

ROMANS 14:1-13 February 19, 2012

<sup>1</sup> As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.  
<sup>2</sup> One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

<sup>5</sup> One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup> The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

<sup>10</sup> Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;

<sup>11</sup> for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord,  
every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

<sup>12</sup> So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. (ESV)

- Christian Community Means Genuine Acceptance of One Another
- Christian Community Means Acceptance of Non-Essentials
- Christian Community Means that God is the Judge
- Christian Community is about Only One Thing

Christianity in its earliest years was known for something rather extraordinary. It became so threatening to the powers that be – the Roman Empire – that the state did everything it could to put an end to this group that called themselves Christians.

There were a variety of things that threatened the state – for one, Christians didn't worship Caesar. And then there was the fact that Christianity grew so quickly. But more than anything, what threatened the state was *how* it grew so quickly: Christianity grew so fast because it combined separated, isolated cultures and people-groups. Men and Women. Slaves and Free. Rich and Poor. Jew and Gentile. It held out the hope, and was *living* the hope, that people of different races and cultures could live together in peace.

And those of you who study politics and sociology know how often it is that these divisions make peaceful living so impossible.

We've had these struggles within our country, being a country based on immigrants, where we've had a civil war that involved race, and then up through the civil rights movement, and now we have it between ourselves and others, with the attacks of 9/11.

Paul says that there *really is* a way – that *Christianity* has a way – of handling the challenges that divide us that no other view of the world has. A way to overcome these divisions, and that this way is utterly distinct and unique to Christianity.

Paul explains it here in reference to a real-life dispute that is underway in Rome. Paul is writing to this growing congregation in Rome of both Jewish and Gentile converts. Two very different groups of people who have both come to see that Jesus is Messiah. That's all good. Paul doesn't see this as a problem. After all, Paul is a *Jew*, but he is the apostle to the *Gentiles*.

But the people *themselves* are having a problem with this unity and diversity. Normally diversity does not make for unity. Our human tendency is to judge those who do not conform to our customs or standards. The church is like any other institution – sadly, its unity is often imperiled by diversity.

And so, in the early church, the differences were just what you would expect. The Jews have been raised with the law, or under the *shadow* of the law. That is to say that, even if the 10 Commandments were not in their thoughts at each and every moment, they had been raised with a distinction between days – the Sabbath still matters, and so do the high holy days and so forth. They had also been raised with distinctions like circumcision. And they had been raised with distinction regarding foods – kosher and non-kosher food. There are lists of things in Leviticus that described unclean foods.

Now what was the purpose of all of these peculiar distinctions in behavior in the first place? Why did they matter?

Both Jesus and Paul taught that the reason for all of these things was twofold. 1) Whenever Israel was overpowered, overrun, or *on* the run, Israel would still maintain its identity as a nation. It would still maintain their national identity as God's people. 2) The second reason is that it taught the people over and over that God is holy – holiness, purity and righteousness *matter* to God – and that you can't go before him any old way you want. You can't go in before the presence of God without some kind of cleansing.

But look at v. 14, just after our section: Paul says that he is "persuaded" that "in the Lord Jesus *nothing* is unclean in itself."

And that is the idea that Jesus, Paul, Peter and the writer of the Hebrews all teach – that all of these laws were actually meant to point forward to Christ – I don't have time here to go through how circumcision, certain days and kosher food are signs of Jesus (ask me afterwards or read Hebrews!) – but that once the reality, Christ, had come, all of the shadows (all of those purity laws) were to disappear. You are made pure through the atonement of Christ. By grace we are saved, and not by works of the law.

*But ...* you still had a generation of Jewish believers who *had* embraced the Messiah, but were so steeped *in* these rules, that for them, throwing them out was unthinkable.

So what do we learn from this? Two things: 1) racial and cultural differences are always there. And they are often there *underneath* our theological, our doctrinal, and our ecclesiastical differences. Often, disputes in the church, when you scratch down below them, are cultural, racial, traditional and even political.

We read life, we even read the bible, through the lens of our customs and traditions. And every people group has had its own experiences and practices. And because these differences are there, we can't avoid them. We have to face them. Everybody stands in a culture. The differences are there, they can be a problem, and you have to talk about them, because if you don't, they will create problems in the church.

But here is the second thing. 2) Our cultural differences are also the solution. Look, Christ's love had brought together a remarkably diverse group of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Their backgrounds had very little in common. The former paganism of these Gentile Christians had required very little of them. On the other hand, the Roman Jews often outdid the Jerusalem Jews in their Jewishness!

