

The Way of Love and Peace

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Date: 19 July 2026

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[0:00] Holy Spirit, would you illuminate both your living word and our hearts that we might receive! as we seek to be a loving community, a loving family. Teach us the way of love.

Not one that is, we make up, we construct ourselves, but one that comes from you. And so as we hear, help us to apply all that you have for each of us. Amen.

Well, I spent a few moments this week doing a little Google search, and it was on what silly things have churches had disputes over that have either caused division or major splits and that sort of thing. There's quite a few of them. One listed that there was a debate about the length of the worship pastor's beard. There was a huge rift about whether the service leader should be wearing shoes or not. There was one incident recorded about the size of the filing cabinet that was being purchased for the office.

Type of coffee being served. Huge debate about that. And of course, who gets to use the photocopier in church? Now, I read this list and many more. And to be honest, I thought, well, I could read that. Oh, actually, that one's a bit close to the bone, in my experience. Oh, yes. Yeah, that one. I can see how. And as I read through, I thought, well, yes, some of them seem silly. They all seem silly. But how often have church communities been driven apart or come into major conflict over what seems really on the surface to be quite a trivial matter? And here at Christchurch, I believe we're on a journey towards becoming increasingly inclusive. And I wonder, and perhaps not just here, but many people wonder into our churches and to this church, perhaps, and what's the thing that mainly puts them off? Perhaps not what's taught or said up front, but actually it's people's attitude to, I don't know, their hairstyle or to what clothes they're wearing or maybe the language that they're using. And so it's really important we examine ourselves this morning and tease out, well, what's going on there? How do these small, seemingly small matters suddenly become so huge? And what part can each of us play in changing the dynamic?

[2:41] So we're going to explore three different things that arise out of the reading that Margaret read for us.

Firstly, why quarrelling over minor issues does cause so much damage? So what's going on there? That's what we're going to ask. Secondly, why tolerance is not necessarily the best answer.

And then thirdly, a better way of walking together. Okay, so we're going to explore the issues that cause damage, why tolerance might not be the best answer, and then we'll explore a better way to walk together.

So over the last few weeks, we've been exploring this mighty book of Romans, Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. And in this letter, he unpacks and expands on the wonderful gospel of God, God's good news to the world. That we are, even though we are wayward from God, he has provided a way in which we can be brought into his family, that we can become children of God, not by our own efforts or any system of law, but by grace alone, through faith. And that's at the heart of what he's saying. And it's clear that he has his, the recipients of this letter in mind, because as we've talked about over the last few weeks, we know that that group of churches in Rome would have been filled with people who were both Jewish by descent and in heritage, but also Gentiles, non-Jews. And there were legitimate questions about what aspects of their heritage they should hold on to and perhaps let go of.

And in the chapter 14, as Paul begins to apply the gospel into the life of the community, we meet several of these issues that aren't frivolous. They're not kind of in the sort of what size filing cabinet kind of category. These are like actually concerns. Should we be eating meat or no meat? Should we be reserving special days, sacred days, or not? And particularly you can see this one that came through in our reading. Is there any more clean food, unclean food? You know, what if my Jewish background tells me something different to my neighbour? The drinking of alcohol, should we,

shouldn't we? And Paul regards these issues as disputable matters. That's the phrase he uses, disputable matters. I'll just read the first verse of chapter 14. Paul writes, accept the one whose faith is weak without quarrelling over disputable matters.

[5:37] Because as he's unpacked the gospel, hopefully it's becoming clear to them and to us that there's incredible freedom almost to live as we want, because we're not tied down by an external law anymore. We're not justified by what we do. We have freedom if we stand in the grace of Christ.

