

"The Gracious Lifestyle"
Lesson 9 - Romans 14-16

Most churches hand out bulletins before their services. Some contain information like announcements of upcoming events, socials, meetings etc. Most often in smaller churches, the bulletins are created by wonderful volunteers, but they may not have the best editing skills. Here's a couple examples of announcements that were actually distributed throughout an entire church congregation. I thought they were applicable as our lesson this week is about harmony and peace in the church:

- The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been canceled due to a conflict.
- Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our community.
- Smile at someone who is hard to love. Say "Hell" to someone who doesn't care much about you.
- The church will host an evening of fine dining, super entertainment and gracious hostility.

In our lesson this week, Paul wasn't dealing with gracious hostility - but close. He was dealing with an issue that shouldn't, but does, arise in some churches - believers disagreeing. The first century Christians struggled to maintain unity, just as some churches do today; however, Paul wanted all believers to handle their differences in a lifestyle of grace. Not extending grace to fellow believers is still something that divides churches and sometimes even Christians when they disagree.

Differences of opinion aren't necessarily wrong. On certain matters it can lead to spiritual growth. But it's *how* the differences are handled that's crucial.

Paul wrote of what could be called the "golden rules of Christian kindness": "Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters." (Romans 14:1) and "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19)

Before addressing *how* Paul told us to do that, here's a bit more background on what he was dealing with at the time.

The early church was made up of Jewish and Gentile Christians. Each brought with them baggage from their background. For the Jew, it was the Law with its ceremonial requirements and pride of being favored as God's chosen people. For the Gentile, it was either practices from idolatry or without a true knowledge of God, a perception of what "religion" was supposed to be.

Some of these Christians were not fully convinced that God's grace meant they no longer had to follow the Mosaic Law, so giving up the restrictions and rules they had lived under all their lives was difficult. Certainly, there were also new converts to Christianity who were still growing in the knowledge of the freedoms available to them in their new faith. Paul referred to this group of Christians as "weaker believers."

Then, there were Christians who were fully confident of God's grace - that nothing was unclean or impure for them *except*, of course, the behavior God explicitly forbids. They had a strong sense of freedom to participate in behaviors formerly forbidden by the law of Moses or Jewish tradition. Paul referred to these Christians as the "stronger believers."

Because of diverse backgrounds and the religious and cultural practices of the Jews and Gentiles, there were tensions between them that threatened the unity of the body of Christ. Weaker believers held to their convictions about what was unclean; that they couldn't eat meat, possibly because they couldn't be sure that the meat they bought in the marketplaces met kosher

laws. They also believed God required them to continue observing Jewish holy days and traditional religious activities and practices.

Stronger believers knew they had liberties, that is, freedoms in Christ, to eat and drink anything, and they could choose to consider some days as sacred or not.

These issues of diets and days plagued the early church, but there are more, many more differences that have disrupted the church for generations. On some matters in the Christian faith, Scripture is simply silent. Not all solutions to disputes are absolute, black-or-white, one-size-fits-all and Paul referred to those matters as "disputable." You'll more often hear of them termed as "non-essential" matters and "opinions."

Disputable, non-essential matters are those which God does not explicitly condemn. They fall within Christian freedom and liberties. Whether non-essential behaviors are right or wrong depends on the convictions of the one embracing or abstaining from them.

It's extremely important to know that in Romans 14, Paul was *not* dealing with "essential" matters – ones that God's Word clearly states are sin. Sin does *not* fall under freedoms believers have in Christ. Some essential matters Scripture clearly identifies as sin, such as drunkenness, sexual immorality, and idolatry.

Additionally, there are *essential* matters that are absolute truths all Christians must accept because they are the foundation for the faith. They are not debatable and include, the deity of Christ, His atoning death on the cross, His resurrection, and that all people are sinners and need the Lord Jesus as Savior. These and other core beliefs are defined by Scripture. They will not change nor depend on whether one chooses to embrace them or not.

Warren Wiersbe wrote, "Some activities we know are wrong because the Bible clearly condemns them. Other activities we know are right because the Bible clearly commands them."

Unfortunately, some church denominations insist on elevating non-essential matters to the status of divine law and impose them on believers. Standards and practices in churches are often traditional, but not necessarily scriptural.

There are Christians with sincere but very different convictions from other Christians regarding whether they should watch TV, go to movies, especially R-rated ones, dance, play cards, have tattoos, play the lottery, have jobs where alcohol is served, only go to church on Sunday.

In church services, must it be suit and tie or can it be tank tops and shorts? Guitars and drums or just organs and pianos? Historical hymns or modern worship music? Serving the Lord's Supper every service or once a quarter? Believers have different opinions about when the rapture will occur and when Christ will return. And many believe the King James Bible is really the only true translation.

