“Pursue What Makes for Peace,” Romans 14:13-23 (Pentecost, May 19, 2024)

**13**Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. **14**I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. **15**For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. **16**So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. **17**For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. **18**Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. **19**So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

**20**Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. **21**It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. **22**The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. **23**But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

PRAY

We continue in our study in the book of Romans. Last week we talked about what happens when Christians disagree with one another over what Paul, who wrote the book of Romans, called “matters of opinion.” Some translations call them “disputable matters.” These aren’t disagreements over what constitutes Christianity, nor are they disagreements over sin.

That means these disagreements do not involve someone saying, “Jesus Christ is bodily raised from the dead” while someone else says, “No, he’s not; his body rotted in the grave.” That wouldn’t be an argument between two Christians; it would be an argument between a Christian and someone who is not a Christian.

Nor are we talking about a disagreement where someone says, “You think it’s wrong to commit adultery, but I think it’s appropriate in certain circumstances. Let’s agree to disagree.” No, adultery is always a sin. It’s intrinsically, in its essence, sinful.

But, Paul says, Christians are free to disagree and form different opinions on matters that aren’t intrinsically sinful. Take alcohol, for example. Jesus would not have turned water into wine for people to drink as his first miracle if alcohol is inherently sinful. The Bible wouldn’t say in a praise to God, “You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth **15**and wine to gladden the heart of man …” Psalm 104:14-15a.

However, it does not follow that Christians ***should*** drink alcohol, for the Bible also says, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.” Proverbs 20:1. There are lots of warnings about the drunkenness in the Bible. Plus, we have all the modern research which shows how bad drinking can be for your health, how many traffic fatalities are a direct result of alcohol. So, what’s the answer? It’s that ***Christians can disagree on this subject.***

Now, in our passage for this week, I want to show you how Paul is saying that merely agreeing to disagree with other believers isn’t enough. We also must ***consider one another***. Philippians 2:3 says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” Consider is one of my favorite words in the Christian life.

Do you know what it means to “consider” someone else? It means to ***think carefully about them.*** The opposite of being “considerate” is being rude and “inconsiderate.” Paul wants us to think carefully how we can encourage other believers by how we live out our own personal convictions on these issues.

Let’s look at our passage this morning from that angle and under three headings: *first, let’s consider, think about, the two groups quarreling in the church at Rome.* *Second, let’s see how the strong should consider the weak.* *Third, how the weak should consider the strong.*

First, consider the two groups. The Roman church was divided into two groups: Paul calls them “weak faith” Christians (that’s Romans 14:1, 2, and 15:1) and “strong faith” Christians (15:1). Paul thinks of himself as a strong faith Christian because he writes, “***We*** who are strong …”.

What’s the difference between the two groups? Why does Paul call one group “strong” and the other “weak”? It’s because, while everyone in both groups sincerely desired to follow Jesus, the people in the “strong” group felt more liberty in how they lived out their lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They felt more freedom to enjoy God’s creation, and they felt more freedom to ignore rules and regulations that were binding under the administration of the old covenant.

So, for example, people in the strong faith group could eat pork without it bothering their conscience at all, while those in the weak faith group could not because for two thousand years Jews had been told that pork was an unclean meat and you dare not eat it. People in the strong faith group did not feel it necessary to observe all the high holy days set out in the Old Testament, while people in the weak faith group felt compelled to continue to do so.

But it’s a bit confusing to use these terms because people “weak faith” people often seem to have the strongest convictions, they are the most pronounced about their opinions and often seem the surest of them, while “strong faith” people can come across as those who don’t care, because they don’t get all worked up over the same issues.

For example, I know of a family who years ago volunteered to lead a Wednesday night children’s ministry in their church. It was a new ministry that was to start in August, when the kids went back to school. But as this couple started preparing that summer and reviewed the curriculum provided by the church, they noticed that there was a musical component to the curriculum. At some point during the hour the kids would come together and learn a new song each week. But to this couple, the music sounded like rock and roll. That’s because it ***was*** rock and roll. There were electric guitars and drums and a driving beat.

