

DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

by Steve Zeisler

One of the things I appreciate most about this church is the diversity that God has allowed us. Many of the members of this church family were born in different nations and speak different first languages. Probably most of the continents of the world are represented here. We have known the Lord for more or less time. Our diversity is something that we ought to actively appreciate more than we do.

The great advantage of a diverse community is that it gives us frequent opportunities to practice loving one another. If everybody in a church is exactly the same, you can adopt habits in your treatment of one another that don't require you to extend real love. But if you encounter somebody whose life experiences, habits, and ways of going about things are a little different, you have occasion then to change, to try new things, to learn, to grow, and especially to express yourself in love.

The last one-third of the book of Romans, chapters 12-16, is supremely about living together in Christ, and the theme word of this whole section is love. Paul has said that love should be genuine, without hypocrisy. Love is the debt we owe inexhaustibly. This passage is about loving people who are different from us, whose habits are not congenial to ours. It is particularly about loving people whose expression of their Christian life and whose freedom or lack of it strike us as peculiar or requiring change.

We will encounter two major ideas in this passage. First, we must not overextend ourselves into the lives of other people so that we assume too much influence over them. We must not meddle, tweak, change, and pressure other people to become like us or reject them if they won't. Second, we must not move too far the other direction; that is, ignore our influence on other people and care not at all that we can hurt them by not paying enough attention, not seeing that our expression of freedom needs to be limited by love. We can be either too meddlesome or too unconcerned. Neither of those is loving, and each will come under some examination in Romans 14.

Stop Meddling

Verses 1-12:

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:

"As surely as I live,' says the Lord,
'Every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will confess to God."
So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

This is the first of two sections we are going to look at. It concerns over-doing attempts to change people, meddle in their lives, and pressure them. We must not take the role of master that only Jesus should occupy in someone else's life.

Before we try to unravel Paul's argument, I would like to describe the issues a bit. These are not completely unfamiliar to us, but what Paul is highlighting here does not have the same effect in our time as it did in the first century. One of the concerns is disagreement between people as to what should be eaten at meals.

Fellowship at the Table

We have what Paul will call the weak and by implication, the relatively less weak (we'll come back to that shortly). And in the first argument one person says only vegetables should be eaten at meals, while another is completely free to eat meat at meals. Now, you may have decided not to eat meat because of concerns for your health, the environment, animal rights, or any number of other things that are not in view here. The issue here was whether God was offended if they had meat (or a certain kind of meat). This issue surfaced because the church in Rome was a multicultural church, just as we are. Specifically, various Gentile groups and Jews were together in the church. The Jews, have dietary laws that some take very seriously (contemporary orthodox Jews still keep a kosher table). They won't eat pork, and they won't eat certain kinds of food with other kinds of food, according to restrictions given in the Old Testament. These dietary laws become habits over a lifetime. So eating pork for a Christian Jew in the first century would have been a struggle: "Am I permitted to do this? It feels wrong to me, I'm uncomfortable."

Further, we know from 1 Corinthians 8 that there were pockets of Gentiles who had problems with food, too. Many of them had been raised in the dark and demonic worship of idols, and it had ruined them. Idol worship had made them act in degrading ways. It was a painful experience to remember. Idols were worshiped by sacrificing animals on their altars and selling the meat in the marketplace. Some Christians who felt great anxiety about touching the meat that had been offered to idols because they remembered what idol worship had done to them.

So all this disagreement about food was ultimately a disagreement over whether they were offending God, whether there was a spiritual taint somehow to the choices they were making as to what to eat at meals. There were some with more freedom and some with less freedom, and they were crashing into each other.

Something similar was taking place regarding sacred days. Jews, of course, had a series of holy days that they kept throughout the calendar year: the Sabbath every seventh day, the Sabbath year every seventh year, and so on. Gentile groups had other days that were holy for various reasons. Again they found themselves disagreeing as to when the church should meet, what kind of prayer should be said on what kind of occasion, and so on. There were people with more freedom to worship anytime and people with less freedom who felt constrained to worship on certain days in a certain way.

Mutual Accusation

Both those whom Paul calls the weak and those who will take the role of being less weak have a problem of accusing each other. Look at verse 3: "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does...." Each group found themselves thinking, "People who live like that really ought not. I may have to grin and bear it; in public I may have to be at least civil to them. But deep down I completely reject their choices."

