

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(April 28, 2013)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

When We Disagree...

(Romans 13:8--14:4)

Study #23

Introduction: Getting along...

It’s easy to get along as long as everybody agrees.

Throw a party, set to begin around 5:30 this afternoon, for a bunch of Spurs fans to watch the game and it’ll likely be a pretty congenial gathering. It’ll be a more interesting party if you invite a few Lakers fans.

There will be no arguments about politics when everybody present is in the same entrenched position. It’s when the different voice shows up - the conservative, the liberal - that things can get dicey.

Homogeneity, sameness, and uniformity breed peace and tranquility. When people who see things differently get together, there is friction. Friction produces heat - heated arguments, hot tempers. But when the conditions are just right, friction can also produce light.

Today, the Apostle Paul leads you and me into the world of spiritual friction, with a promise of light, if we will listen to his counsel.

Romans review and preview...

In our recent studies in Romans, the Apostle Paul has provided us with a map, guiding us through varied aspects of Christian discipleship.

In chapter twelve he led us into an understanding of what it means to be personally committed to Christ. It looks like climbing up on an altar and presenting ourselves as living sacrifices to God.

From there, he told us that we are to exercise our gifts for the benefit of our friends in the Body of Christ AND that we are to love those who are outside the faith - even those who oppose our faith.

Then, in the first part of chapter thirteen he gave instruction in the fine art of Christian citizenship and told us how we should relate to the secular state.

Starting today, Paul launches us into the next (and last) major section of Romans. This section is very near and dear to my heart because what he has to say here, in terms of how we are to get along in the church, is about as vital as passage we find anywhere in the Bible.

Here, Paul talks to us about what we should do with each other when we disagree with each other.

Diversity to disagreement...

Given the fact of diversity, disagreements are part and parcel of life. When Paul sat down to write his letter to the church at Rome, he was writing to people living in a huge, metropolitan, and cosmopolitan city. There was at least as much diversity in Rome as you would find on the streets of San Antonio, where there is LOTS of diversity.

Cultural diversity just about guarantees that there will be different opinions about how to get things done.

Case in point: On Thursday evening, Kathy and I attended a “meet the candidates” gathering in our District 8 neighborhood. We listened to three bright candidates explain how they would tackle some of the issues facing our city. We heard three pretty different perspectives. They are all asking for our vote. We expect these kinds of differences in the political arena.

Today, the Bible speaks to the reality that differences exist and that, therefore, disagreements will arise between brothers and sisters in the church. It is REAL important that we embrace that reality.

After you have been in any church for a while, it is inevitable that you and a brother or a sister will disagree about something.

It could be about church leadership, style of ministry, Bible interpretation, lifestyle choices, music, or politics and culture - you name it. But it WILL happen.

When it happens, what do you do? Today, Paul addresses that question and offers some very helpful guidance.

Now, of course, the scenarios he lays out are Roman scenarios.

He speaks to the use and the non-use of certain items, the observance or non-observance of social customs, the eating or not eating of certain foods, and the celebrating - or not - of certain days. All of these items were hugely important to the church at Rome in AD 50 or so.

It's entertaining for us to see the issues with which first century Christians had to deal. We smile and think to ourselves, "*Silly ol' Romans.*" Don't be surprised if, by the time we finish with Romans 15, you've looked in the mirror at least once and thought, "*Silly ol' me.*"

(And if I don't address the issue that you believe needs to be spoken to today, that's OK. I may get to it over the next three Sundays. If it is a really big thing and you want to make sure that I get to it, talk with me...)

Here in Romans, Paul gives us a grid to help us think our way through disagreements.

And over the next three or four weeks you'll get used to hearing about Weak and Strong Christians, Pharisees and legalists, and stumbling blocks. And all of this on the way to helping us be the people of God, together, Jesus saved us to become.¹

The actual tip-off to these themes is found at Romans 14:1, but there is a pre-game warm-up that we really shouldn't miss.

We could easily summarize all that follows by mentioning two themes. These two themes are prominent throughout the Bible and they are central to Paul's coming theme about disagreements. The two themes are "love" and "good behavior."

First, listen to his bold, clear exhortation to us to love.

The Warm-Up - Two Commitments for ALL Christians (13:8-14)

Love

[8] Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. [9] For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." [10] Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. [11] Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.

Love is the strong AND soft side of our faith. It is the oil that keeps relationships running smooth. Love is patient and kind and gentle. Love never fails. Without love, we'll never become the powerful Jesus people the world needs to see.

But he's not finished. We are also called to good behavior.

Holiness

[12] The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. [13] Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. [14] But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

That's a call to holiness, and holiness is the strong AND hard side of Christianity. Holiness pays attention to God's inconvenient commands. Holiness says that behavior matters - and it really does!