And this couple went to their pastor and said, “I’m sorry. Either you’ll have to change the curriculum, or you’ll have to find new leaders, because we can’t be a part of any ministry that has that kind of music associated with it.” They were convinced rock and roll music was sinful, that it stirred up all kind of unclean desires in the hearts and bodies of those who listened to it, and while they were respectful, they were adamant that they would have no part of it.

This couple had strong convictions, but the pastor didn’t. The pastor wanted something for the children on Wednesday nights, and the music could have sounded like Bach or Beethoven or the Beastie Boys for all he cared.

Your average person would probably have thought the couple had strong faith, because of how vocal they were about their convictions, but according to Romans 14 the couple had “weak faith” (because they felt like they had to abstain from this kind of music) and the pastor had “strong faith” (because he felt free under God to take the music or leave it).

Those are the two groups Paul’s writing to in the church at Rome. But don’t think that everyone is always only in one group or the other. In the church today, you have people who are strong faith about music, but weak faith about alcohol. In other words, they don’t get bothered by music that sounds like rock and roll in the children’s ministry, but they have strong convictions about not drinking a beer. Or someone is fine with enjoying alcohol in moderation, but they can’t imagine anyone not voting for their preferred political party. Or they’re not looking to win you over to their political viewpoint, but they could never imagine buying a lottery ticket. And so it goes. Depending on the subject, we will all find people who have stronger faith than us and those who have weaker faith. We are all in both groups.

Second, how should the strong consider the weak? Paul says ***don’t flaunt your freedom.***

You’re a “strong faith Christian” who feels liberty to do all these things. You don’t think it separates you from God at all. Your favorite verse is Psalm 24:1a: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it…”. You want to enjoy all there is under heaven: the best wine, the best bourbon, the best meat. You want to enjoy a good cigar at Spring Street. You say, “God made it all, so I want to enjoy it to his glory.” You want to listen to all the music and go to the concerts. You’re not overly concerned about politics, and you don’t have any hills you’re going to die on when it comes to the subject of educating your children.

Great, good for you. You’re a strong faith Christian. But don’t throw it in your weaker brother’s face!

If you don’t feel constrained by your conscience to vote for one and only one political candidate, that’s fine. But when you’re around someone who is a die-hard Republican or die-hard Democrat, don’t stir the pot. Don’t get them fired up because you think it’s funny. That’s not being considerate. That’s just being rude. Consider your brother and try and preserve the peace.

If you don’t have a problem with alcohol, that’s great. But my goodness, don’t insist on drinking in front of a brother who does have a problem with it! If you must, wait until you are at home. Don’t drink to prove a point to your weaker brother. That’s not considerate or loving, and it could be putting a stumbling block in front of him. Paul says, “Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” Romans 14:13.

If you know someone struggles with an addiction to alcohol and you know they don’t feel safe around it, it would not only be rude to drink in front of that brother, but it could cause him to stumble because you might be helping him back into full-blown addiction. What could be a worse thing to do to someone than to encourage them back into the slavery of addiction?

But I don’t think Paul has in mind here the scenario where the weaker brother struggles with addiction. Rather, he has in mind a situation where someone thinks ***drinking alcohol is a sin.***

Let’s be clear: the use of alcohol in and of itself is not sinful. The Bible nowhere says that. But ***if you*** think it’s a sin, then ***for you*** it would be sinful to drink it. Paul says in verse 14, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, ***but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean***.” Romans 14:14.

All things (including meat, pork, and alcohol) are clean, because they belong to God’s good creation. But Paul says that if some part of you thinks that eating or drinking any of those things is sinful, then for you it’s unclean and you shouldn’t partake.

Perhaps it’s unclean to you because of your upbringing, because your parents and grandparents and the church you grew up in told you it was wrong, and you just can’t get their voices out of your head. Perhaps it’s unclean to you because of the way you’ve misused this part of creation in your past, and it brought a lot of pain into your life and the lives of others. Perhaps it’s unclean to you because you’ve seen what it’s done to other people and how it’s hurt them, and so your conscience flares up every time you’re around it or even think about using it.

For whatever reason, if it’s unclean to you, don’t partake. As Paul says in Romans 14:23, “But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”

“Strong faith” Christians need to keep all this in mind. They must consider their weaker brothers, be aware of their struggles, and resolve to do nothing that might cause them to stumble, because if you do you might destroy your brother. Paul says that in verse 15 and verse 20, where he writes, “Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.”

