

“The Influential Church”

Romans 14:13-23

November 12, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

The church in Rome was being divided over differing opinions about appropriate foods for Christians to eat and about the observance of days. There were two groups that Paul refers to as the “weak in faith” (14:1) and the “strong” (15:1). The weak in faith had scruples about the things that could and should not be eaten. They seemed to believe that the dietary laws of the Old Testament were still mandatory for the Christian. That conclusion is based on the technical term used by Paul in verse 14 when he talks about that which is unclean. That was the Jewish term used for food that was not to be eaten. Paul did not agree with this group, believing that Jesus had made all foods clean. His strong faith in the word of Jesus allowed him to eat all foods.

At first glance, it seems surprising that Paul expends so much ink on this issue of differences of opinion among the Christians at Rome on such matters. In a letter that treats such exalted themes as the grace of God through Jesus that restores the world to the paradise God always intended, it seems a little odd that Paul should spend a chapter and a half on this topic. Upon closer inspection, though, we realize that a great deal was at stake in this discussion. The phrase “no longer” in the command not to pass judgment on one another (v. 13) indicates that this church was being ripped apart by judgmentalism and disunity. Also, the language of grief and destruction makes it clear that real and lasting damage was being done to people by these differences.

Any pastor can tell you that it’s nothing new for Christians in churches to disagree with one another. We disagree about worship music, what constitutes a good sermon, what to wear when coming to church, how Christianity works itself out in the political arena, priorities for the church budget, and a whole host of other areas. We sometimes think that the solution for this is to keep searching for a church where everyone will agree with us about everything. Our passage this morning makes it clear that this is barking up the wrong tree. While differences are inevitable, the disunity brought about by judgmentalism is not. We need to appreciate what’s at stake in this matter. A simple truth reveals this. Every church is influential. It’s only a question of whether it is an influence for good or for bad. What we see in this passage is that the church is like a sharp scalpel, able to bring much good when wielded by the skillful surgeon, or much damage when wielded by a more malevolent hand. It’s not differences that divide, but the wrong attitude to these differences.

I. The Destructive Power of the Church

The church can become a destructive force when we allow our differences to divide us. These two paragraphs at the end of chapter 14 describe how the strong can do that with the weak. While the previous passage spoke more to the sin of the weak in judging the strong, this one addresses the strong. They were putting up a stumbling block for the weak.

In order to understand this, we need to see something of the setting that is assumed in this passage. The setting was the common meal. Ancient Greco-Roman culture was one in which large dinners and feasts were common. So it was a natural thing for Christians to embrace this practice in association with their weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Their celebration of the Lord's Supper would be in conjunction with what we might call a potluck dinner. Paul wrote extensively to the Corinthians about their practices with this common meal. In that case, the rich would bring and consume a lavish feast while not sharing with their poor brothers and sisters, with the result that not only would the poor leave hungry but also with feelings of being excluded from the fellowship. The problem in the Roman church was just the opposite. Instead of a refusal to share, it was a forced sharing when the strong who had no scruples against eating food that would have been forbidden by Old Testament law would too strongly encourage, or perhaps even shame the weak into eating this food.

The results of this in the lives of the weak are described with several words. They "stumbled," a word that means to experience a fall in a spiritual way. In verse 15, he says that it resulted in "grief" to the weak. There are a couple of words in Greek for our English word "grief," and this one is used elsewhere in the New Testament of the kind of grief that comes when a loved one dies (1 Thess. 4:13) or a close relationship is broken (2 Cor. 2:4). This is not a quickly passing grief but a consuming grief that lasts a long time. Then at the end of verse 15 he says that the strong by this behavior "destroy the one for whom Christ died."

Our understanding of the problems this behavior from the strong caused for the weak can be seen at the end of the passage when Paul writes, **"But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats"** (v. 23). The strong have caused the weak to do something that is against their conscience in eating this meat. Notice the significance of the conscience in this. Paul has made it clear that the eating in itself was not sinful. But for those with convictions against such eating, it is sinful to do so. The dietary practices of the weak, though not required by God, were an important way of expressing their faith. So their faith could be destroyed by the overt compromise of these convictions.

Though Paul in today's passage is addressing the strong, he has already addressed the weak in telling them not to judge the strong. John Murray summarizes the attitudes and behaviors of both the strong and the weak like

this. He calls the attitude of the strong “the smile of disdainful contempt.” In other words, they were condescending and self-righteous as they looked down on their brothers and sisters of weaker faith. Murray calls the judgmental attitudes of the weak as “the frown of condemnatory judgment.” It’s not hard to imagine the results of these improper responses to this difference of opinion. The church’s life could easily be dominated by the matter of eating and drinking. That’s why Paul reminds them that **“the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** (v. 17).

The Iron Bowl will be upon us in a couple of weeks. Imagine that you are allowed to attend the coaches’ meeting before the game when they are plotting their strategy. The first item on the agenda is the menu for the pre-game meal, and they argue back and forth about that for two hours. The second item is the hotel the team will stay in the night before the game, and the third the bus company to be chartered to take the team from the hotel to the stadium. Every item requires lengthy arguments, and by the time these three items are settled, all the time has lapsed and the meeting ends. They never get to the critical items of game strategy.

