

“Faith vs. Opinion”

ROMANS 14:1-15:7

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This morning I would like for us to look together at a comment that was turned in by one of our members several months ago – a request for more information concerning what the Bible has to say about handling differences of opinion as opposed to handling scriptural differences. As we study how to handle differences of faith and opinion, I would ask that we look together at a passage in the New Testament book of Romans – Romans 14-15 (p. 1777). Certainly this passage in the book of Romans is a passage that has been terribly misunderstood (and even abused) for many, many years. The passage was written by the apostle Paul to a congregation made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and it was written during a time when many of the new converts were coming right out of the Jewish faith, a time when the early Christians were really struggling to stay united in spite of some widely diverse backgrounds. We might say, then, that the book was written during a time of transition, a time when Gentiles (having previously been under the Law of the Heart) were merging with Jews (having previously been under the Law of Moses), a time when these two groups were merging into one large Christian family, both being governed by the Law of Christ. As you can imagine, there was some tension between those two groups, and nowhere was that tension greater than in the ancient city of Rome. Paul, then, writes to the church in Rome with some inspired advice concerning how to handle some of those differences. If you will, then, please look with me at Romans 14:1-15:7,

1 Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. 2 One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. 3 The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. 4 Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. 5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. 7 For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 8 for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

10 But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. 11 For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." 12 So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. 13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this — not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. 14 I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. 19 So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. 20 Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. 21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. 22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

1 Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. 2 Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. 3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me." 4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. 5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.

More than 200 years ago, there was a saying among members of the Lord's church, a saying that seems to summarize what Paul teaches here, and the saying was this: In matters of faith, unity; In matters of opinion, liberty; In all things, charity (love). And really, as we look at Paul's words here, that is a pretty good outline of this passage. In matters of faith, we must stand together. In matters of opinion, we are allowed to have diversity. But in all things, we must practice love toward one another as Christians.

- I. **As we begin our study, let us please go back to the idea that WE ARE ALLOWED TO HAVE GREAT DIFFERENCES IN MATTERS OF OPINION – in other words, WHEN IT COMES TO MATTERS OF OPINION, WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN GREAT FREEDOM.**

In the opening verses, please notice that Paul uses the example of being a vegetarian. And to emphasize that this is in the realm of opinion, I should point out that under the Law of Christ, the Bible says nothing concerning whether we should eat meat or whether we should eat vegetables only – our doctor might have something to say on that issue, but the Bible is silent. And yet when we look at the background to the book of Romans, we start to understand the issue here. On one hand, we have people coming into the church as Gentiles – these are people who grew up eating all kinds of stuff – pork, lobster, catfish, all forms of meat, it did not matter – if it was capable of being eaten, the Gentiles would eat it! But then on the other hand, we have people coming into the church as Jews – these are people who grew up with some incredibly specific

dietary laws and some incredibly burdensome traditions. Under the Jewish system, God had a very specific and detailed list of certain animals that could and could not be eaten. And for them, to eat the wrong kind of animal, or even to eat the right kind of animal that had been prepared improperly, it was a huge issue. For them, to eat a single piece of bacon was an abomination – it would cause them to be lost forever, it would cause them to be cut off from their families, it would cause them to be unclean.

But then we have these two sets of people coming into the church, and even into the same congregation. I don't know if we can really appreciate how tense it must have been. Imagine coming to a fellowship dinner! Half the church brought bacon, and the other half thought that just the smell of that bacon might be enough to bring down the wrath of heaven! And on top of that, the meat eaters were apparently treating the vegetarians with **“contempt.”** The word refers to despising or completely rejecting another person, to regard the other person as nothing. The word refers to seriously looking down on someone.

To start solving this division in the church, then, Paul divides the members of the congregation into two categories (and to me, it is interesting that Paul does not divide them into Jew and Gentile): 1.) Those who are weak in faith (that is, those who have this built-in fear of bacon and will only eat vegetables), and then a second group, 2.) Those who are strong (or, those who know that bacon and all other forms of meat are just fine under the New Law). And into this situation, Paul says that those who are strong (those who are okay with the meat) are to **“accept”** those who will only eat the vegetables. Or in other words, in matters of opinion, we have a great deal of freedom. And I would emphasize: There is nothing inherently right or wrong about eating meat or being a vegetarian. As far as the Law of Christ is concerned, this is one of those issues that is clearly in the realm of opinion, and this is the example Paul uses.

