July 12, 2020

Romans 14

Sermon 33

Mitch Jolly

Good evening, Red Oak Church. I need to ask your permission. If you don’t mind, can I take a little bit longer than maybe you’re used to tonight? Thank you. When the guys asked me to come and preach tonight and they said the passage was Romans 14, I knew the timing was providential, it was of the Lord. Since the Rona[[1]](#footnote-1) hit, this passage has been key to elder ministry, pastoral ministry, in our church. Just providentially, I have had no occasion to preach it. So, when they said Romans 14, how much of the passage do you want to preach? I said instantly, “All of it.” So, I trust God in His good providence. He never makes errors. There are no runs, no drips, no errors, no fumbles, no oops with the Lord. He runs His universe well and every molecule is in place, including passages on a preaching calendar, dates, times, and availability. So, I trust that there is a convergence now of God and His good purpose for you and me together in this time, so I don’t want to limit that, if you don’t mind. I’m not going to preach an hour-and-a-half but I may come closer to an hour than thirty minutes. I don’t know. But, if you want to follow along, there are some notes available for you at mitchjolly.com. If you have the capacity on your phone or some kind of device and you have cell or interwebs access somehow, you can go there and the passage is Romans 14. It’s the most recent post and you can follow along and see everything I have for us tonight, if you don’t mind. If not, you can go back and look at it later and that’s absolutely okay.

We as the church, right now, Red Oak Church, Three Rivers Church in Rome, Georgia, any other church represented in this room, we have a grand opportunity right now to be a city set on a hill. How we do Romans 14 right now, at this time and this place in history, could be, could be, a testimony to the power of the Gospel. Alright? Hear that carefully—could be a testimony. What we do is not the Gospel. It’s the message we preach; that’s the Gospel, okay? But how we do and execute Romans 14 could be the testimony to the validity of the Gospel if we actually hear it and do what it says. “He who hears these words of mine and does them is wise, and they build their house on a rock.” But he who hears and does not do them, you go away and you say, “Oh, that was a great sermon, or that was a poor sermon, or that was a whatever sermon,” and we go about our day and we don’t do them, we build our house on sand, and when the Rona comes it will knock it down. But if we hear and we obey, we set our footings on something that’s unshakable, the truth of who God is and how He reveals himself in His Word, and we plant our footings on that. Nothing can shake us and the structure that is constructed on it. See, we’re not going to see great movements in our country, and in our cities, and in Andrews, and in Rome, Georgia, because we offer better worship experiences, or have cool preachers, or can entertain people better than the church down the street, or have better children’s ministries, or better youth ministries. That’s not how movements are going to start. The church growth movement from the early to middle-80s up until today was just a mirage of the kingdom of God and it was just that, a mirage. And it’s proven to be not much more than consumer marketing of Christian’s spiritual wares and it’s lacking in wholesale cultural transformation. Large megachurch has not shifted the culture, it has only produced the product that takes people from places who can’t keep up in the marketing world. That is not the kingdom of God, that is not the work of the Gospel. That’s swapping sheep, not making disciples.

But the Gospel of the kingdom, the Gospel of the good news of Jesus Christ, and His reign, His rule, His salvation, the true and powerful story of everything that exists—that messages produces transforming actions like Romans 14. Romans 14 is a production of the Gospel. That Gospel, that good news of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, can wreck the dark kingdom and we must submit to it and make all application as absolutely robust as we can. If we don’t do Romans 14, we’re in danger of being a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Romans 14 is one of the most intensely practical outworkings of the call of Romans 12:1-2 to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship. Romans 14 is all practice. There’s no cool, spiritual ninja stuff in Romans 14. It is all flat-out practical application of chapters 1-11, lived out as a life of worship. It’s a very tangible practice of owing nothing to anyone except to love them. You heard that the last two weeks, right? Romans 14 is the very tangible living-out of owing nothing except to love each other really well.

So, before we jump into the passage there are two textual questions that we have to handle before we hit this applicable content, and here are the two questions. The first question is, what is the reason Paul is including this content right here? Why is he saying this right here, right now? That’s question number one. And question number two is, what is the basis for the practices of the weak contrasted against those which we’re going to assume think of themselves as strong? The passage never tells us that; it just refers to some as weak, meaning there are probably some here who see themselves as strong. So, what’s the basis of those practices? Well, let’s answer those two questions pretty quickly because I want to get into the meat of the text.

