

SERMON FOR 24TH JUNE - ROMANS 14 verses 10 - 23.

We are currently in a series focusing upon Romans Chapters 12 - 15 which we have entitled "The Practice of Holiness".

Here is a quick reminder why it is called that.

Let me read you Romans 12 verses 1, 2 (Read it)

"Therefore" - in light of the great mercy and grace shown to us by God in Christ Jesus - this is how you should practically live, this is how you should practically express what Paul describes as our "True Worship" to God - a worship that is not just about our individual or corporate praise but actually embraces everything.

Today we are in the second half of Romans Chapter 14 and Paul is addressing the fact we are all different and some of the practical problems that may arise from that.

We are all different in just the basic things such as age, gender, backgrounds and life experiences. We have different tastes and preferences, different views on a number of issues.

We have different things we get excited and passionate about.

How many of us here are really looking forward to England playing in the football this evening and excited that they may get to the semi final?

How many are looking a lot more forward to the whole thing being over - which is next Sunday evening by the way.

How many of you don't know what I am talking about?

No two people here are exactly the same - "You are indeed unique - just like everyone else" (that is not a contradiction if you think about it)

We all have different opinions - some are strongly held and some are held very loosely.

What about when our opinions differ about how we should do Church, or how we should interpret certain parts of Scripture?

How do we practically practice holiness and express true worship when there is disagreement and dispute over these things?

Paul takes two whole Chapters to address this issue - so it is important for us to think and work through and put into practice.

First, some background before we read the passage from Romans 14.

In New Testament times some churches were largely made up of Jewish Christians - such as the Church in Jerusalem right at the outset. Others were largely Gentile, like the Church in Antioch.

But most Churches were somewhere within that spectrum and were mixtures of Jews and Gentiles - as in the Church in Rome that Paul is writing to here. The contact between the Jewish community and the Gentile community within a particular Church was not always

easy. There was an issue brewing about the extent Christian believers should keep the strict dietary laws required by the Jewish religion – even though they had converted to Christianity. In verse 14 of chapter 14 Paul talks about food being “clean” or “unclean” – we are in the language of Old Testament food laws.

The Gentile Christians didn’t worry about what they ate – they had no history of following food laws – and were getting annoyed with their Jewish brothers – whilst the Jewish converts were judging their Gentile brothers for their failure to obey the dietary laws found in the Old Testament.

Some from a Gentile background were saying:

“What do all those Jewish laws matter – we are free from all that sort of thing – they are just shackles that we don’t need.

The Christians from a Jewish background were saying:

“Of course they matter – they are part of God’s revelation in the scriptures and we ought to observe them. Yes, Christ has set us free from having to try and earn our salvation by keeping the law – but there are things that we still ought to do”

In the opening verse of Romans 14 Paul says:

“Accept those whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters” .

What does he mean by “disputable matters”?

To help us, in his commentary on Romans John Stott writes:

“Disputable matters are those on which it is not necessary for all Christians to agree – matters of indifference, whether, as here, they were customs and ceremonies, or whether they were secondary beliefs which are not part of the gospel or the creed, matters on which Scripture does not clearly pronounce”

We may be sitting here thinking that falling out over what we eat is irrelevant – bring on the Church lunch, for what has this to do with us?

But we know that churches of whatever background or denomination can still easily disagree and fall out over points of relatively minor detail. There are potentially many things that we can disagree and very sadly separate over.

How can we avoid this happening?

I think we must first acknowledge and accept that this is hard and challenging – Simon highlighted this last week and it is worth quickly repeating.

It is hard because we do all have blind spots which mean we just can’t see them.

It is hard because relationships are hard – aren’t they?

We all come from different backgrounds - and we naturally assume our way of doing things must be right!

Relationships are hard because being judgemental comes naturally.

Significantly, I think, in the middle of this chapter – a chapter that is about how we are to strive after unity and harmony – Paul writes this:

READ ROMANS CHAPTER 14 verses 10 - 13

Paul asks the question - "Why do you judge your brother or sister?
Why do you treat your brother and sister with contempt?"

That is a searching question - so why do we find judging others, being critical and condemning, so easy?
Do you find that an easy thing to do? Or am I the only one?

