

# Love Across the Divide

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, as Jeff said at the beginning of the service, good morning, welcome, especially if you're new. My name's Tommy, I'm the rector here, and if we haven't met and you're visiting, I'll be hanging around after the church service.

I'll be up front for a little while, and I really hope we get a chance to meet. Before we have this baptism that we're excited about, we're gonna spend a little time looking at God's word together. A couple of scholars at Vanderbilt have developed something called the Unity Index, and it's a way of measuring how divided our society is, how polarized we are, and their question was, is it getting better or is it getting worse?

What would you think they discovered? Yeah, things are getting worse. Over the last 40 years, we've become increasingly divided, as a society, and perhaps more so than we've ever been. And there's a reason why you got that answer correct. I think that we probably know that. I think we've probably experienced it. How many of us have lost friends over the last few years?

[ 1 : 15 ] Yeah, how many of us have maybe lost friends over disagreements about politics or culture or society? Maybe you have people that you used to talk to and then you just don't talk to them anymore.

How many of us have family members that we avoid? You don't have to raise your hand for that one. That we avoid talking to because we're afraid certain topics might come up.

How many are dreading Thanksgiving this year? In particular, it being an election year and all. Sitting around that table might be pretty interesting.

And so I don't have to tell you that we live in a highly pluralistic society. And the question that confronts us all the time is this. How can people who have massive differences when it comes to beliefs and values and lifestyle live together in society?

When people are distressed or even offended by one another's beliefs and values, are relationships even possible or not?

[ 2 : 24 ] What we're going to see this morning is that the gospel has the power to transform every aspect of life, including the way we treat those with whom we disagree.

Time's up. The way we treat those with whom we disagree. And I would actually go a step further and say I think this is maybe one of the biggest or greatest tests of any belief system, sacred or religious.

How does your belief system lead you to treat those with whom you disagree? The gospel has the power to transform this in the human heart.

And Paul gets into this issue in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. And actually this is part of a larger argument that goes through chapter 11 verse 1. And then he picks this same issue up in other places such as Romans chapter 14.

So we're going to primarily focus on the lectionary reading which is 1 Corinthians 8. But I'm going to be drawing from these other places because it's a larger argument. And you really need to see the whole argument to understand the beauty of what we're about to discuss.

[ 3 : 37 ] First we're going to clarify what Paul is not saying. And then we're going to look at what he is saying and what makes such a thing possible. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is not a dead word nor is it merely the product of human ingenuity or creativity that this is a living and active word and that as we gather together in your name you speak.

Speak to us and through the power of your Holy Spirit make us receptive to your word. We pray this in Jesus' holy name. Amen. So first of all let me give you a little context of what's going on and why Paul feels the need to address this.

He gets into this because there's major disagreement in the church over food that has been sacrificed or dedicated to a pagan deity. In order to participate in public life in Corinth it was almost impossible to avoid food that had been dedicated or sacrificed to some pagan god.

So virtually all the meat sold in the meat market had come out of the temple sacrifices. When people would invite you over for dinner you could be almost assured that there would be food that had been dedicated to a deity.

If it hadn't been a part of a temple sacrifice it could very well be that your neighbors if your pagan neighbors invited you over for dinner that they would offer a blessing and dedicate that food to their pagan deity before you ate.

[ 5 : 16 ] At civic meetings there would usually be food of some kind and whoever was presiding over the meeting would often bless or dedicate that food to a pagan god or goddess as a part of the ceremony.

And so there are Christians living in this society and so they're reacting different ways. Some Christians are saying hey listen it's just food it's just meat. You know it went on sale in the market I bought it I don't care where it came from and it's just food.

Right? And other Christians are very very scandalized by this. They refuse to touch this food they refuse to get near it they're very scrupulous about making sure that the food is spiritually clean before they eat it because they're afraid of being defiled and there's this sense that the Christians who do eat meat must not be serious about their faith and they might even be tainted by it.

So there was a lot of argument happening in the church over what to do. And the question is how can these Christians who disagree over a pretty important issue go to church together?

Right? How do these Christians eat together? What do you bring to the potluck meal when you have these major disagreements and somebody might be scandalized? So here's what Paul does not say.

[ 6 : 38 ] Okay. Paul does not say well listen all truth is relative and all that matters is that you live your truth. Whatever you feel is right you do you let them do them and then we can all get along.

