

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 16, 2017**

DISPUTABLE MATTERS (3)

Romans 15:1-13

It was not the only thing we talked about last Sunday, but we looked at the question of drinking alcohol as a kind of case study on dealing with “disputable matters” in which we have the freedom as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ to disagree with one another. I left you with two bottom-line principles for dealing with such “disputable matters.” In case you missed it, or need a reminder, here they are:

1. When liberty and love come into conflict with each other, love trumps liberty. It has to.
2. Relationships with one another are more important than insisting on your rights. Or, to say it another way, relationships trump rights. If demanding my rights or my freedom to do as I wish regarding some non-essential of the Christian faith or life threatens or harms the well-being of a Christian sister or brother, I must set aside my rights for the sake of the relationship with my fellow Christian.

LEFTOVERS FROM LAST WEEK

Paul reinforces these principles as he brings this section of his letter to a close in Romans 15:1-13. Before delving into this passage, though, there are a couple leftovers from Romans 14 that I want to mention briefly.

MAKE EVERY EFFORT

In verse 19, for example, Paul urges the Romans – and us – “to make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.” The word “edification” comes from the Greek word (*oikodomes*) that means “building” or “edifice.” It reminds me of an old story about three men working at a construction site. When asked what they were doing, the first man said: “I’m laying bricks.” The second replied: “I’m putting up a wall.” But the third, with an exuberant spirit, said: “I’m building a great cathedral!”

God is in the business of building great cathedrals – where He Himself resides – in the lives of His people. And He uses us in the process. To edify is to build up or to make strong, especially in knowledge, understanding, faith, or character. The love to which Jesus calls us in the church requires us to disciple one another, to assist and encourage one another to grow up to full maturity and full strength as followers of Jesus. It is God’s intention to build us together into a magnificent spiritual edifice that exhibits His glory and proclaims His love and grace in the gospel. So, part of our mission is to help one another grow up spiritually into cathedrals that exhibit God’s glory.

And, of course, we are to do what leads to peace and harmony in the body of Christ. The Hebrew word for peace, as you probably know, is *shalom*, which includes the sense of

wellness or wholeness, not just the absence of conflict. True peace or *shalom* is the result of grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. We who are the *recipients* of God's grace are likewise called – commanded – to *extend* grace to each other, which leads to peace with one another and the building up not only of our brothers and sisters but of the body of Christ as a whole.

So, take this to heart and “make every effort” in both essential and non-essential matters “to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” Look out for one another. For the well-being of your sisters and brothers for whom Christ died. For the wellness and wholeness of the church. And for the glory of God.

BETWEEN YOU AND GOD

A second leftover is Paul's instruction in 14:22 to “keep between yourself and God” “whatever you believe about these” disputable matters. In other words, don't flaunt your freedom in the presence of “weaker” brothers and sisters who will be harmed by it. Don't boast about it or make an issue of it in a way that is likely to wound or embarrass a fellow believer. Does this mean you must always defer to a “weaker” brother or sister who has qualms about the exercise of your freedom in Christ? Does it mean, in effect, that the “weaker” sister or brother always gets to decide what is OK or not OK? No. It does mean that you must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine if the expression of your liberty in a particular setting – at a party, for example, where wine and/or beer are among the beverage options – will be harmful to a brother or sister who has scruples against drinking.

It is not necessary, says Paul, for you to try to change the mind of a “weaker” Christian. It would be wrong to try to do it in a public setting that would put pressure on the “weaker” Christian to act against his or her conscience. You could explain your perspective in a private setting, but always with love and respect, and never in a condescending or judgmental way.

To keep “whatever you believe about these things ... between yourself and God” (14:22) means at least two things: First, you don't have to try to convince others of the rightness of your view. Second, you can always exercise your Christian freedom in private. While there may be some settings in which it is not prudent or loving, for example, to have a beer or glass of wine, what you do privately at home with respect to this or any “disputable matter” in which God has given us freedom is, as Paul says, between you and God.

Whatever you do in these matters, remember what Paul says in Galatians 5: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (5:1, 13). The highest purpose of freedom is not pleasing yourself. The highest purpose of freedom is not self-expression. The highest purpose of freedom is to serve in love. To serve God. To serve one another. To serve others. In love.

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CHRISTIAN UNITY

Now, let's turn to Romans 15. You could say that the theme of 14:1-12 is Christian liberty – the freedom God gives us in the non-essentials of the Christian life. You could say that the theme of 14:13-23 is Christian charity (love) – the necessity of love for one another, both the “weaker” and the “stronger”, in the exercise of our liberty in the non-essentials. You could also say that the theme of 15:1-13 is Christian unity – the unity that is ours as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ and members together of His body, the church. Paul speaks expressly of this unity in verses 5 and 6, where he pronounces this benediction: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen to that.

THE KEY TO CHRISTIAN UNITY

The key to Christian unity, Paul indicates in verse 5, is following Jesus. To follow Jesus involves at least these two things:

BELIEVING JESUS

First, it involves *believing in* Jesus as the true and only Son of God and Savior of sinners. It also involves *believing* Jesus, that is, believing, accepting, and following the teachings of Jesus as His teachings apply to God, ourselves, the world, our relationships, our sinfulness, our salvation, life, death, heaven, hell, good, evil, right, wrong, the church, and the purpose for which God created all things. Unity in the essentials of the Christian faith is *essential* if we are to follow Jesus together.

FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

Second, it involves following the *example* of Jesus. Notice how Paul begins chapter 15: “We who are strong” – in other words, we who know and enjoy the freedom that is ours in Christ – “ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up” (15:1-2). There is that idea of edification – of building up one another – again. But Paul does not stop there. He continues in verse 3: “For even Christ did not please Himself.” The way of Jesus was and is to consider others first. Jesus didn't demand His rights. He put the interests of others before His own. Instead of *pleasing* Himself, Jesus *gave* Himself in the service of the Father and of humankind. Although He was “in very nature God, He did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” for His own pleasure or advantage, but He willingly “emptied Himself” of His glory and majesty and then “humbled Himself” as a man to suffer death for us (Philippians 1:6-8). He chose to put the will of God first of all. And, as a result, He suffered the insults of those who insult, who reject and defy and rage at God (15:3; Psalm 69:9). He did it for us. As an act of love.

To set aside our own desires and freedom for the sake of our sisters and brothers in Christ is to follow the example of Jesus. Jesus didn't come to have His own way. As He Himself said:

“The Son of Man” – Jesus’ favorite way of referring to Himself – “did not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). To serve others in love, not to demand the freedom to do as we want, is to follow the example of Jesus.

Then, look at verse 7, where Paul once again reiterates the principle he first laid out in 14:1: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” The “strong” are to welcome and accept the “weak” in their scruples of conscience regarding “disputable matters.” And the “weak” are to welcome and accept the “strong” in the freedom they enjoy in these “disputable matters.” Both are to follow the example of Jesus.

GOD’S PLAN FOR JEWS AND GENTILES

In verses 8-12, Paul goes on to speak of God’s plan and provision for the unity of Jews and Gentiles – “insiders and outsiders” (*MSG*) – in the family of His church as an analogy for the unity of the “weak” and the “strong” in the fellowship of believers. Just as God has ordained that Jewish and Gentile believers should praise God together, so God has ordained a unity in Christ that transcends all the differences and disagreements of the “weak” and the “strong.” Whether Jewish or not, whether insiders or outsiders, whether weak or strong, God intends that we all worship Him together in the unity of the Holy Spirit. It is what we were made for. We were made for worship. Not to *be* worshiped, but to *worship God*. We were made, all of us, to “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” “with one heart and mouth” (15:6). Together.

Unity in Christ is essential to the health, vitality, faithfulness, mission-readiness, and mission-effectiveness of the church. This is not a fuzzy, feel-good kind of unity that has little or no depth, but a deep, rich, relational and convictional unity centered in Jesus and the fullness of who He is. He is the One in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:17), the One who holds all things together, including the church itself. Staying together under the leadership and lordship of Jesus is absolutely critical for the church in the world, and for our church here in northern Virginia. We can’t afford to be fractured or divided. We can’t afford to let any “disputable matters” threaten or rupture our unity in Christ. We can’t afford to compromise our witness or sacrifice our unity for the sake of some non-essential.

STAY TOGETHER

Do you remember the movie *Gladiator*? It won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2001, and Russell Crowe took home the Oscar for Best Actor for his role as Roman General Maximus Decimus Meridius. Maximus, you may recall, comes to Rome not to be honored as a military hero but as a slave, dirty and shackled. Through a maze of events, Maximus goes from celebrated warrior, favorite of one emperor (Marcus Aurelius), to despised traitor, nemesis of another (Commodus). He becomes a fugitive, then caged slave, then unvanquished gladiator. His growing fame in the arena brings him to the pinnacle of the “sport,” if you can call it that, Rome’s magnificent Coliseum, to face her elite warriors.

With the evil emperor, Commodus, present, the games open with what is meant to be a re-enactment of the battle of Carthage. The gladiators, all foot soldiers, are cast as the hapless

Carthaginians. It is a stage for slaughter. They are marched out through a dark passageway into brilliant sunlight and met with a roar of bloodlust.

Maximus, the leader of the gladiators, shouts to his men: “Stay together!” He gathers them in a tight circle in the center of the arena: back-to-back, shields aloft, spears outward. Again he shouts: “Whatever comes out of that gate, stay together.”

What comes out of that gate is swift and sleek and full of terror. Chariot after chariot thunders forth. War horses, with deadly agility and earthshaking strength, pull wagons driven by master charioteers. Amazonian warrior princesses ride behind and with deadly precision hurl spears and volley arrows. One gladiator strays from the circle, ignoring Maximus’ order, and is cut down. Maximus shouts once more: “Stay together!”

The instinct to scatter is strong. But Maximus exerts his authority, and the gladiators resist the impulse. The chariots circle, closer, closer, closer. Spears and arrows rain down on the men’s wood shields. Just when the chariots are about to cinch the knot, Maximus shouts: “Now!”

The gladiators attack and decimate the Romans.

Whatever comes out of that gate, stay together.

(Adapted from Mark Buchanan, “The Good Fight,” *Leadership Journal* Fall 2004).

That is the message the Lord Jesus has for us when we face spiritual warfare of any kind. *Stay together.* It is the message Jesus has for us whenever we are tempted to let our differences or disagreements in “disputable matters” drive a wedge between us. Don’t let it happen. *Stay together.* We are much stronger when we are together than when we are divided.

It all comes down to this:

1. When liberty and love come into conflict, love trumps liberty.
2. Relationships are more important than demanding or asserting your rights.
3. Don’t let “disputable matters” cause division in the body of Christ. Stay together.
4. Sustain, enhance, and strengthen a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow the Lord Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, let it be so in us. Let it be so in our lives and relationships here at Faith, to the glory of Your name. Amen.