

Repairing the Altar

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to think for a few moments today then about, first of all, the main verses in the middle of this chapter, that is verses 7 and 8 in Romans 14.

For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord, and whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

These verses really sort of sum up the key factor in what we have here, that God is in ultimate control over all these things and over our lives.

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. A lot of people are quite anxious and worried and fearful at this time about the obvious spread of this virus, which has caused many to become infected and some to lose their lives.

But what we require in these uncertain days is something unto which we can hold, which will suffice us, which will strengthen us, which will keep us, whether in life or in death.

[1 : 11] Because the big thing that we fear, ultimately, is that we might be taken out of this life into eternity. What we require is a provision which will see to our good, our safety, our protection, our salvation, whether we live or whether we die.

So we have to work out then, in a sense, in this chapter, what he's talking about, mindful of the context. Talking about what's important, what's maybe less important, but what's most important of all.

In other words, what is a matter of life and death? The context of this chapter is that Paul is talking about Christians who disagree about lesser matters.

Not about things which are unimportant, but things which are perhaps not about life and death in terms of one's faith, one's relationship to Christ. It's rather like Christians disagreeing about things on which they have a difference of opinion.

That which God has commanded, obviously, we don't have the luxury of debating about. We have to obey what God has commanded. What God has specified in his word, we are to follow.

[2 : 20] Where God leads, we are to follow after him. But where God has left things perhaps less crystal clear, where there seems to be perhaps more than one right path that a Christian might follow, then that's where maybe discussion or disagreement, even amongst believing brethren who respect one another, these disagreements may come in.

In the immediate context, Paul was talking about those who thought to eat meat sacrificed to idols was perfectly okay. Because an idol is nothing, it's meaningless, it's an empty statue.

And so it doesn't really matter whether you eat what's sacrificed to idols or not, because it's irrelevant. You might as well just get the good of the food, for the earth is the Lord's and the fullness is the Lord's. Others took the line that, no, this is a false god.

And others believe it's a false god. If you take that which is offered to a false god and you eat that, they think that you are approving that false god. They think that you are entering into some kind of approval of that false god.

And their faith might be shaken, if they are Christians, or the pagans might be strengthened in their unbelief. So they said, you shouldn't, you shouldn't do that. Even if it is nothing, even if it is a totally false god, you shouldn't have anything to do with that.

[3 : 35] Now, of course, Christians may disagree, and they did disagree in those days. But whilst these things are not unimportant, we have to recognise what is most important of all.

And for that, we have, as it were, the last part of the last verse in this chapter is, I think, significant. It says, he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith.

For whatsoever is not of faith is sin. I want us to come to verses 7 and 8 in just a minute. But first of all, I'd like us to look at this final part of the last verse, 23.

For whatsoever is not of faith is sin. Listen, anything that we do, in other words, not in a state of faith in Christ, is by definition sin.

You might think, well, that's a bit strange. We can do perfectly neutral things or perfectly good things. We can help people. We can strengthen other people. We can be kind to other people. Surely these things are not sinful.

[4 : 32] Well, if we look at the letter to the Hebrews, the apostle writes, Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Like, okay, fine, fine enough. But then it goes on a few verses later at verse 6 to say, Without faith it is impossible to please him. That is God in Jesus Christ.

For he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. If we don't believe in the Lord, how can we possibly come to him?

If we don't believe in Christ, how can we possibly do anything in a state of grace, in a state of faith? And whatsoever we do not in a state of faith is, by definition, sin.

Because we're doing it in a state of enmity against God. Now, some people, of course, struggle with that. They think, no, no, some actions are good in and of themselves. The actions may be perfectly good.

[5 : 32] But the things that we do in a state of unbelief are, by definition, sinful. As St. Augustine said many centuries ago, that without faith in Christ, even our best works are but splendid sins.

Sins that may look great. They may look like they're good. They may be arrayed in the best of robes, but still they are, by definition, sins. Splendid sins.

If we're to look at what our church's confession of faith, the Westminster Confession, says in chapter 16, and at paragraph 7, it says, works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them, they may be things which God commands, and of good use, both to themselves and others, yet because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith, nor are done in a right manner, according to the word, nor to a right end, the glory of God.

