**COVID-19**

**WELCOMING THOSE WHO DISAGREE WITH US**

**Romans 14:1-23**

**INTRODUCTION**

Imagine going to church one Sunday and meeting someone you really liked. You have a lot in common. You’re in a similar stage of life. You both love the Lord. You start thinking, “I could see myself becoming really good friends with this person.” And so, you invite them over to your house for lunch, and they gladly accept.

You ask the customary question of whether there are any dietary restrictions, and the friend simply replies, “If the Bible says I can eat it, I’m good to go!” So you buy a couple of big juicy steaks because you want to do something special for this new Christian friend. You even break out a bottle of vintage wine that you’ve been waiting to serve for a special occasion.

But when you serve the meal, your friend says, “Oh sorry, I don’t eat meat.” “Wait a second”, you reply. “I thought you said you’ll eat anything if the Bible says you can eat it.” “Well yeah,” the friend replies. “But the Bible says I can’t eat meat. It also says I can’t drink wine, so you can put that bottle away too.”

It dawns on you that this friend has never read Acts 10 where Peter receives a vision of a great sheet containing all sorts of animals descending from heaven and God’s voice saying, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat!” But your friend says, “I know that, I’ve read it.” So then you turn to Mark 7 where Jesus says that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, but only what comes from within, and how Mark clearly says that Jesus declared all foods clean. But your friend says, “Yes, I know that as well. But I’m still convinced that the Bible tells me that eating meat is wrong. And if I want to glorify God and honour the Lord Jesus Christ, I have to be a vegetarian.”

How would a conversation like that change your relationship with that person? Would you think, “So much for becoming friends”? Or would you shrug your shoulders, say “To each his own”, and pull out the cabbage?” Would you be able to attend the same church? Sit under the same preaching? Participate in the same small group?

What if the issue wasn’t food, but masks, or vaccines, or whether the church should open or close during lockdowns? Can believers who disagree on these issues still live in unity?

That’s the question that our text today is going to help us answer. But before we get into the text, I want to commend you for not letting these issues become divisive in our church. I know people in our church have different opinions on these things, but you haven’t let those opinions lead to division. That is so rare in times like these.

And so, on behalf of our pastors and our leadership team, I want to thank you for your unity: unity with one another, and unity with our leadership. We have gone through a tremendously trying time, and continue to do so, but we have endured it all together.

My hope is that this sermon will give you biblical categories for understanding how that works. How can people remain united in one body when they don’t just have different opinions, but different biblical convictions? How is that possible?

There are times that we need to divide when it comes to essential issues, like the Trinity, or the authority of Scripture, or the person and work of Jesus Christ. But if our differences rest on non-essential issues like masks, vaccines, or politics, then Romans 14 tells us that we can still welcome one another.

The title of this sermon is **Welcoming Those Who Disagree With Us.** This chapter gives us three reasons why we should welcome brothers or sisters in Christ who have different biblical convictions than we do:

1. They have been welcomed by God
2. They desire to honour the Lord
3. They should follow their conscience

(1) **THEY HAVE BEEN WELCOMED BY GOD**

**1** As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

In verse 1, Paul writes of those who are “weak in faith”. They’re not weak in character. They’re weak “in faith” because their faith doesn’t permit them to do certain things. Paul gives multiple examples throughout the chapter, beginning in verse 2:

**2**One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.

Those who were “weak in faith” didn’t allow themselves to eat meat. They believed that they could only eat vegetables. This shows us that the “weak in faith” had imposed a more rigorous standard of conduct on themselves than the Bible required. We see that again in verse 5:

**5**One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.

The weak in faith believed that there were certain days that were more important than others. This was likely a reference to the Sabbath, but it could have referred to Jewish Feasts as well. The point is that they’re conforming to a moral and religious standard that no longer applies to New Testament believers once again.

