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Romans 14:1-12

30th Message

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# HANDLING DIFFERENCES

*SERIES: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ETHICS?*

Three hundred and seventy years ago, Ulrich Zwingli began his ministry as pastor of the Great Minster church in Zurich, which still stands today. He entered the service of that Catholic church on his 36th birthday, January 1, 1519. Having devoted himself to the study of Scripture, the light of the gospel had dawned in his heart and set him free. Thus, he decided to do a new thing in the Catholic church. He was going to expound whole books of Scripture. Beginning in the book of Matthew that Sunday, he went through the entire New Testament in four years. His goal was “to preach Christ from the fountain” and “to insert the pure Christ into the hearts” of his people.

As a result, the people became liberated. The old ways of superstition melted, the gospel took root in their hearts, and a reformation caught fire in the city of Zurich. Zwingli also took a keen interest in the young men of his town. This was just after the Renaissance when everyone wanted to learn Greek, so he gathered young men to teach them Greek with the New Testament as his text. Not only did they learn Greek, they learned the gospel and became evangelical Christians.

At the same time this great fire was flaming in Zurich, another man the same age as Zwingli was having a similar impact in Wittenberg, Germany. His name was Martin Luther. At Zwingli's instigation, they corresponded, and Zwingli sensed that here was another man who had discovered the same Scriptures which had been hidden for 1,000 years. An invitation went out to Luther and his other brothers to meet with Zwingli and his men in a city called Marburg located in what is now Northern France.

In October, 1529, these two delegations came together, and Zwingli's desire was that this movement would be of one spirit and one mind. Thus, they debated fifteen points of doctrine such as the person of Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, sanctification by faith, and the authority of the Scripture. They agreed on all points except the last one which was the nature of communion. Martin Luther proclaimed, “Jesus said, ‘This is my body.’ That is what it says, that is what it means. The bread is the literal body of Jesus.” Zwingli replied, “Jesus also said, ‘I am the vine.’ He did not mean that literally. I think it is a metaphor.” Their debate became so heated that they came to an impasse.

Finally, after many days of debate, with tears in his eyes, Zwingli approached Luther and extended the right hand of fellowship. Luther declined, saying, “Yours is a different spirit from ours.” Zwingli responded, “Let us confess our union in all things in which we agree; and, as for the rest, let us remember that we are brethren. There will never be peace in the churches if we cannot bear differences on secondary points.” But Luther responded, “You do not belong to the communion of the Christian Church. We cannot acknowledge you as brethren.” You can imagine what this did to Zwingli! He went home devastated. Because of that historic event, a split occurred in

the Reformed church. The Lutheran church went into Scandinavia. In Switzerland, Holland and England, the Reformed church grew.

As I read Romans 14, I realized this was why Paul wrote this chapter. He saw the potential for the church splitting over different expressions of worship or different areas of freedom in our conscience in relationship to the world. Paul's desire was that we would be such a community of love that in the areas where the Bible is silent, regarding our worship in the New Covenant and our walk in the world with liberty, love would bind us together so that we could see our differences as insignificant.

In this text, the apostle first explains the basis of our differences. Then he gives a proper response to our differences. Finally, he offers a warning to us if we choose to foster our differences. In his discussion, he will give us a lesson in history, a command and a warning. Let us look at the basis of our differences in verses 1-5. Especially note verses 2 and 5.

## I. The Basis of our Differences (14:1-5)

**Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. 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. 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. One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. (Rom 14:1-5 NASB)**

Let me say that when Paul talks about the basis of our differences he is not talking about those areas in which the Bible is explicitly clear. For example, on issues of morality, sin is clearly defined as adultery or fornication, jealousy or strife, stealing or bitterness. In these areas, the church is to judge one another by the written word in order to cleanse ourselves and to be one family.

The particular differences that Paul talks about here come down to one issue: How does a person understand his own holiness? What does it mean to be separate to God, to be owned by him, to be his personal property? Paul discusses two aspects of our holiness. First, how do we express this holiness in worship? Second, how do we live out our holiness in relationship to the world? At the birth of the church of Jesus Christ, there was a great difference of opinion regarding this very issue, for Jews coming out from under the law were worshipping for the first time with Gentiles who had no heritage in the law.

On Friday night, I subjected my daughter to my favorite movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*. At the beginning of the movie, Tevya says quite clearly, “Every (Jewish) man used to know who he was and what God expected of him. My children were exposed to all the dietary

laws, the sabbath, circumcision and so on. Why is it so different now?" The reason, of course, is the difference in holiness expressed in the Old and New Testaments which is as striking as the difference between an engagement and a marriage.

