

MULTIPLYING LOCAL CHURCHES BY WELCOMING BELIEVERS WITH WHOM WE DISAGREE

Romans 14:1-12

INTRODUCTION

I'm pretty sure that even those of us who are completely disinterested in politics are aware of the storm raging in our state capital as Governor Walker and the Republican majority in our state Legislature have passed legislation to limit the collective bargaining rights of public employees and seek to cut the budget while the public employee unions and their Democratic allies fight to preserve collective bargaining rights and state programs. Tens of thousands of people have been protesting in and around the state capital for weeks. Did you know that we have people sitting in our church who were part of those protests? We have people who were at the state capital protesting against Governor Walker and his policies and people who were protesting for Governor Walker and his policies. We have many people in our church who support the public employees collective bargaining rights and many who oppose those rights.

And this isn't the only issue about which the Christians in our church disagree. We have people sitting here this morning who believe God does not want them to use birth control and we have people who believe God approves of their use of birth control. We have people who believe God wants them to home school their children and others who believe God wants them to send their children to public school. We have people who believe wives and mothers should not work outside the home and others who believe God approves of wives and mothers working outside the home. We have people who believe God does not want Christians to drink alcohol and others who believe God approves of their drinking. There are people sitting next to each other this morning who are sure God wants them to believe the earth is only 10,000 years old and others who are just as sure God wants them to believe the earth is billions of years old. We have people who believe God does not want their teenage children to date and others who believe that God approves of their teenagers dating.

The fact that believers in our church disagree about important things is not limited to our church or to our day. It has always been the case that the Christians who make up local churches disagree about all kinds of issues and behaviors. The unity and effectiveness of local churches has always been threatened by these disagreements. Thankfully, God knows this and has given us some very clear and helpful instructions about how we are to deal with the fact that believers disagree about important things. Without question the most complete instruction in the Bible about the way in which we are to deal with disagreements is in Paul's letter to the local church in Rome. In Romans 14:1 through 15:7 God, through his apostle explains how Christians who disagree are to live together in local churches. This week we are going to look at 14:1-12 and next week at 14:13-23. While this passage does not directly address the issue of evangelism and the planting of other churches yet I cannot think of an issue that is more related to the successful gathering in of God's lost sheep than this one. God's sheep come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, that is, with a large diversity of opinions on all kinds of issues and so if we are going to be a church that has a part in reaching all of God's lost sheep we must be a church that knows how to warmly welcome believers with whom we disagree.

Paul's aim in this chapter is quite obvious. He begins his argument with a command to the "strong in faith" Christians in the Roman church to warmly welcome the "weak in faith" Christians. Then in the last verse in his argument, 15:7, he commands all the Christians in the church to warmly welcome every other Christian, just like Jesus has welcomed each of us into his family. You can see Paul's chief concern is the unity of the church in 15:5-6 where he prays, "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Local churches are to be united by our common faith in and love for Jesus so that, in spite of all of our differences, we are joined together in the common cause of praising and promoting the beauty and wonder of the Triune God who saved us and made us his children. Churches that aim to be united by a common political philosophy or a common musical preference or a common sociological demographic or a

common moral crusade are wrong. If the reason you are in this church is not because of your delight in Jesus and his saving work you are in this church for the wrong reason. Our unity is found in Christ only and that unity is preserved by our warmly welcoming every believer into our church and into our lives, especially those who disagree with us about important things. In the first half of Romans 14 Paul gives us three reasons why we should warmly welcome and not despise or judge those who disagree with us.

MAIN POINT

Christians warmly welcome all believers into their churches because...

I. God through Christ welcomes all believers (vv.1-3)

As I indicated Paul's opening command is directed to those who are in the majority in the church in Rome, those who are "strong in faith." Paul does not use the term "strong" until 15:1 but throughout this passage he is addressing these two groups of people who disagree about various lifestyle choices. Let's make sure we understand what Paul means by "weak in faith" and "strong in faith." He does not mean that there are some people in the church who are trusting in Jesus as their Savior and Lord and others who are not trusting in Jesus. This is not a reference to that faith which unites us to Jesus and is the means by which we obtain all of his benefits. As for example in Romans 5:1 when he says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ..." Every person to whom he is speaking is depending upon all that Jesus is and all that he has done to make them right with God. All of these people have been saved by grace through their personal faith in Jesus. None of them believe that what they do or don't do will save them.

