

A Matter of Disputes.

Romans 14

Romans 6:1-11

Romans 6:12-23

Responsive Psalm 27:1-6

This week we are going to be getting into some very practical teaching of Paul here. But as we go through this passage this morning we must also remember what he said leading into it for it is the basis upon which Paul builds on the statements in chapter 14. Another thing to keep in mind as we read through these verses this morning is who Paul is writing to, remembering that he is writing to the churches in Rome which would be a mixed group of believers made up of both Jews and Gentiles. And much of purpose of Paul's letter it would seem is to drive home unity in Christ in both of those groups which come from extremely different religious backgrounds. One group given the oracles of the one true God, who have a history of his provision, and instruction, and their own set of rituals and beliefs. The other group came from a background of Paganism, worshiping nature, idols, and the stars, with their own set of rituals and beliefs. Each having their own idea of holy days, food, and practices.

Paul here in chapter 14 is addressing these differences specifically, and through all of it, pointing to the unity we all have together in Christ. In the time that I have been doing this, standing up here and preaching the word of God week after week, there is one main point that seems to be always pressed upon my heart and mind as I prepare the message each and every week. That point, is the simplicity of the gospel, the simplicity of the faith. We see examples in scripture of believers making it more complicated, in the letter written to the Galatians the issue there if you remember was the temptation to add in law keeping with faith. A group self identifying as super-apostles infiltrated the church and began to teach that to truly be right with God, you not only need faith, but also to keep various aspects of the law. Complicating the gospel, complicating the christian walk...when the reality is simple, walk in faith, love God, follow Christ, and love those God has brought into your life. And the simplicity of it all, is that God gives you the ability, and willingness to do all of these things.

That was the point I was trying to make last week, the sort of marriage between spirit and works, that the christian life must reflect the things of Christ, but it is the spirit working in us to do so. It can not be forced, it must be a natural out-flowing, practical and personal part of your life. So the idea of Christian conduct becomes a test of faith, not a means to earn it. As James wrote, there must be these good works in the life of the believer, for if there is not the spirit is not in them, and if there is no spirit working in them to will and to do the things that are pleasing to God, then there is no salvation, and that belief is false, and that person deceived. But he who has the spirit, is from the the law and its condemnation, for the purpose of the law was to point to mankind's inability to please God. This becomes an important matter when addressing the church at Rome which had Jewish believers who brought with them some of those rituals and lifetyles into the body of believers. Paul instructs both parties, the ones who have come from a life of law, and religious structure based around it, and those who have come from a life of idolatry and pagansim. Let us go ahead and read this morning, chapter 14:1-13.

As I was reading this passage this week, I started to think about the mindset of both of these groups, based upon their history how each would approach the faith differently. I think the key here is understanding that Paul is saying that neither of these groups are observing, or abstaining in any way to gain merit or favor, but he says they do so unto the Lord. This is an important distinction to make, because again there is not some new standard or law being placed here, but rather Paul is seeking to make peace between people with largely different backgrounds.

The Jew, growing up in ritual and practice based around the testimony of the forefathers and prophets, would find meaning and purpose in certain practices. Even as believers, trusting Christ, one can see and believe that he is the fulfillment of these things but yet continue to do so out of reverence. Some observe a day, some observe strict eating habits, but they are doing so unto the Lord. This isn't the same kind of law following as before, for if it was I think Paul would be instructing against such practices, but instead there has been a shift, it is no longer a following of these practices to make one holy, but rather in a reminder of where they came from, and I think the key is the phrase, unto the Lord. The sabbath, the sacrifices, the temple ordinances, and even the dietary laws were all fulfilled in Christ, each and every part of the old testament revelation that was given to the patriarchs and prophets were to point to an aspect of the coming Messiah. Being focused upon purity, and making oneself pure to have access to God, is caught up in the fulfillment of Christ who by his blood has made us truly pure, and given us access to God, not as servants, but as children.

And Paul points out here in verse 4, "who are you to judge another mans servant? To his own master he is made to stand, for God is able to make him stand." I can only imagine that conflict that might arise in that early Roman church, peoples from various walks of life, and backgrounds coming together to worship God, each bringing with them the baggage of their old ways and their own understanding of various teachings. I think today it is likely a bit easier in that we tend to look for a group of believers who are like minded to worship with, therefore we end up with church buildings on every corner. But I don't think that is a luxury that was afforded the early church, while today we gather around various sets of beliefs and doctrines as we seek to grow in faith and understand God more, back in the early days of the church the defining factor was simply if one was a follower of Christ or not. Though there was likely division and struggle I that gathering, and we know this because of Pauls instruction here, there was a benefit in that through that struggling of persuing Christ together there is a various number of ideas which are challenged, and tested to see what is true. This I think can be something that is lost in the gathering of the church today, because we gather together and seek those who are like us, in many ways we have lost the concept of debate, and testing, to see what holds true to scripture.