That's not what Paul says. In the postmodern world a lot of people think that's the way to overcome these kinds of divisions. If we could just all agree that there really isn't any objective truth that all truth is relative and that even if there is an objective truth it would be so impossible to know it that it would be better for society if we all just live with the idea that your truth is your truth and your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth and then we can all get along.

But of course that does start to fall apart a bit. If you push the logic you begin to realize well that is itself kind of an absolute truth right? You know the one absolute truth that's allowed to exist is the truth that there is no absolute truth.

It doesn't really work. Paul clearly believes that there is an objective truth and Paul believes that it is possible to know and ascertain things that are more true or less true according to that continuum right?

So it's what we would call a correspondence theory of truth. There is an objective truth there is an objective reality and what we believe either corresponds more or less with that objective reality.

[ 8 : 13 ] So he believes there is a truth and to some extent it is knowable. And in this particular case he says listen in this particular case it is totally okay if you want to eat that meat.

If you want to go to the market and you want to buy that meat and you want to eat it if somebody invites you over to their home it's okay to eat the food. And he lays out his argument in verses 4 through 6. He says listen we know that idols don't actually exist.

We know that human beings have created them that they've imbued them with spiritual significance but they don't actually exist. We know that there's only one God. Now in other places he says there's a danger in idol worship of corresponding of relating to demons.

But that's a different, that's a related but distinct issue. He says we know that idols themselves don't actually exist. There's only one true God and he made everything including that food on the table so eat it and you'll be fine.

And he says in verse 8 you know what you eat is not ultimately going to have an impact on your relationship with God. Eating certain foods is not going to bring you closer to God. You might feel like it does if it's really good food but it's not going to ultimately result in a better relationship.

[ 9 : 24 ] And eating other foods is not going to push you further away from God. That's not what this is about. So Paul's saying there is a correct way of thinking about this issue but not all Christians see it.

and there's a significant number of Christians who are very scandalized by this. And he says you know those Christians who are refusing to eat the meat the issue is that they have a weak conscience.

Now normally what we think of as a weak conscience is the opposite of what Paul actually says. The way Paul defines weak conscience is he says your conscience is too weak to protect you from unnecessary guilt and superstition.

Isn't that interesting? So we would think of it normally as the opposite. A weak conscience is a person who's sort of licentious you know. But Paul's saying no no no. These people have a weak conscience because it can't protect them against superstitious guilt and anxiety.

So these are people who are the weak Christians are likely people who are not as well theologically informed. They tend to be more superstitious as a result of that.

[10:33] These are probably people who like to have things very black and white. They really want there to be a rule for everything. They want somebody to tell them exactly what to do and not to in every situation which helps them feel more in control.

Maybe these are people that tend to overthink to overanalyze. Right? These are the weak Christians. And Paul contrasts those with the strong Christians.

people who have a strong conscience. The reason they're able to eat the meat is because the conscience is strong enough to resist the unnecessary guilt and superstition.

Now sometimes guilt is unnecessary. But sometimes I'm sorry sometimes guilt is necessary. It could be a good thing. But in this case it's not. And so Paul says these are the people who are probably more likely to be theologically informed.

They don't need all the rules spelled out. They have good instincts about what faithfulness looks like. Very important they probably have a much higher tolerance for ambiguity.

[11:40] Some people have a really hard time tolerating ambiguity. The strong Christians probably have a much higher tolerance for ambiguity meaning situations that are very gray and unclear.

And in Romans chapter 14 Paul actually clearly identifies himself as among the strong.

He basically says these are the people this is how I live. Right? And presumably he hopes that everyone is going to grow and get there eventually. The desire would be that the weak Christians eventually become more theologically informed more able to tolerate ambiguity less prone to superstition and that they all become strong eventually.

So in situations like this there is an objective truth out there. Paul is not saying you do you all truth is relative. He's saying there's a way of thinking about this that has a greater correspondence to what we believe theologically.

However not all Christians are there yet. They don't all understand that yet. Everybody is kind of at a different place on their journey of maturity. what this means is that we can't just in a situation like this just pretend like everybody's truth is equally valid.

[12:52] Some people's beliefs and stances have a greater correspondence to what is true. But the question is how do we relate across those lines of disagreement when people are at different places in that journey?

How do you relate to people when there is strong disagreement? think about the conversations that you have had around theology or social issues or politics.

Think about people in your life who may send you quotes or send you articles or in other ways sort of convey that they think that you're way off base in what you think or what you believe or what you value.

