

## “IN ALL THINGS...”

Studies in Romans – 17

Romans 14:8-19 (p. 1102)

No matter who you are or where you live, you will always have to put up with two kinds of people: those who are more conservative than you and those who are more liberal. In every church there are those who have the freedom of conscience to do things that, if you did them, you'd feel guilty. There are others who would be embarrassed to do things you could do with a perfectly free conscience. That's just how it is.

Paul was convinced, as am I, that one of the strongest arguments in favor of the Christian faith is its ability to bind people together from different parts of society, people who would otherwise remain separate. Paul insisted that, in Christ, all sorts of social barriers had been torn down – barriers between male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free. Their unity in Christ was a preview of heaven as well as a practical way of bringing a measure of peace on earth.

But since this was a radical experiment in the first century (and in some societies it still is) careful controls had to be placed on it. Because many of these barriers that, in theory, had been torn down have a nasty way of putting themselves up again. What was needed was a measure of discernment about which barriers are essential and which are not. And it is the non-essential barriers that Paul deals with here in chapter 14.

Now granted, there are some barriers that have no business being torn down in the first place. In Galatians 5, for example, Paul lists some of those lines that no Christian has any business crossing. *“The acts of the sinful nature,”* he writes, *“are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like.”* You and I have no business even dabbling in such things.

There are other things, however, that ought to be common among all Christians. *“But the fruit of the Spirit,”* he says, *“is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”* In fact, these ought to be the most easily recognizable characteristics of a diverse group of men and women who have found their unity in Christ.

But apart from these immensely important “black and white” moral issues, there are a good many that come in varying shades of gray. The Stoics used to talk about things they called “adiaphora” – things that were morally neutral, neither

right nor wrong in themselves. Their moral value was determined by how they were viewed. And here in chapter 14 Paul gives some very practical advice to the folks in Rome about how they ought to deal with these issues that could go one way or the other, depending on the attitude with which they were approached.

Paul has three helpful things to say to Christians in all places and at all times. First, he talks about the *inevitability of differences of opinion*. Second, he reminds us of the *importance of discerning the essentials*. Third, he stresses the *imperative for discipline in attitudes*.

1. He begins with an appeal that they accept the *inevitability of differences of opinion*. “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters,” he says. Before we go any further let’s be clear about what Paul means by the “weak.” When he talks about the “weak,” he’s not questioning the validity of their faith, or evaluating their relationship with the Lord. The context makes it clear that they are “weak” in the sense that they don’t have the inner assurance that certain relatively unimportant things really are permissible for Christians.

For instance, those with a Jewish background had been taught that certain foods were simply unacceptable. Undoubtedly there had been good public health reasons for imposing those restrictions in the first place. But where had they learned those dietary rules? Not in health classes in public schools. There weren’t any. They had been taught, “Thou shalt not eat this and that” in the context of their religion. In other words, all those Jewish dietary laws (their national public health code) had been seasoned with a unique moral flavor.

When some of those Jews became Christians, they still objected to eating certain meat. But it wasn’t because it was unhealthy to do so. They simply felt that it was wrong. To them it was a moral issue. And since quality control was a serious problem in First Century Roman meat markets, the safest way to avoid sinning by eating the wrong kind of meat (from their point of view) was to become strict vegetarians.

Meanwhile, there were Christians from a Gentile background who had no such problem. To them meat was meat. Unfortunately, some of those Christian carnivores looked down on those who refused to eat meat, perhaps smugly recalling Jesus’ words: “*Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him.*” (Mark 7:15) Meanwhile those more fastidious Christians retaliated by condemning those who, in their opinion, were defiling their bodies with “unclean” food – bodies that were supposed to be temple of the Holy Spirit.

The real issue wasn’t whether or not to eat meat, of course. The problem between the folks at the Church of the Immaculate Pot Roast and those down at First Vegetarian was their attitude toward each other. On the one hand, the meat-eaters had conveniently forgotten the rest of what Jesus had said: “*It is what comes*

*out of a man* (his critical words) *that makes him ‘unclean.’*” (Mark 7:15) Meanwhile I suspect those dietary fanatics assumed that Jesus must have had someone else in mind when, moments before, he had said: “*You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.*” (Mark 7:9)

The same sort of conflict swirled around the observance of certain religious holy days. There were those who were obsessed with keeping these days, while others, frankly, didn’t consider them all that important. It threatened to cause serious trouble in the church. Now, one solution to the problem would have been to simply put all the conservatives in one group and all the liberals in another. Keep them away from each other. But doing this would not only be a concession to human stubbornness. It would have robbed the body of Christ of its unique character of unity in diversity. And frankly, Paul had a better (although admittedly a more difficult) solution.