The problem becomes we get so caught up in our own idea of ritual and understanding that we are not open to anything outside our own through process. Take for instance the concept and idea of the Sabbath day. Each and everyone of us here likely agree and see the Sabbath rest as being fulfilled in Christ, it was never about a day but rather about the rest in the mercy and grace we find in Jesus. But as we know this is a hotly debated topic, there are those who have built an entire denomination around the concept of what day they gather together to worship, rightly observing that day on the true sabbath day, which would be Saturday. But that has become such a focused part of their belief system that many other aspects of faith fall to the wayside in favor of finding whether or not you are right with God by which day you observe the Sabbath. We also have our reformed brethren who are adamant that day must be set aside to worship, and to be kept holy, keeping with the Jewish traditions of a Sabbath day of rest. So what has happened, is now we have 3 different denominations, largely split by this one issue. Now I am over simplifying it here slightly for this point I am making, but in many ways at its core this is one of the major distinctions between us, our reformed brethren, and the seven day adventists.

The early church, didn't have that luxury, they came together to worship God, bringing with them these various ideas and understandings which were things that they were at times likely forced to confront and deal with. So Paul is giving instruction on how to deal with such things. First he says, Receive one another who is weak in the faith, but not to dispute over doubtful things. He never really resolves who this, weak in the faith person is, so the interesting thing that happens when 2 people with varying ideas come together to discuss them? Both perceive the other was being the one who is weak, creating a atmosphere of patience and understanding in that discussion. Or rather, that is what Paul is implying here should be the atmosphere of these discussions. If first established that this conversation of any doctrinal issues is between 2 followers of Christ, then we must treat one another with such respect and love that he implored us to in chapter 13. And many of these things are a healthy and honest discussion to be had, through which the purpose should always be to grow in grace and understanding, as we strive to know our God more, and seek to relate to him in a closer more intimate way.

The goal in the end, is building a unity together around Christ, and in many ways we might be inclined to divide over things which are of a secondary nature in the faith, by that I mean disputes over doctrine and beliefs to the detriment of not seeing the other was a brother and sister in Christ. Over the years, our church has been called a cult by others, because of our belief in the sovereign grace of God In salvation, we have been called lawless and antinomian, because of our belief and stance of God's work through Christ on the cross fulfilling the law, freeing us from its condemnation and by the spirit works in us conviction, apart from any need or adherence for an external law. Some of these accusations have been hurled at us by those who have called into question our legitimacy as a gathering of believers, and with doubts of our own faith. Via Pauls instruction here, the proper handling of these differences should never be one of such accusations, but rather an honest discussion as we search the word of God for the answers to these questions, with an open hear and mind to hear the truth of scripture.

The issue that Paul addresses here about the eating of meat in verse 2 I had always largely attributed it to the dietary laws of the old covenant, and while that may play a large part in the congregations that Paul was writing to, one thought I ran across while studying this is that was not the issue Paul was addressing, though the same principle would apply. Rather the issue was the common practice of the meat which was available in the markets may have been previously offered up as sacrifices to pagan gods. There would be ne way to distinguish which has, and has not been previously offered as a sacrifice. This issue makes a lot of sense in the context of Paul's writing, for eating only vegetables was never a tennent of the old covenant, but would rather be someone who is concerned with the eating of meat offered to idols and by proxy being a part of that ritual and process. This would have been a very common issue in the early church, for Christians lived in pagan societies and would have been surrounded by idolatry. So some, possibly previous pagan worshipers themselves wanting to distance themselves from anything associated with it refused to eat the meat offered at market and chose to eat only vegetables.

This was an issue that plagued the Church in Corinth as well to which Paul addressed in his letter to them, which he said, in chapter 8 “Now concerning things offered to idols; We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that the hknows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by him. Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, that there is no other God but one.

For even if there are so called other gods, whether in heaven or on earth yet for us there is one God, the Father of whom are all things, and we for Him. And one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live. However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol, and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food does not commend us to God, for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours becomes a stumbling block to those who are weak.”

So even though Paul understands that idols have no objective reality, or real existence, he realizes non the less that for some the eating of the meat offered to idols is an area of conviction, and a difficulty for them. In verse 3 Paul lays out this biblical principle for tolerance within the faith, in preference for one another out of love has he wrote previously. He says, “Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has received him. It seems to be human nature to always see ones own understanding and belief as superior, In this issue of you were to put yourselves in the shoes of either party its easy to see how one view would believe itself right, Those who had no issues, and would eat the meat offered in the market with no thought of the idols it may have been sacrificed to would likely seem themselves as the more mature christian, with a robust faith clear of conviction in exercising their liberty. While on the other side, those who would abstain may see themselves as being more spiritual, and sensitive to the will of God, rejecting idols and everything that goes along with them. But Paul says, neither are wrong for both are doing so out of out of a concern for God's glory.

