Applying Principles

Second in the series,**“God’s Word: Guide for Daily Life”**

# Scripture: Romans 14

# Key idea: With practice and by God’s help, we learn to use the great principles of Scripture to guide us.

# Intro:

## An example of principle-centered decision making

Recently the circus was in the news. Ringling Brothers and Barnum, and Bailey Circus, the last circus in America was closing for good. Today I have a circus story for you. It takes place some years ago when prices were lower than today and when families were often bigger.

Dan Clark writes that when he was a teenager, he and his father were standing in line to buy tickets to the circus.

Finally, there was only one family between us and the ticket counter. This family made a big impression on me. There were eight children, all probably under the age of 12. You could tell they didn’t have a lot of money. Their clothes were not expensive, but they were clean. The children were well behaved, all of them standing in line, 2 x 2 behind their parents, holding hands. They were excitedly jabbering about the clowns, elephants and other acts they would see that night. One could sense they had never been to the circus before. It promised to be the highlight of their young lives. The father and mother were at the head of the pack standing proud as could be. The mother was holding her husband’s hand, looking up at him as if to say, “You’re my knight in shining armor.” He was smiling and basking in pride, looking at her as if to say, “You got that right.” The ticket lady asked the father how many tickets he wanted. He proudly responded, “Please let me buy eight children’s tickets and two adult tickets so I can take my family to the circus.” The ticket lady quoted the price. The man’s wife let go of his hand, her head dropped, the man’s lip began to quiver. The father leaned a little closer and asked, “How much did you say?” The ticket lady again quoted the price. The man didn’t have enough money. How was he supposed to turn and tell his eight kids that he didn’t have enough money to take them to the circus? Seeing what was going on, my dad put his hand into his pocket, pulled out a $20 bill and dropped it on the ground. (We are not wealthy in any sense of the word!) My father reached down, picked up the bill, tapped the man on the shoulder and said “Excuse me sir, I picked this off the ground it’s yours.” The man knew what was going on. He wasn’t begging for a handout but certainly appreciated the help in a desperate, heartbreaking, embarrassing situation. He looked straight into my dad’s eyes, took my dad’s hand in both of his, squeezed tightly under that $20 bill, and with his lip quivering and tears streaming down his cheek, he replied, “Thank you again, sir, thank you, this really means a lot to me and my family.” My father and I went back to our car and drove home. We didn’t go to the circus that night, but we didn’t go without. (A Second Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul p. 3, 4)

## On applying principles

In this series of messages, were talking about how to make God’s word guide for daily lives. Today our topic has to do with applying principles from God’s word to our decision-making. In the story that I just related, the father was doing something good, going out with his son, spending time with his boy, making a memory. But an opportunity came along to meet a greater need. Principles of love and compassion overruled and the money which would’ve been spent to take the boy out was spent instead to help another father in an embarrassing moment. It was a marvelous example of how to do the loving thing on a moment’s notice. It was, for the teenage boy, a lesson that he never forgot.

Principle-centered decision-making is often like that. It stands out in a world where so much decision-making is just based on plain self-interest or taking the easiest way out. So I invite us this morning to look at this passage in Romans chapter 14, which provides for us a great example of the Apostle Paul applying big picture principles to a knotty moral issue faced by early Christians.

## What was the problem in Romans 14?

Romans 14 begins with a conflict over the rules. Some in Rome, most likely early Christians with a Jewish background, were still keeping Jewish regulations concerning what to eat and not eat and they were observing the Jewish Sabbath Day. Other Christian people at Rome, Gentile Christians, were following the rule of the Apostles that was set by the assembly of the church in Acts 15. (You could call that assembly the first Church Council or in the lingo of Methodism, the First General Conference.) It forbade only the eating of meat offered to idols, that from strangled animals and from blood. All other meats were okay to eat. This same letter from what is known as the Jerusalem Council did not task the Gentile Christians to keep the Sabbath either and Paul’s writings imply that many Gentile Christians did not observe the Jewish Sabbath. The picture was further complicated because Paul had written to churches interpreting the Acts rule and advising them that it was okay to eat meat from the market if one honestly did not know whether it had been offered to an idol first (I Cor. 10:25). He had also advised that it was okay to eat without asking questions if you went to a house to eat, unless the host told you the meat had been offered to an idol (1 Cor. 10:28). However, apparently some of the Christians, who we might call those of tender conscience, were afraid to eat meat at all for fear that it had been offered before an idol since most of it in fact had been if its path to the market were to be actually traced.

The result of this picture is a three way conflict of rules at the Roman church over eating meat. Plus a related conflict over Sabbath observance. One group judged another over what they did nor did not do. How would Paul decide between the rules? That is the difficult task that Paul attempts in Romans 14. So how did Paul approach this thorny issue and what can we learn from his methodology? Let’s begin by observing the role of rules versus that of principles in Paul’s reasoning.

