

**Freedom to Serve God**  
**Reflecting on Practical Issues Raised by Romans 14:1-15:13**  
**#69 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans**  
**Faith Community Church – June 10, 2007**

---

**Introduction**

Please turn to 1 Peter 1. We're going to get there in a few minutes.

Thirty-five years ago there was a sharp debate within evangelical circles. It was not over the nature of Scripture, nor was it over the person of Christ. It was not about whether Jesus really did rise from the dead, nor was it about whether there was a literal heaven and hell. The great question being debated was this: how long should Christian men wear their hair.

On one side of the debate stood the older generation. Long hair was condemned in Scripture, they said, and was a mark of the rebellious culture of the 1960's. Therefore Christian men needed to be sure that their hair was kept out of their face, that it did not touch or cover any portion of the ear, that it did not hang on the shirt collar, and that sideburns did not go any lower than the bottom of the ear lobe. Beards were forbidden. No self-respecting, God-fearing Christian man could look like one of those dirty hippies and claim to be following Jesus.

On the other side of the debate stood a younger generation – my generation, including many who had come to faith in Christ out of that hippie culture. There were exceptions, but many of us regarded the rules about hair to be arbitrary and without honest biblical support. Besides, every painting of Jesus ever made showed him with long hair, so how did they reconcile that?

The older generation was in control, though, so if you wanted to attend many Christian colleges, most Bible colleges, and even serve in some churches you needed to agree to follow the guidelines about hair. I can remember being tapped on the shoulder by our Dean of Men, who suggested that it might be a good idea for me to visit the barber.

My generation called those kinds of rules “legalistic” – which referred to an idea that people who kept rules like this were showing themselves to be spiritually in-tune. The older generation said it was a matter of considering the culture that we lived in and trying to be a good example. In particular we should be careful that (and here they pulled some words out of Romans 14 & 15) we didn't cause a fellow believer to stumble. I have a friend who recalls getting an anonymous note in his mailbox in Bible College that said that his sideburns had grown a bit below regulation length and was causing the brother who had written the note to stumble. So I guess we were playing with fire.

The issue of hair length was one of many such issues that were topics of conversation and debate in that day. I can remember one man's scathing attack in chapel against youth leaders who wore blue jeans to their youth meetings. Perhaps the most outlandish thing

I've ever heard along these lines comes from the lunatic fringe of fundamentalist Christianity. There is a church in Texas that – as recently as a few years ago – sent a letter to its missionaries inquiring as to what kind of pajamas the wives wore. You see, if they wore PJ's with pants or shorts, they were violating the biblical prohibition against women wearing men's clothes, and their support was in danger of being dropped.

Some of you are probably thinking, "Wow! What planet did those things happen on?" Others of you are no doubt remembering those good old days. Looking back, I have to say that some of the issues that some Christians were up in arms over were petty, insignificant, and silly. And yet, underneath even the most trivial, someone was at least trying to come to grips with what it meant to live a life that was distinct from the culture around us.

Please follow along as I read 1 Peter 1:13-2:12.

It should be very obvious that living a different life is at the heart of what Peter is saying here. If Christians are supposed to be different, in what ways are we to show our difference? Are there biblical principles that govern the way that women dress? that govern the kind of music we listen to? Who decides what movies are appropriate for us to see? Can we trust Hollywood to tell us what is good and what isn't, or doesn't it really matter? Are there standards that govern our sexual behavior? Is it wrong or right for Christians to drink alcohol? Are the gambling tables in Atlantic City on our list of places to avoid, or should we take a chance on winning the big one (and of course, we'll be sure to give our 10% to the church)? How do we decide?

This brings us to Romans 14 and 15. Paul is talking to them about some should's and should not's that were being debated in the first century. Those particular things are not an issue to us, but what he says in these two chapters is very helpful to us in deciding how we ought to live. I'd like to suggest that we can tailor our lives to biblical standards if we follow two primary passions.

### **How Do We Make Decisions About Lifestyle Choices?**

Obviously we refrain from behavior that God clearly condemns, but what about areas where God has not clearly spoken?

1. By looking God-ward.

#### *A fact to consider*

The language of the New Testament makes it clear that when we believe in Christ, taking him as our Savior, we belong to Christ. This forms the basis of what Paul has said in Romans 12:1-2, and we are reminded that we belong to Christ here in 14:4-9. He is our master.

### *Our objective*

It becomes our objective, then, to workout the Lordship of Christ – his rule – in our lives. What does it look like for Jesus to be our master? There are a number of places in the New Testament that challenge us. We read one primary passage a few minutes ago in 1 Peter, but we also see this theme in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 and Colossians 3:1-11.

### *A motivating reminder*

In order to remind us that we are not our own, and that our lives are to be lived under Christ's rule, Paul tells us that we will all stand before Christ on the day of judgment. I don't have time to develop this idea, but suffice it to say that the judgment, while not dealing with our eternal destiny, is real, and that it is not to be taken lightly.

2. By considering the community.

### *Our objective*

Look at Romans 15:5-7. This passage tells us that God desires that we live together in harmony so that together we can bring glory to Him. This becomes our objective. So how do we accomplish this?

### *Three considerations*

Read 14:13-15:7. Note several clear principles from this passage that govern our choices:

a. There are people around us who are – spiritually – more fragile than we are.

We're to realize that what may be acceptable for us may be too closely linked to a former lifestyle that someone else is trying to move away from. I am to consider the impact of my behavior on the well-being of others with whom I am involved.

b. My rights are subordinate to the well-being of my brothers and sisters.

In this situation, Paul is saying that there is nothing morally wrong with expanding one's menu beyond what the Jewish law prescribed. But because the church was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, one needed to decide that other people's feelings were more important than my right to pursue even what is good.

c. To engage in activity that is good becomes sin if we don't pursue it with a clear conscience.

Which means that if we have doubts about the appropriateness of an activity or choice, we need to not do it.

### **Responding to God's Word**

As I was studying there were a couple of things that I had wanted to talk about, but I have to put them aside. They include the question of the rightness of codes of conduct, the

need to be careful not to label something as wrong if God has not said it is wrong, the importance of a good reputation in the community (in the church), and exactly how the weaker brother principle is applied (because it can be abused). But I have to leave them for another time. So let me close with these two questions, because if we get these right, we'll be heading down the right path:

1. Are you asking “that” question? Earlier I spoke about the fact that even with regard to issues that seem to us today to be bizarre, most of the time people were asking the question, “How do I live a life that is different from the lost world around me?” In other words, what does it look like to live as a Christian? Are you asking that question?
2. Where is your heart? Are you committed to community and in being the kind of person who has a positive impact on the spiritual health of others? We should all aspire to that and as a result make it our goal to live in a way that considers the well-being of others first. As Paul says, Christ did not please himself. Let's follow his example.

This discussion is directed at people who are part of God's family. Are you a member of God's family? We should be reminded that no one is born a part of God's family nor does one become a member of God's family simply by attending a church, reading the Bible, or doing religious things. The Bible tells us that we have all rebelled against God's holy law – we've done what we wanted even when God has said no – and that God is right in holding us accountable and in punishing our rebellion. But the good news is that God sent Jesus to pay for our sins, and by turning away from our sin and accepting by faith God's offer of forgiveness, we can be forgiven and be brought into his family. If you have not trusted in Christ, I encourage you to do so today.