

## **Building God's Kingdom by Loving Others and Pursuing Unity**

**Romans 14:1-23**

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**August 14, 2022**

Wow! It's hard to believe it's mid-August, and summer is almost over. My son went back to college in South Carolina on Friday, my wife begins another year working at Elmwood Elementary tomorrow, and my youngest daughter begins her first-year student orientation at Messiah University on Friday. The end of summer also means that our study of Paul's letter to the Romans is coming to a close. After today we have just two more sermons from this book.

It may be hard to remember now, but I began preaching on Romans back on June 5<sup>th</sup>—Pentecost Sunday. I shared in that introductory sermon that in my experience Romans gets mixed reviews—you either love it or you aren't too fond of it. Most of Paul's New Testament letters are 4–6 chapters long, a length we're told that would fit on a normal sized scroll, but Romans is three times that length. Romans is long and it's also complicated. It's considered the Apostle Paul's *magnum opus*—his crowning work—because it contains doctrinal truths that lie at the heart of our faith. Romans describes God's nature and delves into our relationship with Him. The letter makes numerous references to Jewish history and contains terms like faith, grace, righteousness, justification and holiness. We've covered a lot of ground in this letter this summer, but it's difficult to do justice to Romans in 12 weeks. Romans has a lot to say about doctrine and theology, but like all the letters in our New Testament, it was written by early leaders in the Church to help Christians living just several decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, live out their faith. Romans' primary purpose is to disciple us as followers of Jesus—to equip us in living out our faith in the world.

The first 11 chapters of Romans focuses mostly on doctrine and theology and Paul closes chapter 11 with a wonderful prayer...

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!  
“Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”  
“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?”  
For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever!  
Amen.

– Romans 11:33-36

Following that prayer, Paul launches into the last third of the letter—chapters 12-16—where he focuses primarily on how we live out our faith as followers of Jesus Christ. Last Sunday Pastor John King preached from Romans chapter 13 where Paul talks about the Christian’s relationship to government, and John concluded his sermon by reading verses 8-10 of chapter 13 where Paul emphasizes that love is the fulfillment of everything in the law.

Before we look at chapter 14, I want to read verses 11-14 of chapter 13 because of the context they provide us...

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. – Romans 13:11-14

Paul is creating a sense of urgency, reminding his 1<sup>st</sup> Century and 21<sup>st</sup> Century readers of the importance of living as people of light. It’s in that context that I encourage you to follow along as I read Romans chapter 14 verses 1-4...

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. <sup>2</sup>One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup>The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Paul isn’t writing in these verses about whether followers of Jesus should be vegetarians or meat eaters. He’s referencing a dilemma early Christians faced as they lived in a predominantly pagan, idol-worshipping culture. The dilemma Paul addresses here is also written about other places in the New Testament. In the pagan Roman culture of that era, meat was routinely dedicated or consecrated to idols. The butcher who someone might buy their meat from, if he was a devout idol worshiper, may have dedicated the meat he sells to pagan gods or goddesses. And if a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christian was eating in the home of a non-Christian, the meat

they were served at the meal very well might have been consecrated to a pagan deity. So, in that culture one rarely had the assurance that the meat they were eating hadn't been dedicated or sacrificed to an idol or a pagan god or goddess. Accordingly, some followers of Jesus determined that it was simpler just not to eat meat, because they didn't want to unwittingly participate in pagan worship. This way of thinking was especially prevalent among recent converts who had just left paganism to follow Jesus. On the other hand, were people like Paul, who said, *"I like a good steak or lamb chop. I'm not going to allow the possibility that it was dedicated to an idol keep me from enjoying a meal that I can pray over before I eat."* I wanted to share that background with you, so you understand what Paul is alluding to when he writes about eating meat or vegetables.

The past 2+ years have been a challenging time for the Church in America. Followers of Jesus have publicly squabbled over our political views, over our perception of racism in our country, and over masks and our response to COVID. As I read over this passage last Sunday morning—trying to tune into what I'd be preaching about this week—I realized that this passage is one that in private conversation I compared the mask debate to. Allow me the liberty of changing some words in verses 1-3...