We do this ourselves all the time, perhaps subtly and unconsciously. The younger group says, "Those old geezers drive me crazy! They haven't had a new thought in years. They're completely bound up; there is no freedom. They do things the same old way at the same time over and over again. God can't be pleased with a

life that is so routine and so lacking in creativity. I guess I have to put up with them, but I sure don't like it." Those who are sitting across the table in fellowship say, "These young people are playing fast and loose with everything God cares about. They say they're free, but, by golly, they're not free; they're just using this as an opportunity to live fleshly, self-indulgent lives. I know what they're really doing. And God can't be pleased with the way they're acting." We need to look hard at how we treat each other over issues that are the business of the Master judge and to change.

Let's talk a bit about what it means to be weak or relatively less weak as Paul is describing them here. It is clear that he intends for the people with the most freedom to be understood as those who are farthest along in faith. Verse 14 says, "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself." The people who are recoiling from eating certain kinds of food are misinformed; there is no spiritual taint attached to any kind of food. People who live with outward restrictions in their lives don't really have to live that way. If they were farther along in faith they could learn freedom. I remember when I first encountered this argument I was surprised by it. My earliest pictures of Christianity suggested that the people who were most like God were those who lived with the most severity in their lives, had the fewest freedoms, and said no to the most things. They were the truly advanced Christians.

But Paul is arguing from the opposite direction. He is saying that real maturity comes from being controlled inside, from having the Spirit of God himself be so important in our lives, and our thinking be so much captured by him, that we are completely free to do anything. We choose over and over again to do what is right, courageous, creative, and holy because we have been changed from within.

We can imagine someone who has just entered into the Christian life, and we hope they will have barriers and protections lovingly provided around them, because all the old habits of their lives are so deeply ingrained in them that they need to say no to a lot of things; they need to flee environments they can't handle. But we can also imagine people way at the other end of the maturity scale who have walked with the Lord a long time, and they have his character formed in them to such a degree that there are very few places that they are unwilling to go or things that they are unwilling to encounter. That is why Jesus was so free to go to the homes of arrogant Pharisees and to parties with drunks and harlots. There wasn't any setting that he was unwilling to go into; because when he was there he changed the setting, it didn't change him. He went in as the Lord, as the one who would bring his influence on that place, not fearing that it would influence him.

An odd picture came to mind as an illustration of this: If you were to see Mother Theresa visiting a crack house, what would you assume had taken place inside? My assumption would be that she had gone into that environment as God's servant to care for the people who were throwing their lives away, just as she has gone into scores of other such environments. But if you saw someone who was a week old in the Lord and had had a twenty-year cocaine habit exiting the crack house, you would draw a different conclusion. You would be worried that they had gone into a setting where they couldn't handle it.

Paul knows that there are some whose faith is still in the growing process, who will choose restrictions for themselves because they need the protection that comes with them. Yet he recognizes at the same time that growth occurs, and with growth comes freedom to go wherever the Lord would send us.

There are two ways in which weakness is set aside. One is learning. Sometimes we are weak because we just don't know very much. The Spirit has touched us, and we want to live lives pleasing to God, but we don't yet know what it is that is pleasing to him. We may have heard the Ten Commandments and said, "If that's what God wants then I'll attempt to live that way"; but unfortunately we have been given a hundred other things that we think God cares about as well that are of no concern to Him. What we need is for someone to instruct us about the things that really matter to God so that we can live lives that please him.

There are people who were raised in very conservative, controlling religious environments who were rightly taught that sexual sin is an abomination to God, but were also taught that in order to avoid sexual sin you should avoid sexuality entirely; it should be feared and run from and repressed. This of course is not true; God delights in sexual pleasure and intimacy for those who have given themselves to one another in marriage for a lifetime. The misunderstanding is that because adultery is wrong, sexual pleasure must be wrong. One can be taught the truth and so be strengthened as a result.

Some who have been raised in fundamentalist backgrounds have been taught that liturgy and ritual in Christian experience is something that should be avoided, because it has been abused so many times in hierarchical churches. Of course it has been abused, but that doesn't mean that there aren't times when grandeur, silence, meditation, ritual, poetry, and all of that might not be a very great thing to experience in worship. So we learn that the things that we are familiar with are not the only things that God approves. We can be set free and strengthened as a result.

You may have been raised to think that only the experts can do Bible study, that you need three Ph.D.'s before you dare open the Bible and think an original thought for yourself. Of course you can learn that is not true; the Bible was written for everybody, and the Spirit of God teaches us as we read it. You can have the joy of discovering the Scriptures for yourself, and someone can strengthen you by teaching you what you didn't know before about what pleases God and what is true.

Secondly, every one of us has temptations that have regularly tripped us up and made us vulnerable. These temptations also make us weak. If greed or love of money has been a particular weakness that has driven you into places where you don't want to be and ruined your life, as you grow in the Lord you can become strong in this area where you are now weak.

