

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(May 25, 2014)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### Sermon series: THE TIES THAT BIND

#### **Relational “NOTs” (part 2)**

(Romans 14)<sup>1</sup>

Study #4

#### Introduction: Getting along...

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

If you throw a party, set to begin around 6:30 today, for a bunch of Spurs fans to watch the game it'll likely be a pretty congenial gathering. It'll be a more interesting party if you invite a few Thunder fans.

Again, there will be no arguments about politics when everybody present is of the same mind when it comes to things political. It's when the different voice shows up - the libertarian, the conservative, the liberal - that things can get dicey.

Homogeneity and uniformity breed peace and tranquility. When people who see things differently get together, there is friction, and friction can produce heat - heated arguments and hot tempers.

However, when the conditions are just right, friction can also produce light. I can produce insight and energy.

This morning we are going to continue our consideration of “one anothers”, turning to a second “NOT.”

---

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller treatment of judging and acceptance, legalism and freedom, stumbling blocks and weaker brothers, check out the messages from Romans 13-15 on [www.nwchurch.org](http://www.nwchurch.org). I hope you find them helpful.

Last week we thought about NOT envying and NOT boasting. The theme, taken positively, was learning to appreciate each other.<sup>2</sup> Today, the positive way to say it is that we are to accept one another. More negatively, don't judge.<sup>3</sup>

*The short trip from diversity to disagreement...*

When the Apostle Paul sat down to write his letter to the Roman Christians, he was writing to people living in a huge and cosmopolitan city. There was at least as much diversity in Rome as you would find on the streets of San Antonio today, where there is *lots* of diversity.

The presence of diversity just about guarantees that there will be disagreements about how to get things done - in a city and in a church.

Today, we're going to look at a major passage in Romans that speaks to the reality that since *differences* exist between us Christians, *disagreements* between us will therefore arise.

After you have been in any church for a while, it is likely that you will find yourself disagreeing with a brother or a sister about something. And there is not a thing wrong with that.

In fact, it can be perfectly healthy when we Christians are not in lock step with each other about how to behave in a given situation. And the different cadence might involve a perspective about church leadership, style of ministry, Bible interpretation, lifestyle choices, music, politics or culture - you name it.

---

<sup>2</sup> There are other “NOTs” listed in the New Testament. Among them are Paul's reference s to “Christian cannibalism” [*Galatians 5:15*] ***But if you bite and devour one another take care that you are not consumed by one another.*** Also note his negative spin on the positive of truth-telling when he writes to the church at Colossae [*3:9*] ***Do not lie to one another*** (or, just as possibly, ***“STOP LYING to one another!”***), ***since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices.***

<sup>3</sup> There are quite a few verses in the New Testament that instruct us to “not judge” along with others that tell us to judge with righteous judgment and not according to appearance. Take a look at Matthew 7:1-2; Luke 6:37; John 7:24; Romans 2:1; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 5:12; 14:1-13; Colossians 2:16; James 2:4; 4:11-12.

But when it happens that you and your Christian friend disagree, what do you do? Today, Paul addresses that question and offers some very helpful guidance.

Now, of course, the scenarios he lays out in Romans 13-15 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 dealt. We smile and think to ourselves, "*Silly ol' Romans.*"

Don't be surprised if, by the time we finish this morning, you've looked in the mirror at least once and thought, "*Silly ol' me.*"

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.

First, Paul calls us to love.

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

#### **Love (13:8-10)**

***[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.***

Love is the strong AND the soft side of our faith. Love is patient and kind and gentle. Love never fails. And without love, we'll never become the powerful Jesus people the world needs to see.

Love is crucial, but Paul's not finished. We are also called to good, God-honoring, holy behavior.

#### **Holiness (13:12-14)**

***[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.***

Holiness pays attention to God's inconvenient commands. Holiness says that obediences matter.

Paul tells us that we are to be loving and holy. And holding to both love and holiness at the same time is one of life's trickier challenges.

It is especially tricky when you and I disagree over what holiness and love should look like at O'Connor High School, at USAA, at 15315 Grey Fox Terrace, at Silverado Theatre, or at 8900 Guilbeau Road.

And, by the way, there IS room for disagreement.

The New Testament gives a lot of commands and exhortations (you knew that). Some of these are real specific. Some, quite frankly, are somewhat vague.

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 can lead to lack of acceptance and it can lead to judging.

So, Paul guides us onto a very helpful path to help us navigate the choppy waters of diverse opinions while maintaining love and holiness.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> 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).

He begins by telling us that we must learn the grace of “acceptance” in the body of Christ by consciously welcoming fellow believers with whom we have disagreements.

### **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 opinions<sup>5</sup>*

*Paul addresses the “Strong”*

In speaking of those who are Weak he assumes the presence of the Strong. He is speaking to the Strong here.

Now it is my strong opinion ( ☺ ) that there probably isn’t a clean division between “Strong” and “Weak” Christians. There likely wasn’t in the church in Rome and there isn’t at Northwest, either.

