“Don’t Quarrel Over Opinions,” Romans 14:1-12 (Seventh Day of Easter, May 12, 2024)

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

**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. **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. **7**For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. **8**For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. **9**For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

**10**Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; **11**for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”

**12**So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

PRAY

We are working our way through the last five chapters of the book of Romans on Sunday mornings at Grace Bible. These chapters form the “practical” part of the apostle Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. In them he gives detailed instructions on how Christians can live to honor and glorify their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That’s our job as Christians, to please God by living as he taught us.

In chapter twelve, Paul writes about the gifts of grace God gives to Christians, how no believer has all the gifts, and how we need to work together in our churches to make sure all the gifts God has given are exercised so that everyone can be cared for and the kingdom can grow. He also writes at the end of chapter twelve about the marks of a true Christian, especially that we should be known as those who love and pray for our enemies.

In chapter thirteen, Paul writes how Christians should submit to those in authority over us in our government, then at the end of that chapter he gives an exhortation for believers to love one another.

He continues that theme in our passage for today. Specially, Paul writes and tells the Christians in the church in Rome how they must relate to other Christians in that church who disagree with them. What do you do when you come across another believer, but you strongly disagree on some issue? This is especially difficult when this other believer is a friend of yours, or attends the same church you do, or who is in your family, ***yet you just don’t see eye-to-eye on something that’s important to both of you.*** How do you handle that? What do you do?

Paul tells us three things: *first, recognize the nature of the disagreement.* *Second, respond with complete acceptance.* *Third, remember who we serve.*

First, recognize the nature of the disagreement. In the church at Rome, Paul encountered two types of Christians. One group thought it was wrong to eat meat and that they must celebrate certain holy days (probably by refraining from work and attending a worship service). The other group thought it was fine to eat meat and that they did not have to celebrate holy days. Many pastors have referred to this as the “diets and days” dispute.

***You could call group one those who abstain and observe, while those in group two enjoy and ignore.*** For reasons that aren’t entirely clear to us today, this was a big disagreement. It caused a lot of heartburn in the church at Rome.

But Paul says about these disagreements, “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, ***but not to quarrel over opinions.”*** Romans 14:1. According to Paul, these are matters of opinion, not obedience. The NIV translates it as “disputable matters.” Another translation calls them matters of “different reasonings.”

Paul’s point is that Christians can have different opinions on these questions. You can disagree about eating meat and celebrating certain days, ***but don’t separate from other believers over it.*** Don’t break relationships or stop going to church with people because you don’t see eye to eye about these things.

I realize that, at first glance, your response might be, “Interesting, but what does it have to do with me?” Or it might be, “This isn’t even interesting.” Fair enough.

We aren’t troubled by the questions that troubled the Roman Christians. Few if any of us are worried about “diets and days.” But Christians today still have disagreements. Over the years I’ve compiled a list of some things I’ve heard Christians argue over, and I’ll read it to you.

They include alcohol (whether or not to drink it), dancing (whether or not to do it, and if you do it, how), the appropriateness of watching R-rated, PG-13 rated, or any movies at all. Should a Christian have a television in his home? Should a Christian be on social media and, if so, which platforms, and how often? Should a Christian own a smartphone in the first place, or is there just too much temptation?

Should Christian teenagers “date” or “court,” and what constitutes proper “courting”? What kind of contact between a boyfriend and a girlfriend is appropriate (the “how far is too far” question: is it hand holding, is it kissing, or something else)? How should Christians educate their children? Is the right way homeschooling, private Christian school, or public school? How should a Christian celebrate Christmas or Easter or Halloween (in other words, what role if any can Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or dressing up as Spiderman play in your life)?

Can a Christian smoke, can a Christian chew tobacco, can a Christian vape? Should a Christian use nicotine at all? Should a Christian gamble? Does playing cards at home constitute gambling? Can a Christian buy a lottery ticket? Should a Christian visit a casino? Should a Christian visit a water park built with casino money?

What kind of music should a Christian listen to? What kind of instruments are appropriate in church? Should instruments be allowed in church at all, or should Christians have only *a capella* singing?

Which political party should Christians support? Must a Christian vote at all? Should a Christian use birth control? What kind of birth control is appropriate? And last, but not least, during COVID, must a Christian wear a mask to “love his neighbor”? Should churches have disobeyed “mask mandates”?

This is not close to a comprehensive list. I could go on and on. But these are the equivalent of the “diets and days” questions we face today as 21st century, American Christians.

Yet the one thing we ***must not do as Christians*** is divide over questions like that and let our opinions on these issues separate us. Now, how can I say that? After all, someone might say, isn’t alcohol an important issue? Haven’t Christians divided over that before? Some think Christians think we should divide over how to educate our children. It’s an important issue. And, with our country as divided as it is today and the agendas of the various parties so far apart, what under heaven is more important than politics?

