

Gospel Driven Diversity (from the Series “*Longing for Change*”)

Romans 14:1-12

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Sunday, November 3, 2019

It is very, very good to see you this morning and to have the privilege of worshipping with you. Just to remind you of a couple of things to be praying about before we get into the message: we had the privilege of ministering to around a thousand or so people—we kind of lost count at the end. It was hard to keep up with everybody but, here for Trunk-or-Treat Thursday evening. We made an effort to try to count how many people we were sharing the gospel with, and I gave up at some point, but we literally shared the gospel with hundreds of people. Personally, I talked to dozens. And so, just pray that the work that we did—we prayed beforehand that God would open the door for the message of the Word that this seed that we planted Thursday evening. And I'm so grateful to all of you who worked so hard for weeks to help us to be prepared for that moment on Thursday evening.

Also, just to remind you about the town hall business meeting coming up next Monday evening. And then, two weeks from yesterday, Mary-Catherine Satterwhite and I, along with a team of six or seven other folks, will be traveling to Barcelona and ministering there. This will be my fourth trip there, [Mary-Catherine's] third trip. And so, we know the personnel on the ground there; we understand the work, but we greatly appreciate your prayer. It's slow work; it's difficult, but it's really important. So, we would ask you to be praying with us about that.

Likely, you have some favorite foods, some things that you love to eat. And then there's probably some things on your mind that's a list on *I will never be able to eat that*. I had some help this weekend doing some research on this subject. There are sometimes those things are culturally conditioned people in different parts of the world—either there's things they really like, or there's things that they really don't like. For instance, it's my understanding that Thai people, the most disgusting thing that they can think of to eat is runny brie cheese, and I'm kind of with them on that. That does not sound good to me at all. Some Eastern European peoples eat horses. Some cultures eat chicken feet. When I was thinking about this, I looked up what blood sausage is—you don't want to know. [Crowd laughter]. [Gene laughing] You know and you don't want to think about it. And then there's a dish, a Nordic dish called lutefisk that is a fish dish that's made with lye, and it soaks so that it just becomes this sort of gelatinous blob, a sort of fish jello. [Crowd laughter]. And, uhm, and this—I'm not making this up—it literally will corrode sterling silverware, and I just don't want to eat something that's going to, that would chew up something that's metal. It doesn't seem right.

I'm speaking—this is not just a story about nothing—I'm speaking from Romans 14. And I had the privilege this week of speaking to a group of elementary students about this passage, and I introduced it to them as, what was going on and what the Apostle Paul was addressing here was a kind of food fight if you would. But they weren't throwing food; that's not what was going on. They had differences because of their cultural and religious background on what their diets were,

and they were, they had sort of gravitated to not just *I don't like what you're doing*, but *I don't like you because of your differences*, and that's what was being dealt with. Paul was writing to a church in Rome that he'd never been to, but it's obvious when you read chapter 16 that he knew people well who were there, and he understood the situation and what the challenge they were facing. They were a church of a Jewish background believers along with Gentile believers, and they were trying to work from their very different backgrounds on how to relate together, how to love one another together, how to serve together inside of one church body. And, in particular, they were they were wrestling with the background of the Old Testament food laws and celebrations—the very thing that Gary was alluding to earlier. And let me just say to you: it is, we have to be very careful in interpreting this passage to try to understand exactly how we apply it to ourselves now, because we don't have anything quite like what was going on with them now.

But here's one way to think about that: is that we wrestle with what I will call—not original with me—first-order, second-order, and third-order doctrines. First-order doctrines are things like the gospel itself—how does a person come to faith in Christ? Who is Jesus, and what is his divinity and how we describe him? And we would understand the Bible to say, *if a person doesn't agree on those subjects, that person is not a follower of Jesus*, not according to the New Testament. Second-order doctrines would be things like the mode of baptism—it's the sort of things that tend to divide people into denominations in various churches, but we would not say that those people are not believers. In fact, I have great friends who disagree with me on those kinds of subjects. But then there are third-order doctrines, and just one case and point—and we could list many—is believers disagree on whether or not a good, God-honoring Christ follower or Christian family should celebrate Halloween or no.

