

## Liberty, not Judgment, for All

- Romans 14
- We are in between expository series in the pastoral epistles. We completed 1 Timothy and by God's grace we will begin 2 Timothy up ahead. But first, it seemed good to me to spend some time re-visiting our church foundations. There are more than 10 families who have been here for less than a year. And there are many others who have been here less than 5 years. Consider this a New Members' refresher course. Perhaps it will also serve the two Guilford County church plants that are in the making right now. The first week we looked at Acts 13:1-3 and uncovered five reasons why the first church at Antioch could be held up as a model. Last week we looked at Acts 2:41-47 and talked about eight signs of a healthy church as displayed in that text. I realize that was a lot of points to cover in those two sermons and I am reminded of the pastor who preached a 21-point sermon on Sunday morning and on Sunday night said, "Because my sermon this morning had so many points, I have decided that my sermon tonight will be pointless." Well, I trust that will not be the case as we unpack some important truths in Romans 14. I will actually only have 3 points for us to consider.
- Now, before we look at the three points, let me say this. We talk a lot in the new members' class about the motto of the reformers: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity (love)." It is rarely the essentials that have divided us from one another over the years. We have never had a member of the church, in my recollection, come to the elders after being with us for a few years and saying, "You know, this whole sola gratia thing I just cannot go along with." You mean, you don't believe that salvation is only by God's grace and not based at all on my merit? "Right, I disagree with that and don't believe it for a minute." That's never happened. What has happened is a disagreement over the nonessentials which has sometimes ended with a family leaving the church. Sometimes God multiplies by dividing, there's no question about it. But many times He is simply giving us an opportunity to grow in grace and bring glory to God. That's ultimately what all conflicts are for: to expose our sin so that we cry out to God for forgiveness, apply His grace that is made available to us through His sacrifice on the cross, and give glory to God as two who disagree learn to walk together anyway. I believe Paul gives us three steps we can take towards that end.
- First, accept one another. That's how he starts off this section, isn't it? Receive one another. Welcome one another. Figuratively, open your arms to one another. But what if that person doesn't have a faith as strong as mine? What if that person believes, for example, that it is wrong for him to eat certain kinds of meat? Accept him anyway, Paul says.. And by accepting him, Paul says, I don't mean inviting him in for a tongue lashing about why he is all wrong about meat and you are all right! No, accept him. Period. Why is it important that we do that with our brothers and sisters in the faith? Because that is exactly what God has done for him! Paul makes that clear at the end of verse 3: "for God has received him." Not only that, but that is what God has done for all of **us** as well. Paul summarizes this whole teaching that began in Romans 14:1 in three important verses in chapter 15. **Look at verses 5-7.** The sad truth is that there are Christian circles where we would not be accepted by the group because we do not dress a certain way or worship a certain way or read the right version of the Bible, according to that group. The opposite extreme is true as well, that there are places where anybody can go to and believe anything they want about Jesus or the Bible and there is a place at the table for them because there really is no final authority, just whatever the individual believes or whatever makes you feel good. The truth is found in between those two extremes, that I believe we could label legalism on one side and license on the other. We are called to liberty. "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free,

and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.” (Gal. 5:1) We are free IN Christ. Paul says, God accepted you. Christ accepted you. Therefore you are called to accept one another.

- Second, do not judge one another. This is what Paul says in verse 4. Than again in verse 10. Eric Alexander had a great word on this text years ago. He said we need to avoid judging for three reasons. First, it is judgment on the wrong issues. It deals with the nonessentials and loses sight of the essentials. Second, it is judgment by the wrong people. That’s the question Paul asks very pointedly in verse 4: who are you to judge another’s servant? Especially if that servant belongs to God! Third, it is judgment at the wrong time. Don’t miss this. Judgment will come, Paul says in verse 10, and every one of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. And then in verse 12, “Each of us shall give an account of himself to God.” Alexander says this in reference to verse 12... “I will not have to answer for the position my brother may have held...but I WILL have to answer for the position I took on the position that he held.” Do you get that? I do, and it makes me tremble. Because as FF Bruce says in his commentary on Romans, “There is no sin to which Christians – especially ‘keen’ Christians—are more prone than the sin of censoriousness.” (by keen, I think Bruce means sharp or quick; censoriousness: the root is censor, and it means that one has an appetite to be critical of others’ beliefs and behaviors; lets face it, saints; unless we daily clothe ourselves in humility, censoriousness can become our favorite pasttime). So Paul says in verse 13, and I use JB Phillips here, “Let us therefore stop turning critical eyes on one another. Let us rather be critical of our own conduct and see that we do nothing to make a brother stumble or fall.”
- Third, let each be fully convinced in his own mind. Look at verse 5. Paul uses the example of whether a Christian believes every day is holy or if some days were holier than others. Paul doesn’t settle the argument. Nor does he suggest they debate it until one side is pronounced a winner and the other a loser! He does something far better. He says, “let each one be satisfied in his own mind.” MIND. Remember that Romans is divided into two parts. Chapters 1-11 are doctrine and teach us what we are to believe. Chapters 12-16 are the practical application of all that we have been taught. Here’s how to live it out, Paul says. And it is important that we see how Paul opens the section of practical application: present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God, and be transformed by the renewing of your MIND. We are not to live day by day as a Christian according to how we feel but we are to renew our minds with the Word of God and especially when it comes to these debatable things, the nonessentials; we are to be convinced in our own minds. This would apply to a number of nonessentials that we face every day in the world we live in. How will we educate our children? How will our children prepare for marriage? Will we borrow money for depreciable assets? Will we have a TV in our house? Will we go out to eat on a Sunday? And many, many more. Paul says we are to accept one another no matter what side of each of these issues we come down on. Further, we are not to judge one another. Finally, we are to know what we believe about these so that we can operate by faith in each of these areas. **Why?** Look at verse 23: ***for whatever is not from faith is sin.*** If you cannot do something without violating your conscience, it is sin for you. But listen! Be willing to change your opinions about nonessentials as you mature! That’s one of the points of this passage, is that a Christian weak in faith, an immature Christian, may have a real problem with eating meat sacrificed to idols, whereas a more mature Christian has no problem with it. The job of the mature Christian is not to try and change the mind of the immature Christian. That is the Lord’s responsibility, if the Lord so chooses to do that. The job of the more mature Christian is to accept the less mature Christian! But we have another responsibility to that brother.
- Consider this issue of eating meat that was sacrificed to idols. Paul was convinced in his own mind that he could eat that meat with no problems. Look at verse 14. Paul had worked this

