

Who Are You to Judge?

Scripture Text: Romans 14:1-6

Introduction

There is no doubt that scripture calls for unity within the Church. It is of utmost importance. At the same time, however, there is diversity among the members of Christ's Body. Oftentimes, unity and diversity are not compatible, but for the Church, we are called to be one with many members. Sometimes, our diversity can be a source of disunity. It can lead to conflict and sometimes dissension. Paul takes up the matter of peaceful coexistence again in this passage. The Church living peaceably with one another must have been difficult then as it is now. There are so many things and issues that Satan uses to drive a wedge between God's people. When the real issue the Church should be addressing is making more disciples of Jesus Christ, we spend more time arguing about things that really do not matter in the grand scheme of things. It is so easy to get focused on things that are not essential and miss the bigger picture.

So it was in Rome. The church was diverse and the members came from various backgrounds. If they came from a tradition that believed certain foods were wrong, they brought that belief with them when they joined the church. If they came from a tradition that believed in worshipping on certain days of the week, they brought that tradition with them to the church. Paul spoke very clearly in this passage about the concept of Christian liberty. This is not about Church and State issues or the freedom to worship how we want. Here Paul was dealing with matters that are necessary for the peace and health *within* the Church. He was dealing with how believers should behave towards one another with respect to issues that have no scriptural mandate. He was dealing with non-essential issues that should not divide a church. The Church must strive for tolerance and understanding on non-essential matters, emphasizing our unity and love of one another regardless of our personal convictions.

Do Not Quarrel Over Non-Essentials

One of the first things Paul mentioned in this passage was something we have already read. If you recall, Paul just told us that we ought to not quarrel with one another. In fact, he called this a "work of darkness". Rather, we ought to put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:13-14). Does this mean we should never disagree with one another? Does this mean we should never argue about things? It depends on the situation. Quarreling is an angry dispute with someone based on different points of view. If we should not quarrel, then some marital communication is forbidden! Look at what Paul wrote.

Romans 14:1 ¹ *As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.*

At Rome there were probably two sets of Christians trying to coexist in the same church. There were Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians were probably reluctant to give up certain aspects of their religious heritage. Many were

proud of their tradition and were uncertain about how to integrate their Jewish heritage within their faith in Jesus Christ. The Gentile Christians, on the other hand, embraced the new freedom in Christ and did not hold to the Jewish traditions. That sounds oddly familiar, does it not? The church today still struggles with integrating the more traditional ways with the more contemporary ways. Paul referred to one group as “weak” and the other group as “strong” (Romans 15:1). That may not sound very flattering, but the issue Paul was addressing here is that some Christians had not come to a place in their faith where they experienced true freedom in Jesus Christ, while others had embraced it.

Therefore, the principle Paul was trying to convey was that we should accept others who think differently than we do. In other words, believers are not to be contentious with those who are still working through certain issues of Christian liberty. For the church in Rome, they were to welcome into its fellowship those Jewish believers who were finding it difficult to let go of their religious past. Since Paul had now said that believers are no longer under the Law of God but under grace (Romans 6:15), how to integrate what was tradition was difficult for many Jewish Christians. Gentile Christians were to lovingly welcome them, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on their opinions. Believers were quarreling over opinions and Paul’s exhortation to the church was that those who were considered weak in their faith should be welcomed, not fought. Do we quarrel over preferences? Do we fight with others about things that are not essential?

This verse is not saying that every person has the freedom to say what is right and what is wrong. For example, if one person in the church thinks there is more than one way to heaven, and another thinks Jesus is the only way, then we clearly have an issue. The Word of God is very clear that Jesus is the only way. When the issue is over an essential, like whether it is by faith in Christ and not obedience to the Law, or clear scriptural commandments against sin, then we should stand boldly for the truth. But when it involves matters of conscience or opinion, things that are not essential, we ought to extend a measure of grace and understanding. If it is a matter of dispute that does not really matter in the grand scheme of things, then agree to disagree and pursue unity with one another. Do we really need to argue our opinions to the point that it creates dissension in the church? No! We must respect one another. Demonstrate a stronger faith by refusing to squabble over non-essential issues.

