

## ‘A CULTURE OF PEACE & EDIFICATION’ ROMANS 14:1-23

**[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday March 20, 2022 – 8am & 5pm]**

### 1. Understanding the Roman Situation.

I want you to imagine a church a bit different to our own. This church was a newish congregation in the ancient city of Rome. It was simply known as the church that met in the home of Ampliatus. His house was on the Via Flamina on the northern outskirts of the city. Every Saturday people gathered there for worship and teaching. It was a mixed church- which in those days meant it was a fellowship of both Jews and Gentiles. This was a great blessing and a sweet expression of the gospel of Jesus- the Messiah for all people. But being a mixed church also had its problems. Sometimes there were disagreements, and clashes of perspective. I guess in this respect the church that met in the home of Ampliatus was not unlike any other church. People from different nationalities and backgrounds, people of different ages and traditions, people with different families and values, all coming together in one family of God. We could say that this is the beauty and the complexity of every Christian church. And this was certainly the situation in Rome. And the chapter in front of us today/tonight makes this very clear.

#### - disputes

In Paul’s day, in the Roman church, there were disputes. We learn this from the very first verse of the chapter. And as the chapter unfolds we find out what some of these disputes were about. One of them was about what people in the church should be allowed to eat. Some believed Christians were free to eat anything. But others believed that there were restrictions on Christian eating- probably restrictions they thought came to them from the Law of Moses in the Old Testament<sup>1</sup>. As a result some in the church were vegetarian by principle. We see this in verse 2.

A second dispute was around the sacredness of particular days- verse 5. This was probably a debate about strict Sabbath keeping.

And we get a hint of a third dispute in verse 21 around the consumption of alcohol.

And these are just the three points of tension that Paul refers to explicitly. There may have been others. And, of course, the fact that there were disputes is not really a great surprise or a great concern. Disagreements are a fact of life, perhaps particularly in churches where people tend to hold to their views very passionately. So Paul does not take issue here with the presence of disputes in the church. But he does take issue with the way they’ve been dealt with. They have not been handled well.

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<sup>1</sup> See Genesis 9:4 and Leviticus 7:26-27. It’s also notable that when living outside of Israel, devout Israelites often thought that vegetarianism was the best protection against the danger of violating these laws- see Daniel 1:12. It’s possible that Jewish Christians in Rome thought it wise to follow Daniel’s example.

### - not handled well

For example, in verse 1 Paul critiques their quarrelling. Clearly these disputes have led to unproductive and perhaps even unkind arguments.

But it goes further than that. Because Paul also talks about how people have started judging others and treating them with contempt. Look at verse 3.

[Read 14:3]

And exactly the same language is used again verse 10.

But it even goes further than that. Because it seems that the Christians in the church who believed they were free to eat anything and free to treat all days the same, may have actually just gone ahead and exercised their freedom in front of those who believed these freedoms didn't exist. And as a result, the Christians in the church with a more sensitive conscience had become distressed- verse 16. The Christians who felt "free", by exercising their freedom without love, caused their sisters and brothers to stumble spiritually- verse 13, verse 20. And Paul's point here, of course, is that, at this point, the stakes are very high. At this point it's not just about annoying someone, or causing offence, but potentially being destructive<sup>2</sup> of their relationship with God!

So, this is the situation in Rome that Paul wrote to address. And that's what he's doing here in chapter 14, and in the first half of chapter 15 which we'll read next week.

## 2. Defining Some Key Terms.

Now, before we begin to think about how this chapter might be applied to us and our church, I want to just pause and spend a few minutes defining some key terms in this chapter. Because there are a few words or phrases that Paul uses here which are unusual and require some explanation. Three in particular.

### - disputable matters

Firstly, there's the phrase that we find in verse 1 that introduces the whole subject. Paul urges them not to quarrel over 'disputable matters'<sup>3</sup>. And this phrase is used to distinguish between disputes that really need to be had, and disputes that are less necessary. We know, don't we, that there are times when it's right for us to pass judgement on the things that others believe, or say, or do. Paul himself models this. He corrects false doctrine in the strongest terms<sup>4</sup>. He rebukes those who are in error<sup>5</sup>. And he even advocates, in certain circumstances, for unrepentant sinners to be excluded from the church<sup>6</sup>. Make no mistake- there are times when disputes are not

<sup>2</sup> See this language in verse 15 and verse 20.