out through his study of the Scriptures and had come to a freedom there. But he also knew that other sincere believers had not come to that place and were fully convinced in their own minds that they could not eat meat. So Paul goes on to say in verse 15 that his brother is more important than Paul's freedom. THIS IS HUGE! In other words, the law of liberty is to always be controlled by the law of love! My brother is more important than my freedom. When someone says, "I can do anything I want. I can eat anything, drink anything, watch anything, read anything, because I am FREE," that brother is possibly not walking in liberty controlled by love, but his liberty has become license.

- Perhaps there is no greater and more relevant example of this in our culture than that of drinking alcohol. The Bible does not forbid it. Search it out in the Scriptures. There are plenty of warnings about drinking wine, but it is not forbidden. Jesus drank wine. Paul told Timothy to drink wine (which leads us to believe as I said a few months ago that Timothy had taken some kind of Nazirite vow or decided that he was not even going to touch the stuff so no one could ever accuse him of being a winebibber.) The Bible does not forbid drinking alcohol. The Bible does forbid drunkenness, and almost every example of drunkenness in the Bible ends in tragedy. Drunkenness is a disqualifier for church leadership, as Paul says in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1. What is drunkenness? Paul said in Eph. 5:18, "Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit." Whatever fills you controls you. Those who get drunk are accepting a substitute for the Holy Spirit's control, submitting themselves to the control of a different spirit. So we are not talking about drunkenness; there is no reason for that at any time. What about the person who says, "I am free to drink because the Bible does not forbid it?" That is exactly right, but remember the law of liberty must be controlled by the law of love. If your freedom causes another brother to stumble into sin, then you have sinned. That's what Paul says clearly in verse 20. Here's the ESV version: ***Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.*** (Or what he drinks!) What is more important, my freedom or my brother's faith? His faith! Because remember, "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (verse 17) Listen to what FF Bruce wrote about Paul: "Never was a Christian more thoroughly emancipated than he from un-Christian inhibitions and taboos. So completely was he emancipated from spiritual bondage that he was not even in bondage to his emancipation. (THINK on THAT). He conformed to the Jewish way of life when he was in Jewish society as cheerfully as he went along with Gentile ways when he was living with Gentiles. The interests of the Gospel and the highest well-being of men and women were paramount considerations with him; to these, he subordinated everything else."
- This is why Paul would say, "All things are lawful for me, but not all things helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything." (1 Cor. 6:12)
- What are we to do with these truths? Love one another with them. Work hard to clothe ourselves in humility, as Peter said, and work hard to avoid judging those who believe differently about the nonessentials, the disputable things. Be convinced in our own mind so that we can walk by faith in these areas. And do nothing that would destroy or defeat another brother or sister.
- Now, what does this mean on the church level? What if a brother comes in here next week and says, "It is sin for me to listen to music that has drums in it. You need to remove the drums so that I am not offended." There are lots of ways to answer that. Here's the way I would respond, and I am certainly open to correction by you or by the Lord! I would say, the church is under the jurisdiction of the local elders, according to the Scriptures. And the Bible does not give us a detailed prescription for how we are to "do church" whenever we gather. Not in the nonessentials, at least. He gives us a lot of freedom, which is one reason why there

are so many different kinds of churches. What God does prescribe, we believe, is that the leaders of the church are to hear from Him about what He wants that church to do, how to worship, how to give to missions, how to disciple the men, etc. So if someone comes in who disagrees with what the leaders believe they have heard from the Lord about these nonessentials, they really have three options.

- First method: Leave and take as many people with them as they can persuade. This is the Acts 20:30 method that Paul warned would happen in Ephesus after he left. Some would “draw away the disciples after themselves.”
- Second method: stay and grumble and groan and be a pain to the whole church. Paul said in Titus 3:10, “reject a divisive man after the first and second admonitions.”
- Third method: submit with a whole heart to the leadership of the church. Hebrews 13:17. They can also pray that God would change the hearts of the elders if they have missed Him in anything. (Not out loud at the end of the service! “Oh, Lord, the elders are clearly walking outside your will in the are of music...” That might make you a divisive brother!)
- The final thing I would say... if that same brother who is offended by drums came to my house for dinner, I would make sure we didn't have Switchfoot or Relient K playing while we ate supper! There, in my house, I am most concerned about my relationship with this one brother. In the church, I am concerned for all the flock and for what God has spoken to the leadership about the nonessentials.
- May God give us grace to walk in the life-changing truths of Romans 14. Accept one another, just as God in Christ has accepted you. Do not judge one another in these disputable things, these nonessentials. And let each be fully convinced about these nonessentials in his own mind, walking them out by faith. The law of liberty is always controlled by the law of love.