So, question number one: What’s the reason Paul includes this content? Well, here’s the reason. This is not simply a general appeal Paul is making to the church at Rome that he includes in all his correspondence. Paul is addressing a real challenge to the unity of this multinational house church thing made up of all the believers in the city of Rome. This church—they didn’t have buildings, right? You guys understand that? They met house to house and there were a lot of them, so they all can’t meet in the same house. So, there are many believers meeting in many houses but there’s one church and it’s called the church at Rome. And this church is made up of a multinational group of people. We’re talking about the seat of the Roman Empire. We’ve got Jews and we’ve got Gentiles of every flavor under the Sun, and they have come to faith in Jesus, and they are dwelling together and seeking to do it in unity. So, this church is made of Jews who have become Christians and Gentiles who converted to Judaism and then became Christians. That is a blend of cultures and worldviews. And FYI, when we practice unity among diversity like they’re trying to do, these are the kinds of thorny issues that we are going to have to tackle through the lens of the Gospel as we live as living sacrifices in the world, seeking to make disciples of the nations. It is not always clean, it is not always easy, and the answers aren’t always tight, but the story of everything, the Gospel, carries the key. So, what’s the reason? Paul is addressing a real issue that’s challenging the unity of the church at Rome.

So, the second question is: What’s the basis of the practices of the weak and the strong? We’ve alluded to it just a little bit. The basis of these practices of the weak and the strong is likely this multiethnic, multi-religious background group of people who have believed, and some of them have believed that they are bound by certain ritual laws or cultural laws that they brought with them from their background and they’re seeking to practice them in the fellowship, while some who don’t have that background don’t want to practice it. What has happened is that their distinction has been raised to the top as the primary issue. Chances are—the text doesn’t tell us this but—chances are, and the reason I’m going to say this is because I’m human and I know me—I prefer to gather with people who share my affinities. Right? Because it’s easy. If I can gather in a group of black, white, football loving, football watching, certain beverage drinking, bacon eating guys, that’s a good group of people. But you insert a Georgia Tech nerd into that group and chances are I’m like, “Umm, he’s watching the wrong team. And he’s vegetarian. And can we put him in another group?” Right? That’s just me, right? And I ought to know better. So, chances are these guys who are just completely different are segmenting off by religious background, cultural background, weak and strong practices, and it is challenging the unity of the church and the proclamation of their Gospel to the city of Rome.

So, how does Paul address this situation? How does he come at this? Well, he comes at it by verse 13. Verse 13 is the centerpiece of the whole passage. Everything in verses 1-12 and then verses 14 down through verse 23 hinges on verse 13. The reason we know this is because he makes his argument with two words, the exact same words that have different grammatical applications, and everything hinges on that in the passage.

Here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to read verse 13, show you how he uses it, and then we’re going to come back and work our way through the entire passage with some observations on how they are putting into practice verse 13. Alright? Are you tracking with me? So, how does Paul address these two questions? He does it with verse 13 and here’s what it says. Romans 14:13,

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

Paul leans on a key word he uses in verse 13 twice, and that word is translated as ‘pass judgment’ and the exact same word is translated as ‘decide.’ There’s a little bit of word play here. The difference in the use of this word is the mood of the verb. Any Greek people in here? Anybody studying Greek? Alright, then I’m not going to bore you; I’m just going to tell you what it is. If you’re parsing verbs—anybody study Spanish? If you parse verbs, there’s tense, voice, mood, person, and number, right? Well, here, in this passage, this word that’s translated as ‘pass judgment’ and ‘decide’—both of them carry a different mood. ‘Pass judgment’ is the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood is the mood of hypothetical kind of stuff. Right? To put it simply. So, therefore, it’s present active subjunctive and it translates as ‘pass judgment on.’ Let me say it to you kind of like this; “In our present circumstance,” Paul is saying to them, “let’s not pass sentence on each other’s spirituality, because hypothetically we shouldn’t be passing judgment; we should be owing nothing to one another except to love each other. Therefore, don’t pass judgment, because hypothetically we should be loving.” So, what he’s saying here is, loving stands in contrast to passing judgment. He’s already said in chapter 13, “Love each other and owe nothing.” The key to fulfilling the law is love and love well. God is love. Therefore, since you’re made in His image, even more so now that you’ve been redeemed and the Holy Spirit dwells in you, you fulfill the law by loving each other well. Therefore, hypothetically, we ought to be loving, not passing judgment. Alright? So, that’s do not pass judgment on one another.