Do Not Judge By Your Personal Convictions

That raises the question as to what is non-essential. Many of us may not know what is essential to our faith and what is not. This is where it may be helpful to understand the difference between *doctrine*, *confession*, and *conviction*. Doctrine is what is essential for all Christians to agree, such as Jesus is our Savior and salvation is by faith in Him. A confession includes those things that a group of Christians agree, but not every Christian, such as believer’s baptism or eternal security of the believer. Convictions would be those beliefs or opinions that an individual has that are not binding on other Christians. Many disagreements which cause disunity in the church are really over convictions. They should never cause division because they are personally held beliefs. In this passage, Paul was addressing the issue of when we disagree with convictions.

The Church oftentimes struggles with Christians who are living side by side, but who are not operating with exactly the same set of beliefs. One person thinks it is wrong to do this; another thinks that it is right to do that. How do we deal with these issues? Well, we typically judge one another, or look down on another person. Do we like to be judged? Probably not! Do we like to be the judge? Probably! Our tendency is to judge those who do not conform to *our standards*. If someone does something that is not the tradition or the way things have “always” been done, our natural inclination is to say that person is wrong. That was the situation in Rome. Paul gave us two examples of things that were sources of quarreling among members in that church. Those two things were what to eat and what day to celebrate or worship. Let us look at verses two through four.

Romans 14:2–4 ² *One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.* ³ *Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.* ⁴ *Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*

So, one person believes he may eat anything, and another eats only vegetables. I suspect most of us here would side with the one who believes he can eat anything. After all, we are Baptists and we do love to eat. Apparently, the two groups in Rome thought each other were wrong. The ones who ate only vegetables condemned the others, and the ones who ate anything looked down on the ones who ate only vegetables. One judged the other and one despised the other. Paul’s point here is that in the exercise of our Christian freedom, God has left us free to eat whatever we want. If I eat meat and my brother does not eat meat, am I supposed to hold my brother in contempt because he does not share my view? No! I am not to judge the person who refrains from eating meat, and the person who refrains from eating meat is not to judge me for eating meat. We are not supposed to fight with each other over this issue. God has accepted both of us; we are both in Christ and we are to mutually accept one another.

There is a time when the Church is to judge one another. Jesus clearly mandated a procedure for such (Matthew 18:15-20). That is not what Paul was addressing here. Paul wrote about a specific dispute concerning Jewish traditions. Paul advocated for mutual acceptance. You are to follow your conscience before the Lord without condemning others who may disagree with you. Are there other things aside from eating meat and vegetables that may apply here? What about drinking alcohol? Is that an issue where there is freedom to partake of it or to abstain from it? Is there an absolute command in scripture about it? We will come to that issue later in this chapter, but for now, let us accept those who have different convictions. The other issue Paul addressed was about when we worship together. Most Christians worship together on Sunday morning, but is that the only day we should do it? Is Sunday a better day than the other six days of the week? Are there restrictions for Sunday activities? Look at the following.

Romans 14:5 ⁵ *One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.*

No doubt, the issue for the church in Rome, which had both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, was in regard to how to integrate old traditional Jewish customs in the Church. Jewish Christians may have believed in observing the Sabbath or the many Jewish feasts and festivals, whereas the Gentile Christians probably felt no need for them. The Jewish Christians demanded that these days be observed, while the Gentile Christians argued that every day is equally devoted to God. Scholars are divided over what exactly Paul meant here in this passage. Some believe that Paul was strictly addressing the observance of the Sabbath, and others believe he was writing about observing Jewish festivals and feasts. Which was it? It may be that Paul was referring to a particular issue in the church in Rome, and it is also possible that Paul was referring to both issues — festivals and the Sabbath. Either way, I think Paul made it clear that we are not to judge one another regardless of whether it is in regard to food, festivals or Sabbath observation. Look at what he wrote in his letter to the Colossians.

