

Loving in Disagreement - Part 1

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[0:00] Well, in case anyone is concerned or worried, both Jeff and Steph have both made up during that song, so they're reconciled to each other.

And I do want to thank them for being willing to enter into a disagreement just for the sake of us being able to understand this passage better tonight. It's easy to love when everyone agrees, isn't it?

Whether it's in a marriage or the family or a church, loving is easy when we all share the same view. But the true test of love arises when we disagree, when we can't agree what we need to do together.

Now, often people would think that we need to agree in order to move ahead together. That's how we maintain or achieve unity. But what if we can't?

Not because we're stubborn, but as a matter of conscience. What then? Well, we're called as Christians to still love one another, to owe the continuing debt to love others, as Paul said last week.

[1:16] And so, how do we go about accomplishing that then? Well, that's the substance of our passage today. And in the conversation Jeff and Steph had earlier, they role-played when Christians disagree.

Not because they want to be disagreeable, but because they feel strongly about what the Bible teaches. Or maybe that even if the Bible is not prescriptive, yet at church, there's a right way and a wrong way to do certain things.

And so, how does a church navigate such situations? Well, today's passage will hopefully give us some insights to work that out.

But first, let's understand the context for these instructions. There would have been some disagreement in Rome. I think that's the background into which Paul is speaking.

But we need to understand what they were specifically. Otherwise, I think there's a danger of misapplying this passage to any or every sort of disagreement.

[2:21] So, this week, I want to focus on specifically applying this passage. But next week, as we then move into Romans 15, we will consider how we may apply this more generally to a wider range of conflicts and disputes.

So, let's begin in verse 1, where Paul says, Accept the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters. So, there are two key things here, aren't there, that need defining, which I'll put on the next slide.

First, what is a disputable matter? And second, who's the person whose faith is weak? Well, let's turn to the first question.

A disputable matter isn't simply any dispute, but rather a matter which is disputable. So, it needs to relate to a matter of faith in this context.

Not a disagreement over anything. You know, for example, whether you prefer tea or coffee. But it also has to be a matter that is disputable.

[3 : 32] That is, where the matter of faith is open to dispute. So, it's not related to things which the Bible is clear. So, for example, the matter that Jesus is the divine son of God, let's say.

Or that Jesus froze from the dead. Now, certainly you can disagree with those statements, but from the standpoint of Orthodox Christian faith, those aren't disputable matters.

Rather, a disputable matter relates to something where a Bible teaching may be clear, but different Christians still end up having a different approach to application.

Or it may be an area of faith where the Bible is silent. And so, we're open to take a different approach as to how we practice them. In such a case, the Christian on either side of the dispute can be considered to be valid in what they do.

Neither is sinning. So, in Paul's day, in verse 2, he says, One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another whose faith is weak eats only vegetables.

[4 : 46] The exact situation here is not entirely clear, but it likely referred to maybe certain Jewish Christians who still felt unable to exercise the freedom they have in Christ.

Perhaps there were certain Jewish laws or practices that they still wanted to keep.

Similarly, Paul adds another example in verse 5. One person considers one day more sacred than another.

Another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. So, again, the situation is that one practices something because of their conscience, whereas another does the opposite.

What we have then in this situation is a disputable matter. It's not just any dispute, but one where the practice of faith is open to disagreement.

And so, when a situation like that arises, then the next thing is to ask and answer, Who's the person whose faith is weak? That's the second question.

[5 : 49] And here we jump quickly to verse 13 where we read, Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your own mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

I'm convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.

If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. And so it's clear then that the stronger person is the one who is able to exercise the greater freedom.

Note then that it's not really about whether you're a more mature or less mature Christian, or whether you're a more recent convert or not. Rather, it's defined as the one whose conscience gives them less freedom.

So in the case that Jeff and Steph talked about, it's the person who feels like she or he can't dress in a certain way, because it's not reverent enough for coming to church.

[7 : 01] And if you think about it, there are many other examples, aren't there? So for example, Christians who believe it's okay to drink alcohol compared to those who are not comfortable doing that.

Or some who think it's okay to be part of a footy tipping or gambling kind of competition, whereas others don't feel comfortable doing that. Or some who prefer, are able to read Harry Potter books, and others who feel they can't because there's images or descriptions of witches and curses and spells in them.

Now, some of us have consciences that allow us the freedom to do these things, in moderation of course, but then there are others whose faith is, quote unquote, weak, who feel that if they did these things, they would be sinning.

And here in verse 13, we have an added condition. Not only is it something that their conscience stops them from doing, they also have to be stumbled when others do it.

It could be because they're compelled to join in, as we will see further on in verse 23, or maybe they just feel like they're complicit just by belonging to a church that allows it.

[8 : 18] Guilt by association, in other words. But either way, their conscience is seared, and they begin to doubt their faith, and it causes them to stumble. And so how should a group of believers faced with such a situation behave?