They are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God. And yet, the neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.

Of course we should be doing things which are good, or we perceive as good, kindness and helpfulness and caring for others. These are good things to do, but if we're doing them in a state of unbelief, then everything we do is a sin in the sight of God, however good it may be.

[7 : 03] Like, oh well that's nonsense, that can't possibly be true. God must be pleased with these things. However much the action itself may be good, it is by definition sinful, if done in a state of sin.

As my own congregation will know from examples that I've given often in the past, if somebody is in a state of overdraft, and that may be something that many people are struggling with at this time, if you're in a state of overdraft and debt, and let's say that you've got a checkbook, or a means of transferring money or whatever from one place to another, if you're to try to pay off your overdraft, simply by writing more checks, drawing on the very account which is itself overdrawn, all you're going to do is put yourself further and further into debt.

Or if you're to try and use one credit card to pay off another, then yes, you may have shifted the debt from one place to another, but all you're doing is incurring more interest and incurring more debt.

If you're going to get free of debt, then you have to address your debts from a source of income, which is untainted as yet, by your own debt.

In other words, the source of income has to come from somewhere completely other. It has to come from somewhere completely free of debt, somewhere which is itself liquid, something which is itself positive and in credit.

[8 : 37] Now, we don't have credit with God. There's only one person who does. Or again, to take another example, with which some will be familiar, if I am underwater, if I've got breathing apparatus and I've got a face mask and an oxygen tank and so on, but I'm underwater, everything I do underwater will be, by definition, wet.

And it doesn't matter if there's some kind of heat source under the water and I go and stand beside the heat source and say, I'll try and make this heat get me dry. It won't get me dry if I take half a dozen towels with me underwater and start rubbing myself furiously with them underwater.

I will not become dry because I am underwater. Everything I do will be wet. No matter how much I try and apply the things that might otherwise get me dry, if I was above water and on dry land, it won't help whilst I'm underwater.

So in order to become dry, first of all, I have to come out from the state of being underwater. I have to come out of the water onto the dry land.

I have to come out of my state of sin and unbelief. I have to come onto the dry land, or to use a biblical example, onto the rock. And only once I'm in the fresh air, only once I'm in a dry condition, am I able to be dried either by the air, whether it is warm or cold, or by any towel that I may apply to myself.

[10 : 09] Nothing is going to work while I'm still in a state of unbelief. Everything I do will be tainted by sin that way.

The only source of income that can get us out of this debt is Christ. The only source of drying power to take away the filthiness and the wetness of our sin is Christ.

He is the only one with the breath of life in him. He is the only one with the source of that credit with God because all of us are born and conceived in sin except Christ.

That is the only source whereby we can be saved. As it is written, verse 11 in the chapter we read, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall confess to God.

So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. You know, part of the difficulty with trying to persuade people of their need of Christ is that we don't often as Christians or as a church, we don't often live and behave as those who live out and exemplify that urgency.

[11 : 22] If I were to say to you, for example, there's toxic gas in the place, you've got to get a gas mask, but it's okay. Look, there's lots of gas masks and they're free. Come on, take one, quickly put it on, otherwise you'll be gassed and you'll die.

Now, the person to whom I was saying that might think, okay, that's fair enough and there's the gas mask, that's great, but why haven't you got one on? Why aren't you wearing yours?

If it's all that urgent, why haven't you got yours on? And the people might look at us and say, well, if it's so important to repent, if it's so important to live holy and God-fearing lives, why aren't you doing it?

Why aren't you acting as though this were the most important thing in the world? And to that extent, we are guilty. Christians and the church, especially as an institution, has behaved for way too long.

As though the things which God commands were simply negotiable. As though the things which God has laid down in his eternal truth of his word were things that we could just take it or leave it.

[12 : 26] It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if I put the gas mask on or not. It doesn't matter if I do this. I can say to other people, this is what you should do, but I don't have to live it myself. Yes, you do. because people will take their lead from what they see the followers of Jesus doing and the church, both as individuals and as an institution, has been at fault.