Then, he comes and says, “But rather, decide.” ‘Decides’ mood is the imperative. You guys know what the imperative is, right? Imperative carries the force of command. It’s forceful. It has this idea—in fact, since we’re looking at the Scriptures, that’s God’s Word, so it’s God’s Word to us. It is God, through Paul, saying to us, “I’m commanding you, you’d better decide.” What are we to decide? To never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. So, the centerpiece of this passage is verse 13, which tells us, in contrast to loving, you guys are passing judgment on each other. Therefore, decide that you are never, ever, ever going to put something for someone to fall over or to keep them off the way. Make it your goal to never stick anything in front of the path of the Gospel, or something that makes them trip up in what they think.

Therefore, the question is this: How do these Roman house churches that are, by the way, on the same team—it’s not acceptable that the Helenized Jews meet at this house and that the Italian Gentiles meet at this house, and maybe the Ilyricum Gentiles meet at this house, and maybe the Egyptian Gentiles meet over at this house, and at the same time—call themselves the church at Rome. How do they come together in unity under the banner of the Gospel? Well, I think this passage, all twenty-three verses, show me eleven observations. I want to walk through all eleven of them with you if you don’t mind, okay?

Eleven ways to not pass judgment and to decide that we’re going to never cause stumbling and hindrance. Okay? Are you ready for those eleven things? We’re going to go like Jehu through the house of Ahab. Here we go. We’re going to go fast, and hard, and hit these things. Ready?

Number one, how do we pull off not passing judgment, and showing love, and making a decision to never cause stumbling or hindrance? Here we go—number one, and it’s found in verses 1-4. Don’t quarrel over opinions. How do we pull this off? How do we love each other well, and not pass judgment, and not cause stumbling or hindrance? We refuse to quarrel over opinions. Look at verse 1-4.

1As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him (or her), but do not quarrel over opinions.

That couldn’t be clearer, right?

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

In their setting, it’s a matter of eating and drinking. Now, you can right now, and I trust the Holy Spirit in you to begin making all matter of application right now, because we could stop right here and talk about quarreling over opinions and list a thousand different opinions, and contrast those opinions, but that would waste our time. I’m going to trust the Holy Spirit to make that application in you, where you are and among the people you are with. But he says, “Don’t quarrel about opinions. One person thinks they can eat anything and another person thinks they can only eat vegetables.”

Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains…

The Georgia Tech guy who’s a vegetarian, “I guess come on in. Bring your broccoli, wrap it in bacon.”

…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.

The Lord is our master. We are His subjects. We stand before Him. He’s able to make us stand, therefore we don’t pass judgment or put blocks of stumbling or hindrance in front of each other. We refuse to quarrel about opinions and we refuse to isolate ourselves based on our opinion from those who differ from us. And we have the ability to know, right now in this moment, what is opinion and what is something that needs defending. You know what that is? It’s the manual. The manual, God’s Word, is where we go to know the difference between what needs defending and what isn’t worth fighting for.

I’m going to give you a real helpful tool right here and it’s called theological triage. Anyone ever heard that language—theological triage? Theological triage is something you can do to help decide if this is something we need to deal with or something we need to not quarrel over. There are three tiers in theological triage.

In Tier One, if there are things that if we disagree on, we’re on different teams. Example, the deity of Jesus. You can believe that Jesus isn’t God but you’re on a different team. You’re not on team Jesus. You’re on team Dark, not on team Light. We’re on different teams and we’re going down different paths. That’s a Tier One issue, the deity of Jesus. Trinity—if you’re not Trinitarian, you’re not Christian. We may disagree but that means we’re on different teams, so we’re definitely not worshipping together, right? We’re on completely different teams. That’s a Tier One issue.

A Tier Two issue is something we can disagree on and still be on team Jesus, but chances are we’re not worshipping in covenant fellowship together. An example would be infant baptism. We can disagree and be on the same team on that issue but we’re not going to be worshipping in covenant fellowship with people. If somebody comes to our elders at Three Rivers Church in Rome, Georgia, and they had a new baby, and they want to do a baby baptism, we are going to say negative Ghost Rider, the pattern is full[[2]](#footnote-2). We go to the Word. We’re talking about believer baptism. You are still on team Jesus and you can believe that bad teaching if you want to— just kidding, Presbyterian friends—but we disagree heartily on this issue. You can still be on team Jesus but we’re not in covenant fellowship and we’re probably not going to be worshipping in the same place. That’s a Tier Two issue.