Then there's the issue of smoking and alcohol. A German believer said, "I grieve for all you Americans who harm your bodies with smoking. I could just cry in my beer." There are churches who forbid women wearing makeup. But some say, "If the barn needs paintin', paint it." I could go on, but you get the idea. You might snicker or be shocked there are such issues, but churches have, and some still do, struggle with them. And sadly, some churches permanently close their doors because of them.

I heard of a church some time ago that got into an argument over whether they ought to have a Christmas tree in their church. Some thought that a tree was fine; others thought it was a pagan practice, and they got so angry at each other they actually got into fist fights. One group dragged the tree out of the church; then the other group dragged it back in. They ended up suing each other and it was spread all over the news. Christian faith is not eating or drinking or Christmas trees. It's about righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Romans 14:17)

So, what did Paul teach about *how* those strong in their faith should live in relationship to those who are weaker?

- Accept the one whose faith is weak

"Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters." (Romans 14:1) We must have grace in understanding what backgrounds and teachings influence believers that lead them to participate or abstain from practices and freedoms in Christ. If every believer were to attend the same church service, hear the same messages, read the same Bible, believers still won't all be exactly the same in spiritual maturity.

- Don't judge your brother or sister in Christ

Paul said, "If anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean." (Romans 14:14) A key part of his teaching was that we are not to judge fellow believers or regulate their conduct when we differ on matters where the Bible doesn't give specific commandments. Fellow believers are not our servants. They are the Lord's. We are not their Master; the Lord is.

- Don't put a stumbling block or obstacle in their way (Romans 14:13)

Paul cautions that "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall." (Romans 14:21). And that is no insignificant matter, because if the weaker believer violates their conscience, if they participate in doing what they feel is wrong, Paul called that sin. Stronger believers are not to engage in a freedom if it destroys someone. Why? Because Christ died for them too.

Think of it like this. Picture a swinging bridge over a mountain stream or deep valley. There are people who can run across that bridge without any problem. They are not alarmed by it; they can keep their balance. But there are others who may start to cross but are very uncertain and just can't; or some might inch along a little at a time, maybe even crawling across. They probably will make it to the other side if they're given the time and can do so at their own speed and each time they approach the bridge, they may pick up confidence, and eventually be able to run right across it.

It can be like that with believers who are still growing in their faith. Some just can't see themselves moving towards freedoms they've been brought up to think are wrong. As in the case of the swinging bridge, it would be cruel for someone who was free and confident to cross the bridge, to grab the arm of someone who was timid and drag them across. It could cause them to trip, lose their balance and fall. Paul said not to distress a weaker believer. It's not loving to force one to embrace liberties you embrace. For a strong Christian to not indulge in a freedom for the sake of a weaker or younger believer is one of the clearest and truest exercises of Christian love and grace. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8:13 the rule he followed as a stronger believer was that if by practicing his freedom in Christ, caused another believer to stumble and sin, he would never practice his freedom again.

And Paul also provided instruction for *all* believers:

- Don't violate your conscience

Paul wrote that believers "...should be fully convinced in their own mind." (Romans 14:5) – they are to be fully convinced of their view on non-essential issues - which means not violating their conscience.

A man complained to his doctor. "I've been misbehaving, Doc, and my conscience is troubling me." His doctor asked, "You want something that will strengthen your willpower?" "Well, no," said the man. "I was thinking of something that would weaken my conscience."

Believers make decisions according to the light they possess, and they may be "fully convinced" – only differently than you. We must refrain from exercising a liberty if it might embolden or encourage another believer to sin by going against their conscience.

- In all we do, honor the Lord

Paul wrote, "Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor Him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God." (Romans 14:6) Believers are to consider everything they do that they are doing it for the Lord - whether or not they observe holy days, observe freedoms they believe they have, or abstain from freedoms, for Christ is Lord of every believer.

- Be accountable to God

Paul wrote, "Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God." (Romans 14:12) Now, for believers, we won't be accounting for sin because that was paid at Calvary, but all *will* account for how we lived. We're to offer weaker believers respect and grace for living within their convictions because they are accountable to God, not to us.

- Do what leads to peace through love

"Make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." (Romans 14:19) and Paul also urged us to pursue what leads to building each other up. "For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer acting in love." (Romans 14:15) Paul told the Corinthians it is love that strengthens the church.

