



BE TRANSFORMED

THIS HANDOUT

BEING TRANSFORMED BY THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS CHAPTER FOURTEEN



FAST FACTS

ROMANS CHAPTER 14

- Christians should warmly receive those who are weak.
- Christians are to avoid judging.
- You should not live simply to please yourself, but instead should live and die according to your relationship with God.
- If you judge others, you are forgetting your *real* place in life: as a person who will have to answer to God for your own thoughts and actions.
- Avoid damaging people with your attitude and behavior towards them.
- Everything you do should be done according to your faith in God.

ON THE CD

- DO I FAST?
- THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR FASTING
- AM I JUDGMENTAL?
- 1 CORINTHIANS 8
- INTERACTIVE QUIZ
- MUCH MORE!

ROMANS 14

Romans chapter fourteen examines how Christians can live in unity despite significant differences in spiritual disciplines among individuals.

The church in Rome was comprised of two different groups of people: Jewish and Gentile Christians. According to St. John Chrysostom, Romans chapter fourteen addresses a significant conflict between these two groups: the Jewish Christians kept to a dietary law that restricted meat and wine (14:21), while the Gentiles kept no specific dietary law. The Jewish Christians therefore viewed the Gentiles as gluttons, while the Gentile Christians viewed the Jews as being weak in their faith for following their dietary law (the groups also clashed over whether to observe certain days as holier than others).

St. Paul begins by encouraging Christians to warmly receive individuals whose faith is weak without arguing with them about matters that are non-essential to the Faith (Romans 14:1). As an example of non-essential matters that are nonetheless important to the weak, St. Paul addresses eating habits: some Christians believe they can eat all things, while others - influenced by such things as the Old Testament prohibition against pork, as well pursuing ritual cleanliness by avoiding meat that had been sacrificed to idols (see 1 Corinthians 8-10) - eat only vegetables (Romans 14:2). The solution to this dilemma is tolerance: neither group of people should despise the other group, because God accepts both groups (14:3).

A similar issue divides the strong and weak groups: the issue of believing certain days - most likely the Sabbath and Jewish holy days - to be holier than others and therefore requiring specific religious obligations (Romans 14:5). St. Paul simply advises Christians to accept each other's positions while "being fully convinced in his own

THE BENEFITS OF FASTING

St. John Climacus emphasizes the benefits of fasting: *The path of fasting leads to the path of purity. Fasting is the cutting off of lust and evil thoughts, the purity of prayer, the illumination of the soul, the guarding of the mind, the deliverance from hardness of heart, the door to contrition, the occasion for silence, the health of the body, freedom from the passions, the remission of sins.*

We of course do not believe that fasting alone accomplishes these things. Instead, as St. John states, fasting *leads* to the path of purity. Taking attention away from ourselves, and namely through the ways in which we attempt to satisfy our passions with food, enables us to better focus our attention where it belongs: on God and others (Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:33-34; Luke 10:27-28).

Fr. Stephen Zitton explains how you can start the powerful spiritual discipline of fasting:

It can be easy to justify not participating in the fast to your greatest ability if that is your desire. If you've never done it, it's hard to describe what you're missing. But it's a great first step to growing as a Christian. Fasting can be a lot easier when it is viewed not as an end in itself, but as something which aids in our repentance. So, ask your Spiritual Father to give guidance if you've never fasted before. Avoiding the foods from which the Church asks us to abstain is easier if you replace them by increasing worthy activities like self-examination, works of love, giving to the poor, prayer, reading the Scriptures and the Fathers, and refraining from gossip. If you are only avoiding certain foods and aren't doing those things which edify, then you are not really fasting; you're just on some kind of weird diet.

CONTINUE

mind” that what he or she does is best in light of the Christian’s relationship with God.

How can St. Paul encourage such tolerance of radically different positions within the Church? He responds in essence that Christians are to avoid judgmentalism - particularly when it involves a servant of God (Romans 14:4). Each Christian is answerable to God for his or her relationship with Him, and only God can determine and judge the reason for which an Orthodox Christian adheres to a particular approach to food and holy days.

The issue of motivations occupies Romans 14:5-9. When it comes to non-essential matters, the important thing is not *what* you do, but *the reason* for which you do it. Therefore, a person who abstains from certain foods should do so to grow in his or her relationship with God; likewise, a person who believes that such dietary regulations would constitute an act of self-righteousness should eat all foods with the belief that this approach is most conducive to his or her healthy relationship with God (14:6). You should not live simply to please yourself, but instead should live and die according to your relationship with God (14:7-8).

This means that you - and St. Paul actually uses the personal address - should not judge or show contempt for people who differ from you (Romans 14:10). If you judge others, you are forgetting your *real* place in life: as a person who will have to answer to God for your own thoughts and actions (14:10, 12). Since every knee shall bow in obedience and subservience to God (14:11, quoting Isaiah 45:23), you must leave all judging to Him. Instead of focusing on what you believe to be the shortcomings of other Christians, you should focus on your own shortcomings (14:12).

Furthermore, you should be careful that, in believing yourself to be superior to others, you do not instead damage them with your attitude and behavior toward them (Romans 14:13). St. Paul uses himself as an example of how you should behave: St. Paul believes that Christians should be allowed to eat all food, but he refuses to force that belief on Jewish Christians who follow strict dietary law (14:14). He knows that attempting to change the way in which they relate to Christ would destroy them, so he chooses instead to “walk in love” and tolerate their position (14:15). As long as the weak Christian is adhering to non-essential practices in an effort to grow in union with Christ, “he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men” (14:18).

St. Paul reinforces in Romans 14:17 that the issues of food and holy days are not essential to the Faith by saying, “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” You must always remember that your relationship with God is the focus and grounding for everything in your life - the blessings of this relationship are so vastly important that they should never be substituted with non-essential matters. Because every Christian is a member of the Body of Christ, the peace and edification of all members must be a priority for you (Romans 14:19). You should never destroy another member of the Body with an inordinate

emphasis on such matters as food (14:20-21).

How, you might ask, would forcing a person to follow what you believe to be beneficial spiritual practices - such as taking a specific position regarding your diet - destroy that person? The answer goes back to verse five: “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” The situation can be best understood by reversing the circumstances: imagine that someone is forcing you to follow their dietary practices. Everything you do should be done with faith - you should follow your conscience and do only what you believe is best for your relationship with God (Romans 14:22). If, however, you were to violate your conscience and follow the other person’s dietary practices because of peer pressure, or because you were afraid that rejecting that person’s position would affect your status in the community, then you would no longer be eating with faith: you would be more concerned with status than your relationship with God. God would then condemn your decision, “for whatever is not from faith is from sin” (14:23).



FASTING AND LOVE

St. John Cassian, the chief recorder of the Desert Fathers, explains that fasting and other spiritual disciplines must be tied to love:

Fasts and vigils, the study of Scripture, renouncing possessions and everything worldly are not in themselves perfection, as we have said; they are its tools. For perfection is not to be found in them; it is acquired through them. It is useless, therefore, to boast of our fasting, vigils, poverty, and reading of Scripture when we have not achieved the love of God and our fellow men. Whoever has achieved love has God within himself and his intellect is always with God.