A Tier Three issue is, the Rona is real, the Rona is no big deal. We can have some differences and still be in covenant fellowship and be on mission together. Here’s a little rhyme for you: If it’s Tier Three, leave it be. It’s okay to talk about it but it is never okay to begin to divide over it. Right? If it’s Tier Three, leave it be. Therefore, we do not quarrel over opinions. That’s number one.

Number two, found in verse 5-6, whatever good Tier Three thing you do or think, be fully convinced in your own mind that it’s acceptable with a clean conscience. Whatever good Tier Three thing you do or think, be fully convinced in your own mind that it’s acceptable with a clean conscience. Look at verses 5-6,

One person esteems one day as better than another,…

So, they’re talking about holy days. Probably, for someone from a Jewish background they’re talking about the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. Or they’re talking about Passover. Maybe somebody from a pagan background, a Gentile from some other background, is thinking about Summer Solstice or Winter Solstice, and they’re wanting to have a feast on Winter Solstice. They think this is a great holiday and the Jew is going, “Don’t y’all worship demons on that day,” and they’re going, “Well, we used to but we don’t anymore. It’s kind of a special day.” “It’s not a special day to us.” “Well, you stay over there and I’ll stay over here. I’m not coming to your party and you don’t come to my party.” “Okay.” Someone is hearing that and going, “I don’t like either one of those days.”

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.

Notice, Paul doesn’t take a side. The Jew, who has a ministry to the Gentiles, doesn’t jump over with the Jews and go, “Man, this is really kind of the reveal day, Yom Kippur, so you need to be a little Jewish,” right? He doesn’t do that. He says,

Each one should be fully convince in his own mind.

Verse 6,

The one who observes the day,…

Listen to this,

…observes it in honor to the Lord.

A pagan, who observes his special day in Christ, he’s doing it for Jesus so leave him alone.

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.

Believe that whatever good Tier Three thing I do and think, I need to be fully convinced in my own mind that it’s acceptable with a clean conscience. When we’re convinced with a clean conscience, we are then to do what we do as worship to the Lord Jesus.

Romans 12:1-2. Romans 12:1-2 sets the fulcrum point of the book of Romans. You have these beautiful eleven chapters on the Godward doctrine of justification, this glorious work of the cross, where God substitutes the holy, righteous Jesus, this propitiation. Romans 3:21-26, right? In the past, God passed over previous sins committed because in the fullness of time He put forward His son, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, who comes, and He dies in the place of David, and Adam, and Saul, and He dies in their place for their sins, so that God is just. He pays for David’s sin. David doesn’t go scot free—Jesus pays the price. You look at David’s life and you think, David walked away scot free, because Jesus was going to pay for it and that was the plan, so David believed by faith. Abraham believed by faith because Jesus was coming. So, these guys here are leaning on the finished work of Christ and Paul unpacks this glorious Gospel, then he comes to chapter 12, verse 1, and he says, “Therefore”—in view of this glorious mercy of God—“offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” He said that’s your worship. That’s how you worship the Lord—give yourself up for them like Jesus gave himself up for them. Imitate that. So, whatever good thing I do, be fully convinced in my mind that it’s acceptable with a clean conscience, and when I do that I do it as worship to the Lord. Whatever day I esteem, whatever festival I esteem, that is biblically okay and clean, whether you like it or not, or like it and agree with it, be fully convinced and do it to the Lord as worship.

Number three, verses 7-9. Believe that our opinions are not the apex of what matters. You wouldn’t know that by looking at social media, would you? You would think that our opinions are the apex of all social life. But I think that we’re going to learn in this passage that our opinions are not apex to what matters. None of us is our own. We are the Lord’s own possession and that’s what matters. Look at verses 7-9,

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.

We need to believe that the apex of what matters is not my opinion. It’s not your opinion. We need to recognize that what matters is that we are the Lord’s. I think it’s important to recognize the plural nature of this passage. It’s not, “I am the Lord’s and you are the Lord’s,” singular, it is “We,” together, unified, in covenant fellowship, “are the Lord’s.” This is huge.

