

Romans 14:13-23

“Pursue Peace”

“Don’t dispute over doubtful things.” That was the topic of discussion during our time together last week. Dealing with controversy in the arena of the Christian community, and again it’s essential that we qualify, or clarify what we’re in reference to as we speak of *doubtful things*. Because outright non-repentant, rebellious sin in a person’s life is in no way a doubtful or debatable area that’s open for discussion, the fact of the matter is that sin contains the power to devastate and destroy, not only myself personally, but it can also corrode and contaminate the spiritual and moral health of the church corporately. So in areas to which the scriptures speak clearly, be it in either a commanding way or a condemning way (commanding a certain action or attitude, condemning others) there’s no debating there. There’s no room for personal points of view, or individual opinions, we all are to adhere equally to the Word of God.

But there are those areas, areas that we might term as “gray areas” of which the scriptures don’t readily address. and Because the scriptures don’t specifically *address* those areas we as individuals form various personal opinions on how we believe we ought to *approach* those areas. We mentioned acceptable *dress*, we mentioned various *diversions* (the way we entertain ourselves), we mentioned even *disciplines*, and how much time do you spend in God’s Word, and do you pray everyday? How involved are you in the fellowship? What about haircuts, or tattoos, what about various piercings? You see these are areas of debate in the Christian arena, and because some people take a little more relaxed and liberated approach, yet others take a more conservative legalist position, there’s tension, controversy, and it can devastate and destroy the unity and harmony in the body of Christ.

To keep it concise the Holy Spirit through the apostle Paul tells us that when it comes to these areas of uncertainty in the scripture, it’s not that one person is wrong and the other person is right (necessarily) but that each of us need to be obedient to the conviction that we believe God has placed upon our hearts *individually*. The problem comes in when I try to make *you* obedient to my personal persuasion. Paul says, “Don’t do that.” Don’t wrestle one another over doubtful, debatable things, receive one another. If you take a more conservative approach, don’t judge your brother or sister who’s not adhering to your code as being a loose cannon, non-respectful of God’s grace, to undisciplined to be of any real use to God. and If you enjoy the liberty with which God has made you free, don’t show contempt, or disdain for your brother or sister who’s a little more tense in their approach and relationship with the Lord as if they’re just a legalistic, self-righteous holier than thou who’s too uptight to serve God effectively. We’re not to shun one another, but recognize that we’re all at different places in our walk and relationship with the Lord and receive one another.

Why? Primarily because God has received us, I want to be real careful not to subject you to a higher standard than God has before I'll receive you. God receives us on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ now if I need more than that before I'll receive you, have fellowship with you, walk in love towards you, than I have a real problem. But not only does God receive you, He also sustains you, now if God will *sustain* you, who am I to *disdain* you? On top of that I'm to trust that the Lord is big enough to direct you in His plan and in His purpose for your life. If there's something going on in your life that I don't agree with but I don't have clear cut scriptural grounds to encourage you by, than I can *pray* for you, but I'm to trust the Lord to *impress* upon you His direction and desire for you life. He's the Lord, I'm not, I don't have to be your Holy Spirit.

How is it that I believe God is big enough to deal with me, but that He needs my help in dealing with you? The Lord is able to speak to your heart just the same as He's able to speak to mine. You can *share* your opinion with me, but you can't *shove* your opinion upon me. Finally we're to understand that none of us are going to give an account for what went on in someone else's life, only our own. We're each going to have to give an account of ourselves to the Lord, every knee will bow, every tongue will confess to God. There's plenty to be occupied with in my own life, making sure I'm where I need to be with the Lord, investing that which He's entrusted to me spiritually, or materially or whatever in the areas He's leading me. I don't need to consume myself with your life to, I've got plenty on my own plate. and As we mentioned last week there are bigger fish to fry, 150,000 people (give or take) that leave the planet everyday. Add it up, somewhere to the tune of 1 million 50 thousand people have died since we've gathered last Sunday. Now how many people did we share Jesus with, (or even invite to church) over the course of this week. Most of us, probably no one, why pick apart the saved when we should be laboring for the lost? Let's read this portion in its entirety, then we'll look into it a little more closely.