¹ There are points of contact in this section with 1 Cor. 8:1-13 and 10:23-33; Gal. 4:10-11; Col. 2:16-17, 20-23.

So, as clear as a bell Paul has written to tell us to be loving AND to display good behavior. Love and moral purity. Love and holiness.

Holding to both love and holiness at the same time is one of life's trickier challenges.

It is made especially challenging when you and I disagree over what holiness or love should look like at O'Connor High School, at USAA or Rackspace, at 15315 Grey Fox Terrace, at Silverado Theatre, or here at church.

And there is room for disagreement.

The Bible gives a lot of commands and exhortations (you knew that). Some of these are real specific. Some are relatively vague.

Some are given in response to a first century context that doesn't apply much in 2013. (Few biblical commands speak specifically to issues of the use of digital technology.)

Maintaining great relationships in the church can be tough when I apply this or that somewhat vague exhortation differently than you do.

That difference of opinion between sincere believers can cause problems. It need not, of course, but it can - and often does.

So, Paul starts us on a very helpful journey of discovering how to navigate the choppy waters of diverse opinions at Romans 14:1.²

He begins by telling us that we must learn the grace of "acceptance" in the body of Christ by consciously welcoming opinionated believers - people just like you and me!

² I highly recommend some outside reading on this topic. An old reliable is Gary Friesen's Decision-Making and the Will of God (Multnomah Press). A bit more recent is Bruce K. Waltke's Finding the Will of God - a pagan notion? (Eerdmans). Accidental Pharisees by Larry Osborne is a recent helpful guide to the topic of legalism and freedom, stronger and weaker brothers, and Pharisees.

Game Time - The Powerful Grace of Acceptance (vv. 1-4)

Opinionated Christians (v. 1)

[1] Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions³

Paul addresses the "Strong"

In speaking of those who are *Weak* he assumes the presence of the *Strong*. He is pointedly speaking to the Strong here. I'm sure that Paul would have fit into the Strong category.

So, who were the *Weak* ones? And what characterizes the *Weak* Christian? Paul says that the Weak Christian has *opinions*.

Understanding the "Weak"

Of course the Strong have opinions, too, but it is the opinions of the Weak that have prompted Paul to write what he writes here. We'll see shortly what one of the specific opinions of the Weak was in first century Rome.

But, before he moves on, Paul gives instructions to the Strong, telling them how they were to respond to the Weak.⁴

The task of the "Strong"

Paul says that those who are Strong in a certain area of life are to treat the one who is Weak in that same area as the full-fledged member of the Body of Christ that he is.

³ William Barclay's paraphrase of verse 1: "Welcome the man who is weak in the faith, but do not introduce him straight away to the discussion of questions which can only raise doubts."

⁴ It is my opinion (☺) that there probably isn't a clean division between "Strong" and "weak" Christians. Probably not at the church in Rome and probably not at Northwest. One Christian might be strong in one area, and weak in another. And Christians who are weak or strong are not necessarily all weak or strong in the same ways.

The Weak Christian is not a second-class Christian simply because she holds to certain opinions.

The Strong are to ACCEPT the Weak. And the Strong aren't to accept the Weak just so that they can debate with the Weak or twist the Weak's arm or change the Weak's opinions.⁵

No. Acceptance means acceptance. In ancient times this word we translate "accept" was what you did when you welcomed someone into your home or into your closest circle of friends. It is an open-armed, hold nothing back, loving embrace.

Now, to be clear, this acceptance is not about moral issues where the Bible is explicit and clear. You may have an opinion that stealing is OK, but that opinion is not OK, because the Bible says that stealing is sin.

What is at issue here are opinions about matters where the Bible is vague, where Scripture is silent, where it doesn't draw a hard and fast line.

We'll call these "grey areas." They are fuzzy, not clear. And in case you hadn't noticed, life consists of lots and lots and lots of grey areas (not just above my ears, either...)

There are a few things that are certain and nailed down and absolute. There are hundreds of things that are not.

So much in life is ambiguous and mysterious and nuanced.

The Strong are to accept the person who has come to a different opinion about one of these scripturally vague areas.

We're thinking, "*Well, Paul, would you please get specific?! What are you talking about?*" As if he is reading our minds, he immediately gets very specific about one of the areas in which the weakness of the Weak was especially demonstrated in the first century church.

It is about food.

Eating - and Not Eating (vv. 2-3)

[2] One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.

The Strong - and food

The Strong man is able, because of a clear conscience and the clarity of his faith, to eat all kinds of food.

The Strong Roman believer went to the market and bought anything he wanted to eat. Vegetables and breads and meats of all kinds. The Strong would buy veal, beef, chicken - and pork. She'd cut coupons and get cut-rate meat of questionable origin.

It was all fair game as far as the Strong was concerned.

The "Weak" though, in this passage, were those who were constrained by their opinions and weren't free to eat all foods.

