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GETTING ALONG IN SPITE OF OUR DIFFERENCES

Romans 14:1-4

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Romans, Lesson 92

Getting Along in Spite of Our Differences Romans 14:1-4

H. A. Ironside (*Illustrations of Bible Truth* [Moody Press], p. 115) relates a story that the late Bishop Potter of New York used to tell on himself. The bishop was sailing for Europe and found that he was to share a cabin with another passenger whom he did not know. After he had met his cabin mate, he went to the ship's purser and asked if he could leave his gold watch and other valuables in the ship's safe. He explained that normally he would not do that, but he had been to his cabin and had met the man who was in the other berth. He said that judging from his appearance, he was afraid that he might not be trustworthy.

The purser took his valuables to store in the safe and said, "I'll be glad to take care of them for you, bishop. The other man has already been up here and left his valuables for the same reason."

We're all prone to judge others, aren't we! But Jesus' words (Matt. 7:1), "Do not judge so that you will not be judged," are frequently misapplied. I once sat on a jury where the defendant had twice the legal blood alcohol level. But one woman on the jury would not vote to convict the obviously guilty young woman. When I asked why she wouldn't vote to convict, the woman replied, "Because the Bible says, 'Judge not, lest ye be judged'!"

If people would keep reading Matthew 7, they would see that in verse 6 Jesus tells us not to give what is holy to dogs and not to cast our pearls before swine. He isn't talking about animals, but about *people* who are dogs and swine. Obviously, we have to make some judgments to obey that command! And in verse 15 Jesus warns about false prophets, who come to us as wolves in sheep's clothing. Again, to spot a wolf in sheep's clothing, you have to make some careful judgments.

So Jesus was not telling us that we should not make any judgments. Rather, we should judge ourselves by taking the log out of our own eye before we help our brother with his speck. The Bible repeatedly teaches that we must be discerning in terms of judging

other people's character so that we can either avoid their company (1 Cor. 15:33; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; 2 Tim. 3:5; 4:14-15) or try to help them grow in the Lord (2 Tim. 2:24-26). And we must be discerning of true and false doctrine so that we are not deceived by it (Matt. 7:15; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9).

But, having said that, there is still the danger that we wrongly judge one another, which can lead to all sorts of problems in the local church. A younger believer might come into the church and his appearance is very different than that of the older believers. If they judge him so that he feels unwelcome, he may never come back to the place where he should have felt loved and accepted, where he could grow in the things of God. Or, he may conclude that Christian maturity consists in conforming to certain standards of dress or appearance, and so be led astray from the heart of the faith, which is to love God and love one another.

So the apostle Paul was very concerned that the believers in Rome not judge one another on non-essential matters where the Bible does not give specific commands. He has just made it clear that Christians are never to be involved in carousing and drunkenness, sexual promiscuity and sensuality, or strife and jealousy (13:13). Those are clear moral commands that we all must follow. But there are many other areas that the Bible does not address or where it allows liberty of conscience. In these matters, Paul repeatedly says that we are not to judge one another or regard one another with contempt (14:1, 3, 4, 10). Rather, we are to accept one another, just as Christ has accepted us (14:1, 3; 15:7). He's saying,

In the church, we are to accept and not judge one another
when we differ on matters where the Bible
does not give specific commandments.

You may wonder why in Romans Paul urges tolerance and acceptance of those who have scruples over food and drink and observing certain days, but in Galatians and Colossians, he denounces in no uncertain terms those who do such things. The difference is that in Galatians, those who urged observing certain days (Gal. 4:10) were saying that in addition to trusting in Christ as Savior, you must keep the Law of Moses to be saved. They were perverting the gospel of salvation by God's grace through faith alone. In Colossians, the heresy seems to have been a form of Gnostic as-

ceticism, where the false teachers said that by abstaining from certain foods or by keeping certain holy days, you could be more godly. But they were not holding fast to Christ and our position in Him. But in Romans, the weaker believers who did not eat meat and who observed certain days did not hold to these heretical views that undermined the gospel. And so Paul deals with them quite differently (see John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], 2:172-173).

