

The Book of Romans is one of the greatest writings on Christian doctrine and theology. It is considered by many to be the masterpiece of the Apostle Paul. The first few chapters of Romans deal with the declining spiritual condition of the human race and our need for salvation and forgiveness. Paul makes sure that the reader realizes that we are saved by faith and not by our works, and that this salvation includes all who will accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. He concludes his letter with some practical advice for living the Christian life. Since I am always interested in how to apply the Bible to my daily life, this is the part of Romans that I want us to focus on this morning. Our scripture text is taken from the fourteenth chapter of Romans, verses 1 through 13.

Read Romans 14:1-13

Unlike his other letters in the New Testament, Paul is now writing to a church that he did not start and had never visited. The Church in Rome was founded by someone else and initially had been made up of both Jews and Gentiles. However, Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome in 49 AD because of disturbances in the synagogues. When Emperor Nero came to power, he allowed the Jews to return. But when the Jewish Christians got back to Rome, they found that some things had changed in the church under the leadership of the Gentiles, and thus, there were some internal problems. Now Paul had a lot of experience in dealing with the problems and disagreements in the early churches in Corinth, Philippi, and other places, so he wrote the church in Rome offering some practical advice on how to live in harmony and fulfill Jesus' commandment to love one another.

Now remember the Christian Church, especially at this time in history, was just getting started. It was like a newborn baby or perhaps a child that was experiencing growing pains. In Acts 4:32, the Apostle Luke indicates that while the initial believers may have indeed been of one heart and mind right after Pentecost, the disciples were seldom of one accord, and there were often disagreements over what Jesus said and what He actually meant. In addition, each new believer brought their own personal background, traditions, and opinions into the Church. Thus, the Church, like the human body had its growing pains, and even got sick at times.

In our text this morning, Paul is describing some of the early symptoms. The members of the church in Rome were a diverse and contentious group. A judgmental, know it all attitude prevailed. Initially, the symptoms came about due to debates over which foods the members could eat and which days were considered sacred and holy. Remember that some early members came from the Jewish faith and thought that every new Christian should continue to follow the Jewish rules on clean and unclean food, while the Gentile members believed that they could eat anything they wanted.

It was not so much the disagreement itself that did the harm as the mismanagement of the disagreement, making it a bone of contention; in other words, making a mountain out of a mole hill. Those who were strong in the faith and recognized their Christian liberties despised the weaker members who did not. Instead of helping them understand, they got all puffed up in their knowledge and looked down on their weaker brothers and sisters, and vice versa, the weaker members judged the stronger ones as law breakers.

Now we must be careful not to jump to conclusions with respect as to who was weak in the faith. This does not mean that they did not believe in Jesus and were not saved yet; they were. It just means that they had not grown spiritually enough in their Christian journey to recognize that they were saved by God's amazing gift of grace and not by their works or by following a prescribed set of rules and rituals. They were basically not liberated yet. In their heart, they still believed that they could gain God's favor by doing certain things and abstaining from others. They were still trying to earn their salvation and had not yet accepted the way of grace; still thinking more about what they could do for God than what God had already done for them. We must continually remind ourselves that we are all at different stages in our Christian walk, and that no one's spiritual experiences or beliefs are exactly alike. Remember ours is a relationship with Jesus Christ, and not just a religion. Or as one of my sons told me: "It's a relationship, not a religion!"

Unfortunately, this affliction to the body of Christian believers was not a one-time epidemic, confined only to the young church in Rome. It has been with us since Pentecost and most likely will inflict the Church until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The items that are debated have changed over the years, but the difference of opinions and practices in the Christian Church remain. And as in the church at Rome, we still tend to mismanage the situations and make mountains out of mole hills. There are always at least two points of view on every issue. And that's why there is almost a different church on every street corner in every city; just look at how many different churches that are near here. And there's nothing wrong with this as long as we are all serving and worshipping God.

So how do we treat this illness of the Church? Dr. Paul gives some fatherly advice to the church at Rome and to us today. As Paul is closing his letter to the Romans, he stresses to his readers back then and now that the love that Christ has for us must be demonstrated through the love we have for our fellow brothers and sisters – even when we don't always see eye to eye on certain things. The *Message* paraphrases our first verse as follows: "Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with." Now that's great advice!

In this text Paul gives us a prescription for handling our disagreements in love. First, he says that we should welcome each other in love; remember each one of us is at a different stage in

our walk with the Lord. Each of us comes from a different upbringing and a different religious background that places us at different stages along our faith journey. We need to recognize and respect this reality, and learn to support one another as we each grow together in grace.