One answer to that question could be suppressed guilt.

By that I mean this - we feel guilty about something - but we don't want to face up to it, confess it, repent of it and seek to change.

Instead we deflect it onto someone else - shake our heads and say:

"Isn't it terrible that so and so are like that - that they do this?"

To try and get rid of our own guilt we transfer our own faults and failings onto someone else.

Beware of this - for our capacity for spiritual blindness is at its greatest when our eyes are fixed upon the failures and faults of others.

I believe the main answer to Paul's question is that judgementalism has its root in what the Bible sees as being the greatest and most destructive sin - Pride.

It is pride that finds satisfaction in condemning others - but then refuses to acknowledge that I too have faults and failures in my own heart and life. Pride will always blind us to our own sin and leave us in denial. We then judge others in order that we look just that little bigger and better than they do.

Pride is always at the root of conflict and confrontation and the reason for us being critical and condemning.

So - we clearly have no place to be perpetually judging each other.

We are not the judge of other people - we are not equipped, being neither powerful enough, or perfect enough, to do it.

That is why after asking the question "Why do you judge your brother and sister and treat them with contempt", Paul reminds us that we will have to stand before the Judgement seat of God and we will have to give an account - not of other people's lives but rather our own. Let us never lose sight that the greatest and most important judge is God himself.

To use courtroom language - if we constantly attempt to occupy the bench - we will end up in the dock.

For the measure by which we judge others, is the measure by which we will be judged ourselves.

By whom? Well, clearly by God.

I want to suggest that if we do have an attitude that is constantly condemning then that exposes that we haven't really truly grasped in our hearts the glorious gospel of grace and forgiveness. Paul, right in the middle of a chapter dealing with Christians wrongly judging each other reminds us that only God is qualified to judge. So we would be wise not to usurp the prerogative of the judge of all the earth - because the truth is we are hopelessly ill equipped to do so.

The fundamental issue in both chapters 14 and 15 is unity - for the fact is unless we have love and unity amongst each other then we have nothing to offer a broken world. Remember the Church is the way God has chosen to make visible his own nature here on earth. The church is, or should be, reflecting "the word made flesh" for today - we are meant to be the Body of Christ in the here and now. After the cross, resurrection and Ascension of Christ - that was always the plan! Our love for each other is the key to draw people towards the Love of Christ.

What is the basis for our unity?

It is based on the Gospel of Christ.

If we are loved and accepted by God - we must be committed to love and accept each other.

If we have found peace with God - we must be committed to be at peace with one another. Christian unity is based on something far greater and stronger than mutual goodwill and making the effort as best we can to get on with each other.

It is based on the gospel - it is based on who Christ is and what he has done - it is that should determine our attitude on to another.

So we shouldn't have a judgemental attitude that looks down and condemns. We cannot have an attitude that shows favouritism towards one person, and then prejudice towards another. These attitudes are damaging and a sure way to hinder the unity and witness we should all desire and be prepared to work for.

Now, today, there are certain issues, maybe not about food or special days as it was in the Church at Rome, that are disputable matters - those that are potentially divisive. We will not agree about everything - which is why we need to constantly pray for grace and discernment. Don't let secondary issues - those things that are not part of the gospel - those things which scripture does not clearly pronounce on - become a barrier between us.

In verse 19 of Romans 14 Paul declares:

"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and edification - do not destroy the work of God over what is a disputable matter"

Let us pursue everything that makes for peace and builds up our common life. A great strength in a united fellowship is where people recognise that they may well differ on various issues - but there is a higher calling that accepts differences for the sake of the kingdom of God.

But while you might want to think about what some of these disputable matters are - I feel it important to point out an issue where Paul says it may be right to separate over.

Turn over one page - to Romans 16 - let me read you verses 17 - 19.

(Read it)

At the end of the letter Paul gives a clear warning about false teachers. He wants the Church to grow up and learn how to understand - in love and wisdom and discernment - that there is an ever present danger of false teaching in the Church.

This is one area where we do need to make a proper judgement on - that would not be regarded as being wrongly judgemental.

