

MULTIPLYING LOCAL CHURCHES BY LIVING FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS

Romans 14:13-23

INTRODUCTION

In Romans 14 Paul is giving instructions to the family of God in the city of Rome on how they are to live with each other in view of the fact that they, just like us, disagree with one another about important things. In this church in Rome the source of the disagreement is that some of the Christians in this church, whom Paul labels as “weak in faith” believe it to be a sin to eat meat, drink wine and work on the Sabbath. Others in the church, whom Paul labels “strong in faith”, believe they are free to eat meat, drink wine and to treat all days alike. His objective in giving these instructions is far bigger than merely keeping the peace. He aims for all of these Christians to warmly welcome each other into the church and into each other’s lives so that they may, “with one heart and voice glorify the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ” as he states in 14:1 & 15:5-7.

Last week we looked at the first 12 verses of the chapter to see the three reasons Paul gives for why Christians who disagree about important things should not despise or judge each other but instead warmly welcome each other. To review: we must not despise or judge other believers with whom we disagree but embrace them as brothers and sisters because 1) God has welcomed them into his life, 2) because Jesus is their Lord, not us and 3) because all of us will stand before God’s judgment seat and give an account to him and how you treat the Christians with whom you disagree will be very high on God’s list of things for which we will have to answer. This week Paul gives us more specific directions for how we are to relate to those with whom we disagree and he gives us more reasons for why we should live this way in our relationships to others. As I mentioned last week, while this passage does not directly address the issues of evangelism and church planting there is no more important issue than how we treat each other that will directly impact our ability to gather in God’s lost sheep.

MAIN POINT

Christians regularly modify their behavior and speech for the good of other believers because...

I. We limit our liberty to protect those for whom Christ died (vv.13-16)

Whereas in vv. 1-12 Paul addressed both groups in this church, in vv. 13-23 Paul places a larger responsibility on those who are “strong in faith” to give up their rights in order to love their more conservative brothers and sisters. This is especially clear in the second half of v. 13, vv.15-16, vv. 20-21 and especially 15:1-2. However, I think it would be an error to say that Paul only requires the “strong in faith” to adjust their behavior and speech for the sake of others. First, the whole church is being addressed in this letter and thus all must learn from what Paul commands a certain group in the church to do. Second, there are several statements that clearly are addressed to all, the first part of v. 13, vv.17-19, vv.22-23. Third, how much of what Paul says to the “strong in faith” does he say because of their theological understanding that “nothing is unclean in itself” and how much is due to the fact that they are in the majority in this local church? There is a special responsibility in every local church for those who are in the majority, regardless of where they fall in the category of “weak” and “strong” to pay particular attention to how their speech and behavior is affecting the people in the minority. Thus in our church parents who homeschool their children, the young, the married, those who are racially white, children who are homeschooled—all these are in the majority and thus should pay attention to what Paul says to the “strong” in this passage.

Paul commands all Christians in the opening of v. 13: because God has welcomed all true Christians and because all true Christians are the servants of Jesus and because all true Christians are going to give an account to God, therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another. Every critical, condemning thought and feeling you have towards other Christians in this local church is a sin. Let me repeat that, every critical, condemning thought and feeling you have towards other Christians in this local church is a sin. When you say in your heart,

“That person is wrong to think that way or to act that way” and the way the other person thinks or acts is not specifically condemned by the Lord in his word; that thought must be viewed by you as sin and confessed to the Lord and forsaken. Every action you take to avoid others in our church or to not welcome them into your life because you disapprove of their lifestyle choices or political views or station in life or race or whatever is a sin which must be confessed to Jesus and for which his help to do the right thing must be implored.

But the next command in v. 13 is addressed specifically to the “strong in faith”. The way we know this is not clear in the English as in the Greek. The first clause in v. 13 is addressed to “us”, all Christians in the local church. The second half is addressed to a subset of the church as Paul switches the subject of the verb to the plural “you” and that same “you” is addressed in v. 15 as those who eat, which is what the “strong” do but the “weak” do not do. In v. 13 Paul commands those who know, like he does, that God has no preference about what food you eat, to not put a stumbling block or hindrance in the path of a brother or sister who believes that there are certain foods that God does not want you to eat.