And that's just one. And we've had people who were part of this church who have declined to participate in Trunk-or-Treat because they don't believe we ought to acknowledge that in any way whatsoever even though we're attempting to share the gospel in the way that we do that very thing. And there are several challenges even still in lining it out that way, but one of the challenges is that people don't always agree on, you know, one person might call *well, this is something that the New Testament is not clear on; this is a third-order doctrine*, and another person would say, *uh-uh, that needs to go in the second category, and we should not cooperate with people who have this particular view*. And that gets into things like worship styles and other things.

One of the ones I came across this week, and I didn't remember this, I think I'd heard this before, but there's a group of people sitting over here who are in town for a wedding. I learned this week that Christian people used to disagree on whether or not you should exchange wedding bands. So, I would not call that a first-order doctrine or a second-order doctrine. That's a third-order doctrine. Good and God-honoring Christian people could disagree on whether or not the exchange of a wedding band was a good idea or not. However, there's a danger in the other direction, is that some want to argue, especially when it comes to the sexual ethics of the New Testament, is that to say that we need to reinterpret or to read the Bible differently now because there's a different situation in the culture and take things the Bible clearly explains and say that's really something that we ought to be able to agree to disagree over. And so, I'm approaching this,

and we approach this in this church as this: this Book is the authority. I don't judge this Book; this Book judges me. And so, when the Bible speaks clearly to a subject, I'm not at liberty to edit that differently or interpret it differently because it might be more convenient in the moment. And so, a body of believers working together though, coming with culturally different backgrounds and disagreements on some of these third-order issues can be a challenge of living together, and loving, and worshipping together. And so, here's this message, the gist of it: the gospel is going to drive you and I to worship with, and connect with, and to serve with people who are diverse from us, both in their practices and in some of their beliefs, and that's going to present challenges to you. That's going to tempt you to judge people. That's going to tempt you to put them in boxes that are unfair. And so, knowing that that is coming, how are you going to prepare to welcome people well into your life, and into your family, and into this church family, and into this church body? We *must*, we *must* get this for the sake of the gospel, and for the glory of God, and for the good of our neighbors.

This is what Romans 14 is about. Three things we need to do and that is to update our calendar, to put down our gavel, and to prepare to meet God. First of all, you need to update your calendar. And you're going to have to give me a minute to lay this out as to why I say that from this text. So, let's look at verses 1-3: "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."

Now, Paul is writing as a Jewish man with a rich Jewish background, but he describes those who are still wrestling with some of the Old Testament practices and laws and wrestling with whether or not that was still a requirement for them spiritually before God. He calls them, that Paul's term: "weak in faith." And so, those were, not exclusively, but those were mostly Jewish believers wrestling with that. Gentile believers coming into the Christian faith from a pagan background; some of them, but not exclusively, would have been people going back and forth on this. But, basically, there was a difference in how they were looking at the subject. But, the verb there, the command there, the imperative in the text is that the strong had the responsibility to welcome people who looked at this differently. And that word "welcome" is a very strong image; it's way more than being able to smile and being able to shake someone's hand or even to give them a hug. It's talking about opening up your heart and welcoming this person into your life to become a part of your family, a part of your world.

And so, on these kinds of differences that Paul is seeking to address, he's saying we're to welcome these people into our lives, into our hearts, but *not* to quarrel over opinions. In other words, *not* for the sake of *I see this person who's thinking about this wrongly, and I'm going to welcome them into my life. I'm going to befriend them so I can get them straightened up, so I can make sure that they're thinking about this accurately.* And he says that what they're not to quarrel about though is opinions. And some translations say that's a disputable matter, or what I called earlier a "third-order issue" about which Christian people can honestly disagree on the exact application of how that works. And so, Paul says, *one person believes they can eat anything. The weak person believes they can only eat vegetables.* That was the difference, and this very simple, this very practical, this very everyday issue—their diet, what they ate was creating divisions

among the body. And Paul says that is an issue that we are called to be sensitive to and to address.