Colossians 2:16 ¹⁶ *Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.*

What Paul seems to be saying in this passage is that whether you consider one day of the week set apart for worship or rest, or you think all days are the same, whether you think you need to observe certain events throughout the year, or not, each view is permissible. Each person must follow his or her own conscience. Since every member of the Church belongs to the Lord (v. 8), we should have mutual love and respect. This means the priority for us is serving one another and building up the church rather than enforcing our own convictions. Each person will answer to the Master for his or her own convictions, and that master is God. The important thing is that each person be fully persuaded in his or her own mind regarding personal convictions. Do not violate your conscience. If God has convicted you to do something or not do something, you ought to follow that conviction. It would be a sin for you to not follow a God-given conviction. You should not, however, impose those convictions on others. That places you as judge.

Do Honor God in Whatever You Do

What are some things in the church that are not commanded in scripture: Going to the movies, using cosmetics, using alcohol or tobacco, playing cards, dancing, clothing and fashion, bible translations (Jesus did not speak nor did Paul write in any particular English translation!), and many others? One issue for churches that tends to be divisive is the *style of music*. Some prefer a traditional style of music, while others prefer a contemporary style of music. Some have called this the “worship wars”, and it rages on. What is the correct way to worship God? Maybe that is not the right question, because it assumes there is a correct way to worship God through music and song. One only needs to look at the history of the Church to see that God’s people have worshipped Him in many different ways through the years. How the early church worshipped though music is vastly different from the way we do it now. The way churches worship in Africa or China is different from the way churches here or South America worship. Can you imagine the controversy when pianos were introduced in the worship service? Do you think people argued about having a choir or a hymnal when they were first introduced?

So, how should we respond to our convictions or personal preferences? How should we handle them? We should not condemn or ridicule those who think differently than we do. The charge in this passage is that whatever we do, honor God. Look at verse six.

Romans 14:6 ⁶ *The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.*

What Paul was saying to issues like these is that you are free to have your opinion, but you are not free to judge your brother or sister for having a different opinion. Some things are personal preferences or personal convictions. Where scripture neither commands nor forbids something, we ought to accept the opinions of others. We ought not to judge others because they think differently than we do. Whether one observes a special day or does not observe a special day, whether a person eats all foods or abstains from some foods, the important thing is to honor the Lord and give thanks to Him in all that we do. If you have a conviction about something, then do it to honor God. How we live our faith must be done out of conviction before God. Our walk with God must come from a conviction that we belong to God and we live to honor Him. Whatever you do, whether it is eating meat, observing a special day, or abstaining from some things, do it all to honor Jesus Christ. Do it all for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Maybe the question should be this: What can you do to bring greater unity to the church? How can you better follow your convictions and honor God, and still welcome your brothers and sisters in Christ? How can you maintain the unity in the church? Is it that important for you to exercise your freedom or conviction if it causes others to stumble? Is it necessary to have it a certain way, or to impose your personal convictions on others? This issue will come up later in this chapter. According to Paul, we should not judge others by our convictions. We should consider each other more important than ourselves by placing our freedom aside for the good of the church. Honor God, follow your convictions, but also maintain the freedom for others to exercise their convictions, if they are different from yours. This, too, will bring glory to God!

Conclusion

In closing, are we quarreling over issues that are not essential? Maybe there are issues that are important to you, but in the greater scheme of things, in the context of peace, love, and unity in the church, are those things that important? Fundamental to the whole discussion is that the Christian's life is not his or her own. Both in life and in death, Christians belong to the Lord, and He alone is their Judge. So, who are we to judge the servant of God? Unless it is an issue of doctrine that denies a fundamental issue of faith, we ought to extend grace to others who may think or believe differently than we do. Follow your convictions, but realize that not everyone shares the same convictions as you have, and that is Ok. God has brought us together, a diverse group of people to bring glory to Him. Yes, we may be different, and we may not believe exactly the same way, but we are still a part of Christ's Body — the Church. Whatever you do, bring glory to Him. This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!