1 Corinthians 6:19-20,

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

How many times do we quote this passage in regard to personal holiness? It’s not. The “you” is plural. Paul is talking to the church at Corinth. You are holy. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Meaning, if I isolate that to me, I’m misapplying the passage. We, together, are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and Paul is here speaking “we,” not “I” or “you,” singular “you.” We live to the Lord, we die to the Lord. So, whatever we do, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. Meaning, the unity of the body in its diversity is an essential issue. It matters. It’s important to God. And we should owe nothing to anyone except to love and love well. Right? Therefore, any stumbling block, any hindrance, or any passing of judgment on issues of opinion, flies in the face of the cross of Jesus Christ and what He purchased, to take a group of diverse people from every tribe, and tongue, and nation, and make them one body.

They use plural. We are the Lord’s, not I am the Lord’s. We, together, are the Lord’s. I would argue that this is one of Satan’s greatest tools; to highlight opinion over fact and then divide us based on opinion so that we start throwing verbal rocks at each other. This was a real issue for the church at Rome and it’s a real issue for us in America as followers of the Lord Jesus.

Number four, we find this in verses 10-12. We need to know—and this is sobering—we need to know that each one of us will have to stand before the Lord and give account of ourselves to God. Verses 10-12.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother?

Why do you pass judgment? Why do you despise him? Why do you despise him for not eating meat? Why do you think they’re inferior because they won’t eat the bacon? Hmm? Why do you think they are less than because they think the Rona is real? Do you think they can’t critically think? Do you think they can’t read the data? What’s the matter? Why do you despise them?

For we will all…

Listen to this.

For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God;…

Uh, oh.

For it is written…

And he quotes Isaiah 45:23,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,

and every tongue shall confess to God.”

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

Now, understand something. This is not in regard to my salvation. That’s already been taken care of. That’s what chapters 1-11 is about. If I have turned from sin and believed on the Lord Jesus, I am saved, I am rescued from the wrath of God. But Jesus taught us that we should be careful because every careless word we say, every careless deed we do, we will give an account for before the Lord. Uh, oh. Meaning, what I do after my salvation matters. What I say matters. The actions I take, they matter. My thoughts matter. And I will give an account to Jesus for every careless thought, every careless word, and every careless deed. So, Paul reminds them here; know, that before you get so fired up about your Tier Three issue, know that you will give an account of yourself to the Lord. I don’t know about you, but that starts making Tier Three issues get really small for me really fast. I determine real quickly what I want to fight about and what I don’t want to fight about. You want to fight me about the deity of Jesus? We’ll go to blows. I might actually hit you in the face over that one. We could fight over that one. I may get fired up. I’m going to yell at you about baptism, in love, of course. Hopefully, it’s a heart of love, maybe, sometimes. Sometimes there’s a little anger thrown in there. But it’s righteous anger sometimes; sometimes it’s not. It depends. Just being honest. But that Tier Three issue? Hmm. I don’t want to have to stand before the Lord and have to deal with that one. Is it really worth it? To stare into the Revelation 1 Jesus, who stands before John with eyes of flaming fire? Right? You’ve read that? That’s Jesus, and He’s standing there, and He has the churches in His hand, and He has the stars, and He’s ruling the universe, and He is the God of creation—and I’m going to stand there and go, “Yeah, I was kinda fired up about the Rona,” and Jesus is going, “I know. Let me show you who you ruined because of that. Let me show you who stumbled over your words. Let me show you who walked off the path of the Way because they heard what you said.” Or because of your bacon eating or whatever it is that’s a Tier Three issue for me, or for you, or whoever it is. It makes those Tier Three issues get really tiny, really fast.

Number five, found in verse 14. Let each one have their own biblically informed conscience and fight for unity in diversity. Paul says,

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

That’s a bold statement. Even the Lord said, “I made good stuff. Kill and eat.” So, Paul said, “I’m persuaded that nothing is unclean in itself.”

… but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

I’ll just be frank with you. I’ve wrestled with this passage since I’ve been a Christian. If it’s clean, how can I think it’s unclean and still count it unclean for me. I don’t have an answer for you for that, so if you’re looking for that answer I don’t have it. Sorry. I have eleven observations on how to apply this passage but I don’t know how that works metaphysically. What I do know in this passage is very clear, and I think it’s crystal clear, let each person have their own biblically informed conscience and fight for unity and diversity. If you’ve read your Bible and you’ve come to that Tier Three conclusion on that issue, or maybe a Tier Two issue, be fully convinced with a clean conscience and fight for our unity amidst our diversity as a primary importance. Does that make sense? Be fully convinced. Have a clean conscience.