Paul uses three examples in this chapter to distinguish between the "weak in faith" and the "strong in faith". In v. 2 the weak are those who believe that God does not want them to eat meat but to eat only vegetables, while the "strong" eat anything and everything. In v. 5 the weak in faith are those who believe that God requires that they treat certain days as more important or holy than other days. In v. 21 the weak in faith believe that God does not want them to drink wine. Verse 14 tells us the exact problem. Those who are weak in faith believe that eating meat, working on Sunday or drinking wine is a sin, it makes a person unclean, unfit for God. We don't really know why they believed these things; there are at least 6 theories among the commentators for why people might have believed these things in this church. But the point is fairly obvious: the weak in faith are those who believe that certain activities are sinful which Paul does not regard as sinful. Paul clearly puts himself in the camp of the "strong in faith", that is, he believes that Christians are free to do these things, that eating meat, working on Sunday and drinking wine are not sinful. You can see that in v.14 and in 5:1.

However, Paul, other than using the categories of "weak" and "strong" and making the one statement he makes in v. 14, puts no pressure on anyone to change his or her mind. His aim is not to make people think like him about these things but to get those who disagree about these things to stop despising and judging each other and to warmly welcome each other. Paul understands the particular way each of these two groups will tend to treat those who differ from them. Those who eat meat and work on Sunday and drink wine easily despise their more conservative brethren and look down upon them with disdain. Notice in v. 1 these people are commanded to not seek to change the minds of those who believe these activities are sinful. It is wrong for those who believe they are free to eat whatever they want or to drink wine or to work on Sunday to pressure or seek to persuade those who think these things are wrong to change. So Paul's command to these strong in faith people is to not be condescending and to not try to change those who disagree but to engage in warm personal relationships with those who differ from them.

However, he also commands the weak in faith to not do what they are prone to do. Those who believe God does not want people to eat unclean meat or to drink wine or to work on Sunday tend to judge their more liberal brothers in the Lord. They have a tendency to view themselves as more serious Christians and those who don't obey these rules as liberal and lukewarm. At the end of v. 3 Paul says the reason that strong in faith Christians must not despise or quarrel with the weak in faith and the reason the weak in faith must not judge the strong in faith is because, "God has welcomed him." We must welcome all those whom God welcomes. How do you

think God will feel if you refuse to welcome into your life someone whom he has welcomed into his life? If someone tells me they like me but they despise my children, will I want to spend time with that person?

However, that does raise the question: who are the people that God has welcomed? The short answer is this: all who have been born again by the Spirit of God and thus have a true faith in the true Christ and by faith through the Spirit live in accordance with the will of God as revealed in his word. Paul is not suggesting that we are to welcome into our lives those who say they are Christians but who are living in open disobedience to Christ or who are believing false doctrines about Christ. Listen to one place where Paul shows that we are not to warmly welcome those who profess to be Christians but do not believe the truth or live in accord with it: "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people--not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. 'Purge the evil person from among you'" (1 Cor 5:9-13). This is one of dozens of texts that tell us that we are not to welcome into our lives as Christian brothers or sisters people who say they are Christians but who are living in open defiance to God's clear word or who do not believe true doctrine. However, you must warmly welcome every true believer into your life, even if they are doing or believing things you don't think God likes but about which God has not clearly spoken.

I can hear some of you saying, "Well that is just the problem. I think the Bible clearly teaches these things and that's why I don't do them or believe them and so I am not going to be friends with those folks in my church who don't agree with me because I think they are bad Christians, if they are Christians at all." Let me be specific. Let's say you are a mom and you believe that God does not want moms to work outside the home. You and your husband have made serious sacrifices so that you can stay at home and care for the children. But you know another mother in the church who works outside the home. Let's say you are both members of our church which means that you each have submitted to a pretty rigorous course of instruction and interview and have been accepted by our church as a true Christian. What God is telling you in vv. 1-3 is this: you only have two choices in relation to this working mom who belongs to your church. Either you are required to not judge her but to warmly welcome her into your life and to be her Christian friend or you are required to go to her and gently confront her with her sin of working outside the home. If she is unwilling to repent and stop working outside the home then you are required to go get another Christian to confront her with you. And if she will not listen to the two of you then you must begin the process of having her excommunicated from the church. In a similar way that working mom must enthusiastically pursue a warm friendship with the mom who stays at home and not look down on her in any way or try to show her that God doesn't require moms to stay at home but seek to be her Christian sister. The evidence that you are a Christian is that you warmly welcome into your life those other true Christians in your church who live differently than you and think differently than you. It is no evidence that you love Jesus when the only people you enjoy being with are the ones who are just like you.

