

Sermon 189: Romans 14:7-8: Belonging to God in life and death

OUTLINE

'We live to the Lord'

'We die to the Lord'

INTRODUCTION

The portion in Romans that we are presently studying is confounding to the modern-minded person. Paul is talking about accepting each other, not judging each other and the liberty that we ought to extend to each other, all of which are popular distinctives today. The confounding part is where in the middle of a discussion about liberty, he talks about being slaves of Christ and everything we do either in life or death we are the Lord's. Romans 14:7-8, 'For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.' But weren't we talking about liberty of conscience? Why then is Paul talking about being submitted to God in life and death? This confuses the modern-minded person because we have two very different definitions of liberty. The modern definition of liberty is freedom to do whatever I want to do, ignoring the reality of sinful desires which can lead us astray and a God who commands us for our good. Christian liberty is that freedom God secures for us in Christ where we are free from everything that hinders us from serving God. We believe what the bible says about being created and God being good and our happiness being found not in our independence from the source of all good—God; but in our dependence upon Him.

Paul has been addressing the Roman Church talking to the two distinct groups he has called the weak and the strong. These groups needed reminding of certain truths because they were judging and despising one another. In verses 5-6 Paul has told these divided Christians that they need to grant liberty to their brothers and sisters in Christ to worship according to their consciences when what they are doing is to the Lord and not in violation of any clear command of scripture. He repeated phrases like 'in honour of the Lord' and 'gives thanks to God.' In verses 7-8 Paul is going to elaborate on the principle of our individual standing before the Lord and how we are obligated to serve Him in life and death. This emphasis adds to Paul's overall point of why we should be accepting and not criticising our brethren. For if our purpose is to live for God and honour Him in all we do, we can ask nothing more of our brethren if that is what they are in fact doing. They may differ from us, but we must accept that they are not pouring themselves out in sin but in service to God. This should make us slower to be so critical of our brethren in Christ.

So as we look at Paul's developing argument we come to a central premise that we are God's and all we do is to be for God. As we explore this idea I would like to look at three key ideas. Firstly, the way in which Paul sees us all as individuals before God. Secondly, I would like to think about how we live to the Lord, and then in an age of euthanasia think about how we die to the Lord.

We live to the Lord

As we look at the concepts Paul is dealing with in v7-8 an underlying assumption must be recognised. Paul sees each one of us individually standing before God. In the Chronicles of Narnia book, The Horse and his Boy, the main character, a boy called Shasta is visited by Aslan, at this point in the story he does not know who Aslan is, he is presently fleeing lions

which are chasing him, he feels a presence beside him who he begins to talk to. A girl named Aravis he had been travelling with had been attacked and wounded by a lion. 'And as Shasta gaped with open mouth and said nothing, the Voice continued. "I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you as you slept. I was the lion who gave the Horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you."

"Then it was you who wounded Aravis?"

"It was I."

"But what for?"

"Child," said the Voice, "I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own."¹

This wonderful point in the story which reveals that God was in every event of our lives leading us to Him and to fulfil His will, also reveals that each one of us stands before God individually. This point is told allegorically in the Chronicles of Narnia by Aslan taking the children aside individually and meeting them alone, and not telling them about what He said to the others. Paul is using this truth which he first mentioned in v4, 'It is before his own master that he stands or falls,' to encourage us to stop meddling in the private worship of another Christian. In v10 Paul will talk about how we will all stand before the judgement seat of God, and in v12 how each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. Standing before God as individuals has certain implications. Firstly, as Paul is insinuating, we cannot take over our brother or sister's conscience and make every small decision for them. We have to let them make their own choices and face their own consequences. We cannot treat them as small children but individuals who will have to give an account of themselves before God. Secondly, we need to own this responsibility for ourselves.

When we are parents to small children it is our responsibility to be more involved in heart issues as we shape worldview and understanding, but as our children age we step back. We press their consciences for guilt when they ought to feel guilt. We hold them to our rules and judgements. But our goal in parenting is not to be the one who makes every decision for our children but to equip them to stand and function as individuals before God. This is a challenge for parents and for children as well. The purpose of the rules we gave them was to train them in what was right, to help them identify for themselves what ought to be done to honour God. Good behaviour does not consist in rule keeping but hearts that want to do what honours God and pursue it. The rules being kept is a by-product of a heart on the right track. The parent will always face the temptation to meddle, and not let their children work it out for themselves. Fear born of love, with a mix of legalistic reliance upon rule keeping as a true sign of holiness is the complex motivation of such good intentions. This would be meddling at its best. The meddling in Rome was further tainted with suspicion and racism as different, traditionally antagonistic groups came together in the church. Will you recognise the others individual standing before God?

Children I must ask you, do you recognise your own individual standing before God?

Perhaps you have come from a home where your parents believe in God and Christianity is assumed. That is a great blessing to be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. But do you see yourself as an individual before Him. Do you read the bible for yourselves or only as part of family devotions? Do you pray for yourselves or only with

¹ <https://gavinortlund.com/2008/06/05/favorite-narnia-moments-2-shasta-meets-aslan/>

others? Do you spend time in God's presence allowing Him to search your heart for your sins? Do you bring your life and future to Him and ask Him to lead you as you serve Him? This stress on the individual standing individually before God reminds us to stop meddling in the affairs of others and to tend more dutifully to our own affairs.