The principle here he lays out in detail to the Corinthian church, again back in chapter 8, of 1st Corrinthians, “But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours becomes a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge in eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” The principle here is a preference for one another in such a way that we are careful we do not lead each other against our conscience and conviction. Inherently there is nothing wrong with either stance, but the circumstance can largely dictate the conviction. For those who have come out of such idol worship, there is more meaning to that meat which is offered at the market than those who have not come from such a background. And we as believers should be aware and if possible give preference to that brother or sister. Likewise it is the same with the issue of alcohol that can be hotly debated in christian circles today. Just like with the meat offered at the market and those who had come out of that idol worship choosing to abstain, so to there are many who have come out of alcoholism, or various other addictions and vices, and flaunting a freedom that you may have under this principle that Paul lays out is wrong, for if it causes that brother to stumble back into sin, then you are guilty.

He says, when you sin against your brother in this way, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Paul says it is better to put aside your freedom knowing that others may struggle, then it is to cause them to stumble in their faith. So it is, out of love we are to preference one another, and the same principle stands for those who do not drink, to not judge those who do. I think that the important thing to take away from this, is learning to live in harmony with one another. We may all have things we struggle with, or can be a point of temptations. It is important to communicate, in our fellowship, there is nothing wrong with asking if something may cause offense.

And likewise there is nothing wrong with if something does cause offense to communicate that with one another. The goal here, as a group of believers, is to come together and worship Christ, to encourage, exhort, and lift each other up. There is far too much in this world that seeks to tear us down, the last place that we should have problems is with fellow believers, for we serve the same God. In chapter 12 Paul said, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." In the context on that verse he was talking about strife with the world, but if we are to live peaceably with the world in as much as we are able, should we not all the more so seek to live peaceably with one another? Fellow believers in the gospel, brothers and sisters in Christ? The key to all of this, is a phrase repeated in verse 6, "To the Lord." As much as some people may try to make it seem, this life is not black and white, nor is it always clear, but God has given us the Holy Spirit which rules and guides us in our walk, he knows our weakness, our struggles, our desires, and our sins, and through conviction works in us to fight against our sinful nature. Who are we to judge a conviction of another believer? We do not know the inner thoughts, and struggles, and what we perceive ourselves to be free in may very well be a stumbling block to another. That is why Paul can say in verse 5, "let each be fully convinced in his own mind."

It is an understanding that Christ followers, have been given the spirit and that spirit works in each and every one of us to convict, and guide us in the rights and wrongs of our conduct. That is why the law is no longer necessary, that is why it has faded away, for one greater than the law has come, which works in the heart and mind directly to produce in us good works. The danger of such preaching, that things are left to the conscience of each person, is that some may use it as a license for sin, but the argument against that is, the holy spirit convicts, if you use your freedom as an excuse for sin, be wary that your confession of faith may be false and you have deceived yourself. Paul already addressed this in this letter back in chapter 6. he said, "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin so that grace may abound? Certainly not! For how shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? If you see your liberty as an excuse for sin, it calls into question your very faith. For the spirit works in the believer conviction, not excuses. This was the point of last week's message, we must conduct ourselves both in word and deed, both in heart and mind as those who have been redeemed by Christ, there is an aspect where good works, and moral conduct must be apart of the life of a believer, because it is the spirit within who guides us in such. We have not only been given the capability, but the desire to do that which is pleasing to God, not in fear of judgement, but because we love him.

So our conduct toward one another, should reflect that love. In preference for one another, seek the things which are above.. That is, Christ is our center, Christ is the goal, and we a group of fallen messed up sinful people, come together to worship, and praise him recognizing his mercy and grace toward us, and likewise share this grace for one another, for in Christ we are to love one another, so when these sort of issues arise as Paul is speaking here, we first and foremost recognize our unity in Christ, and seek to live together as one in him being wary, and careful to not be a stumbling block to one another. This principle spreads to each and every relationship we have, friends, family, spouses, children, as we strive together to be like Christ, giving preference to one another, seeking peace and understanding as we may discuss any of these areas that fall into this category of conviction. Recognizing that we are all sinners, saved by grace, who will fall short, but thankfully, it is God who has saved us by his Son, and it does not rely upon our actions, but upon our belief. May God give each and every one of us this measure of faith, may we grow in patience and love toward one another, and may we reflect this love that we have first received to all others around us. Being faithful to give an account of the hope that we have in Christ, so that others may see, and believe. May our conduct toward one another be guided by this love, through the spirit, so that our liberty does not become a stumbling block for one another, but rather in love let us communicate without judgment, and work to give preference to one another in love.