

“PURSUE PEACE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Romans 14:13-23

Introduction.

The Apostle Paul is a pastor at heart. He is a shepherd who loves and cares for his sheep. So he is constantly teaching, instructing, admonishing, warning, and training in the way of the truth.

The Apostle Paul has not yet been to the church in Rome, but he already clearly loves them and is caring for them through this letter. It can be summed up in Romans 12:9, let your love be genuine, real, authentic, visible. Paul is writing out of love for the sake of peace and unity.

Chapter 14 is a lengthy call to love each other, and especially for the strong to love the weak.

We should pay attention to what Scripture pays attention to, especially when it devotes this much attention to it.

God sees what we need as a church so let's pay attention. Let's submit our hearts and minds and wills to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church this morning.

The church in Rome was filled with new converts to the Christian faith, some were former Jews and some were former Gentiles.

The Jews were coming out of very strict dietary laws about what was clean and unclean. The ancient world was full of pagan idolatry and temple worship where lots of animal were sacrificed to idols. The pagan temples were the local butcher shop; it was where you went to buy your meat. But these converts were having conscience issues with eating meat that was used in demonic idol worship. They were having a hard time letting go of all the trappings of their old ways. The Gentiles didn't care.

This was a big deal in the early years of the church. Paul wrote about these same things to the Colossians and Corinthians.

Colossians 2:16-17 Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or

a Sabbath. 17 These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:23–26 “All things are lawful,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful,” but not all things build up. 24 Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. 25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. 26 For ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.’

It is interesting to hear Paul shows his hand with regard to the food issue. I guess we can commend him for waiting until verse 14 before he does.

Vs. 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.

His conscience is free to do whatever he wants and he views this as being stronger in faith. So if all food is clean, then Paul is free to eat any food, any time. Right? No, that’s not the bottom line for Paul. Walking in love is the bottom line, that is the goal, that is the first thing first.

Vs. 15 For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

Paul knows that given a chance we will judge each other, we will look down on each other, we will feel smug and superior to each other. He knows that we use our knowledge and freedom to be proud.

Don’t use your freedom to hurt, harm or hinder the faith of another, or worse yet cause them to sin.

Paul is saying to the Gentile Christians, “stop bringing your BLT sandwiches to the church picnic, your Jewish brothers/sisters are freaking out.” And they argue back, “But Jesus died to set us free to eat bacon!” And Paul says, “Yeah, but even more importantly He died for your brother and your focus should be the same as Jesus: how can I help and build up my brother?”

If Jesus loved him enough to die for him, can you not love him enough to do such a small thing as not to wound his conscience?

Jesus had some very strong words about this:

Matthew 18:6 Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

Paul applies what Jesus said to all of God's children of all ages.

Romans 14:13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Every church has its issues that test their unity, and Paul is giving wisdom on how we can remain in community with each other and still have our differences about non-essential issues.

In all matters of liberty, freedom, debatable non-essentials we are called to reverse course and switch from offense to defense. Rather than create an offense, let us be willing to let go of our views in order to not cause someone to sin.

Paul is saying don't harm the faith or conscience a brother who has been redeemed by the blood of Christ just to satisfying our own belly or our own opinion. Jesus doesn't care about food, He cares about faith.

The kingdom of God does not consist of eating and drinking, or a whole host of other things, so if we have to lay those things aside, we have lost nothing of the kingdom of God and the Gospel.

If you have the righteousness and peace and joy of the kingdom of God by the Holy Spirit, you are blessed and rich beyond whatever food or drink or any earthly thing could give you. Let your conscience be most satisfied with that.

Righteousness is the guide to our actions, that we do what is right for others. Peace is the environment which all Christians should pursue, and joy is the experience that all Christians should have when love and unity rule the day.

If someone has a gluten or lactose intolerance, we don't force the issue. If someone is allergic to peanuts we don't give them a PBJ. If the nursery says we are peanut free, we go with it, for the sake of love and care for others.

We don't fight and divide over people's choices, views, decisions or hobby horses or pet peeves or axes to grind or fixations, whether it's vaccines or

buying local or American, or going green or electric or what is healthy or how we should spend money or wearing bike helmets.

And yes, this applies to donkeys and elephants, to politics and political parties. What does it say about us if we care more about politics than theology and doctrine and Scripture? One of the most grievous parts of Covid for me was seeing Christians and churches divided over politics and failing in the law of love.

The Kingdom of God is infinitely more important than differences over countless arguments over food or drink or personal or political preferences.

When Christians in the church in Corinth were choosing up sides over which leader they liked:

I Corinthians 1:10-13 I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. 12 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." 13 *Is Christ divided?* Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Is Christ divided? No, so let us not be divided, by anything on earth, but united in Him who died for us.

