

Sermon for Sunday, January 9, 2011
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Putting Others First
Romans 14:13-15:2

Romans 14-15 commands Christians to put others first: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up" (15:1-2). We should "do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (14:19).

We have daily opportunities to put others first. We can clean up the kitchen or fold laundry when the regular cleaner or folder is weary. But Paul has a more specific issue in mind – the way Christians disagree with each other about our faith, our convictions and our practices.

Suppose several couples, about 30-years-old, are living in community. They are starting to have children and to buy homes. They have questions: Shall we try to live near each other? If so, where: the city or the suburbs? How many rooms do we need? How many children do we want? When children come, what is our view of child safety? May they walk three blocks to each other's houses? The kids wear will helmets on bicycles, but how about tricycles? Sledding? Skiing? What is the goal – to remove every possible risk or to teach children to assess risk?

People disagree on all these questions and for many there is no middle ground. We have to pick a place to live. We have to decide about helmets. When we disagree, it affects others. If one parent says, "Helmets" and the other says, "That's paranoid parenting?" What happens when the helmeted child sees the child of the "liberated" parents and asks, "Why do *I* have to wear this?" Imagine the disruption.

Romans 14 teaches Christians how to disagree, even sharply. The topic was the nature and extent of a Christian's freedom. Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (John 8:36). What if we disagree about the nature and extent of our freedom (Gal 5:13)?

First, Paul forbids mental laziness. We can't turn off our minds and meekly follow the herd, the majority. Paul says we must think things through: "Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind" (14:5). Study the matter! Search the Scriptures, search for wisdom. Don't be afraid to debate. As we saw last week, the Christians at Rome were debating two topics. The first was the calendar – do we observe special days or not? For example the Sabbath or the days of feasting and sacrifice described in Old Testament law? Second was the diet: Are disciples free to eat meat, and all kinds of food or not?

Paul gives clear answers to these questions. A disciple may eat meat. He says "Nothing [no food] is unclean in itself" (Rom. 14:14). Elsewhere: "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim. 4:4). Second, it's not necessary to honor Jewish holy days.

Nonetheless, knowing *the answer* is not Paul's first concern. His chief concern is the quality of their life as a community. Those who *are* right may not simply do what's right. They must think about the consequences of their free action. What will happen *in other families* if my children never wear helmets?

Paul's central statement is in 14:17: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The exercise of your freedom – eating meat, drinking wine, going without helmets - is less important than the quality of your life together.

How then do we act when we disagree? First, Paul says there are correct answers. One opinion is not just as good as another. We should pursue the truth, with energy, freedom and respect, study the issues, marshal arguments, make our case, and listen to the other side.

This is what the early church did after Paul's first mission to the Gentiles. The question arose: shall we require Gentile converts to observe Moses' laws for food and circumcision? Acts 15 says the apostles and elders gathered and discussed, even debated the matter. They cited Scripture and reviewed the acts of the Spirit as he empowered the Gentile mission.

Then they declared their decision: The church must not lay the full burden of the law on Gentiles, for we are saved through grace not law (Acts 15:10-11). Yet to avoid offending the Jews, the apostles asked them to observe certain food laws (15:20-21).

This is the path. When we disagree, study, debate, and vote our convictions, if there is a vote. We hope for unanimity. If not, we hope that we win. After all, we do think our view is correct (or we would change sides)! If we lose – we all lose at times – we submit to the majority. We don't sulk, we keep working with the group. We tell ourselves, "Maybe I was wrong" and pray for God's blessing.

This applies in other settings. Work should be similar. Make your case, then receive the decision. Give thanks if your view prevails. If not, support the decision. Remember Romans 13:4-5: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for... the authorities that exist have been established by God. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities." Hebrews 13:5 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account."

If a matter is vital to you, if you can't support the decision, try to step away. Change duties if you can. It might be necessary to resign. But Peter says, "Submit yourselves to your masters" (1 Pet: 2:13, 18). The sole exception is a decision that is clearly immoral or threatens human welfare.

But Paul's prime interest lies with cases where there is no official decision. I trust we agree that it's wrong to get drunk; the Bible says so. It's also wrong to take mood-altering drugs that create highs, lows, and crashes: heroine, cocaine, methamphetamines. But imagine that someone says, "What is the difference between cocaine and coffee, coke, and chocolate? I believe we should take nothing into our body that needlessly alters our natural state." Let's

stipulate that this person is wrong. After all, the Bible praises honey, which is a kind of stimulant. Still, Joe believes coffee is immoral. Now what?

We discussed this last week, with Romans 14:1-12. Paul emphasized that "the weak" - the person with too many scruples or laws - must not judge or condemn others. "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat" (Rom. 14:10, cf. 14:13a).

