

The challenge to maintain the unity of the church has often been unmet in church history. This should galvanize us to a deeper resolution and determination to practice Christian love.

“Living to Please Others”

Romans 14:13-15:7

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We have been away from our series of sermons on Romans since mid-May so let me remind you where we are. Paul began his exposition of the Christian life in 12:1 by connecting theology to ethics in his typical way. Paul’s exposition of divine grace and the way of salvation in chapters 1-11 is connected by a “therefore” to his description of the authentic Christian life. God’s grace leads to a particular way of living. We are to live in such a way that amounts to a fit or appropriate response to what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

In chapters 12 and 13 Paul described the Christian life in general terms. Then in chapter 14 he began to deal with a specific issue that was troubling the Roman church, viz. differences of opinion between Jewish and Gentile Christians regarding what was or was not appropriate behavior. Jewish Christians were of a mind to retain certain practices from their spiritual culture, Gentile believers had been taught that such was not necessary. Paul brings up two particular issues: *first*, regulations concerning food (you remember that from ancient days in the law of Moses the Jews were commanded to distinguish between clean and unclean foods and in more recent times had made much of the way in which animals ought to be slaughtered before being eaten) and, *second*, the observing of particular sacred days of the Jewish religious calendar, perhaps especially the continuation of the observance of the Saturday Sabbath *in addition to* the Sunday Lord’s Day of the New Testament church.

In regard to the issue itself Paul sided with the Gentiles. It was not any longer necessary, even for the Jews, to observe the Old Testament food laws that had served their purpose and had passed away. Nor was it necessary to observe Saturday in addition to Sunday as the Christian Sabbath. However, Paul was such a free man that he was free even from his freedom. He knew that there were folk in the church who had not yet come to appreciate their freedom from these old requirements and he insisted that they must be treated gently. [Bruce, 243] Whether a Christian’s faith is weak or his theology not entirely or precisely accurate at some points is not nearly as important as the fact that he is a Christian and a servant of the Lord. The Lord loves him and so must we. And the Lord will hold us to account for how we treat his children and his servants. That is Paul’s argument in the first 12 verses of chapter 14.

Now Paul proceeds to elaborate the point he has just made. No one loses his freedom who voluntarily places limits on the exercise of his liberty for the sake of others. Indeed the man who can cheerfully do this is the most liberated person of all.

Text Comment

v.13 There was too much judging, too much looking down on one another, and too much criticism of one another’s viewpoints going on in the Roman church and not enough

consideration of one's Christian brothers and sisters. Paul has already made it clear that both the "weak" and the "strong" Christians are to stop this constant judging of one another. They must live cheerfully with their disagreements. A "stumbling block" in Paul's usage is something that causes another to sin.

- v.15 Once again, Paul sides with the strong so far as the issue itself is concerned. Indeed, he seems to allude to the teaching of the Lord Jesus himself, recorded in Mark 7:19, that "all foods are clean" and may be eaten. But, once again, Paul says, that isn't the most important consideration. It is good to be strong in faith, it is good to be liberated in one's conscience, but Christians do not live to themselves. They must think of their brethren. And if a Jewish brother feels that the meat you are eating is unclean, but is emboldened to eat it anyway by your example, he will have violated his conscience and done what he still believes is sinful. For him, his action was sinful because he committed it thinking it was sinful. Motive counts for a great deal in the Christian life. And so the strong Christian will have contributed to his brother's sin. In that way he would have harmed his brother. The obligations of love supersede the obligations of correct thinking about some ethical issue.

Christ's death for sinners is the irrefutable evidence of the value God places on a human life. Your calling is the welfare of your brethren, not their destruction or harm! The strong Christians are putting too high a value on their personal freedom in the matter of ceremonial observances. [Moo, 856]

- v.16 What is more, if you love true freedom you will want others to love it too, but they will not if they see it being employed selfishly.
- v.17 Some things are more important than others in the Christian life. Your diet is not nearly so important as a godly life, peace between the brethren, and the joy of salvation that is fostered when Christians love one another by the Spirit! There is never much joy where there is a lot of argument, criticism and passing judgment.