I’ve read Scripture, and here’s some of the challenge; there are people who throw stuff on the internet and the best they’ve done, the best they’ve done in twenty years of following Jesus, is possibly read through the book of Romans, chapters 1-5. Maybe they read a devotional that somebody put out but they’ve never gone through Genesis through Revelation even once. But they have a culturally informed opinion and they throw it out for the world to see and they tack Jesus’ name on the end of it. Or maybe their bio says “follower of Jesus.” They’ve never read their Bible but they have an opinion, and they take a passage of Scripture and stick it on top of there and they put it out there for the world to see. I promise you, there are Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists, who read that and go, “Christianity is trash,” because of an unbiblical, Tier Three, issue that we fight for and stick Jesus’ name on it. Do you think that’s worth it? No, it’s not. No, it’s not. “The world will know you are mine by how you love one another,” right? Jesus said that. Therefore, don’t pass judgment. We owe nothing except to love. We don’t pass judgment but we make a decision because Jesus commands us to never put a stone of stumbling, or something that hinders someone from the way. Let each person have their own biblically informed conscience and be unified on mission together.

Guys, I’m going to tell you something. This is hard. This is hard. I think what you’ll begin to find is what I’ve found since March. I worship an awful lot of my opinions that I cannot ground in the Scriptures. And those things cause me more consternation than perhaps the deity of Christ, or the Trinity, or even the defense of the Gospel. And this passage resets my focus.

Number six, love each other by not grieving the other by what you approve. Love each other by not grieving the other by what you approve. Verse 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.

Wow. Love each other by not grieving the other by what we approve. I threw out on Twitter the other day that I was going to be preaching on Sunday night on Romans 14, and I just asked, “Hey, does anybody have any insight on this passage?” I already had things kind of ironed out and kind of knew where we were going with the passage. I was pretty clear about that but I just wanted some insight and some feedback and I had one response from a former student of mine. I’m very proud of this young man. He’s an IT director at a local Christian school in our city, Joshua Bryant. I told Josh I would quote him, so if Josh is listening, thank you Josh. He was a good student. He always made A’s in my class, so I’m proud of Josh. Here’s what Josh said. I’m going to quote Josh, so here we go, “If my behavior toward something not mandated is creating problems for another Christian, my conduct is not loving. The welfare of that person should take precedent over my freedom to do that thing.” Amen.

Number seven, we find this in verse 16, know this—that through bypassing our rights and good… Yes, sometimes being an American can stand in the way. I’m patriotic—do not misunderstand what I’m about to say. I’m a patriot. But you need to understand something—this idea of rights—listen—the Bible tells me I ain’t got none. My rights are bound up in Christ. I’m a servant of Jesus Christ. He is the King of the Universe. Jesus rules in a monarchy and He is the sole monarch. The kingdom of God is a reality. It’s here and it’s coming in its fullness at some point in the future. And Jesus is the king. He’s king right now and therefore my knee bows to one king. And this idea that I have rights and I should fight you for what I think is right doesn’t have any grounding right here in this passage, inside the community and the kingdom of the church of Jesus Christ. So, I need to know this—that by bypassing my right and good, which we should do, we guard what is good from being spoken of as evil because we used it to bludgeon a brother or sister.

Let me read verse 16 and it will make sense, what I’m saying there.

So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.

I used to read that and think it meant this: “Man, don’t talk about that like that. That’s a good thing and you ought to know it. Haven’t you read your Bible? What’s wrong with you?” That’s what I used to think that passage meant; don’t let that person who has a different opinion speak poorly about what I have a different opinion on, “Shut your mouth, boy! Get on my side.” That’s what I used to think that passage meant but that is not what it meant. That’s not the spirit of the passage. Know that by bypassing my right and good, I give up my opinion, in this moment, for you who thinks differently. I guard what is good from being spoken of as evil because I didn’t use it to beat you up with. So, if I say, “You know what, bacon is awesome, but you know what? Not today. I would prefer to honor you, and love you, and us be together in unity.” Do you know what we do? We prevent them from saying that bacon is evil. “You love me well. Thank you. I appreciate you receiving me in.” What we’ve done is we’ve guarded what is good from being spoken of as evil because we used our good Tier Three thing to beat somebody up with it. Does that make sense? There’s a place for bacon—or whatever is good for you that’s biblically okay, and we’ll talk about that when we get to number ten, so hang tight. There’s a place for the bacon. The bacon doesn’t have to go away. There’s a place for it but in this moment, so that you don’t speak evil of my Tier Three issue, I’m going to bypass my right to it because you’re more important than the Tier Three issue. Make sense? Okay.