Vs13-23

Now last weeks text included admonishment to the weak, those who were more on the legal side of their walk with Christ, this weeks text speaks more specifically to the strong, those who enjoy the liberty with which Christ has made us free. and The overall exhortation is, "Don't flaunt your freedom, have your faith to yourself before God." Don't entice your weak brother or sister to engage in activity, or dress code, or diversions, even diets or days of the year that they're not comfortable being apart of or else you'll become guilty of stumbling them, causing them to sin. Someone says, "We don't even set up a Christmas tree because we've read in Jeremiah where that sounds awfully close to pagan rituals and we don't want to go anywhere near that." Don't say, "Give me a break, it's an evergreen tree, or an artificial tree, you put ornaments on it and presents under it, what's evil about that?" and You press and you push and you persuade, until finally they say, "Well, maybe I'm just too uptight." So they put it up and the whole time it's crushing them, it's killing them, because their conscience is convicting them and not giving any peace to them. God says, "That's on you, you entice someone *like* that, you'll be held accountable *for* that."

Now I want you to notice the pivoting point found there in Vs 13, because up until this point the focus has been primarily on the do's and don'ts of our brother or sister in the Lord. "They do this," or "They're too bound up in that," but Vs 13 pivots the perspective altogether. Paul says, "We've all got enough to be accountable for on our own so let's not judge one another anymore, but rather make this resolve, not to put a stumbling block, or cause to fall in our brother's way." In other words, Let's not focus on what we consider to be our brother or sister's *frailties*, but rather lets start focusing on how we can minister to them *personally*. Which is to say that if you're one who's conscience *permits* you to take part in a doubtful or debatable thing (i.e. you feel the liberty to get a tattoo, or have your nose pierced, or enjoy the entertainment of a wholesome movie or whatever) you can make it easier for others by not forcing your liberty upon them as some sort of measure of their spirituality. That's what he's speaking of when he says, "Don't place a stumbling block before them." The word that's been translated "stumbling block" speaks of that which would impel or prompt someone to sin, entice them to go against the grain of their conscience before God. It would really help that weak brother or sister out if you weren't or I didn't flaunt my freedom.

But if you happen to be one whose conscience *prohibits* you with regard to a particular doubtful or debatable thing, you can make it easier for others by not impressing your personal conviction upon them as a measure of *their* spirituality or acceptability before God. That's what this word that's been translated "cause to fall" is speaking of, it's speaking of the trigger point by which a snare is activated and sprung. Don't seek to get them all hung up and ensnared in your personal convictions over non-essential matters, it'll squeeze them, squelch and smother them to the point of unhealthy utter exhaustion. Why? Because they're not really doing what they're doing because God has convinced them they need to do it, but because I've placed a trip on them that God never intended *for* them, I've snared them.

So we're not to get overly *worked up* about differences of opinion, but rather we're to seek to *build up* and aid one another in our walk and relationship with Christ. In other words, "Hey, I'm of the persuasion that that's taking that particular perspective a bit too far, but if God hasn't spoken that *to* you, than I'm not going to bring it up and lay that *on* you. You just follow the Lord with all your heart." "Well, I'm of the opinion that you're a little uptight and over worked about something which has absolutely no bearing upon our usability, or righteous standing before the Lord, but if you're not comfortable being *apart of* this, or the Lord hasn't released you to take part *in* this, than I'm not going try and entice you to *do* this, you just follow the Lord with all your heart and I won't bring it up, or try to persuade your perspective in the least." There's no reason we can't receive one another and let the Lord work out the details, and knock off the rough spots, meanwhile let's love on Jesus and reach out to those who need Him.

Vs14-15

So Paul places himself in the category of the strong, not bound up by rules or regulations, days of the year or various dietary habits. He is able to enjoy the liberty with which Christ has made him free, and remember that he was a Pharisee before he met Christ, so if there was anyone strict in his regulated righteousness it was Paul. But he's matured, he's grown, he's come to realize that it's not about what we do or don't do, but it's about what Christ has done. and I want you to notice that this wasn't simply his opinion. He says in Vs 14, "I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself." Remember he spent a # of years after he was saved out in the Arabian desert being personally tutored by revelation of Jesus Christ

This was one of the things that the Lord taught him, coming out of his legalism and all. So he came to realize, "*To the pure all things are pure,*" Titus 1:15 Remember Jesus had to teach Peter the same thing. There he was in Acts Ch 10, he's hungry, he's hanging out on the roof (the patio of that culture) waiting for dinner to be made. and He sorta slips into this daze, and he sees a vision. This sheet coming down out of heaven with all sorts of unclean animals according to the law found in it, and he hears the Lord speak to him and say, "*'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.'* But Peter said, '*Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.'* And a voice spoke to him again the second time, '*What God has cleansed you must not call common.'* This was done three times. And the object was taken up into heaven again." Acts 10:13-16 and Of course in the big picture the Lord was teaching Peter that the Gentiles were just as acceptable before the Lord on the premise of faith as were the Jews. But on a personal level he was also teaching Peter that it's not about what goes into a man's mouth that makes him unclean. God has created these things for us to enjoy and take part in. Paul told Timothy, "*For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.*" 1 Tim 4:4-5

So whether it be diets, or days of the year, these other things we've brought out as debatable, none of them in and of themselves unclean. Now lets continue to qualify and keep the context. Paul isn't saying in and of itself meth isn't unclean, or pornography isn't unclean. If you're pure, those things are pure, no...no, no.