<sup>3</sup> In actual fact, this is a phrase that the translators have inserted to try and help us understand Paul's meaning. But it's a helpful insertion.

<sup>4</sup> eg. 1 Corinthians 15

<sup>5</sup> eg. Galatians 2

<sup>6</sup> eg. 1 Corinthians 5- where the outcome is the very opposite of the 'acceptance' Paul urges on us here.

only allowed but necessary. The truth of God's word and the salvation of his people are too important not to fight for.

But there are a range of other issues Christians could fight about which are not of the same order or importance. There are issues about which Christians can disagree whilst maintaining strong and unified fellowship. They may be disagreements about how the Scriptures should be interpreted. Or they may be disagreements about things the Bible is silent about. And these are the sorts of disputes Paul is talking about in this chapter. This is a very important distinction. Here Paul's not talking here about the kinds of disputes where truth is more important than peace. Instead he's addressing the kind of disputes Christians have when they can agree to disagree, and live in peace. Disputable matters.

### **- weak (and strong) faith**

Secondly, let's think about what Paul means when he refers to weak faith. Because I don't think Paul is trying to suggest that the person of weak faith is a person who doesn't really trust Christ, or a person who is spiritually immature. Rather I think he's referring here to a person who has a more sensitive conscience about some things. By implication, the person who is "stronger" in faith<sup>7</sup> is someone who, in certain matters, has a better grasp of their freedom in Christ.

We should acknowledge that Paul does see the person of weaker faith here as someone who has things to learn. For example, in verse 14 he says that he's convinced that Christians are free to eat all kinds of foods<sup>8</sup>. So, Paul would say that those who think Christians have restrictions upon them when it comes to eating are actually wrong. But, he sees this as a deficiency in understanding, rather than as a deficiency in maturity. In that sense, Paul considers himself one of the 'strong'- because he has a full understanding of his freedom in Jesus. And those who have an insufficient understanding of this freedom are those he calls 'weak'. But remember, he's talking about people who believe these things very sincerely and with a humble conscience before God. And so he wants to underline that they have the same status in God's family as those who think differently. So, it's in only in this very restricted sense that he identifies some as weak and others as strong. It may even be that Paul is using this language with a hint of sarcasm? If so, he might be poking fun at the way some are treating others with contempt. Maybe he intends us to read the words "weak" and "strong" in inverted commas. I'm not sure. But in any event, it's important we understand what he is and isn't referring to by this.

### **- judgement**

And then, thirdly, the whole idea of judgement. This is also important to clarify so we don't get muddled in our thinking. Sometimes I hear Christians taking a very one dimensional view of judgement. But the Bible has a very nuanced view of it. And this chapter reflects that nuance.

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<sup>7</sup> He doesn't actually use the word 'strong' in this chapter but he does at the start of chapter 15.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Mark 7:17-23, Acts 10:9-16. He reiterates this in verse 20.

On the one hand there is the clear exhortation in this chapter for Christians not to judge others. Verse 3, verse 4, verse 10, verse 13 etc. This is the sense judgement is most commonly thought of. And it's here that Christians can be quite one dimensional in the way they think about it- by just seeing judgement as a bad thing. Of course, in this sense at least it is a bad thing. This is the judgement that we also sometimes call judgementalism, or judginess!

But, on the other hand, there are senses in which judgement is a more neutral idea, or even a positive one. In this chapter, and in the Bible as a whole, it's definitely a positive idea when it comes to the judgement of God. And that's because it's the judgement of a perfectly just God. In righteousness he holds all people to account for everything they've done. See, for example, verse 10 where Paul contrasts our negative judgements with God's good judgement.

[Read 14:10]

But there's also another sense in which this chapter uses the language of judgement. And this is the sense in which we Christians make every-day judgements based on our convictions before God. Here it's the language of discernment and consideration. Frustratingly, our English translation uses different words for this. But in the original the word is the same as the word used to condemn judginess. For example when Paul says in verse 5 that one person 'considers' one day more sacred than another and another 'considers' every day alike, the word considers is actually the word for 'judges'. And it's the same word again in verse 13 where the NIV uses the phrase 'make up your mind'. So in those verses the word again has a much more positive connotation.

Now the reason for pointing this out to you is that this issue is really at the heart of the chapter. And understanding these different uses of the word 'judge' actually brings us to a good grasp of the chapter's key themes.