Emily and I courted for over four years before we were married. I was devoted to her while I was at Stanford and she at San Diego State. My fraternity brothers noticed certain rituals that I developed early in our relationship. Every day after lunch I would race to my room to start typing a letter. All my friends used to call me a "wimp." I even had all of our letters numbered. We also communicated with pictures. I had an "Emily bulletin board" that I enjoyed looking at. Then there were the special holidays for which I lived. We always tried to save enough money to fly and visit each other. Emily had even arranged her classes so that she had four-day weekends. I would be in heaven for four days until grief set in on Monday night knowing I would lament her departure.

When we were married, everything changed. I do not have to write letters any more. I do not worship her pictures any more. I have the real thing in my presence twenty-four hours a day, every day—a blessing for me, a trial for Emily at times!).

That is what happened with the New Testament. The New Testament view of holiness was an advancement over the old. Everything in Israel's worship—the dietary laws, the temple, the sacrifices, the priesthood—was only a shadow of the heavenly King and his kingdom. They all pointed in anticipation to the coming of the Messiah. He came! The heavenly King came down from heaven, made a heavenly sacrifice, and built a heavenly temple. He declared all food clean because he is the pure food. We eat his body and his blood. Thus, the New Testament is like marriage. We can dispense with the writing of letters, the keeping of pictures and the practice of holidays.

There was a tremendous new freedom for the Christians to whom Paul was writing. But Paul understood that it might be difficult for some Jews to eat pork after 1400 years of abstaining. Their consciences might be weak. He recognized that we all have different levels of freedom regarding how we express ourselves in worship based upon how we understand our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Second, when Jesus came to earth and set up his heavenly kingdom, a new intensity of God's holiness came into the world. In the Old Testament, a Jew was to be holy, separate. He was not to defile himself by eating or by contact with the world. Therefore, certain people were excluded from the temple—the lepers and lame, for example. If a Jew touched a dead person, he became defiled. His separateness made him holy.

When Jesus came, notice what happened. This King touched lepers and was not defiled. In fact, he was so holy he cleansed the leper. When the hemorrhaging woman touched him, the flow of her blood should have made him unclean. Instead of her defiling him, he healed her. He even came in contact with the dead and brought them back to life. Most controversial of all, he went to a party at Matthew's house. Do you know what Matthew's house was like? It was filled with drinking, carousing, and prostitutes! But Jesus went to Matthew's house and was not defiled. Rather, he transformed it and converted Matthew. Do you see the liberty in this new intensity of holiness? Instead of being defiled by the world, Christians are now to go out into the world and transform it. But Paul knew there would be varying degrees of freedom regarding Christians' consciences to enter into some of these areas.

One of the women on our staff just went on a cruise with her parents and her sister, none of whom are Christians. This cruise was worldly, but the woman went as God's representative. Instead of this worldly cruise defiling her, she transformed it. Many men tried to pick her up because of her beauty, but she said no and would not do many of the things they did. Finally, she and her sister were invited to the staff party which included drinking and carousing. When they asked her why she would not go along with their lifestyle, she replied, "Let me tell you about mine." The whole party listened to her share about Jesus Christ. She transformed the party! That is the intensity of our holiness.

The basis of our differences lies in the different ways of expressing our love relationship to God in worship and of expressing our holiness in the world. There will always be differences of opinion regarding what we can and cannot do. What is the proper response to these differences? How are we to react to one another when we come together with these different backgrounds? The answer is found in verses 1 and 3.

## II. The Proper Response to our Differences (14:1, 3)

**Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. 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. (14:1-3)**

Paul gives a word to the stronger brothers and a word to the weaker brothers.

He tells the stronger brothers, "Do not despise the weaker brother because he is not as free as you." The word "despise" means "to disdain so as to breed contempt." This is when the stronger brother might turn his back on the weaker and keep him out of the inner circle of fellowship. Paul used this word about himself when he communicated with the Galatians. When he visited them, he had an eye disease that was so bad it made his physical appearance repulsive. Thus, he said to them, "That which was a temptation to you in my weakness of the flesh you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus himself." That is what we are to do with our weaker brothers.

The word "accept" in the Scriptures presents a beautiful word picture. It is used eight times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Every time it expresses how God himself receives weak saints. Psalm 18:16 says, "He sent from on high, He took me;/He drew me out of many waters." Psalm 27:10 says, "For my father and my mother have forsaken me,/But the Lord will take me up." Again, Psalm 65:4 reads, "How blessed in the one whom Thou does choose, and bring near to Thee/To dwell in Thy courts." Finally, Psalm 73:24 says, "With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, and afterward receive me to glory." These passages give us the wonderful sense that when God sees the saints in their weakness he comes to them in haste and with no reserve. In their plight, he saves them from affliction or loneliness and brings them into the closest, most intimate fellowship. This fellowship evokes a feeling of blessedness and protection and tastes so sweet it is like stepping back into the garden of Eden.