Now, what does Paul mean by “destroy” your brother? Some have argued that what Paul has in mind here is hell. He’s warning strong Christians, “Be careful how you use your Christian liberty, because if you misuse it, you can by your example completely destroy the faith of your weaker brothers and send them into eternal fire.”

I admit the words in verses 15 and 20 can mean that, but I don’t think we are required to understand them that way, nor does it best fit the context of the entire book of Romans. If all it takes to completely destroy a Christian’s faith is the bad example of one believer, then it wasn’t much faith to begin with. It certainly doesn’t sound like the salvation Paul writes about in Romans 8:38-39 where he tells all the Christians there (the strong and the weak brethren), “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, **39**nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate ***us*** from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I don’t think Paul in Romans is saying that neither death nor life nor anything in all creation can separate someone from God, but a bad example can. That’s absurd. No, you can’t destroy a weaker brother’s faith, ***but you can hurt it.*** You can destroy it in the sense of damaging it. You can cause the brother “to stumble” by leading them into an activity or attitude that is, for them, sinful. And sin of any amount does destroy faith. You can’t simultaneously sin and grow in your faith in God.

Strong faith Christians tend use their freedom in a couple of inconsiderate ways: *first, they like to push the envelope with their weaker brothers.* They get a kick out of testing boundaries. This is especially true of those who grew up in very conservative churches where there were long lists of do’s and don’ts, but then they got a little older and realized that lots of Christians around the world do things differently than those in their home church did. They took one trip to Europe and saw how Christians there have a glass of wine with supper, so they come back to the States on a crusade to change everyone’s mind.

Strong faith Christians also tend to be inconsiderate by *patronizing their weaker brothers.* They strike an attitude along the lines of, “Oh, I used to think that way too, but then I grew up and I know better and now I have a more mature view, and maybe if you would just study your Bible and broaden your horizons you would also.”

Paul says don’t do any of that. He says in Romans 14:19, “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”

When you are tempted to flaunt your freedom, you strong faith Christians, remember Jesus. All of creation literally belonged to him. Talk about freedom! He could have done with it whatever he wanted. But instead of using his freedom to serve himself, he gave up his freedom. He allowed mere men to arrest him, condemn him, and nail him to a cross.

On the night Jesus was arrested, we read that Peter grabbed a sword and was ready to defend Jesus. But Jesus says, “Peter, put the sword down. Don’ t you know that if I wanted to, I could call on my Father and he would send twelve legions of angels to defend me?” One angel could have killed all the people trying to arrest Jesus; twelve legions would have been sixty thousand.   
  
In other words, Jesus is saying, “I did not come to use my freedom to make myself comfortable. I’m using my freedom to lay down my life to be the sacrifice for your sins.” He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life for your sins. To the strong faith Christians, when you remember Jesus, you will want to carefully consider how to serve your weaker brothers.

***And if you’re a strong faith Christian, let me challenge you: do you need to change something in your life to better love your weak faith brothers and sisters?*** As I worked on this sermon, I was convicted about some things I need to change.

Third, how can weak can consider the strong? Don’t demand conformity*.* Don’t insist on rules that would always apply to everyone who calls themselves a Christian simply because you feel strongly about this issue and think it would be unwise to form a different opinion.

Here’s how R.C. Sproul put it in an article he wrote years ago called *The Tyranny of the Weaker Brother.* He wrote, “What happens when weaker brothers want to elevate their personal scruples [on one of these disputable matters] to a level of moral standard for Christianity or when they want to require it of all those who want to be members of officers in the church? Here the weaker brother becomes the ***legislative brother*** and begins to … bind consciences of people, destroying Christian liberty.”

A lot of churches all over the United States, but especially in the South, did this with alcohol beginning in the late 19th century. These well-meaning Christians saw the destruction alcohol brought in so many homes, how it led to so much abuse and neglect and hunger and unemployment, and so they went to war against it. They joined temperance movements to try to get rid of all alcohol in their communities and in their churches. And when you know all the damage alcohol caused, you understand why. I sympathize with what they were trying to do.