So, why can I say that Christians must not divide over issues like that? Two reasons: *first, because these questions are not issues fundamental to the faith, central to what it means to be a Christian.* A fundamental doctrine is one that, if you don’t believe it and adhere to it, you cease to be a Christian at all.

An example of a fundamental of our faith is that all of us are sinners and under the judgment of God. We have offended God by breaking his law, and his wrath is hanging over us. Yet another fundamental is that we are saved by grace alone. That means a saving relationship with God is a gift. You cannot earn it, you must instead simply trust God and believe that has, out of the mercy shown you in Jesus Christ, saved you.

Still another fundamental is that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead. If Jesus died on that Roman cross two thousand years ago and that’s the end of the story, Christianity is a waste of your time. That’s what Paul tells us explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15.

These are fundamentals of the faith. We can’t have Christian fellowship with people who deny such things because ***they aren’t Christians.***  We want to have fellowship with them, we want to be in churches with them and call them “brother” or “sister,” but we can’t, because they don’t believe!

That’s not to say that you can’t be friends with someone who disagrees with you on fundamental questions. Of course, you can. You can be friends with Muslims. You can be friends with atheists. You can have them in your homes and go on vacations with them. And of course, you must love them because Christians are commanded to love everyone.

But you can’t have Christian fellowship with them because ***they aren’t Christians.***

However, no one starts being a Christian when they quit drinking alcohol, nor stops being one when they do. No one starts being a Christian by voting for the particular political candidate, nor stops being one when they don’t. No one starts being a Christian they day they decide to never again watch a movie where they use profanity, nor does anyone stop being a Christian when they do watch a movie like that.

That’s not to say these aren’t important questions that require wisdom and prayer and good counsel and knowing yourself and your tolerances and limits. These are important questions. But it is to say that these are ultimately matter of opinions, they are disputable matters, as Paul says, so Christians are free to disagree.

Paul makes all this clear in verse one when he says, “As for the one who is ***weak in faith*** …”. Notice he doesn’t say, “As for the one ***who has left the faith***.” We’ll talk more next Sunday about what Paul means by “weak” and “strong” faith, but the point Paul makes is that no matter where you come down on these issues, you’re still in the faith because these don’t involve questions fundamental to Christianity.

*The second reason I can say we must not divide over these questions is because they don’t involve sin.* Paul does address sin at the end of chapter thirteen. He reminds them in verse 9 that adultery is a sin, that murder is a sin, that theft and coveting are sins. Then he writes in verse 13, “Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.”

In other words, Paul is saying, “Those things are sin.” You can’t say, “Hey, you think adultery is a sin, but I think it’s okay in certain circumstances, so let’s agree to disagree.” No, you can’t do that about sin. But then Paul gets to chapter fourteen and he says, “Whether or not you eat meat? That’s not a sin question. Whether you celebrate this high holy day? That’s not a sin issue. Christians can disagree on this.”

The Bible never says it’s a sin to drink alcohol, nor does it give us detailed instructions on how to educate our children. The Bible doesn’t even mention tobacco, or Santa Claus, or the Easter Bunny. I’ve read it cover-to-cover many times and never found a word about those guys.

Questions like these are matters of wisdom but not sin. Historically Christians have called these kinds of issues *adiaphora*, which means “matters of indifference.” That doesn’t mean they are unimportant, but that Christians can come to ***a different opinion*** on them for ***they aren’t sin issues***. Therefore, when you find another believer who disagrees with you over one of these questions, Paul says to ***recognize the nature of the disagreement***. Don’t divide over it.

Instead, second, respond to your brother or sister who disagrees with complete acceptance. Paul couldn’t be clearer about this. He writes in verse one: “As for the one who is weak in faith, ***welcome him***, but not to quarrel over opinions.” In verse four he tells us not to judge those who disagree. He writes, “Who are you to ***pass judgment*** on the servant of another?” Romans 14:4a. In verse 19 he says, “So then let us ***pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding***.”

Paul’s instruction on this subject ends in chapter fifteen, not fourteen, and there he sums up his argument in this section by writing (in verses 5-7): “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to ***live in such harmony*** with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, **6**that together you may with ***one voice*** glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. **7**[Then Paul sums it all up with] Therefore ***welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you***, for the glory of God.”

When you have an encounter with another Christian and they have strong convictions on some matter of wisdom, some *adiaphora*, and you have strong convictions in the opposite direction, Paul says, “It’s ok. Welcome them anyway. Accept them. Treat them as a brother or sister.”

But you know what we want to do? Instead of welcoming Christians with whom we disagree, ***we want to argue with them!*** We want to tell them why we think they’re wrong and why they need to change their minds.

When we do that, when we argue needlessly with others on disputable matters, it is a sign of great immaturity in the faith. I remember years ago, when our children were very young (indeed before some of them were born) I decided I had figured out the proper way to educate our children. I decided, mind you, after reading two books, I think. Two entire books. Now, I’m an expert! And I can remember having conversations with family members and friends suggesting that if they really wanted to do things right with their children, they’d do it my way.