The Weak - and food

The Weak Christian has qualms about certain things. In the church at Rome, the specific concern was whether eating meat was appropriate for them, as Christians.

Now, in case you are hearing all of this, scratching your head and wondering what is going on, if this is a first century vegan thing, or an anti-paleo diet thing, a bit of background might help.

A believer in ancient Rome might have chosen to be a vegetarian in order to avoid eating meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols.

It was perfectly fine meat and was often marked down because it had already served its purpose in having been offered to one of the Roman gods or goddesses.

⁵ "Opinions" in Greek is, dialogismos, sometimes translated, "scruples."

But some Christians (here, the “*weak*”) believed that to eat such meat would implicate them in the practice of idolatry. They therefore refused to buy and eat it.⁶

Others in the Weak camp who were converted Jews, might have been vegetarian to avoid eating meat that had not been prepared according to the laws of kosher. They could have certainly had problems with eating pork (yes, that’s right, no bacon!).⁷

Some of these weaker Jewish Christians felt strongly (!) that even though they were now believers in Jesus, they should continue to obey the Law of Moses regarding diet. They were of the opinion that doing so was an important element of their Christian faith.

So, for either of these two reasons (or for some other, unknown reason), the Weak believers in Rome were vegetarians.

Notice. Paul calls the Christian with ultra-scrupulous standards the one who is “Weak”? Today we might say that the one with the most scruples is the Strong one. Not Paul.

He says that the Weak are those who are more narrow and rigid. He doesn’t say that they are wrong or sinful. They are Weak. The Strong are flexible and broad.

You may be aware that in some of his other letters Paul wrote about believers placing themselves under obligation to the Old Testament Law. In some of those passages, he is not at all patient or kind with the ones who were doing that!

Here in Romans, he deals with the situation with tenderness and sympathy. Why?

⁶ Some believe that the issue addressed here in Romans 14 is identical with that spoken of in 1 Cor. 8, where Paul addressed himself to the issue of whether or not believers should ever eat meat that had been - or might have been - first offered as a sacrifice to idols. And, in fact, that is, in my opinion, a good bit of the scenario that was going on in Rome when Paul wrote.

⁷ It is likely that the weakness of some of those who were weak consisted in a continuing concern with obedience to the ceremonial parts of the Old Testament Law.

(*Parenthetically...*

Well, the dynamics of the situation in Rome were very different from what was going on in some other places.

When Paul wrote the book of Galatians, for instance, he was dealing with people we refer to as “Judaizers.”

They were legalists. They were Pharisees who thought that they could put God in their debt by their obedience. They insisted that obeying the Old Testament Law was essential to being saved. Or, for those who were already saved, that obeying Moses was essential to pleasing God as a Christian.

They ordered their fellow Christians to follow suit. Believe in Jesus AND follow Moses. With such legalism Paul showed no patience.

But, the Weak believers of Romans 14 didn’t think that following certain aspects of the Law was necessary to secure salvation. They didn’t think that they were obligating God to bless them by not eating meat.

They simply believed that paying attention to what they ate was a valid and important way to express their faith.

Weak Jewish Christians simply could not with a clear conscience give up the observance of the Law’s dietary restrictions.

Others in the Roman church were concerned that eating meat that had just been sacrificed to pagan idols was a really bad idea, one short step away from idolatry, maybe even unwitting, unintentional idolatry!⁸

Paul calls them “*weak in faith*.” He doesn’t mean that they are weak in their ability to trust Christ, or weak in their grasp of basic Christian truth. It is a weakness in *confidence*.

⁸ Thus, the issue addressed in this passage is not the same as that addressed in Galatians (Judaizing legalism) or in Colossians (incipient gnosticism). In Galatians, Paul was lambasting Judaizers who were perverting the Gospel. Here, in Romans 14, there is no evidence that the Christians who were not eating meat were involved in any respect in the error of the Judaizers.

The Weak Christian is not confident that he is permitted to do certain things, even though these things aren't explicitly condemned in Scripture.

Strong Christians believe that they are permitted to do whatever Scripture doesn't explicitly prohibit.

Strong believing Gentiles marched with confidence into the meat market, bought cut-rate meat, not giving a hoot about whether it had been sacrificed to idols - after all, there is only one God. Strong converted Jews didn't much care about the strict observance of kosher anymore.

But, these issues were show-stoppers for the Weak, who ended up with a plate full of veggies. (Can you understand how this divide might have made for a difficult time at church brunches?)

How were Christians in the church at Rome to relate to each other, when there were such differing opinions about such an important thing as food?

What was a Jewish Christian who had convictions about Old Testament dietary restrictions to do when offered a juicy pork loin by a "Strong" Gentile Christian?

