

## Romans 14:13-23 “The Kingdom of God”

### Introduction

Last week, I spent time remembering the 10 years since the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11. How did you spend time reflecting on this tragedy? In particular, last Sunday evening (7th), we spent time listening to the stories of those who have been working in Ishinomaki for the past 10 years to support the affected areas, and we prayed together.

At that time, Tokyo was also thrown into turmoil. Due to the (planned) power outage, the normally glittering Ginza district was shut down in darkness, and I suddenly realized how, to a point, Tokyo's prosperity comes at the expense of this affected region. Looking back on it now, 10 years later, I am reminded of how greedy we are.

Because of the Great East Japan Earthquake, we have experienced sacrifice and hardship, deficiency and loss, despair and death. Yet we continue to seek for more success and blessings, as if it were natural, greedily seeking for self-gratification. In light of the suffering of Jesus' cross, we must repent. Now, 10 years later, we are suffering from the coronavirus pandemic, which is, once again, forcing us to repent.

Today, let's look at the second half of Romans 14. What is it that we need to seek in the midst of hardships and toil, in the midst of hurt and suffering in our relationships? Isn't it righteousness, peace, and joy? Our heartfelt cravings and desires (greed) need to be redirected. And when we focus on the Kingdom of God, we will taste righteousness, peace and joy.

### Romans 14:13-23

<sup>13</sup>Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

<sup>14</sup>I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

<sup>15</sup>For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

<sup>16</sup>So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.

<sup>17</sup>For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

<sup>18</sup>Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

<sup>19</sup>So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

<sup>20</sup>Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.

<sup>21</sup>It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

<sup>22</sup>The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

<sup>23</sup>But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

From these verses, we see that first of all, our freedom is to be exercised with love. We are free to do whatever we want, but let us accept one another in love without judgment. Second, we will consider the community of God's kingdom, which is full of

righteousness, peace, and joy. We all want a community that serves Christ, is pleasing to God, and respects people.

And thirdly, we will see how faith in God is essential for meaningful relationships and the creation of a righteous, peaceful and joyful community. For we are told that anything that does not come from faith is sin. In summary, the 3 points are: (1) exercise freedom with love, (2) a community of righteousness, peace, and joy, and (3) the necessity of faith.

### **1. Exercise freedom with love**

As we saw last week from the first half of chapter 14, we have a tendency to judge others with a sense of superiority when we think we are right. In the church in Rome in the first century A.D., there were people who did not eat any unholy food that was forbidden in the Old Testament, even after they came to believe in Christ. They also did not drink wine. They also considered the Sabbath and the Jewish festival days to be important and they continued to practice special ways of observing them.

They were Jews, and they considered it important to keep the Old Testament laws, even after they believed in Jesus as the Messiah. They were afraid that if they didn't keep the law, they would be unclean before God, and not only would they not be able to worship Him, but they would not be able to receive His blessings.

The Gentiles, who were the majority in the church, looked down on them as "people of weak faith." It is also true that the Jews judged and condemned the Gentiles who did not keep the Old Covenant Law, as if they were sinning against God. Paul says this.

*14:13. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*

Foolishly, we are prone to sin by judging, disrespecting, and belittling others because we feel we are right. Why are righteous people so angry? Why is a righteous person not kind? Though their behavior is good, why are they self-righteous and argumentative?

It is because we are not exercising our rightness and freedom with love. In fact, because we are right, we should limit our freedom with love, and act with kindness and consideration for others' situations. If we have genuine love for our neighbors, we will not cause others to stumble nor will we attack them.

Indeed, as Jesus says, the Old Covenant food regulations, called the ritual law, ended with the coming of Christ. There is no longer any distinction between the holy and the unclean.

*Mark 7:18-20. And he said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from the outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him."*

The real problem is our hearts. Christ has come and poured out His eternal love on us and has forgiven us of our sins. Because we have Christ, we no longer need to rely on the food laws or the laws of how to spend certain days. Therefore, whether we keep the food laws or not, our relationship with God does not change.

Furthermore, Paul says, "Don't be upset with those who are still following the food regulations. Don't look down on them or judge them. We should accept them with loving consideration as they are in their present situation."

Some people have a strict attitude toward alcohol from a religious point of view and will never drink. I was like that when I was younger. The Bible teaches, "Do not get drunk," but it does not say, "Do not drink." However, I was afraid that I might get drunk and if I did, I might sin. People around me also warned me about this, so I didn't drink in order not to destroy my relationship with God (or rather, that my holy Christian life would not be destroyed).

But, when you are a college student, drinking comes with the territory. People around you encourage you to drink, you don't want to ruin your relationships, and some people are very forceful in getting you to drink. When I drank and got drunk, my heart was in anguish over my sin. I blamed myself for being a bad Christian. I was filled with guilt, and I felt separated from God. When verse 15 says, "For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died," it is referring to this kind of situation.

This example may seem too naïve, but the Bible teaches us to consider these things with love. Of course, Paul is not saying that we should not discuss or teach how we should think about food regulations, alcohol, or how to keep certain days. It is absolutely essential to teach and discuss what is truly biblical thinking, gospel values and a proper lifestyle.

However, as verse 15 says, do not destroy "your brother" over "your food." Paul is contrasting "food" and "brothers." Isn't your brother far more important than your food?

Therefore, you should exercise your freedom with love. Everyone's freedom of conscience must be protected. At times, your freedom must be restricted out of love. This is so that our brothers and sisters will not be hurt and filled with guilt and fall away from God.

