

Differences without Division (Part II): Romans 14:5-12

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This sermon is a continuation of the message last Sunday, because verses 5-12 are a continuation of what Paul wrote in verses 1-4. We're talking here about differences that should not cause division. Among believers, we are going to have various convictions on many issues, but that doesn't mean we should judge one another for those differences or look down on one another or be harsh toward one another or sever our fellowship. Differences without division.

There's a lot to say about this passage, a lot to think about. When I set out to write this sermon, I planned on getting through verse 12. But in the midst of my preparation I realized that I couldn't do justice to all of these verses. So I'll be coming back to this paragraph one more time.

For today, then, I want to say several things about how to discern which issues are Romans 14 issues that we can agree to disagree on, and which issues are core, Gospel matters that do require a firm stance on the part of the corporate body of believers. I'm going to spend the first half of the sermon dealing with that question. And then the second half of the sermon we'll look at the issue of observing certain days (as Paul mentions in verse 5).

At the start of the sermon last week I gave a long list of issues that Christians disagree on. It was not an exhaustive list. But I was trying to get us thinking about the manifold ways this passage applies. Everything from schooling options to birth control to alcohol to one's view of the end times. I want to come back to that now and try to say a little more about differences among Christians. We can't put all differences in exactly the same category. Another observation I made last week is the contrast between Paul's comments here in Romans 14, where he is exhorting us all to welcome one another in spite of differences, and Paul's strong rebuke to the church in Galatia. Paul says to them, not "welcome one another," but "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel."

So we must understand that there are different kinds of differences. Some differences require a response like what Paul wrote in the letter to the Galatians. Other differences require a response like what Paul is telling us here in Romans 14. Don't

judge one another. What else can we say, then, as to how we can discern what issues fall into which category?

Theological Triage

I'll share with you a couple things that have been helpful to me in thinking through this. One is an article I read years ago by Al Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. He uses the illustration of triage, which is a discipline used in the emergency room to determine which needs have the most urgency. Certain individuals need to be rushed to the front of the line, while the scraped knee or the cold can wait. Mohler applies this method of sorting out physical needs to the sorting out of theological issues. And he proposes three levels of theological importance. The first-tier theological issues are of the utmost importance. To disagree on these issues would be to disagree on the Gospel, and therefore there can be no genuine Christian fellowship if there is not agreement on these foundational theological principles. These first-tier issues would be things like the doctrine of the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, justification by faith apart from works, and the authority and truthfulness of Scripture as God's Word.

When we move to the second tier, we come to some issues on which genuine believers can disagree. But on this second level, disagreement on these issues will cause some degree of separation between different positions. One example here is baptism. Baptists and Presbyterians disagree on the meaning of baptism. And that disagreement is why it's very difficult for Baptists and Presbyterians to fellowship as members of the same congregation. Because a church has to decide, Are we going to baptize infants, or not? And more fundamentally, What is the meaning of baptism? So our disagreement on this level will separate us significantly, but if we agree on the first-order issues, we can still affirm each other as brothers and sisters in Christ and even cooperate together in many ways for the cause of Christ.

I think the debate over biblical manhood and womanhood would fall into this second-tier category as well. It is a significant difference in how one interprets and applies the Bible. Each church will need to make decisions about the role of women in ministry. Will the church allow a woman to preach and teach over men, or not? And yet, if we agree on the first-order issues, again we can affirm one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and appreciate the fruit of the Spirit in one another's lives and congregations.

I also think different viewpoints about God's sovereignty in salvation would fit in this category. There are genuine believers, vibrant believers, who have very different perspectives on this. So we recognize that other believers may see things very differently, even on some very important matters. We praise God for their faith, but we also realize that it would be detrimental to the health of the local church if there was significant disagreement among the leadership on matters such as this.

So the first tier issues separate biblical Christianity from false teaching. The second tier issues are disagreed upon by genuine believers, but will usually result in different congregations.

The third-level of theological triage will cause significantly less departure between opposing positions. These issues we can disagree upon and still happily serve together in the same church. These are issues like one's view of what the Bible teaches about the end times. In theological terms, the difference between a premillennialist and an amillennialist and a postmillennialist. This is an important discussion, but we can disagree on this and still be VERY united and work together very closely in the same local church.