By the way, verse 17 is as far as Martyn Lloyd-Jones got in his series of sermons on Romans preached over twelve and a half years of Friday nights at Westminster Chapel in London. He took up the word "peace" in what, though he did not know it at the time, was to be the last of 372 sermons in the series. For the sake of comparison, this is the 39th sermon in our series on Romans and we are taking not the single word "peace" in v. 17, but the eighteen verses that make up the paragraph!

- v.20 Here Paul puts in negative form the exhortation he had put in positive form in the preceding verse.
- v.22 You know the Lord will approve when you act on behalf of the welfare of others and you know your own conscience will condemn you if you do not.
- v.23 Christians should act with conviction and true to their convictions, absolutely. And that being so no Christian should contribute to undermining another Christian's living

according to his convictions. Certainly sometimes convictions need to change, but that is a process that takes time and the right sort of changes in thinking are far more likely to be made if they are pursued in love instead of in the spirit of judgment.

Paul now concludes his exhortation by appealing to the example of the Lord Jesus.

- 15:3 In other words, the Lord suffered because of his determination to do his Father's will when he might have chosen for himself an easier path.
- v.4 In an extraordinarily important parenthesis Paul reminds his readers that he is absolutely right to take instruction from the ancient scriptures as he just did in the previous verse. They were written *for us*. The entire Bible is the Word of God for us.
- v.7 Paul concludes his argument with a brief prayer that the saints in Rome will live together in love and peace and by that means give glory to God. And then ends with one final exhortation summing up the whole: treat others as Christ has treated you, in love and forbearance.

The summary of Paul's instruction is found in 15:2: "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." And that summary is repeated in other words in 15:7: "Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you." The second adds to the first the idea that in an imperfect world and an imperfect church one must always make allowances for imperfections. The Lord makes such allowances for you as he does for others, so you should certainly make them for others as well. You are not better or wiser than Christ are you? You don't have a better sense than he does of what the situation calls for, do you? That is Paul's point. There are some details of Paul's argument that may not be entirely clear to a modern reader of Romans, but the gist is altogether clear. Our convictions about things don't matter nearly as much as another man or woman's life. In particular, our Christian convictions, no matter how sure we are that they are correct, are not as important as our brother or sister's soul. Being right is not as important as loving others!

I regret to say that this is a part of Christian ethics that over the centuries has been honored more in the breach than in the observance. That is, Christians in vast numbers – all of us to one degree or another – have found a way around Paul's straightforward exhortation here; have found a way to assure ourselves that it doesn't apply to us. "In *our* particular case," we find ourselves thinking, "with regard to *this* matter, the issue in *this* case is too important to treat as a matter that calls for brotherly love rather than right judgment. But very rarely is it so. Usually we end up practicing that very same unloving judgment that Paul is here condemning.

Paul, at least, practiced what he preached. The great apostle to the Gentiles was anyone's doormat with regard to matters on which it was possible to be flexible (which prove to be most matters, by the way) – no matter that he knew precisely what the right position was and no matter that he was an apostle of the Lord – so that he might win others to the truth and so that he might not weaken the church by fomenting arguments within her. He would bend again and again where other men would not. If the gospel itself were not at stake he could bear with a great many dumb ideas that Christians have from time to time. But there have been far too few like him in the ages since. And what is the nub of this chronic failure?

