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Sermon Notes

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Maintaining Sweet Fellowship Over Disputable Matters, Part 1

Romans 14:1-4

Introduction: Shunned for Buttons

There are two great and opposite errors into which the church of Jesus Christ has constantly struggled not to fall: LEGALISM and LICENSE

Legalism is the belief that our standing before God depends totally on obeying rules and regulations. It leads to a joyless existence in which rule after rule, law after law are multiplied, so that an ever-increasing burden is laid on the conscience of the Christian. Rules about eating and drinking, about entertainment (like dancing, spectator sports, card playing, and movie watching), about dress styles and a host of other personal choices become grounds for church discipline.

License on the other hand is the belief that the grace of God has so completely freed us from any concern about the law that we can live however we want, without any concern about worldliness. It has a light view of sin, and a twisted view of grace.

The nub of the struggle between these two is usually on the issue of worldliness or separation from the world:

1 John 2:15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

2 Corinthians 6:14-17 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ... ¹⁷ "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you."

Obviously the concern over worldliness and defilement by our surrounding culture is a major one in the New Testament. But so also is the concern over the grace of God in the gospel and the fact that obeying laws doesn't save anyone.

Especially since the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century, religious groups have sprung up and splintered again and again based on how best to understand separation from the world. A very good example of this is the Amish, who live in rural communities in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and many other states.

The Amish were born in division, born in controversy, born in a spirit of strict adherence to extra-Biblical requirements. And that spirit has led to repeated splintering of their movement... again and again, the Amish have split over how to understand lifestyle choices as a community.

The Amish are an Anabaptist sect which split away from the other Mennonites at the end of the 17th century. The founder of the sect was a Mennonite minister in Switzerland named Jacob Ammann. He strongly felt that certain transgressions, such as lying, justified excommunication from the church and that excommunication should involve social ostracism. He visited different Mennonite congregations throughout Switzerland and aggressively demanded that the leaders of each congregation state their views on these issues. In the end, his actions forced a schism among the Mennonites in Switzerland and southern Germany. Those Mennonites who adhered to Jacob Ammann's views came to be known as Amish Mennonites or simply as the Amish.

By 1727 members of the sect had begun to immigrate to America, as had other German Mennonites.

From the beginning, Jacob Ammann insisted that the members of his church conform to a particular style of dress and that men leave their beards untrimmed. Even before coming to America the Amish had adopted the custom of using hooks and eyes rather than buttons to fasten clothing.

This led to the essential distinctive of the Amish: protection from the world's pollution by a strict set of community rules called the *ordnung*. It involved rulings about modern technology, dress codes, facial hair, transportation, etc. The *ordnung* covers every area of their distinctive lives... but it has also resulted in a repeated pattern of splintering, of one schism after another. Old Order Amish are especially noted for their willingness to practice strict shunning of any Amish person who violates key aspects of their code.

But the Amish are not the only Christian group that has struggled with understanding how to maintain balance between grace, Christian unity and charity, humility, and purity.

These vital streams of our gospel are on Paul's mind as he writes to the potentially divided Jewish and Gentile church in Rome.

Thus he writes the incredibly important chapter before us... Romans 14

At issue: how do we maintain sweet Christian fellowship over disputable matters? How do we uphold purity and separation from the world without becoming judges with evil thoughts? How do we watch over one another with brotherly love without becoming arrogant busybodies who forget our own sinfulness, and who forget how powerful grace is to save sinners?

I. Central Command: Christian Acceptance

Romans 14:1 Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.

A. Rich Fellowship Commanded

1. Word literally means “welcome” or “draw alongside yourself”

In Acts 28, Paul uses the word to refer to the warm welcome the Maltese showed in their kindness and hospitality in drawing in Paul and his shipwrecked, bedraggled companions

Urged also by Paul of Philemon concerning Onesimus:

Philemon 1:16-17 He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

2. Divisions and arguments threaten this

- a. Christian unity constantly threatened by our sinfulness
- b. Paul desires a warm, loving community... not a faction-ridden group of sullen people who won't cross the floor to greet one another

3. So, the welcome is coupled with a negative clarification

ESV Romans 14:1 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

- a. The word is used of Peter drawing Jesus close so he could rebuke Him

After Jesus told them all He was going to die in Jerusalem:

Matthew 16:22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

- b. Picture from the Old Testament: Joab and Abner

2 Samuel 3:27 Now when Abner returned to Hebron, Joab took him aside into the gateway, as though to speak with him privately. And there, to avenge the blood of his brother Asahel, Joab stabbed him in the stomach, and he died.

