

Sermon Title: Don't Pass Judgment (Part 1)

Biblical Text: Romans 14:1-4

Teaching Series: Justified by Love

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Romans 14:1-4

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Today we start a new chapter but we'll stick with a theme. The Apostle Paul has been talking about the life of love. He's been describing what it looks like to love other people like we've been loved by God. From there we're introduced to what seems like the first specific issue Paul deals with in Romans. It's about disagreement. That's what I'd like to talk about today. *What does the life of love look like when we disagree?*

It's important to keep in mind ... they're not disagreeing about core issues of the gospel. They're not debating sin and commandments. Their disunity is about what

many call "matters of conscience." They have different perspectives toward cultural and social issues of which the Scriptures give freedom. Specifically the Christians in Rome disagree about food and holidays. You see, some within the church grew up in Jewish homes which abided by strict dietary laws of the Old Testament. Others didn't. Some understood certain days as special. Others didn't. Now both groups are in community together and Paul wants them to learn how to love each and disagree at the same time.

This is an important lesson. Because some people see all doctrines like springs on a trampoline. Essentially, any spring could be removed and you can still bounce. *It works.* Others see all doctrines like bricks in a wall. Essentially, any brick removed compromises the integrity of the whole structure. *It won't work.* Ultimately, the Scriptures seems to teach that the spiritual life has bricks and springs.

Jesus' identity, burial, and resurrection?

That's a brick. If removed the Christianity's foundation is seriously compromised.

Eating meat and celebrating religious festivals and various other secondary issues?

Those are springs. If removed the Christian faith still flourishes.

Romans 14:1-12 is talking about springs not bricks. And ultimately what's in focus for us is not the specific doctrines being contested and discussed. The doctrine isn't the point. Rather what Paul is keen to communicate is how we treat each other

when we have different springs; different perspectives on cultural and social issues of which the Scriptures give freedom. You see, what Paul observes is that instead of loving each other and learning from each other's differences we're prone to despise judge each other. That's the substance our consideration today.

Here's how we'll organize our time ...

- Our *freedom* from judgment
- Our *motivations* behind judgment
- Our *cosmic* judgment

Movement 1: Our Freedom from Judgment (vv.1,3; 13:8; 15:7, Galatians 5:1, Matthew 2:13)

The first thing Paul does is give us a picture of a healthy community which is *free* from judgment. *Read Romans 14:1 ... As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.* For the next couple chapters Paul will be juxtaposing two people—one is weak and one is strong. The first he describes here as "*weak in the faith.*" The other he doesn't explicitly identify as "*strong*" until the next chapter, but their presence is implied throughout this passage. So, *what's he talking about? Who is weak? Who is strong?*

Well, first it's probably good to acknowledge who he's not talking about. He's not talking about non-Christians as weak and Christians as strong. Both groups are

Christians. In fact, both are most likely members of the same local church. Paul also isn't comparing those who trust God a lot (the strong) and those who struggle to trust him (the weak). Biblical faith isn't measured like that. Remember, Jesus said a mustard seed of faith would do (see Matthew 17:20). Faith is always about the *who* not the *how much*. So that can't be what Paul is comparing. What's most likely from the context is that the weak and strong have different understandings with the law. They have different habits, experiences, and beliefs about matters of conscience. They're having a hard time distinguishing between matters of basic principle and of individual preference. And these groups arrive at different conclusions about bricks and springs. *Make sense?*

Scholar Leon Morris brings some more clarity. He explains this is not a difference of faith and trust, "***Rather, the person [Paul] has in mind is the one who does not understand the conduct implied by faith ... He does not understand that when the meaning of justification by faith is grasped questions like the use of meat and wine and special days become irrelevant***" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 477). What we've been learning in Romans is that justification through Christ, frees us from the obligation to the law. Specifically laws that were previously meant to keep God's people spiritually clean between various sacrifices are now irrelevant because Jesus has made us clean forever. That's how Paul could say in the previous chapter, ***Read Romans 13:8 ... the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*** In Christ, love is our only law. Therefore food, days, and drinks are matters of conscience.

The weak in faith are those who are having a hard time detaching from that old way of living. They're still bound to certain religious expressions which are now obsolete in the new covenant. The strong, on the other hand, are those who have detached, or were never attached to this way of thinking and living. They know and enjoy freedom. The type of freedom described to the church in Galatia, ***Read Galatians 5:1 ... For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*** The gospel frees us from guilt ... frees us from shame ... frees us from the bondage of the law. The gospel frees us from submitting to dates and dietary restrictions as a means to holiness. However, we all understand and come to terms with this freedom at different times and in different ways. You see, though this is immediately true in the life of a Christian, freedom takes time to embrace. That's especially true for those who were steeped in moralism. That means when we're in Christian community, we're all in different places of freedom and it becomes easy to despise or judge one another based on where we are in that journey.