Well, it is invariably that Christians simply ignore the basis of Paul's counsel and instruction here in Romans 14 and 15. They argue that the situations are not similar, that in *this* case, *their* case, Paul's instruction does not apply. It's *always* the gospel that is at stake in their view. There are, as it turns out, virtually no issues that can be treated with the large-heartedness and Christ-likeness that Paul recommends here. But time almost invariably proves it is not so. It is always time; it is always the perspective that time brings, that unmasks what was not a loyalty to truth and love at all, but simply selfishness, pride, and bigotry. What seemed so obvious to them at the time, generations later seems so obviously to have been something entirely different! I told you a few weeks ago of such a split or division resulting from such criticism and judgment and disagreement in our conservative Presbyterian church history – this in 1937 – a division that seemed so necessary at the time and seemed so wrong to most of the principals themselves some years later.

What they argued at the time was the defense of the truth appears unmistakably to us today to be more a spirit of fear, or of pride, or of some other spiritual defect. The disunity that results from the judgment of others in the church invariably looks later to be a lot less like purity of doctrine and a lot more like the work of people who have a significant lack of Christian faith and love. And, unfortunately, that sad description has fit very many Christians through history.

I read over the past two weeks a gripping new history of the battle of the Little Big Horn and of the lives of its two principle combatants, George Armstrong Custer and the Lakota Sioux chief, Sitting Bull. The book is *The Last Stand* by Nathaniel Philbrick. The narrative is interesting on many levels. One of the things that just fascinated me was that Custer, who was a notorious poppycock and showoff, went into battle in a buckskin coat because he thought it made him look dashing. Sitting Bull, who realized that wool and cotton were much superior fabrics, went into battle in a wool shirt! But as a Christian reader of Philbrick's history, what I found most fascinating was the demonstration of the selfishness, the petty jealousy, the rivalry and the constant carping and criticism that bedeviled both sides in that conflict. The spirit of pleasing one's neighbor for his good was in remarkably short supply in southeastern Montana in June of 1876. The idea that the blessing of others is to be the principal object of one's interest and activity was so far removed from the spirit animating either side of the conflict that a Christian reader of the history turns from it disgusted by the unworthiness of it all. There were exceptions, to be sure, on both sides; there are always exceptions, but far too few to make a difference.

Describing the rise of the Sioux in the American west through the late 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries, their conquest of the lands that once belonged to other tribes, Philbrick quotes one Sioux leader, an Oglala Sioux by the name of Black Hawk, as saying,

“These lands once belonged to [other tribes], but we whipped those nations out of them and in this we did what the white men do when they want the lands of the Indians.”

Black Hawk was a perceptive moral philosopher: he saw the nature of human life as shared by Indian and white man alike: a grasping after what belonged to others, a selfish indifference to the welfare of others, and a perfect willingness to serve oneself at the expense of others. Whatever the Seventh Calvary and the Sioux did not have in common, this was something they shared.

The Seventh Cavalry went into battle in June of 1876 seething with personal resentments, petty jealousies, and outright hatred. Commanding officers couldn't stand one another, a fact that had fateful consequences when battle was joined. Nor did they manifest a truly human concern for the Indian nation they were bent on destroying. The last thing one could say about this group of men was that they were living to please their neighbors, either their fellow soldiers or the Sioux.

When we open a window on history like that we Christians are supposed to notice how utterly different our life is supposed to be from *all of that!* How utterly different our view of others and our treatment of others is to be in the church. And when we then find *in the church* judgmentalism rather than love, indifference to the welfare of others rather than a spirit of concern for others, jealousy rather than a ready desire to live to please others, a turning away from others rather than a warm welcome, we are to react *with horror* that the world has come into the church and immediately set to work to put matters right. This may be what the world is like, but surely not the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Surely, there are to be no battles of the Little Bighorn there!

You may indeed be thinking the Little Bighorn was not the church and probably very few if any of these individuals were Christians; what can you expect? No wonder they cared so little for others. Here Paul is talking about the behavior of Christians toward other Christians.