God is telling us to do for our weaker brothers what he has done for us. Then he adds that we are to do it unconditionally. He says, "Don't accept them in order to change their opinion." Often when we invite people into our homes, we have a hidden agenda regarding

their lives. Paul says we are to love them unconditionally, with no inner reservations.

I am so thankful for older men who have done this for me. When I was nineteen I had a very weak conscience. I will never forget being on the street in Amsterdam when I met a school teacher named Yap Oousterhuis who was preaching. He welcomed me as a stranger and a weak brother into his home and he loved me. Never once did he try to change my opinions. Instead, he showered me with his love. That was nineteen years ago. When I met up with him a couple of years ago, he shared with me that this was his standard operation procedure. What he did with me in Amsterdam is what he did in South Africa after he retired. He went to the Izulu kingdom, the black state of South Africa, and started a school. He took a multi-racial, multi-national staff to create a symphony of love for these black children living in poverty. He did this for eight years on a teachers' pension without any other support. That is the kind of love expressed when stronger brothers welcome weaker brothers.

Paul also has a word for the weaker brothers. They are not off the hook! In verse 3, Paul says, "Let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him." In the ancient world, all meat purchased in the butcher shops came from sacrifices to idols. Many Christians, especially of Jewish descent, thought that meat dedicated to an idol was defiled. Thus, they became vegetarians, for their consciences were weak. There were other Christians in the market place who knew that idols were nothing and felt free to eat. They said, "God made the cow; food cannot defile us. He has declared all foods clean. We can give thanks!" But the weaker brother condemned him in his heart because that was something he could not do.

Paul says the weaker brother is not to condemn or slander the stronger brother who may be free and pure in his heart. This cannot be seen from the outside. He may be like Jesus at Matthew's party—he is not defiled and can transform the situation to holiness. Though the same action may be a stumbling block for the weaker brother, he is not to judge someone else for it.

Last week I had the privilege of leading the memorial service for seven-year-old Lindsey Rose Buchanan who was born blind and deaf. Her parents Michael and Hazel had prepared a beautiful memorial service for all their friends. They listed the Scripture readings they wanted, and they had prepared statements about what this little life did for them as parents. They considered her a gift. As I looked out over the audience, I realized that we had a mixed crowd. Half of the family attending was Catholic; there were also many from our body and many unbelievers. Yet we all experienced a beautiful worship experience. It was a taste of heaven because we all came with a single focus—to lament the loss of Lindsey Rose. The lament created an ocean of love that washed away all of our differences. We were one family. After I finished the service, I realized that this is what every worship service is to resemble.

Think of our own body here with all the various religious and pagan backgrounds. We gather together to lament the death of Jesus. That lament should create a bond of love that will melt our differences. This is what God does. Welcome one another! Do not reject or despise or judge your brother. Do for your brother what God has done for you.

Paul ends his text with two warnings if we choose to foster our differences instead of dealing with them as he has instructed. Look at verses 4 and following.

### III. A Warning if We Foster our Differences (4:4-12)

**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. 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (14:4-9)**

#### A. We Usurp God's Role as Lord of Worship

Paul warns us that if we continue to foster our differences and judge our brothers we are usurping God's role as Lord in worship. In his first statement, he tells us that in Christ all of us are bond-slaves (house servants) of one Master. By judging my brother, I am saying that as his fellow slave I am the source of his evaluation rather than the Lord. That is blatantly presumptuous, especially after the Lord himself has already pronounced the verdict, "He will stand."

Second, he says that under the New Covenant, the standard of evaluation for all servants is internal rather than external. It is love from the heart. Under the New Covenant, the external expressions of this love may vary. We are given very little prescription as to how to worship God and what to do. Yet it is over the fine details that most denominations part. What is vital, as Paul says, is to do everything from the heart with full conviction. One man may think one day is more holy than another. The Jews considered Saturday to be holy. The early Christians settled upon Sunday because of the resurrection. Paul says, "Every day is holy. I worship every day and give myself to good deeds. I am his property all my life." Whatever we do, we are to do from our hearts with full conviction.

A while back, a brother challenged me on this very issue. He was questioning whether or not I really loved the Lord based upon how I was expressing my worship in external fashion. He wanted me to do it his way. After our conversation was over, my spirit was wounded because he was attacking my basic motive for the love relationship I had with the Lord.