And these are the kinds of matters Paul has mind in Romans 14 as well. He mentions dietary restrictions that were connected with the Jewish food laws. Some believers in the church in Rome were convinced that they needed to continue observing those food laws. Paul also mentions the observance of certain days, and we're going to look at that specifically this morning. Later in the passage, Paul also mentions wine. Eating meat and drinking wine were both matters that believers differed on. And today, we have many issues that are similar. We have different convictions, but we must not separate or be divisive or judgmental when it comes to these matters.

Essential vs. Peripheral Doctrine

There are some helpful comments in the back of the ESV Study Bible (Jake Walker mentioned to me this week that he had read these) that I want to read to you. There's an overview of biblical doctrine, written by Erik Thoennes, and one of the short subsections is about "Essential vs. Peripheral Doctrine." He says this, "The ability to discern the relative importance of theological beliefs is vital for effective Christian life and ministry. Both the purity and unity of the church are at stake in this matter." Do you see the importance of this? If we don't dig in our heels on central gospel issues, then the purity of the church will suffer. If we do

dig in our heels on non-essential issues, then the unity of the church will suffer. So, then, how do we distinguish the central issues from the non-essential ones?

Well, Erik Thoennes gives us 7 pointers in thinking this through. 1) biblical clarity, 2) relevance to the character of God, 3) relevance to the essence of the gospel, 4) biblical frequency and significance (how often in Scripture it is taught, and what weight Scripture places on it), 5) effect on other doctrines, 6) consensus among Christians (past and present), and 7) effect on personal and church life. He concludes, “All the categories should be considered collectively in determining how important an issue is to the Christian faith. The ability to rightly discern the difference between core doctrines and legitimately disputable matters will keep the church from either compromising important truth or needlessly dividing over peripheral issues.”

As I think about this, as helpful as those guidelines are, it just makes me want to cry out to God for wisdom and discernment. I want to encourage us to make this a matter of prayer. For our church and for our personal lives, we need the Spirit of God to guide us. We should pray for purity in the church—doctrinal purity and purity in our conduct. And we should pray for unity. We don’t want to be divisive over non-essential issues.

Teaching on Disputed Matters

I also want to say something about how to discuss disputed matters. We saw last week in verse 1 that Paul tells the strong to welcome the weak and “not to quarrel over opinions.” But we also observed that Paul gives some teaching on the very matter that’s in dispute. The question of whether to eat meat or not to eat meat (because it might be ceremonially unclean) was one of the questions that the believers in Rome differed on. And Paul is telling them, don’t despise or judge one another because of those differences. But he also says, in verse 14, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.” And again in verse 20, “Everything is indeed clean.” In the coming weeks we’ll look at those verses in more detail, and in the context of an additional point Paul is making there about not causing your brother to stumble. But just notice with me that Paul is saying, “Don’t divide over this issue,” while he also teaches on that very issue.

The simple point I want to make is that we still teach through the Bible, even on disputed matters. To live according to Romans 14 doesn’t mean we have to avoid discussion of all secondary and tertiary issues. But when we do teach on these

things, we should do so in a way that recognizes, This is more of a peripheral matter, not an essential, core doctrine.

Two particular passages that I've taught on come to mind, just to give you a couple concrete examples. One was recently when we were in Romans 11 and I had to deal with that debated phrase, "all Israel will be saved." Godly, Bible-believing Christians disagree on the precise meaning of that verse. And I did my best to understand it, and I shared with you what I learned. But we didn't split the church over differing viewpoints on that question. Or a few years ago when I came to the end of a sermon series through the Gospel of Mark, and I devoted a sermon to explaining the complex question of whether the longer ending or shorter ending is original. Again, there are different viewpoints on this among believers. I taught my viewpoint, but we didn't split the church over it.

I'm going to teach on many things, including many disputed matters. And many of you, in small groups and Sunday School classes and discipleship relationships, are going to do the same. Hopefully we can do this with a sensitivity that fosters both purity and unity. We want to discern and convey what are the most central issues. And we want to make it clear that there are many topics where different viewpoints are OK. You don't want the person you're discipling to think that if they disagree with you on the millennium that they can't be your friend anymore.