That's what Paul is saying should never be the case in the Roman church. The strong aren't supposed to build community for themselves nor center themselves in community. Instead, *what's he say? Welcome the weak.* In Greek, that word ***welcome*** has more meaning packed into than the English word supplies. It's the root word *lambano*. It's the same word Matthew uses when he records what the angel told Joseph in a dream, ***Read Matthew 2:13 ... "Rise take (lambano) the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt ..."*** To *lambano* someone is not to put up with them or simply allow them to exist around you. John Stott says, ***"It means to***

*welcome into one's fellowship and into one's heart" (Romans, 359). So lambano is really about loving someone you disagree with. Are you with me? And the weak were likely in a minority in Rome. So the strong were meant to draw them close, not to argue with them about matter of conscience but to love them. After all, *is this not the story of our faith? Have not we, the eternally weak, been welcomed by Christ, the eternally strong?**

The cross of Christ frees us from judgment. We have been welcomed. We have not been despised and judged. That's the gospel. And the gospel transforms the heart. Skip down to v.4. The strong should welcome the weak, ***Read Romans 14:3b ... for God has welcomed him.*** God has welcomed the strong and the weak. God has drawn close to the strong and weak. God has befriended the strong and weak. This idea becomes even more emphatic in the next chapter when Paul says, ***Read Romans 15:7 ... Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*** And, *how has Christ welcomed us? By grace. With love. Free from despisement and judgment. This is certainly a brick of our faith and the foundation of our nature as God's people.* You take this out and the whole project collapses. And so as a community we are meant to be established upon this foundation, welcoming all kinds of different people in various seasons and stages of their spiritual development. People with whom we will likely disagree.

The life of love results in a life of unity in diversity. Yet, in our fallenness diversity breeds judgment. Paul helps us get underneath this by clarifying our ***motivations*** behind judgment ...

Movement 2: Our Motivations Behind Judgment

(vv.2-3, Luke 23:11, Matthew 23:23-24)

What motivates a critical spirit? What leads us to judge others? Remember, we're not talking about bricks, we're talking about springs, matters of conscience not core doctrines. In Rome they're talking about food. *Read Romans 14:2-3 ... One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.* Some believe they can eat anything. They see no spiritual prohibition against eating meat. Others believe dietary restrictions are still in force. And what Paul is saying is that regardless of what you believe ... in fact, the specifics don't really matter at all ... there's a motivation which grows in our hearts to not welcome each other, but instead despise and judge.

First, in v.3 Paul says the strong are tempted to despise the weak. Those who live with more freedom often look down on those who live with more constriction. Specifically, the strong think the weak are legalistic. What's more, they view them as inferior Christians who have yet to ascend to the heights of their spiritual sophistication. Church, this is judgment. It's despisement. That's the caution. Paul says, "*Let not the one who eats despise ...*" That same word is used of Herod's treatment of Jesus. *Read Luke 23:11 ... And Herod with his soldiers treated [Jesus] with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing,*

he sent him back to Pilate. This is the opposite of welcoming. It's the opposite of drawing near those with whom we disagree. It's holding people at arms length, holding them in contempt. Refusing to be known or associated with someone.

Beneath the surface the strong are prone to see rules like springs. Take one or two or a few out, all is well. They're free. Ironically, what Paul is helping us see is that their freedom combined with despisement leads to a new bondage. When we are bitter toward our brothers and sisters for not being free like us, we are enslaved to comparison ... to competition ... to bitterness ... to despisement ... to contempt. We view them as simple, immature, and narrow-minded. We view ourselves as more wise and mature. The motivation behind judgment is superiority. In Rome the strong think they're better than the weak. And you can not truly love someone who you think you are better than.

Secondly, in v.3 Paul says the weak pass judgment on the strong. Those who live with more limits than others are tempted to judge those who live with more freedom. While the strong think the weak are legalistic, the weak think the strong are lawless. Beneath the surface the weak are prone to see every rule and idea like bricks. Paul says, "*Let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats ...*" While the motivation for the strong is superiority, the motivation for the weak is fear. We are prone to follow rules with this type of zealousness because they provide us with moral assurance. And so we build robust walls of theology which are clear and strident and comprehensive in order to remain unstained by the

world. Ironically, in seeking safety behind walls of rules we are morally exposed. When you treat everything like a brick, you invariably start throwing some.

This was Jesus' concern with the Pharisees in Matthew 23. He warned them, *Read Matthew 23:23-24 ... "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"* They tithed everything. They were sure to do exactly what they thought the Bible taught them. They thought they were safe. But Jesus exposes them. Their moral diligence had led them to neglect love in the form of justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Fear tells us we are unsafe and rules protect us and that people who don't follow rules are dangerous. And so it leads the weak to pass judgment on the strong.