But somehow, these early Christians got it together. Somehow, in understanding the gospel, they got it together enough that their diversity didn't kill their unity, and in fact, the diversity of the church actually energized and empowered them such that it threatened the greatest super power in the history of the world, the Roman Empire.

Now there is no doubt about the relevance of this. Because I think the church today needs to get it together. We need Paul's teaching because judging one another is one of the favorite indoor sports of Christians today.

You see it all the time. A Christian from South Africa is repelled when he moves to North America where there is a swimming party, hosted by a Christian, for both men *and* women. Then he offends his Northern brother, by lighting up a cigarette.

At an international conference for missionaries, a Christian from western Canada thought it was *worldly* for a Christian acquaintance to wear a wedding ring, and a woman from Europe thought it almost *immoral* for a wife *not* to wear a ring that signaled her married status.

One Christian from Asia thought it was inappropriate for a Christian Indian woman's sari to expose her midriff. A man from Denmark was pained to even watch British Bible school students play soccer on the Sabbath, while the British students shrank from his pipe smoking (even though C.S. Lewis has a pipe clenched between his teeth on half the covers of his books). And then there are tattoos, body piercings in some countries... well, you name it. Churches have been ripped apart by even smaller disagreements. But, when we study, when we gather around one another in fellowship and worship, when we understand that God is diverse in his personhood – he is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and the he is united – he is One – then there is a power that goes out from the church. A power that communicates gospel grace, gospel peace.

**The bottom line is this: When the church focuses on rules – it doesn't matter whether you're for these rules, or against them – the church loses its real focus in ministry.**

The gospel unites us IN our diversity, whereas a focus on the rules divides us *because* of our diversity. No, a gospel focus will always center on the mutual acceptance by God of sinners because of Christ. God saves only law-breakers. We unite in him and his grace.

- Christian Community Means Acceptance of Non-Essentials

Now, the first solution Paul lays out here is that in Christian community, there must be an acceptance of one another when there are matters of ethical indifference. What the bible calls "matters *adiaphorous*." The church – based on this very passage, and on the text that Simona read – called this *adiaphora*, a Greek word which simply means, "things indifferent." In other words, how do we respond as a church to activities or behaviors where God has neither commanded them, nor forbidden them?

This is an extremely important category to know, and to understand, and remember.

Because you and I can think of a whole set of behaviors that the bible never speaks about. But we also know that people receive laws, regulations, and ethical ideas from a lot of places other than the word of God. And we have this tendency, when we think a certain behavior or activity is important to do, or to avoid, to surround that rule with divine sanctions. As if it WERE the law of God. And this is what the Pharisees did. They invented laws and put a halo over them. And a lot of people became convinced that these rules that were devised by the Pharisees were actually laws of God. And what did people do? They obeyed the laws of the Pharisees, *thinking* that by doing so, they *were* obeying God. So their intentions and their motivations to obey were all godly intentions. Unfortunately, their ethic was not informed by the word of God.

So here in Rome, we have two groups of Christians, and Paul gives them labels. The Law-observing Jewish Christians are called "weak," and the liberated Gentile Christians are called "strong."

So imagine a Gentile brother just returning from the grocery store with an armload of meat, and he meets Abe, a Jewish brother.

Abe very cheerfully greets him. "Grace and peace, friend! What have you got there?"

"Oh," the Gentile believer says, "we're having a barbecue tonight, so I've got some meat. Great prices—New York strip eleven cents a pound, T-bone nine cents, and pork is a steal! Tonight we're going to make Aunt Martha's pig-knuckle soup. Why don't you bring the wife and kids and join us?"

Abe's face goes dark, and he says nothing. And then the Gentile brother is taken aback. He realizes what is going on, and he's angry at being judged!

The "easy" solution to this problem would have been to form two churches: "The Church of the Carnivores" (perhaps not a bad name for some churches I have heard of!) and "The First Church of the Vegetarians."

Fortunately, Paul is committed to the nobler, though far more difficult, solution – unity amidst the diversity of the Church.

So how does Paul navigate this? How do we treat our brothers and sisters with whom we disagree in matters indifferent? Well, first, Paul says to "welcome" or "accept" the one who is weak in faith. And what does he mean by the "weaker" and "stronger" brothers? Well, here is what it's not:

Paul does not mean that the person "weak in faith" has a lack of intensity to their faith. Or that their faith is somehow insecure, or that they are on the verge of backsliding. What he is really talking about is a weakness of an understanding of the faith. People who are not deeply rooted in the things of God. People who are still a little confused about what God commands, and what God forbids.

