**Paul's Letter to the Romans**

**"OUR DILEMMA: GOD'S SOLUTION"**

**Romans 14:1-23**

**“Come Together Right Now Over Me”**

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early a century ago, in 1917 czarist Russia, the Bolsheviks revolted and seized power under Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky. As their 370-year-old government imploded, Russian Orthodox priests were quibbling over how long their robes’ tassels should be. Instead of coming together to deal with the *coup d’etat*, their church came apart over the inconsequential.

A half-century later, Timothy Leary decided to run for office. In an LSDeep haze the good doctor dreamed up “Come Together” as his slogan and asked his friend John Lennon to set it to music. But Tim and his acid were hauled off to the slam, dashing his political hopes while the Beatles tripped to the bank singing:

*He roller-coaster, he got early warning*

*He got muddy water, he one mojo filter*

*He say "One and one and one is three"*

*Got to be good-looking 'cause he's so hard to see*

*Come together right now over me*

The U.S. population is at 299,000,000, adding one body every 11 seconds! Worldwide we’re up 2.4 every second! But judging by the news, we don’t seem to be coming together, at least peacefully.

Nineteen centuries before the Beatles, the other Paul wrote to his spiritual family in Rome about what it means to follow Jesus Christ. They were Jews and Gentiles who’d come to Jesus out of varying spiritual persuasions. The Jews had always gone to their temple when it was time to worship Yahweh (God). They had scrupulously honored dietary restrictions, special days and feasts, circumcision and countless traditions, most of which were added to God’s instructions in the Torah, the first five books of the Protestant Bible.

Conversely, Gentiles were into pagan gods, mysticism or Greek philosophies like: (1) The Epicureans chased happiness. (2) Stoics elevated Reason and Fate, believed that man’s soul is divine, and sought to be at one with the “Universal Mind.” (3) The Cynics were convinced that “man could save himself if he would.” (4) And the Skeptics were certain that certainty was worthless.

From circumcision to cynicism, Christ’s homies in Rome were a cobbling of mostly slaves and lower class, some farther along than others in understanding their new relationship with God through His Son Jesus. **Getting these two camps on the same page is Paul’s goal as we read Romans 14:1-23 (p. 845).**

**QUESTION: How would Paul’s message in this excerpt sit with John Donne’s oft-quoted “No man is an island?”**

***Cutting Remarks Are Out. Cutting Slack Is In.***

***Romans 14:1-12***

Paul urges believers (who’d been taught what it means to be “in Christ”) to welcome their spiritual siblings who still struggle with the non-essentials of performance-based, religious legalism.

One believer’s convinced that something’s taboo; another believer does it in good conscience (John 8:32, 36, Galatians 5:1). Neither should judge the other since God has welcomed both (Colossians 2:11-23). God guarantees that both will get a passing grade at the final judgment (Romans 8:1; Philippians 1:6, 2:13)!

Moses never told the Israelites, “Just go with your conscience.” But armed with knowing what God says is right and wrong, and guided by the peace –- or lack of it –- that we have from God’s Holy Spirit, our own GPS (God’s Positioning System), we’re free to decide what’s right for us personally (1 Corinthians 10:23-24; Romans 12:1).

This is such a cold shower-shock that when Paul introduces it (Romans 6:1-4), he anticipates his reader’s response: “Hey, if I’m *totally* forgiven, I can sin at Mach 10, right, because God’s grace and mercy are scalable enough to cover my contrails.” Paul: “Why would you want to do that, after all Jesus did for you on the cross?”

Scripture condemns some things specifically – pride, dishonesty, stealing, injustice, self-righteousness, sexual immorality, etc. Beyond what’s listed, God calls for the believer to make wise choices.

But what are God’s non-negotiables? With all due respect to God, when You ARE the Truth, what’s to negotiate (Hebrews 4:12-13)! But here are a few that He says are off the table:

* The Bible, in its original manuscripts, is the verbally-inspired word of God (2 Timothy 3:14-17).
* God is three-in-one: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 28:19).
* Jesus Christ is eternally God, was born on earth of a virgin, was fully God and fully man, lived a sinless life, was crucified, resurrected and returned to heaven (Colossians 1:13-23).
* By nature, mankind is sinful, separated from God, destined for eternal separation from Him (Romans 3:23).
* But God, because He loves us, provides total forgiveness and right standing before God for all who, by faith, trust in Jesus who paid our sin debt in full (Romans 3:23, 6:23, 8:1).
* Jesus will return, at any moment, to take His followers to be with Him always (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).
* At the end of the 7-year Great Tribulation Christ will come back to defeat Satan and all evil, establish His kingdom on earth for a 1,000-year reign, then an endless eternity in heaven for believers, and unending torment for non-believers (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).

