



Right now, at this very moment, I'll bet I can read your mind. In fact, I'll bet there are two different groups here today who are thinking two different things. Some of you are thinking, "Why is he wearing a hat? That isn't appropriate in church! Actually, that's down right disrespectful. Something is really wrong with Mark. I'm not even sure I can go to a church where the pastor wears a hat in worship."

But there's another group here and your thinking is different. You're thinking, "How cool he's wearing a hat. I love coming to a church where we don't have to act religious and where we can just be ourselves. After all, the Bible never says, 'You shall not wear hats in church.' Isn't it great to be part of a church where it's not what you wear that matters but who you are on the inside?"

This kind of thing often happens in a church. We want to please God, but we sometimes face issues the Bible doesn't directly address, issues the Bible calls "disputable matters." These are things the Bible hasn't clearly forbidden, nor clearly commanded. But nevertheless they're things we may feel very strongly about, one way or another. When it comes to things like wearing hats in church, it's almost like we're left on our own to figure out what would be most pleasing to God.

Of course, we have to be careful when we call something a disputable matter. There are some things that are **not** disputable. For example, the Bible doesn't specifically talk about downloading music you didn't buy, but that doesn't mean it's right. In fact, it's called stealing, and the Bible has a lot to say about that. But still, there are many other issues the Bible doesn't say anything about, directly or indirectly. Often times what happens in such situations is people find a church where everyone thinks the same way they do on these matters, or we stay in the church but just find people to hang out with that think like us.

So the question is, how do we stay unified when we disagree over how to honor him? We learned last week in Romans 13 we should love one another. Paul said, "*Love does no harm to a neighbor.*" So how do we love one another and not harm one another when we disagree about what pleases God? The Bible gives answers to that question in Romans 14. Here, Paul helps the church in Rome handle disputable matters, and what he tells them will help us handle the disputable matters we face today.

We can divide this passage into two sections. In the first section, which covers verses 1-12, Paul says instead of judging one another, we should accept one another. Then in the second section

he says we should be careful not to put a stumbling block before a fellow believer.

### **Instead of Judging One Another, Accept One Another**

Let's start by reading the first section in verses 1-12.

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:

"As surely as I live," says the Lord,

'every knee will bow before me;

every tongue will acknowledge God.'"

So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Instead of judging one another, accept one another. The word Paul uses for "accept" actually means more than just to put up with someone; it means to welcome them; to open your arms to them and make every effort to receive them into your own circle of loving relationships.

Notice also we can identify what some of the disputable matters were they were dealing with in the church at Rome. Verses 2 and 6 tell us one issue had to do with what you ate. There were some believers who felt it right to only eat vegetables, but others felt the freedom to eat meat. Verse 5 tells us another issue had to do with observing certain holy days like the Sabbath, Passover, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Some insisted on observing those days,

others felt it was unnecessary. Later, in verse 21 we also learn that drinking wine was an issue.

If we know a little about the background, it will help us connect the dots. Because of their Jewish background, some of the believers in Rome were refusing to buy meat at the market out of fear it had been offered to idols, which was the norm in that culture. This is probably why they also refused to drink wine. In turn, they were telling other believers it was dishonoring to God to eat meat or drink wine that had possibly been offered to an idol. But there were other believers who didn't see a problem with this. They felt free to eat meat and drink wine because even if someone else had offered it to another god, they hadn't. And, after all, there's only one God. So it's clear the disputable matters Paul is dealing with in Romans 14 relate to the transition from being under the Law of Moses to being under the new covenant in Christ.

Notice also that Paul speaks of two different groups in Rome—the weak in faith and the strong. These are the two groups who were judging each other and refusing to welcome each other. It's clear those who are weak in faith are more strict about what should be eaten and observing holy days. They're called "weak in faith" because they haven't allowed the full implications of the gospel to sink into their hearts and govern how they think about these things. He's not saying they aren't saved or aren't trying to please Christ. In fact, the weak in faith are usually the most fervent in trying to please Him. Where they're weak is in the remnants of a legalistic mindset that still sticks to them. They were saying, "Yes, I trust Jesus...kind of. I trust him to save me, but if I don't get my act together and keep these rules God will cut me off from his grace or at least be very disappointed with me." So these folks hadn't fully realized that if you're saved by grace alone, there's no need to try to please God by keeping all the old rules. On the other hand, the strong are those who know they're saved by grace alone through faith alone and therefore they're also free from having to keep all the old rules in place to please God.

Verse 3 clearly tells us why the strong and the weak have a hard time accepting one another. He says the one who eats everything (the strong) will tend to "treat with contempt" the one who is weak and still bound by these rules. That tells me the strong will tend to feel superior to the weak, like more mature, spiritually sophisticated and wise. They look down on the weak as being narrow minded. On the other hand, the weak will have a tendency to judge the strong. It's like, "Where's your commitment to Christ? You have a watered down and worldly Christianity! If you were a real Christian, you'd be more disciplined!"