Now I cringe every time I think of how quickly and foolishly I stated my opinions. And guess what? We didn’t stick with it. We basically ended up going in the opposite direction with our kids. It almost always turns out that way when immature Christians are quick to argue on matters of opinion.

The wisest Christians, certainly the Christians I admire most, ***are those who have the slowest to speak on matters of opinion.*** You have to pull it out of them, because the wisest Christians are those who have walked with Christ on this earth long enough to be humbled. They realize how foolish they really are, how many times they’ve been wrong, how easy it is to be wrong, and they don’t want to be wrong again if they can possibly help it.

Now, you have to make decisions on these matters of opinion, do you not? You have to come down somewhere on these issues, you must make decisions, you must pray about those decisions, you should seek counsel on those decisions, ***but you don’t have to seek to convert other Christians to your point of view.*** You can even ***keep your mouth closed.*** As Paul writes, “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.” Romans 14:22 (NIV 1984). You don’t have to state your opinion on everything, and it’s ok not to be sure what’s right on these issues.

A couple of applications: say another Christian approaches you and wants to talk to you about some matter of opinion, and it’s clear they aren’t looking for your wisdom. Instead, they want to convert you to their point of view. How do you welcome that brother or sister, as Paul says?

Here’s a suggestion: say to them, “You’ve raised some important questions. Why don’t we go to lunch one day and talk about it?” So you go to lunch, you hear their view, perhaps, if you think it productive, you share your view. If not, you don’t. Then you say, “You’ve given me something to think about. Thank you.” And then leave it at that. If they come back around to you and ask, “So, what do you think?”, you could reply, “I’m still thinking about it” or “I think you’re right” or “I’m not sure” depending on which it is. You may even have to say, “My friend, I care about you, but I don’t to talk about this subject anymore.” But if you do that, I think you’ve followed the spirit of Paul’s command in Romans 14.

A second application: parents, try your best not to force your opinion on these matters on your children. That is a dangerous game. The number one reason I see children grow up, go to college, and become hostile to their parents or the faith of their parents is hypocrisy. The parent claimed to be a Christian, was in church every Sunday, had one persona there, but at home was a totally different person. That will frustrate a child quicker than anything.

But the number two reason is when parents try to force their view of some disputable matter on their children. Parents, it’s not worth it. I’m not talking about having house rules that regulate the behavior of your children. That’s necessary. I’m talking about getting angry when your child simply says they have a different opinion on one of these issues than you do.

It’s scary, I know, to find your children disagreeing with you. You’re worried where it might lead. My child disagrees with me about how important their English class is. You think, “If they don’t take this class seriously, they’ll flunk out of school. Next thing you know, they’ll be homeless and sniffing glue!” That’s what we do as parents. We panic.

But remember that a lot of the disagreement is simply the developmentally appropriate boundary testing kids do in their pre-teen and teen years. And even if it’s not, if you wake up one day and your now adult child disagrees with you about alcohol, or child-rearing, or politics, it will be just fine so long as you and your child both love the Lord Jesus Christ. At the end of the day, that’s all the matters, not these opinions.

That gets us to the last point: *third, remember who we serve.* Let’s read verses 7-9: “**7**For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. **8**For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. **9**For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”

If you’re a Christian, you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. “We are the Lord’s.” He died for our sins and was raised to life three days later to make us his possession. We belong to him. He died for us to ransom us, to redeem us, to pay for our sins and make us his.

Therefore, all we do as Christians, we do for him. And it is to him and him alone that we will have to give an account for how we lived. That’s verse 12: “So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

And you know what? On Judgment Day, when we give that account, Jesus is not going to ask us, “How many people did you win to your point of view on these opinions? 5? 10? 20? 100?” He won’t ask, “How well did you argue your position on disputable matters? Were you diligent in making everyone know what you thought about these things? Did you carefully police your life to make sure people who disagree with you weren’t a part of it?”

He won’t ask any of that. Instead, he will ask, “How much did you welcome and love your brothers and sisters?” That’s John 13:34-35: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. **35**By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Sometimes I think God kept the Bible a lot shorter than it could have been by remaining silent on these issues to see how far his people would be willing to bend in order to accept and love one another. It’s easy to accept people who agree with you about everything, who also think you’re opinions are dead on and correct. ***But it’s hard to accept those who think you are dead wrong on these questions.***

Yet remember, my friends, in Jesus Christ God accepted and welcomed you when you were as wrong as you could be … when, because of your sin, you were God’s enemies. Therefore, don’t quarrel over opinions.

I know some of you feel like you have to be right on these things, and you have to win the argument with others. But you don’t have to be right about these things. You are not justified before God, you are not righteous in God’s sight, because you are right. You are justified before God because Jesus was right for you.

Therefore, you can afford to love and accept all the brethren, especially those who disagree with you. You’re never more like Jesus than when you do. AMEN.