

A Community at Peace
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Today, we are beginning a new sermon series I'm calling *A Community at Peace*. The series will be an exegetical study of Romans 14 and part of 15. I didn't pick this theme and passage because I see evidence of hostility and fighting in our church family; I love the harmony that we experience together. But I can see some challenges to our peace in the future. As our culture changes more and more, the burden and pressure upon you and me to live as holy people will become more and more challenging. Now, what does that mean: live as holy people? I simply mean to live as people set apart for God and not compromising with the world. That's what holy means; to be set apart. Our calling as believers is an interesting calling; we are to live in the world, but not be of the world. We are to be fully present to our unbelieving neighbors, coworkers and family members, but without embracing or loving the world.

As our culture keeps changing, the pressure and burden we will experience to remain faithful to God will threaten our peace with one another. Why do I think that? I think that because as our culture keeps drifting away from the things of God the decisions we will have to make to remain faithful to the Lord will become more and more difficult. We're going to have to make more difficult decisions concerning the use of our money, the kind of media we digest (and the kinds of devices we let our kids use - and when), the kinds of relationships we have and even the kinds of jobs we take. And chances are that we will have different convictions on what we should do. Do you know what I mean by that?

For example, do we all agree that the content and themes in TV shows and movies are trending more and more ungodly; more and more secular and accepting of standards that are out of step with the ways of God? If that's the case, then, for us to remain holy as our God is holy will mean we will need to exercise more and more discretion about what we watch and what we let our children watch. But we will not all make the same decisions about how to go about that. Some of us may go cold turkey; we might remove TV from our home. Others of us might restrict some programs and not others. Others of us might strengthen the interpersonal accountability without making any actual changes to what we have at home.

So, how do we know what we should do? Oh, that's easy, right? Let's just turn to the chapter in the Bible that talks about movies and TV. Can't do that, right? There are no chapters in the Bible about watching TV. And so here's what that means: we have to take what God's word does say about purity, about holiness, about grace and truth and apply that to our lives in faith. But here's what's going to happen: I might do some things in certain areas that you don't feel you should; and you may take some steps that I don't think I need to take.

So, how do we live at peace if we all have different practices in our pursuit of remaining faithful to God? How do we all pursue holiness together, yet respecting the differing opinions we have and different actions we take? And what do we do when our convictions bump up against

each other? Sure, what we all do in our own homes with our TVs doesn't really impact one another. But what about our collective decisions? That's what this study will be about so let's start by reading Romans 14:1-9 (READ).

You can see that the points of disagreement that Paul brings up for the Roman church concern food and days. One group of people view some food as bad and other food as good. And so, if some food is bad you have to make sure you stay away from that food. But another group of people in the church didn't think that way; they saw food all the same. In vs. 5 we see that some of the disputes have to do with certain days. One group is saying, "Some days are holier than others so we need to make sure we treat those days special," while the other group is saying, "Every day is the same." And the passage reads like both groups of people were simply trying to do their best to honor God with their lives. I say that to emphasize that the motivations by both groups of people were true and noble.

Why would people have these differing opinions or why would they disagree about such things? And why might we disagree about what are the best practices of pursuing Jesus? Well, there are probably a variety of reasons. First all of, not everything is spelled out in the Bible in black and white. I firmly believe that's designed by God. He instructs in a way of life, in a way of faith; we then go apply and implement that way of life believing in his provision through Christ. Certainly, there are some things that are universal (no drunkenness, for example), but there are also some gaps in the prescriptive teaching of the Lord; so we apply God's word differently to fill in those gaps. Secondly, our life experiences play a huge role in our convictions. Some of you grew up believing that alcoholic beverages were a destructive tool in the hands of Satan, that Scripture clearly condemns drunkenness and that alcohol is an addictive or enslaving substance. You know that the Bible doesn't forbid it, but you grew up being taught that it's wise to avoid alcoholic drinks altogether. So, you see it drinking alcohol as wrong. Others of you grew up believing that alcohol is a gift from God and should be consumed as a way to give glory to God. You also believe it can be destructive, but you believe the best way to avoid it's danger isn't to write *forbidden* across it, but to practice and teach it's honorable use. Both of those ways/positions/beliefs can be defended in the scriptures; neither of them are wrong. And our experiences, whether they are experiences as children growing up in certain homes or experiences as adults plays a significant role in the decisions we make to pursue holiness to God.