By the way, don't forget we're **not** talking about moral issues here. There are some things in the Bible that are just plain wrong. For example, in 1 Corinthians 5 Paul confronts the church about a man among them who was living an immoral life. Paul rebukes

them for not judging his sin. He even tells them to put the man out of their fellowship. He's not talking about judging unbelievers. We shouldn't expect anything else from unbelievers. But he's talking about believers in the church who live in unrepentant sin. He says, "*You must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people*" (1 Corinthians 5:11).

But this is a different situation. Again, we're talking about disputable matters where the Word of God says nothing definitive. On these matters, instead of judging one another, accept one another. Paul says, when you judge one another, here's what you're forgetting:

First, you're forgetting God has accepted them. At the end of v. 3 he says just that: "*for God has accepted them.*" Because of what Jesus has done for us, we're completely loved and accepted and always welcomed with open arms by our Father. So if God has welcomed someone with open arms, how can you shut them out? The audacity of that! Think about it—they're good enough for God, but not for you?

Second, you've forgotten they don't answer to you but to God. In v. 4 Paul asks a rhetorical question to show that each person is primarily God's servant (not ours) and they'll answer to God, not us. It's quite interesting, he uses a word here for a household slave. In the Roman world it was the worst possible manners to come into someone's home and start telling their slave what to do. Paul says when you judge your brother on these matters that's what you're doing. They're God's servant, not your's. And they answer to God, not you. I love how he says, not only will they stand or fall before God, but the Lord is able to make them stand! He nails all this down later in verses 10-12 when he says we'll all stand before God's judgment seat and give an account of ourselves. In essence he's saying, "How can you stand in God's place of judgment when you yourself will be judged? You should focus on your own life and how you'll answer for it when you meet God."

Third, you're forgetting both the weak and the strong do what they do as an act of worship. This comes out in verses 5-9. Paul says both groups worship God—those who don't eat meat or drink wine and those who do. As long as they're fully convinced in their own mind what they're doing is unto God, as long as they can give thanks for it, as long as they're living for God, they belong to the Lord and they're pleasing to the Lord because he died and rose from the dead on their behalf. Isn't that interesting? We often judge people, thinking, "Well, they can't be pleasing God and do that!" But Paul says, "Guess what? They are pleasing God if they're operating out of a clear conscience and with gratitude to him."

Before we go to the second half of this chapter we might want to think of a few applications. Obviously we're not dealing with the same issues the church at Rome was, but we can still think

of some parallel situations. For example, we just got done celebrating Easter. I know some Christians who have no problem with having the Easter bunny be a part of their Easter celebration. They know the true meaning of Easter but they have no problem incorporating these symbols into their celebration, and there's nothing in the Bible to forbid it. But I know other believers who have a hard time with that. For them, the Easter Bunny steals the true meaning of this holiday. It would be really hard for them to come to church and see one of the pastors in an Easter Bunny suit. What should these two groups do? Instead of judging one another, accept one another.

Here's another one: There are some believers who are quite proud of their tattoos. When I first met our Foster City Campus Pastor Neal Benson I didn't know whether to shake his hand or read his arm! I think Neal's goal is to have the entire New Testament tattooed on his body before he's 40! But they feel this is an expression of their faith, not to mention their freedom in Christ. But for some of us tattoos represent something we feel a Christian shouldn't be associated with. Like they're for shady, anti-social deviants. At the very least we feel like when they're our age and their skin starts to sag like a wet paper bag, they'll regret it. But the Bible doesn't say anything about tattoos. So what should we do? Instead of judging one another, accept one another.

Let me say I believe this applies not just to issues between the strong and the weak in faith, but also to areas where we just flat out disagree. For example, there's a presidential election coming up. I know some believers who feel strongly Christians should vote a certain way because certain candidates take a stand on certain moral issues. It's like, how could you ever vote for someone who is pro-choice or pro-same-sex marriage? But I know other believers who see things more broadly. They may feel voting for a candidate who stands for compassion and justice on issues like poverty and immigration is equally as important. These two groups may have a hard time talking politics in their Community Group, but instead of judging one another, they need to accept one another.

But this still brings up an important question. What if in my freedom in Christ, I do something that actually leads a fellow brother or sister in Christ to do something that deep down they feel is wrong and sinful? This is the issue Paul deals with next. Paul goes on to instruct the strong on what to do in this situation.

**Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy**

**Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.**

**Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.**

**So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin (verses 13-23).**

### **Don't Put a Stumbling Block Before a Fellow Believer**

Notice here Paul finally tips his hand and he tells us where he stands on this matter. In v. 14 he says, *"I'm fully convinced no food is unclean in itself."* Jesus said the same thing in Mark 7:15-19. That's part of why he got into so much trouble with the strict Pharisees. Paul is clearly part of the group that says it doesn't matter if a piece of meat or a glass of wine was offered to Zeus. And if someone invites him to an athletic contest on the Sabbath, he has no problem going.

But Paul also recognizes there are believers who feel differently. And he clearly says if they really believe something is wrong (unclean) then for them it really is wrong. He realizes, therefore, that he could actually hurt someone by exercising his freedom in the wrong way. So he says to the strong not to put any stumbling block in the way of a fellow believer.