Firstly- Christians need to make judgements all the time. They make them about their own actions based on their understanding of God's word. And they should do so considering what God thinks much more so than what they reckon others think. As verse 5 puts it, each of us 'should be fully convinced' in our own minds. This judgement is an essential part of the Christian life.

But secondly, it's possible for Christians to fall into the sin of judginess, or judgementalism. This is judging that definitely does not please God. This is when we look down on other Christians and fail to treat them with the dignity their status before Christ affords them. This judgement is something Paul wants us to flee from.

And then, thirdly, this chapter reminds us again that God is the perfect judge. And he will hold us to account- all of us- for every judgement we make. He will hold us to account for the judgements we make each day as we seek to live life to and for the Lord. And he will also hold us to account for the judgementalism into which we sometimes stray.

And I think if we understand those three different senses in which Paul uses judgement language, we'll go a long way to understanding this chapter well.

### 3. Considering Some Modern Parallels.

But understanding the chapter well is only the half of it. Because we also want to think about what this chapter means for us and for the culture of our church. What are the kinds of disputes we might have which are similar to the kinds of things Paul was talking about here? What are our 'disputable matters'? In what situations might we be tempted to be judgemental, or even contemptuous of others? Here are a few suggestions. You might have others.

It's possible that we, like the Roman church, could disagree about the extent to which the Old Testament laws now apply to us. This could surface in disputes about the importance of a Sabbath day, or about things like whether Christians should get a tattoo.

It's also possible that we could disagree about how to read the Bible and apply it in our context. This could lead to disputes about things like whether Christians can believe in evolution, or disputes about what role women should play in the leadership of our church.

It's also possible that we could disagree about how appropriate it is for Christians to engage with the practices of other religions or spiritualities. This might lead to disputes about the kinds of events we attend, or about the freedom Christians have to do yoga or martial arts.

It's also possible that we could disagree about what our Sunday worship services should be like. We could have disputes about how we pray, or in what form we share the Lord's Supper, or what kinds of music we sing to.

It's also possible we could disagree about what it ought to look like for a person to be truly committed to our church- what events people should attend, how regularly they should be here on Sundays, whether they should join a Home Group.

And I think there are a range of other issues about which we might disagree too- the consumption of alcohol, our political convictions, whether or not we should wear masks in church, and many other things.

In all of these potential disagreements we face the dangers Paul describes in this chapter. We can quarrel in unproductive or unkind ways. We can look down on those who think differently to us. We can treat people with contempt- avoiding those we disagree with, being dismissive of their point of view, or making jokes at their expense. We can also unsettle others by the way we exercise our freedoms without regard to the distress it may be causing them. Even worse, we could potentially lead someone to act against their own conscience and cause them to sin. So we must see the relevance of these verses to our own context.

Typically those in churches who have a strong sense of their freedoms default to seeing those who are less free as immature or legalistic. Does that sound like you? And typically those in churches who have a strong sense of the restrictions we're under see those who act with more freedom as liberal or impure. Does that sound like you? I suspect all of us incline in one direction or the other. And so, all of us need to hear Paul's exhortations.

#### 4. Hearing Paul's Exhortations.

##### - what we must not do

Paul says there are a few things we must not do.

We must not be judgemental<sup>9</sup> or treat others with contempt. So if someone takes a different view to us on evolution, or music in church, or politics, or anything else, we must not allow ourselves to be dismissive of them, or unkind in the way we talk to them, or ungracious in the way we talk about them with others.

And we also must not cause our sisters or brothers to stumble. If you think it'd fine to get a tattoo, or join a yoga class, or drink alcohol but you know someone else in the church who thinks these things are wrong, then make sure you don't fail to love them. Don't get a tattoo they can see. Don't mention that you do yoga. Don't drink alcohol in their presence<sup>10</sup>. Don't take the risk of emboldening them to do something which they don't believe they should. Don't cause them to sin in this way. This is what the last few verses of the chapter are all about. And Paul makes it very clear that even if God is fine with Christians having a drink, if someone else thinks it's wrong then them drinking is actually sin. Because they are going against their conscience before God.

And Paul says we must not do these things because if we do we'll distress those we love- verse 15. We could even play a part in their spiritual destruction- verse 15. And we could lead people to see legitimate and good freedoms as something evil- verse 16.