What impresses me about Paul's statements here is the sweeping way in which he sees all of our lives as the Lord's. In verse 7 he puts it negatively, 'For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.' He assumes this to be the rule for every single Christian. It is not stated as a possibility but as the only reality we ought to recognise. He is referring to the worship of those who abstain or those who eat, trying to help these Christians be more accepting of the other. But the sub-text is clear and Paul spells it out in v8, 'For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.'

In a post-slavery age, where we all have rights and a sense of entitlement, when we live at a time when all external authorities owning us, or telling us what to do is the new sin, this statement goes down like a lead balloon. So what do we do with this? We could ignore it, soft pedal it and hope people don't notice it, but that is cowardly and implies there is something wrong with this statement. Or we could bombastically shout it, and force people to accept it, giving no explanation or dressing we force feed it to people cold and berate anyone who doesn't immediately like it. This shuts down any willingness on the part of others to listen and does an injustice to the reality stated. It leaves the impression that it is hard and ugly but you just have to accept it, this leaves an ill impression of God and dishonours Him making it seem that He is cold and unreasonable.

Can we be free and belong soul and body to the Lord? Our present culture says this is impossible, the Bible teaches us that there is no other freedom available for created human beings. The present assumption about freedom is that I am only free when I can do whatever I want. My personal desires being served unhindered is the essence of freedom. As Christians we would respond and say that this is a naïve and destructive idea of freedom that in fact erodes freedom and does not protect or ensure it.

Here are several examples apologists are using to highlight the bankruptcy of this modern view of freedom. 'Imagine a man in his sixties who likes to eat whatever he wants to eat. He also loves to spend time with his grandchildren. Both of these activities are an important part of what makes his daily life meaningful and satisfying. Then at his annual physical a doctor says to him, 'Unless you severely restrict what you eat from now on, your heart problems will worsen and you will have a heart attack. You must completely stop eating all your favourite foods.'² What we want to do may clash with other desires and one of them has to go. Or what about the medical student who wants to be a doctor, yet also wants to live it up and enjoy their youth. The loss of liberty during studies where a person disciplines themselves now brings the greater satisfaction of graduating and practicing medicine later. The personal habits of a gold medallist would not be described as a paradigm of freedom but of discipline and restrictions.

'Let's say you get into a romantic relationship with someone who lives in the same city. Your independence is immediately curtailed in the most concrete ways/. In the past you could simply leave town for the weekend if and when you wanted. Now if you do that, the other person calls you and says, 'Where are you?' and can't believe you left without checking or informing. Now, you might respond by saying, 'Well, I don't have to tell you where I am

² Timothy Keller, Making Sense of God, p101.

or where I am going. I belong only to myself. No one has the right to determine for me how I live my life.' There will be silence on the other side of the lone. The person might say, 'I think we need to break up!' and be quite right. Love relationships don't work that way. You can't be completely free in the contemporary sense of the word and simultaneously in a strong love relationship.³

Today's person thinks they know what sort of freedom they need, but they don't. We are not free to reinvent ourselves as creatures, we are created and subject to the conditions of our existence. We are not free to live any way we please there are physical consequences. If we pursue the freedom we think we want then love is impossible. And so many have opted to prioritise freedom over love and will not commit to marriage. But God has created us for a life of happiness in His will. True freedom is not the futile gesture of attempting to throw off the constraints of the God who created us; defined us; and determined the right way for us to live. Rather, it is doing what we made for.

We die to the Lord

We know what it means to live to the Lord, it is to love God with all our hearts, soul, mind a strength, it is to seek His glory in all that we do, it is to put His will before our wills. But what does it mean to die to the Lord? Once again we feel a battle coming on between what the Bible says and present day opinion. 'It is my life and I can do what I want with it,' is a common attitude today. The right to take my own life, an act which historically was a crime and traditionally a sin is now a right the governments of this world are being petitioned to grant. But the Christian teaching is that we are not our own, we are not the Lord's of our own death, we are God's and it is our duty to accept the universal lot of death as God assigns it to us. The glory of God not escaping pain is the purpose of our lives. The fact that Jesus is the Lord of our deaths works itself out in various ways.

Firstly, the timing of our deaths is God's decision to make not yours. If you go to deathclock.com and you put in your age, weight and personality type it will guess when you will die, my death day is supposedly 11 August 2045. This is nothing more than a guess at when I will die based on the present state of my weight and emotional state. God is ultimately the one who has already determined when I will die. David speaking of God's designing of David and his life writes, 'Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them' (Ps. 139:16). Our lives which were a gift to begin with are a gift twice given and not a possession. God made the world to begin with, our whole existence is a gift from Him, and when the world fell into sin, God by His grace saved us from death. We experience the gift of creation and the gift of salvation, if you are a Christian you have experienced the gift of life twice given. We do not bring ourselves into existence any more than we caused our own births to our parents at the time and place of our coming into the world. We are not our own, the earth and everyone in it belongs to the one who made it, Psalm 24:1, 'The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.' So He and not we decides the day we day. Our lives are His possessions to allocate not ours. I know this will alarm some people, but let me say this. God's hands are better hands than yours, God's plans are better plans than yours, God's motives are better motives than yours, there is no safer or happier place to be than in His hands.