Again, in Paul's day the sources of despisement and judgment was about food and the law. But, *what about us? What causes the strong in our day to despise the weak? What causes the weak today to judge the strong? What do we disagree about?*

Well, we could make a very long list I'm sure. Within our church family there's a wonderful diversity of thought and expression. And honestly I'm not sure each of our divergent thoughts would fall within the same category of what Paul is writing about. But I do know anything we disagree about can lead to despisement and

judgement. So let me lay out a few ways I know we disagree as a church family and then consider what it looks like to love each other in our disagreements ...

- We disagree about abortion. While some believe the Scriptures teach the sanctity of life should lead all Christians to advocate for the eradication of abortion, others see the whole-life vulnerabilities of women and children and therefore abortion as health care provision.
- We disagree about gender identity. While some of us see gender as a binary concept and marriage as a covenant between a man and women in the Bible, others see space for fluidity, complexity, and personal dignity within human sexuality.
- We disagree about sexual orientation. For some of us we open the Bible and believe that marriage and sex are reserved for one man and one woman, while others of us open to the same passages and conclude that God's love makes space for same-sex sex and marriage.
- We disagree about wealth distribution. Some of us think wealth is a blessing from the Lord to be enjoyed and distributed in generous ways, others think wealth corrupts and marginalizes the poor.
- We disagree about parenting. While some of us spank our kids and keep strict bedtimes and never let our kids eat carbs on week days, others of us

refuse to discipline our children physically and have much more open discussion with them about things like sex and family history.

- We disagree about women in church leadership. Some of us believe that the Bible teaches that only qualified men ought to serve in the role of elder, others of us open our Bibles and see space for qualified women in that role.
- We disagree about racial harmony. Within our church we believe Christians should be vocal and active advocate for the racial marginalized, while others of us are more convinced the Word of God speak gospel truths but refrains from such overt social and racial applications.

There ought to be time and space to consider and discuss these things together. And as a church organization we've done our best to think deeply about these and other issues, and in good faith set doctrine and policies which demonstrate goodness, beauty, and truth. To be sure, the church in Rome had to make similar decisions as they started new churches. But notice, Paul does not answer every question in this passage. He doesn't say, *here's who's right and here's who's wrong*. He says, *don't despise and don't judge. Welcome each other. Love those with whom you disagree. Church, can you image? Can you image if we became a people whose primary goal was to show love rather than show we were right? Can you image if we desired to welcome more than we desired to argue and feel superior?*

I think this is where God's Word guides us today. This one of the primary reasons we've elected in our membership process to ask members to affirm (or agree with) primary doctrines or bricks, and only acknowledge secondary doctrines or springs. However a document doesn't give us any power to live with this type of love. We'll be empowered to do this only when we keep our *cosmic* judgment in mind ...

Movement 3: Our Cosmic Judgment (v.4, Isaiah 33:22, Hebrews 9:27)

Paul brings it home by bringing it to the heart. *Read Romans 14:4 ... Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.* He makes it a bit personal. He asks, *who are you? Who are you to exercise superiority over someone who belongs to another?* It's rhetorical of course. None of us is in a position where we ought to control or dictate to another brother or sisters. We should not pass judgment on them. But not because judgment is wrong. Rather, because we are the wrong judge.

Throughout Scripture God is described just so ... as the judge. The prophet Isaiah says, *Read Isaiah 33:22 ... For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king; he will save us.* The writer of Hebrews puts it this way, *Read Hebrews 9:27 ... And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* Paul latches on to that historic vision of God and invites his readers to look forward with humility and trust. We will all be judged. We will be

judged by God. And on that day, our Lord, our master will bring order to all this moral confusion. Paul says, *it's up to God if the weak or strong stands or falls*. But he goes further than that. He says, God will uphold the strong and the weak. This is why we should not judge. This is why we should not despise. Because these, our brothers and sisters, belong to the Lord ... we belong to each other ... we should show love not show we're right.

Remember, the disagreement in Rome is a matter of conscience. It's a debatable topic like the many matters of conscience we face today. And I think Paul is helping us to see that not only are the answers to many of our questions not the most important thing ... but also, we should have a posture which holds out the possibility that we might be wrong. In his book, *Think Again*, professor Adam Grant suggests that "***we need to spend as much time rethinking as we do thinking***" (16). While he's thinking about a broad view of knowing, *how much more ought we be a people willing to not just think but rethink who God is ... what he's like ... and what he calls us to as a people? I'm not suggesting we act like we can't and don't know anything (we'll talk more about that next week when Paul says "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind")*. What I am suggesting is that our posture toward the bricks and springs we find within the Bible should change. We should not enjoy our theologies for superiority. We should not build our doctrines for fear. We ought to welcome people. We should not despise or judge, but welcome.

Because one day we'll stand before our Cosmic Judge. We will stand before the Lord and he probably won't ask us if we got all our bricks and springs right. I'm convinced he's not going to ask, *did everyone know you were right about everything?* It seems much more likely he's going to ask, *did you love people? Did you even love those you disagreed with? Or did you live with fear and superiority? Did you welcome people the way I welcomed you?*