It's very tempting when somebody's doing that to just cut them out of your life. I mean it's very tempting just to start to wall your life off and only relate to people with whom you know you're going to have very little conflict around these issues.

Very understandable why that would be tempting. Here's what Paul says. Here's what Paul says. Notice that he aims his correction not at the weak Christians.

[14:06] Christians. The force of this is aimed at the strong Christians. So he says you know you guys are correct but evidence of a changed heart is found in two things according to Paul.

Number one the way we hold our convictions. The way we hold our convictions. What do I mean by that? Chapter 8 verse 1 he says now concerning food offered to idols we know that all of us possess knowledge and then he says but this knowledge puffs up.

What's he saying? The sin of pride is always there and it is always lurking just under the surface and what Paul is saying is this you can have the right theology you can be theologically solid and you can be technically correct in what you believe but just under the surface that pride is simmering away and in your correct theology you can start to feel pretty good about yourself and you can start to feel pretty smug and you see this all the time especially online you know think about your theological beliefs or your political beliefs or your beliefs about various issues people with solid views I see this all the time people you know who I rely on who I look to I say this person has really solid thinking on these issues and yet you see them online like on Twitter or X whatever it's called now treating their opponents with contempt right with smug condescending belittling comments going back and forth and you ask how could this person be so solid and yet there's such smug contempt in the way they talk to people do you ever see this in yourself right you ever read or hear somebody say something and your first response is to roll your eyes you know rolling your eyes is a sign of contempt you can't believe anybody would be so stupid or so misguided you know as somebody who I find myself in lots of conversations about theology and culture

I constantly feel this in myself that is knowledge puffing us up that is that pride simmering up bubbling up to the surface filling us with hot hot air and so the question is what do we do about it and Paul goes on to say in verse 2 if anyone imagines that he knows something in other words if you think of yourself as a person with a good read on things and you think of yourself as a person who knows a lot right about the situation if anyone you know if there's an expert on this issue I'm probably it and I probably have a better understanding than anybody else on this issue and why can't everybody agree with me he says if you're that kind of person listen he says if anyone imagines that he knows something he does not yet know as he ought to know in other words if you think you know everything about a given topic chances are that's evidence that you know very little right if you think that your perspective is the only one that's reasonable that's evidence that you don't actually know what you're talking about in other words this is a call to be intellectually humble evidence of a changed heart is that you are intellectually humble people who have had their hearts changed by the gospel this quality emerges you know a person who talks about this difference in how we hold knowledge is the great philosopher

Charles Taylor he says there are two ways that people tend to hold their views the first group assumes their view is the only plausible view right they assume that what they think is the only reasonable way to think and they cannot imagine any reasonable person holding any other view than their view and this group the first group he says you can here's what is interesting he says you can find this on the right and the left you can find it on both sides of any issue so a fundamentalist from the Bible Belt might say there is a God and anybody who doesn't think so is a moron but then you go into the secular academy and you find a secular academic there is no God and anybody who thinks there is is a moron and Taylor would say you know they're on different sides of the issue but down deep they're exactly the same they're both holding their views in the same way mine is the only reasonable way to think and anybody who disagrees is clearly an idiot that's the first group here's the second group

[19:13] Taylor says the second group is intellectually humble so they hold on to their view and they they they they they believe what they believe but they also understand that their view is one view it's a point of view and they are open to the possibility that other points of view are understandable that they they might also be plausible there are people who understand you know I've arrived at my set of convictions but I understand how a person coming from a different perspective might arrive at a different place that doesn't mean they agree it doesn't mean they're saying it's true but it means they can understand how somebody would get there so you can hold strong convictions but you remain open to the possibility that there are things maybe that you don't know or that there might be certain aspects of this that you are wrong on now a person who has had their heart changed by the gospel holds their views with intellectual humility it doesn't mean they lack conviction and this is a big misunderstanding here because we say well does that mean that they're weak sauce right that they don't they don't really have any convictions absolutely not right a person who's intellectually humble can hold very strongly to their convictions they might be willing to die for their convictions under the right circumstances but they also understand the danger of pride they understand what it's like to wrestle with sin and they understand the limits of their ability to understand every angle of the issue because they are human beings and they understand that no human is capable of knowing everything and these days honestly much of what we do know especially in the realm of culture and politics is skewed by the algorithms that literally

