

Walking in Love

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Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

[0 : 00] And please grab a seat. I have a habit of, as I walk up these stairs to preach, of mumbling to myself one, two, three times for each step, I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit.

And this morning I think I said that in a week of a tough legal decision, a Canucks loss and a riot, I said it with a bit of gusto this morning.

So can we pray together as we hear God's Word? Father, we believe in the Holy Spirit. Lord, would you quiet our hearts this morning as we hear your Word.

Lord, we pray that it would go deep. It would be a word of encouragement and comfort. In Christ's name, Amen. So this week's passage is obviously very related to the previous week.

And just to give you a bit of a catch-up and reminder of what last week's was about, let me tell you a quick story. I was at the end of my first year at Regent College, and I was invited to speak at a youth conference in Winnipeg, I think.

[1 : 32] And I was feeling pretty good about myself because I thought, wow, I've only been in the country a year and I'm already on the circuit. This is awesome, right? And I'd learnt a lot of stuff that year at Regent.

A lot of sort of very interesting and obscure theology. A lot of wacky stuff about the end times, which I didn't really realise, but turns out it's probably quite true. A lot of really great stuff, fascinating stuff.

I mean, my core stuff that I believed didn't change, but all this really interesting stuff was kind of added onto it, right? And so I went, I spoke at this youth event, so I went down there, armed with all these non-essential, marginal ideas, and I just hit them with them all, right?

It was a youth conference. They're like, you know, 13 years old or whatever. I'm hitting them with this obscure kind of theology and thinking, they are just going to love this. They'll thank me for this afterwards.

But basically, I was just really confusing them. And, you know, like there's probably 12-year-old girls sitting in the audience crying, I don't know what he's talking about. Why is he yelling?

[2 : 40] Because I was really excited about this stuff, you know. And it was mostly secondary stuff. And I think what I was trying to do is, I was just trying to prove that I was clever, I think, and trying to be controversial, I think.

What had happened, basically, is, unfortunately, I think over that year, a fair assessment of my heart would have been this, that my knowledge of God had outran my love of him and his people.

And that is a terrible thing. I remember after I preached, the gentleman who was emceeding the occasion got up and spoke for a couple of minutes. And I remember him vividly, because he looked a lot like the late Harry Robinson.

He was an enormous man, huge, huge hands, very huge head, but very kind face. And he got up and he said, Listen, folks, I don't know what you think you heard Aaron say today, but let me tell you what I heard Aaron say today.

I heard Aaron say today that it's not such a big deal what you think about all these obscure, non-essential theological points. What really matters is that you love each other and keep following Jesus.

[3 : 57] That's what I heard Aaron say today. Which is, of course, I didn't go anywhere near that stuff, you know. But it was very Paul-like of him.

And I was reminded of this when I was studying this passage here this week. Because I think last week, in last week's passage, Paul was concerned about people like me, I think.

People like me that had forgotten the importance of unity and encouragement. And just like to argue over secondary things.

Who like to argue over minor points of theology and cultural things. Now, I will add that, you know, over the next couple of years, my maturity and my faith did grow at Regent College.

And now I feel like I have the best of both worlds. So Paul last week was encouraging the church to love each other, to not argue, and to welcome people into the church.

[5 : 01] This week, Paul ups the ante quite a bit in his argument. He says, not only should you welcome people with great warmth, people that might have different scruples than you, but you should actually do what they do when they're around or not do what they don't do when they're not around, when they are around, as the case may be.

Let me just unpack this a little bit. Using the example of, and this would have been a, you know, a key one in the early church, young Jewish believers coming into the Roman church.

Okay. So how does a Gentile church deal with that? Well, a bit more background. The Israelites, they were God's people in the Old Testament. They had external markers, things which separated them out as God's special folks that had a unique place in his redemptive plan.

And now, what marks us out as the people of God is our faith in Christ, of course. But back in the day, the Israelites who became Christians and started entering the Roman church would have obviously been very, still attached to these external markers because they were so culturally embedded.

And they weren't, it's not like they were bad things or wrong or anything. Very culturally embedded external markers. So here's how Paul ups the ante with folks like this, for example.

[6 : 22] He says, right, the food laws that the Israelites are very attached to, Gentiles, you should go along with them in the presence of these new believers.

Go along with them. And here's why he says that in verse 15. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. But what you eat do not destroy the one whom Christ has died.

So Gentile church, Paul says, if you're going to have a potluck dinner, you've got these new Jewish believers there, don't bring your ham steaks, your shrimp salads with your milkshake chasers, because the young Jewish Christians will be really thrown by that.

I remember when I was a very young Christian, I'd been a Christian for a couple of months, this is 1988, and I was going on a camp at this new church I started attending, and there were, I walked past these leaders, and I overheard a leader say what I thought was a slightly risqué joke, slightly risqué.

And I remember being completely thrown by that. And let me tell you why. I went to a high school called Auckland Boys Grammar. It was a proper grammar school, you know, Latin was compulsory, wore a uniform all year and stuff, it was a great school.