Number eight, found in verse 17-19. Go after peace and mutual upbuilding because that is the work of Jesus that He purchased for His church. Go after peace. Paul says this earlier in Romans, “As far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people.” You cannot do that if you fight for your right. Sometimes, peace means you have to stop short of getting your way. That is the most pride-destroying thing you can ever do. Because sometimes you’re right—you know you’re right—but their good is more important than my right and I have to trust that on that last day that Jesus will make that clear, and I will never be justified in this life for being right. Make sense? That is so crushing sometimes. But you are more important than me because I owe nothing but to love you well, so my goal is to go after peace and mutual upbuilding. Look at verses 17-19,

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking…

This is not about that. Or insert whatever Tier Three issue you can there. The kingdom of God is not about that.

… 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.

I would argue that the source of the conflicts in our local fellowships are the exaltation of Tier Three issues to Tier One issues, and the exaltation of pride over humility, and getting my way over loving you well. Go after peace and mutual upbuilding and trust that on the last day, if necessary, Jesus will reveal on that last day all that is good and I will receive, you will receive, reward from the Lord for doing what’s right. Isn’t that faith? Living by faith and not by sight? Yeah.

Number nine, believe it’s better to abstain publically than destroy the work of God in a brother or sister. Verses 20-21,

Do not, for the sake of food,…

Or insert any Tier Three issue.

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.

That’s a bold statement. Meaning, that if I exalt myself and my opinion above you, there is the potential of stumbling block, or hindrance, or of passing judgment that is destructive to you.

Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. 21It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

Believe it’s better to abstain publicly that to destroy the work of God in a brother or sister.

Number ten, found in verse 22. I told you there was a place for the bacon. Here we go. Number ten, we need to know and believe that it’s okay to keep some good things private. It’s not hypocritical. 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.

I used to think and I used to be told, “Well, if you’ve got to do it privately is it right?” Yeah, right here. If you think that meat is good, don’t bring it to the church supper. Eat the broccoli, and when you go home, eat the bacon. It’s okay. It’s not hypocritical. Because what did we just do in that scenario. We said, “You’re more important than me,” and I am to owe nothing but to love you well, and out of care for your soul—and that almost comes out sounding sarcastic and I don’t mean it to, because that’s not how I’m intending this to come out. Maybe I need to change my tone. Maybe it’s, “Out of an abundance of care for you, because I don’t want to destroy the work of God in you, I’m going to eat that broccoli, and I’m not going to eat the bacon in your sight, because I love you more than I love bacon.” Right? Now, when I go home I’m going to eat the bacon. I’m not going to tell you that but that’s what’s going to happen. Listen, it’s okay to keep good things private. It’s not hypocritical; it’s love. And it’s offering to God our worship as our spiritual sacrifice.

Number eleven. This is the last observation of how Paul tries to pull off verse 13 in the church at Rome, found in verse 23. Operate in faith. Operate in faith. Because if it’s done in anything other than a peaceful trust—this is a loaded sentence and I couldn’t find any other way to write it, so it’s just loaded. It’s verbose. Operate in faith, because if it’s done in anything other than a peaceful trust in the pleasure of God in us through Christ, it’s coming from sin. Operate in faith, because if it’s coming from any other reason other than a peaceful trust in the finished work of Christ for us, it’s coming from sin. Look at what the passage says,

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats,…

If doubt is present, don’t eat. If doubt is present, don’t say it. If doubt is present, don’t believe it.

…because the eating is not from faith.

If I can come in a peaceful trust, that through the purchased work of Christ for me, that this is good and my conscience is clean, then I can go forward.

For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

If I can come to the table and believe the finished work of Christ bought this good Tier Three thing for me, and I’m clean before God, before my family, and before my fellowship, I can have it. That’s the faith we’re to operate in. Because if it comes out of doubt, if there’s doubting, if there’s wonder, if there’s concern about another, don’t do it. But if it’s clean—boom—get after it. Right? If it comes from faith, it’s good. If it comes from doubt, it’s sin.