You can learn to say no to the destructive power of anger in your life. There are many whose lives have been terrorized by anger flaring within them and hurting people around them; they don't know how to control it, and it has wrecked things again and again. So they have learned early in their Christian life to live with restrictions about where they will go, what they will say, or who they will associate with because they don't want their anger to come back. But eventually, as you crucify those responses and hand them to the Lord, as his character is formed in you, you can learn that anger doesn't have to control you, and you can become strong where you were weak.

So Paul is writing about the experience of having restrictions that early in one's Christian life are to be expected and may be necessary and helpful. But eventually, as we are taught and as our character is formed, we required them less and less. Eventually we can get to the point where we experience new freedom and realize no offense is taken by God at all.

The Master Will Judge

With all that in mind, now let's look at Paul's argument. The problem he discusses in verses 1-12 is judgment. I have already said that it is true of both groups sitting across the table from each other. He says in verse 3, "You must not look down on the person who is different from you." In verse 10 he makes the same point: "Why then do you judge or look down on your brother?"

Verse 1 makes a more subtle point, that of acceptance that has a hook in it. Paul's unqualified statement is that we are to accept the one who is weak in faith. And the possible qualification that he warns against is that we will accept someone with the intention of changing them. You welcome a brother, embrace him, and invite him to join you, but the whole point is to make sure that he is more like you when you get done with this association. That is a subtle hook that appears to be open-hearted but is in fact controlling. That we must not do.

The alternative, as the argument unfolds, is to recognize that Jesus is the Master of everyone. We are not capable of being the lord of another or of fixing their lives. We don't know enough.

Let me ask you to think for a moment about some of the contemporary issues that would be analogous to eating meat offered to idols in Rome in the first century. Wealth can cause division among believers. The rich look at the poor and say, "If these people weren't so irresponsible, if they would just take life seriously and get out of the mess they're in, it would be more honoring to God." On the other hand, the middle range look at the rich and say, "How can they justify buying such an expensive car and taking such an extravagant vacation? Who do they think they are, anyway?" We are unwilling to let God fix them; we would rather fix them ourselves.

I have seen a real difference in this congregation between people who are comfortable using the language of modern psychology and those who are not. Some will say that the language of Scripture---justification, sanctification, glorification---describes the processes by which God gives life to the dead. We ought to continue to teach the Bible just as it was given to us. This is what the Lord intends for us. Others will say, "If the contemporary culture uses words like co-dependent, dysfunctional, and so forth, we will use the language of the culture, infuse it with biblical thinking, and teach the truth that way." Each group questions whether the other is free to teach the way they do. Again, the master in this is Jesus. We must urge everyone to do what is right before the Lord rather than to say things as we ourselves say them.

Worship and Family Life

Music is another area where there is disagreement over what is to be approved for Sunday worship. Whose tastes ought to dominate? What is important and what isn't?

There are correctional fads of all kinds that sweep through Christian groups. Perhaps in the kind of prayer meeting that is in vogue for the moment people hold hands, have silence, then raise hands, read a psalm, and read something in Latin. But others contend that the right way to have a prayer meeting is maximum spontaneity with no planning ahead. People advocate what is current or what is not current in methods for Bible study, conducting small group meetings, and evangelism as well. All of these come with booklets and lesson plans on how to do them, and people are either for them or against them.

In the last ten years that I've been walking through issues with people in our congregation, probably the most difficult issues have had to do with family style: How should people raise their children? Should both parents work? What kind of schooling should their children have---a Christian school, private school, home-schooling, or the public schools? You make a decision that you've thought through, knowing your child, trusting your Lord, and doing your best as you decide together as a family. Then you find yourselves unable to believe that God could allow other people to come to a different conclusion, because you have worked so hard at deciding this and prayed so much about it. And so we subtly divide ourselves, perhaps remaining polite, but not really giving other people the right to be different.

All of that is exactly what Paul is wrestling with in Romans 14. And we have to accept one another and let the mastery of Christ reign supreme. He is the one who is able to make his servants stand. Our efforts to meddle in another person's life are going to fail because we are not wise enough, strong enough, or far-sighted enough.

We may decide that it's time for our Christian brother to learn to stop swearing. We're sick and tired of it. However, on God's agenda, which is dealing with deep fears and longings and the condition of the man's heart, he will get to the swearing eventually, but that is not the main point right now. His own Master will make him stand. Jesus is good enough at sanctifying people that he will get everyone there. He doesn't need us wedging ourselves into others' lives and taking over where we don't belong.

