

HANDLING DIFFERENCES IN CHURCH

Romans 14:1-15:12

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. If you brought your Bible, turn to Romans 14.
2. **Romans 14:1-2** Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables.
3. The church in Rome had a problem. Let's call it a challenge. Within the church there were disagreements about "disputed matters." The NIV calls them "disputable matters."
4. What is a "disputable matter"? An ethical question not clearly answered in Scripture. The church in Rome seemed to disagree about three questions:
 - i. Are certain foods sinful (14:2)?
 - ii. Are certain days more holy than others (14:5)?
 - iii. Is it wrong to drink wine (14:21)?
5. The church in Rome was made up of Jews and Gentiles. Many scholars believe that the situation of this church was that while everyone in the church agreed about salvation – by grace alone, by faith alone, in Christ alone – they disagreed about a few ethical issues. Before turning to Christ, the Jews had always been taught that certain foods and drinks were sinful, and certain days were sacred and needed to be observed. It was hard for them to forget these laws. However, the Gentiles were different; they had no problem eating and drinking anything, and they didn't care about Sabbaths or others Jewish holy days. And these differences threatened to split the church, and in fact, cause a rift in the church around the world between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.
6. Therefore, to help the church maintain unity, Paul's devoted significant attention (14:1-15:12) to helping the church handle its differences without dividing.
7. This section in Romans can be very helpful to us in the twenty-first century because we too have differences. There are "disputable matters" among Christians today, too. And if we don't learn how to handle these

differences wisely and lovingly, then they can divide us and destroy what God wants to do in and through us.

8. Examples of modern “disputable matters” include:

- i. Halloween.
- ii. Mardi Gras.
- iii. Satan Claus.
- iv. Tattoos.
- v. Drinking alcohol.
- vi. Dancing.
- vii. Gambling (e.g., playing the lottery; sports betting).
- viii. Playing cards.
- ix. Listening to secular music.
- x. Men wearing hats in church.
- xi. Investing in certain companies.
- xii. Shopping at certain businesses.
- xiii. Fantasy books and media, such as the Harry Potter novels and movies.
- xiv. PG-13 and R-Rated movies.
- xv. Certain types of video games (e.g., Grand Theft Auto).
- xvi. Yoga.

9. I call these “disputable matters” ethical questions not answered clearly answered in Scripture, nor are they clearly answered in the church’s doctrinal statement.

10. How do we handle these differences without dividing?

II. IS UNITY WORTH FIGHTING FOR?

1. The first question we should probably answer, briefly, is whether unity in the church is even worth the trouble? Should we strive to maintain unity and harmony, or should we allow every disagreement to divide us?
2. It’s sort of like marriage. If I was preaching a sermon on how to handle differences in marriage, a prior question needs to be addressed first: Do you need to handle differences in marriage? Do you need to work hard to make your marriage work in spite of differences? Or is it okay, or perhaps beneficial, to simply go your separate ways? Is unity worth fighting for?
3. Paul certainly thought that the church in Rome should strive for unity?
 - i. He commanded it.
 1. **Romans 12:16** Live in harmony with one another.

- ii. He prayed for it.
 - 1. **Romans 15:5-6** 5 Now may the God who gives endurance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, according to Christ Jesus, 6 so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice.
- iii. He devoted significant attention to it.
 - 1. Romans 14:1-15:12 focuses on this issue.
- 4. Many Christians don't seem to understand the importance of the church to God and His purposes. They claim to love Jesus and to love God, but they either despise the church, or they are apathetic to it and uninvolved ("involvement is a personal choice"), or they are loosely affiliated with it (they attend occasionally, but they aren't actively committed to a local church). But love for Christ and apathy or hatred for His church is incoherent. It is an untenable position. Why? Because Jesus is all about the church. The church is extremely important to Jesus. He is committed to the church. The Bible says He is building the church, He loves the church, He gave His life for the church, He provides for the church. The church is His body, His bride, the pillar and foundation of the truth. The church is God's vehicle for accomplishing His primary objective on earth – the Great Commission – making disciples of Jesus Christ. This is why Christians are commanded to attend church regularly, to contribute to the church, to submit to the leaders of the church, to love each other in the church, to use their spiritual gifts in the church, and to pursue unity in the church. So yes, unity is worth fighting for!
- 5. Because this is such a lengthy passage (35 verses), we are not going to be able to look at every verse and every word. But we are going to highlight some of the key verses.
- 6. In this passage, Paul gives us...