We believe in Sola Scriptura. The Bible alone is our final authority. No pastor or church official has that kind of authority. So we should all be like the Bereans in Acts 17 who listened to Paul preach and then examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Let's foster that kind of attitude among us.

The Clarity of Moral Issues

One more brief comment. I also want to say in this discussion that the Bible has a moral clarity on many things that cannot be moved down to the level of non-essential matters. For instance, when we read the list of works of the flesh in Galatians 5, "*Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*" (Galatians 5:19–21, ESV)

We can't say that jealousy is a matter of personal conviction (for some people, their conscience is pricked when they

give themselves over to jealousy, whereas others aren't bothered by it and therefore it's OK for them to entertain jealous thoughts). That reasoning doesn't work for jealousy, because jealousy is clearly a sin. Or drunkenness, or sexual immorality. These are not on the level of things we can agree to disagree on. Sin is sin.

The specific matters Paul is addressing in Romans 14 are not sin issues. Whether you eat the meat or not, whether you drink the wine (assuming you're not getting drunk) or you choose not to drink at all, whether you esteem a particular day as better than another or esteem all days alike, we're not dealing here with things that are inherently sinful. These are matters of Christian liberty.

Differences over Days

Well, this brings us now, finally, to the issue of days. Verses 5-12 are a continuation of verses 1-4, but with some new particulars. There's a similar structure. Paul brings up specific differences among the believers in Rome. He gives admonitions not to judge others due to such differences. And there's also a discussion of the coming judgment.

Follow the logic of the passage with me for a moment. Beginning with verses 1-4. The specific difference Paul mentions here has to do with food. He exhorts the one who eats not to despise the one who abstains and exhorts the one who abstains not to judge the one who eats. There's also a rebuke in verse 4, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?" And the reason we shouldn't judge is because God will judge. God is the master over my brothers and sisters in Christ. They don't answer to me, but to God.

Similarly in verses 5-12. The specific difference Paul mentions here has to do with the observance of particular days. And he says each should be convinced in his own mind. There's also a strong rebuke in verse 10, "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?" And the reason we shouldn't judge is because God will judge. Each of us will give an account to Him.

So we're looking at basically the same message this week as last week, but with some new particulars. Last week I talked some about the different convictions regarding meat. That was one problem in the church in Rome. Another was the observance of days. Let's look at that in some more detail now, and then we'll talk about how this applies to us.

Verse 5 says, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.” Like the question of dietary restrictions, this question of observing certain days is also connected with the Old Testament laws. Those who are being identified in this passage as the “weak in faith” were the ones who had the conviction that continuing to observe those Old Testament ceremonial laws would be most pleasing to God. So they didn’t want to eat any meat that might be ceremonially unclean. And they wanted to continue to observe the Jewish holy days. So they were the ones who esteemed one day as better than another. These were probably mostly Jews who had come to believe in Jesus Christ, and maybe also some Gentile believers who had come to embrace many of the Old Testament teachings.

Now, there’s debate in the interpretation of this verse as to whether Paul has the Sabbath in mind here or not. Some say that Paul is only thinking of Jewish festivals and days of fasting. But it seems that the Sabbath would also be included here. Food laws and Sabbath observance were key practices that distinguished the Jews from others. And in Colossians 2 Paul puts all of these together. This is helpful to compare to Romans 14.

“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. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” (Colossians 2:16–17, ESV)

The remarkable thing that Paul seems to imply both in Colossians 2 and Romans 14 is that Sabbath observance is no longer binding on believers in the new covenant age. This new day has dawned in the coming of Jesus Christ, and those Old Testament shadows have now given way to the substance, which is Christ, Himself. Indeed, Jesus spoke of Himself as Lord of the Sabbath.

And Paul, back in Romans 10, said that “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” He is the goal and completion of that era in salvation history. We now live in a different era, under the new covenant, and those Old Testament laws don’t apply to us directly.

How does this discussion of observing days relate to us? If we ask the question today, “How do we keep the Sabbath?” there are different answers given. Most would agree that we are not required to keep the Sabbath exactly as it was commanded in the Old Testament. The Sabbath, being Saturday, the seventh day of the week, is no longer the focal point for Christians. Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday, the first day of the week, and so we

gather for corporate worship on Sunday, to celebrate His resurrection.