We know that these standards no longer apply because of texts like Acts 10 and Mark 7 where God declared all foods clean, or Hebrews 4 which says that the Sabbath was fulfilled in the rest from trusting in our good works that we receive in Christ. But we also see it here in Romans 14, where Paul says:

**14**I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself…

Nothing is unclean in itself, which means that, for the Christian, everything is on the table. Christians can eat pork and shellfish. We can eat animals that chew the cud but don’t have cloven feet, and animals that have cloven feet but don’t chew the cud. We can eat all kinds of meat prepared in all sorts of ways, because that’s the freedom that Christ has bought for us.

And yet, there were Christians in the early church who didn’t believe this. It’s important to note that they were in fact Christians. They weren’t like the false teachers who believed that you had to be circumcised, or that you had to obey the law of Moses in order to be saved. If they were, Paul would have condemned them just like he did to the Judaizers in Galatia, but he doesn’t.

They may have been “weak in faith”, but they weren’t among those who had no faith. Paul refers to them as his brothers in verses 10 and 15. He even calls them those “for whom Christ died” in verse 15. These are Christians – justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – who were only eating vegetables and setting aside certain days as better than others.

They clearly came to the wrong conclusions, and yet Paul says “welcome him”. Welcome him into your life. Welcome him into your home. Welcome him as your brother in Christ. Don’t welcome him just to “quarrel over opinions”. The point isn’t to have a theological debate, but to show them the love that they are due as fellow Christians.

This applies equally to the vegetarians:

**3**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.

The “strong in faith” aren’t to despise those who disagree with them, and the “weak in faith” aren’t to pass judgment on those who disagree with them either. Why? Because “God has welcomed him.”

This is where theology meets practice, where doctrine meets culture, where the big ideas of the gospel change the way that we treat one another. We are to welcome one another because God has welcomed us to himself.

Of course, this implies that we needed to be welcomed in the first place. We needed to be welcomed by God through Christ because we were unwelcomed in our sin. But Jesus changed that. On the cross, Jesus was alienated from the Father so that we could be reconciled. He was forsaken so that we could be accepted. He was sent far away from the presence of God so that we could be brought near.

God has welcomed us. He has welcomed the weak in faith, and he has welcomed the strong in faith. He welcomes those who eat everything, and he welcomes those who eat only vegetables. He welcomes those who believe in the dangers of COVID, and he welcomes those who deny it. And if a Holy God welcomes sinners like us, how much more should we fellow sinners welcome one another?

Romans 15:7 says,

**7** Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Do you want to know how to glorify God? Then welcome those who disagree with you as Christ has welcomed you.

(2) **THEY DESIRE TO HONOUR THE LORD**

Second, we welcome believers who disagree with us because they desire to honour the Lord.

Notice that Paul never tells the two groups of believers to stop talking about what they can or cannot eat, or whether God has created certain days to be more important than others. He doesn’t say, “These are secondary issues, so they don’t matter”, or “Don’t have strong opinions on them.” In fact, he says the exact opposite!

**5**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**.

I used to play in an orchestra in high school, and our conductor would always tell us that if we’re going to play the wrong note, we better play it loud, because he’d rather have us play the wrong notes well than the right notes poorly! That’s what Paul is saying here. Even what you believe about food or days is wrong, you should be fully convinced in your own mind.

Again, we need to make sure we don’t read too much into this verse. He’s not encouraging believers to be fully convinced of heresy and to not listen to anyone else. He’s talking about secondary issues like food, and Sabbaths or our modern day equivalents of masks and vaccines. He’s saying, “Whatever you believe about these secondary issues, be fully convinced in your own mind that this is what the Bible teaches.” Why?

Because we do these things unto the Lord. Verse 6:

**6**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 who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

God doesn’t just care about us having all the right answers. He cares about the heart. If we’re fully convinced that we should observe special days, that honours the Lord even if God didn’t say we had to. If we’re fully convinced that we should abstain from eating meat, that honours the Lord even if God didn’t say we had to. And if we eat, fully believing that Old Testament laws on unclean food no longer applies to those who are in Christ, we honour the Lord as well.

God looks at the heart, so that even if we get a secondary issue wrong, God is honoured, because we’re doing it for him. We honour the Lord by our obedience, even when God hasn’t told us to obey in that specific way.