Here's a very important point from Romans 14 in our path towards peace: Paul does not say the path towards peace is found in trying to persuade our brother or sister that we are right and they are wrong (REPEAT). Do you know what I mean? I know that's what we are tempted to do. We're tempted to pursue peace by trying hard to get other people to agree and to conform with what we think. But that's not the solution Paul gives us. Do you know why? He tells us in vs. 5-6 (READ).

Look what he's saying: both groups of people, those who eat the meat and those who don't, those who observe special days and those who count all days the same, both do what

they do in honor and thanks to God. It's how they've been led by God to live thankful lives to their Creator. Take the observance of particular days. Sally looks at certain days and counts them especially holy. Christmas Day is holy (because it's the day we observe the birth of Jesus, even though we don't know what day it actually happened). Easter morning is special (because it's the day we observe the resurrection of Jesus Christ, even though we don't know what day that was... in fact, every year Easter is on a different Sunday so we all admit we're guessing). Or switch it around; Sally thinks Halloween is an evil day glorifying the works of Satan. So, consequently, she observes those days differently. Why? In honor of God. For the nourishment of her faith. She does what she does because she's seeking to glorify God.

But John thinks differently; he doesn't see something especially significant about these days. Yes, obviously, there's something significant about the birth of Christ and his resurrection, but John doesn't assign that significance to a day. Instead, he tries his best every day to honor baby Jesus, the risen Jesus because every day is holy. And why does he do that? Because he's trying to honor God, too. He's giving thanks to God.

Here's the point: why would I try to convince my brother or sister to stop doing something that honors God? Why would I want to upset their conscience and prevent them from giving glory to the Lord? I don't want to do that. Friends, living at peace with each other requires a couple of things: First of all, it requires me to slow down and actually listen and understand why others may be pursuing holiness a way that's different than my way. When I refuse to do that, I'll stay a slave to my very, very limited understanding and most likely be judgmental. Secondly, it requires me to humble myself and stop insisting on being right. Do you know one of the reasons we need others to think we're right? It's because we're unsure of ourselves. So I don't take comfort or assurance about my actions based on prayer and meditation on the word; instead, I feel assured and confident because other people agree with me. God's word doesn't affirm me, the opinions of others affirms me. But when I don't get that approval, it shakes me. So, I do my best to convince others that I'm right so I can feel more confident and assured in my position. Do you see how insecure I am and how my actions and beliefs are on very shaky ground? That's not the kind of life God is calling us to. At our best, we've all made our various life decisions in faith to honor and praise God with our very lives. I don't want to get others stop honoring God; I want to encourage that kind of living.

So, in a way, both the weak and the strong are right; they are right in that they are both following their conscience and implementing life-decisions for the glory of God. We should support that. Now, they both can't be right about the cleanliness of the food being eaten (God either says it's clean or not clean), but that's not the most important point at the moment. What's most important is being the kind of brother or sister who supports others in their attempts to honor and praise God.

There are two temptations that we will need to resist to be a community at peace. We must resist *despising* and *judging* each other. Look at vs. 2-3 (READ). We can see that Paul labels the strong as those who feel comfortable in faith eating anything while the weak in faith

are those who are convicted that you should only eat vegetables. This, most certainly, is a reference to the difference between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Jewish custom taught that some food was clean and some unclean. Unclean food was common food. You may remember in Acts 10 when Peter was told by God in a vision to kill and eat and Peter said, "No way, God! I've never eaten common, or unclean food." So, for many Jewish Christians their conscience was conflicted about eating common food.

Now, don't make too much of the words "weak" and "strong." Initially, we might think of weak as negative and strong as positive. Of course, when we start using labels like this there's a temptation to use those words against our brothers and sisters. Do you know what I mean by that? Here's how Paul is using those terms: One has weak faith if their conscience condemns something that isn't wrong in itself. This food isn't actually unclean (Paul will say that later in the chapter), but my conscience still doesn't permit me to eat it; that's weak faith. Now the reason why I say, "Don't make too much of those words" is because I think there are areas where all of us are the weak in faith. I think we all have areas where our conscience is burdened by something that isn't actually forbidden. When we realize that we all have areas that we are weak in, we're not as tempted towards self-righteousness when we see an area of weakness in our brothers or sisters.

