing to use their bodies to enshrine anti-God messages; or if it merely a matter of vanity or pride. Then yes it is.

In the same way a person can decide not to get a tattoo knowing that it would be a hindrance to ministry as a pastor or as a missionary. Or some might out of love decide to not do it knowing that many Christians would judge them. Is this a good thing? Yes. But if someone says, I will never get a tattoo because I am not scum like those sailors, or prisoners. I am a better person than those who have tattoos. Yes it is possible to sin by not getting tattoos.

There is no NT command to say you should or shouldn't, other principles such as love, serving, stewardship, wisdom and worship become the guiding principles for making a decision. This is what Paul is demonstrating here for these Romans. Here is a matter that

¹ <https://www.biblestudytools.com/topical-verses/what-does-the-bible-say-about-tattoos/>

² <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/hebrew-bible/what-does-the-bible-say-about-tattoos/>

is not central and is not sin. They are to recognise by the fact that each other are doing it as an act of worship that this is the thing that sanctifies it.

Paul makes much of the fact that the intent on the part of the one they disagreed with was one of worship. 'The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.' This is very helpful for us today. For the first time in history we have 7 distinct generations sharing the same space. Never have there been such differences among the human race as we have them today. Conflict arises as a result of these differences. The church should be the one place where people from all different sorts of backgrounds should be able to love one another and maintain unity. This is one way of doing it. Recognise that that thing which the other in the church is doing, that they are doing it to the glory of God and allow them to express their love to God, when the scripture is not clear according to their consciences.

Distinguishing good practice through worship

The last point we need to make is this observation. When Paul comes to issues that are not clear, like the matter of eating food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians, Paul uses worship as a guide to doing the right thing. After giving three differing answers depending on the circumstances, yes you can eat it if you just buy it in the meat market—even though it has been sacrificed to an idol, give thanks and eat. No you cannot eat it if you are going into the temples and participating in the pagan ceremonies. It depends, on whether who you are with thinks you are compromising your faith. No, when it causes another in Christ to stumble. At the end of his discussion he makes this general remark, 1 Cor. 10:31, 'So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.' Paul has already applied this point to the weak for himself and has satisfied himself that they are doing it in good conscience for the sake of worship and lets them be. But we must also take note on how helpful this principle is when we are not sure about what is right when the scripture does not have a specific command about something.

One commentator puts it this way: 'May I allow myself this or that pleasure? Yes if I can enjoy it to the glory of God, and while giving thanks for it; no, if I cannot receive it as a gift from his hand, and bless Him for it. This mode of solution respects at once the rights of the Lord and those of individual liberty. This is helpful for ourselves but how does it help us when evaluating the activity of our brother or sister? If their action is done in worship to the glory of God then do not be so quick to judge them simply because they did not share your conscience on the matter. You may disagree, you may not be sure, if they are worshipping then allow them the liberty of conscience to offer their own worship to God without a policeman. Inside the boundaries of God's clear commands there is space where the mature and the immature, the ignorant and informed all worship and work out their own salvation. We must be careful on the one hand to be our brother's keeper and hold he/she accountable for any real breach of God's law, but on the other hand allow them the space we ourselves need to be ourselves before God without someone else micromanaging our faith and imposing their consciences upon us. This is how one friend put it to me. 'Preach the principles and commands, and live by your convictions; but don't preach your convictions.' Each one will have to work the fine detail out for themselves.

GV is a sad testimony to what happens when one man's food preferences, clothing and hairstyle preferences, movie choices and conscience issues on secondary matters police the faith of others. In there now is an atmosphere of scrutinizing another's worship and constant judgement. We like Paul should protect the liberty Christ has won for us. Not the

liberty to indulge sin but the freedom to personally render our heart's worship to God as far as our conscience is informed. Right actions by a forced conscience are not mine, are not love.