

Practical Christianity

Part 4

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| Speaker | Ernest Brown |
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[00:00:01] Those who've been able to be with us on each evening will, I'm sure, be kind and tolerate a minimum amount of recapitulation, so that we know where we are embarking tonight. Saturday evening, following on, I trust, in the will of the Lord from Saturday afternoon, we concentrated on the basic principles which should govern every department of our life. In order that we on earth might exercise our privilege and responsibility in so moving, so walking, so living, that the will of God might be brought to light in a very detailed, practical way in the lives we live here on earth. Not to take shape, not to be [00:01:04] conformed outwardly to the fashion of the age, but rather to be motivated and to be shaped by the transforming effect of an inward power, the life that God has given us. And after looking at that, I thought it was worthwhile to spend three evenings showing how these things are developed in the epistle to the Romans in chapter 12, 13, and 14. Like others have said in conversation after the meetings, these are matters we think about, they crop up in our Bible readings and discussions, we think about them from time to time, but it's not often that in a formal way there is an opportunity to develop in detail the things that are mentioned in the chapters. Now that's what we've been [00:02:01] trying to do this week. And in order to provide a link, we have quoted once or twice that grand verse in Micah 6, verse 8, which outlines for us what the Lord, our God, requires of us. Look it up. That other verse, Titus 2, verse 12, enjoining us, we who've been educated by the grace of God, to the end that we might live here in this world in a way that can be described variously as sober, righteous, and godly. And we looked, first of all, in detail at chapter 12, which presents for us how it is that we can live soberly, with a right assessment of ourselves. Fastening particularly on chapter 12, verse 3, I say through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more [00:03:02] highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly. So we are enjoyed to be right in ourselves, in our basic attitude selfward, and having a right estimation of ourselves, neither too high nor too low, but just as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith. And then last night, we looked at chapter 13, which expands the phrase which comes towards the end in verse 13 of chapter 13, let us walk honestly, parallel, very close to what Paul says to Titus, that we might walk righteously, that we might live righteously here in this world. And then tonight, the third aspect of our life, covering everything in these three facets of it, not this time what we are in ourselves, not this time our [00:04:04] relationship with others, but our relationship directly with the Lord. And so in verse 8, we have a verse, a statement, that can well be taken as a heading over the chapter, whether we live, we live unto the Lord, whether we die, we die unto the Lord, whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord's. Now we hope to look at some of the aspects in chapter 14, and to get the sense it really continues through to verse 7 of chapter 15. As on the other evenings, no time for every detail. Pointers, we hope, will be given, which we can all take away and meditate in the presence of the Lord. As on other evenings, time will only [00:05:01] permit the presentation of a judgment which has been arrived at over some time, some years perhaps, in meditating on the Scriptures, comparing

Scripture with Scripture. Of course, as on other evenings, it would be possible to state another point of view. There are many. But my responsibility tonight, to give you an indication of conclusions that I've come to over the years, and this I would hope to do, and I trust that you would receive them in that spirit, meditate upon them, and indeed, as this very chapter says, let everyone be fully persuaded in their own mind. If we look for them, I think we will see three threads running right down this chapter, not necessarily confined to certain [00:06:04] sections of verses, but things to look for and note and meditate upon. The first thing that we might see is liberty. Liberty is a major topic in the chapter.