And how are Christians at Northwest to relate to each other when we disagree? How are we to get along when we have different opinions about highly charged issues - issues of morality that are not clearly spelled out in Scripture, public policy issues, politics, non-essential (but important) doctrine, ministry style, use of media - and on and on we could go!

The problem of weaker and stronger believers getting along is certainly not confined to the first century. Tensions can - and do, at times! - run high today, too!

How do we avoid those tensions, maintain unity in the church when my pursuit of love and holiness leads me in a different direction than your pursuit of love and holiness?

Well, Paul has some helpful counsel for us. He knew that when dealing with those who are Weak in a certain area, the Strong are often tempted toward certain dangerous responses.

Paul anticipated those responses, and spoke first to the Strong.

The particular temptation of the Strong

[3a] The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat...

When a Weaker brother comes into the church, holding convictions that are stricter than what the Bible requires, the Strong Christian needs to run from the temptation to view their brother or sister with contempt.

There must be no looking down on the Weak. No snobbishness. No irritation. No aggravation. Rather, the Strong are to work hard to see the other person's perspective, to sympathize, to understand, and to accept.

There must be no ridicule, as in, "*Oh, the poor, deluded fool. Still won't take advantage of HEB's special "after idolatry" sale. What a waste. What poor stewardship!*"

(I know, eating meat sacrificed to idols is not a 2013 San Antonio thing. We'll get more specific as the weeks pass...)

It is not a little matter to laugh at someone else's opinions. It's a big deal. Those opinions may seem to the Strong nothing more than superstitions. The Strong one is to do everything possible to see the matter from the perspective of the Weak, to understand what has driven that person to have their opinion.

It may be tempting to regard the narrower person as trivial, old-fashioned, and not worth taking seriously. But, to yield to that temptation is to fail to value and accept the weaker brother.

And, likewise, there are particular temptations that the Weak needs to watch out for, too, when they are dealing with those who are Strong.

The particular temptation of the Weak

Suppose that you were a Christian in Rome and you weren't sure that you should eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. So, you don't. (Using Paul's terminology, that would mean that you are a Weak Christian.)

So one day as you are shopping in the more expensive part of the meat market - because, after all, your scruples won't allow you to shop elsewhere - you notice your good friend from church shopping in the mark-down section where meat that had been sacrificed to idols was being sold. You watch as your Christian brother buys that meat.

What is your temptation?

Right! You are tempted to judge him. So listen to Paul speak to the Weak.

[3b]...and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.

If you have scruples that prohibit you from something, fine. Abstain. But if God hasn't prohibited it, let your brother enjoy it. God has accepted him. Why be less accepting than God?

Just as there was no place for ridicule and contempt of the Weak by the Strong, so is it just as wrong for the Weak to judge the Strong.

We are to put away BOTH contempt and condemnation. Why? Because it's not our place to judge Someone Else's servant.

Who's Your Master? (v. 4)

[4] 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.

Servants don't judge servants

If you hire a neighborhood teenager to mow your yard, I have no right to climb over your fence and bawl the kid out for not doing a good job.

Are you satisfied with the work that he is doing? Yes? Great! That is all that counts. You are in charge. You are the master over his work.

If the contractor you hire to paint your house shows up and begins painting on the first day of work, without having done any preparation work - no stripping, caulking, priming, taping, you have every right to be displeased.

You can rightly judge him, tell him to start over, hire a new painter, or take whatever action you deem necessary. I can't, but you can. Why? It's your house. You are the boss.

As a Christian I have no business judging opinions you arrive at as you seek to submit to your Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. You are subject to Him, not to me or to anybody else.

Remembering this one thing would help soooo much when it comes to how we get along in Jesus.

The Master of Christians

I am to remember that you are subject only to your master, Jesus. You are to remember that I am only answerable to my Master, Jesus.

Weak Christians may be tempted to regard the exercise of liberty on the part of the Strong as a lack of devotion to Jesus. They end up thinking that the Strong will be judged harshly by the Lord because the Strong don't hold themselves to the same rigid standards as they, the Weak, do.

The Weak Christian can relax and back off. It is not his place to judge the Strong. The Strong Christian answers only to Jesus.

And when the Strong Christian analyses the Weak Christian's scruples he tempers that analysis by remembering that the only analysis that counts is that of Jesus.

How many congregations have been torn apart because those who hold broader, seemingly more "liberal" views are contemptuous of those whom they regard as sticks-in-the-mud, as die-hard conservatives, or as "puritanical"?

How much damage has been done to the cause of Christ because those who take a narrower, stricter view are critical and condemning of the seeming laxness of those with less scruples on “grey” issues.

No judging. No contempt. When it comes to matters of opinion, acceptance is the name of the game.

Conclusion:

What can we do when we disagree? We can:

- Agree to disagree.
- Accept each other.
- Love each other and focus on our unity in Jesus.
- Talk with each other, learn ABOUT each other and learn FROM each other.