But as I say, there's some legitimate questions that still remain. And so we've got these questions of food, drink, holy days, and they become issues of conscience for people. People would like to do them. People think that they are no longer necessary. And actually many of those, and you've probably already sensed this, the fault lines continue to this day. And your attitude to them will differ depending on your experience and also your culture. And we can add on to those a whole number of issues. And not to call them trivial in the sense that they're small, but in some sense they are just disputable matters. We might talk about what kind of music should we worship with. Still, the idea of what clothing is suitable when we gather. The issue of hats, head coverings continues. What language is acceptable to use? You know, how coarse should one be with your words? Even that issue of what frequency of church attendance is proper. You know, all these things, little niggles perhaps, and perhaps you already, you can feel, oh, I've got my own view on that, or perhaps you haven't at all, and that's okay. But these become what we call disputable matters, are around still. And as I've already illustrated, they can cause division. And I think it's important to realise that what Paul is talking about here is disputable matters rather than core matters of faith, the kind of non-negotiables. And sometimes in different church circles we might call these primary issues over secondary issues. So we're talking about issues of salvation, the person of Jesus, whether we should forgive or not, whether we should love our neighbours or not. These aren't disputable. These are part of the gospel. But there are obviously some disputable matters which is disputable whether they're disputable or not. So let's have a dispute about that. Perhaps issues about sexual ethics might fall into that category, or even about how involved we might get in other spiritual practices or other religions. So a good example of this, and I know from my own experience it is disputable, is what's your attitude to yoga? As I say that, some of you will be thinking, what's wrong with that? And others will be thinking, oh, I wouldn't touch that with a barge pole. You know, it's association with the Eastern traditions. So does that give you an example?

I'm not asking for opinions at the moment, but they're there. Don't have to dig very far to realise that there are some fault lines here that we all need to know, oh, how are we going to manage difference of opinion in this? And I would suggest that as we go through, and perhaps other issues will come in, they all need to come under this attitude, this posture that Paul encourages us in, particularly in verse 19. I'll just read it. It says, let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. So even if we disagree, and that's kind of the point here, let's not let disputable matters bring us into dispute. So there's a question, and I think many of us would like to be leading to peace and mutual edification. Absolutely. But how should we do that? How should we do that when there are different points of view about issues, or whether they're, how important they are even, or what we should do about them? Now one response, as it were, is that we might be tolerant towards one another. Being a tolerant society is often one that we are encouraged to be. And I'd say that even in the last 10 or so years, the plurality and the diversity within our society has meant that there are increasingly different views on different subjects. My truth is also by the nature of the way our media works. There's just so many views out there. And working out my truth, versus your truth, seems to be happening. And so there's a sense in which tolerance seems to be necessary in that kind of atmosphere.

Now the problem is, if tolerance is all you've got, then those disputable matters, whether they're inside or outside the church, all seem to get raised to the same level as one another.

[11:02] They seem to become non-negotiables. So for example, if you take a particular political view, sometimes that seems to be inseparable to your very person. And they become very linked. Our different views come linked to our sort of identity. So of course, if you disagree with their point of view, you start disagreeing with them personally. And then it gets personal.

And then we start using others to either push down to promote our own view, or we get derided by others because our point of view is different. And so what I want to say is, without being too controversial, is that tolerance has its limits. Because sometimes tolerance can actually just lead to indifference, to sort of ignoring the other point of view, and getting our heads down, and thinking, I'll

just tolerate that. Until it comes too much, and then we're very intolerant about the other point of view. And Tim's already mentioned it in our prayers, actually.

As a framework for our laws and ethics, which has been founded by the Christian faith in this country, as that begins to sort of shift, our understanding of what right and wrong is, is also a bit more of a shifting entity. And it seems that our rights and our preferences, again, they've become equivalent of rights and wrongs. And there seems to be no mechanism anymore for distinguishing between the two.

And so preference becomes everything. Everything becomes a disputable matter. And that's what kicks off the disputes. And tolerance, although it is worthy in some ways, it does seem to keep us at arm's length from one another. And within a church, there's got to be more. There's got to be a better way of negotiating and walking with disputes and disputable issues. So let me just find where I am here. Yeah, so what is the better way? I would say that tolerance is a distant relative of gospel love. It is, if you like, the poor cousin of something far greater and a far richer resource to help us move on together and to navigate disputable matters. And one of the prime reasons why it's different to tolerance and is better is because it brings God into the picture. Because it starts by reorienting, reorienting, I can't even say it, reorientating ourselves to living to please God, not people.