# Level 1—Rules: specific and simple

## Rules are a way we learn morals as children

Sometimes when there are conflicts like this, the rules get blamed. People say we just need better rules. But we need to acknowledge first that from a moral point of view, rules are not the problem. Rules are one of the early moral levels upon which we operate as young children. We want to a good boy or girl and so we abide by the rules. Games have rules. So we learn to play by the rules. Even if we might make up some rules as we go, we recognize that rules are where it is at when we are little. Societies have rules called laws. Rules act as a way of guiding society and have some big advantages. They are fairly clear. They are specific. They don't require thinking. Even a child can apply them. They keep people safe from harm. This is the moral level in which nearly all people can operate. Offenders are easily identified and dealt with.

## OT had many rules

In the moral development of humankind, God began with rules. In the garden, there was one rule; “Don’t eat from the one tree in the center of the garden.” We as a race broke the rule.

In the Covenant given to Moses there were many rules. The Old Testament Legal system was known for its rules. The Ten Commandments, the dietary rules, the rules for holidays and sacrifices, clean and unclean, and many more. The Jewish leaders really bought into the whole idea of living by rules and developed many more to go with them.

## Us today

Many Christians function at a very elementary moral level and just want a list of rules. Tell me what to do and what not to do. Some churches have functioned this way. Rules for conduct proliferate. It is called legalism. Groups like that become known mostly by the rules, usually by the things they don’t do. The Amish are an example. Everyone knows for example that they don’t drive cars, they don’t wear modern clothes and they don’t want their pictures taken.

It’s not that rules are wrong. For example, the Ten Commandments are still powerful Biblical instructions for today. Yet as soon as I say that, someone will remind me that one of them has to do with keeping the Sabbath and ask me why I do not worship on Saturday which is the Jewish Sabbath.

You see, we need to recognize that operating by rules alone is the starter level of moral development. The trouble with rules as a moral code is that there is no tie breaker. There is no way to balance one rule against another. What happens is a proliferation of rules. This is what had happened in Judaism before Jesus came. A good contemporary illustration is the game of golf. There is a rule for every situation. Rules upon rules, and sub-rules too. At every golf tournament, there are rule officials who can be called upon at a moment’s notice to apply the rules.

That is the situation Paul faced here. Several groups were honestly and sincerely keeping different rules. But the rules were in conflict. How did Paul handle it? Something higher than rules was needed.

# Level 2—Principles: broader application, more powerful

## Principles help us decide but it’s not simple anymore

In the illustration at the beginning, the father of the teenage boy unconsciously used the principles of compassion, generosity and love to overrule his normal parenting plan for the evening, a night out with his son. Here in Romans 14, Paul very consciously guides the Roman church using big picture principles.

Paul introduces principles that help him decide how to handle the conflicts between the rules. Principles are a higher level of moral reasoning. Advancing to the use of principles enables us to exercise judgment. Principles are broadly applicable. They apply to many situations. They will help us prioritize, bend or even overrule the rules. But they are often not as black-and-white as rules. And applying principles requires maturity and moral reasoning as opposed to simply the ability to find the right line in the code book. Let’s illustrate from Romans 14.

## Romans 14

The first principle that Paul introduces is stated in several ways in Romans 14:3-12.

“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?” v. 4
“You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.” v. 10
“Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.” v. 12

The principle is that in the end, we are responsible to God rather than to another’s interpretation of the rules. The implication is that when it comes to matters that are not clearly spelled out in Scripture, there is liberty for the individual to follow their own conscience. We should not try to force other people to practice the same as we do on such issues. We should not feel superior or inferior on the basis of such issues. Each of us is responsible to God.

Paul’s conclusion after applying this principle is this: The church members should stop judging and condemning one another for individual practices on “disputable matters” (Rom. 14:13).

* I remember one of my first lessons in using the principle that Paul is teaching. It was my first year in seminary and I was serving as a chaplain intern at the Golden Living Center in Danville, Kentucky. Now I was raised in the North, and in a rather strict holiness Methodist group, where use of tobacco in any form was strictly forbidden. Good Christians just didn’t do that in the church I grew up in. Well, as a young chaplain I would go around to the rooms of different people, the aged and the infirm and sing with them, read Scripture to them and pray with them. I could soon discern that some had an earnest and passionate faith by the way they responded to the reading of the Scripture and the way they often participated passionately in the singing. I remember enjoying ministering to one elderly lady in particular and thinking how great it was that she participated and responded so well. Certainly, she was among God’s faithful followers. Then one day I accidentally made the discovery that she spit and chewed tobacco. Now, remember this is Kentucky, southern tobacco country. Fortunately, by God’s grace, I was wise enough to realize that culturally, in this area of Kentucky there was no conflict between practicing Christian faith and using tobacco. That doesn’t mean the practice was good for them; it certainly wasn’t; just that they didn’t see any spiritual conflict. Fortunately, I thought of Paul’s words that it would not be right for me to judge them because they chewed when that’s the way they had been brought up, and when they had never seen a conflict between it and their practice of Christian faith. If the Holy Spirit had never spoken to them, it was not my job to judge.