These two words, “stumbling block” and “hindrance” are most often used in the NT in reference to Jesus based on the OT prophet Isaiah’s use of them in a reference to the Messiah. If you turn back a few pages to Romans 9:32-33 you can see them both used. Paul is discussing the fact that most Jewish people have rejected Jesus, while myriads of Gentiles have embraced him and so he says, “Why? Because they (unbelieving Israel) did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” Jesus is a large stone in the path that causes all unbelieving Israelites to stumble and fall over the cliff into eternal destruction. Jewish people are offended by a crucified Messiah and the assertion that they are not righteous by their obedience to the law but can only be accepted by God on the basis of their faith in this offensive, crucified Messiah.

However, Jesus also uses the second word, “hindrance,” several times to describe how the actions of some people cause “the little ones who believe in him”, that is, all true Christians, to stumble in their faith in Christ. Listen again to what he says in Matthew 18:6-7, “whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” “Temptations to sin” is the same word translated here as “hindrance” and the phrase “cause one of these little ones . . . to sin” is the verb that comes from this noun. In a moment we will describe what exactly this means but the main point to see is that putting a stumbling block or a hindrance in the path of a Christian brother or sister is very serious business. If you do this you are in deep trouble with God.

So what does it mean to put a stumbling block or hindrance in another Christian’s path? Verses 14-16 tell us. Paul begins by stating what all “strong” believers know and thus the reason they eat meat, drink wine, and regard all days the same: He says, “According to the plain teaching of the Lord Jesus himself, when he was upon this earth, nothing is unclean in itself.” Paul is not saying that God has no standards and that once you are a Christian you can do anything you want with no fear that God will react negatively to you. We know he doesn’t mean that because of the context. He is saying that no food or drink or day is unclean. We also know he’s not saying a Christian can do anything he wants because of dozens of other statements in the Bible to the contrary. Paul writes in Galatians 5:19-21, “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” If these attitudes and behaviors characterize your life, you are unclean before God and unfit for heaven. So there are lots of actions and attitudes that will make you unclean before God but eating meat, drinking wine and working on Sunday are not among them.

Paul goes on in v. 14, and I paraphrase, “however, if a person believes that eating meat, drinking wine and working on Sunday are sins, then they are sins for that person, even though God does not call them sin, considered as actions in themselves.” “Therefore,” Paul says, “if you strong in faith person cause grief to your

more scrupulous brother or sister by your eating what God permits you to eat, you are not acting in love. You shall not, by what you eat, destroy your brother for whom Christ died.” What Paul means here is this: if your brother thinks that it is a sin to eat pork and you know he thinks it is a sin and you invite him over to your house for a meal and serve him pork and so he eats because of the social pressure you have put on him, you have caused him to sin and if he does not repent of that sin and continues to eat what he believes to be sinful, he will come under the judgment of God. By your putting pressure on your brother or sister to do what they believe to be sinful you are placing him or her in spiritual jeopardy. What you have done is just like inviting a group of men to your house to watch porno movies or inviting women over to your house so you can talk about what an evil person another member of your church is or like encouraging a group of your friends to join you in shoplifting. Verse 16 reflects Paul’s agreement with the right of the strong to eat but condemns them for making this God given freedom the focus of hostility as more conservative Christians react to being pressured into doing what they believe to be sin. The strong will bring destruction to the Christian community, that is, dissension and division, if they insist on exercising their Christian liberty and by so doing pressure those who are not convinced of that liberty to go against their conscience.

It is important to note that the grief you cause your brother or sister in v. 15 is not the critical attitude that the weaker brother feels towards those who do what he or she does not think Christians should do. It is this critical, judgmental attitude on the part of the more conservative Christians towards their more liberal brothers and sisters which Paul forbids throughout the chapter. So for example if you know that a Christian brother is mad at you for drinking wine with your meals but that brother is not tempted to drink and so violate his conscience, you are not required to refrain from drinking so that he is not mad. The grief that you cause a weak sister is the grief of sinning against the Lord by doing what her conscience tells her is a sin.