This is exactly what Paul warns of if the strong press their case that all foods should be regarded as clean. The church will be diverted from its central purpose. Even though the strong are correct that in fact all foods have been made clean, they will bring great harm if they press this too far. It’s possible to be right theologically and wrong ethically. **“So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil”** (v. 16). He is talking about the way unbelievers see the church and speak of it. If we let matters like diet and day observance divide us, unbelievers will justly criticize us. What’s more, Paul says it will serve to **“destroy the work of God”** (v. 20). I agree with John Stott that “the work of God” is a reference to the church. We help destroy the church when we let matters such as this divide us.

It's not hard to see how this might apply in our day. Many unbelievers look at the evangelical church in America and see it primarily as a political organization. We are not seen as an institution that is all about the kingdom of God come to earth, a kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy. That brings us to our next point.

II. The Healing Power of the Church

Paul says that **“the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** (v. 17). The kingdom of God in our age is the Church. The challenge presented by this verse is not to allow ourselves to be dominated by these minor issues that serve to divide us, but to focus instead on the power of Christ’s Church to bring

healing to the nations. That will happen as the Church becomes known for these three gifts from the Holy Spirit of righteousness, peace and joy.

When Paul speaks of “righteousness,” I believe he has in view the righteousness he has spoken of consistently in this letter. That is the righteousness of Christ that comes to us through justification. This gift of righteousness puts an end to our struggle for self-righteousness. Paul speaks of this practically in verse 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.”** Paul is using the word “faith” here as roughly synonymous to our word “conviction.” If you believe that your righteousness is secure in Christ, why do you need to force your convictions on others? Instead, you can just keep your conviction between yourself and God. He then pronounces a blessing on those who can live with such a clean conscience. On the other hand, it is those who are insecure in their conscience who feel the need to make sure others agree with them. They think their righteousness will be validated by being seen as right by others. Tall people don’t need to go around saying to everyone, “Have you noticed how tall I am?” They are secure in their “tallness” and have no need to point it out or have others affirm it. Similarly, those who are secure in their righteousness from Christ have no need for validation of their views from others. And no one can be secure in that righteousness until they come to understand that it is, as Luther calls it, an “alien righteousness.” That is, it comes from outside us as a gift from God.

The kingdom of God is about peace as well as righteousness. It brings peace with God, with ourselves, and with others. It brings an end to fear and anxiety. It allows us to live with others without choking them. And then it’s also about joy. Though everybody wants happiness in life, it proves elusive to so many. Its source is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the arena for his work is the Holy Spirit.

In the Church we have both the potential for destruction or for healing. The reason Paul spends so much time on this seemingly obscure matter of the ethics of diet and day observance is that these are the kind of everyday issues where the destruction or healing happens. The difference is in the quality of our relationships. We will consider this more next week, but I want to point out that this section is bracketed by the command to welcome one another. It appears at the beginning (14:1) and the end of the passage (15:7). It is in these relationships that we become instruments of destruction or of healing.

The truth is that we all need healing. Curt Thompson says that we all have a glass shard deep in the soul. It is constantly moving around and cutting and hurting us with its sharp edges. We live as broken people in a broken world. We were all raised by parents who also had a glass splinter in their souls, and then we often responded to that in unhelpful ways because of our own

brokenness. Let me offer myself as an example. When I was growing up, my parents often affirmed me based on my hard work, even comparing me favorably with my brothers in this regard. Though I am grateful for my parents' sacrificial love for me, in looking back on this I have realized that they were not always wise in the way they affirmed me. And because of my own brokenness and its resulting poor response to their occasional unwise affirmation, I grew up with a deeply settled conviction that my value is based on my performance. Perform well through hard work and people will accept and love you. But you are not loved because of who you are but only by what you can contribute. Even though I can name this for the error that it is, the glass shard persists even to this day.

How is this to be helped? The Church is a matter of righteousness, peace and joy, and God uses his people to bring healing. Ultimate healing can come only from Jesus, but he uses his people to bring his healing. When the Bible refers to the Church as the "body of Christ," it is more than a metaphor. The church is to be the embodiment of Jesus during this entire era when Jesus is seated in heaven before his return. I can report that God has used this Church to minister to me in this way. I have felt myself loved and accepted by so many even when my performance is not what it should have been. When the Church is functioning as it should be, it follows the example of a 12th century monk named Alred. In a book he wrote called *Spiritual Friendship*, he sits down with a friend to talk. This is the way Alred starts the conversation: "So come now, dearest friend, reveal your heart and speak your mind. You have a friendly audience. Say whatever you wish."

CONCLUSION:

A final application of this is to be patient with any who disagree with you, even if you are convinced you are right. The healing we all need because of the glass shard in our souls doesn't happen merely by people coming to the right conclusions about things. It comes when we embody the love of Christ, accepting others even as we have been accepted. So let's be patient with one another that AVPC might more and more be the healing community God intends.

Discussion Questions
Romans 14:13-23

1. We all recognize that Christians don't agree with one another about everything. Name as many differences as you can think of among people at AVPC. Include everything from minor differences (whether to root for Auburn or Alabama) to those that are of more consequence.
2. How do differences such as these make you feel? What is your instinct when differences between Christians are brought out into the open? How might some of these instincts be harmful?
3. What does it mean to cause another to stumble? What are some current examples of that?
4. In light of the differences that were stated in #1 above, how might we apply verse 19? "So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."
5. The church has great power for healing of the damage sin has done to us, either the sin done to us by others or by ourselves. How has God used other Christians to help with your healing process or with others you might know?