

SERMON NOTES

SERIES: Romans: God's Power for Salvation
TITLE: "When Christians Disagree (Part 2)"

SCRIPTURE: Romans 14:13-23

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The book of Romans is a masterfully written exposition of the gospel of God. Without a doubt, it is the foundation of authentic Christianity and the most articulate, systematic understanding of our faith found in the Bible. Countless lives have been changed by the truth found in this ancient letter, and it continues to change lives today. Interestingly enough, Romans was written to Christians. So, while the good news found in Romans can certainly bring people to faith in Jesus, the actual focus is on how the gospel helps Christians think rightly about God, life, faith, and Christian community. If you want to grow to know God more personal and intimate way, this letter is for you!

In the church at Rome, some of the Jewish believers are upset at the Gentile believers for eating non-kosher meat and drinking non-kosher wine. And while this might sound trite to us, things like this (and Sabbath, circumcision, etc) were driving a wedge in between Christians there. After all, didn't God command kosher-eating in the Old Testament? But Paul also talks about how Jesus fulfilled the laws of the Old Testament (Romans 10:4, etc). So, what does Paul have to say about all this? How are these Roman Christians supposed to live *in* harmony and *with* differences at the same time? And this same question has to be asked at every local church. How do we disagree agreeably?

Now, obviously Paul and the rest of the biblical writers clearly define certain things as sin - adultery, gluttony, drunkenness, lying, gossiping, stealing, etc. But there are also dozens of issues about which Scripture doesn't give specific parameters. For example, the Bible says nothing directly about dating, smartphones, smoking, yoga, mental health, movies, Halloween, aliens, birth control, and the list could go on for days. And Paul is saying that it's okay for Christians to have different opinions on these secondary issues if they get their opinions from biblical principles, and if they don't pass judgment on people whose opinions are different than their own.

And as Paul considers these different opinions in Romans 14-15, he talks about Christians with weaker and stronger consciences. The weak have stricter consciences, and the strong are freer in what their conscience allows them to do (i.e. drink non-kosher wine). And the tension comes when what is free to one Christian might be hurtful to another. What do we do when that happens?

Paul says in 14:13 that we should not "pass judgment" on one another, but he says that we *should* "pass judgment" on how we're going to treat one another, no matter who is it or what it's about (if it's a disputable matter). And the decided way to treat someone with whom you differ is to not put a stumbling block in their way (the language of stumbling is used in verses 13, 20, and 21). This is a warning specifically to those with freer consciences. Paul tells them that burdening other brothers or sisters because of your freedoms can "destroy" them (14:15, 14:20), which is very heavy language. So, the negative response for the strong believer is that they shouldn't cause others to stumble. But what does this look like positively? It looks like...

- Love limiting liberty.

Love is the proper motive, from 14:15. *Limiting* is from verse 21, where it says not to do something if it's a hindrance to another Christian. And *liberty* is what the strong are free to do in verses 14 and 22, but should consider not doing for the sake of others. And this principle was intended to push the Roman church (and us!) towards maturity and unity.

So, if you have a strict conscience, and you intentionally make stronger brothers feel guilty about their freedoms just so that you can feel victorious, there have assuredly been no honest conversations about unity. And if you're a stronger brother or sister, and your dominant thought is that people with weaker consciences are missing the point, and your entire goal is to bend their consciences to yours, you are selfish and acting against unity. "Love limiting liberty" is one of the supreme ways that we learn to live *in* harmony and *with* differences at the same time, and it requires discipline and sacrifice from all Christians, but especially those with freer consciences.

At the heart of the passage, Paul also gives another way for us to think about these differences of opinion. And this suggestion means that the weak shouldn't look for contexts to be offended, and that the strong shouldn't think and act poorly towards the weak by haphazardly exercising their freedoms. Paul tells his friends to...

- Pursue peace.

Meaning, every discussion about a difference should begin and end with peace. After all, peace (and not your opinion on modesty, alcohol, or rated-R movies) is the way that the kingdom is built up eternally (14:17). So, begin those dialogues by gratefully talking about the peace and unity that we have because of Jesus. Then learn to ask honest questions. Don't defend your opinion. Pray for each other. Encourage each other. And then close the conversation thanking God for his peace. This is how we disagree agreeably, by "pursuing peace and mutual upbuilding" (14:19).

Lastly, Paul frames his entire discussion in Romans 14-15 around the idea of welcoming one another. And to close this discussion, he says that we should "welcome one another *just as* Christ has welcomed us" (15:7). Well, how has Christ welcomed us? Answer: with grace. Jesus loved us when we disagreed with him. He pursued peace with us when we were distant from him. In our rebellion, while we were still his enemies, he welcomed us, he invited us, and he called us. And in order to bridge the gap, in love, he limited himself, stooping from heaven to earth. This all means that loving a Christian with whom you disagree isn't about how you feel, it's about further experiencing God's grace. Meaning...

- Vertical grace leads to horizontal grace.

If we truly grasp the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus, we will more naturally move towards maturity, unity, love, and grace with each other. Jesus is the focal point of our disagreements, not the issue itself. If Jesus doesn't judge us, what are we doing wasting our time judging each other? And if we know that vertical grace is glorious, why do we often refuse horizontal grace?

Our primary need when it comes to discrepancies with other Christians is not more education or less tradition. Our primary need is a more robust view of Jesus at all times. He is the source of love, peace, and grace that should bind us to each other as we are bound to him. Focusing on him is how we can do Romans 15:7, "Welcome one another *just as* Christ has welcomed you."

For Discussion

Have someone read Romans 14:13-23.

1. What are some current issues that, when you hear other Christians state opinions different than yours, you find it distracting or hard to see why they believe the way they do?
2. In Romans 14, what are Paul's basic commands to the strong (those with freer consciences)?
3. Name a 'mature weak' brother or sister and a 'mature strong' brother or sister who you know handles fragile issues with grace. How do they do it?
4. Personally, what is the hardest thing for you about welcoming other Christians with whom you disagree?
5. Can you think of a time in your life when your opinions about a specific issue may have been a stumbling block to another Christian?
6. Is there are relationship in your life right in which you need to more intentionally pursue peace?
7. How do all of these differences relate to the gospel? What is the connection in Paul's mind in Romans 14-15?