- c. Don't draw your weak brother close to dispute with him or argue with him

4. Rather: WELCOME him warmly... get close to him, love him, cherish him

B. Not Worldly “Tolerance”

1. The world is ALL ABOUT tolerance... acceptance
2. BUT it specifically means tolerance of sin...
 - a. Doctrine: “embrace my views”
 - b. Lifestyle: “accept me as I am”
3. Tolerance has become the religion of America
 - a. Especially in embracing other religions
 - b. Refraining from making absolute truth claims about Christ
 - c. Denouncing sin (like homosexuality) = “hate speech”
4. This is NOT the acceptance Paul has in mind!!
 - a. We are NEVER to tolerate false doctrine
 - b. We are NEVER to tolerate sin, what the Bible proclaims as sin
 - c. Paul is not dealing with a pluralistic secular society like America
 - d. He is dealing with the church

C. Basis: Gospel Truth

1. Accept people that God has accepted

Romans 14:3 God has accepted him.

Romans 15:7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

2. The basis is commitment to the gospel
 - a. It is faith in the gospel that unites Christians
 - b. The brother or sister with “weak faith” still has faith in Christ
 - c. That alone is the basis for the warm fellowship Paul has in mind here

D. The Need for Discernment

1. It is obvious, then, that the church must develop discernment

2. We have to **discern people**: We have to be able to know whom God has accepted on the basis of the Gospel; we are not to call somebody a non-Christian based on disputable matters
3. We have to **discern issues**: We have to understand when something is a legitimate matter of Christian freedom, or if it violates the doctrine and holy lifestyle that God enjoins

II. Context: Disputable Matters in the New Covenant Church

A. Mixed Church at Rome

1. Jew and Gentile alike worshiping in this church
2. Problem of differing cultures and traditions
3. Very significant because of the strategic importance of the church at Rome

Romans 1:8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.

Everyone was watching to see how this church would get along.

Jew-Gentile relationships were put on display for the entire world to see.

Christ tied the progress of the gospel to outward visible displays of love and unity among Christians

John 13:35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

John 17:23 May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

In other words, if the church at Rome can't figure out how to be perfectly united in mind and thought, if they dissolve into factions that are constantly arguing about disputable matters, if the church divides and subdivides again, the cause of the gospel will be hindered all around the world!!!

B. Transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant

1. Unique era: a transition time from Old Covenant to New Covenant doctrine and lifestyle
 - a. The temple was still standing in Jerusalem and animal sacrifices were being offered there every day
 - b. Moses had been preached all around the world from the earliest times

- c. Jews had grown up living under the constant scrutiny of the Laws of Moses... like Peter, they had never eaten anything impure or unclean
 - d. They had scrupulously avoided all physical contact with the uncircumcised Gentiles
 - e. Some Gentiles had become “god-fearers”... who sought to obey the Laws of Moses as well
 - f. They had memories of the years before Christ
 - g. They had made pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the three Jewish festivals
 - h. They had offered animals at the temple there
2. Ceremonial law divided Jews and Gentiles
- a. Biggest issue was circumcision
 - b. BUT circumcision was just a gateway into an entire way of life dictated by the Laws of Moses
 - c. Eating regulations a major issue

Law of Moses laid out very specifically what meats you could eat and what you couldn't

Leviticus 11:1-3 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ² "Say to the Israelites: 'Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat: ³ You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud.

Leviticus 11:4 "'There are some that only chew the cud or only have a split hoof, but you must not eat them.

Deuteronomy 14:8 The pig is also unclean; although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud.

