



DISAGREEMENT WITHOUT DIVISION

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 14:1-12

28th Message

Gary Vanderet

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It was wonderful to hear our deacons share today. I am thrilled at how God is using their ministry among us

Some years ago I came across this quote by Marion Leach Jacobsen, from her book, *Crowded Pews and Lonely People*. Her words have remained with me in a special way:

If any group of Christians who claim to believe and practice all God has said in His book, will face up to their personal responsibility within the family of Christ, and to the real needs of Christians around them, their church will impress its community with the shining goodness of God's love - to them *and* among them. Such a transformation probably would do more to attract others to Jesus Christ than any house to house canvass, evangelistic campaign or new church facility. People are hungry for acceptance, love and friends, and unless they find them in the church they may not stay there long enough to become personally related to Jesus Christ. People are not persuaded, they're attracted. We must be able to communicate far more by what we are than by what we say.¹

The world ought to recognize about Christians the fragrance and beauty of our Lord Jesus, an aroma so sweet that they can't get it out of their minds. Being a Christian is not a matter of becoming rigidly correct in everything we do; it is a matter of loving people the way our Lord did. This authentic love is what the apostle Paul is emphasizing in these closing chapters of the book of Romans.

We have reached chapter 14 in our studies. At this point Paul will give a lengthy example of what it means for Christians to love one other. His example, which runs from 14:1 through 15:13, deals with two groups of people in the church at Rome, believers whom the apostle refers to as the "weak" and the "strong."

Before we come to the text, it is important to understand what Paul means by these terms. When he uses the word "weak," he is not referring to someone with a weak character, one who gives in easily to temptation. He is speaking of one who is "weak" in faith, whose faith doesn't permit him to do certain things. This person does not lack self-control; what he lacks is freedom.

The structure of the passage is simple. In 14:1, Paul gives a command, which lays down a principle. Then, over the next chapter and a half, he develops the rea-

sons why Christians should act this way. Today we will cover the opening twelve verses.

First, the principle:

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. (Rom 14:1, NASB)

This is the principle of unconditional acceptance, especially of the "weak in faith." That word "accept" means more than a mere acknowledgment of their right to belong. John Stott comments: "It implies the warmth and kindness of love."² The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament of Philemon giving Onesimus the same welcome that he would give an apostle. It is also used of the welcome that believers will receive from Jesus when we are ushered into his presence in heaven (John 14:3). The "weak" are not to be rejected, ignored or treated as second class believers. Paul adds, "but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions." We don't accept one who is "weak" in order to debate or argue with him. Our acceptance and welcome come without ulterior motives or hidden agendas. We are to respect the opinions of others.

That word translated "opinions" in the NASB, or "disputable matters" in the NIV, deals with areas that Christians do not have to agree about. The sixteenth century Reformers called these "matters of indifference." In matters where Scripture is unequivocally clear and absolute, where truth is stated in such a way that is unmistakable, it is sinful for us to debate those issues. Adultery is sinful. Homosexual behavior is sinful. Stealing is wrong. Gossip, greed, envy, jealousy, resentment, all are sins. But there are all kinds of matters about which the Bible is not clear. Christians may disagree in these gray areas. This is what Paul is dealing with in this text.

Let's continue and try to understand what was happening in Paul's day that prompted him to write these words.

One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. (14:2)

One man regards one day above another [the "weak" man], another regards every day alike. [the "strong" man] Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. (14:5)

The church in Rome, like the city itself, was very cosmopolitan. Jews and Gentiles from all over the Empire

made their home there. The church was made up of a remarkably heterogeneous group of Jews and Gentiles. Their backgrounds had little in common. Some who had attended Greek centers of learning had one way of looking at reality. Others who hadn't had that opportunity were less sophisticated. There were vast differences of outlook even among the Jews. In addition, there were enormous differences between Jews and Gentiles. Such was the makeup church in Rome to which the apostle was writing.

Paul raises two issues in this chapter. One has to do with eating and drinking, the other with the Sabbath and holy days. Some Jews in the church continued their conscientious commitment to Jewish regulations with respect to diet and days. David Roper writes: "For 1,500 years the Jews had observed certain dietary laws. The book of Leviticus lists certain animals that they could and could not eat. They could eat four-footed animals that had divided hoofs and chewed their cud, but they couldn't eat four-footed animals that didn't chew their cud, like a pig. And we are told in Leviticus 11 why those rules were given. They were getting ready to go into Canaan, and there was to be a difference between them and these pagan nations."³ These regulations were symbolic of God's desire for their holiness and their distinctiveness as God's people.

