

Gospel Principles for God's People: Gospel Humility – Romans 14

CBC Ilderton

Andrew Hall

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Humans have a way of getting our priorities all mixed up. We have a tendency to make the less important things the most important and then make the most important things less important.

I have seen this over and over in pastoral ministry. In my first pastorate, an elderly woman had made the donations for the basement renovation. When it came time to decorate, she hung the clock on a wall where it was difficult to see because she did not want the newly renovated walls to have a nail put into them.

So the clock was on the side wall where it couldn't be seen. A very practical lady looked at this clock and one day thought, "Wouldn't it make more sense to put the clock over on this main wall?" So she joyfully moved the clock, thinking that she was serving everyone else.

When the elderly woman saw that the clock had been moved, she became incensed. She threatened to leave the church. And conflict ensued.

Now this is a small example of what happens in our world. Today, we have many very complex issues facing Western culture that cannot be reduced to a soundbyte. What should be done with statues of former slave holders? Should you say "Black lives matter" or is there a better way to affirm the dignity of all human beings made in the image of God? Should people be judged because they do wear a mask out in public, or should they be judged because they don't? Can I have my neighbours over on my back deck and stay 6' apart, or can I have them into my home?

These issues move from being theoretical to very practical in the life of the church. Paul saw how the racial tensions, cultural practices, and religious behaviours of Jews and Gentiles could fracture the church in Rome. Was one day more holy than another? Should they eat meat or just veggies? What about wine? So in his most doctrinally deep and rich books, Paul spends 10% of his letter writing about how the church should get along! In this long section, I want to summarize it with one reminder, two cautions, and three people.

First, a reminder. Welcome one another.

We tend to make a big deal about little things and make a little deal about the big things. We miss the weightier matters of the law and focus on the little matters. But the law of God could be summarized with two commands: love God and love others. These two commands summarize how we should treat others, respond to others, and Paul here makes it very clear at the beginning of this section in 14:1 and at the end of this section in 15:7 that loving one another means welcoming one another. Paul could have spent a lot of time trying to get them to all agree on what day is most important, what foods and drinks they can and cannot partake of. But that's not what he does. He recognizes that we can get our priorities all mixed up.

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Jesus saw this problem with the Pharisees. He condemned the religious leaders in Matt. 23:23 because they neglected the weightier matters of the law. They would go to their cupboards, measure out their dill and cumin, and then give 10% as an offering to God. In the meantime, their starving neighbours were desperate for a meal but were being neglected! And Jesus tells them that they should be concerned about justice and mercy and faithfulness.

The most important thing is to welcome one another. Why? Because God in Christ welcomed you. God did not wait until you agreed with him on everything to shower you with his love and forgiveness. When we were weak, when we were sinners, when we were his enemies, that's when God sent his Son for us. The gospel is the welcome of God to sinners.

These have been hard days. These months have been lonely and difficult for families. Children have been trying to figure out a new rhythm of life; parents have been trying to keep order in their homes. Businesses have been trying to figure out how to survive. And now we gather together and every little difference could become a spark for conflict.

Jesus told his disciples that the world would know that we are Christians by our love for one another. Humility means that we keep our convictions in right proportion. How we treat one another is more important than being right about so many secondary things. We need to be sensitive to love and welcome one another.

Second, two cautions. Don't despise; and don't expect uniformity.

First, our differences will tempt us to despise one another. The way that we will despise one another is seen in v. 3 and v. 10. The weaker brother and the stronger brother are both fully convinced in their minds that they are being obedient to God and doing what God wants. And what follows is a temptation to be judgmental and despise others.

This is the heart of many conflicts over secondary matters. The conflict over coffee cups vs. Styrofoam wasn't merely about cups. It was one person believing that we should be caring for the environment and another person believing we should not take up other people's time washing dishes. But instead of seeing the deeper issues, we move in our hearts to judge others – they aren't as environmentally mindful as I am! Or we despise others for not considering how valuable our time is and become hostile.