III.

3 DIRECTIVES FOR DIFFERENCES

1. Accept one another.

- i. **Romans 14:1** Welcome anyone who is weak in faith.
- ii. **Romans 15:7** Therefore welcome one another, just as Christ also welcomed you, to the glory of God.
- iii. Some versions translate it as "accept" (NIV; NLT; HCSB). I prefer that. Accept one another. In other words, accept those with whom you disagree over disputable matters.

- iv. Let me point out first that this is one of the fifty-nine “one-anothers” in the New Testament that instruct Christians in how to treat each other in the church. Let me read some of these to you.
1. Rom 12:5 says we are one body in Christ and individually members of one another.
 2. Rm 12:10 says to love one another deeply as brothers and sisters.
 3. Rm 12:10 says to take the lead in honoring one another.
 4. Rm 12:16 says to live in harmony with one another.
 5. Rm 14:13 says don’t judge (i.e. criticize or condemn) one another.
 6. Rm 14:19 says to pursue what builds up one another.
 7. Rm 15:7 says to accept one another.
 8. Rm 16:16 says to greet one another with a holy kiss (i.e. with affection).
 9. Gal 5:13 says to serve one another in love.
 10. Eph 4:2 says to bear with one another in love (i.e. put up with one another (LEB); or make allowance for each other’s faults (NLT)).
 11. Eph 4:32 says to forgive one another just as God has also forgiven you in Christ.
 12. Eph 5:19 says to speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music with your heart to the Lord.
 13. Eph 5:21 says to submit to one another in the fear of Christ.
 14. Col 3:9 says don’t lie to one another.
 15. Col 3:10 says to teach and admonish one another.
 16. 1 Thess 4:18 says to encourage one another.
 17. 1 Thess 5:15 says to always pursue what is good for one another.
 18. Heb 10:24 says to motivate one another to acts of love and good works.
 19. James 5:16 says to confess your sins to one another.
 20. James 5:16 says to pray for one another.
 21. 1 Pt 4:9 says to be hospitable toward one another.

22.1 Pt 5:5 says to clothe yourselves with humility toward one another.

- v. All of these are elaborations of Christ's command to love one another (Jn 13:34).
- vi. The command in Rm 14:1 and 15:7 is to accept one another. Accept those with whom you disagree over disputable matters.
- vii. What does this look like? Paul gives three answers.
- viii. First, don't argue.
 - 1. **Romans 14:1** Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters.
 - 2. Disagreements don't have to turn into arguments; they don't have to divide. Let's just agree to disagree. You can hold your view, and I can hold mine. We can both feel very strongly. We can discuss it. We can study it together. But let's not argue about it.
- ix. Second, don't look down on the weak.
 - 1. **Romans 14:3** One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him.
 - 2. In this section on handling differences Paul distinguishes between the weak and the strong. The weak is the one who believed it was wrong to eat certain foods, and the strong believed it was okay to eat. Paul has a word for both.
 - 3. He starts with the strong – they must not look down on the weak.
 - 4. "look down on"
 - a. NIV "treat with contempt"
 - b. ESV "despise"
 - c. ERV "feel that you are better"
 - d. Many translations use the word "despise," so I looked it up in the dictionary. Merriam-Webster says "despise" means "strongly dislike or hate: to look down on with disrespect or aversion."
 - 5. In other words, the strong – the person who doesn't think the disputed matter is sinful, must not look down on the weak. Don't say, "They are immature; foolish; ignorant; stupid."