2. So Paul went on to remind his readers about the *importance of discerning the essentials*. And he noted three essentials:

First, he wanted his readers to **act out of conviction**. There is an immense difference between doing things out of a sense of convention and doing things out of a sense of conviction. One way is giving in to pressure, while the other way grows out of inner resolve. Paul wanted them to deal with controversial issues on the solid basis of commitment to Christ, rather than surrendering to pressure. Personally, he didn’t care whether they ate meat or not. That was really unimportant, as long as their decisions were based on what each one believed the Lord’s will to be for himself/herself.

“*Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind,*” he wrote. “*He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.*” The point is that you can practice different conventions and yet hold the same fundamental convictions.

Second, he tells them to **stop the criticism**. And here he refuses to take sides. To the weak he asks, “*Why do you judge your brother?*” And to the strong he says, “*And why do you look down on your brother?*” Unfortunately the answer to both of those questions was all too obvious. Both sides were acting like petty, self-important jerks.

It’s a sad fact of human nature that when differences of opinion arise over deeply held traditions, people tend to react in the extreme. Strong feeling will spill over. And if the dispute is heated, the tendency on all sides is to become more entrenched in their positions and isolate themselves from those with whom they disagree. Before long, people decide that the only way to strengthen their position is to tear down the other’s. And so criticism becomes the order of the day.

Paul flatly condemns that kind of behavior. His point is that every Christian is ultimately responsible to God, and one day every one of us is going to have an

opportunity to explain our behavior before the only judge whose opinion really matters. When it comes to the “adiaphora” (things that really are a matter of personal choice) judgmental attitudes are totally out of order. “*Therefore,*” he says in verse 13, “*let us stop passing judgment on one another!*” If you want the church to survive and thrive, then it is essential that you *act out of conviction and stop criticizing each other.*

The third essential, he says, is to **see the other’s point of view.** “*Make up your mind,*” he goes on in verse 13, “*not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.*” It seems to me that the only way you can avoid turning your brother’s “way” into an obstacle course is by seeing how that “way” look from his point of view. One of the most gracious things you can do as a Christian is to get to know those with whom you wouldn’t normally associate, with whom you have little in common, simply to learn to appreciate how they approach life. Try it.

Does that sound like an uncomfortable assignment? Sure it does! Naturally we feel more comfortable around people who share our views, our values, our priorities. But I can tell you that the lessons you learn are invaluable. There are people here in this church, people from whom you would never expect it, who can teach you lessons on wisdom and sensitivity, insight and courage. But because of their age or gender or their social status or their appearance it is all too easy to ignore them, or even be oblivious to them. They probably won’t come to you. You’ll have to approach them, and do it with an open mind and a teachable heart. It may not be easy, but it’s essential if we’re going to have the kind of unity that Christ expects in his Body, the Church.

3. Paul talks of the *inevitability of differences of opinion.* He reminds us of the *importance of discerning the essentials.* Third, he stresses the ***imperative for discipline in attitudes.*** And that’s true on both sides.

To those whom he labels “the strong,” Paul says, “*If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love.*” In other words, “*Despite the fact that you know in your heart that you’re free to do it, don’t do it! For your brother’s sake, don’t do it. You’re the strong one here; you know you’re free. But there is something far greater at stake here than your freedom. It’s your integrity.*”

And to those whom he calls “the weak” Paul says: “*You must not condemn the one who eats.*” In other words, “*Don’t use your weakness as a way of manipulating the strong so that, in order to make you feel better, they have to give up their freedom. Psychologists call that ‘passive-aggressive behavior.’ Paul calls it ‘rank manipulation.’ God calls it ‘sin.’ There is something far greater at stake here than following the letter of the law. It’s your integrity.*”

Paul says, “*The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace... Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads*

*to peace and mutual edification... Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.*” Whether you are weak or strong, what is at stake here is the peace and health of the body of Christ, nothing less. And the outcome depends, more than you may realize, on your attitude.

No matter who you are or where you live, you will always have to put up with two kinds of people – those who are more conservative than you and those who are more liberal. Our tendency is to associate with those who are like-minded and avoid those with whom we differ. But God’s remarkable plan, however, is to shape you and me, with all our differences intact, into the body of his Son, Jesus Christ. That happens wherever Jesus himself is the center of everything we do. Meanwhile let’s follow the dictum attributed to St. Augustine: *“In essentials, unity; in differences, liberty; in all things, charity.”*

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