Unfortunately, we are living in a time where outrage is valued. If you do not agree with me on every issue, you must hate me and therefore I have the right to despise you. We saw this happen in Parliament this week when one member raised questions about systemic racism and immediately another politician stated that if someone doesn't support this legislation to deal with systemic racism, you're a racist.

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As Christians, we will find that we disagree on a lot of issues that are not central to our faith. We should not join in the outrage culture and be a people of outrage. Outrage communicates harshness, judgmentalism, and despises people. But the way that God won our hearts was through his kindness and gentleness, as Paul says in Romans 2:4.

But the second caution is to not think we will all think the same on secondary matters. Do you notice that Paul doesn't say, "Listen, all days are the same! Christ has come and fulfilled the Sabbath – so one day isn't more important than others!" No, he says that each person must be fully convinced about what is right on these secondary matters in their mind and then live faithfully to their conscience. Why? Because we will all stand before God where we will have to give account for how we obeyed God's Word and our consciences.

Instead, we ought to be a people who die to ourselves, welcome one another and not try to cause each other to stumble. Why? Because we are learning to not make little things big things and big things little things. Instead, we are becoming most sensitive to the ultimate things.

So then we need to **think about three people.**

The first person is Weak Wes. Wes is very convinced that people should be wearing a facemask. The data is clear – masks stop the spread of contagion. He is not unsure about his convictions; he is very sure. He's read the science reports about wearing a mask for long periods of time and thinks it must be done.

Now what makes Wes weak in faith is not that he is unsure about his beliefs – he is very sure! But what makes him weak in faith is that he has a limited understanding about the Bible. He isn't thinking that facemasks are about loving others; he's thinking about himself. Notice how Paul says God will deal with Wes? In v. 4, God will enable him to stand. God will keep Wes in the faith. This isn't a matter about his salvation. A weak Christian isn't legalism. If they're trying to love God and obey God, they are a faithful Christian!

But the weak in faith are those who let everyone know their opinions on social media. Before you have coffee with them, you've seen all their instagram posts about vaccines and environmentalism. They get into debates with everyone and anyone about all sorts of issues. And Paul says to these Christians – stop passing judgment! Some people don't want to talk to you because what they hear from you is only judgment on every issue in the media today. If I was to come over to your house, we'd be into debates on every subject! What we should be known for is not our intense opinions, but our gracious and welcoming embrace of one another.

Strong Sally is very similar to Weak Wes. They both are trying to honour God and live for him and thank him (see v. 6). Strong Sally understands what the Bible says

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and has a good knowledge of God, knowing where there are areas of liberty. Sally believes that you don't need to wear a facemask – and she feels the liberty to not wear one. In fact, Sally is tempted to not wear her mask because she wants to make a point about her rights – she doesn't want governmental overreach in her life mandating what she does.

But don't think that Strong Sally is more mature than Weak Wes. Strong Sally might have more knowledge than Weak Wes but still act more immaturely by flaunting her liberties. And Paul says that you might have that right, but if you act in a way that flaunts your rights, you could be damaging the faith of Weaker Wes (see. v. 15). So Strong Sally is called to give up her rights. Dying to her freedom for the sake of another believer is acting in love.

The sign of maturity is not that you know more, but that you love more. If your conscience is more sensitive to rights rather than

The third person is our gracious God.

God does not consider weak obedience as disobedience. Look at v. 23. Both strong and weak are operating by faith. They want to obey Christ. And even imperfect faith is still faith! And this is good news and should help us to welcome one another. Why?

We tend to think that the person who is more conservative than us is in danger of legalism and the person who is more liberal than us is heading to apostasy. But that's not the case! Why? Because what is the nature of our God? He keeps the weak and the strong. He will uphold his people (v. 4). He will enable them to stand!

When God saved us, he knew that our convictions were out of proportion. Yet he says we are not condemned and keeps us standing. And seeing our imperfect obedience, God sustains us, welcomes us, patiently working us.

And this is the God of the Bible; this is the God of grace; this is the God who welcomes and receives sinners to remake us to look like Jesus. So let's stand, and not cause one another to stumble. Because God sent his Son who obeyed perfectly in righteousness so that our imperfect faith would be acceptable to God.