The Law of Moses got specifically into what kinds of animals were clean and what were unclean

There were long lists of birds that were clean and unclean.

C. Christ Fulfilled the Ceremonial Law

1. The coming of Christ ended forever the need for the ceremonial law
2. These laws were established to show everyone their need for Christ AND to identify who Christ was once he came

3. These laws made a barrier, a wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles
4. Once Christ died, He destroyed that legal barrier, made them truly one forever
5. To that end he declared all foods clean

**Mark 7:18-23 ...nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'?
¹⁹ For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.")**

There was no spiritual significance whatsoever to the flesh of one animal over another

We can eat anything we want and not be displeasing to God

6. Peter had to grapple with this change and it was very difficult for him

Acts 10:11-15 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

D. Deeper Issue: Justification by Faith Alone

1. The true issue here was understanding how a sinner is made acceptable to God
2. Obedience to the Law never saved a single soul
3. The full understanding of the gospel meant that people were made pure in God's sight simply by faith, not by obeying the Law
4. Peter made this very clear when the church met to discuss whether or not Gentiles were going to be forced to obey the Laws of Moses... this was the great lesson of the sheet in Acts 10 before he led Cornelius to Christ... God makes people clean by faith, not by obedience to the Law of Moses

Acts 15:10-11 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹ No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

E. Arguing over "Disputable Matters"

1. So, what are these "disputable matters"?
2. In Romans 14, they have to do with the Old Covenant ceremonial law
 - a. Eating and drinking

Romans 14:2 One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.

- b. Special religious days; perhaps the Sabbath regulation itself

Romans 14:5 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.

3. They definitely DO NOT have to do with core doctrines, such as the Trinity, or the Deity of Christ, or Justification by Faith in the Blood of Christ
 - a. Satan has brought every core doctrine in the Christian faith under question at one time or another
 - b. False teachers start cults that question clearly taught doctrines
4. Neither do they have to do with clear commands and prohibitions given by the Lord:
 - a. Make disciples of all nations
 - b. You shall not murder, or commit adultery (just repeated in Romans 13)
5. Disputable matters are grey areas of the Christian life... issues of Christian liberty

III. Strong and Weak Christians

ESV Romans 14:1 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

Romans 15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.

- A. Paul uses the terms “weak” and “strong”
 1. “weak” = “sick”, “frail”, “ill”
 2. “strong” = “powerful” or “capable” “able”
- B. Weak in “the Faith”

Romans 14:1 has a specific phrase connected with the term “weak”

KJV Romans 14:1 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye

1. “the faith” = Christian doctrine... the pattern of Christian teachings

2. Specifically, these Christians seem to show a weak grasp of the doctrine of justification by faith alone
3. They are fearful of sin, fearful of displeasing God by externals, fearful that eating meat sacrificed to idols will lead into a sinful lifestyle
4. So, they make man-made rules and regulations to prevent themselves from straying into sin
5. Also, they seek to enforce these laws on the whole community
6. They have lost their grip on GRACE... they feel they must finish their own salvation... begun by the Spirit, they now need to finish the Christian race in their own strength
7. They are motivated by fear, not faith
8. SO Paul calls them weak in the faith... they have not yet grasped justification by faith alone, nor do they have a strong sense of how much power Christ is exerting in them every day to hold them in Christ, how certain it is that He will finish in them the good work of salvation He began
9. They fear the future and make their own resolutions and determinations and rules and regulations to be sure they never drift into sin again
10. AND they judge themselves and others MOST HARSHLY when these rules are broken

C. Strong in “the Faith”

1. They understand the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works
2. They do not use the grace of God as a license to sin but as freedom from fear
3. They have a lively sense of the immeasurable power of Christ at work in them to finish their salvation
4. They are fearlessly roaming in the path of Christian liberty, not violating any of God’s moral laws, but freely eating and drinking and laughing and living as Christ did
5. Paul himself was strong and applied it to the matter of eating meat sacrificed to idols

Romans 14:14 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.

6. But at the same time, he was conscious of the needs of his weak brothers and sisters

Romans 14:15 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.