Let me just, well, and so basically, a life concerned to please God will prevent our preferences prevailing over others. A life concerned to please God will prevent our preferences from prevailing over others. Let me just read the first verses that Margaret read out for us, verses 10 to 12.

[14:17] You then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? 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 acknowledge God. So then each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. Now, if that is always in view in your life, that what you do is for an audience of one, and that is God only, I think that changes everything. If we are to surrender to him and his ways, surrender to his grace and his love, then we'll recognise it's him that calls the shots. It's him who defines what is important, what are the primary matters that matter to him.

And of course, by submitting to that, our identity starts becoming more associated with him. We realise that we are children of God, that that is our identity, that that's the core of who we are. And that perhaps allows us to let go of the other stuff that we sometimes prop ourselves up with in order to make us who we are. Now, some of those things are important, and some of them, nearly all of them are God-given. But perhaps a reorientation of our hearts, which says, firstly, I am God, and I will live for him. Now, this idea of God judging each of us might become a little bit of a surprise to some of us, because you thought, oh, I'm saved. I'm not going to face God's judgment, am I? Now, this isn't that God's going to be going to stand before God, he's going to say, oh, because of your good works and your lack of, because of the way you handled this dispute, oh, maybe you're out. No, in Jesus, he has passed the test for us, and we cling to him and his track record. That is ours. We stand before God, not condemned. We are free. But nevertheless, as his children, we are in relationship with our Heavenly Father, and what we do matters to him. Are we going to please him, or are we not? And that is important. And the Bible speaks of reward and great blessing for those who seek to please God in what we think, say, and do. So that's why I think Paul writes clearly about recognising that we will each bow before God. And it's not someone else's account, it's what we do, which he will be interested in and concerned with.

And so if we know we are children of God, and perhaps I say, in some sense, outside of the church, if we recognise that actually everyone is made in the image of God, then everyone is worthy of our respect and our love, whatever they've done. And that, for me, that changes everything. It means we can't slander others. We can't reduce them to an argument on social media or whatever. These are people made in the image of God. And I think that needs to undergird everything that we do as we interact with people. And I think living only to please God also encourages us to think about, okay, so where am I in that relationship with God? Am I pursuing my relationship with God? Am I actually being formed by relationship? Actually, my opinions and my preferences, are they being shaped by what God loves and God's call on my life? Because however long, whatever step on the journey you are, whatever stage in faith, whether you're completely new to this, you've just walked in today, who knows why, and this is all new, or whether you've been here for many years on this journey, it's a question for us. Are we in a position where we are listening to what God is saying, and that is shaping our thoughts and our opinions and how we go about life? And I want to lay that

out as a sort of primary challenge for us here. And this isn't to be formed by other people's opinions of God. It's what's yours? Are you personally in touch with God, hearing from him daily to know and gradually be shaped by what he has? It's a personal call of God because each of us, not each group of us, each of us will be called to give an account before God. So what are you going to do about that? Have you invested, are you investing in time spent with him, letting the word of God form you? Are you in community enough that actually when you've got questions about God, the conversations are such that they are about discipleship. It's like, oh, I'm struggling with this, or I'm not understanding this. And I'd say that the key value we need to take if we want to avoid letting disputable things crack us over, crack us open, is that of curiosity.

As we follow God, we might be curious about, well, what do my gospel freedoms allow? What can I go and do? And when we're talking to others, say about something that you've got questions about, you know, what's your attitude to me? I'll take the example of yoga because I think it's quite a ripe one. I mean, if you just go up to someone and say, oh, you do yoga, you're in league with the devil. I mean, that's going to shut down conversations, it's going to, and also, it also displays a sort of ignorance from your own point of view. Far better, whatever the disputable matter is, get into relationship with that person so that it's not the first thing that you're talking about, and then begin to ask questions. You know, tell me about what it is you do, what it is, what it is said. What are you thinking about it? How does it help your faith? And those sort of things, then there's an openness to hearing different points of view, to understanding them. And actually, that in community helps build us up. And each of us should be open to ways in which maybe blind spots we've got in our attitudes, in our thinking, in our actions, that actually might just encourage us to live more towards pleasing God. So curiosity,

[20 : 48] I think, is actually a real key if we are going to be a church that learns to love one another and be increasingly inclusive. Because let's face it, our disputes, the things we care about, and I've listed a view already this morning, they often come from a concern. But we should first check whether our preferences and also our experiences are not clouding the sense of importance we are putting on that particular area of church life or of following God. Let me just read the closing verses.