And Paul says, "That's okay. Your responsibility is to receive them, to *welcome* them, into the fellowship of the household of faith."

That is the first important point – we *must* accept each other when faced with non-essential differences.

Now second, notice that in verse 2, Paul says, "One person believes he may eat anything, while the *weak* person eats only vegetables."

Paul is judging the vegetarian position as the weaker, immature position. There is no call to vegetarianism in the bible – nothing wrong with being a vegetarian – it's just not a rule.

Now the problem we run into is that you can be absolutely sure that the vegetarians didn't think they were the weaker brothers. The vegetarians thought they were the stronger ones! So why does Paul call them weak? Why that word? Doesn't it take strength to have and stand by scruples?

He uses the word because their scrupulosity was not grounded in the word of God. Their scruples are commendable in so far as they are trying to please God by them, but they were *not* commendable in that they reflected an *ignorance* of the word of God. Look, the weaker brother, more often than not, is the person who believes that things, in and of themselves, are evil. The guy that thinks that the evil is contained *in* that bottle of whiskey, instead of in the human heart, is the weaker brother. Now some of us grew up thinking that it was the person who drank a glass of wine now and again – that he was the weaker brother – but Paul says, "It's the other way around."

Now look, I have yet to meet the Christian who says, "*I am* the weaker brother." I have yet to meet the Christian who says, "I know I am the weaker brother but I do not think you should have that cigar at dinner." No, they think *they* are the stronger brother, looking out for *my* self-interest.

And I have seen this happen, where the "stronger brother" responds that not only *can* he do what he wants, but turns around and tries to make the weaker brother *live out* a greater freedom.

Now, the stronger brother might be right, biblically, that this challenger really ought to live out the freedom that he has in Christ, but if he makes the weaker brother *go against* his conscience, he's causing someone who might be a new Christian, to violate his conscience. And that is always wrong. Paul says it so clearly here: "Let **not** the one who eats despise the one who abstains." That is the second principle for maintaining unity. Never violate the conscience of another Christian over things indifferent.

Remember, we're only talking about "matters indifferent." A Christian does *not* have the right to choose on his own to disobey what God has clearly commanded or forbidden. Scruples on things where God has not spoken, we leave up to God. "Who are you," Paul says, "to pass judgment on the servant of another?" God, he says, is the judge.

One more point before we move on. What happens when the weaker brothers... get a little out of control? Over in Galatians, the weaker brothers attempted to elevate their scruples to the level of law. They tried to make them matters of obligation for everyone. What did Paul do there? He crushed it. Paul never became so angry as when a group would add law to the gospel.

Are you seeing the difference? When Timothy thought it might help him as a Gentile believer to be circumcised – you know, they had public baths or showers back then – and he wanted it not to be a stumbling block with weaker brothers, Paul said, "fine." It's *adiaphora*. It's meaningless... go ahead.

But in Galatians, when circumcision was deemed necessary for being counted among the people of God, Paul said, "Hey, if you love those old, shadowy laws so much, if you're so obsessed with being circumcised, *why don't you go all the way and emasculate yourselves.*"

So what does that mean? It means that in front of someone who is an alcoholic, it would **not** be good for me to try and enjoy a glass of wine. But in front of a prideful person who flaunts that he has never had a drop, which makes *him* spiritually better... I *must* have a drink! It's exactly what Paul says over in Galatians 5 when he says, "It is for *freedom* that Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit yourselves again to a yoke of slavery."<sup>1</sup> That's a command. An imperative. The liberty that Jesus won for us cost him his very blood, so we can't – we should not – give it up easily.

Friends, the principle is this: We are to bend over backwards to be kind, to be charitable, to be patient with the weaker brother. But we must not allow the weaker brother to exercise a tyranny over the people of God. As soon as that happens, as soon as the weaker brother wants to elevate his scruples into law, he must be resisted for truth's sake, and for the sake of the kingdom of God.

- Christian Community Means that God is the judge.

Everyone in this dispute thinks they are right. They are committed to it. Paul says, "That's okay! Each one *should* be fully convinced in his own mind."

---

<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:1

But here is the thing. One group is very broad-minded – they eat anything. And the other is narrow-minded. No meat, and certain days must be celebrated.