Well, let's go back to verse 3, where Paul says, So if you're weaker in faith, don't show contempt to the one who is free.

Don't think they're less godly for dressing in a certain way, for having a sip of wine, or when you've discovered that they're part of their company's footy tipping competition.

Now, it may be that just me raising some of these examples has caused an emotional reaction in you. You might instinctively be thinking, surely Christians shouldn't be allowed to do that.

Well, we'll get to the matter of not stumbling in a while, but in the first instance, don't be too quick to judge. But rather, be prepared to consider if perhaps this is a disputable matter.

[9 : 36] And if it is, what Paul is saying is, don't let that influence your view of your brother or sister by judging them. Now, the converse is also true.

If your conscience allows you the freedom, don't show contempt for your brother or sister who can't. Don't think, for example, that if they can't do this really, that they must be just weak or uptight.

For Paul says that God has accepted them. God has accepted both sides, actually. We don't know why God may have given one person a particular kind of conscience that's different to the other.

But Paul is saying is that if God accepts us all, then so should we. Further, we're all ultimately accountable on such matters, not to one another, but to God.

That's the next point on my outline. Paul now says in verse 4, Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servant, stand or fall?

[10 : 44] And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. God's their master, not you. So let them give account to God. And Paul has already said God has already accepted them.

And so they will stand before God. Don't try and stand in God's place, is what Paul is saying, and you be the judge of them. So Paul continues, verse 5, Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord. For they give thanks to God. And whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord. And if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether you live or die, we belong to the Lord.

And for this reason, Christ died and returned to life so that He might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. Now as humans, we are all influenced to some extent by what others think of us, aren't we?

[11 : 48] But as Christians, we need to be clear that first and foremost, what we do needs to be pleasing to the Lord. We live for the Lord.

By all means, learn from others, take their advice, but at the end of the day, whatever we decide, we need to be convinced that our choices are right before God.

We are answerable to Him. Don't follow me or mentor just because that's what we say. You are answerable to Christ as your Lord who died and rose again to save you.

So work it out in your own mind what the Lord requires of you. And it may be that your answer is different to the person next to you or to your pastor or to your mentor.

Now so important is this point that he repeats it again in verse 11. 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.

[12:52] Each of us. 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 I think if Paul's emphasis in the earlier verses is that others are accountable to God and not us, here Paul is saying that we are accountable to God not just for what we do for ourselves, but as I think he will go on to say, we are also accountable to God for how we treat others.

So if we judge others or show contempt, then we will have to stand for God one day and answer for that as well. And so you may well think you've done the right thing in terms of this disputable matter, whether it's to exercise freedom or not, but if you have not acted in love for your brother or sister who disagrees with you, then you have to account to God for that as well.

You see, whenever there's a disputable matter, our tendency always is to focus on the matter itself, isn't it? We think God only cares about us doing that right thing.

And don't get me wrong, He does. It matters. Our conscience has to be clear before Him on that. But He's also concerned for how we treat others as well, those actions of love.

[14:20] Have we done so in a loving way? Have we done so with humility? That's why we've been focusing over the last few weeks on love. But here, we focus on how we continue to love when disagreements come into play.

And Paul is saying here that even now, when we disagree, we must remember that true love is about putting others before ourselves. And so Paul expresses this in the form of two aims.

How do we show love? Well, the first aim in verse 13 is that we are not to stumble others. The act of love ensures or has us thinking how we will not be stumbling others.

That's how we show love in a disputable matter. So we read again, Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

I am convinced, Paul says, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love.

[15:38] Do not, by your eating, destroy someone for whom Christ died. Now, right now, we are seeing images, aren't we, of the desperate situation with those air evacuations coming out of Afghanistan.

Like on this next slide, images like this where the cargo plane, surely just for cargo instead of people, is packed from end to end.

Now, imagine if some person on that flight comes up to the pilot and says, you know what, I'm a frequent flyer with American Airlines and, you know, based on the terms of the program, I deserve a meal, extra leg room, and free movies on this flight.

What would you think of that person? I mean, you'd say, get real. It's ridiculous, isn't it? Lives of people are at stake here trying to evacuate them to safety and all you can think about is your perks, your freedoms as a frequent flyer.

And that's really similar to this situation, isn't it? Because we need to understand what God's priority is whenever there's a disputable matter. He's more concerned in some ways than that everyone is not stumbled, that everyone for whom Christ has died does not forfeit their salvation by stumbling.

[17:03] That's more important, isn't it, at the end of the day than whether you or I get to exercise our freedoms in Christ, is it not? And so, while it appears that Paul is putting more onus in this passage on the ones who understand their freedom in Christ, you can begin to understand why, can't you?

