

Who is On the Lord's Side?

[based on Romans 14:1-12]

Peace, what a big subject to even attempt to cover! There are many different directions we could go in talking about peace.

We could talk about world peace, and God's desire for wars to end, and for those conflicts to be replaced by justice and peace. We could talk about each of us having peace with God, as our sins are forgiven, and we are adopted into God's family. We could talk about inner peace – that sense of calm assurance within each one of us, that comes as we let go of hurts and expectations.

Living in the 'Kingdom of God' means living side-by-side with other people, and God's Word has a lot to say about how we must live with one another.

There was once a big fight going on in a particular church. Christians were divided against one another - feelings were hurt; harmful things were said; groups formed and spent time attacking each other, on the areas in which they disagreed.

Each firmly believed that they were right, that God was on their side, because, after all, their opinions were backed up by Scripture, and those "other" people just didn't get it. The others, obviously, were not as spiritual as they were - they were narrow-minded and enslaved, or else they were undisciplined, and they abused freedom.

And, as the conflict persisted, the groups became more and more entrenched, and further and further from the point of the Kingdom of God where love for God, and love for one another, is more important than any other consideration.

What was the issue? It could have been the colour of the carpet. It could have been the Sunday School curriculum. It could have been how to allocate the church budget. It could have been whether to focus upon Missions or church membership. It could have been the type of music used in worship.

But, in this particular church, it was none of those. Instead, the issues were what kind of food was correct to eat, and what day should be set aside for worship.

The church to which I am referring, was the New Testament Church in Rome, and the apostle Paul wrote to them to set them straight. I can sum-up his response with this verse, "the kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but in living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

The Kingdom of God is a mindset of peace, meaning that all of us who claim to be a part of God's kingdom, must put peace with one another as a higher priority, than forcing our personal convictions on others. That has very specific implications for how we treat others, how we exercise our own personal freedoms, and also on our attitudes towards one another.

The first verse of today's reading from Romans, teaches that acceptance of one another, is more important than theological arguments. It must be true and deep, not with a condescending attitude, not "looking down on" others who have not, in your opinion, "arrived" at a like-minded conclusion. Rather, it commands a true acceptance, which is rooted in the fact that God has accepted 'those people', God loves them and it is up to God to be responsible for them, to judge them and to help them do what is right.

Verses 5-9 emphasize what we have in common – namely, that those who worship the Lord on a special day, do it to honour Him. Those who eat any kind of food, do so to honour the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who **refuse** to eat certain foods, also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God.

And so, we all have the same goal in common – to honour, please, and give thanks to God. We might have different ideas about *how* to do this, but we can, and should, have unity and peace with one another, when we recognize that we are all striving for the same thing; we are all working towards the same goal; we are all serving the same King.

In verses 10-12, we see that we are all equal before God – there is no hierarchy. Rather, we will all stand before God; we all will kneel before Him; and we will each give an account of our lives – what we have done, and what we have *not* done, and our attitude toward one another.

I find this a good and sobering reminder. I will not be accountable for what you have done, but I *will* be accountable for my **response** to what you have done. For the ways in which I have failed to please God with my chosen reactions – for these, I will be held accountable.

If any of us have looked at others and felt that we were better or holier or even more mature, we have 'looked down on them', and we will be held accountable. The better way is instructed: Decide to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall. In other words, put others first! Do nothing that would make their journey more difficult. Strive instead to make sure *our* lives build others up, lead them towards God, and demonstrate love and selflessness.

There is a higher value in the Kingdom of God – Love! Verse 15 says, "If another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it." The translation is that love for others is more important than anything, including the exercise of personal freedom. Love means putting relationships ahead of every other consideration.

It might be right to exercise our own views and opinions about certain things, but if it discourages instead of encourages; if it brings down instead of builds up; if it distresses instead of brings joy, then it is wrong. What is surprising for us, is that this applies even when the other person is wrong. On the issue of what to eat, Paul is clear in verse 14 that no food is wrong to eat. Can you imagine the 'eat meat' group getting excited as their point is affirmed? But Paul's whole point is that even if they are right on the issue, they are wrong - they are putting that ahead of love and unity.

I find it surprising, perhaps even revolutionary, and I think it is at the heart of our relationship with God - love for others is more important than being right, or about how to worship, or in what activities to participate - indeed in all the ways we live out our Christian lives.

We often take a different approach, don't we? When we believe we are right and others are wrong, we feel the need to convince, to teach, even to encourage. When we believe we have learned something or experienced something, and others around us are lacking that knowledge, we feel that they are less mature or spiritual than we are, and that if only we could get them to see or experience things from our perspective, then they would be mature and spiritual, like us.

This passage turns that on its head. It says, leave that to God. It says that if we feel more spiritual than others and we look down on them, we are sinning. It says that, more important than being right, is being in right *relationship* with one another. The Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you too.

So, how do we apply this passage to our lives? The passage makes it pretty clear; "So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and build each other up." I must add a personal comment here – THIS CHURCH IS REALLY GOOD AT THAT!

But I do have a challenge for us. Based on this passage, based on the truth that God's Kingdom is a Kingdom of Peace; based on the idea of preparing for the truth and that making peace with one another is a crucial pre-requisite for worship; here is my challenge...who can you build up? Maybe you have looked down on someone else; maybe you have been hurt by them; and maybe you were even in the right all along, but that 'righteousness', came at the cost of a relationship and unity.

I'm not asking you to re-open an old wound, wade through the mess again, but I am saying, "Let us try to build each-other up". How might you bring a bit of goodness, a bit of peace, a bit of joy in the Holy Spirit? Is it through a card, or a prayer? Is it through a tangible gift expressing genuine acceptance? Is it through you choosing to forgive and let go of old hurts? These, I think, are harder to give than gifts to those we love, and with whom we are in good relationship.

Unfortunately, by passing judgement on others, we are demonstrating ignorance and prejudice, but by personal evaluation, we can learn from our mistakes, and that is a gift we can give ourselves.

In closing, please hear and reflect upon the words of this old hymn...

Who is on the Lord's side?

Who will serve the King?

Who will be His helpers, other lives to bring?

Who will leave the world's side?

Who will face the foe?

Who is on the Lord's side?

Who for Him will go?

By Thy call of mercy, by Thy grace divine,

We are on the Lord's side!

Saviour, we are Thine! AMEN