Their argument against alcohol was that it has proven itself to be so dangerous and so destructive, Christians should say, “While in theory alcohol might be okay, since it’s hurt so many people, let’s just play it safe and say no Christian should ever touch it.”

In fact, in the first church I served as pastor, hanging on the wall of the auditorium was a big, framed poster, 2x4 feet, of our church’s covenant. And one line in that covenant read like this: “We will … abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage …”

But Paul says we shouldn’t force people on pain of disfellowship to agree with us on matters of opinion. Why? I’ll give you three reasons: *first, it’s always a bad idea to try to be more holy than God.* If God through his word allows something, who in the world are we to forbid it?

*Second,* *it unnecessarily embitters people to the Christian faith.* I can’t tell you how many conversations I’ve had over the years with Christians who’ve asked me, “What does the Bible say about alcohol? Because my pastor told me as a kid that no true Christian would ever drink alcohol, but then I started reading the Bible and history and reading about the global church and realized, ‘That’s not been the view of most Christians at all. Most Christians have used alcohol. Most Christians in Europe and indeed around the world drink alcohol.’” They’ve gotten fixated on this issue and resentful because a church placed a rule on them that did not come from Scripture. Some couldn’t serve in church leadership because they wouldn’t sign a pledge saying they wouldn’t drink, and it left them angry and alienated from the church.

*Third, when you demand conformity on disputable matters, it obscures the gospel.* In 1982, John Piper put his ministry at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis on the line when he asked his church to vote to revise their church covenant which was, I think, identical to the covenant in the first church I served. You could not be a member of Bethlehem Baptist Church without promising to abstain from both the use and sale of intoxicating beverages.

Now, John Piper was and, so far as I know, still is a teetotaler. He does not drink any alcohol. But this is what he preached: “I want to hate was God hates and love what God loves. And this I know beyond a shadow of a doubt: God hates legalism as much as he hates alcoholism … Legalism is a more dangerous disease than alcoholism because it doesn’t look like one. Alcoholism makes men fail; legalism helps them succeed in the world. Alcoholism makes men depend on the bottle; legalism makes them self-sufficient, depending on no one … Alcoholics don’t feel welcome in the church; legalists love to hear their morality extolled in the church. Therefore, what we need in this church is not front-end regulations to try to keep ourselves pure … the enemy is sending against us every day the Sherman tank of the flesh with its cannons of self-reliance and self-sufficiency. If we try to defend ourselves or our church with peashooter regulations, we will be defeated … The only defense is to [quoting Colossians 2:6] “be rooted and built up in Christ and established in the faith.”

When you start adding rules to the Christian life that the Bible doesn’t have, when you add start adding new laws to the Ten Commandments, it obscures the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. ***It adds a legalistic footnote to the gospel***, because the message then becomes, “Repent of your sins, trust in Jesus, and don’t eat meat if you want to be saved.” Or “repent of your sins, trust in Jesus, and celebrate this high holy day if you want to be saved.” Or “repent of your sins, trust in Jesus, and don’t drink alcohol if you want to be saved.”

To my “weak faith” brothers and sisters, I ask that you please don’t elevate your convictions on disputable matters to the point that they become new laws your fellow Christians must obey. Consider your strong faith brothers and sisters and allow them to enjoy the freedom to follow their consciences as they see fit. ***By the way, our church covenant doesn’t mention alcohol.***

One last admonition for everyone, whether you’re “strong faith” or “weak faith”: ***assume the best of people on the other side of the issue from you.*** I think this is implied from Romans 14:4, where Paul writes, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?”

If you’re a strong faith Christian, assume your weaker brothers are zealously trying to obey the Lord Jesus Christ and please him in all of their lives. Don’t assume they are immature; instead, assume they are acting on the basis of a lot of wisdom in the decisions they make. And, please, whatever you do, don’t call them “weaker brothers” to their face. That’s obnoxious. If you’re a weaker brother, assume your stronger brothers are trying to enjoy all creation for the glory of God. Don’t assume they aren’t serious about their faith; assume they are serious about pursuing joy.

Paul says, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. **18**Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.” Romans 14:17-18. Therefore, don’t judge another believer over a matter of conscience. Consider carefully how you can love them and pursue those things that lead to peace and building each another up. AMEN