II. Jesus is Lord of all believers (vv.4-9)

In v. 4 Paul tells us that every Christian is the servant of Jesus. In v. 9 he says Jesus is the Lord and master of every Christian. Thus, as v. 4 says you have no business judging the servant of Jesus. Each servant will be judged by his own master and because our master is Jesus each servant will survive that test because Jesus enables us to pass the test. He took God's anger upon himself for our sins and he obeyed the law for us and thus when we stand before him in judgment we will pass through it safely because Jesus is able to make us stand in God's judgment.

However, in vv. 5-8, before he elaborates on that point, Paul concentrates on what it is that motivates the true servants of Jesus. He begins, in v. 5, by using another example of disagreement between the strong and weak. Some Christians believe that God commands them to treat Sunday as a holy day, that is, that it is a sin to work on Sunday. Other Christians think that all days are the same and God makes no distinction between days of the

week. Look at the end of v.5: each one is to be fully convinced in his or her own mind. Paul is not requiring anyone to change his or her mind. Rather he is insisting that each person be fully convinced about his or her position. What does he mean by this? He tells us in the next three verses.

In v. 6, if you observe Sunday as a Sabbath, as a day holy to the Lord, then you are doing it to honor the Lord. That is, you are doing it by faith and for his glory. Your not working on that day is so that you can demonstrate that Jesus is your treasure. You are not doing it to show your piety or to win God's favor but because you love Jesus and delight in him and his saving work. In the same way the person who eats meat without asking any questions about how it was butchered or what kind of meat it is does so in honor of the Lord. The evidence that he or she eats in honor of the Lord is that he or she thanks God for the meat. In the same way, those who restrict their diet do so for the Lord. The evidence of their eating in honor of the Lord is they give thanks for their food as well.

Then in vv. 7-8 Paul gives the main theological reason for why Christians do whatever they do and thus the reason we should not judge or despise each other but warmly welcome each other. No Christian is living his or her life for his own glory and benefit. No Christian dies and enters into eternal life for his own glory. In all of our living and in all of our dying we belong to the Lord and thus we do all that we do trusting in him and seeking to serve him and honor him with our living and our dying. If my brother in Christ is supporting the public employee unions as service to Jesus and for his honor, then who am I to criticize him or to reject him or not be his friend? If my sister in Christ is supporting Gov. Walker's plans to control the state budget because she loves Jesus and is seeking to honor him, then who am I to judge her and refuse to be her friend? If my brother believes the earth is billions of years old by faith and for the glory of God, then who am I to judge him and call him a bad Christian? If my sister believes the earth is 10,000 years old by faith and for the glory of Christ then who am I to despise her and not be her friend?

Listen to me, you cannot get drunk for the honor of Christ. You cannot look at pornography to the glory of Jesus. You cannot hoard your money and not give it away for the sake of the gospel to the honor of Christ. You cannot gossip and slander another person by faith in Jesus. But you can send your child to public school for the honor of Christ and you can home school your child to the honor of Jesus. Paul's point is simply this, we are all servants of Jesus and we all are doing what we do as an expression of our faith in Jesus and for his honor and thus we have no ground for criticizing and for refusing to be friends with those who are serving Jesus differently than we are. We are all on the same team and doing what we do for the same reason, the display of the greatness of our Lord and Savior Jesus. Therefore, don't judge or despise but warmly welcome and befriend and relate to your brothers and sisters who are living to the glory of God, just like you. Obviously Paul's entire argument presumes that you and I are doing all that we do for the honor of Christ. Therefore, each of us must evaluate our own hearts and lives as to whether or not that is true. However, I am to always assume about my Christian brother or sister that he or she is living to the Lord and dying to the Lord. I am to assume that every Christian is living as they do because they are convinced this is what pleases the Lord.

III. Jesus will judge all believers (vv.10-12)

Paul ends this part of his argument by asking the same pointed question he asked before. Why do you "strong in faith" people despise your brothers? Why do you "weak in faith" people judge your brother? Then he gives the reason for why doing these things is not good for you. The reason we should not do these things is because we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Then he quotes a verse from Isaiah 52 in which God declares that every human being will bow the knee in submission and verbally acknowledge that God alone is the judge. Thus Paul says, each and every Christian is going to have to give an account of himself or herself to God. I think for many of us this is a confusing statement because of how we have been taught the gospel.