Another major topic is lordship, and a third major topic is love. Liberty, lordship, and love. Now, the chapter does split itself into three fairly recognisable sections, not necessarily with those three headings, but I would suggest that in parallel with that thought of liberty, lordship, and love, we also look at three sections of the chapter. First of all, the first nine [00:07:01] verses. And I would pose the question as to whether or not we feel that proper Christian attitude is better summed up or needs to be on the line of liberty or license. I think that that's the kind of perplexing problem that crops up whether we judge a way of life, either in ourselves or in others, as liberty or license. This is followed, and I would suggest verses 10 to 14, where what is stressed is the individual's privileges and responsibility, the privileges and responsibilities of the individual, and it's very much an individual matter. And in the third section, verses 15 on to the end of the chapter, verse 23, I would [00:08:05] suggest that a challenge comes to us, certainly to me. Am I on the lines of construction or demolition? Am I building up or am I pulling down? You see, as on the other evenings, these are basic practical matters that perhaps we think about, and perhaps we should talk about them more. Now, we hope to go through each of these three last-mentioned sections. First of all, the first nine verses. Now, in each of these sections, we find fairly readily an important statement, and then based upon that statement, and in the light of that statement, we get an exhortation, a statement of truth, a statement of fact, and then following on [00:09:06] from that, an exhortation. Now, before we go section by section into chapter 14, perhaps it will be well to clear any doubt by mentioning what the major topic is in the chapter. There's always room at the front. Romans chapter 14. The temptation is, when terms like this are used, Christians who can be assessed as strong, Christians who can be assessed as weak, we go either one of two ways. Before we look at the detail, before we examine the context, either we are self-confident, [00:10:08] assertive individuals, notwithstanding what chapter 12 says about that. We are fairly confident that we try and do the right thing, so even before we examine the context, we assume, well, it's talking about the strong, it's talking about the weak. Well, obviously, being talking about the strong, that's the way I do things and view things, and the weak are the people who disagree with me. Now, that is a conclusion which is so easy it springs to our mind. However, if we are on the other side and are self-effacing to an unnecessarily large degree, maybe we will think the proper thing to do is to say, well, I'm so weak in everything. Everyone [00:11:03] else is strong, and I'm the weak one. Now, either attitude, if it hasn't examined the context, is at least a mistake. I'll put it stronger, it's an error. We need to examine the context to see what it's all about. And it's an important consideration because most of the teaching of the chapter follows on from it. It is not referring to evil, the toleration of evil in any way, neither doctrinal evil, ecclesiastical evil, moral evil, or any other kind of evil. There are other scriptures which deal with that. What is under consideration are things which are [00:12:03] not vital to the Christian testimony, things which are a matter of individual judgment, where initial prejudice and environment might largely shape what our attitude is. Now, the immediate problem when Paul was writing to the Romans was that there were some converted Jews who felt strongly that the dietary restrictions, that the recognition of certain calendar days, and the keeping of them in a formal, rigid way, was something that should be continued in Christianity. Their whole mode of life was geared to that kind of rigid self-discipline. And