Unfortunately, some have taken these verses on acceptance to try to prove that we must have unity with those who teach and practice things that are actually wrong. Some, for example, have said, “Well, I use instrumental music in worship, but I can handle it.” They will then say, “You people apparently can't handle instrumental music in worship, therefore, you are my weaker brother. So, based on this passage, we just need to accept each other.” Let us never forget, though, that this passage deals with matters of OPINION. The use of instrumental music in worship is a matter of FAITH. In other words (unlike the meat vs. vegetables issue), God has spoken concerning the way He wants us to worship. In matters that are truly in the realm of opinion, we have freedom. If, however, we are dealing with a matter of faith (where God has told us what to do), then neither a strong brother nor a weak brother nor any other kind of brother has permission to do anything contrary to the will of God...and we will get to that in just a moment. But instead, here in Romans 14, Paul is asking us to be accepting and tolerant when it comes to the minor differences of opinion that all of us have within the Lord's church, so that the church does not divide.

If we could think about a modern situation for just a moment (and I'll admit that it's exaggerated to make a point): Every Sunday, a number of families go out to eat with each other after worship. Whether we go to Wendy's or Culver's is a matter of opinion – God does not care where we eat. I might care, some of you might care, some of us may have some strong feelings about where to go out to lunch from time to time, but God does not care. And since God has not told us what to do, since it is in the realm of opinion, then we can politely disagree over where to eat together as a congregation, and we can still get along as brothers and sisters in Christ. However, if we consider adding a Culver's Bacon Butter Burger to the Lord's Supper next Sunday morning, then we have a problem, because (again), God has given us specific instructions concerning the Lord's Supper. We do not have God's permission to add a Butter Burger as an act of worship. Think for just a moment about the discussion we've had over the past few months concerning what to do with our pew situation. Various members had some strong opinions on that issue, and yet, since it falls in the realm of

opinion, a lot of people were able to be tolerant to accommodate the opinions of the rest of the congregation. And that is what Paul is encouraging here. In the realm of opinion, we have a tremendous amount of freedom, and we can bend our opinions for the sake of unity.

- II. **Let us go on and notice a second idea this morning, and that is: IN MATTERS OF FAITH, WE MUST HAVE UNITY. That is, WHEN THE BIBLE HAS TOLD US WHAT TO DO OR NOT DO, WE AS A CONGREGATION NEED TO STAND TOGETHER ON THOSE THINGS.**

Now I won't spend too much time on this, because I'm pretty sure most of us understand that we need to stand together on certain things. There are literally dozens of passages referring to the importance of unity and consistency in matters of doctrine. But for the purpose of our study this morning, I would simply refer to some of those comments Paul made at the beginning of Chapter 15. Please notice again Romans 15:5-6, "***Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.***" And so we find that when it comes to matters of faith, we need to be "***of the same mind with one another.***" In matters of faith, we need to stand together, or we will divide as a congregation. There can be no compromise in the realm of faith. Where the word of God has spoken, we must also speak. For example, the Bible teaches that baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. We need to stand together on this. The Bible teaches that we are to worship God by going to Him in song. We need to stand together on this. The Lord Himself teaches that there is only one cause for a divorce and subsequent remarriage. We need to stand together on this. The Bible teaches that elders must be married men with Christian children. We need to stand together on this. In these areas, God has spoken. In the realm of opinion, we have liberty, but in the realm of faith, we must have unity.

- III. **As we look back over these two ideas as summarized in our passage for this morning, we now need to step back a bit and apply what we have learned to our situation today. As we sometimes do, I might refer to this part of the lesson as the "SO WHAT?" section. In other words, since this is what the Bible teaches, so what? In practical terms, what does this passage really mean for us here in Madison, Wisconsin? I am about to share several ideas, but I would summarize everything I'm about to say by saying that IN EVERYTHING, WE ARE TO TREAT EACH OTHER WITH LOVE.**

And by love, I'm referring to the idea that we will make a decision to do what is best for another person. That is the kind of love that God had for us, and it is certainly the kind of love we have for each other.