[7 : 49] There were very few Christians at that school, but you knew who the Christians were, because they didn't cuss, and they didn't tell dirty jokes. And so, I thought, I was a very new Christian, I thought being a Christian, what marks out a Christian is mostly those things right there, is you don't tell off-color jokes, and you don't cuss.

And so when I heard these Christian leaders doing that, I was really shaken. I thought they don't really believe what they say they believe. It really, really threw me.

They're just pretending, this is all fake. And I think Paul was worried about this happening in the Roman church. Again, the example of young Jewish believers coming in, seeing Gentiles do things which in their mind the people of God don't do.

You know, eat unclean foods, for example. And them thinking, well, this is just a fraud. And so Paul, this is a fairly significant pastoral concern of Paul, because he wants his church to grow, wants the church to grow, and so he's giving some pretty simple advice here.

Just go along with it, folks. Go along with it so as not to throw them off. That is the loving thing to do. Now, let's get a little bit deeper here.

[9 : 07] Like I've said, I think the main action point is fairly obvious, but it can be misinterpreted. So I want to spend a bit of time looking at how we can misinterpret Paul's advice here.

What is the passage not telling us? Well, the passage is not advocating tolerance. It sounds like tolerance, doesn't it?

But it's not. In fact, it's the exact opposite of tolerance. Here's what I mean. If you were to go out there and ask somebody to define tolerance, they would probably say something like this.

There's two parts to it. The first part is this. Do not make any negative evaluations of anyone else. And two, do not hinder the way other people live, and you don't hinder the way I live.

So two parts. Do not make negative evaluations, and live and let live, and let's not hinder the way the other person lives. All right. Paul here is not advocating tolerance.

[10 : 10] You remember at the beginning of last week's passage, which forms the beginning of this huge chunk here, he said, accept the weak. Accept the weak.

So Paul is actually making a negative evaluation. The second thing he's doing is he's asking the church to adjust their lives, to make changes in order to care for the new people, in order to build bridges to them.

A negative evaluation, a request for a change of behaviour, this is the opposite of tolerance. And what's really cool about this is that invested in this, what I've been talking about here, this concept here is the gospel, is the pattern of Christ.

Let me explain that a little bit more. If you ask people today what is one of the biggest problems in the world, people would likely say something like this, that there are large powerful groups of people split along ideological lines that don't like each other, and this leads to war and violence.

Now the solution that the media bombards us with is tolerance. What we need is more tolerance, no negative evaluations, and an attitude of you do your thing, I'll do my thing, let's not restrict each other in any way.

[11 : 26] That's the world's solution to that big world problem. Now as we shift our eyes to the cross, what is God's solution? Well again, it's not tolerance, because Christ on the cross is making a negative evaluation of me.

Christ on the cross says, Aaron, you are a sinner, and that is why I'm here. But at the same time, Christ is making space for me, making the ultimate enforced personal restriction, the incarnation, and the ultimate adjustment, his sacrifice.

So Paul's solution to the problem of division in the church was not tolerance. God's solution to the problems of the world is not tolerance. No, in both cases, it involves judgment and sacrifice.

And in both cases, sacrifice on behalf of the strong. It is the strong that is asked to sacrifice. Paul is not advocating tolerance.

The way of the cross is not tolerance. What else is Paul not saying? What else is the passage not saying? Well, it's not saying that we should do things which are morally wrong if the weak in faith are doing them.

[12 : 40] It's not saying we should let the weak in faith continue to do things which are morally wrong or encourage them to do it or assist them in doing it. Remember, the weak are weak in faith, the passage says, not weak morally.

So it's important to differentiate between moral issues and devotional slash cultural issues. Now the example used in the passage today is food. Don't eat food they don't eat.

Now the Israelites, you know, had strict food laws. We've talked about that. Those food laws were about two things. One, they were about national identity, which was really important to them because they were often an occupied people.

And two, a reminder that we can't go into God's presence without being purified, without some kind of cleansing. So they avoided unclean foods as a ritualistic way of symbolizing that concept.

So they were devotional acts, thoroughly ingrained culturally. Now Christ is the realization of those acts, of course. It's Christ that marks out our identity, not the things that we do ritualistically.

[13 : 52] It's Christ that allows us to come to God by cleansing us. All that to say, the passage is talking about accommodating people's acts of devotion, cultural proclivities, not immorality.

society. If somebody came into the church that was rioting on Thursday night, setting fire to things, if they sat at the back and I noticed them, I said, what did you do Thursday night?

well, I just smashed some stuff. I wouldn't put my arm around them and go, brother, I've brought some lighter fluid with me, should we just go burn some stuff?

Would that make you feel welcome? Would that make you feel part of the community? Of course not. Of course I'm not going to do that. Paul is not advocating tolerance.

Paul is not advocating immorality. What else is he not saying? Well, he's not saying it doesn't matter what you think either. You could read this and you could sort of go, well, what Paul is kind of saying here is it doesn't matter sort of what you think, it's just as long as you love each other.

[15 : 03] Well, he's not advocating a thoughtless Christianity either. He's not saying that the issue of food and stuff shouldn't be thought out. In verse 14, I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself but it is unclean if anyone who thinks it unclean.