Also, while there are some similarities between Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, where Paul deals with the problem of eating meat sacrificed to idols, the two situations were different. Scholars are not sure exactly who these people in Rome were who were not eating meat or drinking wine (14:21) and observing certain holy days. Some argue that they may (as in Corinth) have been Gentile believers, but most contend that they were mostly Jewish believers who had not let go of their continuing loyalty to the Mosaic Law (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 829; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], pp. 708-710). They were immature in their understanding and needed to grow. But they were not promoting heresy that undermined the gospel. So Paul's main concern was the potential divisions among Christians because they were wrongly judging one another over secondary matters where the Bible does not give specific commandments.

Here are five observations that I hope will explain and apply these verses to our church:

1. Paul is talking here about matters between believers who are all seeking to please the Lord.

The weak brother here is "weak in faith," or "weak in *the* faith." (The Greek text has the article.) This does not mean that he does not trust in Christ as his Savior or that he is confused about the gospel. Rather, Paul specifies that the one who is weak in faith eats vegetables only (14:2), apparently for religious reasons, not for health reasons. He thinks that eating meat somehow would damage his relationship to God. He has not yet understood the full ramifications of faith in Christ that frees us from the law (Rom. 7:1-6). The strong brother (Paul puts himself in that camp, 15:1) knows that eating or not eating meat has no effect on one's relationship

with God, so it doesn't bother his conscience to eat a good steak or, for that matter, a slice of ham or bacon.

Paul says that the weaker brother is not to judge the brother who eats meat, "for God has accepted him" (14:3). He assumes that both the weak and the strong are the Lord's servants and that they are doing what they do out of a desire to please the Lord (14:4, 6). These non-essential matters do not determine whether a person is saved or not. A person is saved if God has accepted him. God accepts sinners when they turn from trusting in their own good works and trust in the blood of Christ to cover all their sins. Those who have been accepted by God inevitably then live to please God. They may need teaching regarding what pleases God, but pleasing Him is their motive and aim.

So we need biblical discernment. We should not immediately jump to the conclusion that someone who does things that we do not approve of is not saved. He may be a weaker brother or he may be stronger than I am and his behavior shows me where I need to grow. But unless he is knowingly denying some cardinal doctrine of the faith or living in unrepentant sin, I should not accuse him of not being saved. He may need to grow, but so do I. He and I may never agree on the particular issue, but if it's a secondary matter where Scripture is not specific, then we may need to agree to disagree. But we should not accuse each other of not being saved.

2. Paul is very concerned that we believers get along with one another in spite of inevitable differences between us.

James Boice (*Romans: The New Humanity* [Baker], pp. 1723-1724) points out that the subject of how we get along with those who disagree with us on non-essential matters must have been of supreme importance to Paul, because he spends the longest part of the application portion of Romans on it. He only spends two verses (12:1-2) on developing a Christian mind. He spends six verses (12:3-8) on having a right estimate of ourselves and of others in the body of Christ. He spends 13 verses (12:9-21) on love and seven (13:1-7) on church and state. He gives three more verses on love (13:8-10) and four more on godly living in light of Christ's return (13:11-14). But now he spends 35 verses (14:1-15:13) on how we are to accept and not judge one another on non-essential matters where we differ. It was *very* important to Paul!

There are probably several reasons that this was so important to Paul and should be important to us. For one thing, the unity of the body of Christ is at stake. If we separate from those who differ from us on minor matters, we will soon be left all alone. In fact, I don't always even agree with myself! Again, we need discernment to determine whether a matter is crucial to the gospel and vital to a person's spiritual health, or whether it's relatively minor. It's sad to say, but Christians divide far more often over relatively minor issues than over major doctrinal or moral reasons.