Those are things that the scriptures clearly condemn, he's speaking with regard to those gray areas, specifically, diet and days of the year. Whether it's April 16th (Easter), or July 4th, or October 31st, or December 25th, a day, is a day, is a day. Whether its beef, or pork, or chicken, broccoli, or corn on the cob, food, is food, is food. However, if it violates someone's conscience to eat a certain meal, or acknowledge a certain day, than that's where they're at and it would be problem if they engaged in those things accordingly.

As a stronger brother or sister, you are, I am to walk in love and sensitivity towards them, not flaunt my liberty before them. Why, well notice the words that Paul has been using, the types of fall out that my contemptible attitude toward a weaker brother or sister might reap. He speaks of “stumbling” them “grieving” them, and even “destroying” them. In 1st Cor Paul spoke of how we need to be careful to strike the balance between our learning and our loving. Because knowledge *puffs* up, but love *builds* up, and the idea there is that you might have the knowledge that be it diet, day of the year, or whatever, it’s no thing before the Lord. You’ve learned that, are mature *in* that, but love is always to take precedence over liberty. Your weaker bro or sister isn’t at that point, so because you know something is it ok to deliberately do something that will stumble, or grieve, or destroy your brother? Or as Paul said, “*And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?*” 1 Cor 8:11

So the Holy Spirit calls on the stronger to walk in love over liberty towards the weaker. But listen, not to the end of catering continually to the scruples of the weak life with out end. Remember the balance of learning and love. We’re not to wrestle one another, but receive one another, I can’t argue a child out of being afraid of the dark, I can’t command their conscience even though I have the *knowledge* that there’s no monster under their bed. But if I take what I’ve learned, and mingle it with love so as to sit with them, talk to them, and reassure them, eventually the child will be able to fall asleep with out fear, so knowledge mingled with love helps the weak grow strong. So don’t be flippant and flagrant about your freedom, so as to stumble another believer, because that’s not attractive or appealing to anyone, it becomes repulsive, or as we read in Vs 16.

Vs16-18

Vs 17 is key (read) To the Colossians Paul put it like this, “*So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.*” Col 2:16-17 The kingdom of God isn’t eating, drinking, diets or days of the year, but righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Or to understand that another way, it’s not the *externals* that we’re to focus on in a Pharisaic frame of mind, but rather the *eternals*. Keep the main thing the main thing, don’t get bogged down by external issues, focus on eternal issues. The kingdom of God isn’t composed of those kinds of things, days, diets, diversions, dress code, things of that nature, those things are external, non-essential matters. But proper priorities focus on eternal issues, righteousness (through faith in Christ) peace (with both God and man *through* Jesus Christ) and the joy of the Lord Jesus Christ and all of which flood into our lives via the Holy Spirit. The external things will all perish with time, but the eternal things will last throughout eternity, which ought our priority to be?

Vs19-21

Vs 19 is really what sums up this entire section with respect to our context of controversy in the Christian arena, how am I to handle it, what am I to do with it, “Pursue the things which make for peace, and the things by which one may edify another.” Don’t debate and dispute over doubtful things, pursue the things which make for peace, don’t stumble, or ensnare one another, build up and *edify* one another, walk in love *towards* one another.

Yes everyday is just a day, whatever diet you choose is nothing more or less spiritual before God, but not everybody understands that, and we’re not to force our freedoms regardless of where our brother or sister may be at. We’re to be peacemakers not peace breakers because peace breaking isn’t blessed, but peace making is. Forgo your freedom if it imposes a guilty conscience upon your brother, if it entices them to sin. Because it’s not good to eat meat, or drink wine, or for that matter to do anything by which your brother stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak.