decide the content that we consume and so there's a certain amount of humility to understanding I live within a bit of an echo chamber within a point of view that is reinforced but that's not everybody's experience so evidence of a changed heart is down number one in the way we hold our convictions I believe this and I would die for it and I believe that it corresponds to truth but I understand how and why you might disagree number two the way we receive those who disagree not just the way I hold my convictions but the way we receive those who disagree this is truly breathtaking verses 7 to 13 even though the strong Christians are theologically correct even though Christians according to Paul have a right to eat wherever they want to eat whatever they want they are completely and totally free Paul's primary concern is the well-being of the weak brother and sister if one of these weak Christians sees other Christians eating food sacrificed to idols if they're walking through the market and they look up and they see in a temple courtyard they see Christians eating in that temple courtyard with non-Christians and they know that that food was just sacrificed and they see that happening they're going to be deeply scandalized by it and they might stumble in their own faith they might then go to the temple the next day and eat the same food but they think that they're actually worshipping that idol and that could lead to spiritually disastrous consequences and so Paul says the strong Christians need to be guided by this overarching question what is the impact of my behavior on my brothers and sisters what I choose to do with my body what I choose to do with my time what I choose to do with my money what is the impact of that on the people around me including the people

I disagree with right and Paul says if you ever find yourself in a situation where your choice to eat that meat may in any way scandalize we brothers and sisters don't do it verse 13 he says therefore if food makes my brother stumble I will never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble I mean that is amazing when you consider how countercultural that view is so people in our culture right we're all about demanding our rights right we are taught and we are encouraged to insist on our rights our constitutional rights our civil rights human rights our rights as Christians our rights as Christians right those of us here who are Christians I would say Christians are as loud and as insistent about this as anyone out there but what's the motivation behind all of the clamoring for our rights what is the motivation behind the marches what is the motivation behind the political alliances is it insecurity at no longer being the majority is it a fear of irrelevance is it wounded pride is it a fear of losing maybe some of the freedoms that we have enjoyed as long as we can remember you know the New Testament scholar

N.T. Wright says this and by the way he would fully affirm the value the importance of rights he would say that these are things that we need to be grateful for but here's also what he says insisting on one's rights even insisting on one's rights as a Christian is a sign that something else other than the true God is being worshipped saying when that is your sole focus what is really motivating you a heart that has truly been transformed by the gospel is motivated not by fear not by insecurity not by pride but by sacrificial love so when it comes to our rights we should be thankful for them we should praise God for them we should hope to exercise them freely as often as we can but we should always ask what the impact of our free exercise of rights has on the people around us and Paul says if there's a chance that we may do harm we should be ready to relinquish our rights immediately out of love for others there was a recent there's lots of examples we could give of this there was one recent example of this that came in the early days of the COVID pandemic we were learning more and more about the virus staying up late at night reading as much as we possibly could there was a fear that large public gatherings could accelerate the spread of COVID the word that people used was the super spreader events and because of that they said that big public gatherings would put the more vulnerable members of society the immunocompromised the elderly at greater risk and therefore local authorities said churches should temporarily stop gathering in person until the transmission rates go down right and Christians were up in arms about this because we have a right to gather for worship and the government has no right to tell us that we can't do that it's a fundamental right in our society and because of passages like this we chose as a church to stop meeting in person as hard as it was not out of fear of COVID not out of fealty to local governments but because we looked at passages like this and we decided to temporarily relinquish our right to meet in person in order to demonstrate our love and concern for the broader community and it doesn't mean that we don't think that that right is important and it doesn't mean that under certain circumstances we wouldn't fight for that right but in this case we allow this ethic from places like 1 Corinthians 8 to govern our conduct and I would say if you're

hearing this and you disagree

[ 27 : 46 ] I can point you to a sermon about how to interact with people you disagree with and you can listen to it but it was a very hard issue it was a very gray issue I mean I understood both sides but at the time we decided this is the kind of thing that Paul would call us to do and if you follow Paul's argument through the end of chapter 10 where it picks up and then Romans chapter 14 we actually see that we're called to go even further than this not only should I have a willingness at times to relinquish my rights for the well-being of my brothers and sisters with whom I disagree but Paul calls us to go much much much further in Romans chapter 14 because see these days it is very common for people to say this when it comes to disagreement people will say this agree with me and then I might accept you but unless we disagree I don't think that we can be in relationship and so