Now what we do culturally, today, is to always say that the broader-minded person is better. Not only that, we go further, and we say, if only the narrow person would *become* the broader minded person, everything would be better. Do you see what happens? It's no longer two possibilities. Broad mindedness is the ANSWER for narrow-mindedness. So that the only way we can have peace, the only way we can get along, is to broaden out to the lowest-common denominator, track back to the widest perspective, retrench to the broadest set of ideas, even if that means saying, "We're all right. Everyone has a little bit of the truth. So let's gather up the little bits, and use that as our basic morality. Then we can say, everyone is right, everyone is moral. Everyone has the truth."

This is happening in culture, and by the way, it is happening in entire denominations. It happens in seminaries. But have you noticed? It isn't working!

Paul says in v.3 "Let not the one who eats (the broad minded!) despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains (the narrow minded) pass judgment on the one who eats." Why does he say this? Because it's happening. The broadminded STILL pass judgment on those they think are narrow-minded.

Do you see why this fails? Now listen close, because Paul himself counts himself among the strong! But he warns them not to despise the weak or narrow-minded ... why? Because when you judge the weak by saying, "Your truth is wrong. Nobody has the truth," you are doing the very thing you are denouncing. You are being narrow-minded. There are whole denominations in the Western and North American world who look down on their narrow-minded brothers in the Southern Hemisphere over certain issues – *issues far more dangerous than adiaphora, because these are things on which the bible is clear* – and the broad-minded have become the narrow-minded because they say, "Our relativistic way of looking at the truth is right, and anyone that doesn't hold to it we consider uncivilized and dangerous."

Tim Keller says "it's worse than being the weaker brother. If you're intolerant of intolerant people... you're intolerant! If you are judgmental of judgmental people, you're judgmental! Broadmindedness per se, where you say, I'm not going to criticize anyone, everyone is right, can make you just as disdainful, make you just as judgmental, just as contentious as the narrow-minded weaker brother."

This leads us to our last point.

- Christian Community is about Only One Thing

D.A. Carson has a new book out called *The Intolerance of Tolerance*. I've only just started reading it, but I can recommend it. And in it he says that today's cultural doctrine is 2-fold. On the one hand, we must never say anyone else is wrong, we can never pass judgment on anyone else's behavior, we must have no negative evaluations, and call nothing sinful. On the other hand, we must never allow someone else's viewpoint or judgments to control or hinder us. See, no judgments going out, and not judgments coming in.

Paul flips this thinking on its head. To the idea that we can never pass judgments, he says, "Accept the weak." The weak! He evaluates and judges their perspective! It is weak. It's wrong. BUT ACCEPT THEM. Welcome them. Receive them. The word "accept" means to alter or change or adjust your life to accommodate them. Now do you see how different this is? The world has redefined "tolerance." "Tolerance" used to mean you actually had to tolerate something you didn't like or accept. It meant that you endured something painful or unpleasant. Like when you say that you are tolerating pain. Now tolerance means – and Carson actually traces the change in dictionary definitions in his book – means the acceptance of something. More than that, to no longer oppose the view you accept. So to tolerate pain in this new definition would be to simply accept it as okay...and not painful.

Now that's subtle, but significant. Because it means you have no enemies anymore. Because you have no differences anymore. Don't make negative evaluations!

But the bible says, in love, make criticism, make negative evaluations, but then make adjustments to HAVE relations with those with whom you differ. The bible says, don't change the truth, but speak it in love. Make deep connections with those with whom you differ. You might be weaker, and he might be stronger... but you're *brothers*. Enter in to their view of things. Understand them and why they believe what they believe. Do everything you can to know and love them, short of agreeing with them when they are biblically wrong.

How do you do this? Look at v. 10. "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God."

Now there is a lot packed in there. But Paul is pointing to all brothers and all sisters – all of us of different races, different backgrounds, different cultures and different genders and ideologies – and says, you can't judge, ultimately, because there is only one judge. The one who will come back in judgment.

But when you look at the cross, what do you see?

We have to see, Paul says, the Jesus Christ made a negative judgment, a negative evaluation, of each and every one of us. He judged as sinners. And not over matters indifferent! But at the same time, he was saying, I am making space for you in my home, my mansion, my table. Come. I accept you. I receive you. See, it was a tolerance that said I will take the pain. It was an acceptance in spite of what was wrong with us. It was a sacrifice so that I could live eternally for him. It's that absolute and singular truth that will give you the power to overcome your home, your neighborhood, and even an empire.

Let's pray.