We have lived for too long as though the things of God were negotiable. We could take it or leave it. It was up to us. Man was the ultimate arbiter of what God would and wouldn't allow.

And now, of course, what do we find? Well, the churches are closed. People aren't able to gather for worship anymore. The churches, like every other part of society, is to an extent under judgment. We are under this chastisement. We are under the fact that we are no longer able to do the things that for way too long we took for granted. But although the churches are closed, as Paul wrote to Timothy in chapter 2, verse 9, 2 Timothy, the Word of God is not bound.

And this is one reason why we're able to use this technology and ensure that the Word of God gets out there into the world, that people are able to hear it and to benefit from it.

[13 : 49] The Word of God is not bound even if the institutional church is itself closed. So, we have to recognize what is most important of all. What is a matter of life and death?

And our faith in Christ is a matter of life and death. Some things, of course, are important, but they're not the most important of all. But whether or not we accept Christ and whether or not we live according to his teachings and commands, it will have an impact on other people.

Of course it matters. What we do matters. is it affects and it impacts other people. You know, this coronavirus that is spread around the world, we know all the restrictions that we have to live under and we hear of the rising infection rate and the rising death toll.

But of course, it only becomes even more real to us when we happen to know of somebody who has succumbed to it. And for ourselves personally and romance, just in the last couple of days, as

some of you will know, we have heard of a friend, a colleague on the mainland who died of COVID-19 just a couple of days ago.

Now, when it's someone you know, it becomes more real. But whatever happens with this virus, every part of every person's life impacts on other people as well.

[15 : 11] And whether or not we live according to the teachings of Christ, whether or not we put our faith in Christ, that impacts other people. We are like a stone dropped in a pond and all the ripples that spread out touch other people's lives that we couldn't perhaps even have thought about.

But what we do matters. And when you know someone to whom it has happened, even if you're not a believer yourself, you might know somebody who has become converted.

You might know somebody who's beginning to show an interest. in the things of Christ. And that has an effect on your life. Because you think, well, if it can happen to them, if it can be real for them, maybe it can be real for the likes of us too.

Now, in this chapter, as we say, the context has been disagreements about lesser things. About meat sacrifice to idols. And for us, you know, Christians can have general disagreements about what is and isn't the right thing to do.

Some Christians, for example, believe that you shouldn't listen to or watch anything that is broadcast on the Lord's day. That would be a violation of the fourth commandment.

[16 : 19] And some people believe that and they take that seriously and we have to respect that. Others might take the line that, no, as long as what you're listening to or watching is something that honours the Lord, if it is God honouring, it's okay to do it on his day.

And Christians may take a different view on what is the right or wrong way to proceed there. We have to respect each other's differences of view there. Others, for example, might think that whilst obviously no Christian should ever indulge in drunkenness, some believe that Christians shouldn't drink alcohol at all.

Others think, well, a little in moderation, that's okay, that's biblically allowed. Christians may disagree about these things, but we must disagree in love and respect one another's points of view. Likewise, what Paul is talking about here, about observing different days. We know that in many parts of the church across the world, some people observe Easter or Ascension Day or Lent or whatever it may be, these different parts of the so-called Christian year.

Some people attach huge importance to that. And what they're seeking to do there, albeit perhaps not with a biblical mandate, is that they're seeking to honour the Lord.

[17 : 32] And if Christians genuinely think they're serving the Lord and seeking to do that, even if we may or may not agree with them, we have to respect that this is what they're trying to do to honour the Lord.

Ultimately, we hope always to have a biblical mandate and command for what we seek to do. But Christians will disagree. But these things on which they disagree, whilst they are important, they are not necessarily matters of life and death.

The matter of spiritual life and death that is most important of all is whether or not your faith is in Christ. That is the thing that will determine not only how you spend your life, but where you spend eternity.

Now, when we think about these lesser things, it's not that they're unimportant. If we think about, you know, when Jesus was disagreeing with the Pharisees, who, you know, took issue with him in a lot of things, he says in Luke chapter 11, verse 42, but woe unto you Pharisees, for you tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs and pass over judgment and the love of God.