Now in 14:13-23, Paul especially exhorts "the strong" not to use their liberty in ways that "cause weaker brothers to suffer spiritual harm." The strong are free to eat meat, discuss their topic, but love of their fellow believers must govern the use of that freedom.¹ Paul says this both at the beginning and end of our passage: "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall" (14:21, cf. 14:13b).

So the Christian is free from legalism, but we must use our liberty aright, in love. Joe, who thinks caffeine is immoral, is wrong. But "the strong" might decide to stop drinking coffee, at least in front of him. The principle:

1. We are not *free* to practice our convictions, if they cause others to fall

Paul's mind is on meat, not coffee, but he makes the point several times: we should not eat meat, or practice any freedom, if it destroys a brother:

- Do not put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way (14:13).
- Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died (14:15).
- It is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble (14:20).

We are our brother's keepers. "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up" (15.2). We *are responsible* if our technically innocent remark or action causes them to stumble. Again, the truth is still the truth. Assuming Joe is wrong about caffeine, I may *choose to abstain* from coffee for Joe's sake, but it is not evil to drink coffee. To follow Romans:

14:13 repeats the word "judge." To paraphrase a bit: We must stop judging one another. Instead, we make this judgment: we will never put a trap, a hindrance, a cause of spiritual ruin, before a brother. We don't judge others; we judge the right path for ourselves. Listen: We should not burn our effort deciding how other people should live. We should decide wisely for ourselves.

Jesus said "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:5). We start with ourselves. The weak, who think meat or coffee are sinful, must not play judge. God is judge.

¹ Moo, 850

14:14-15. Paul's reasoning unfolds: "Nothing [no food] is unclean in itself" (14a). Again, "To the pure all things are pure" (Tit: 1:15). Everything God created is good in itself; it simply has to be used the right way, at the right time. Because he is immersed in the life and word of Jesus, Paul knows that Jesus, "declared all foods clean." (Mark 7:19b).

Nonetheless, "if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean" (14b). If someone thinks it sinful to drink coffee, he must not drink coffee. We must not stand before God and do things that we believe to be sin. Therefore, I must never entice my friends to violate their standards even if they are wrong. I must help them change their mind first. "People differ in their ability to internalize truth." In fact, the coming of Christ brought an end to Old Testament laws of separation.² But some people cannot grasp that. Paul continues...

14:15a, (English Standard Version) "If your brother is grieved [or "distressed"] by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love." The strong should ask themselves, "Given that my friends thinks meat or coffee are evil, what grief and pain they must feel as they watch me partake? And what if they look up to me, to set an example? What if they feel pressured to join me, even though they think it's wrong?" (cf. 14:23).

14:15b "Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died." We wonder, "Can my actions destroy a brother, cause physical or eternal death?" No, we cannot, by ourselves, destroy another person. The true believer is secure in God's sovereign love. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (8:35-39). Those [whom God] predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (8:30). What then does Paul mean?

First, some who *appear* to be brothers may fall away and this may be the cause.

Second, this warning is God's instrument to keep people from falling away. Paul does not say a genuine brother will be destroyed eternally by food. But it's a warning: If you lead someone into sin and the sin goes unchecked, you will not build them, you will tear them down - real destruction.³

Third, the Bible regularly tells believers of the danger of perdition. We are saved if we "continue steadfast to the end." If we become apostates, we perish. God's people are not preserved in spite of apostasy "but from apostasy."⁴

We're not preserved *as* we do whatever; We're preserved *from* doing whatever. We can't do what we please, thinking, "My salvation is secure no matter what I do." Say it this way: we must persevere and by God's grace, including the grace of warnings, we will persevere. God

² Moo, 851

³ Murray, Romans 2:191-2, Rom. 14:20

⁴ Hodge, Romans 424.

does not keep us safe *while* we turn our back on him. He keeps us *from* permanently turning away from him.

Similarly we cannot say, "God will protect my fellow believer no matter what I do." The Bible's warning says, "Be careful." Your care for your brother is a means God will use you to bring them safely to eternal life. So we must be willing to give up our preferences.

Once more, "Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died" (14:15b). Jesus paid the supreme price, his death on the cross, for the sins of the weak brother. How then can the strong refuse to pay this insignificant price, of restricting the way they eat and drink?

14:16 There are limits on the call to bend to the conscience of others. Paul is never willing to compromise over the gospel. Further, the good of Christian freedom must not be spoken of as evil – and it will be if "the strong" use it in ways that harm others.

2. The Kingdom is more important than food and drink

In **14:17**, Paul states another great reason to put others first. The strong are putting too much value on their freedom from law. When they do, they lose sight of all that matters most, "The kingdom of God is not [a matter of] eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit..."

The strong, paradoxically, make the same kind of mistake as the Pharisees.