Romans 14:21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

IV. Sinful Tendencies: Disdain and Judgmentalism

Romans 14:3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

A. The Strong Disdain the Weak

1. Paul's word literally means "look down on" "treat with contempt" as though you were a lofty Lord looking down on some lower life form
2. Perhaps it comes in the form of mocking, or laughter

Illus. Tim, discipling me, laughed at me not eating meat on Fridays

3. Perhaps the disdaining Christian would just give up on the weaker brother... break fellowship
4. This tendency is all the more pronounced when the weaker brother starts to judge and condemn the brother acting in liberty

B. The Weak Judge the Strong

1. More powerful is the tendency of the weaker brother to JUDGE those using their God-given liberties
2. They set up all these rules and regulations and are SHOCKED if you don't follow them
3. The word Paul uses here may be translated "CONDEMN"... i.e. declare the other to be unsaved because of this grey area issue
4. Here come all those legalistic Christian groups who have condemned others for the way they live their lives
 - a. Roman Catholic monasteries, with their hierarchy of holiness
 - b. Separatistic groups who refuse fellowship with others on the basis of community derived rules and regulations

- c. Fundamentalists who excommunicated others on the basis of dancing and card playing
- d. The list is just about endless concerning the debatable lifestyle issues Christians have used to condemn other people

C. A Constant Problem—from Generation to Generation

1. So many issues have been the ground for Romans 14 disputes in Church History
2. Can a Christian drink any alcohol if he never overindulges or gets drunk?
3. What about the use of tobacco? Some Amish grow tobacco, and consider it one of God's good gifts, since He declared everything good in Genesis 1

Illus. J. Vernon McGee, in introducing the whole issue of Romans 14 judgmentalism and Christian community spoke of two groups of Christians, one from a farming community and one from the California coastline; they were together in Christian fellowship, until the issue of mixed swimming came up... of young men and young women wearing bathing suits and swimming together; the California Christians thought there was nothing wrong with it, the rural Christians were utterly horrified and considered it openly sinful and immoral. However, when the issue of tobacco use came up, some of the rural Christians grew tobacco and the California Christians, saying the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, were deeply offended by their freedom with tobacco!

HOW WE JUDGE ONE ANOTHER!!

4. How about entertainment?
 - a. In the past, anyone who went to the theater to see a play or a movie was considered in open, defiant sin
 - b. Dancing has always been controversial in conservative circles... among the Puritans AND among fundamentalists... FBC disciplined a number of its own members for dancing a hundred years ago
 - c. What about spectator sports? Is it sin to watch a ballgame? Even more poignant are questions about sports on Sunday
 - d. Card playing was an open sin a hundred years ago... the grounds for severe judgment by other Christians
5. Worship styles is a big one: some people judge those who want to maintain traditional music as being totally unconcerned about the lost, unconcerned about evangelism. Other people judge those who want to use rock music or back beat in Christian worship as openly sinful or worldly... there's a lot of judgmentalism that goes on on both sides

6. Bible translations: is it KJV only or are modern scholarly translations acceptable?
7. How about home schooling? We have many homeschool families in our congregation. It would be easy for the judgmentalism to fly each way: homeschool families to judge those who don't or vice versa.
8. Bottom line: on any "debatable issue" of Christian lifestyle, each one of us stands on a line, a continuum, with Christians to the right (more espousing Christian separation from the world) and Christians to the left (more espousing Christian freedom). It is so easy to judge either direction!! To look to those on your right and say "They are so legalistic!!" and to look to those on your left and say "They are so liberal" Be careful, because others are doing the exact same thing to you!