But, of course, most of you know your American history. There were far, far too many American Christians who had a view of the native population of the country that we look back upon now with horrified disgust. We think, how could Christians think and act as they did? How could the followers of Jesus Christ care so little for the obligations of love and, in the face of the native population's moral failures, fail to remember how it was that they themselves were Christ's enemies when he died for them? The vantage point of history puts what many Christians accepted at the time as a matter of course in a very different light. What many brothers and sisters took for granted, we today are absolutely humiliated to know was the thinking and the behavior of the followers of Jesus Christ. But, if so, how important is it for us to remember that those Christians were no different than we Christians today, the same sinners saved by grace. Can we possibly believe that we are not subject to the same temptations and will not commit the same sins in our own way, in our own time, and in our own circumstances, as they did in theirs?

At the same time that I was reading about the battle of the Little Bighorn, Florence and I watched for the second time some of the episodes of Ken Burns' excellent history of baseball. Interesting as those episodes are in many ways, as a window on the experience of black Americans, they are humiliating to see today. We are much closer to that history than to the battle of the Little Bighorn. Jim Crow was still very much a part of American life when I was a boy and growing up to be a young man. There was a well-known restaurant in Chattanooga that we loved to frequent as Covenant College students in the late 1960s – a lot of tasty food for a small price – until some of our black fellow students were refused service. I'd bet my bottom dollar that the owners of that restaurant were members of a conservative, Bible-believing, Protestant Christian church!

You hear Ken Burns tell of what black baseball players endured in American cities – sleeping on the floor of the bus or train station because none of the hotels in the town would take their

money, the taunting, the petty disrespect they endured every day – it turns your stomach. And don't kid yourself; among the many who were treating African-Americans this way were a great many Bible-believing Christians. And, to make it worse, much, much worse, a great many of those blacks being abused and denigrated were themselves Bible-believing Christians. Do you know why black baseball crowds on Sunday were so well-dressed: the men in suits the women in dresses and hats? Because they came to the ball park directly from church! When white Christians saw this why didn't they die of shame?

From the vantage point of a mere generation we can't help but ask: "What in the world were they thinking? Could Christians in those days possibly have thought that they were welcoming one another as Christ had welcomed them? Could they ever have imagined that they could justify their behavior as a case of pleasing their neighbors to build them up? What had happened to their consciences?"

And it wasn't just the blacks. Hank Greenberg, the great Detroit first-baseman and outfielder, was a Jew and he was abused in America in many of the same ways the Jews in Nazi Germany were being abused at the very same time. He was belittled and held in contempt and spat on the same way the Jews had belittled the Samaritans in Jesus' day. What in the world were these people thinking? Were they out of their minds?

Well they were well and truly out of any authentic Christian mind. That is for sure! We are Christians here and it is no business of ours to excuse or extenuate behavior in which we ourselves and our church have been implicated. Let's tell it like it is. This was the pathetic behavior of insecure people, it was the lashing out that we expect of little people who are afraid because they are so little. They think themselves so little – though they refuse to admit that this is what is happening – they think themselves so little that they have to abuse and belittle others to feel that at least there are some others smaller than themselves. How sick; how ugly; how despicable! You watch these episodes of Ken Burns' *Baseball* and they turn your stomach as a Christian precisely because there were so many who would have called themselves Christians, and so many who really were Christians, who were treating other Christians in this despicable way. There are no little people in Christ; so if one acts the way little people act, that is a betrayal of Christ, a failure of faith in him, and a betrayal of the gospel. The gospel makes every believer a free man and, even more, a prince!

My goodness, the color of a person's skin or his or her ethnicity isn't remotely as important as kosher food – which had an ancient pedigree in the Law of God as revealed at Sinai – or the Saturday Sabbath – which went back to the creation itself! What were our people thinking? But then comes the still more horrifying question: will others a generation from now ask the same question of us?

Now I began by saying that not a one of us has any real difficulty understanding what Paul is telling us here. Our differences with other believers, no matter that in regard to some particular issue we may be in the right, are not so important that they should ever interfere with our commitment to their welfare. No matter our differences, other believers should know, should have absolutely no difficulty telling that we are far more committed to them than we are to our

opinions. They should feel from us the kind of unqualified welcome Christ himself has extended to both us and them.