Paul, in this very letter says that everyone who is trusting in Jesus has been declared not guilty but perfectly righteous because of Jesus' perfect obedience to God's law, his willing death upon the cross and his glorious resurrection. Thus Paul says in Romans 5:9, "Since then we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him." Or in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” In other words, because of Jesus, every believer is going to safely pass through God’s judgment. We will not suffer wrath or be condemned for our sins. So how can it be that each of us will have to give an account of ourselves to the Lord at the judgment? Here is the answer, while no one can be or will be granted eternal life because of his or her works, everyone is going to be judged according to his or her works. We are rescued from God’s wrath and given eternal life because of what Jesus has done. However, the evidence that we have been rescued by Jesus will be seen in the good works that Christ has done through us as we have trusted him. We will be judged according to what we have done.

Let me share with you an illustration I got from John Piper and adapted that I think helps to understand this. Imagine that every day of your life is a 100 question test. Every wrong answer you get on each day’s test deserves hell because every wrong answer is sin against the great and good and kind God who has given you everything. Also, you have to get every question correct on every day to be fit for heaven as only the perfectly righteous can live in heaven with the righteous God. From the moment you are born you get every question wrong on each day’s test. Thus, you are an object of God’s wrath in your natural condition. Let’s say you are born again by God’s Spirit during the 12th year of your life and thus you begin to trust in Jesus as your Savior and Lord. At that moment you, sinner that you be, are declared forgiven of all your sins and perfectly righteous with the righteousness of Christ. According to Ephesians 2:10 (and scores of other verses) the moment you are saved by grace through faith, not by works, you begin to do good works which God has prepared for you to do. Thus on each day following your becoming a Christian you get a few answers on each day’s test right. Most of them are still wrong and you never really get full credit for any question; you always do part of every question wrong. Yet, there are some partially correct answers, that is, thoughts, words and deeds you have performed by faith for the glory of the God through the work of the HS. At the end of your life you will come before God with all the tests from all the days of your life. However, before you give an account of your life, the Lord Jesus takes all your tests and he takes every wrong answer and burns them up because he has already suffered God’s wrath for all your wrong answers. Then he approaches the throne with you, carrying the correct answers. He tells his Father that you are one of his. He suffered God’s just wrath against your sins and he has clothed you with his perfect righteousness which he performed for you. The public evidence that you are one of his are these few good works that have been made acceptable to God through Christ. If there are no good works, no correct answers then Christ will not be standing there with you, you will have to answer to God alone for all of the tests on which you got every question wrong. This is not a perfect illustration and cannot be pushed but it does help us to understand how each one of us will give an account of our lives to God and how we are not saved by our works but rewarded according to our works, that is, our good works which God prepared in advance for us to do are the public testimony that we are one of Christ’s redeemed sheep because, “my sheep hear my voice and they follow me”.

So how does knowing that one day I will stand before God in judgment motivate me to not despise or judge my Christian siblings but warmly welcome them? First, I recognize that I am not the judge. My brother or sister does not answer to me. When I despise or judge my Christian sibling for different lifestyle choices they have made I am acting as though I am God, as if I am their Lord. This is not my place. They have to answer to God, not to me and so I can freely love them as they are and trust that God will justly deal with them. Second, as the evidence of my being saved by grace through faith are the good works which God created me to do, then I am eager to not do bad works but only good works. Criticizing other Christians and not loving them is a bad work, it is sin. It is not a God wrought, Spirit directed work to despise and judge another Christian and thus if I do not repent of my critical heart and cold actions and lack of love, then these sins will testify against my claim to be a Christian. Or to say it positively, my loving Christians who disagree with me is an obvious Spirit produced good work which will testify for me at the judgment. Because I trust and love Jesus, I dread having him say to me, “Away from me you worker of evil. I never knew you.” I am eager to hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.” Therefore I will work to not despise or judge those Christians who live and think differently from me and seek to warmly welcome them into my life and into our church because one day I will give an account of myself to God.

There are many questions which this chapter raises and which I hope we will talk with one another about. Next week, as we look at the second half of this chapter we will examine some of the down and dirty details of how this actually works in our relationships.

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