So whatever you believe about these things, i.e. these disputable matters, whether we should eat particular food or not, whether we should listen to particular music, whether we should do certain activities, whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves, but whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith. And everything that does not come from faith is sin. It's a pretty stark statement. So even if you are a particular fan of, say, a musical style or way to worship, be careful that by your words you don't force others into thinking, oh, I should be doing that too. Because their response is not driven by faith, it's by fear. It's like, oh, I want to fit in. I don't want to leave out here. And that, anything that doesn't come from faith, is sin. And so we've got to not make sure we don't make others feel condemned by even the very things that we promote and approve. It's a fine line here, and I hope that doesn't sound too complicated, but there's an attitude here about whether we are choosing to serve others or we are setting up obstacles or stumbling blocks for others to get over before they might feel truly part of what we are.

So I think there's something here for us all to check ourselves on. Because the gospel, the gospel of love, the love of Christ, actually, it does help us get the right attitude.

It more than helps us. It reshapes us. Because it humbles us, and it helps us to serve others, rather than get them serving you. Because at the heart of the gospel, the good news of God, that the whole of the Bible, and Romans particularly, sets out, is the cross of Jesus.

The cross of Jesus humbles us so that we don't, so that we know that what we don't know, or what we haven't done, and what we haven't always done what is best, that our own sin, well, yes, on one hand, it does have serious consequences. It does break community. It breaks our relationship with God.

[23 : 55] It breaks our relationship with others. But God's love demonstrated through that cross was a sacrifice, a costly sacrifice, to try and reverse that. And because it's that serious, because it was that costly to do it, we know that we can begin to focus on what is most important.

It costs that much. Let me realign what I think is important to what Jesus thinks is important. And of course, Jesus laid down more than just his preferences. He was more than inconvenienced by the choices of others. He laid his life down for those who completely disagreed with him. He laid his life down for those who are his enemies, offering them life instead of condemnation.

He didn't tolerate them. He loved them. He died for them. And when we're able to put ourselves in the place of being recipients of that love that's undeserved, that is just coming at us because God loves us, when we recognize the significance, the weight, the preciousness of what God has done for us, and we surrender to that, then that is the thing that is going to change our hearts towards others.

That is the very thing that will make us become servants to others, that will allow us to let go of those preferences because our identity so stuck in Jesus, the servant king, that we don't care what other people think, to be honest. We're living for him.

And that will reposition us so that we use our own time, our own energies, our own money, our own conversations to step towards others, not away. We open up our arms rather than keep them our arm distance. And it helps us to give us the energy and the inspiration to build relationships, with not just people like us, but people who are called to be part of God's community, and to open the doors to others, and to have discipleship-building conversations with people.

[26 : 31] Curious, encouraging, always pointing to Jesus. So folks, that's what I think it looks like to be an increasingly inclusive church. It's a love that is always looking to open our arms to others, even if we might disagree with some of the ways that they conduct themselves, even some of their theology in that sort of sense. Let's open our arms and trust God's love to be at work in us.

My sense as I wrote this is that there will be those here who have been the recipients of those disputes, or you've been hurt in the past by disagreements.

And I just wonder whether the Holy Spirit has just been shedding any light on what was at play there. What were the dynamics that caused that to be so? What caused someone to maybe do more damage than not?

And I wonder, can you step towards them and begin to forgive them? And I wonder if there's perhaps another group of people, or perhaps even overlapping here, where we have got hung up on some of our own preferences for stuff.

Stuff in church, stuff in the way we feel things should go. And perhaps we've forgotten the call to serve one another above ourselves.

[28 : 19] So Holy Spirit, would you bring life? Bring love? Would you address the particular incidents and disputes that are on our minds, and help us to realign ourselves with Jesus?