- x. Third, don't judge the strong.
 - 1. **Romans 14:3** One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him.
 - 2. Just as the strong are tempted to look down on the weak, the weak are tempted to judge the strong.
 - 3. The word "judge" means to condemn (NLT). In other words, the weak are tempted to say of the strong, "They are so sinful for having dancing at their wedding," or, "They are so evil for reading *Harry Potter*."
- xi. That leads us to the second directive for dealing with differences in the church.

2. Keep a clear conscience.

- i. **Romans 14:5** One person judges one day to be more important than another day. Someone else judges every day to be the same. Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.
- ii. "Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind."
- iii. In other words, while you should accept one another, you must still follow your conscience. The word "conscience" is not used in this section, but that's what Paul is referring to.
- iv. What is your conscience? It is an internal mechanism that alerts you when you've sinned. Your conscience either accuses you or excuses you. When you don't do anything wrong, you won't notice that you have a conscience. But when you do something wrong, your conscience will make you feel guilty.
- v. What does the Bible say about your conscience?
 - 1. Your conscience is unique.
 - a. "One person judges one day to be more important than another day. Someone else judges every day to be the same."
 - b. We have different convictions about disputable matters. Don't be surprised when people disagree with you.
 - 2. Your conscience is not infallible.
 - a. It is not perfect. It is not God.
 - b. It is possible for your conscience to be wrong. Paul admitted this.

- c. 1 Cor 4:3-4 3 It is of little importance to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I don't even judge myself. 4 For I am not conscious of anything against myself, but I am not justified by this. It is the Lord who judges me.
- d. Paul had a clear conscience. But he said this didn't justify him; this didn't mean that he was entirely innocent and without sin. He acknowledged that it was possible that he was sinning in ignorance.
- e. Just because you feel that someone is sinful doesn't mean God thinks it is sinful, or that it is universally sinful. And just because you can do something with a clear conscience doesn't mean that God is pleased, or that it is permissible for everyone.
- f. The goal is to let the Bible train your conscience so that you it alerts you when you violate scripture.
- g. But it is possible for your conscience to be trained by things other than Scripture. For example, if you are born into a family of devout Mormons who taught you from infancy that drinking coffee is sinful, then drinking coffee would make you feel guilty, even though that's not Biblical. In that case your upbringing, your religious education, rather than Scripture, trained your conscience.
- h. On the other hand, if you ignore your conscience, you can train it to not feel guilty about something that is truly immoral. It's like playing the guitar. When you first start playing, it is very painful on the tips of your fingers. But if you ignore the pain and keep playing, eventually your fingers will develop callouses, and playing the guitar will no longer hurt. It is possible to train your conscience to become desensitized and calloused toward sin. If you have sex outside of marriage, at first you will probably feel guilty. But if you ignore the guilt and continue to sin anyway, eventually you will no longer feel guilty about it.

- i. Your conscience is not infallible. It is not God. The feeling of guilt is not the ultimate proof that an behavior is sinful, and the absence of guilt is not the ultimate proof that behavior is permissible.
 - j. This is why it is so important, when it comes to disputable matters, not to argue, or look down on, or condemn others. This is why it is important to not try to force your personal convictions on to others. You might be wrong, and they might be right.
3. You must follow your conscience.
- a. Even though your conscience is infallible, God still expects and demands that you follow your conscience.
 - b. This is Paul is saying in Rm 14:5.
 - i. Rm 14:5 Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.
 - c. Elsewhere Paul talked about the importance of keeping a clear conscience.
 - i. Acts 24:16 [Paul said], "I always strive to have a clear conscience toward God and men."
 - ii. 1 Timothy 1:15 Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.
 - d. In Rm 14, Paul made it clear that even though your conscience may be wrong, intentionally violating is a sin.
 - e. **Romans 14:14** I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean.
 - f. Paul said that he knows objectively that it's okay for a Christian to eat anything. But, he says if your conscience tells you that eating something is a sin, then for you it is sinful.
 - g. Notice what Paul says at the end of Rom 14.
 - h. **Romans 14:22-23** 22 Whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God.

Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. 23 But whoever doubts stands condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that is not from faith is sin.

- i. If you do something that your conscience says is wrong, or in this case, even if you do something even that you have doubts about – you are unsure if it pleases God – then you are sinning.
- j. You are always supposed to live by faith. In this context “faith” means confidence. You must always be confident that what you are doing is pleasing to the Lord. If you aren’t confident, then it is sin, and you need to avoid it.
- vi. Why is it important to keep a clear conscience?
- vii. **Romans 14:6-9** 6 Whoever observes the day, observes it for the honor of the Lord. Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and he gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. 8 If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. 9 Christ died and returned to life for this: that he might be Lord over both the dead and the living.
- viii. What’s Paul saying here? The reason you must keep a clear conscience, or do what you are fully convinced is pleasing to the Lord, is because that’s your purpose in life. Your purpose is to live for God – to please, and love, and serve Him.
- ix. How can we handle differences in the church?
 - 1. First, accept one another.
 - 2. Second, keep a clear conscience. Accepting others doesn’t mean you should ignore your conscience.
- x. But there’s a third directive for dealing with differences in the church.

3. Don’t be a stumbling block.

- i. **Romans 14:13-15** 13 Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister. 14 I know and am persuaded

in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean. 15 For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died.

- ii. This passage says not to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sisters.
- iii. What is a stumbling block? A stumbling block is an action that causes another believer to sin. More specifically, it is when the exercise of your freedom tempts another believer to violate their conscience.
- iv. There is an example in 1 Cor 8. The church in Corinth was dealing with its own differences and disputable matters. One of them had to do with meat sacrificed to idols. When a person sacrificed an animal to an idol, a portion would be burnt, some would go to the priest, and the rest would be taken home by the worshiper. That leftover meat would often end up for sale in the meat market; or someone might throw a party and serve the meat to family and friends. Some in the church had no problem eating this meat, while others who were saved out of a life of idolatry felt strongly that it was sinful. So how did Paul instruct the church to handle this difference?
- v. **1 Corinthians 8:8** Food will not bring us close to God. We are not worse off if we don't eat, and we are not better if we do eat.
- vi. First, Paul says that it's not a sin. But he doesn't stop there.
- vii. **1 Corinthians 8:9-12** 9 But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, won't his weak conscience be encouraged to eat food offered to idols? 11 So the weak person, the brother or sister for whom Christ died, is ruined, by your knowledge. 12 Now when you sin like this against brothers and sisters and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.
- viii. What's Paul saying? If you eat meat sacrificed to idols, you might tempt your brother to join you, or to follow your example, and thereby violate his conscience. That's a stumbling block. A stumbling block is an action that causes another believer to sin.

It is when the exercise of your freedom tempts another believer to violate their conscience.

- ix. Paul finishes 1 Corinthians 8 like this.
- x. **1 Corinthians 8:13** Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother or sister to fall.
- xi. This is the same thing that Paul is saying in Romans. Don't do something if it tempts your brother who is weak to violate their conscience and sin.
- xii. In other words, it is better to give up your freedom, than for your freedom to hurt someone else.
- xiii. This is very challenging, I realize. This really shifts the burden on the strong. So Paul says several things to encourage strong Christians to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of weak Christians. We can call these...
- xiv. Reasons to Sacrifice Your Freedom:
- xv. **Romans 14:15** 15 For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died.
 - 1. The first reason to sacrifice your freedom is for the sake of love. The most important command is to love your neighbor, and you aren't doing that if you are causing them to sin.
- xvi. **Romans 14:16-17** 16 Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.
 - 1. The second reason has to do with the purpose of salvation. The "kingdom of God" here is a synonym for salvation. The purpose or reason that God saved you – or rescued you from the dominion of darkness and transferred you into the kingdom of Christ (Col 1:13) – is not so you can eat non-kosher foods. It's not so you can go dancing on Friday nights. It's not so you get an ankle tattoo, or a naval piercing. That's not why God saved you. Those freedoms are benefits of salvation, but not the purpose.