Some pastors and their churches believe that the Lord commands them to meet in person every Sunday. The result is that they’ve continued to meet during lockdowns, believing that the only way they can be faithful to the Lord is to disobey the government and meet every Sunday as a church.

I don’t agree with them, because I don’t believe that’s what the Bible teaches. But I can still respect them, because they’re meeting to honour the Lord. They’re disobeying the government to honour the Lord. Romans 14 tells me that I should even welcome them, because what they’re doing, they’re doing to honour the Lord.

Paul grounds this in gospel truth once again:

**7**For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. **8**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. **9**For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Jesus died and lived again, so that we could honour him whether we live or we die. What we do no longer reflects on ourselves, but on him. If we are to show the world that the Lord Jesus Christ is our Saviour, our greatest treasure, and the object of our highest affections, then everything that we believe and do should be to honour him.

There is something intensely personal about the fact that each of our lives reflects on the Lord Jesus, and that’s precisely Paul’s point. If each of us belongs to Jesus, then who are we to judge one another? Paul says this three times in verses 4, 10, and 13, and his point in all of those verses is that we have no right to judge the servant of another, because they’re not our servants. We’re not their masters. They have their own master, and he will judge them, just like he will judge us.

In his commentary on Romans, John Stott writes:

“We have no warrant to climb onto the bench, place our fellow human beings in the dock, and start pronouncing judgment and passing sentence, because God alone is Judge and we are not.” – John Stott

We are not the judge, but the judged. Verse 12 says,

“So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

We are to give an account, not of the person at that other church, or sitting across the sanctuary, or living in our homes. We are to give an account for ourselves. Each of us will stand before God our master, and he won’t ask us if we ate meat or only vegetables, or whether we observed certain days or treated all the same. He won’t ask us whether we wore masks, or whether we got the vaccine, or whether we voted for the right political party. Instead, he will ask, “Whatever you did, did you do it for me? Did you do it to honour me?”

(3) **THEY SHOULD FOLLOW THEIR CONSCIENCE**

Lastly, we welcome them because they should follow their conscience.

The conscience is one of the most important parts of the Christian life, and yet it doesn’t receive nearly the attention that it deserves. That’s because we have become experts, not in listening to the conscience, but silencing it. When we feel the guilt of our sins, we say, “Cheer up, it wasn’t that bad, forget about it,” but the Bible says “Repent! Let your godly grief lead you to repentance, so that you stop sinning and receive the comfort of knowing that Jesus died for your sins.”

In the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian removed his burden of guilt by looking to the cross. We try to remove our guilt by building up our self-esteem. We look to ourselves rather than to Jesus for the cleansing of the conscience, because we see the conscience as a curse that distracts us from trusting ourselves rather than a gift that leads us into trusting God.

The conscience also keeps us from doing what is wrong. It’s our internal alarm system that warns us when we’re approaching moral danger. “Don’t do that”, it warns us. “That’s going to harden your heart. That’s going to hurt other people. That’s going to offend God.” It warns us from doing what’s wrong, and it rewards us for doing what’s right. When you feel good about serving your neighbours, or giving to the needy, that’s your conscience speaking.

The conscience is a gift, but it can be silenced, or it can be seared. It can be seared like a hot iron pressing down on our skin so that we can no longer feel anything and it doesn’t work the way it’s meant to anymore. It doesn’t make us feel guilty for doing what’s wrong anymore, so that we head towards self-trust and self-destruction without knowing it.

What does this have to do with welcoming those who disagree with us? It teaches us that we must learn to respect the fact that people must listen to their conscience, even if their conscience isn’t completely accurate.

That’s the argument Paul makes in verses 13-23. Verse 14:

**14**I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

Paul knows that eating meat doesn’t offend God. But he says, “It is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean”. In other words, if someone believes that eating meat is wrong, it becomes wrong *for them*. They may not be sinning against God by eating meat, but they are sinning against God by acting against their conscience.

This highlights one of the central arguments of Romans 14. We know that we sin if we offend God’s law. But Romans 14 says that we also sin if we offend our conscience. If we do what we believe is wrong, we sin even if the act itself isn’t sinful.