These ought ye to have done and not to leave the other undone. You see, he didn't say, forget about these things. They're totally unimportant. Whether or not you tithe the things you've got and whether or not you serve God with all the little minutiae as well as the big issues.

[18 : 54] He didn't say these things don't matter. They are important. It's just that some things are even more important. And it does matter whether or not Christians have a biblical mandate for what they do.

It does matter that we follow the Lord and his commands and his teachings. It does matter that we apply his laws and commands to every aspect of our life. But some things are not life and death. But faith in Christ is a matter of life and death. If you are hanging off a cliff by your fingertips, then that may not be the best time to discuss or think about, you know, did I bring the best kind of hiking boots with me on this trip?

You know, the ropes that I've got, well, were they the best kind? What about my ice axe? Was it as sharp as it should be? You know, here you are hanging off a cliff. And the two most vital things are that firstly, you keep hanging on there.

You don't let go. And secondly, that you be rescued. All the other things about how well your trip was planned or your map reading abilities or whether or not you were properly equipped to come out on this trip in the first place, all of these are important.

[20 : 03] But the most important thing of all is whether or not you can hang on long enough to be rescued. Whether or not you are rescued is what will make the difference between whether you live or die.

All these things may be important but the most important thing of all is being saved. Now, as we go on in this chapter, we read at verse 7, none of us liveeth to himself, no man dieth to himself.

In other words, what we do isn't just about us, it impacts other people as we've said. But whether we live, we live unto the Lord. And whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord's.

In other words, God owns us already by creation and if we are his children, he owns us also by redemption. But he has made us so we belong to him anyway.

But this faith in Christ, this is a faith to live by because it is a faith and a saviour in whose arms it is not only safe and wonderful and fulfilling to live, but it is also safe and wonderful and fulfilling in which to die.

[21 : 19] Because it's safe because he himself has conquered death. If we're putting our trust in Christ and we know we're putting our trust in a saviour who has himself overcome death, he has gone right into it.

He has faced it on the cross, he has died as it were and gone right through the gates of death. He has entered into death, he was dead, he was buried and he rose again the third day, victorious over the grave.

He conquered death by going down into it and dying truly and completely. And then he rose again and conquered death. So it is safe this faith to live by and this faith in which to die.

It is safe because it is in a Christ, a saviour who has conquered death, who has been through it and come out the other side in a way that nobody else has.

So it is safe to put our trust in him if we are anxious about life, if we are anxious about death, it is only Christ who is able to conquer death completely.

[22 : 19] It is also wonderful in the sense that it should and does fill us with wonder as soon as we begin to think all that he has done, all that he has made by way of creation and providence and every little detail of every microscopic creature that he has made in the ocean beds or in the fields or in the grass or the air or the vastness of the universe and the stars and the constellations, all that he has made fills us with wonder.

And we consider that all this is done not for our benefit, although we do benefit from it, but ultimately for his glory. and the most wonderful thing of all is that he is glorified in the saving of lost sinners.

He is glorified in the doing of the impossible and it would be impossible for us to be saved and to be redeemed except by Christ. So it is wonderful in the sense that we should be filled with wonder even if all we saw was this world, even if all that there was was this world, it would be testimony enough to the reality and the truth that there is a God and that he has made all these things in their sophistication and complexity and perfect balance.

You see, those who would deny God and would claim that science disproves the existence of God, it doesn't, of course. It's only their false ideologies and the mythology of their own opinions that rules out God from all the scientific evidence that is in front of them because the evidence backs up what God has revealed in his word.

Scientific evidence points us to a creator, not away from him. Scientific evidence points to what the Bible has already revealed. It's as though the Bible gives us a shortcut to the answers and in unbelief men are still scrabbling about trying to find the right question to ask.

[24 : 22] So it is wonderful to live by and it is wonderful to die in because as great as this world is, it's passing away and what comes after it will be not only like this world but better and eternal and such an improvement on it as the difference between night and day.

