

## Romans 14-15:7, Let's Be Considerate, 3/14/21

The truth from the Scripture we are studying today is the foundation for one of our values.

**Bible-Centered, Generously Orthodox:** "God's Word is our guide, authority and conscience in everything. We stand firm where it stands firm and remain flexible where it remains flexible. We welcome a diversity of opinions and thought on secondary theological matters."

One of the reasons this value is so critical for our church is because it helps us combat the spirit of judgmentalism that can sometimes plague local churches. In a massive study done by the Barna Group a few years ago 87% of respondents labeled Christians as judgmental. Now there is a difference between making judgments and judgmentalism. The Bible calls us to make judgments- to call sin and sin, to call truth, truth. Judgmentalism is when we assume the worst, judge motives, think we are better than others, dismiss and reject people. Jesus reserves some of his harshest words for judgmentalism. Judgmentalism is counter to the gospel of grace that Paul has been teaching. Well, in the church in Rome, Paul was addressing this spirit of judgmentalism. **V.10 You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt?** The source of this judgmentalism was that some of the church members were **v.1...quarreling over disputable matters.**

What are disputable matters? Well on one hand Paul's not talking about things that are trivial- whether The Mandalorian or Wandavision were the better Disney+ shows, the best way to cook an egg (where's Omelet crowd...you are my people), who is the GOAT- LeBron James or Michael Jordan...after all we know the answer to that. On the other hand, he's not talking about doctrines that are essential to the faith. Disputable matters often go by other names- personal conscience, Christian freedom and gray areas. Many theologians use three categories to help us: **First Order Matters- essential for salvation** (Deity of Christ, salvation by faith alone). **2<sup>nd</sup> Order Matters- important to the faith and the church, not essential for salvation** (morality, commands like baptism, lord's supper, purpose and mission of the church). **3<sup>rd</sup> Order Matters- preferences, personal convictions, biblically unclear theological issues or minor issues.**

Paul gives two examples of 3<sup>rd</sup> Order Matters:

One is biblically unclear. **<sup>5</sup>One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike.** Likely the issue here was that some Christians were saying that they should still practice the Sabbath and set it aside as holy. They understood these things weren't necessary for salvation, but still, they believed Christians ought to observe them since God had established them. But others said, no these are part of the OT law, and the death of Jesus Christ has released us from this. After all, in Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath and we find our rest in him every day of the week. Christians ought to not observe these the Sabbath. Paul doesn't answer this question for us because it was a matter of personal conscience.

The other disputable (3<sup>rd</sup> Order) matter is biblically clear, but is minor issue.

**<sup>2</sup>One person's faith allows them to eat anything (That's me...carnivore, meat at every meal), but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.** Now vegetarians, don't get offended, we shouldn't try to cancel Paul on social media because he called vegetarians weak. The context is

completely different. There were Jewish dietary laws that made people ceremonially unclean so that they couldn't go to worship. We don't have time to go into all the reasons why, but it was an object lesson getting across a massive truth: that you can't just go into the presence of a holy God, you must be clean. And so there were some Jewish Christians who believed in salvation by Christ alone, but still were struggling to feel completely clean in approaching Christ while eating these formerly forbidden meats. Notice, Paul says they are incorrect. ***14 I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself.*** Elsewhere in Scripture, Jesus in Mark 7, Acts 15- In Christ nothing is unclean in itself. Jesus is what makes you clean. It's not up to you to clean yourself up, Christ does it for you.<sup>1</sup> Paul is saying, the Gospel makes this clear- you can eat BBQ, but it's a minor issue.

**[3<sup>rd</sup> Order Matters Slide]** Those silly ancient people...surely, we are much more sophisticated and mature and we don't have these kind of gray area or disputable matters that we judge each other about today...right? HA! I grew up in a church where Christians argued about what you should wear to church: Some said that God deserves our best in worship, and that should include what we wear so you dress up (Sunday bests). Other Christians said, "No, man looks on the outward appearance, God looks on the heart. It doesn't matter what you wear. And we don't want to make people who don't have dress clothes feel like they aren't accepted if they don't have dress clothes."