I do not have the time and space here to go into the differences between active and passive euthanasia, voluntary, involuntary, or non-voluntary euthanasia; abortion, infanticide,

³ Ibid. p107-108.

eugenics, suicide or assisted suicide. Each one of these issues though is impacted by the point we are making now. Life belongs to God not the individual. Doctors are stewards of God's common grace in sustaining human life not God to take life, or the bestower of rights or enablers of people to play God themselves. Human life, being made in the image of God is to be protected in all its stages or conditions. The only time you can voluntarily lose your life is when it is lost as a by-product of doing God's will, this can be either in the form of jumping in front of a car to get a child out the way, or as a martyr who is preaching in a closed country. But once again, the assumption in these activities is that my life is not my own and we submit to God's sovereign workings in providence if we have to die in His service.

Some might think that such an attitude induces a type of passive fatalism. If our lives are God's, and the day of our death is by His determination, and we are not to resist God's will, then we should also not take any medicines or go to doctors or try and prevent death in any way. This is a forced logical conclusion based on only half the truth. We also need to acknowledge that God through common grace sustains life, He has given us science and medicine and technology and brains that are able to harness the potential He has put in nature. His revealed will is also that we love our neighbours and seek their good, and this as ourselves. So seeking to preserve our lives and the lives of our neighbours as far as we are able is the will of God. The hidden purposes of God are not for us to know nor make decisions from, we do His will not on the basis of what we can discern from circumstance or what we have received by a divine voice in our minds, no, we regulate our lives by the clear teaching of scripture.

This reality of God controlling the time of our deaths has led many to live boldly and go to the mission field. Some have spoken about being invulnerable until the moment that God calls them home. This sets a person free to do all God commands, and leaving the decision of when we die to God. John G. Paton a missionary to the New Hebrides faced many dangers, he wrote, 'My enemies seldom slackened their hateful designs against my life, however calmed or baffled for the moment. . . . A wild chief followed me around for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards me, God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there, and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in his hands, and felt immortal till my work was done. Trials and hairbreadth escapes strengthened my faith, and seemed only to nerve me for more to follow; and they did tread swiftly upon each other's heels.'⁴ 'Immortal till my work was done,' in one sense that is completely true. This is not a truth we lean on in order to be complacent or foolish or throw caution to the wind, no, it should motivate us to see our time as given for a particular purpose and that purpose being certain. This should help us see that we are not wasting our time and gladly pour ourselves out more with an expectation of God's will coming to pass.

If we believe that we are the Lord's and our deaths fall under His will and sovereignty, then we can more willingly accept the hard ways in which most of us will die. We live under the illusion that we are all alive and healthy and then at some point just before we die, we enter into dying, and then we die. The truth is much messier than that. We are born into death, the cradle is in the grave every moment we are alive our bodies are continuously experiencing attack and degeneration. As we get older we have a growing set of complications as various parts of our bodies fail. And when death comes it is because of

⁴ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/you-will-be-eaten-by-cannibals-lessons-from-the-life-of-john-g-paton>

some failure in some vital organ or function. We live with bodies that have experienced the effects of the fall, and death is now the lot of every person. The Christian has a unique perspective on this life of living death. We recognise that when man first fell into sin that the human race should have been wiped out on the spot. However, God was merciful and instead of pouring out all His justice, He chose to have mercy and grant an opportunity to be redeemed from justice. This opportunity came in the form of our present state where we are born to inevitably die. We are granted a window of opportunity where we can turn to God, repent of our sins, believe in Christ and secure a better existence with a better body in a better creation free from sin and death. So the Christian looks at his/her own death as a gift, for without God's mercy there would be no life to end in death. Some are granted easy deaths, but many are not. We observe these pains as the repercussions of a stayed judgement. And if we believe in Christ they are a small suffering that gives way to a greater glory. More on this next week.

God deals with us as individuals and has decided how we will die, some will go peacefully, some will go hard. A peaceful death is not necessarily the reward of a good life and a hard death the lot of bad people. God has hidden purposes we are not able to discern but we trust in God's wisdom and submit to whatever our lot may be. For we see Him as Paul says as the Lord of our deaths. This quiet trust and submission was Paul's own attitude, 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 'For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.⁸ Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.' He saw his death as a service to God, and sought to honour God in the way he died. You only get to die once and glorify God before the angels on your deathbed once, angels don't die. You only get to die before your family once, your friends once, and lean on the Lord's sufficiency in death once. It should be our goals to die well, in order that God, the Lord of our deaths will be glorified in them.

Paul has confronted us with the wonderful truths that God is our Lord in life and death, is He?