Those who have a freedom to eat or drink have the freedom also not to. Their faith is not injured by their not exercising of their faith.

Whereas the weaker Christian doesn't have that choice, does he or she? Their faith is compromised if they do what their conscience doesn't allow them. That's why they're considered weaker.

Paul himself writes in verse 14 that he's fully convinced of his own freedom in Christ, and yet, even though he knows his right, he wouldn't use it for his own benefit.

Rather, he's more concerned for his brother or sister's faith. And so Paul continues in verse 16, therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil.

[18:13] 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 receives human approval.

can you see how Paul is saying that something that's originally good, that freedom, can be turned into a sin because we've not considered its impact on others.

So you may well be right to eat and drink, Paul says, but if you stumble a fellow believer by it, then you've actually sinned by eating or drinking. So the context of how and when you do exercise your freedom is very important, isn't it?

The higher goal for all of us should be righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit, not just for us, but also for our brothers and sisters. When what we do builds up the faith of others and brings peace among the members of Christ's body, that is what is more pleasing to God, isn't it?

And what's more, it will meet the approval of others within the church. And so that brings us to our second aim on how we can be loving in verse 19, peace and mutual edification.

[19:29] That's actually just the opposite of not stumbling others. And so Paul says, let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. And so in this instance, the work of God that Paul talks about is again the other person's salvation.

Don't destroy it for the sake of your freedom. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

Instead, if something is disputable, then let it just be between you and God. Paul writes, so whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

You can choose your freedoms and where to exercise it in a setting, Paul says, that does not stumble others. But if your action prompts another Christian to follow you and then you knowingly cause them to sin, then that's not good for Paul writes, whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat.

[20 : 43] That's the brother that he's talking about because their eating is not from faith and everything that does not come from faith is sin. Now it may all seem like this is one way here, that is we are to protect the faith of the weaker believer, but I do think that there is something in here even for the one who is weaker.

For I think when Paul asks them not to judge, Paul also places some responsibility on them. And so they too can play their part, I think, in these last few verses to promote peace and mutual edification.

How? Well, someone of a weaker faith may not be able to participate in a freedom that we know, but I think there's an encouragement here for them to also make every effort to do what they can that leads to peace.

peace. And so if that's you, think about how you can maybe allow your brother or sister to exercise their freedom, which you can't. I've sort of seen sometimes how people use the whole stumbling block argument as a weapon, as a means of getting their own way, when really they're not stumbled by it.

And so be honest, if someone's eating or drinking, or whatever other example is, doesn't destroy your faith, then let them exercise their freedom. Stop judging them and stop sort of putting restrictions on them when there's no need to do so.

[22 : 16] Otherwise, you're creating a burden for them, aren't you? That's not edifying for them. So here I want to ask perhaps that you consider what examples there might be that this passage applies today in church, in our church, in our fellowship.

Maybe afterwards over Zoom or at home, you can share some of those with others. And then consider what does it mean to be loving in those situations.

So for example, if you're the one with the weaker faith, let me encourage you to be open and gracious about it. Talk to those whose freedoms are bothering you.

Yeah, raise it gently with them because they may not realize that it's impacting you. But then, I think, be prepared to hear their answer. It may be that it opens your eyes and perhaps you might be convinced that you can have that freedom too.

If, however, you're the one with the freedom, then don't be dismissive or defensive when people raise something like that. Rather, be gentle and be ready to give an explanation and also listen carefully and think about how you can practice your freedom or maybe not practice it at all so that your brother or sister doesn't stumble.

[23 : 39] Now, I'm pretty sure that some of you will have examples in your mind, running through your mind right now. And so, if you like, you can email or text me through the week. We wouldn't do a Q&A; today, but it will give me a chance to think it over and then perhaps we can cover it next week as part of the service.

But at the end of the day, I think if you just think about it, it boils down, doesn't it, to love in action in the context of a disagreement or a disputable matter.

When we think about just ourselves in a dispute, then yes, it's not easy to see how others should have the freedoms that we can't have or that we should forgo our freedoms just for the sake of others.

But love is wanting to see all those whom Christ has died to save living in peace with each other and being built up in their faith, having security in their salvation rather than stumbling, isn't it?

Well, in our Old Testament reading earlier, that was Psalm 133, Will Belcher read out what a vision of that looks like in that psalm. Well, I'm going to close in prayer right now, but then the song after that, our response song, will allow us to give voice to sing of that vision.

[25:05] Let's pray. Father, we know that in matters of faith, there are times when there may still be disagreement as to what is right and wrong. Teach us not to judge others or to show contempt when we disagree.

Help us to realize we are all accountable to you, our Lord and our Master. remind us that you have called us to love by not stumbling others and to react so as to cause discouragement amongst the body.

Rather, you have called us to love by living at peace with each other and building each other up in mutual edification. Help us to do that.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.