But then I reminded you how often, how profoundly, how disgustingly Christians – real Christians – have failed to do this. When I preached a series of sermons on Roman Catholicism years ago, I read and listened to several Presbyterian Church in America ministers who had left our church to become Roman Catholics. In each case one of the primary motivations was their disgust with the disintegration of Protestant Christianity, split after split, division after division, denomination after denomination and why? According to these men it was because there was not enough authority in the church. Their answer to the problem was that everybody should think the same way about everything. That was not Paul's explanation of the problem. Paul's explanation was that disunity resulted from people's failure in love to surmount their differences of opinion, and instead of loving one another they judged and condemned and let their hostility grow until there was no alternative but another separation. They failed to do the very thing Paul says here that we must do; they did the very thing Paul forbids us to do. They did not live to please others; they did not welcome the brethren in their hearts and with their hands as the Lord Jesus had welcomed them. That is what happened. Now these former Presbyterians didn't explain the fractured Protestant world in terms of Romans 14 and 15. They should have, but they didn't. They explained it as a lack of a single, all-encompassing authority. They thought there wouldn't be differences if all were *required* by the Pope and the church to believe the same thing. But, of course, the failure to follow Paul's counsel in this text is as real in the Roman Catholic Church as in the Protestant. You can't solve the problem by eliminating differences of opinion; you can solve it only by love, by Christians living to please others!

What I am concerned to do this morning is not elaborate the Apostle's point. It needs no elaboration. What I am concerned to do is to make us feel the great evil of our failures here, the impossibility of our justifying ourselves when we pass judgment on others because their opinions do not match our own or because we do not share their convictions or because of any other difference between us. I want us to be horrified that we could so betray the Lord and his gospel in this way. I want us to be frightened, positively horrified that we might also fail to do this. And I want us to be humble enough to realize that if our parents and grandparents were able to be blind to a fault so perfectly obvious, who are we to think we cannot be as well? How could they, we ask? How could they have turned away a Christian brother from their restaurant or their hotel or, worse, their church, which is, after all, Christ's church not theirs? How could they have turned away *anyone* for such a reason, much less a Christian brother or sister? How could they have? But to ask the question is to admit that Christians have far too often failed to welcome other brethren as Jesus Christ has welcomed them.

So what are we to do? What is the solution to this problem of the Christian ages? Well it isn't merely telling ourselves today that we should be careful to welcome others and to please our brethren and our neighbors. Our Christian ancestors told themselves that and then passed judgment right and left. They knew the parable of the Good Samaritan as well as we do. They knew that without love we are noisy gongs or clanging cymbals. They knew that they were under the strictest order of their master to love one another as he had loved us. No, it is not enough, not nearly enough, to comfort ourselves with our knowledge of this truth. Something much more is needed.

We must go to war against our perverse and profound selfishness, our pride in our own thoughts and our own opinions, however accurate they may be; we must go to war against our indifference to other believers. We must refuse to judge ourselves by any other standard than the love and compassion and self-giving of Jesus Christ. And then we must set out, every day, on purpose, with full intention, to live to please others and to welcome others as Christ has welcomed us. Every day such a welcome; every day such a pleasing of others; words and actions meant to promote their welfare, not our own, until we ourselves know full well that any day not lived in this way is a day not rightly spent. What Paul tells us here must become the settled intention and then practice of our daily lives. We must examine ourselves to see if we are in fact doing this. No one else is going to hold us to this standard if we do not. We've got to think about how to welcome this person and how to please that person and we've got to rip that tendency to pass judgment right out of our hearts as the betrayal of Christ and his gospel that it is.

And we should not spend too many hours in any day without remembering where we would be if Christ had not welcomed us in defiance of every thing about us that is so unpleasant and unattractive. No one who does not welcome others can imagine that he or she is faithfully serving the welcoming God!