I don't know if you've noticed this but a lot of times I find myself in conversations where the first few comments or questions people are kind of feeling each other out they're kind of making little references and they're seeing how you respond and what they're trying to do is to sort you and I do the same thing we're trying to sort each other to figure out is there a chance that we agree on the issues that we see the world in the same way or not and many times when people start to get a sense that I don't think that we're coming from the same place there's kind of a polite distancing where I'm not going to talk to that person anymore and it happens all the time because we have the sense that unless we have a kind of agreement around the basics I'm not sure we can be in relationship Romans 14 says the opposite it says that when we encounter someone with whom we strongly disagree before we try to correct them before we try to argue with them Paul says the first thing that you should do is to welcome them and the word in Greek means much much more than just you're welcome to sit at my table or you're welcome to interact with me

John Stott writes this means more than to accept people in the sense of acquiescing in their existence or even in their right to belong it means more even than to receive or accept in one's society or into one's home or circle of acquaintances here's what he goes further than all of that this isn't just yeah you can come you can be a part of the group you can be among my kind of acquaintances he says no no it means to welcome into one's fellowship and into one's heart it implies the warmth and the kindness of genuine love I welcome you in with warmth and kindness and genuine love and then maybe down the road we start to sort out where we agree and disagree it's a completely different posture and just take a moment and imagine how different would our society be if Christians just Christians regularly responded this way to people who disagree with us not only within

Christian circles but in the broader society it doesn't mean we have soupy convictions but it means the posture is one of open warm embrace first there are plenty of places where Paul highlights the importance of correct theology and working through and making sure to correct people who are led astray right absolutely right but the ethic says the first thing that you do the posture is foregrounds love welcome embrace and in that context differences can be explored imagine how different it would go at your Thanksgiving table if this were the ethic this Paul says is evidence of a heart that has been transformed by the gospel and we read this and quite frankly I think it raises a question how is such a thing even possible how could anyone be expected to be willing to relinquish their rights or to welcome and embrace their enemies with such extravagant love and the key to the whole argument is found in Romans chapter 15 verse 7 where he says welcome others as Christ has welcomed you why should we be willing to relinquish our rights to love people who disagree with us because once we stood condemned as enemies of God in our sin and yet Jesus the eternal son of God who had all of the rights who had all of the glory and all of the power relinquished all of that gave up all of his rights to come and to die the death of a common criminal out of love for us why should

I relinquish my rights because he relinquished his rights for me right why should we enter into the world and embrace people who disagree with us because this is what it means to welcome this is what John this is what it means to welcome others right you encounter somebody you disagree with what does it mean to love and embrace them well you enter intellectually into their world you work to try to understand and sympathize with their viewpoint their point of view right a fundamental rule of debate is you should be able to articulate you should be able to articulate the point of view of your opponent better than they can and you should be able to do that before you respond so what I hear you saying is and you should do when you get done they should look at you and be like wow

that yes that's exactly what I I couldn't have said it better myself right that's what it means to welcome and to embrace you enter fully and you understand their perspective you love them as a friend even though you disagree

[ 33 : 49 ] Paul says why should we be willing to do that for the sake of somebody else because that's exactly what Jesus Christ did the eternal son of God takes on flesh he enters into our world he becomes in every way exactly like us he takes on our weakness he experiences the human condition from the inside right in every way he is tempted as we are and yet without sin why does he become in every way like us so that one day we might become in every way like him and when that truth when the truth of the gospel is driven into your heart when you recognize that you are the one who deserved to be cut off and yet Jesus Christ was willing to relinquish his rights and enter into your world and welcome you and embrace you that fundamentally transforms the way you see those with whom you disagree and you cannot help but love them as

Jesus has loved you let's pray Lord we thank you for your word and we thank you for the gospel and we thank you that you're a God who doesn't sit sternly and distantly away waiting for us to get our act together you're not a God who confronts us with all of the ways that we have fallen short and then leaves us there to wallow hopelessly but you're a God who cares about holiness above all else you care about our holiness above all else and yet you are willing to set aside your rights and your power and your glory and enter into our space to embrace us while we were still sinners Lord to renew us from the inside out Lord we pray that this would govern that this would transform the way we see ourselves that it would transform the way we see people across those lines of difference that it would give us a new set of priorities that it would reorient our hearts to a posture of sacrificial love we pray this that we might be as a community  
Lord a beacon of hope and peace building and reconciliation in this city that we might bring you glory we pray this in your son's holy name amen