But many Christians would argue that the commands for Sabbath rest in the Old Testament should now be applied to Sunday. Sunday should now be the day of rest for Christians. And while that may seem like a logical and compelling argument, I don't find anything in the New Testament that says we are required to rest on the Lord's Day. Of course, there's nothing that says we shouldn't rest on the Lord's Day, either. And we certainly should have regular times of rest. Life is not all about work. But whether or not you observe the Lord's Day as a day of rest is a matter of personal conscience. I think that's an implication of what we're learning in Romans 14. And where believers differ on this, we ought to give one another lots of grace.

What we SHOULD do on the Lord's Day is gather with other believers to worship our Savior together. This is what the early church did. We see them in Acts 20 gathering to break bread and hear Paul preach on a Sunday evening. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul instructs the church to put something aside as a collection for the saints "on the first day of every week." On the first day, Sunday, the Lord's Day. Then the apostle John, in Revelation 1:10, makes reference to the Lord's Day. He writes that he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's day," when his visions began. In the New Testament there is an emphasis on Sunday as the day for corporate worship and fellowship and giving. And I believe that's where our focus should be.

So when we think about the details of whether or not you should mow your lawn on Sunday, or go to a ballgame, or work at your business, I believe those are issues of personal conscience, and we shouldn't try to enforce specific rules about what activities should be avoided on Sunday.

Because of this understanding of Romans 14 (and many other passages) we, as a church, revised our Statement of Faith a few years ago to reflect an attitude that gives more liberty to the individual believer to determine how to conduct oneself on Sunday.

The Statement of Faith used to read this way, speaking of the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath. "The Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day, from their own works, words and thoughts, about their worldly employment and recreations, but also

are taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”

You see, that’s a particular conviction regarding the Lord’s Day. And there’s nothing wrong with that viewpoint if you choose to conduct your own life that way. To devote the entire day Sunday to corporate worship and personal study of God’s Word and prayer, and not giving any time or thought to your normal, weekly activities, not giving any attention to your vocation and not giving any attention to other recreational activities. If that’s how you choose to spend Sunday, I commend you for it.

But because of Romans 14 we don’t feel it’s right to impose that particular viewpoint on the whole church. So our Statement of Faith, on that point, now reads this way: “The first day of the week is the Lord’s Day. It is a Christian institution for regular observance. It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should include exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private. Activities on the Lord’s Day should be commensurate with the Christian’s conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.”

That reflects the attitude we want to have corporately. I think that is in perfect harmony with Romans 14. Yes, there are things we should do on the Lord’s Day. We should make every attempt at being together for gathered worship. We should celebrate together, and personally, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But when it comes to whether you’re going to watch the ball game, or whether you’re going to go for a bike ride, or whether you’re going to spend some time at the office, that’s a matter of personal conviction. You make that decision before the Lord. And we shouldn’t judge one another when we happen to make different decisions on those matters.

To come back to the question of how we should observe the Sabbath, I would answer this way: This is how all Christians do observe the Sabbath. We may differ on specific activities that we do or don’t do on the Lord’s Day, but here’s how we all must keep the Sabbath today, and every day: Trust in Jesus Christ. Rest in Him. He is the substance that the shadow points to. He is the ultimate meaning of the Sabbath rest. God created the universe in six days, and then He rested on the seventh day. Not because He was tired, but because He was finished. And He wanted to set this pattern for work and rest, and by design He used this seventh day rest, this Sabbath day rest, as a pointer to the ultimate rest that can only be found through Jesus Christ.

The last passage I want to read is in Hebrews 4:1-11. This is an amazing passage about the ultimate significance of the seventh day, the ultimate significance of God's rest. Verse 3 says, "we who have *believed* enter that rest." Do you see that it is by believing that we enter the rest? Believing IS resting. It's the opposite of working. There's no more work to be done. Christ accomplished the work. He paid the price for our sins. And there's nothing we can add to His work. What we must do is rest in Him by believing in Him, trusting in Him.

As verse 10 says, "whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his." God's rest is heaven. It wasn't the Promised Land that Israel entered. That was just another pointer. God's eternal rest is heaven, which will be enjoyed by all those who give up working and simply rest in Him. That's how Christians keep the Sabbath, by trusting in Christ. That's how we are united in our observance of the Sabbath.