Paul is talking from the perspective of someone who has arrived at a considered position here. Verse 22, the faith that you have keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

This person has a belief, a judgment, they have approved. Verse 23 is a warning against people who haven't thought through the issues which divide us. Verse 23, but whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats because the eating is not from faith.

So the aspects of our faith which might divide us, wrongly divide us if they're non-essential things.

Paul is not saying we shouldn't think this stuff through, we should. You should have an opinion on woman's ordination, you should have an opinion on the sacraments, you should have an opinion on infant baptism.

[16 : 18] Paul is not saying forget that stuff, let's just love each other. Think it through but don't let it get in between you and your brothers and sisters in Christ. I remember Bruce Waltke preaching about something which can potentially divide the church.

I think he might have been preaching about woman's ordination actually, which I know is a bit of a wedge for some people. And he made this extra long caveat after he talked about this.

He goes, I've given you my opinion, now let me tell you something else. I go to a church with woman ministers in it. They know what I think, I've told it to them once, I'm not going to bring it up again.

Because it's more important, unity is more important than this issue here. Okay, moving along. What else is it not saying?

It is not saying, just sit down, don't rock the boat, don't cause any problems, you know, we don't want to offend anyone, so just keep your mouth shut and just come to church and, you know, just say hello to people and leave.

[17 : 23] No, this is not a call to passivity. It is not a call to avoiding friction by sitting on your hands and not moving. The passage is a call to actively seek peace, to actively seek the best, to actively encourage.

Verse 19, so then let us pursue, pursue, that's an active word, isn't it? Pursue, let us pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding.

Pursue it, track it down, live with intention, decide to do things which build up other believers. It is active, it is not passive. Is this what characterizes your conversations when you come to church?

The active pursuit of peace, the active pursuit of building each other up in faith. Right now, we need a bit of this.

That is enough on what the passage is not saying. let's have a look at what it is telling us. It's not rocket science.

[18 : 36] Paul is simply saying this, that strong believers are right in their belief that they possess the freedom as new covenant people of God to eat and drink what they like.

All things are clean. Verse 20, people of God are qualified. If in exercising that freedom you trip somebody else up, it's a bad thing.

It's a bad thing. And Paul uses very strong language here. Verse 20, he says it will destroy the work of God. Verse 15, it will destroy the work, destroy the one for whom Christ has died.

So don't do it. Adapt your life. Voluntarily restrict your behaviour for the sake of others. Now Paul here is not just saying this because it's nice to be nice and it's good to be good.

Paul has solid theology behind this. Now this theology, if you look at that verse there, is found right in the middle of the passage.

[19 : 53] This text is kind of like a sandwich. Let's say a ham sandwich, to be ironic. It's right like a ham sandwich. Verses 13 to 16 are kind of doing stuff, talking about doing things.

Verses 19 to 23 are sort of doing things. And if you look at them, they're kind of like a mirror of each other. We don't have time to get into it. Actually the destroy stuff is a good example. It appears on both sides.

And so like the middle verses, 17 and 18, they're like a pivot point, like a mirror reflected on both sides. It's an ancient Hebrew way of writing which draws your eye in to the key point.

So what are those verses, 17 and 18? For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Isn't that awesome? Verse 18, This is the idea that underpins all of Paul's imperatives in the passage.

Here is what he's saying. These small truths, these small ideas, these minor points of theology, these cultural and religious practices which can potentially divide us.

[21 : 11] these things which we like to hang on to because they do kind of give us a sense of identity. You know, this is what I think about this minor thing or this is, you know, in my church this is what we like to do.

These things which we like to hang on to that we sometimes put out front and center which we let define us and shouldn't. Paul points us away from those things gently, away from the secondary things, away from the small truths to the great truth.

The great truth is this, that we are servants of Christ and the kingdom of God and because of that we serve each other as well as we can following the example of Christ, following the way of the cross and we willingly adjust our lives for the sake of others.

Christ. Let me finish with just a couple of suggestions, if I might, as we enter a time of transition in our community.

I'd like to suggest the following things. One, in this time of transition hang on to the greater truth. Hang on to the big idea.

[22 : 33] the small truth is that the building is probably gone. The greater truth is that we are God's family and as cheesy as it sounds, no one can take that away from us.

No one can rule against us on that front. Hang on to that greater truth. Let it shine light into your despair, into your discouragement.

Two, be flexible and willing to sacrifice for others. We might need to make changes in format and function and time.

We might need to do a little bit of maneuvering. But we do this as we follow Christ's example, don't we? Paul has this incredibly high view of our neighbor, of our brother and sister in Christ.

Well, two things actually. He calls us brothers in the passage by inference sisters as well. He links us together in the strongest possible way. He says we're family.

[23 : 48] We're family. And then he says, this person sitting beside you describes them as the one who Christ died for.

They're not just another punter that turns up to church on Sunday. Not just another random back of somebody's head that you never meet. They are a person that Christ has died for. So of course we'll make adjustments for them.

Of course we'll be flexible. Because we are a family. You can't get closer than that. And fourth, would you seek the resources of the Holy Spirit at this time who wants to give you peace and is able to give you peace and joy in a time of disruption and sadness.

Now can I get an amen? Amen. All right. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.