You might be strong in one area, and weak in another. And we who are weak or strong are not necessarily all weak or strong in the same ways.

What identifies a person as Weak in a certain life arena is that they have *opinions*.

This word *opinions*<sup>6</sup> is sometimes translated *scruples*. The Weak have scruples that the Strong don’t have<sup>7</sup> and it is the opinions/scruples of the Weak that prompts Paul to write what he writes here.

---

Accidental Pharisees by Larry Osborne is a recent helpful guide to the topic of legalism and freedom, stronger and weaker brothers, and Pharisees.

<sup>5</sup> 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.”

<sup>6</sup> Greek “dialogismos”

<sup>7</sup> Scruples: a doubt or hesitation that troubles the conscience or that comes from the difficulty of determining whether something is right.

#### *The task of the “Strong”*

Paul gives instructions to the Strong, telling them that they are to treat the one who is Weak in some area, not as a second-class citizen, but as the full-fledged member of the Body of Christ that he is.

The Strong are to ACCEPT the Weak.

Right now, a lot of families in our church have welcomed or will soon welcome additions to their families. The nursery here at church has undergone a delightful explosion through adoptions and births.

When any of these tiny newcomers make their entrance into a home, they are welcomed with open arms. There is no probationary period. The baby is immediately one of the family.

That is how a Weak Christian is to be treated by the Strong.

Now, to be clear, the kinds of issues at issue here concern those areas where the Bible is not clear and explicit.

Someone may have an *opinion* that stealing is A-OK. That opinion is not to be accepted because the Bible explicitly says that stealing is sinful.

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

They are “grey areas.” Fuzzy, not clear. And, as you have noticed, life consists of lots and lots and lots of grey areas.

There are some things that are certain and nailed down and absolute. There are dozens 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?*”

And 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 seen in the first century church.

Paul addresses himself to the topic of food.<sup>8</sup>

### **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 - veal, beef, chicken, even pork.

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

The “Weak” though, were constrained by their opinions/scruples and weren’t “free” to eat all foods.

#### *The Weak - and food*

In the church at Rome, the specific concern was whether eating certain kinds of meat was appropriate for them, as Christians.

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

---

<sup>8</sup> Also in Romans Paul mentions another issue about which Christians disagreed in the first century, namely, on what day should the church gather to worship? Should it be the traditional day of worship for the people of God - the Sabbath? Or should it be the day on which Jesus’ empty tomb was discovered, Sunday morning? Or, could it be any day? Paul’s conclusion was, ***[Romans 14:5] One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.***

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

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

Some Christians believed that to eat such meat would implicate them in the practice of idolatry. They therefore refused to buy and eat it.<sup>9</sup>

Then, there were some Jewish Christians who might have chosen vegetarianism to avoid eating meat that had not been prepared according to the laws of kosher. And they would certainly have had problems with eating pork (yes, that’s right, no bacon!).

Some of these 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 didn’t eat meat.

Notice. Paul calls the Christian with ultra-scrupulous standards the one who is “Weak”? You might have thought that he would have said that the one with the most scruples is the Strong one. Nope.

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.

The Weak believers didn’t think that following certain aspects of the Law was necessary to be saved. They simply believed that paying attention to what they ate was an important part of expressing their faith.

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

---

<sup>9</sup> Paul dealt with essentially the same issue in 1 Corinthians 8 (meat sacrificed to idols) and there gave even more pointed advice.

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!<sup>10</sup>

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*.

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. So, the Strong confidently marched 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.

In the same way, the Strong converted Jew didn’t bother about the strict observance of kosher anymore and he enjoyed his bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich.

But, eating meat was a show-stopper for others and they ended up with a plate full of veggies on brunch Sundays.

So, 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 Gentile Christian?

And how are Christians at Northwest to relate to each other when we disagree?

Now, not many of us are real hung up about eating meat sacrificed to idols today. But in 2014 it is very likely that any of us could differ with others of us about other issues that are not clearly spelled out in Scripture.

### *2014 Weak/Strong matters*

For instance, think...

- playing the lottery or gambling in general;
- types and styles of music listened to, Christian and otherwise;
- types and styles and sizes of churches preferred;
- where we land on the political spectrum;
- the kinds of food we eat - junky, paleo, gluten-free;
- the way we steward our financial resources (homes we live in; cars we drive);
- our position on important but secondary interpretations of Scripture;
- exposure to and use of social media;
- use or non-use of alcohol;
- what movies you will or will not watch;
- decisions about schooling options for your children

Yeah, stuff like that. The issues that we deal with every single day.

The problem of weaker and stronger believers getting along was not a first century only issue. Such tensions arise today, too.

So, how do you and I maintain unity in Jesus when my pursuit of holiness leads me in different directions than your pursuit of holiness?

Paul knew that when dealing with those who are Weak in a certain area, the Strong are often tempted toward a dangerous response. Likewise, the Weak are tempted toward an equally dangerous response when dealing with the Strong.

He 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...***

---

<sup>10</sup> 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 aspect of the error of the Judaizers.