But Jesus had swept all that away. Our Lord declared that it isn't what goes into your mouth that defiles you, it is what comes out of it. Mark tells us, "Thus Jesus declared all things clean" (Mark 7:19). The book of Acts records that very graphic message that Peter received on his housetop when God was preparing him for a ministry to Gentiles. Peter had never eaten with a Gentile, and God was preparing him to preach the gospel to Cornelius in Caesarea. When a sheet descended, covered with all kinds of animals, and God said, "Kill and eat," the horrified Peter cried, "No, I have never eaten anything unclean." But God said, "Don't call unclean what I have called clean. Now kill and eat" (Acts 10:9-16). Thus was this whole dietary system swept away in Christ. It was no longer relevant for Christians.

But this was difficult for many Jews who had always avoided pork. For them, eating a ham sandwich presented a major problem. They had been diligent to eat only clean items. They ate kosher meat, making sure the animal was slaughtered in the correct way. You can imagine the potential problems. Say you are a member of the church in Rome, and a young Jewish family moves into your neighborhood. You find out they are Christians, and you invite them over to your house for a bar-b-que. You are preparing to cook pork ribs, but your guests say they can't eat pork. This was a common problem in the church. In fact, this was such a problem that many Jews gave up eating meat at all, because they couldn't be sure that the meat was kosher.

Secondly, Jews had always worshipped on Saturday, the last day of the week. Many of them still observed the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals. Now they were

worshipping with Christians, celebrating the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week. This was a source of tension for some Jews.

Notice that the one who is described as "weak" observes a lot of rules. Paul is saying that such people have not yet progressed to the point where they believe that the world is theirs to enjoy. Remember that there was only one forbidden tree in the garden, not a grove of trees. For Christians, there are not a lot of absolutes. The world is ours to enjoy. The person who is strong in faith understands that, but the one who is weak in faith needs a lot of rules and regulations to control his life. He finds it difficult to escape the thought that keeping a lot of rules is pleasing to Christ. But Paul has great compassion toward these weak Jewish believers. He does not want the strong to damage their weak consciences.

Those were the issues in Paul's day. What are our gray areas, the issues that potentially divide us? We can start with one issue that Paul mentions here, the Sabbath. Some Christians will not take part in certain activities on Sunday, because it has been ingrained in them that Sunday is the Sabbath day and it must keep it holy. But the New Testament is silent about when we should worship. There are a couple of references that the early church worshiped on Sunday, but this was never mandated. So it is optional. You can worship on Tuesday night or Saturday night. It makes no difference. Every day is alike. In fact, every day is a day to worship.

What about alcoholic beverages? Is it wrong for Christians to drink any alcohol at all? No, it's not. Jesus and his disciples drank wine. What the Scripture forbids is drunkenness. Some people who come from an alcoholic background or who have some genetic problems with alcohol choose not to drink. That is a wise choice. Others who know the dangers and abuses of alcohol choose not to drink at all. Some Christians choose to drink in moderation. What about smoking? Is smoking a sin? Depending on whether you live above or below the Mason-Dixon line may determine how you feel about this issue. But Jesus made it clear in Mark 7 that nothing that you put in your mouth is sin. Smokers may die earlier, but smoking isn't a sin.

What about theology? Can we differ over theological issues and still be evangelical? What about the mode of baptism? What about issues like eschatology, when and how the millennium will be established, or the frequency and importance of certain spiritual gifts? Scripture is not clear about these things. What about musical tastes in worship? Are you really more spiritual if you prefer old hymns to contemporary choruses? Are you more spiritual if you prefer praise choruses, or if raise your hands when you sing? Of course, the answer to both of these questions is no.

What about schools? Young parents face the choice of whether to send their children to a Christian school, public school, or teach them at home. Some feel strongly that it is the parents' responsibility to teach their chil-

dren, so they home school them. Others feel the importance of integrating Christian truth into every subject. For a number of reasons they send their children to Christian schools rather than public schools. Others have convictions about our need as believers to be integrated into the world, not isolated from it. They want to be involved in the public school system. People who hold to all of these different positions are listening to me right now. The point is, we must accept the person who has made his or her choice.

What about politics? Can a person be a liberal Democrat and still be an evangelical Christian? Certainly! I know some.