- Keep it between you and God

Regarding non-essential matters of one's faith, Paul wrote, "Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God" (Romans 14:22) This verse doesn't mean we can't talk about what we believe our freedoms are. Paul was just again reminding stronger believers to keep their view of their liberty between them and God if it might harm a weaker believer. We live in a community of believers with our own convictions that must be based upon God's Word, involve prayerful conversations with God and the leading of His Holy Spirit. Since non-essential issues may not be clear in Scripture, we need wisdom to live graciously with fellow believers. James 1:5 says, "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and He will give it to you."

And in trying to live in peace, Paul didn't mean that the stronger believer could never engage in their freedoms. Because in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul *told* us we could. Albert Barnes suggested we consider enjoying freedoms in a more private setting if doing so would prevent causing a weaker believer to stumble.

Shouldn't we be able to sacrifice or delay practicing a freedom in Christ for one whose understanding of freedoms is less strong?

You've seen signs that say "YIELD." Yield means to surrender or relinquish something. Consider making a "yield" sign and taping it somewhere to remind you that as a believer practicing grace, you may need to yield your Christian liberty if it affects peace between you and another believer.

Matthew Henry wrote: "Meekness, humility, self-denial, and love, make for peace. We cannot edify one another, while quarrelling and contending."

On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus looked toward heaven and prayed for His followers and for the generations of followers yet to be born. His prayer is recorded in John 17. Jesus prayed, asking His Father that all of us would be one, as He and His Father are one, so that we may be brought to complete unity. That was Paul's hope for the believers: "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 15:5,6)

The gracious lifestyle: how can we sum it up?

- Accept the variety in other people, don't judge . . . be gracious.
- Become a servant of other people, yield in love . . . be gracious.
- Cultivate expressions of love, esteem and appreciation for others. Encourage them . . . be gracious.

Perhaps this quote, written in the early 1600's, may be a way of summarizing how, even with differences, we can be one in Christ:

"In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love (grace)."

As Paul approached the end of his phenomenal letter to the Roman Christians, he discussed his purpose in ministry. He had been commissioned by God to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. The Lord Jesus said about Paul, "This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15) and Paul took his ministry seriously.

In Romans 15, there's a list of promises Paul quoted from the Old Testament confirming that God had intended the Gospel was also to spread to the Gentiles:

- The Jews and Gentiles will glorify God. (Romans 15:9; Psalm 18:49;)
- The Jews and Gentiles will rejoice. (Romans 15:10; Deuteronomy 32:43;)
- The Jews and Gentiles together will praise God. (Romans 15:11; Psalm 117:1)
- Christ will reign over all nations. In Him Gentiles will have hope. (Romans 15:12; Isaiah 11:10)

Here in the Greek, the word hope means "confident expectation". Don't you agree that our God is a God in whom we can have "confident expectation"?

Paul's letter included a long list of personal greetings which demonstrated he was a friend maker as well as a soul winner. Paul had friends in the Lord, and he wrote that they brought him joy.

He greeted specific friends and ministry co-workers and his longtime colleague, Timothy. He included Priscilla and Aquila, whose home the church met in. And Andronicus and Junia, who had been in prison with Paul and whom he called "outstanding among the apostles."

He included others but we know little about them. Some were members of royal households, slaves, close friends, and groups that met together in house churches.

While all were obviously dear to Paul, probably the most notable was Phoebe, a deaconess who was given the honor of carrying Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. She may have even been the one who read it to them for the first time. Never did a messenger carry a more important letter than did Phoebe.

Before closing his letter, Paul offered a warning about false teachers who might cause division and teach distorted versions of the Christian faith. Good advice even for believers today.

He shared a goal for living the Christian life: "Be wise about what is good, and innocent of what is evil" (Romans 16:19), which may mean, the best defense against sin is a good offense. Know righteousness. Stay away from evil - have nothing to do with it.

Paul's letter to the Romans is the New Testament's most detailed description of Christian theology. It was written by what many believe to be the greatest Apostle – many say the greatest evangelist – Paul, who was inspired and taught by the Creator of the universe!

In his letter, Paul addressed the conflicts between law and grace, between Jews and Gentiles and between sin and righteousness. He laid out the core of the gospel message - salvation by grace alone through faith alone and that grace is the mandatory lifestyle for a Christian. Paul praised God for the "mystery" of God's plan to unite believing Jews and Gentiles in one body, the church.

Paul wrote this letter to explain God's plan of salvation so believers would be established and confident to share the truth with the lost. We can't really share with others something we don't have ourselves.

I hope your study of Romans has given you a stronger understanding of your faith, strengthened your confidence and excitement to share Christ with others.

And the result of that? Paul's final words in the book of Romans is his hymn of praise to God.

Let's read those words together:

"To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen." (Romans 16:27)

Let's pray.