Is it ok for Christians to read the *Harry Potter* series? Some in this church say, "Clearly, this is witchcraft. The story is literally about witches and wizards and some of the terms come straight from the occult. But others say, "It's clearly fantasy. Kids aren't flying around on brooms playing quidditch. Besides, we don't seem to have a problem with *Lord of the Rings* and *Chronicles of Narnia* that have the same themes."

What 3<sup>rd</sup> Order Matter do you say- **"All Christians ought to..."**? How about worship styles, tattoos, alcohol use, politics, flags in the church, get a passionate homeschool mom in a room with a passionate public-school mom and ask them the best educational approach...Social issues like the best way to address racism or poverty...What about theological issues of freewill and sovereignty, spiritual gifts, end times, denominational differences...the list goes on. We might not be arguing over bacon cheeseburgers...although maybe we argue over how many are acceptable to order in a drive-thru...but we have our share of disputable issues. And there have been churches that have divided over these issues. Judgments made, factions that have formed, friendships lost, people who have been wounded and who have left disillusioned from Christianity and church over these disputable issues.

So how do we avoid the problem of judgmentalism caused by the arguing over these disputable issues? The key is found in the word Paul uses four times in this text and forms the bookends of the section. **Accept- 14:1 *Accept the one whose faith is weak*, and again 15:7 *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*** This is a beautiful, relational, actionable word that means **to welcome others into your heart and home.**

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller- Sermon on Romans 14

It's rooted in the astonishing gospel reality that we have been welcomed into the heart and home of God through Christ. Paul tells us this welcoming spirit is the antidote of judgmentalism, pettiness, division, the antidote to drifting toward legalism and licentiousness.

Paul is going to show us **4 Practices of Welcoming Churches**

### **#1 Welcoming churches make room for personal conscience.**

*<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.*

We don't talk about conscience much, but we should do so more because your conscience is a gift from God. Good definition- "Our conscience is a part of our God-given internal faculties, a critical inner awareness that bears witness to the norms and values we recognize when determining right or wrong."<sup>2</sup> Although it's not infallible, Paul says as Christians we ought to be very cautious about going against it. <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. Also he says*<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.*

Paul is saying to violate your own conscience, even if it's not directly sinful, it becomes sin because you are walking outside of faith, fidelity to what you believe is right by God. Before coming to Christ, one of my idols was sexual conquest and fulfillment. After I came to Christ, I came under conviction that for me, even to kiss a girl was wrong because of all my former experiences. It's kind of strange because right now people might say kissing is wrong because you could give someone COVID. But to violate my conscience was sin.

So we must make room for personal conscience, individually but also as a church family. We should not "bind the conscience" in disputable matters. We don't bind the conscience over alcohol use by saying "all Christians ought to refrain from alcohol because it can lead to drunkenness or abuse." For those who don't have that conviction, they may feel false guilt or feel they need to hide it from others in order to be accepted. And if we bind the conscience by saying "all Christians should enjoy alcohol because Jesus drank wine." That could cause someone to feel the license to abuse it. Paul calls this becoming a stumbling block. Before you say the phrase "All Christians ought to" really make sure it is something clear from Scripture. Welcoming churches help people discern between what is essential and nonessential, between what is a clear line vs. a jagged line from Scripture. **St. Augustine- In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.**

### **#2 Welcoming churches embrace the free and the sensitive.**

<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. And again Romans 15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-is-conscience/>

Paul uses weak and strong... I think it would be more helpful in our context to use the words-free and sensitive consciences. Those who have more free consciences tend to take those with sensitive consciences too lightly, to not give them enough weight because they see them as being uptight, legalists... "They won't even dance at a wedding." and those with sensitive consciences tend to take those with more freedom too seriously and may be deeply troubled and upset by what they see as their licentiousness... "Did you see the skirt she was wearing?" The free shrug their shoulders and eye roll the sensitive, and the sensitive wag their fingers at the free. Both judging and avoiding the other...That's made-man religion. But the way of Christianity is counter-cultural.