V. Remedy: Understanding Our Proper Place in Christ

Romans 14:3 the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him

A. Understanding God's Acceptance... therefore Do Not Judge

1. Paul bases his command not to judge on a simple fact: GOD HAS WELCOMED THIS PERSON

2 Peter 1:11 you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Pictured in the return of the Prodigal Son:

Luke 15:20-24 "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Bunyan displays this in Christian and Hopeful's welcome into the Celestial City:

"Now, while they were thus drawing towards the gate, behold a company of the heavenly host came out to meet them: to whom it was said by the other two shining ones, These are the men that have loved our Lord when they were in the world, and that have left all for his holy name... Then the heavenly host gave a great shout, saying, "Blessed are they that are called to the marriage-supper of the Lamb." There came out also at this time to meet them several of the King's trumpeters, clothed in white and shining raiment, who, with melodious noises and loud, made even the heavens to echo with their sound. These trumpeters saluted

Christian and his fellow with ten thousand welcomes from the world; and this they did with shouting and sound of trumpet.

This done, they compassed them round on every side; some went before, some behind, and some on the right hand, and some on the left, continually sounding as they went, with melodious noise, in notes on high; so that the very sight was to them that could behold it as if heaven itself was come down to meet them. Thus, therefore, they walked on together; and, as they walked, constantly these trumpeters, even with joyful sound, would, by mixing their music with looks and gestures, still signify to Christian and his brother how welcome they were into their company. And now were these two men, as it were, in heaven, before they came to it, being swallowed up with the sight of angels, and with hearing of their melodious notes. Here also they had the city itself in view; and they thought they heard all the bells therein to ring, to welcome them thereto. But, above all, the warm and joyful thoughts that they had about their own dwelling there with such company, and that for ever and ever; oh, by what tongue or pen can their glorious joy be expressed! Thus they came up to the gate.

Paul's basic point in Romans 14: If God has welcomed them, how can you refuse them?

2. How can you be holier than God??
3. God's message to Peter was very clear when He let down the sheet with all the previously unclean animals

Acts 10:13-15 Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

4. Peter rightly applied that to Cornelius the Roman... formerly unclean, now made clean by simple faith in Christ

Beginning his history-making gospel presentation to Cornelius and his Gentile friends:

Acts 10:34-35 Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right

When confronted by a bunch of zealous Jewish Christians, who wanted to condemn Peter for going into the house of an uncircumcised man and eating with him:

Acts 11:17 if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

The lesson was clear; God has power to make unclean people clean by SIMPLE FAITH IN CHRIST:

Peter made that case at the Jerusalem council on circumcision:

Acts 15:7-9 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.

5. So... if God has WELCOMED this man, who are we to CONDEMN him??

B. Understanding God as Master... therefore Do Not Judge

1. Paul's second point is a strong rebuke to the weak brother who is judging the strong

Vs. 4 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.

2. It is brutally bad manners to go into someone else's house and give commands to the owner's servants; still less to rebuke them

3. Modern day equivalent: correcting or disciplining someone else's children

4. We know enough to keep our thoughts and our authority to ourselves... it is not given to us to rebuke or correct another man's servant or child

5. That servant answers to his own master; that child answers to his own father...
NOT TO YOU

6. So it is really the height of arrogance for a Christian to step in and say something to judge Christ's servant

7. When you are starting to judge someone else, take it before the Lord in prayer and ask, "Is this a matter of Bible doctrine or clear command from Scripture, or is it a 'debatable issue'?"

C. Understanding God's Power... therefore Do Not Fear

And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

1. The biggest problem with the weak brother: they have forgotten the power of God and the grace of God in salvation

2. They think it is all up to them to keep themselves in Christ by rules and regulations, because of the world's overpowering strength to rip us from Christ

3. Paul ends this section by reminding us all to look ultimately to Christ's sustaining power, not to our careful efforts to remain standing in the torrent of temptation Satan and this world and our own flesh will hurl at us
 4. Our ultimate hope is NOT in our own watchfulness but in the priestly ministry of Christ... at the cross, at the empty tomb, at the right hand of God
- D. Understanding Our Community Responsibility... Therefore Do Not Stop Watching Over Each Other
1. Later in Romans 14, Paul will make a strong case for the unity we must strive for in Christ
 2. It is unacceptable to Christians to retreat from "watching over one another in brotherly love"
 3. We will learn that, what is acceptable for one person could lead another into sin
 4. We are called to still help each other be holy... but not to judge each other in the process