If you think it is a great burden or annoyance or imposition to set aside your liberty for the sake of a weaker brother, just pause and think for a moment of what Jesus set aside for the sake of us weaker sinners. Think of the length He went to sacrifice for us, and then get over yourself.

I got to thinking about another area where our differences are exposed and can lead to conflict. The battle of the sexes, of male and female, men and women, husbands and wives.

We are different and as they say in France, *viva la difference*, long live the difference.

Generally speaking men and women think differently, men tend to think analytically, and women tend to think intuitively. Men tend to have one

track minds, women have multi-track minds, juggling several issues at once. Men tend to be thinking, women tend to be feeling.

The problem comes when men think women are being illogical or not thinking right because they are thinking differently; or when women assume a man's analytical thinking is insensitive or cold. This can cause a relationship to become adversarial. Men and women should not fall into the trap of judging the other for the way they think. Instead, we should both focus on how we are designed by God to work together. Apply Romans 14 to your relationships, pursuing what makes for peace, unity, harmony and love. Our differences are from God.

Why has God left somethings ambiguous, not clearly spelled out?

Really, have you every thought about why there are multiple views or perspectives in the church on issues like baptism, forms of church government and the end times? Didn't God see what kind of trouble that would create in His church?

God has revealed everything necessary for salvation clearly. The Gospel is clear and unambiguous. But not everything in Scripture is equally clear, and some matters are intentionally, purposefully left less explicit. He chooses not to reveal everything with the same level of clarity.

We read this in Scripture.

Deuteronomy 29:29 The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.

1 Corinthians 13:12 "For now we see in a mirror dimly..."

John 16:12 I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

Why do you think God left some things less clear or unclear? A few reasons come to mind.

God limits our knowledge to humble us and break our pride, to dispossess us of our superior thinking, to get us to put love above our own perspectives, views and opinions. It makes us acknowledge our dependence on Scripture and the Holy Spirit and on one another. It makes us seek a unity of Spirit that is not based just on knowledge but on love and acceptance, free from judgment.

I have strong opinions about baptism, church government, and the end times but I am not willing to break fellowship with another brother over them.

Like Paul about meat, we can hold our commitments and convictions without judging or despising others for not holding the same views as us. This applies to us individually in our personal relationships and it applies to churches not being proud or feeling superior over other churches. Walk in love.

Tyranny of weaker brother.

In conversations around the so-called weaker brother texts it often comes up, what about the tyranny of the weaker brother.

There is another kind of weaker brother who is not really a weaker brother. This is the legalist who is actually very strong, who disagrees with something and tries to impose their preference on everyone else through manipulation, passive/aggression, power plays. They are trying to impose their personal preferences or strict rules and limit the freedom of others. They will play the victim and use their so-called weakness to oppress the strong and fight unfairly. We should not misuse this passage in order to manipulate people in order to get our own way.

When that happens we have moved beyond protecting a weak conscience to catering to a controlling person. Love the weak, stand up to the legalist. God requires the strong to relinquish their privileges only for the sake of those who are weak in personal conscience.

Should the weak in faith or conscience become stronger or more mature? Of course, we are all to grow up in the Lord. But do you kick someone when they are down? No. You give them grace and space and time to grow. It is not sinful to be “weak.” Are you strong? Good, then show it by knowing when to be quiet, and show love.

Vss. 22-23

Paul draws all of this to a conclusion. Be at peace with God regarding your conscience. You don't have to prove anything with others. It is only to God that you are accountable.

Vs. 23 For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

All that's not of faith, means all that is not supported or approved by the Word of God. Anything we do that we believe is not approved by God is sin. Anything we do from a wrong conscience or against our conscience is sin. Don't sin against your conscience, what you know to be right or wrong according to God's Word. It doesn't matter if it is OK for others, if in our own conscience we know we ought not do something, and we do it, we are accountable to God.

A Christian must never act unless he can do so in faith, with a clear conscience before God.

Implications and application.

OK, we are done with Romans 14, but I hope it isn't done with you, in giving you a greater love for your brothers and sisters in Christ and in creating a greater desire to "pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."

All our freedoms are submitted to the rule of love. We must not use God's blessings as instruments of harm, of not loving our neighbor.

Brothers and sisters of First Church, welcome and accept one another in love, based on the glorious truth that God has accepted us with all our differences and wrong-headed opinions and weak faith. Love your brothers and sisters because Christ died to make your love effective in helping the weak brother persevere. Love your brothers and sisters more than you love your own liberty or freedom. Pursue peace, let your love be genuine, and strive for unity in all matters of non-essentials.

I Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Prayer: Holy Father, thank you that you have pursued peace with us all the way to Christ's death on the cross. Thank you that by the blood of Jesus we are reconciled to you and to each other. Make our love here genuine and make our unity stronger, for the sake of Jesus and His church. Amen.