I have three daughters who all have different personalities. I have discovered because of this that they even express their love differently. My youngest, Katie, loves to draw pictures and always writes me love notes. The middle one is shy and has a difficult time expressing her love overtly, but she has subtle ways of doing it that are just as meaningful to me as a parent. The eldest is our verbal, physical daughter. She loves giving hugs and back rubs. As their father, do I care how they express their love as long as it comes from their hearts? No! But dissension happens in our home every time one child compares herself with another, "You don't love Mommy and Daddy like I do!" They hold up their external expression as means of judgment. Nothing causes a father's heart more grief! The same is true for our heavenly Father. The standard of evaluation is love, not externals.

Third, Paul says a slave's focus is to be singular, not plural. The thrust of this text is why a slave does anything: He is serving one Lord. If he lives, he lives to the Lord. If he dies, he dies to the Lord. Jesus alone has won this right because he came, died and rose again. He is Lord. There is only one Master. Paul says, "If I interpose myself and lay my program on others, I have created two focuses. I have

usurped that place. As a result, the servant can no longer be single-minded. He is worshipping to please and impress me.”

When that happens, hypocrisy enters the church of Jesus Christ. This is a horrible thing! Jesus castigated the Pharisees for this. He was angry with them because they had usurped the place of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. Their worship was nothing but external show. He says of them, “They do their deeds to be noticed by men. This is why they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. This is why they love the place of honor at banquets and in the synagogue.”

He told us not to be called “Rabbi” because we have one Teacher, the anointing of the Holy Spirit. We are not to call anyone on earth “Father” because we have one Father. We are not to be called leaders, as founders of a movement, because we have one Leader, the Messiah. He created the church. He is the only founder we have.

Paul says if we interpose ourselves we create hypocrisy in the church. Then people worship to please us because we put a guilt trip or legalism upon them. These are enemies to Christian love. We are not to usurp the Lord’s role in worship. It is a grief to him and creates dissension in his house.

### **B. We Usurp God’s Role as Judge**

Not only do we usurp God’s role as Lord in worship, we usurp his role as Judge. This is seen in verses 10-12:

**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.**

Paul says there is only one Judge to whom we are accountable. As a young child I had three older sisters who loved to “climb my frame” for my table manners. My consistent retort was always, “I have one mother, and you are not she.” That was a rather arrogant, immature statement, but the content was correct. Similarly, Paul is saying we have one Judge.

In fact, his quote from Isaiah is a prophetic word about the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah (45:22-25) says when he appears all the ends of the earth will be saved and come to the Lord of righteousness, and they will bow down and pledge their allegiance to Jesus Christ. In those days, all the offspring of Israel will be justified because of the work of the Messiah. The point is that the Judge has already justified his people. Who are we to condemn them when he has already pronounced the verdict?

Finally, on that day of judgment, there will only be one life for which we will be responsible—ours, not our brother’s. The passage says we will give account of our own lives. I love the story of Peter after he was ordained as a pastor. After talking about their relationship, the Lord said to him, “At the end of your life, you will die a humiliating death.” Peter thought about that for a minute and then said, pointing to John, “What about this man?” In effect, Jesus responded, “Mind your own business! You follow me.” This is the point.

In summary, it is a dangerous, serious thing to not accept our brothers. If we do not accept them and choose to judge them, we are usurping God’s role as Lord in worship and his role as Judge. For this, we will be held accountable on the day of judgment.

After the Marburg debate in 1529, Zwingli died in the battlefield in Switzerland. Luther wrote that he “died in great and many sins and blasphemy; he became a heathen; and he perished by the sword because he took up the sword.” Luther added about himself that he “would rather a hundred times be torn to pieces and burned than make common cause with Zwingli.” Contrast that to what Zwingli wrote of Luther:

Luther is so excellent a warrior of God, and searches the Scriptures with such great earnestness as no one else on earth for these thousand years has done; and no one has ever equalled him in manly, unshaken spirit...He was the true David whom the Lord himself appointed to slay Goliath...Therefore we should justly thank God for having raised such an instrument for His honor; and this we do with pleasure.

Which spirit is more like yours—Zwingli’s or Luther’s? In the 1800s, a church historian wrote about this controversy and said:

It was during the fiercest dogmatic controversies and the horrors of the Thirty Years War, that a prophetic voice whispered to future generations the watchword of Christian peacemakers, which was unheeded in a century of intolerance, and forgotten in a century of indifference, but resounds with increased force in a century of revival and re-union: In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.

May that be our legacy here at Peninsula Bible Church.

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