2. What is the purpose of salvation? Righteousness (a life that is pleasing to God), peace (harmony and unity with other believers), and joy (the happiness of right relationships).
 3. But there's more. Why else should you sacrifice your freedom for another believer?
- xvii. **Romans 14:19-20** 19 So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another. 20 Do not tear down God's work because of food. Everything is clean, but it is wrong to make someone fall by what he eats.
1. When you are determining whether or not it is okay to do something, there are several questions you need to ask.
 - a. First, does it please God? Can I do this with a clear conscience. That's most important, but don't stop there.
 - b. Second, does it promote peace in the church? Will it cause strife and conflict and division with other believers in the church?
 - c. Third, will it build up fellow believers? If it is going to tear them down, or tempt them to sin, then there's your answer. Finally, Paul has one final word of exhortation for the strong.
- xviii. **Romans 15:1-3** Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves. 2 Each one of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself. On the contrary, as it is written, The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.
1. Again, Paul puts the burden on unity on the strong.
 2. You must "please" your neighbor for his good. Does that mean you need to be a people pleaser? No. Some Bible versions use the word "help" (NLT). You must help your neighbor. You are not an island. Christianity is not just about you and God; it's about us and God. It is personal, but it is also corporate. It is a team sport, and you need help and not hinder your teammates.
 3. Finally, Paul reminds us that this is what Jesus did. When Jesus came to earth, it wasn't to help Himself. It wasn't to

live a life of luxury and comfort and pleasure. His life was all about pleasing God and helping others. And He sacrificed everything to help us in our weakness.

IV. CONCLUSION

1. So, what have we learned? In every church there exists differences over disputable matters – ethical questions that are not clearly defined in Scripture. But differences don't have to divide. And we shouldn't let them divide us, because unity in the church is worth fighting for. Just remember Paul's three directives:
 - i. Accept one another.
 - ii. Keep a clear conscience.
 - iii. Don't be a stumbling block.
2. Let's make this personal.
3. First, this message is a reminder that the church is important to Christ. Is it important to you?
 - i. Have you joined the church? If not, that's a good place to begin. Sign up for the Newcomer's Lunch.
 - ii. Are you actively committed to the church? Are you tithing, are you serving, are you attending regularly?
 - iii. Question: If you are a parent, then you need to be discipling your kids. What is your example teaching your kids about church? Are you teaching them that it's a priority; that it is worthy of your time, and money, and energy? Or are you teaching them that it's optional? Just something to do when there's nothing else to do?
 - iv. Let me put it this way, parents: If you are not bringing your kids to church every Sunday, if they are not serving in church next to you, if they are not going to Home Group with you, if you are not teaching them to tithe, then when they graduate from high school, they will likely drop out of church. They might find another church, but they aren't going to stay at this one – because they aren't involved.
4. Second, do you need to change your attitude to maintain unity in the church? Do you need to be more accepting – stop arguing, stop looking down on, stop condemning? Has your freedom become more important to you than promoting peace and building up other believers?

5. Third, if the church is not important to you, then may I suggest that you may not be saved? How can you say that you are a Christian if you are careless about the very body and bride of Christ; about the thing that Christ loves and is passionate about? Maybe you are here this morning and you need to get saved. Let me speak directly to you for a moment. All of us are sinners, and our sins separate us from God. God loves you, and He sent Jesus to die for your sins, and He rose again. If you will turn from your sins and believe in Jesus, then God will save you.

Numbers 6:24-26

24 "May the LORD bless you and protect you;
25 may the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
26 may the LORD look with favor on you
and give you peace." '