Please note: Paul is *not* calling these differences that they had “sin.” He is saying that these are both acceptable positions; it's okay to be in either one of these camps. He does seem to believe theologically that one is better than the other, but he does not say, *that's wrong to think that way*. But then here's the rub, here's the challenge: he says to both those he interprets as strong and weak, he says, *don't despise*. Look at the text again: “Let not the one who eats”—the one that Paul is calling strong—“despise...” That's a very strong word, but you know very well that that sometimes comes about. We look at people who see the world differently than we do, who think about the world differently, who have a different set of practices, and we struggle to wrap our minds around that. And so, sometimes we can switch from *I don't get you* to *I don't like you*, or *I think that's morally inferior what you're thinking on this third-order issue, on this matter of opinion*.

And then he says, *let not the one who abstains judge the one who eats*. And so, the danger there is that if you believe that a certain set of practices, that a fair reading of the Bible would say is an optional matter or a disputable matter, but *you* believe that that's a clear gospel issue, then you're going to think that person is not—they're just kind of a Libertarian. They don't really, they just think you can do whatever you want and not really think about those values. And so, we're not to do that. and no and the reason is: *God* has welcomed him. And so, immediately Paul takes this very simple, practical, granular issue of differences in food and makes a gospel issue of it from the standpoint of he says, *the reason that you're not to do this is because these people that you're looking at differently, God has welcomed them*. And God didn't welcome either party because of their good behavior or because of anything inside of them, but it was simply because of God's grace.

This past Sunday evening Gene Youngblood shared on Sunday night a class about how believers can faithfully look from a biblical standpoint about some political issues. And he quoted a politician. I, not being from Georgia, I didn't know this guy's name, but I'm guessing a lot of you do—Zell Miller was a democratic lieutenant governor and senator in Georgia, and if I get the quote wrong, you'll have to correct me later, but he said something like this, he said, *don't pay attention to what a politician says; pay attention to what they do, how they vote or what they do*. In other words, actions speak louder than words. And my reason for saying that, my reason for saying that we're to update our calendar: it's not easy to translate this issue, this biblical interpretive issue in Romans 14 into our time, but after reflecting on this, and thinking about this, and studying this for quite some while, my sense is is that one of the issues that it relates to is that when we come to the body of Christ from a different set of backgrounds, and we are, the gospel is going to draw us together, and the gospel is going to provoke toward being more diverse. And we can say, you know, *we would really like for our church to be more diverse*, but we don't get to say that we care about that if we're not willing to invest time in people who think, and look, and act, and have different views about some of these third-order issues than we do.

And, I'm not saying that we're supposed to be rude to people who disagree with us on those first-order issues, but I am saying that God's call on our life is to invest time and people who think

differently. If you're not ever with someone who looks at the world differently than you do, then you're likely to not have much opportunity to even question whether you're on the right track about some things. And we, there are some beliefs on this third category that we ought to hold a little more loosely. And, you know, it's not original with me but that eleven o'clock is still the most segregated hour of the week. And, I don't think that's okay. And we should keep trying to do something about that. A good friend of mine who writes and is respected nationally on this subject says, *not every church can be a diverse church, but every church can be a reconciling church; every church can be full of people who are intentionally seeking to invest time.*

So, we can learn whether you and I care about this by looking at your appointment book and looking at your list of contacts and who is it that you message and interact with on a consistent basis. We don't get to say that we care about this issue until those very practical things look differently. So, we need to be intentional. And, I would just like to encourage you to picture a church full of people intentionally welcoming people into their homes and out to coffee who are culturally different than them, because we have a lot to learn about how to do this well.

Let me move on to the second thing. First of all, to be able to welcome people well into our lives, we need to update our calendar, and maybe we should say our contacts list as well. But, secondly, to put down your gavel. Put down your gavel. Look at verses 4-9: "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. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be both Lord of the dead and of the living."