Also, the body of Christ is to be an earthly example and demonstration to the world of the love of Christ. Jesus said (John 13:35), "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." If we quarrel and divide over minor issues, we damage the testimony of Christ and the gospel to a watching world. So it's very important that we learn to work through relational differences and get along when we disagree over minor issues.

The word "accept" (14:1, 3, 15:7) does not mean that you just tolerate someone who differs with you, but you avoid being around him. It's the word used of God's acceptance of us in Christ (14:3; 15:7). Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 478) writes,

The verb means more than "allow to remain in the membership"; it has the notion of welcome, of taking to oneself and so taking into friendship. The weak are not to be made to feel that they are barely tolerated and seen as second-class members. They are to be received with warmth and true fellowship. Christian love demands no less.

Pride is usually at the root of divisions over minor issues. We baptize our pride by claiming that we're defending the truth of God's Word. We're protecting the church from heresy. But the truth is, we're proud that we are right (so we think!) on some minor point on which other souls have not yet seen the light. Or we take pride in keeping some manmade rules that "less spiritual" believers do not keep. By judging others, we feel superior to them. But this is just pride.

So it's very important that we get along with one another in spite of our differences. It always grieves me when I hear that someone is no longer coming to the fellowship here because they had a falling out with another believer over some difference between them. Yes, it is hard and often threatening to work through our differences and to learn to accept one another. But we need to do it. The testimony of Christ is at stake.

3. Paul acknowledges that there will always be differences among believers that we must learn to accept.

Some in Rome were weak; some were strong. The danger for the stronger believers was to look with contempt on the weaker believers (14:3): "If they only had the biblical knowledge that I have, they would see how silly their views are!" The danger for the weaker brothers was to judge the stronger brothers: "How could a born again Christian do what he is doing? He must not be saved!"

It's important to recognize that in every church there will be inevitable differences between believers and that we're careful to deal with these differences with humility and love. We have *different temperaments*. God does not change our basic personality when we get saved. Some by nature are more prone to worry and anxiety. They're easily bothered by things that may just roll off you. While they need to grow and God may eventually use you to help them grow, you need to be kind and patient toward them so that the door might open for you to help them grow. Others may be more prone to depression than you are. Again, you need to come alongside and accept them or you'll not be able to help them become more joyful. If you judge them because they aren't like you are, you're acting in pride. Depression may not be your weakness, but you've got other weaknesses.

Also, we're *different in our natural and spiritual gifts*. Rather than being threatened by another person's strengths or differences, we should rejoice in them and learn from them. As we saw in chapter 12, we're the body of Christ, each having different gifts that we should use to build up one another.

We've all had *different experiences* along the way. Some have come to Christ out of very difficult backgrounds, whereas others grew up in loving homes. Some have gone through horrible trials,

whereas others have had relatively few traumatic things happen to them. Before you judge the other person, get to know him. Find out his background. Listen to his testimony. Often you'll be humbled and enriched to hear how God has worked in his life.

We're also at *different stages of growth* in our Christian walks. Some are weaker, new believers, babes in Christ. You don't expect babies to take on the responsibilities of an adult. Babies need time to grow and they need teaching and guidance. Of course, if a baby is doing something that could seriously injure him (about to pull an iron off on his head), you give a strong warning and do everything you can to protect him. If a spiritual baby is doing something that could damage his relationship with Christ, warn him! But if he's just acting immaturely, as babies do, accept him and try to show him a better way so that he will grow.

We need discernment to know whether this is the right time to speak with the person about a matter where he may need to grow. Paul's statement (14:1), that we should "accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions," does not mean that we should never bring up the weaker brother's opinion so as to help him grow. Rather, he is dealing with the spirit or manner in which we go about it. I'll not help him grow if my aim is to set him straight or to prove that I'm right and he's wrong. The weaker brother will probably be more open to correction if I've established a relationship with him and he knows that I care about him. If I flaunt my liberty in Christ or if I show contempt for the weaker brother's views or I insensitively try to prove that he's wrong, I'm not acting in love and I'll harm the weaker brother's walk with God (14:15).