Paul explains why in verse 23:

**23**But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

This is the key to understanding these verses. We sin when we go against our conscience because we’re not proceeding from faith. We’re not believing that God has allowed us to do that. The Roman Christians who were “weak in faith” weren’t trusting that the gospel had made a way for them to eat everything and to enjoy every day equally. So if they went ahead and ate meat, or if they went ahead and worked on the Sabbath, they would be sinning, because whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

This is the final reason why we should welcome those who disagree with us. We must respect the fact that they must follow their conscience. They must do or not do what their faith allows. We could do the opposite things and not sin. But if they did what we did, they would sin, because they didn’t act from faith.

Someone might say, “Does this mean I can steal, lie, or kill as long as my conscience doesn’t bother me?” Of course not. The conscience isn’t the ultimate standard of what is right and wrong. The Word of God is our standard, and it has clearly told us that stealing is wrong. But if God’s Word tells us that we *can* do something, but we still don’t believe we can, then we sin if we do it anyways.

Mark Dever captures this well when he wrote:

“Conscience cannot make a wrong thing right, but it can make a right thing wrong.” – Mark Dever

Paul wouldn’t have written Romans 14 if the Roman Christians were sleeping around, or lying, or stealing, or worshipping idols. The conscience can’t make wrong things right. But it can make right things wrong if we don’t have faith to do them.

The conscience was so important to Paul that he says if your eating of meat tempts your brother or your sister in Christ to sin, then you shouldn’t do it. If your good conscience wounds the weak conscience of your fellow Christian by tempting them to do what they believe is wrong, you shouldn’t do it. As he says in verse 15:

**15**For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

It’s more important to love than to exercise your rights.

Paul sums this all up in verses 17-19:

**17**For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. **18**Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. **19**So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

That’s why this matters so much. This is what makes it possible for us to lay down our rights for the good of others, because “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating, or drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”.

These are the things that are meant to define us as a community. These are the things that we’re supposed to be talking about most. We’re supposed to be talking about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. That’s what unites us as believers. That’s what holds us together as a church.

Truth matters, but if we hold truth to be the ultimate value in secondary and non-essential issues, then we’re going to sacrifice love. Truth and love – what we believe, and how we treat one another – are equally important in the life of the church.

**CONCLUSION**

We live in a time when people have forgotten how to disagree well. That’s because disagreement is taken to mean disrespect. If you disagree with someone, you’re not just expressing a different perspective. You’re not just engaging in fruitful dialogue. You’re seen as insulting them. You’re seen as attacking them.

Romans 14 shows us a better way. It shows us that unity doesn’t have to mean uniformity. Diversity doesn’t have to mean division. We can have diverse opinions about issues that aren’t essential to our faith and still be united, because the kingdom of God is not a matter of masks, or vaccines; the kingdom of God is not a matter of political positions or even our political theology; the kingdom of God is a matter of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Those who disagree can be fully convinced in their own minds and still pursue peace with one another. We don’t like that because it seems mushy and relativistic, and that’s certainly a danger. But Paul shows us how we can be committed to truth and pursue love at the same time by remembering what the kingdom of God is all about.

And so, if you believe the church should shut down during lockdowns, or that everyone should wear masks or get vaccines, and you meet a fellow believer who disagrees with you, don’t insult them. Don’t even lecture them. Instead, welcome them as Christ has welcomed them; recognize that what they do, they do to honour the Lord; and remember that it is good and right for them to follow their conscience.

The same applies to those who are on the other side of the spectrum. If you say that the time is right for churches to disobey the government, or that wearing a mask is capitulating to fear, or that vaccines are an intrusion into our liberty, and you meet a fellow believer who disagrees with you, welcome them as Christ has welcomed them; recognize that what they do, they do to honour the Lord; and remember that it is good and right for them to follow their conscience.

And let us all remember this classic statement as we journey through these dark and divisive times:

“In essentials, unity;

in non-essentials, liberty;

in all things, charity.”