For example, let's take the issue of drinking alcohol. While the Bible forbids drunkenness and warns against drinking excessively, it doesn't forbid drinking. In fact, in some places it encourages it. So let's say I feel the freedom to drink, but there are younger believers around me who come out of a background of alcohol abuse or even addiction who don't have that freedom. Taking even one drink just doesn't sit right with them. For them, it would be wrong to imbibe. But if a person like that sees me, a more seasoned believer drinking, he might feel pressured to drink. If he does so without being truly convinced it's the right thing to do, he'll be going against his conscience. But now that he's done that, it might be easier next time to go even further and do something that's truly wrong in everyone's eyes. That's a stumbling block.

Now let me say something about this. There's a difference between a weaker brother or sister and legalistic Christian. Often times, the church people most offended by things like drinking alcohol would typically never be tempted to drink alcohol in the first place. In many churches, it's the Christians who think of themselves as more mature who are offended at the behavior of those Christians who are more free. They'd never really be

tempted to drink alcohol, and so their offense has nothing to do with the stumbling block Paul speaks of here.

Someone has called these legalistic believers “professional weaker brothers.” I just call them grumpy Christians who can blackmail an entire church into legalism. Instead of saying you’re causing me to stumble, these folks should study what the Bible really says about the issue and learn to accept those things that are just differences in taste. They shouldn’t pull out “stumbling block” as a trump card that means, “You can’t exercise your freedom in any area I’m uncomfortable with.” In fact, those who know the Bible well enough to even be familiar with the term stumbling block should be mature enough not to trip over one.

But when it comes to a genuine weaker brother or sister, Paul says it’s better to limit your own freedom so you don’t cause them to stumble. When you refuse to do that, when you flaunt your freedom, there are several things he says you’re forgetting:

First, you’re forgetting Jesus called us to love one another. Paul says if you hurt your fellow believer because of what you eat, **“you are no longer acting in love.”** Back in 13:8 he said we have a continuing debt to love one another. Well, if you damage a weaker brother or sister in the name of freedom, you’ve forgotten that. Paul says don’t let your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. He reminds us that’s how much Jesus loved them. He loved them enough to lay down not just his rights but his very life for them, and you’re going to tell me you can’t lay down your freedom to keep them from stumbling?

The second thing you’re forgetting is what really matters in the life of a believer. We’re part of the Kingdom of God. In v. 17 he says being members of the kingdom of God isn’t about eating and drinking, it’s not about us enjoying our freedoms, rather it’s about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. So do whatever leads to those things. Let your behavior be guided by what cultivates righteousness, peace and joy, not only in you, but in your brothers and sisters in Christ. That’s what Paul means in v. 18 when he says, **“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”** I love how he says to “make every effort.” This will take some work. It’s not going to be easy. Living in peace with your fellow believers, thinking about what you can do to build them up, will require effort.

The third thing these folks who are stronger in faith forget when they put a stumbling block in front of another is whatever is not of faith is sin. In v. 22 Paul says we should keep our views to ourselves on these matters. Don’t trumpet your views on these issues. You don’t have to make this the whole church’s business. Why? Because if you do you may cause a person to do something

that’s not of faith, something they have real doubts about, and that’s sin.

I think of the whole issue of Halloween. Suppose a person comes out of a background where they practiced the occult. For them, Halloween was their favorite holiday. They loved seeing little kids dressed up like ghosts and devils and goblins. Then they become a Christian and for them Halloween was seen as a very evil part of their past, like it’s the devil’s holiday. But then someone from church invites them to a Halloween party. “Come on over, wear a costume and celebrate Halloween with us.” The intent isn’t to worship demons. They just want to have some fun with their kids and reach out to their neighbors. But you can see how that might be difficult for a weaker brother or sister. You can see how they might feel like they should come but also have some real doubts about being there. After all, Paul says, “whoever has doubts is condemned” and “everything that doesn’t come from faith is sin.” The people who invited them might think, “Man, you’re sure uptight. Just get over it!” But at the very least, in a church where there are all kinds of different people, we need to be sensitive to the fact that people come from all kinds of backgrounds and do our best to not put them in a compromising position.

The message today is very simple: How do we deal with disputable matters in the church? Instead of judging one another, accept and welcome one another. Instead of flaunting your freedom, don’t put a stumbling block before a fellow believer.

It all comes down to this: love. We need to start loving people the way Christ loved us. That means welcoming people you wouldn’t ordinarily welcome. Open your arms to people who don’t dress like you or worship like you or think like you or look like you. Accept people who you think are under-educated or over-educated. Accept people who just don’t do church the way you think it should be done. Fellowship with people weak in their faith. And be willing to sacrifice for them. Be willing to give up something you really like to do to protect them from falling. Be willing to say no to yourself to protect their fragile faith. Why? Because the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

So look at everyone around you and say, that’s the one for whom Christ died. She’s the one for whom Christ died. He’s the one for whom Christ died. Then treat them like that. They’ll never be the same. You’ll never be the same. And, if we all do that, we’ll never be the same.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1418–29