So the point is, we're all different in many ways, so we need to learn how to accept one another, to encourage one another, and in the proper time and manner, if need be, correct one another. If we judge one another or show contempt for one another, we'll only cause harm.

4. Paul is talking here about matters on which the Bible either does not directly speak or it gives room for different views.

I repeat this so that we're all clear. Paul does not mean that we should not judge others on matters where the Bible speaks clearly. We should judge sin in others as sin. In 1 Corinthians 5, he rebuked the church because they accepted and did not judge a man who was involved immorally with his father's wife. We should judge and not accept serious doctrinal error. In Galatians, Paul did not accept the Judaizers' view that you must obey the Law of Moses in addition to faith in Christ to be saved. He said that they were damned if they taught such a false "gospel" (Gal. 1:6-9). So the Bible is clear that we are to hold to sound doctrine and condemn false doctrine on core issues. We are to make moral judgments on matters where Scripture gives commandments. We must speak out if a matter threatens the truth of the gospel or the spiritual health of a church or an individual.

But then there are many issues where the Bible either is silent or not clear about what to do. Often we can apply biblical principles to figure out what to do. On some issues, godly men differ. We might debate our case vigorously, but we need to be gracious toward those who differ with us.

In Paul's day, eating or not eating meat and keeping certain holy days were big issues. What are some of the issues in our day? I'm sure that you could come up with many more, but here are a few that I thought of where Christians wrongly judge one another:

- ✓ Either you home school your children or you are being negligent of your duties as a Christian parent.
- ✓ The King James Bible is the only acceptable translation.
- ✓ You should dress up for church as you would if you were going to meet the President.
- ✓ Contemporary music accompanied by guitars and drums is from the devil! We should only sing hymns accompanied on the piano and organ.
- ✓ It is sin for Christians to drink any alcoholic beverages or use tobacco!
- ✓ Sunday is the Christian Sabbath. You should not read the newspaper, watch sports, or go to a restaurant or a store on Sunday.
- ✓ Christians should have nothing to do with Christmas and Easter, which are pagan holidays.

The list could go on and on!

5. To refrain from wrongly judging my brother, I must remember that God is the Savior, Sanctifier, and Lord; I'm not.

Paul says (14:4), "Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand." In other words, I didn't save the one with whom I differ; God did. I'm not the one who will keep him and perfect him for the day of Christ Jesus; God is. I'm not that man's Lord and Judge; God is. So I need to let God be God and trust that He will deal with my brother on these non-essential matters if He thinks that they need correcting. But my job is to love my brother, accept him in Christ, and trust God to work in his life.

Conclusion

When I was in seminary, a classmate of mine told me after we had become acquainted that when he first met me, he questioned whether I was even a Christian. I asked him why he thought that. He replied, "Because you have a mustache and you mentioned that you had gone to some movies." (I would have had a beard, but the seminary wouldn't allow it!) He had grown up in an ultra-conservative church where being clean-shaven and not going to movies apparently were marks of the new birth! The truth is, I probably would have judged some of the ultra-conservative brothers for not being as free in Christ as I was.

We're all prone to judge those who are different than we are. But we need to learn to accept one another and love one another in spite of our differences over minor matters where the Bible does not give specific commandments.

Application Questions

1. Why does Paul here command us not to judge others, but elsewhere (1 Cor. 5:3, 12, 13) he rebukes the church for not judging a man?
2. How can we determine whether a matter is non-essential, so that we should let it go or one that requires correction?
3. When (if ever) is it okay to debate a non-essential matter? What guidelines apply?
4. What are some non-essential matters (besides those in the message) where we must accept and not judge those who differ from us?

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