the Apostle teaches in many places that a vital feature of Christianity is liberty, that not the material things like food and drink or [00:13:09] habits of keeping certain days is vital to Christianity. And as we look into it, Christianity is spiritual and moral, rather than primarily connected with the material. And because of that, he uses this as a necessary example of the day. Others, Gentiles perhaps, more prone to it than others, they had been used to a very flagrant breach of all moral code. They were used to throwing everything overboard, doing as they like. At the same time, they had conformed with a way of life that was pagan, and now they had been relieved from that. They had been [00:14:02] ushered into true, full Christian liberty, and they were determined to enjoy it. But the matters under consideration were not matters of Christian truth, they were matters of dietary restrictions and habits concerning certain days. Of course we can say, well, largely, if not entirely, that kind of thing doesn't bother us particularly. It may well. And if it arises, this is the chapter for it. But certainly it is a basis for us to challenge each of our hearts as to what we consider important and vital in Christianity, and where it is that we draw the line and say, well, these are matters of Christian conscience in an individual. Now, with that preamble, we look at this first section, verses one to [00:15:06] nine. It mentions, you will see, and this is the reason for the suggestion, verse two, one believes he may eat all things, another who is weak eateth herbs. Not weak in the sense of physically weak, but, and this is the paradox I suppose, when I first heard this scripture referred to, I assumed those that were strong were those that were firmly disciplined, who recognized a fairly rigid code, and had the moral strength to stick to it without deviating. And those that were weak were those who weren't able to keep to the code, and just pleased themselves. But, as we read the chapter, we find that the opposite is the case. We find that those who are strong in the liberty in Christ Jesus are those that [00:16:06] recognize that the kingdom of God is not connected with material things, such as things that we eat, we can drink, it's connected with moral values, moral features, like righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, which we've come to at this time. But, having introduced that, in verse four, we get the statement in this particular section, which we need to take account of. To his own master he stands or falls, and the exhortation based upon this, and this is why I anticipated in my reading of it, end of verse five, let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. And then an even more important verse, giving the reason for that exhortation. How worthwhile it would be if I recognized [00:17:17] that while I have so much in common with my fellow believers, that while I have such sweet, happy, consistent fellowship with my local brethren, in the ultimate there are certain matters which are the responsibility of the individual brother or sister to the Lord. To his own master he standeth or falleth. And because of that, it means that unless it's a matter concerning the glory of our Lord Jesus [00:18:01] Christ, something vital concerning his person or work, if it's a question as to how we conduct things while we are together, if it's a question the day of the week or the time of day when we do something, if it's a question of which foods we are free to eat, which we abstain from, these are matters which are the individual responsibility of each brother and sister before the Lord. Now it sounds so obvious, but over the years how much difficulty there's been amongst the people of God over this kind of thing, if not in detail, certainly the principle. So the golden rule is, to his own master he standeth or falleth. And let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. I would certainly say, as on another evening relative to chapter 12, I would suggest that we are wise in this kind of [00:19:07] consideration to be as generous as possible in the assessment of our brothers and sisters. And if we are to be rigid, let us be rigid with ourselves. If we want to be strong, let us be strong to ourselves. If we are to be weak in the sense of saying, this here is safety in keeping to these regulations, I will eat certain animals, I will not eat certain animals, on principle that's between my soul and the Lord. There's another thing as to being fully persuaded in our own mind, which I'll deal with now, although it comes right at the end of the chapter. I used to work in an office and an organization where, when tools were made, [00:20:12] first of all there was a master drawing made. And because the drawing was detailed and it needed care and a lot of expenditure in its execution, there were four words

printed on the paper before any drawing was commenced, before the design was started. There were four words and there were these. If in doubt, ask. Good advice. But since those days, I've always felt that for the Christian, in the light of this scripture and others, as far as my personal conduct is concerned, I would be well advised to have inscribed upon my mind, before I [00:21:03] make any plans for my life, these words. If in doubt, don't do it. I'm not saying that I should be saying to other people, because I have a doubt you don't do it for myself. If I have any doubt as to whether some course of conduct is honoring to the Lord or something that could be used by Satan to stumble another believer, I would be well advised to put it to one side and not to engage in it, rather than stumble another believer. Now, we'll come back to that later in the chapter. But let us look at verse 7. What is the overriding principle as to whether a thing is right or not? Or whether I should be engaged in a certain thing or not? I would suggest that verse 7 tells us [00:22:04] most strongly, the overriding consideration is the lordship of Christ. Liberty, Christian liberty, oh yes, if the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed, Christian liberty. But the Son, who makes us free in a sphere of liberty, is the one who is also our Lord. If there is to be any circumscription of the liberty that he gives us, surely only he is the one who can circumscribe such liberty. Not as the Son here, but as Lord. We are happy to confess him as Savior and Lord.