Now listen, we’ve been speaking about the strong not stumbling the weak, and being careful to fashion an environment of love in which to learn. But I want to be careful to qualify and clarify the specifics of what Paul is saying. Because what’s not being said is that we’re to subject ourselves to personal prejudice, or be locked down by another persons rigid legalism, but that we’re to be sensitive to the sincere heart who’s uncertain about a particular area of conscience. For instance when some believers from a Jewish background were offended over the fact that Gentile believers weren’t being circumcised Paul didn’t run out and take care of business lest they be offended, or “stumbled.” He said those things are irrelevant they don’t in anyway commend us to God, and you find it there in Acts 15, and after debating it for a long while Peter stood up and said, “*Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they*” Acts 15:7-11 So the issue isn’t that of catering to legalism for the sake of satisfying the legalist. But rather providing an atmosphere of love from which the sincere in heart can learn.

In our home we have a 2 yr old, a soon to be 6 yr old, and a 15 yr old. Now the learning curve is different for each of them and the environment reflects that accordingly. In other words when our 2 yr old is in the room, we might do a quick sweep, make sure there’s no scissors or anything sharp with in reach. But when our 15 yr old comes in we’re not as concerned about that, believe he’s mature enough (for the most part) to handle that. When our 2 yr old stumbles, that’s a natural part of learning to walk, but if as an adult I’m always stumbling that’s a sign there that something is wrong.

So young believers (not age relevant) need the type of protective environment that encourages them to grow, but yet they can't always be treated like newborns. There comes a time when we should be noting the signs of maturity, growth and consistency, if not something is wrong. My just turn 2 yr old makes a mess in his pants, it's all good and well, my 15 yr old makes a mess in his pants, that's not good and well, that's a problem. But the point here is to understand where our bro or sister is at, and be sensitive to that, help create an environment that's going to foster growth, not falter their faith, or entice them to engage in something their conscience convicts them about.

That's why I try to be as careful as I can not to use this pulpit as a platform to impress upon you the personal perspectives of my own life. I teach the Word of God, you want to know what I think about diets, days of the year, or other debatable issues, you're free to ask me. But I'm not going to use my position as a platform to push my opinion, maybe you'd think I was weak and awfully legalistic and decide you just couldn't hang here anymore, maybe you'd think I was way to accommodating to what I deemed as acceptable activities for anyone who considered themselves a Christian so you'd just have to find some place else.

Maybe we'd see eye to eye on virtually every area that's open for personal persuasion. But none of that is relevant, what's relevant is that we both love the Lord, want to be pleasing to the Lord, we trust the Lord to be the Lord of our lives. Now let's get into the Word, let Him convict us, challenge us, change us, build up and edify His body, equip us for the work of the ministry that we might be salt and light in a hurt and dying world. We agree on the essentials, there's unity there, we recognize the room for liberty in non-essentials, and in *everything*, love is to be the foremost attribute that we exercise.

Vs22-23

Are you strong in the faith, does your faith allow you to engage in certain days, or enjoy various meals, or take part in certain liberties of which the bible neither commands or condemns? Hey, praise the Lord, but let that be between you and the Lord, don't try to talk others into being apart of it with you, or coming alongside it *for* you. Because if that other person can't honestly before the Lord hold that same conviction by faith, then he's sinning. and You don't want to be responsible for causing a brother or sister to slip into sin before the Lord. Even if it's not sin in and of itself, but if it convicts what they believe to be their God given conscious conviction, when they go against it because *you say* it's ok, then their violating what they believe *God* has told them is *not ok* for them, hence they sin against the Lord. What may be ok for you, may not be ok for me, and visa versa, so we're to respect one another, receive one another, and pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may *edify* another.

Prayer Points: God as always we're blessed by Your Word. and Whether we be weak or strong in the faith, help us to foster an environment of love. and God help us to take the perspective that instead of examining the lives of our other brothers and sisters to see what they may or may not be doing, that we would examine our own lives to see how we might benefit and be a blessing to those around us in not condemning them, or in being a support and an encouragement to them. We thank You for the tremendous freedom we have in You, only help us not to use that freedom as a cloak for the flesh, or to flaunt our freedom to the faltering of those around us. Lord there's none of us who've arrive, we all need to grow, and mature in You, help us to that end, for Your glory.

We've heard the fact that whatever is not from faith is sin, and you need to realize that apart from faith in Christ God still holds us accountable for all our sin. But forgiveness is available, freedom from sin, peace with God can be yours. The gospel message is simple, God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ and out of His love *for* you, He laid down His life on behalf *of* you. He was crucified, for our transgression, and on the 3rd day He rose again for our justification. The wages of sin is death, and Jesus became sin for us, paid the *penalty* for us that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. You say, "How is that possible?" By faith, through faith in Christ you can be forgiven of all your sin and have His righteousness accredited to you before God. Just believe on the Lord today and God will make you brand new.