## Paul’s Principle is not Carte Blanche

Remember this principle of not judging others does not always apply. It is not a carte blanche instruction to not pass judgment. Rather it is a limited advice that refers only to "disputable matters" as verse one calls them. That is an important caveat very often ignored today. This principle of not judging that Paul uses does not apply to matters that are clear in Scripture, but which people do not want to hear or accept.

If a person is committing adultery, that is wrong and it is not judging to say so as the Bible is clear about that. If someone is definitely lying about something, that is wrong and it is proper to call the lying sinful. The Bible expressly forbids us from deceiving one another. Business fraud is wrong. It is expressly forbidden. Etc.

# Level 3 - Several principles may apply in one situation.

Now let’s take the next step, and continue to draw our example from the Apostle’s moral reasoning.

## When principles collide

When we begin to apply principles, we often find that more than one principle comes into play and that the principles are pulling us in conflicting directions. Now things are becoming very complex. If this situation is happening in a group decision process, there are bound to be disagreements as to which is the proper way to proceed. What we must do now is use wisdom from God to discern which principle should take precedence.

## Romans 14

In Rom. 14, after having explained the primary principle that each of us is responsible before God, therefore we should not judge each other on disputable matters, then Paul brings out another great principle. This one is also stated in multiple ways but the descriptions work together.

* Don't put an obstacle in another person's way (v. 13). Don’t make someone else stumble either morally or in their faith.
* Don't allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil (v. 16). The Bible predicts in the end times those who are lost will call good evil and evil good. But that is not what is in mind here. What Paul is thinking here relates to when we are acting according to our conscience but another person is taking spiritual offense because they don’t feel the same way about it. In such case Paul urges that we may need to restrict our own liberty in order to help someone else. Let’s say for example that I do not have a problem drinking a beer but I am on a trip with a couple coworkers, one of whom is a strict nondrinker and the other of whom also doesn’t drink because they are a former addict. Now in that situation, if I exercise my freedom of conscience to drink a beer in their presence, I would not be acting in love or for their best interest. So I would be doing wrong, even though I was doing something that I felt okay with.
* Do what leads to peace and mutual edification (v. 19).

In the beginning of chapter 15 which we did not read, Paul states the second principle yet again.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. Rom 15:1, 2

The three goals of Paul help us understand his moral reasoning and help us with ours as well.

* The good of others, building them up (v. 2)
* Unity in the church (vv 5, 6)

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Rom 15:5-6

* Accepting one another as Christ has accepted us.

"Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you." Rom. 15:7

These are Paul’s goals and should also be ours. After helping us with his first principle to understand how each of us is responsible to God, independent of the opinions of others, he then proceeds to help us to understand how we are interrelated and must value our interrelationship by voluntarily curbing our own independence for the sake of the best interest others and the interrelationship of Christ’s body. The second principle overrules the first often as Paul suggested it should frequently do for the Romans.

## 2 John illustration

Another illustration of how principles can conflict was discovered in our Bible study groups this past week in 2 John. In this passage, the principle of demonstrating love by showing hospitality to traveling teachers conflicted with the principle of guarding the truths that had been preached in the church by the apostles. The lady to whom John was writing was likely regularly giving hospitality to traveling Christian teachers and preachers as was the custom. It was considered a duty of love in the early church. But John wrote to her with a specific direction that she not host certain teachers who were coming through because they were false teachers who were spreading teaching about Jesus that was contrary to what John had taught. John discerned that protecting the church from false teaching took precedence over the tradition of hospitality to teachers.

## How do we decide

When more than one principle applies, we must decide which principle takes precedence. But we are not Paul or John. How will we decide?

Examples:

* We might have a need in our extended family that could use some money and also a need at our church. Both gifts would be good deeds, but we can only afford one of them. Which should we do?
* You are asked to be a church trustee and to coach a youth soccer team. Both are things that use your gifts but you only have time for one of these good deeds. Which one is better for you?
* This Friday night your co-workers want you to go to an office party but your spouse wants you to help her with your four children. What should you do?

Every time we face decisions like these and many even more difficult, how do we proceed?

# Conclusion

Of course, for any decision-making, one first needs to gather the relevant facts, and make a preliminary assessment of the options available. But after that, which moral principle has the upper hand in determining our decision?

Here are four suggested steps for finding our way through when more than one principle applies collides.

1. Pray for wisdom. God has promised wisdom to those who need it if we ask for it (James 1:5). The Holy Spirit is our guide. As the Bible promises in Palms, for the one who fears God, God "guides the humble in what is right.” Ps. 25:9

2. Look for guidance in Scripture. Are there examples where similar conflicts of principles occurred? Obviously, the more knowledgeable we are of Scripture, the more help we will receive at this step.

3. Consult with Christian mentors. They have probably experienced similar conflicts and can bring a very useful perspective to our struggle. In addition, they often can supply additional Bible knowledge that is helpful to us.

4. Ask for God's peace to rest on the right path. This is one of the key ways that God guides us as individuals. He just helps us to feel very much at peace with the right path.