We need to be aware that there is such a thing as false teaching - and it matters. The trouble is of course that false teachers seldom give themselves away easily. What they say may well sound Comforting and attractive - many Christians like to believe what they are taught and to take it on board with humility and trust - and so are easy preys for those who have clever and convincing way of putting it across.

How can we detect a false teacher?

We get a very good guideline in this small passage - please note when Paul says "contrary to the teaching you have learned".

Paul is pointing to all the things he has been teaching in the previous 15 chapters. He is effectively saying:

"this is where I want you to engage your heart and mind and will - the importance of a united fellowship based upon and gathered together around the truth of the gospel - I as I have been setting it out before you"

The teaching from Paul and the other apostles - it is their teaching that we believe in and are adhere to.

This is why the key sign of a false teacher is that they don't teach what the apostles taught. We cannot be united with those who deliberately depart from the apostolic faith and teaching.

Watch out for those who are not serving Jesus Christ - but rather their own desires and appetites. False teachers have no love for Christ - and no wish to be His willing slaves - instead they are self serving and self centred. They are smooth talking - they say what people want to hear and tend to avoid that which may make them unpopular.

So what is a good test of any teaching we come across - including here at the Mission of course!

Always ask these questions:

Does it agree with Scripture?

Does it glorify the Lord Jesus Christ?

Does it promote the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Something about what we believe important here at the Mission.

We do have a Mission statement of faith - in agreement with the evangelical Alliance statement of faith - which forms the core of our Church's doctrinal identity and distinctiveness.

It is in our membership form and up on the notice board.

They are eleven statements about the nature of God, what we believe about the scriptures, about ourselves, about the person of Christ and His work of salvation for us, the ministry of God the Holy Spirit, the purpose of the Church, what we ultimately look forward to as Christian believers.

These statements of faith are not to be regarded as disputable matters - they are, rather, what we are committed to hold onto, to guard diligently and to teach faithfully, confidently and clearly.

Our statement of faith provides the foundation on which our gospel unity is based and is built upon.

Back to our passage in Romans 14 and how can we guard against quarrelling over disputable matters and allowing that to affect our witness as a Church together.

I want to briefly highlight four things that Paul gave to the Church in Rome in this letter and that we need to heed.

1. We must desire unity and be prepared to work hard at it - to make every effort.
2. Recognise that there will be some differences of opinion that we accept graciously - rather than pretending they don't exist.
3. In order to deal with these, and work through them, we need to live out Romans 12 verses 1,2 - where we started in this series and we need to keep coming back to - let me read it again.

We all need to have our minds constantly renewed - and, as Paul says in Romans 14 verse 5:

"let everyone be convinced their own mind".

We need to acknowledge our renewed mind is not fully developed - we need to think, read, talk to one another, work through, with grace and humility, the disputable and difficult issues and through it all remain united - keeping our aim for unity and glorifying God in all we do very much at the forefront.

Paul gives us a good example to follow. If someone disagreed with him over issues such as food or the observing of certain special days - that was Ok. We can disagree over certain issues - and maintain our love and unity for the greater good of our witness.

4. We need to see we all have a responsibility towards Christ.

Quick overview of the Chapter:

Verses 5 - 9 - our behaviour is determined as we recognise Christ as Lord.

Verses 10 - 12 - our behaviour is determined as we recognise Christ as Judge.

Verses 13 - 23 - our behaviour is determined as we recognise Christ as our saviour.

Unity, then, is something that deepens as we look back and then look forward.

We are to look back at the Cross and see how Christ died for all sinners - then look forward to Christ's coming as a great incentive to persevere until that great day when He will come as Judge - when there will be justice, righteousness and there will be the new heaven and the new earth.

As we live and work together on the way towards this in the present and you come across Christians who you may not agree with and be tempted to dismiss or judge and look down upon - please stop and think!

What is our standing before the Cross?

It is perfect equality - we all come equal in need of mercy and grace.

What is our standing before the throne of God?

It is perfect equality - we all stand in need of mercy and grace.

If this is the case we must live like this in the in between which is in the now.

We may not get perfect unity now - but let us aim for it.

In light of the Cross, and in light of the throne, have we any greater incentive to live lives that indeed do lead to peace and mutual edification - lives that express our true worship.