The rest of this passage gets to his practical assistance as to how we can follow this principle of welcoming well. First of all, he says, you know, *you simply wouldn't judge the servant of another; that's the relationship between that servant and that Master, and it would be offensive. It's just not done.* And then, moving away from that illustration, and he alludes very specifically when he says that this person that you think is off base on this particular third-order subject, this particular disputable matter, *will be upheld* because the Lord is able to make him stand. Or, as Paul said in another place—Philippians 1:6: "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

So, now Paul moves from issues of food to issues of the observance of particular days. And again, it's interesting that Gary addressed this very specifically, but you can just imagine in this church of people some wrestling with these various feasts on the Jewish calendar. Take for instance, the day of atonement, the holiest day of the year as I understand it on the Jewish calendar. And so, those with a Jewish background would be gearing up for this moment and looking about this day as a very unique day. But the Gentile background believers without any of that would be like *what's the big deal? It's just Wednesday. It's just another day.* And so, they

would really struggle when they would have these issues, and that's the kind of thing that's going on in the body there. And so, Paul says about these matters: *we're to be thoughtful about them. Each person is to be fully convinced in their own minds*, meaning that we need to think about why we do what we do and to do it from a convictional issue. But, on these third-order issues to recognize—and this might be hard for some of you, for some of us. I'll include myself in that. And that's to recognize that we might be wrong on some of these issues. How long has it been on something that's not a gospel issue that someone that you've actually been persuaded that you were looking at a situation in the wrong way? Do you have the humility to be able to make that adjustment, or have you not changed your mind about anything in thirty years? That would not be an image of someone who is open to recognize that God may want to convict them in a different way and for them to take up different practices.

But he goes on into this, and the way that he seeks to address this is to focus not so much on, you know, *you're looking horizontally and bumping into each other*, but *I want you to focus on the vertical relationship. You pay attention to the reality that each of you has a relationship with me*. And when he says, “no one lives to himself, and no one dies to himself,” he's actually not encouraging us to, as important as that is, and there's plenty of passages of scripture about that, to be well connected to other people. He's actually making the opposite point that we're to live all of our lives for an audience of one and to be focused on God and to think about that. And then, he takes it even further to say, *this is why Jesus lived, and this is why he died and rose from the dead, so that from the beginning of our lives to the end of our lives, he is Lord of all of that. And that's why he died, and that's why he rose from the dead*. And so, we're not to pass judgment on each other for these things.

I grew up in a church that, never celebrated Chris—we didn't have Christmas Eve service. I think the first Christmas Eve service I was ever in was in college. I didn't know what an Advent calendar or candle was... I don't think I knew what that was until I was in seminary. Now, you know, make all the backward jokes about Southeastern Kentucky you want. I just didn't know. [Gene laughing]. Something else, maybe even a little more controversial: we didn't celebrate patriotic holidays. And we had patriotic events in town, but we didn't do much of that in church. In fact, I don't remember any of it ever, and I'm not sure that prepared me very well because my entire public full-time ministry there's some sort of argument that goes on every single year on what level of emphasis we ought to put on patriotic holidays. It comes up every year about something. I want to tell you I believe that's a third order issue. And we can agree to disagree on how that is, and you shouldn't make that a higher issue as if that's something morally wrong with seeing that and doing that differently. Maybe you'll need to get me straight on that later, but that is in one of those things that's in this this category.

We're not to judge people. We're not to judge one another on these issues and think of them as lesser people. But sometimes one of the ways I think this applies is that I see sometimes people, when they move to a new area and they struggle to find a church. They're trying to find something that fits exactly, something that they had in the past or something that they believe that is what they need in this moment. And it's very easy to judge a particular body of believers based on some of these issues—when you really don't know them very well—based on racial

issues, based on political issues, based on the relative age of people that it looks like to you that is in that particular church body. And we're to be much more careful than we generally are.

Jesus settled this issue himself in the Sermon on the Mount: *Judge not, so you will not be judged*. Of course, some overinterpret that to mean that that means that we're to accept everyone, except all behaviors, everyone. Everything that we do is okay. But that couldn't be what Jesus meant because a couple verses later he says: *You'll be able to know them by their fruit*. And so, there has to be a time for discerning behavior and assessing behavior, but we're not to be condemning; we're not put people in boxes and to sentence people as someone not worth my time.