Paul says that those who are weak in their faith are susceptible towards improperly judging. How does this work? Let's use TV as our illustration. Let's say the Steve Jones and his wife have decided that they are going TV-free. Ever since their boys were caught watching the Victoria's Secrets hour-long underwear ad their consciences have been restless. Every time the TV is on, they feel like they are failing their children; every time the TV is on they have deep guilt for having it in their home. So, out of a desire to serve God and their family, they are going TV-free.

The Jones are in a small group with the Petersons; in fact, the small group meets at the Petersons house. And the Petersons just bought a brand new 72" big screen to go along with their many other TVs. Steve and his wife go home from small group and they can't stop talking about how wrong the Petersons are for their new TV. Steve decides to take Rick Peterson out to lunch and to try and persuade him that he's wrong. He knows the Bible doesn't forbid TVs, but that doesn't stop him; "Rick," he pleads, "don't you think this is the wisest decision, to get rid of your TVs?" Rick doesn't agree. Over the weeks, Steve starts talking to a few other TV-free friends from church and Rick's poor management of his home seems to be a regular point of conversation. In fact, Steve is now taking out the pastor for lunch to warn him about Rick's reckless lifestyle with media; Steve doesn't think Rick should be an elder any more and he's going to let the pastor know.

That's judgment. Making moral conclusions about a man or a woman's faith based on your conscience. That's probably a pretty good distinction: you know you're judging someone inappropriately if you're weighing/assessing their faith based on your conscience. Not the objective Word of God; your subjective conscience. Do you see the difference in that? If Rick

was cheating on his wife, it would be good and right for Steve to say, “Rick, this isn’t right; this is wrong.” It would be good for him to go to him a second and third time. That’s not an opinion. But that’s different when it comes to matters of opinion and your own conscience. Paul says in vs. 3, “Let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats.” Next week we’re going to dive a little more deeply into judgment because it’s so important to Paul’s argument.

But he also has a word for those whose conscience isn’t conflicted; there’s a unique temptation for them, too. Again in vs. 3 Paul says, “Let not the one who eats *despise* the one who abstains.” Despise. How does that work? Well, let’s keep talking about Steve and Rick. So, we know that Steve isn’t handling their disagreement well, but that doesn’t mean Rick is squeaky clean himself. Ever since Steve has voiced his concerns about TV, Rick has this low-level anger about Steve. He’s finding everything about him annoying and detestable, even stuff unrelated to TV. Last week, when Steve made a suggestion at the church business meeting, one that everybody seemed to like, Rick rolled his eyes at his wife in disapproval. “Spiritually immature” and “legalistic” are words that Rick uses to describe Steve at church board meetings as he looks to marginalize Steve’s influence in the church body. He’s trying to hide it, but he’s not doing a very good job; people can tell that Rick has contempt for Steve.

One of the responses we might have when another person’s conscience rubs up against our freedom in Christ is contempt. Our flesh does not like to make sacrifices for others and when it feels like we’re being forced to do that, we might just despise them for it. Paul knows this temptation is real and ugly; that’s why he gives this word of warning right at the beginning of this discussion. Make sure you don’t despise those who have a conflicted conscience for the way that it might impact you. We’ll talk more about that coming sermons.

You’ll find success in battling judging or contempt when you remember that God’s call on you to live at peace is for you to make changes in how you relate to your brothers and sisters and not for you to make your brothers and sisters to think and act like you. That’s a big difference, isn’t it? To do that, it requires trust in God (that’s going to be the focus of next week’s); it also requires you to have sacrificial love towards your brother or sister (that’s the focus two weeks from now).

Key vs: Romans 14:6

Questions for the week

- Do you think you will need to make more counter-culture decisions to remain faithful to God in our changing culture? Why or why not?
- Why is it so tempting to want others to change for you rather than you change for them in our quest for peace?
- What’s one way God’s word made an impact on you today? What’s way of thinking or being are you hoping to change?