Finally it is critical that we note why we should not pressure other believers to go against their conscience. He says that the reason not to make use of your freedom in such a way as to put pressure on others to violate their conscience is because you will be destroying one for whom Christ died. John Stott in his commentary captures Paul’s sentiment with this burst of questions to those who put pressure on others to do what they believe to be sin: “Did Christ love him enough to die for him, and shall we not love him enough to refrain from wounding his conscience? Did Christ sacrifice himself for his well-being and shall we assert ourselves to his harm? Did Christ die to save him and shall we not care if we destroy him?”

Let me try to illustrate how this might work. Let’s say you’re married and going out to dinner with another couple from church with whom you are developing a friendship. You and your wife normally have a glass of wine with your meal when you go out but you don’t know how this other couple feels about drinking. You could just abstain because you do not know. However, it might be more appropriate to ask the other couple: Do you drink alcohol? If they say they do not drink, then ask: Do you feel it is wrong to drink alcohol? Would you be sinning against God if you drank a glass of wine? If they say it would be a sin for them to drink, then you could ask: If I were to drink a glass of wine with my meal would you feel pressured to join me? Would I be tempting you to do what you believe is wrong? If they say yes or there is any hesitation on their part, then you would refrain from drinking.

II. Our chief joy is the kingdom of God (vv.17-18)

Verses 17-19 are a direct challenge to everyone in the church. Paul asserts that the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. He is employing sarcasm or biting irony to get the attention of the people in the church. To the strong brother he is saying, as one commentator put it, “You think a plate of meat more valuable than God’s kingdom?” To the weak brother he is saying, “Really, you want to determine membership and status in the kingdom of God based on what people eat and drink?” Insisting on your right to eat while destroying fellow citizens of God’s kingdom and bringing division into it or criticizing others for what they eat and drink and thus destroying the kingdom of God is outrageous behavior. God’s kingdom, his rule over people in the present age is made evident in

churches and Christians characterized by true righteousness, by peaceful and harmonious relationships and by the joy of salvation, of belonging to God; all of which is produced by the Holy Spirit.

The question Paul is seeking to force us to ask is this: how do we recognize those people who have the Triune God as their king, who are living in joyful dependence upon and obedience to Father, Son and Holy Spirit? You do not recognize them by their diet or by what holy days they observe or by their politics or by the way they school their children or by their race or age or gender or by how many children they have or by their marital status or by the kinds of clothing they wear or by whether or not they celebrate Halloween or by how old they think the earth is or ...

What marks those who belong to God's kingdom are these things: first they depend upon Christ to make them righteous, not upon their own work and thus they know that they died with Christ to sin and have risen into a new life with Christ. Therefore, their life is marked by his righteousness which is summarized by Paul in Romans 13:9-10, "The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Those who love do not make a woman the object of their lust, do not steal from work, do take a meal to their sick neighbor, do obey their parents, do not put pressure on a friend to sin against his conscience, do not judge a Christian sister who does not live like you. In short, righteousness is a life of love for others.

Second, they are characterized by their work to maintain the peace in the church. They do not cause divisions, do not promote dissension, do not refuse to talk to people who have offended them or are different from them, are not indifferent to their church but view it as their family, in short, they work to promote the peace of the church because they know that we all, through Christ, have peace with God. Finally, the kingdom of God is to be found where the people are full of joy in God, in his saving work on their behalf. This joy is expressed in their corporate worship and in their continual prayer and in their confidence in the goodness of God no matter what happens to them and in their eagerness to please God even when it hurts. All this is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. These are the things that mark out those churches which are an expression of the kingdom of God and those people who are citizens of God's kingdom.