## **2. A community of righteousness, peace, and joy**

Brothers and sisters, I believe we need relationships and communities that are balanced with love and freedom. Many people suffer in relationships and societies where people insist on their own righteousness, where they judge each other, and where guilt and pain are rampant. Sadly, this is true even in the church and among Christians.

*14:17-19. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*

We need the kingdom of God, which is righteousness, peace, and joy, as the Bible says. We need a community that is governed by the love of God that Christ brings, and is led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus often taught about the Kingdom of God while eating and drinking together with others.

*Luke 5:29-32. And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and*

*drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."*

The key factor in this episode is that eating and drinking creates discrimination and arbitrarily decides to whom God's blessings are given. This is exactly what Paul is addressing in Romans. What we eat, who we eat with, whether we receive God's blessing or not, divides human relationships and splits the church. Some say that with regards to "eating," we can determine who is part of the Kingdom of God. Of course, that's not true!

As verse 17 says, the kingdom of God is not a matter of "eating and drinking," but is a matter of "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Again, Paul compares and contrasts "eating and drinking" with "in the Holy Spirit. If the kingdom of God is about food regulations, it will cause discrimination and division, but it will not change anyone's mind. But by the Holy Spirit, the hearts of those who believe are changed, and unity in righteousness, peace, and joy is brought about. What does this mean?

There is a children's book called "You Are Special" that is popular among adults as well. The story takes place in a village of wooden dolls called Wemmickville. These dolls live by sticking star stickers and gray dots on each other. The star sticker is literally a "well done" sticker, received by the talented, smart, and attractive Wemmicks, while a gray dot is a badge of failure.

One day, the main character, Punchinello, who is covered in gray dots, meets Lucia, who, surprisingly, has no stickers at all! Later, Punchinello meets Eli, the woodcarver who is the creator of all the Wemmicks. Eli tells him, "The more you trust my love, the less you will care about the stickers."

Food regulations may not be very relevant to us today. However, we may be judging each other with a variety of well-done star stickers and gray dot badges, just like in the children's book. Good performance, high salary, beautiful girlfriend, towering house, married or unmarried, good company, high position and status, etc. etc.

If something makes your heart proud, superior and condescending, or if it makes you mean, self-loathing and envious, it will ruin your life. Relationships will be strained, true friends will be lost, and the community will be divided.

But, what if your heart is moved by the love of God through the Holy Spirit and your mind is changed to accept the sacrificial forgiveness of Christ? Your relationship with God will become peaceful, your connection with people will be restored, and you will genuinely respect them. You will be filled with joy as you accept and open up to one another with a forgiving attitude. You will support each other in building up your lives.

We need such communities in Tokyo! Is Grace City a gospel-centered community filled with righteousness, peace, and joy? Let's pray and ask for it to be so!

### **3. The necessity of faith**

Paul reaffirms the gospel principles of the Bible one last time, emphasizing the necessity of faith. "All food is good" (v. 20) is a phrase that proclaims the gospel of Christ. The Old Testament law has been fulfilled in Christ and we have been set free. Whether we eat or not, we are forgiven of our sins and declared holy by Christ.

The practical lesson to be drawn from this is to constantly reaffirm the gospel message, repent of sins, renew our faith, accept one another with love, do not cause another to stumble, and use our freedom which is guided by love.

For example, in the Christian church, there is diversity in the practice of baptism (how to do it). Simply put, churches are divided over this issue. At Grace City, we baptize the children of believers, but there are churches that do not baptize until the person expresses their faith. Some churches are very particular about the amount of water used for baptism and insist that it is not true baptism unless the whole body is immersed in water.

How should we deal with such disagreements? According to the Bible, the first thing to do is to emphasize our unity based on the gospel. Compared to the gospel, the practice of baptism is of secondary importance. According to the biblical interpretation, we can legitimately draw out the practice of baptizing children, but the interpretation of withholding baptism until they confess their faith is also somewhat convincing. Also, the Bible does not clearly state how much water should be used and how to do it, so it is inevitable that there is diversity of opinion.

What is clear is that no matter how you do baptism, it has nothing to do with salvation according to the gospel. It is through faith in Christ Jesus that God's love is poured out, that our relationship with God is restored, that we have peace, and that the Holy Spirit fills us with the joy of forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

The problem is self-righteousness, a sense of superiority, and the destruction of freedom of conscience. It's a shame when we emphasize division and difference rather than unity and peace. If you think you are right and good to the point of self-righteousness, you will be judging yourself, because (in your heart, but not in your mouth) you will be saved by the articles of faith you believe, not by the faith of Christ.

The phrase in verse 23, "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin," means that if you are not trusting God through the love of the cross of Christ, then you are either trusting in yourself or relying on the world. Finally, look again at verse 15.

*14:15. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.*

Constantly remind yourself by faith that we are those "for whom Christ died." Jesus, who died for you, gave his life not only for your friends, but also for your rivals who think differently, live differently, and argue with you. The more you trust Christ's love in your heart, the more you can love your neighbor.

### **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have forgiven us our sins through Christ and poured out your eternal love on us. By your Holy Spirit please bring about the kingdom of God among us, which is full of righteousness, peace, and joy. Continually renew our minds so that we can do all things from faith in you. Please remove any sense of superiority over others, and any jealous or envy. May we be tolerant, accepting and loving our neighbors because of the gospel of Jesus. May we serve in the mission of the Kingdom of God by helping and supporting each other. We pray for these things in the name of Jesus, our King. Amen.