An important perspective that comes out of the last sentence in verse 5: "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." And then again in verse 12 he says, "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God." One of the reasons we meddle in the lives of other people, judge them, and pressure them is that we are running from issues in our own lives. We need to think hard about what we believe, what our calling and responsibility are, and what changes God should be making in our lives. We need to become fully convinced in our own minds, because someday we are going to have to answer for ourselves at the judgment seat. God is not going to ask us about anybody else on that day.

First Things First

The way out of this business of judgment and condemnation of another, becoming overly involved in what the Lord is doing in another person's life, is to major on the majors, not the minors. It is to take seriously the important things, such as thankfulness. If you are eating meat, are you eating it with thankfulness to God in your heart, or are you resentful for some element that is not there---some person or some circumstance? Or if

you're not eating meat, are you grateful not to have it? "Thank you, Lord, for the vegetables. I'm delighted with what I have been given and who I am, living for the glory of God." That is what he means when he says, "If we live we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord." Are you caught up in thinking of ways that you can live your life for God's glory?

Are we sure that Jesus died, was buried and was raised again? Are we sure he is Master of all, and is going to judge all? Do we have a big picture of Jesus Christ in our lives? Is he someone of magnificence and importance to us, or is he an errand boy in our thinking? If we decide to be thankful, to live to Jesus' glory, and to have a great Savior at the helm of our lives, and those things are what we pay attention to, we are not going to have the time, energy, or inclination to pay attention to things that do not matter very much.

Let's move on now to the second problem Paul discusses: that of improperly ignoring the influence we have on others, running over them, hurting them inadvertently, not paying enough attention to what we are doing because we are just looking at ourselves and our own interests. Verses 13-18:

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

Reckless Freedom

In this case freedom is being exercised, but it is being exercised recklessly. I am maturing in Christ and throwing off restrictions that once hung me up because I no longer need them. I am someone in whom the Lord is building himself. He is giving me joy and opportunities to go places where I once couldn't go and to do things I once couldn't do. But I retain the responsibility of not hurting the one next to me with my freedom. I can't choose to exercise my rights if the exercise of my rights is destructive to someone else. The language used here is strong: "Do not put a stumbling block in front of someone."

If you have been watching the Olympics, you have probably seen people take some horrendous headers, whether on the ice or on the snow. Someone is moving forward toward a goal that they have trained for for years if not decades, and this is the high moment. They are competing at the grand level, pressing for the prize---and all of a sudden they hit some little pebble in the snow or nick in the ice and have a horrible crash, and it's all over. They stumble and fall, and all hope is dashed.

Paul is talking about the case in which our exercise of our liberty is seriously destructive to another person. In verse 15 the New International Version says, "If your brother is distressed...." But that would be better translated grieved. It is as if your actions have the effect of causing grief as at the death of a loved one. Then you are out of bounds in the exercise of your freedom. If your exercise of freedom has the result of putting someone you care about in the condition of sensing themselves near what is evil, then you are acting out of bounds. If their heart is overcome with a sense of dread and wickedness, as if God is remote from them because of what you have done, then you have no business acting that way. We can put a stumbling block in front of our brothers and sisters when our freedom leads them back into what was once terrible for them. It is when, for example, our cheerful, God-be-thanked glass of wine at dinner can send someone back into a life of alcoholism. We must not engage in the freedom in this case.

Not Letting Weakness Dominate

But Paul also uses strong language because it is important that we recognize what he is *not* saying. He is not saying, "Don't be an irritant in the use of your freedom." There will be times when the use of our freedom will be irritating for people around us, and it may be necessary. If some stuffy, hidebound person in your fellowship cannot abide the way you laugh with your kids, take vacations, drink wine with your meal, have

friends who aren't Christian, and go around with grease under your fingernails, it may well be that you need to irritate them this way in order for growth to take place in them. The restrictive lives of the weak shouldn't control all freedom, growth, and maturity of everyone else.

Playing board games is one of our family habits. I remember when our children were little, we played Candy Land until our eyes were ready to fall out. It is an endlessly repetitive, completely boring game. But when children are little, that is the most they can do. They are inexperienced; they don't have any more to operate with. But it would be terrible if we played Candy Land forever and never moved on to Monopoly or Scrabble. There would be no growth, change, creativity, or anything new. Spiritual immaturity (weakness) shouldn't be reinforced too long, either.

Verses 17-18 are a ringing reminder that nothing important is at stake in giving up our rights. Learning to love those who are different and may be difficult is a worthy cause, and deserves our attention. But whether or not we are able to exercise freedom in what we eat, what kind of music we listen to, where we go, who our friends are, and whatever else it occurs to us to do; nothing eternally important is at stake. All that is important is always ours anyway: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men."

Catalog No. 4357
Romans 14:1-18
24th Message
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February 20, 1993

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