I do not think it difficult to understand that churches which are marked by these things are churches that are going to be part of God's gathering in of all of his lost sheep. Paul points this out in v. 18. People who live as I've just described both please God and obtain the approval of men. In light of what Paul says in other letters the only reason he cares about whether or not men approve of us is so that they will approve of the Christ who is our Savior and Lord. When we are known by righteousness, peace and joy and not by our diet or other lifestyle issues, then will the lost men and women around us take notice and be attracted to our king and submit to him and become fellow citizens of God's kingdom.

III. We live by faith in Christ at all times (vv.19-23)

Verse 19 and the first sentence of v. 20 apply to all of us without distinction. Our main ambition is to be to promote peace in the church and to work to build the faith of our brothers and sisters, even those who disagree with us. Or to say it negatively, we are not to destroy the work of God, which here refers to the local church as the expression of God's kingdom on this earth, for the sake of food or politics or school choice or race or anything else. Then he turns back to the "strong" commanding them to make sure they are not bringing spiritual harm to their more conservative brethren. We are to refrain from exercising our Christian liberty in every way if by our exercising it we are causing other Christians to sin against their own conscience. The key point here is this: do I think about how my behavior is influencing others or do I just live my life without giving any thought to how I am affecting other people? We all notice when others act and speak without any concern for us but do we regularly think about how our acting and speaking is either helping or hurting other Christians? All of us are influencing those around us. The question is: are we influencing them for good or for ill?

I've had a number of people ask me if this passage is telling us not to discuss these matters with other believers. It certainly looks to me as though the people in the church in Rome knew who belonged to each camp and thus there had to have been some discussion of these matters. However, in the first sentence in v. 21 Paul clearly expects that we will refrain from talking about these matters in certain situations. I think it would be over-reading this command to say we can never talk about these matters. If that is what Paul meant then he disobeyed his own command by writing this chapter. But there are times when we will refrain from expressing our opinions on these matters. I've seen in the last couple of weeks, clear examples of what Paul is saying here. I've been in several small group settings where people have expressed their opinion on what is going on in our state government in a tone suggesting that everyone who is in the group agrees with them or as if it is somehow obvious what the correct position to take in this matter is. Yet I knew that there were other Christians in the group who took the exact opposite view. Don't assume the people in your small group or with whom you speak after church think the same way you do and so restrain your desire to express your opinion on these matters. Realize that if you spend all your time talking about these "disputable" matters you are going to alienate many Christians whom you are commanded to love. We need to learn to love the gospel and love talking about what all Christians love, the person and work of Jesus, the nature of God and his works in the world. Talk often and freely about what really matters and keep your opinions about these other matters to yourself unless you are sure to whom you are talking.

The last three sentences are a description of how we all ought to be seeking to live and helping each other live. The best way to live is to have a clear conscience before God, to be certain that the way you are living is approved of by God. It is a sin to do things that you are not 100% sure that God wants you to do. That last sentence, "whatever does not come from faith is sin;" is a description of how the Christian life is supposed to work. When a person knows how great his sin is and how right it would be for God to send her immediately to hell and yet how God has sent his Son into the world to live and die and rise from the dead so that simply by trusting in him that person is forgiven of all her sins and counted as perfectly righteous and guaranteed an eternal home with God in the new heavens and the new earth; when you know this, then your highest ambition and greatest delight is to obey your Lord and Savior Jesus. Your goal is not to see how much sin you can get away with and still go to heaven. Your goal is please this one who has saved you. Nothing causes you more grief or sends greater tremors through your body than the thought of being rejected by him or of displeasing him. Nothing fills your heart with more joy than knowing that he approves of how you are living. You want to love what he loves and hate what he hates. Thus if you are not convinced in your heart that you are free to do what you see other Christians doing, then don't do it and don't judge them for doing it. If you see another believer refraining from doing something you are free to do, live by faith in Christ and limit your liberty so that you do not offend but rather build up your brother in Christ. Not despising or judging your brother or sister in Christ but warmly welcoming them and seeking to build them up and not destroy them are what those who trust in Christ do because faith in Christ always produces love for Christ and thus delight in doing his will no matter what it costs us.

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