We could go on and talk about scores of other Christian “taboos,” things like dancing, movies, cosmetics, fashion, etc.

Paul is saying that Christians will differ on these issues, but that shouldn’t make any difference with respect to how we treat one another. We should accept one another, but not for the purpose of sinful debate. David Roper puts it this way: “Don’t accept your brother into the fellowship and then invite him over to your house to straighten him out. That seems to be the Christian’s favorite indoor sport — straightening out other Christians. There is really only one person in the world we can do very much about. Where the Spirit of God has been ambiguous, we must not be definitive. Where God has been clear, we can be clear. Where God has commanded a truth, we can believe it with assurance. But where Scripture is not clear, we must not be dogmatic.”⁴ That doesn’t mean we can’t have personal convictions about these issues. Paul says that each person should be convinced in his or her own mind. But we have to accept one another.

Paul will go on to develop his argument as to why we should accept one another (through 15:12). But here, in verses 3-12, he gives a number of reasons why we should do so. First, we should not condemn fellow Christians with differing viewpoints because *God has accepted them*.

Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. (14:3)

How dare we reject someone whom God has accepted! In fact, John Stott writes: “the best way to determine what our attitude toward people should be is to determine what God’s attitude toward them is.”⁵

This brings us to the second reason why we should accept each other: we shouldn’t try to change others because *they are not accountable to us*. Stott writes: “If it is inappropriate to reject one whom God has welcomed, then it is equally inappropriate to interfere in a relationship between a master and his servant.”⁶ Verse 4:

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for

the Lord is able to make him stand. (14:4)

We are not their lord. The Lord himself paid the price to be their judge. He died for them, purchasing them with his own blood. They belong to him. We don’t have to change them. How liberating that is!

There is a third reason we shouldn’t judge one another: *we can’t see their hearts, but God can*. He reads their hearts and sees things that we can’t see.

One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. 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. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; 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. (14:5-8)

God sees their motivation. Many differences arise out of honest conviction, which God sees even though we can’t. Some of the things that people do that seem so wrong are done for all the right reasons — out of a deep love for God. In fact, these verses give some helpful guidelines for determining whether a certain activity is proper. John Stott puts it this way: “If we are able to receive something from God with thanksgiving, as his gift to us, then we can offer it back to him as our service to him.”⁷

So we have two valuable and practical tests: Can we thank God for this? Can we do this unto the Lord? The one who drinks beer gives thanks to God for the refreshment and taste of it. That is perfectly proper. The one who says he can’t drink beer but has a cup of coffee, gives thanks for the coffee. It may be as harmful physically as the beer, but in either case, it isn’t a moral question but, rather, a question of what the heart is doing in the eyes of God. The one who regards Sunday as a special day that ought to be kept different from other days is doing so unto the Lord. Therefore, we must honor and respect that viewpoint. The one who thinks that every day is alike, and wants to honor the Lord each day, is doing so as a conviction of his heart. We should respect that. Paul’s exhortation is, “Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.” Be convinced in your own mind about what God wants you to do. The problem with many of us is that we don’t think. Whatever our mother taught us, whatever we learned as a child in Sunday School, that is what we believe. We don’t think! Find out for yourself what you believe.

Paul continues:

For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

**“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me,
And every tongue shall give praise to God.”**

So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. (14:9-12)

God is the one who will judge. One of these days we will stand before him. It will not be a judgment with a view to condemnation but, rather, an accounting that we will give to our Father. Paul says that our brother is going to have to account for his beliefs before the Father, and so will we. We have no warrant to climb on the bench, put on our judicial robes, place our fellow believers on the stand and start pronouncing judgment and passing sentence. God alone is the judge.

Paul has more to say on this subject. We will take that up next week. But, in the meantime, here is an important principle that we must follow. We need to stop judging each other in these gray areas and stop looking down on each other with contempt. Jesus in his High Priestly prayer prayed for unity not only for his disciples, but also for us. I will close with his words:

“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.” (John 17:20-21)

1. Marion Leach Jacobsen, *Crowded Pews and Lonely People* (Tynedale House, 1972), 88.
2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 359.
3. David Roper, “How to Disagree.” A message delivered at Cole Community Church, Boise ID, June 26, 1988.
4. Roper, “How to Disagree.”
5. Stott, *Romans*, 361.
6. Stott, *Romans*, 361.
7. Stott, *Romans*, 362.

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