Perhaps when we first do that, we little realize how much is involved in [00:23:03] acknowledging his lordship over us. We need to recognize, don't we, we are placing ourselves under his authority, under his control, under his supremacy, under his lordship, under his power. And when we come here to verse 7 and 8, we read, none of us lives to himself, no man dies to himself. Now here is a happy consideration. If I'm left here to live upon earth as a responsible Christian, I'm to live here as unto the Lord. I recognize his authority, his control, his direction in all I would seek to do. However, if the Lord, who is in full command of me, and I've been happy to acknowledge that by handing myself over [00:24:03] to him, if he decides that my time of responsible living on earth is to come to an end, having lived unto the Lord, I am then prepared to die unto the Lord. If we live, it's unto the Lord. If we die, it's unto the Lord. Whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord's. It would preserve us from a lot of fretting, wouldn't it? Scripture says, fret not thyself because of evildoers. But here's another place where we could apply the term, fret not thyself, whether the Lord decides you should be living or dying. As long as we are living, it is unto the Lord. If we die, it is unto the Lord. What contentment, what composure there comes to the one who accepts the Lordship of Christ in this way. And again, [00:25:08] the closing part of that section, to this end, Christ both died and rose and revived. As it is in the authorised, very much in parallel with Revelation 1 verse 18, is it? Where the Lord presents himself as the living one who became dead and behold is alive forevermore. I'm aware, as you are, that the more literal translations content themselves by saying he's the one who died and lives in that order. And again, he died, he lives. Well, he died unto sin once, this epistle tells us. And he lives unto God and so as the one who has every right, both on the grounds of creation and on the grounds of redemption, and the [00:26:06] one to whom we have willingly submitted as our Lord. But the one who demonstrated he's competent to be the Lord by going into death, overcoming it and coming out of it victoriously, the one who died and now lives, he is the one unto whom we live or die as it pleases him. Now, that is the matter of liberty or license. Let us not use the true liberty of Christianity as a license for the flesh.

Where you and I draw the line on that, of course, is very much a matter of personal communion with the Lord. But in verses 10 to 14, we see where that individual responsibility comes to a head. The reason given, after warning us not to [00:27:07] judge our brother or sister, we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. Oh, how prone we are to make judgment seats of our own, to attempt to call the brethren before my judgment seat, that I might make an assessment, that I might make a

judgment, and that I might be able to assess the worthiness of my brother or sister. Scripture here says we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, every tongue shall confess to God. Again, every tongue shall confess not to me or to you, but to God. It is a matter of having everything in right order, in right perspective, before [00:28:05] the Lord who died, rose again, and now lives. So then, every one of us shall give account of himself to God. We know it, but sometimes we don't act as though we knew it. Sometimes we act as though we are going to give an account of our brethren to God when the time comes, and because of that, we have to make sure that we take every opportunity of putting them right on the smallest detail, so that when they come to the judgment seat and give account, that everything will be right. Well, we are encouraged to wash one another's feet.

We are encouraged to minister Christ to each other. We are encouraged to apply regularly the refreshing power of the Word of God to each other in the power [00:29:02] of the Spirit of God. But that's not what's under consideration here. When the final reckoning comes, it is as individuals before the Lord, and that is what the Apostle is stressing here. So, there is the statement, every one of us shall give account of himself to God, and the exhortation, let us not therefore judge at one another anymore, but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way. Now, this is where I return to what I mentioned earlier. A very sensitive point with me, when I was feeling my way, beginning to study the Scriptures for myself, beginning to have regular fellowship with like-minded believers, anxious to do the right thing, [00:30:03] there was one aspect of my conduct I began to have a conscience about. I began to think, well, I'm not really sure whether I should be doing this particular activity or not. And I suppose the Holy Spirit of God was guiding me in the way that was right. But I wasn't sure. I suppose most of us have been at that stage in our spiritual career where there's something we were doing, some way of spending our time, where we began to wonder, is it right or would it be better if I dropped it? Well, while I was wondering whether or not to drop it, I was amazed one day to see a Christian brother that I respected greatly, twice [00:31:04] my age, many more years of Christian experience than I had, and he was doing the very thing that I was beginning to be doubtful about. And, of course, the devil very quickly put in my mind, well, if it's all right for him, it's all right for you. I respected him as a very forceful gospel preacher, regular at all the meetings, able to take part quite fluently in all the meetings, seemed to be a very fine upstanding of what a Christian should be. And yet, here I, at a very sensitive stage, was wondering whether or not a thing was right. This is what causes me to say, if in doubt, don't do it until you're quite clear in your mind before the Lord. But I would say, perhaps for another two years, I lingered [00:32:02] in that condition of doubt. I'd been stumbled by this nagging thought, if he's free to do it, why should I be bothered? Oh, I was stumbled. I can look back and see now, perhaps if I'd responded to the promptings of the Holy Spirit under the Lordship of Christ and put that activity to one side, perhaps I would have been able to make quicker progress, I would have developed, I would have matured that much more readily and that much earlier in my Christian life. Now, that's what one of the things involved in this chapter. The chapter says quite clearly, all right, you have liberty before the Lord. Certain things some Christians do, some don't. You feel free to do it, you're in good conscience before the Lord, well in good, to the Lord's, to the man's servant, to the man's Lord he stands or falls. Well, [00:33:06] there is this added consideration. If it occurs to you that something you do, or the way that you do it, might stumble a less well-instructed brother than yourself, you'd be well advised to drop it. Whatever it is, whether it's a hobby, the way you spend your time, the way you spend your leisure, the kind of job you have, whatever it might be. As the scripture says here, if it's not something you can do in faith, in dependence upon the Lord, you shouldn't be doing it. That's another important aspect of this chapter. I'm enjoined here, whatever I do, in life or in death, do it as unto the Lord. Now, if I feel there's no harm in it, why should I not do it? Other people may not, [00:34:06] but I see no