**[Practice #2 slide]** Michael Bird: "Paul is bent on stressing that Jesus is Lord of the weak (teetotaling, Sabbatarian, vegetarian Jews) and the strong (bourbon-sipping, Saturday-shopping, bacon-munching Gentiles). If God has justified them, they cannot condemn each other. If God has raised them up, they cannot put each other down. If they belong to the Lord, they belong to each other. If everyone calls him Lord, they must call each other brothers and sisters. If God has accepted them, they must accept each other." Who may God be calling you to embrace in the church?

### **#3 Welcoming Churches Lovingly Challenge the Conscience.**

Now this sounds almost contradictory to the last statement, but notice that Paul doesn't say "My truth is my truth, your truth is your truth. Don't tell me what to do and I won't tell you what to do." That's the relativism of modern tolerance, that's not love.<sup>3</sup> No, he simultaneously accepts the weaker brother while also gently addressing what is objectively true, eating meat wasn't sinful. The weaker (sensitive conscience) was the one who had remnants of a legalistic spirit or tradition that was clinging to them. They may not have worked out the implications of the gospel in that area. Within the acceptance of a loving community, there is a place to challenge the conscience, to help people reconsider their sensitivities. Take any 3<sup>rd</sup> tier conviction-are you open enough to consider you may be wrong and could be corrected?

In the Christian circle I grew up in there was a popular teaching that the drumbeat goes against the rhythm of the heart and that any rock music was sinful, even with Christian words...there was a time in middle-school I judged Christians I knew for listening to Petra. Still for some, a drum during worship just feels wrong...because of that upbringing. Here's the truth: Demons don't live in drum kits, and angels don't live in organs. God loves all kinds of styles of music whether with an organ, choir and robes, or electric guitars, drums and t-shirts. God is about the Spirit and truth of worship, not the outward forms. Now it's fine to have preferences and we all do, it's another thing to be feel one style is wrong or unholy. Some people feel that because it feels offensive to them, that it must be offensive to God. Paul would say, welcome into your heart that sensitive brother or sister who thinks and feels that way about contemporary music or the drums, has a bad attitude about traditional hymns...and it's OK to lovingly challenge and help them make room for other types of music. Ultimately if you disagree with each other, it's OK. We have to lay down our egos...it really is OK if everyone doesn't agree with you. After all,

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<sup>3</sup> Concept from Tim Keller, *Romans for You*.

they don't answer to you, they answer to God! <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.* You share your convictions with the right-leaning Christian about universal healthcare and stewardship of our planet and they come to a different conclusion. They don't answer to you and God embraces them, so can you.

#### **#4 Welcoming Churches Prioritize Love Over Freedom**

<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.*

To the Gentile Christians, Paul is like, "Look, stop bringing your baby-back ribs to small group because it's making the Jewish Christians upset and drawn into sin." And the Roman Christians were like, "But Jesus died for baby back ribs!" And Paul was like, "Yeah, but even more importantly he died for your brother in Christ. Your focus should be the same as his: how can I love and build up my brother?<sup>4</sup> I enjoy a glass of wine or a beer. But not everyone feels the same freedom to have a drink nor can some do it responsibly. So the loving thing to do refrain if you know that might be an issue, or ask if you aren't sure. Go out of your way to make sure they know they are accepted.

Let us be a welcoming church. Our community needs a church like this now more than ever. We've got social media, news outlets, politicians and bloggers, some within Christianity, bent on polarizing us. Our community needs a church that is more passionate about Jesus and loving one another than we are our opinions on 3<sup>rd</sup> order matters. Who wave the banner of Christ higher than the banner of preferences. [Willie Mah and Zenia Jones \(Picture\)](#) example...The extent to which we have worked the gospel down into our souls is the extent to which we will be this kind of church. <sup>5</sup> *May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had,*

<sup>6</sup> *so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

<sup>7</sup> *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.*

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<sup>4</sup> Concept from Tony Merida and JD Greear.