- The Pharisees so insisted on strict adherence to ritual law that they neglected "justice, mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23).
- The strong so insist on their freedom from the law that they forget that the kingdom of God is "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." ⁵

Both parties acted as if *doing the right things* is the essence of the faith. No! The Pharisees didn't know the gospel at all, but "the strong" are forgetting the gospel. They're not legalists, but they are fixed on behavior just like Pharisees!

The "kingdom of God" is the realm, where God reigns. Righteousness, peace and joy are supreme among God's people. These are major themes in Romans. In Romans 4-5, righteousness means that we're justified by faith in Christ. Peace and joy follow. In Romans 12-14, Paul focuses on the right living, the wholeness and joy we can have, individually and together, as a result. If we give up our freedom and pursue peace and joy together, that is "pleasing to God and approved by men" (14:18).

Building up 14:19-22

14:19 Review: Paul has commanded Christians to stop passing judgment, to do nothing that would cause a brother to stumble. Now he states his goal: "Let us therefore make every

⁵ Moo, 858

effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (14:19). He repeats his point moments later: "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up" (15:2). How do we build each other up?

To build well, we need the proper foundation

The proper foundation is Jesus Christ, professed with clear knowledge and real faith by God's people. Jesus said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock." (Matt 7:24-27): Not "a rock" but **the rock**. What is **the rock**?

Later, Peter confessed his faith in Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "On this rock I will build my church" (16:16-18). Paul confirms it: "No one can lay any foundation other than Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:11). We can build life, individually and corporately, on the person and work of Christ.

Is behavior important? Yes, but not supremely important. What did Paul just say? "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking" – that is, rules of behavior – "but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). This is true edification – change of character, the quiet, patient work of the Spirit. Yes, God's work shows itself in outward behavior, in public morality. But it's not Paul's definition of the essence.

That's why we can bend on questions like food, special days, etc. The particulars of behavior matter, but not as much as this: Are you growing on the foundation of faith in Jesus, Lord and Christ? Are you yielding to his influence? Are you righteous? Are you becoming more whole, more peaceful? Do you have joy? Are you always following your plan? Or are you finding God's plan, the Spirit's plan?

14:22 There is a time to keep our views to ourselves. It's not an absolute, but in the context of tense discussions, Paul even says, "Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God" (14:22). If you believe the drive for child safety has become a nonsensical mania, if you think helmets for sleds and tricycles are absurd, you can keep it to yourself, if in the presence of a worried mom. No law says you need to express all your opinions.

Let me suggest another debate for older couples. They 60-65 years old and secure economically. What is their goal now: Maximum earnings? To what end? Two homes? Travel? The ability to give to important causes? The desire still to fulfill important tasks? Early retirement? Is "retirement" a biblical concept?

14:23 These questions are worth careful discussion. How do we go about it? Study, discuss it with friends, pray about it. Come to a conviction, rest in that conviction, and act on it. 14:23: "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." It is conviction that leads to confident faith – not judging others, but living with integrity.

This point applies to helmets, coffee, meat, retirement: "Everything that does not come from faith is sin." Or, "Act with confident faith." Hear the lesson, the guidance. If you are wondering about some act, ask yourself:

Can I honestly say, "Lord as I am about to act, to partake in this, I do it in faith and offer it to you. I believe this is part of the righteousness, peace and joy you have for me and my community." If you can't say that, don't do it. If you can, then do.

3. Christ, our hero, did not please himself, nor should we 15:1-3

More on this next week, for now the essential word: "Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself" although he had every right to do so. May the Lord, our Savior, be our guide.

To illustrate: A year after he lost his bid for a third term as president, Teddy Roosevelt traveled to South America for a diplomatic tour. At the end, he traveled down the previously uncharted River of Doubt, a treacherous tributary of the Amazon, with a band of explorers. The jungle where they camped each night was the home of many poisonous snakes. The venom of coral snakes in particular caused terrible pain, then paralysis, and within hours, suffocation. There was no antidote.

Late one afternoon, a barefooted Brazilian laborer almost stepped on a coral snake. It began to thrash about menacingly when it found itself in a group of men. In his years as a rancher and soldier, Roosevelt devoted himself to teamwork, and putting others first. And he had boots on. He rushed toward the snake and jumped in the air, hoping to land on its head. He landed on the snake's mid-section and crushed it, but the head, very much alive, struck at Roosevelt's leg. Its fang struck his bootleg and narrowly missed penetrating the leather. Everyone watched as the venom poured down the outside of his boot. So Roosevelt risked his life, as he put others first.

How much more did Jesus do, not risking his life, but giving it up, not for his pleasure or peace or joy, but for ours. So may we walk with Jesus, guided by his Spirit, lay down our rights, and put others first.