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 look down his nose at his brother or sister.

No irritation. No aggravation. Rather, the Strong are to work hard to see the other perspective, to understand, and to accept.

It is not a little matter to laugh at someone else's opinions and scruples. It's a big deal.

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

And, likewise, there is a particular temptation that the Weak needs to watch out for, too, when 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, this would put you in the "weak" camp.)

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 in the cut-rate-already-been-sacrificed-to-an-idol section - you notice your good friend from church buying meat from THAT section of the market.

What is your temptation? Right! You are tempted to judge him. Listen to Paul.

***[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. Go ahead and abstain.

But if God hasn't prohibited it, let your brother enjoy it. God has accepted him, so why be less accepting than God?

Just as there was no place for contempt of the Weak by the Strong, so there is no place 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.

#### **The Only Opinion That Counts (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 matters. You are in charge.

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 tell him to start over, hire a new painter, or take whatever action you deem necessary. I can't, but you can. 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.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> From George F. Will: Baseball umpires are carved from granite and stuffed with microchips... They are professional dispensers of pure justice. Once when home plate umpire Babe Pinelli called Babe Ruth out on strikes, Ruth made a populist argument. Ruth reasoned fallaciously (as populists do) from raw numbers to moral weight: "There's 40,000 people here who know that last one was a ball, tomato head." Pinelli replied with the measured stateliness of John Marshall: "Maybe so, but mine is the only opinion that counts."

In the end, there is only one opinion that counts. Remembering this one thing would help soooo much when it comes to how we get along in Jesus.

*The Master of Christians (14:10)*

***[10] But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.<sup>12</sup>***

In the end, I won't be asked to give an account for someone else. I won't be asked my opinion about anyone else. Nobody else will stand in my place.

You and I will each sing solo before God.

And since the Judge of all is going to Judge us all, we have no business judging each other for the decisions we make about matters where the Bible is not crystal clear.

I am to remember that you answer only to Jesus. You are to remember that I only answer to Jesus.

Weak Christians will be tempted to think that the exercise of liberty on the part of the Strong shows a lack of devotion to Jesus. Relax. It is not your place to judge your brother.

When the Strong Christian sees the Weak Christian limiting his behavior because of his scruples he'll be tempted to look down on the Weak as an old stick-in-the-mud. Chill. He's limiting his freedom because he loves Jesus. And in the final analysis, the only analysis that counts is that of Jesus.

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

---

<sup>12</sup> In other places referred to as the Judgment Seat of Christ. (2 Corinthians 5, for instance)

### **Conclusion:**

People who don't know the Lord hear, "*Blah, blah, blah,*" when we speak out about Jesus and at the same time judge our fellow believers for their differing convictions.

A watching world will, however, sit up and take notice when it sees us who have come to different convictions about politics and movies, music and church structure, schooling choices and alcohol, loving each other, accepting each other, serving each other, and cheering each other on.

So, what can we do when we disagree? We can:

- Commit to not judge one another, but to accept one another

I am not to hold up my own convictions on matters where the Bible is not clear as the universal standard for all Christians. Neither are you to hold up your preferences as the norm for all believers.

Instead, we are to give each other freedom to think, process, and come to our own personal convictions before the Lord.

And we may very well end up coming to different convictions about matters where Scripture is not explicit.

Paul's hope was that Christians in Rome would live together and love each other as some of them ate meat, and others didn't. And the hope **HERE** is that we will accept each other despite our diverse convictions about matters where there is no clear, "***Thus saith the Lord.***"

We are different. But it is really helpful when we understand that, very often, the issue about which we disagree is really not the issue. The issues are **personal conviction** and **loving acceptance**.

\*\*\*What is really important is that we work hard to identify what is a biblical mandate and what is our preference.

\*\*\*What is really important is that we have come to convictions before God that what we are doing is right for us at this time in light of Scripture.

\*\*\*What is really important is that we not try to press each other into a mold.

\*\*\*What is really important is that we lovingly accept those who approach things differently from the way we approach things. After all, it is not our place to judge.

- Talk with each other.

Imagine approaching someone who has a different conviction than you on some grey area with this:

*“Hey brother, I’ve noticed that you and I have come to different convictions about ‘x’. Your conviction shows that you are obviously not submitting to Jesus’ Lordship!”*

How likely is it that this opening will result in a productive conversation?

So, what if, instead, you approached your friend with this:

*“Your conviction on such-and-such an issue is completely different from mine. I would love to hear how you arrived at this conviction in submission to the Lordship of Christ. Tell me about it. Let’s talk about it.”*

What a great, baggage-free way to engage in provocative, edifying conversation.

When we talk with each other, we learn from each other. When I hear how you have arrived at your convictions, I’ll understand you better.

When we talk with each other one of us might even become aware of blind spots we hadn’t previously thought about.

I might even re-think my convictions in light of our talk. I might see that another way would be more honoring to God.

There can be tremendous benefit when we actually speak with one another about our differences of opinion and conviction.

Lord, help us to learn to love!