For instance, I grew up in Bible Belt in the South where worship services were less formal and the preaching was more hell-fire and brimstone. Some people like hell-fire preaching, while others want to hear that God loves them no matter what. Personally, I like sermons that challenge me, make me think, and occasionally step on my toes, but don't stomp them flat. In addition, some of you would like to celebrate communion every Sunday while others prefer it once a month. Some of you like the traditional hymns and other like the more contemporary songs. Our religious backgrounds vary from Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian, other denominations, or none. But Paul tells us to accept each other in love. It's our job to accept others; it's God's job to guide them! Did you hear that? We are to love each other no matter how much we disagree. And it is not our role to tell others how to think and believe, that's God's responsibility.

Next Paul stresses that we should be confident in our own personal convictions. As long as we believe passionately and sincerely that our approach to an issue is God inspired and in line with the will of God, we need to stay the course. Even if our neighbor's convictions are not consistent with ours, we need to trust that God will work everything out. Someone once said: "You take care of God's business; God will take care of yours."

Third, we need to break that habit of judging each other. We must avoid condemnation of those who disagree with our position or who act and dress in a manner that we don't approve of. Disagreement should not lead to judgment. Earlier in Romans, Paul says: "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." If Jesus does not condemn the believer, neither should we. A person's views are their own and should be treated with respect.

Listen to what one man wrote about a wrongful judgment. "I saw him in church for the first time on Wednesday. He was in his mid-70's, with thinning silver hair and a neat brown suit. Many times, in the past I had invited him to come to church. Several other Christian friends had talked to him about the Lord and had tried to share the Good News with him. He was a well-respected, honest man with many of the characteristics that a Christian should have, but he had never accepted Christ, nor entered the doors of the church.

"Have you ever been to a church service in your life?" I asked him a few years ago. We had just finished a pleasant day of visiting and talking. He hesitated. Then with a bitter smile he shared with me a childhood experience some sixty years ago. He was one of many children in a large

impoverished family. His parents had struggled to provide food, with little left for clothes. When he was ten, some neighbors invited him to go to church with them.

The Sunday School class had been very exciting! He had never heard such songs and stories before. He had never heard anyone read the Bible. After class was over, the teacher took him aside and said: "Son, please don't come again dressed as you are now. We want to look our best when we come into God's house." He stood there in his ragged, unpatched overalls. Then looking at his dirty bare feet, he answered softly: "No, ma'am, I won't ever." "And I never did," he said, abruptly ending our conversation.

While there must have been other factors that contributed to his rejection of church and Jesus Christ, this experience definitely formed a significant part of the bitterness in his heart. I'm sure that the Sunday School teacher meant well, but did she really understand the love of Christ? What if she had put her arms around the dirty, ragged little boy and said: "Son, I am so glad you are here, and I hope you will come every chance you get to hear more about Jesus." Yes, I saw him in church for the first time Wednesday. As I looked at that well-dressed old man lying in his casket, I thought of the little boy of long ago. I could almost hear him say: "No, ma'am, I won't ever." And I wept."

Now this story gets to me every time I read it. As I have said before, we may never know how many lives we have influenced to come to the Lord, but in the same way, we may also never know the number of lives that we turned away from the Lord and the Church because of our judgmental attitude, our harsh words, or our cruel comments. Over my ministry, I have talked with many people who will not set foot in a church because of how they were treated in the past by the church. We must be careful to never create any barriers or obstacles to someone coming to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

I hope that this story will remind us to choose our words carefully, because we can never take them back. That's why I stress that we must be welcoming to everyone who comes in the doors of this church, because we never know if it will be their last time; so, make it your practice to greet everybody who comes here in love.

As Christians, we are not here to pass judgment on each other. Instead, we are here to be a blessing and to recognize one another as members of God's family. At the end of each day, we need to look back over the events of the day and ask ourselves: "Was I a blessing or a hindrance in this situation?" Seriously consider: "Were my words or actions hurtful to someone today?" It was Paul's hope that our common belief in Jesus Christ would unite us and not let our different opinions divide us.

Throughout Romans, Paul returns again and again to the controlling motive in all Christian conduct – love. It is the key to all Christian living. In John 13:34-35, Jesus told us to love one

another; by this others will know that we are His disciples. We may not all worship in the same way. We may disagree on how the church and the country should run. We may not find it easy to work together on projects, but we all worship the same God and we are all His children. God loves us and He wants us to be His children. He also loves our neighbors. It is our job to complete the triangle by loving those who God loves. Several years ago, I heard a sermon by Rev. Billy Abraham at Perkins School of Theology. I still remember Billy's advice: "Love the socks off everybody, and leave the judgment to God!" Now that's words to live by.

Some day as the Scriptures say, we will each stand before God to give an account of our life. And I don't believe that God is going to be concerned about what we ate, what day we worshipped on, how we were baptized, what political party we belonged to, or our opinion on certain church issues. I think that He will only ask us how we loved our neighbors. And I hope and pray that we will all hear those precious words – "Well done, my good and faithful servant." One way to be sure of it is to love the socks off everybody you meet. Amen.