harm. Another consideration is this. If I cannot do it as unto the Lord, in other words, if I cannot do it with the sense of his authority and his power resting upon me, if I cannot do it as unto the Lord, under his lordship, it's an indication I shouldn't be doing it at all. Now, that's the kind of thing that this scripture tells me about, I'm sure. And there is another consideration. Verses 15 to the end, after saying, these are things we need to consider because it's brothers and sisters for whom Christ died that this is about. Verse 17 makes another major statement. The kingdom of God is not [00:35:05] meat and drink, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. I would put it this way. The kingdom of God is a moral kingdom. It's about moral issues and spiritual issues. It's not about material things like eating habits. But what it is about is the expression of love one to another. Yes, there is liberty. Yes, there is the lordship of Christ. But this third major consideration is the matter of love. There may well be things that I feel free to do or think [00:36:03] I shouldn't do. But what the overriding consideration here is whether I do it or don't. The manner in which I do it or don't do it is not a manner which gives rise to the impression that I'm either judging my brother and sister or despising them, to use the language of the chapter. But everything I do is geared for the good, the benefit, the spiritual and moral welfare of my brothers and sisters. And that's what this last section is all about. Verse 19, then, the ensuing exhortation, let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another, building up. We were exhorted rightly from scripture on Saturday afternoon not to be biting and devouring one another. Here, [00:37:06] in a positive way, we are exhorted to build up rather than destroy. To build up what is of God rather than looking for something to demolish. I read an article in a current magazine not so long ago, something that's often occurred to me over the years. Rightly, we have principles, but the principles we have should be the principles on which we gather. The principles to govern the way we do things, rather than negative principles about ways in which we don't gather, things that we don't do, activities that we aren't mixed up with. The more we can be occupied with positive principles and positive applications of those principles, the better we [00:38:05] and our gatherings shall be. And, the end of the chapter, whatever it is, it is to be done in faith.

Verse 23 to me seems to say, if in doubt, don't do it. If I have a doubt, do something with misgivings, or if I refrain from doing something with misgivings, my doing or not doing is not of faith. The scripture is quite clear about that. If it's not of faith, it is of sin, and it is not pleasing to the Lord. In the light of all these things, I think the best thing I can do is read again the summary that the Apostle gives in the first seven verses of chapter 15. We've thought about liberty, and lordship, and love. We've thought of our individual privileges and responsibilities. [00:39:08] We've thought of the care we need to take not to stumble one another, and now we come back to the grand summary of the Apostle himself, beginning in chapter 15, verse 1. We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor, for his good to edification. And then the reason given, the perfect example in this, as in all things, is Christ himself. For even Christ pleased not himself, but, as it is written, the reproaches of them that reproach thee fell on me. And then he gives this happy little benedictory comment, verses 5 and 6. Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like-minded one [00:40:08] toward another, according to Christ Jesus, that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God. If we seek to live soberly, righteously, and godly, doing all things unto him, whether in life or in death, it may well be that the outcome will be that God is glorified, and that blessing follows here upon earth.