- A. **With that said, I would point out (first of all), that those who are strong must make a special effort to show compassion for those who are weak.**

We might say that the responsibility falls primarily on the strong, that they are to make a special effort not to "***offend***" those who are weak. And yet as we discuss this concept, we need to be very clear with the definition of the word "***offend***." The word is used once in this passage (in verse 20). Today, when we hear that somebody is "***offended***," it often means that the person is simply irritated by something that we've said or done. And yet in this context, an offense is something much more serious. In fact, it might be better to consider what Paul says about causing someone to "***stumble***" (we see this reference in verse 21). When we combine those two ideas, it seems a lot more serious than just irritating somebody; but instead, it seems much closer to causing somebody to lose his or her faith or maybe causing somebody to actually fall away from God.

And just another reminder, we are talking here about matters in the realm of opinion. A lot of times, as I am standing up here on the front row, during the song before the sermon, I will often pray to God, "Dear God, help me not to offend anybody, unless they need to be offended, and then let me do it in the kindest way possible." And what I'm talking to God about there is the idea that sometimes even a message straight from God's word might make somebody mad, and that is okay. God's word has always made people mad. But my goal as a gospel preacher is to do the best I can to communicate truth...without being mean about it. When it comes to the gospel, I think of what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in (1 Corinthians 1) as he said that the crucifixion of Christ was a "**stumbling block**" to the Jews. The gospel, then, was offensive to some people, but that certainly did not keep Paul from preaching it. John the Baptist offended King Herod. Jesus offended the Pharisees, and that is okay. So we are talking here in Romans 14 about things in the realm of opinion. In matters of opinion, we must be careful to show compassion and tolerance. We must do the best we can not to offend.

So, to begin with, I guess we need to determine in what sense someone is in danger of being offended. If someone is just a little bit irritated, if the person is just whining about something in the realm of opinion, that's one thing. But the danger Paul is addressing here is the possibility that someone might actually fall away from God over some issue. If someone is about to slip back into a life of sin because of my position on some issue in the realm of opinion, then I need to be extremely careful about that. And the idea is: We are living together as a great big Christian family. We are not in this alone, but we need to look out for each other, being especially careful when it comes to things in the realm of opinion. There are some times when those who are strong may even need to limit their freedom for the sake of those who may be struggling with an issue.

For an example that carries over even today, notice what Paul says in verse 21. I am not aware of any members here who are in danger of falling away over the awesome pork loin that Eddie served to us at last week's picnic, but I know we do have some members who struggle with alcohol. We discussed this several months ago, but here in Madison we have a huge problem with binge drinking and alcoholism. In fact, we have pretty much the worst rates in the entire nation. With that in mind, I find it interesting that Paul puts wine in the same category as meat (or bacon). That tells me that someone who does not struggle in this area may need to limit his or her freedom for the sake of a weaker brother or sister who may be right there on the edge of falling back into a life of alcohol abuse. For that reason, living in the Madison culture (and not knowing what some of you are struggling with), we are not going to be serving any wine at our house. That's not something that we'll be bringing to the next fellowship dinner. We may have freedom in that area, but we have chosen to limit our freedom for the sake of others. I will not bind my opinion on the rest of the congregation. This is a decision we have made in our family for the sake of others.

Several years ago, I remember reading an article about a leader in the Islamic faith leaving the religion of his family for generations so that he could obey the gospel of Christ, confessing his belief that Jesus is the Son of God, being immersed in water for the forgiveness of his sins. He moved to the United States, but he continued to follow the dietary laws of Islam, and he did that so that he could try to reach his parents with the gospel. Every time he went back home, his father would ask him, "They have not corrupted you with the filthy pig, have they?" And the son was always able to say, "No." And in that way, he kept those lines of communication open with his father. He was not demanding that we abstain from pork, but He limited his own personal freedom for the sake of reaching his father with the gospel. That is what we are talking about here this morning – the strong showing compassion for the weak.