##### - what we must do

So, there are some things that we really must not do if we're going to honour Christ in the midst of our disagreements. But there are also some things we must do.

Firstly, we should work out what we think about things with our own firm convictions before God. There is a great temptation for us to worry too much about what others think. Of course, there's a time for listening to others who want to teach us, or question us, or even rebuke us. But ultimately, we all need to make our own judgements chiefly before God. Verse 5 says that each of us should be fully convinced about disputable matters in our own minds. Which means thinking deeply about these things, wrestling with the Scriptures, praying for insight, and not just

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<sup>9</sup> See also Romans 2:1-3.

<sup>10</sup> This chapter makes a legitimate distinction between private conviction and public behaviour- see especially verse 22.

leaning on what others say or do. We do this for the Lord- verse 8. And because we'll give an account of ourselves one day to the Lord- verse 12.

But there are other things we must do as well. We must keep asking ourselves what love looks like. Verse 15 makes it clear that in this chapter Paul has not moved on from the major theme of this whole section. Once again we could've called this sermon 'A Culture of Love'. Because this is still at the centre of Paul's concern. When we disagree, how can we do so in love? This is our continuing debt to one another, as we saw last week. And Paul reminds us here that this isn't just serving our church family, it's serving Christ. And it isn't just pleasing God but pleasing others too. Verse 18.

[Read 14:18]<sup>11</sup>

And it's love that means we should always pursue righteousness, peace, joy, and edification. Verse 17.

[Read 14:17]

And verse 19- which might just be the verse which best summarises the whole chapter.

[Read 14:19]

This is the kind of culture God wants for our church. These are the kinds of qualities he wants us to value. But these are not just Christian buzzwords here. Because Paul teaches us that when it comes to disputable matters, peace is more important than everyone agreeing. Think about that. Joy is more important than conformity. And edification is more important than freedom. This is the way of love.

And that doesn't mean there's no place in our church for people to educate those who are ill-informed. And gentle teaching of the truth will always be more powerful than judgemental dismissiveness. Nor does this mean that there's no place for church leaders to make decisions that some people won't like some of the time. But what Paul is saying is that our relationships with each other should always be marked by a desire to build others up. And he's saying that our own preferences and freedoms should at times be curbed because the interests of others are more important than our own. He's saying that in disagreements, as in every other moment of life, we walk in the humble way of Christ. We pursue love.

## **5. Embracing Paul's Theology.**

And then finally, two brief but crucial reminders as we finish. Because welcoming the teaching of this chapter into the life of our own church is not just about hearing Paul's exhortations. It's also about embracing Paul's theology. And by theology I simply mean the things he believes about God.

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<sup>11</sup> This interest of Paul's in pleasing others is also seen in 12:17, 13:3, and 15:2.

### - the judgement of God

Number 1- he believes that God is the judge. And so must we. And this has many implications. Remembering that judgement is God's prerogative will prevent us from taking it upon ourselves to judge<sup>12</sup>. But it will also remind us that when it comes to disputable matters I ought to be far more concerned with what I think before God, than what others in the church may think. And ultimately God's judgement reminds us that we are accountable to him for what we decide, what we do, and how we treat others. You may think your contempt for those you disagree with is well hidden. But it is not hidden from the Lord. And he will one day expose it. The just judgement of God is on Paul's mind a lot in this chapter.

### - the acceptance of God

But then number 2- the acceptance of God. Acceptance of others is what Paul calls us to from the opening word of this chapter! But why? Verse 3- because God has accepted them. This is the deep internal logic of this chapter. Because this is the deep internal logic of the gospel. Accept each other. Because Christ has accepted them and you. Acceptance breeds acceptance. Do you see?

That person in church who you think is really liberal or really legalistic- they're a child of God. That person whose views you find weird or dumb- they're your sister or your brother in Christ. That person who has a different conviction to you and you find yourself thinking "why should I give up my freedoms for them"- well, Jesus died for them, he poured out his blood for them to death, and he asks you- could you endure just a little inconvenience on their account? That person who you are tempted to think is less mature than you, that person whose status in the church family you are tempted to question- their status has been determined by Jesus Christ. Once and for all. They are the servant of Christ, just like you.

So verse 4:

[Read 14:4]

And verses 8-9:

[Read 14:8-9]

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Romans 12:14-21