Our enlightened, 21st century mind gags at the stifling idea of “absolute truth.” Naturally, we prefer whatever-works tolerance. So did Eve when she shopped for apples. But if God exists, if He created the universe and keeps the planets on course, then this is His sandbox, and He can say what is, was and will be. It comes down to who you think God is. Is He “the God who is” or “the God you want Him to be? (2 Timothy 4:1-5)”

As Christ-followers, we no longer own our lives, having transferred title to Him to be our Lord (Philippians 1:21, 6:20). Death is not the end for us -- only a portal into the actual presence of our great God.

One of the most misunderstood points about the Bible is what happens when we stand before God, our ultimate Judge. For starters, everyone who ever lived will eventually admit that Jesus is Lord, as He said (Philippians 2:10-11). But for those who waited too late to do so, God will answer, “Depart from Me; I don’t know you” (Matthew 7:21-23). Not good.

There are two times when God will pronounce “final” judgment. Believers will stand before “the Judgment Seat of Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:9-15), and non-believers get the verdict at “the Great White Throne Judgment” (Revelation 20:11-15). The former is an awards ceremony; at the latter those whose names are not in God’s Book of Life will be “thrown into the lake of fire.” Also not good.

***It Depends On Your Definition of “Free”***

***Galatians 5:1, 13-26***

What is “spiritual freedom in Christ?” Paul had planted a small outpost for Christ in what’s now central Turkey. After Christ had freed them from religious hoop jumping, these believers had been ambushed by teachers who wanted to bring them back into a works-based rather than faith-based relationship with God. **Let’s get Paul’s reaction in Galatians 5:1, 13-26 (p. 867).**

We didn’t come to faith in Christ by working to impress God, so why expect to live for Him that way! He has no long list of to-do’s for us. Only two: Love God with all you’ve got, and love everybody you deal with (Mark 12:28-33). If you trip over #2, re-read #1.

***“I’m Free To Be Me.***

***And You’re Free To Be Me Too.”***

***Romans 14:13-23***

Paul says, “Cut it out. No more passing judgment on each other.” For some of us, that’ll free up a lot of time for other pursuits.

When it comes to spiritual freedom in expendable areas, Paul’s careful to say that knowing God’s take on freedom should precede letting your conscience be your guide, as do the “strong in faith.”

After Jesus had taken the sky-shuttle back to heaven, Peter had to be told by God in a vision not to write off certain foods as unkosher since God had OK’d them. Jews were even cleared to deal with Gentiles (Acts 10:1-11:18)! This was news to Peter and all Jews who came to embrace Jesus (Galatians 2:1-21; 2 Corinthians 12:1-10).

When you become a stumbling block in a brother’s walk with Christ, remember: Christ died for him too. “What right do I have to mess with people Christ died for? Why should my brother have to live according to *my* conscience?” What a person ingests or ritualizes is not mission-critical; being right with God is! Obsessing over non-essentials is useless (2 Peter 2:19; 1 Corinthians 6:12, 10:23-33). Other people’s souls and spiritual wellbeing are far more important than my liberty (1 Corinthians 8:9-13).

Life can be tough; ask Jerry Springer. Too many people are throwing chairs at each other. As Christ’s team, we should always bring a generous serving of peace with us instead of ripping people whose way of living we don’t approve.

**QUESTION: What changes might occur in the way you live if you always created an environment of peace and encouragement? What if, say, five of us began writing one note a week to a friend, family member or co-worker, saying, “I appreciate you” … What would happen?**

When Paul talks about a weak believer, he’s talking about a legalistic Christian who regards keeping rules, regulations and rituals to be what pleases God. Legalistic Christians need to learn more about God’s grace. And Christians who say “I’m not hung up on rules” need to lighten up and ripen their love and self-control.

As to matters about which the Bible is silent, don’t judge or argue. Practice your freedom; don’t parade it (Galatians 5:13-15). Because the believer’s sins have been forgiven, there are no *eternal* consequences to pay, but the principle of sowing and reaping means there’ll always be *natural* consequences (Galatians 6:7).

***Come Together Right Now… Over Whom?***

The core truth of the Gospel is that "God has made peace with us through Christ!" (2 Corinthians 5:18). God bridged the humanly uncrossable chasm that our sin had dug between Him and us. But now God no longer holds your sins and mine against us because of His grace and Christ's loving sacrifice.

The only One we need to come together with is Jesus. He’s done His part to come to you and me. If you haven’t taken that step of faith in His direction, God invites you to tell Him:

“Father, I need You. I am one needy sinner. Thank You for sacrificing Your Son Jesus so that I might come to You and receive Your total, once-for-all-time forgiveness. Count me in, please. I’m ready as I’ll ever be to take the next step with You because as much as I know how, I trust you now. Thank You, Jesus. Amen.

His Deal

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