- B. There is something else for us to consider here, and that is: Although we must be careful not to offend, on the other side, we must not take this teaching to the extreme where we allow ourselves to be dominated by a vocal minority.**

For example, what if we have someone new move into the area, and what if he suddenly says this, “As the weaker brother, I am offended that our songbooks are beige and not blue! Therefore, as the stronger Christians, all of you need to change. We must now order 100 blue songbooks and throw away all of the others! And if you don’t do this, I’m going to be offended at you people!” How would we react to that? I’ll pass along something I’ve learned over the years, and that is: If someone knows enough about the Bible to claim the weaker brother status of Romans 14, then there is a high probability that he is not really a weaker brother, but he is actually a stubborn brother! And in some cases he might actually be a divisive brother, a pain-in-the-neck brother, and the Bible has a completely different way of dealing with that kind of person!

- C. But let us assume that someone is truly shaken up spiritually by something that we are doing in the realm of opinion. I would suggest that our ultimate goal as Christians is to edify that person.**

Notice what Paul says in verse 19, *“So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”* A similar thought is found in Chapter 15:2, *“Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.”* And so, as we’re dealing with these things in the realm of opinion, Paul says that we need to pursue peace, we need to make it a priority to build each other up. And so we get back to the idea that there are several ways to work through a hang-up in the realm of opinion. First of all, we can temporarily remove whatever it is that is causing the offense. But long-term, our goal is to build up a weaker brother until he becomes a stronger brother. Let us go back to the songbook example. If someone was truly offended that our songbooks were beige and not blue, perhaps those of us who are stronger in faith could simply allow that person to bring his own blue book. We are not going to force him to worship out of a beige book if that is truly disturbing to his Christian faith. And yet long-term, our goal is to very patiently bring that weaker brother to a point in his faith where he has the understanding that the color of our songbooks is really not that big of a deal.

I have told you before about a man who was baptized many years ago at the church where I grew up. He came out of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and as some of you might know, that group has a huge problem with any kind of religious images – specifically, the cross. Well, the church had some number boards like we have up here, and like ours, their boards had a little cross at the top of each one (kind of like the crosses on the ends of our pews). I was very young when this happened, but as I remember it, this guy was having a real struggle with those crosses. He wasn’t being a pain about it, he wasn’t being a stubborn brother, he wasn’t being a pain-in-the-neck brother, but as a brand new Christian, this man was truly upset. And so for a very short-term solution, those boards were taken down. However, some of the more mature Christians studied with him on that issue, he came to a more complete understanding of the issue, and the boards were put back up within just a few weeks. As I look back on what happened there more than 30 years ago, it seems to be exactly what Paul was talking about here: Deal with these matters of conscience with compassion, and yet the long-term goal is edification – the long-term goal is to build each other up so that all of us can move along from being weak to being strong.

I know we’ve been talking about this from the Jewish point of view, but over in 1 Corinthians 8, it was the Gentiles that had a problem. Some of the early Christians had a huge problem eating meat that had been sacrificed to a pagan idol. To us, it might be similar to the difference between a steak from Aldi and a steak from Woodman’s. There is a price difference, but the food is basically the same. But here’s the problem: In the

ancient meat markets, those steaks that had been offered to a pagan idol were offered at a discount. As far as I'm concerned, "Awesome! It's the same cow!" But if you grew up in a pagan family and then you obeyed the gospel, you might be thinking, "Wait a minute! This is so wrong!" Please consider Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 8:4,7, ***"Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.... However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled."*** Certainly, over time, this problem would have gone away as those early Christians studied Scripture and matured in their faith. Avoiding meat was merely a short-term solution. One way of overcoming an offense, then, is simply instruction in the word of God.

Conclusion:

As we close, I realize that this is an incredibly deep subject – something we could discuss for several weeks if we wanted to – and yet we have hit the highlights this morning. As we wrap it up, I would encourage all of us to be thankful that we have been given the freedom to hold our own opinions. We can be thankful that we can eat at Culver's one Sunday and Wendy's the next without having some kind of division within the congregation. At the same time, though, we should also remember that where God has spoken, we are to have no opinion. It is there that we are dealing with a matter of faith, and as a congregation, we must have unity in those areas. As the saying goes: In faith, unity; in opinions, liberty; and in all things charity (or love).

One of those areas where we need to have unity is in the plan of salvation. God sent Jesus to purchase our freedom from sin. In response to that sacrifice, God has asked us to believe in Jesus, to change our lives, and to allow ourselves to be immersed in water. Baptism is our way of reenacting the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism is God's way of covering us with the blood of Christ. If you have any questions, let's talk. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com