Okay, one final thought. Have you guys ever read *The Screwtape Letters*? I’ve asked for hand-raising and nobody has known anything I’ve said tonight. *The Screwtape Letters*? Yes, there’re a few. If you haven’t read *The Screwtape Letters*, I think you can probably find a free pdf version if you Google that. Go on the Google and type Screwtape Letters and I think you can download a free pdf version, or buy you one from the Amazon or something like that. If you think the Amazon is evil, buy it someplace else. I don’t care. Just go buy it from somewhere. It’s a great resource. Because in this little collection of letters, C.S. Lewis wrote these fictional letters from an older uncle mentor demon to his protégé nephew demon. So, it’s Uncle Screwtape and Nephew Wormwood. Uncle Screwtape is trying to mentor Wormwood into making sure his subject stays away from the Enemy. Now, when you’re reading this and you see Enemy, you’re thinking Satan. But no, this is Satan’s team talking about humans and trying to keep them away from the Enemy, Jesus. So, Uncle Screwtape is writing counsel to Wormwood on how to keep his subject away from Jesus. These letters are incredibly useful. It’s not true, it’s not Bible, it’s fiction, okay? But Lewis grabs this idea from Scripture, of demons and the kingdom of darkness fighting against the kingdom of light and they’re incredibly helpful as you read them.

So, with that as the backdrop of my thought here, I can hear Uncle Screwtape telling Wormwood to make Christians think they’re on different sides of a political, social, cultural, and medical argument, and get their attention off the other person being more important than themselves, and then get them to stew over it, and blab on about it, and blab on about foolish arguments that only ruin those who hear, so that many watching and listening might stumble from the way. “Hey, Wormwood, get them to think this is a Tier One issue, and make them go public with it, and make them put the Enemy’s name on it, so that everyone starts thinking that the Enemy really thinks that, and that person who was thinking about the Way will now turn away from the Way.” That’s sobering to me.

So, here it is. Here’s the last thing. Red Oak Church, keep the main thing the main thing. Keep the main thing the main thing. Don’t stray from contending for the Gospel of the kingdom and become an evangelist for an opinion based on a theory and an argument that’s destined to fall under the coming King of the universe. Here’s how Paul put it in 2 Timothy 2:14. He said, “Remind them of these things.” What things was he talking about in 2 Timothy 2? He’s talking about Gospel truths. He told Timothy this was his last will and testament. Paul, about to die, writes to young Timothy,

Remind them of these things, and charge them before God not to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.

Red Oak Church, keep the main thing the main thing, contend for the Gospel of the kingdom, love each other well, and we have an opportunity for this to be our finest hour in the world, as we provide testimony to the validity and reality of this powerful Gospel, Romans 1:16, that is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

Let’s pray.

Jesus, we are really convinced of the truth of the Gospel. I don’t think—maybe I’m wrong—that for us in this room the validity of the Gospel is not on trial tonight. We believe—we really, really believe Romans 1-11 hard and fast or we wouldn’t be here tonight. Maybe we came looking for that. I trust you, Lord ,that you’re able to take that Gospel message and work it powerfully and effectively to take a heart from death to life, eyes from blindness to sight. So, Lord, do that if necessary tonight. But I don’t think any of us walked in here thinking we didn’t believe. So, Lord, I pray tonight that you would take that powerful Gospel and that you would work it, massage it down into real, real actions, as we walk out these doors and go about our Sunday night, and our Monday, and Tuesday, and on. I ask that you would cause your Word to be a lamp for our feet and a light for our path, and help us to hide it deep in our heart that we might not sin against you, or pass judgment on a sister or brother, or put a stumbling block or hindrance in their way. And as we come to worship, Holy Spirit, I pray that you would hear that words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart and receive them, be glorified in them. But also, as we sing, I pray that you would do the work of convicting, encouraging, and strengthening as well, and that as you’re glorified in our song to you, that you would do the work of sanctification in us as we practically, tangibly, engage actively, being sanctified by obeying your Word. Do all these things as we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

1. The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Negative, Ghost Rider, the pattern is full,” is an allusion to a quote from the movie, *Top Gun*, and was said as a reply from the tower when the pilot, Maverick, played by Tom Cruise, radioed, “Tower, this is Ghost Rider requesting a flyby.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)