So, this image, to help us to deal with this based on Paul's emphasis here, we're to imagine ourselves daily, imagine ourselves when we're wrestling with someone over these kinds of issues, to imagine ourselves at the foot of the cross, how to use our imagination to think of what it would be like to have been with the disciples in the upper room as they were grappling with the wonder of the resurrection of Jesus, and that we keep these big-picture issues in mind to recognize that the lower-level stuff ought not divide us.

Let me hurry on to this last part. We need to update our calendars. We need to put down our gavel, and finally, we need to prepare to meet God. Part of the reason why we're not to judge, 'cause it's not your job, not my job. In fact, we're the ones who are going to be judged. We're the ones who are going to be held accountable. Verses 10-12: "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgement seat of God; for it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.'" So then each of us will give an account of himself to God."

Another reason not to pass judgment on one another is that we're family; we're brothers and sisters in Christ. And, again he says: "...why do you despise your brother?" It's the second time he's mentioned that. Must be an issue. He doesn't talk about stuff that's not going to be a problem, and so the things that he lays out here is that we're all going to stand before God in the end. Every knee is going to bow. Every tongue is going to confess. Every person's going to give an account of their life. And, yes, of course, there's going to be some differences between us, and some of us are going to be right about some issues and wrong about other issues, but even if you're right and I'm wrong, or I'm right and you're wrong, the differences between me and you when the standard is Jesus are negligible.

I was thinking about as I was studying this and thinking about the overwhelming thought of standing before God. These images before, maybe a couple of days before a boxing match or some sort of fighting event, they have a press conference. Have you seen this? Where two guys that are going to be fighting, they get face to face and nose to—I mean they are right there, just trying to intimidate. I wonder if anybody ever laughs when that happens. But, I mean, they're just right there standing up to one another, just determined to—with everything within them that they can—to give this image of *I'm strong, and I'm big, and I'm going to take you out*. Anyone who would think about the reality of standing before God with anything like cockiness or arrogance is not dealing with reality.

[Motions to crowd]. You're going to be there. You're going to be there. And you guys are going to be there, and I'm going to be there. And the differences in our moral behavior and our differences on issues are not going to matter a whole lot when we are on our face before God and the only hope that we have is the grace of God and the mercy of Jesus. Paul says those are the things that have got to be remembered and taken in to enable us to be able to welcome well people with whom we have differences over. The more we get the gospel, the more we're going to be drawn to welcome people different from ourselves.

Ruth Graham told the story that she was traveling and saw a construction sign that said: *End of construction. Thank you for your patience.* And she said that she was going to have that placed on her tombstone, and as far as I know, she did, which I think is pretty cool. And a generation or so ago there was a popular bumper sticker that said: *Be patient with me, God is not finished with me yet.* That's a fine sentiment and all, but the force of this text is not *would you please be patient with me?* But the challenge to us, the overt command to us from God is that we be patient with one another, that we have tolerance over these issues over which we disagree and to recognize that we're still in need of the same message that I had the privilege of sharing with dozens of people Thursday night: that there's good news—God created you with purpose. You're not an accident. But also, that there's bad news: you chose to rebel against God; you rejected his love and his good instruction for your life, so did I. And the worst news is that we can't fix that. We can't repair that on our own. But the great news is, then, that Jesus came to live the life that I ought to have lived, and that you ought to have lived, and then he died in my place as my *substitute* to pay the price for *my sin*, and then he rose from the dead, proving that he is who he says he is, so that when we trust who Jesus is and what he did and his work on the cross to pay for our sin, he makes us clean and whole on the inside. And that reality about each of us is the basis for us to be able to welcome people well into our lives.

Let's pray.

Father, I ask that we be people that are driven along at every part of our lives by the good news and by your grace and your mercy. And may we increasingly understand the *full* implications of the gospel for even something as practical and mundane as what we eat and how that affects other people around us, and how we hold these third-order convictions. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.