So we can only go on from this life to more life if we are in Christ so it is wonderful. But it is also fulfilling. It is fulfilling to live in Christ because if we are alive in Christ then we see that all the

aspects of our lives and all that had gone before was all constructed and worked by God building up to the moment when we should finally put our trust in him and was also able to utilise all that had gone before so that everything that was part and parcel of our lives he could then apply for his glory because it is all that which God intended to glorify him.

It fulfills the purpose for which we were designed. It fulfills all that our life has been up until now and all that it can be which it can be ultimately only in Christ.

It is fulfilling to see that this is what our life and identity and experience was always intended for when we put our trust in Christ.

It was for this purpose for the glory of God and if that is what makes our life fulfilling in the living of it how much more fulfilling is it when all of that is finally consummated as we pass from this life to that which is to come in Christ it is fulfilling because ultimately we fulfill the purpose for which we were designed to glorify God and to enjoy him forever not just for the brief few years of this life but forever.

[26 : 34] So it is safe it is wonderful and it is fulfilling both in this life and even in death it is fulfilling. The main reason that so many people fear this coronavirus understandably is because we fear to become infected.

We fear that from somebody else we will catch the infection and the main reason we fear to become infected is that we fear we will die. It is as simple as that.

People are afraid of the infection because they are afraid to die. But we shouldn't be afraid to die if we are in Christ. This is a saviour who can and is willing to protect and to save you whether you live or whether you die.

It is safe it is wonderful it is fulfilling for whether we live we live unto the Lord or whether we die we die unto the Lord. Whether we live therefore or die we are the Lord's.

This is a saviour who can do it and who is willing to do it to protect and to save you as we say whether you live or whether you die. If you or I should let's say for the sake of I can let's say you did die of this coronavirus then the key thing the most important thing of all the thing that is the matter of life and death will be whether we trusted in Christ whilst we were here in this life and remember nobody now is going to be able to give a great eulogy or a big send off for anybody's funeral those have been scrapped as well so you can't even comfort yourself and think well my friends will all say wonderful things about me and there'll be a great big gathering at my funeral and they'll all wonder what a great guy that person was nobody's going to do that now you'll be well blessed if you get half a dozen people gather at your graveside that's all that's allowed whether you're a Christian whether you're an unbeliever whether you're a big noise in this world or whether you were just an unknown individual that's all we're going to get half a dozen people round our graves so even the great big gatherings big send off celebratory funerals they're not going to happen now it's what you are in this life who you trust in this life is going to affect what your life is going to be like hereafter that is going to be the key thing the most important thing of all whether we trusted Christ in this life but if we live through this virus if we survive it the ultimate test of the reality of how your relationship with Christ panned out and whether or not it was real will be whether we continue in it you see there might be some people are ready to put their faith and their trust in Christ while they feel under threat but let's say the lockdown gets lifted and things return to normal they think oh that's okay right now we don't need this Jesus anymore we'll be okay how short sighted is that going to be you might survive the coronavirus and you might be run over by a bus the next day none of us knows how long we have we are each given a set number of days known to

[29 : 57] God we don't know the number of our days but it says in the Psalms so teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom and the feet of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom if we should die of this virus the key thing will be whether we trusted in Christ if we should live through the virus the key thing will be whether or not we go on with Christ or whether or not it was just a big charade we can come so close and still fail at the last we can pretend that we belong to Christ but we're not fooling anyone but whether you continue in Christ or whether we are taken off into eternity whatever you do others will see and take note of it for none of us live up to himself and no man dith to himself the things that you do the choices that you make even in a state of lockdown will have an effect on others because we're still in touch with other people we still have telephones we still keep in contact with other people if something happens in your life you accept Christ as your personal saviour other people will know about it and it will affect their lives because they know you and it becomes more real when it's somebody that you know for none of us live up to

himself and no man dith to himself but the thing is God has made you and me he owns us by creation and he wants us to become his children through salvation and that will be the case for all who put their trust in

Christ and believe in him whatsoever is not of faith is sin and that's the state in which we will continue if we don't put our trust in Christ to wash away our sin and to cleanse away our dead for whether we live we live unto the Lord and whether we die we die unto the Lord whether we live therefore or die we are the Lord's acceptable as inario blaint glo park total of