Accept the one whose philosophy about masks is different than yours, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person feels comfortable going without a mask, while another feels compelled to mask for their own safety and the safety of others. The one who doesn't wear a mask must not treat with contempt the one who does, and the one who wears a mask must not judge the one who does not, for God has accepted them both. Who are you to judge? Before God they will stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Before you quibble with me over that analogy and where it breaks down—after all every analogy breaks down—I encourage you to focus on the big idea, judging each other on what Paul terms "disputable matters." I'll continue reading Romans chapter 14 verses 5-9

<sup>5</sup> One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. <sup>6</sup> Whoever regards one day as special **does so to the Lord**. Whoever eats meat **does so to the Lord**, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains **does so to the Lord** and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> **For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.** <sup>8</sup> **If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die,**

**we belong to the Lord.** <sup>9</sup> For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. – Romans 14:5-9

I'll confess that while I tried to help our church family focus on unity and extending grace to each other, on a personal level I didn't always follow Paul's advice. I struggled with judging others who saw things differently than I did, and it was challenging for me at times to stay focused on Jesus and his desires as opposed to focusing on people and their response to COVID.

I'm convinced Romans 14 has important implications for followers of Jesus in how we've walked through the past couple of years, but I don't want us to get emotionally hung up or triggered in such a way that we miss how widely applicable this is for us beyond the past 2 years. The truth is that judging others is human nature regardless of the immediate circumstance, and judgment and our failure to extend grace to those who see things differently is a major impediment to unity in Jesus' Church. Follow along as I read verses 10-18...

<sup>10</sup> You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. <sup>11</sup> It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God."

<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. **Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.** – Romans 14:10-13

I bolded the words, "*Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister,*" because that's Paul's antidote to judging others and creating division. When we determine not to put a stumbling block in front of others we're making the choice to set aside our rights and preferences to consider what's best for others. Paul continues:

<sup>14</sup> I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. <sup>15</sup> If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup> Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup> **For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,** <sup>18</sup> because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. – Romans 14:14-17

Paul continues to emphasize acting in love by looking out for the interests of others, and in verse 17 he reminds us of what is most important. God's kingdom isn't a matter of eating and drinking; God's kingdom is about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The apostle ends this section by refocusing his readers on unity and health in God's kingdom, not about relatively trivial matters like whether or not to eat meat or to abstain and eat only vegetables. In verses 19-23 he says,

<sup>19</sup> **Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.** <sup>20</sup> Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. <sup>21</sup> **It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.**

<sup>22</sup> **So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.** Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. <sup>23</sup> But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

I probably don't need to explain why I highlighted the phrase, "*So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God,*" do I? Notice Paul says, "*whatever you believe **about these things**.*" He's not making a blanket statement that we should always keep quiet. He's instructing his readers that in non-essentials, it's better to keep what we think about what someone else is doing between us and God, rather than feeling compelled to always share our opinions. Ouch! As a pastor, it's easy for me to fall into the trap of thinking that sharing my opinion on topics is always important. More often than not, I'd be better served keeping my judgments between me and God.

Throughout the sermon today I highlighted what I saw as essential statements for us. I want to recap the statements I bolded in this passage. I put these statements under the heading, "**Stay Focused on What is Most Important.**"

- Everything we do we do to the Lord.
- None of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.
- Determine not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.
- God's kingdom is not about eating and drinking; it's about righteousness, peace and joy in the Spirit.

- We're to make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification (building each other up).
- Helping our brother or sister not to fall is more important than what we eat or drink.

Near the beginning of the sermon, I made the application from what Paul says in Romans 14 to the “to mask or not mask” debate that raged in our culture and across the church. I think it’s an appropriate application, that speaks to our current situation, but Paul’s words in Romans chapter 14 about judging others, causing brothers and sisters by our behavior to stumble, and the essence of the kingdom of God go far beyond protective measures related to COVID 19. The words Paul writes in this chapter get at the heart of life in Jesus’ kingdom and striving for unity in the Church.

Loving one another as brothers and sisters and pursuing unity in Jesus’ Church is of the utmost importance to Jesus. How can I say that so confidently, you might ask? In John chapter 13 on the day before Jesus was arrested, at the Last Supper, after washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus said, *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”* (John 13:34–35). Loving each other isn’t just an important thing to do. Jesus said it’s the primary way people will identify us as Jesus’ disciples. And an outgrowth of that love is pursuing unity in Jesus’ Church. In John chapter 17, again just before his arrest, Jesus prayed to his Heavenly Father. In that prayer He committed Himself to God and his will; He prayed that God would keep his disciples true to their faith in Him; and, He prayed that all of those who would believe in his message (that’s us folks) would be unified in Him.

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.  
 – John 17:20-23

I've titled today's sermon, "Building God's Kingdom by Loving Others and Pursuing Unity." It's not a catchy title—I'm not very good at creating those—but it is vitally important. Jesus calls you and me, as his followers, to resist our natural urge to judge others and to fixate on our own wants, needs and desires. Instead, we're called to love others and to place their needs and interests above our own. As we do this, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we'll help fulfill Jesus' prayer that God's kingdom would come to earth as it is in heaven.