

## A Love that Makes Peace

Feb. 5, 2017

Brian R. Wipf

What would you be willing to give up for the sake of another person's soul? What would you be willing to sacrifice? I ask the question in that way because that's what love looks like. You give up stuff that you like when you love someone. I remember when Korby and I were getting married. About a month or two before our wedding, we rented our first apartment. Korby was going to move in and I was going to live with my parents. And when I'd come over and move more of our stuff into the apartment, I saw how she was decorating and organizing our future home. I remember thinking, "Is that all the space I'm going to get in the closet?" and "Is that what's going on the coffee table?" But I loved my bride. Whatever you want, dear. So, I complied. She could do what she wanted with the kitchen and the coffee table and the closet and the spare bedroom and the bathroom. I could give all that stuff up (of course, I couldn't give up my dresser and when she decorated that, too, I began to protest... I think she was just measuring me up.)

Love costs; love sacrifices. And that kind of love - real love, love that makes sacrifices - is required to be a community at peace. We're about halfway through a series called *A Community at Peace*. I stated on our first Sunday that our differences of opinion about how to faithfully follow Jesus are going to threaten our peace with one another. Especially in our day and age when following Jesus requires more and more intentionality and countercultural decisions. Most of what we do and think as followers of Jesus is going to look the same; there's no question about that. There's going to be remarkable similarities in how we live by the gospel of Jesus' grace. But there will be some differences, too. Some things I am going to write forbidden over the top of because I can't follow Jesus faithfully otherwise. But you may not need to do that. And then, there are things you will need to write forbidden over that I don't need to. There are going to be differences of opinion on things that the scriptures do not explicitly command or forbid.

The first thing we need to embrace and believe to be a community at peace is confidence and trust in the judgment of God. He is our judge; he is the one we give an answer to. We are not responsible how a brother or sister stands or falls over matters of opinion. God is watching and he will provide the necessary grace to stand and judgment to correct. When we trust God with that, we'll be on the road towards being at peace with one another.

But there's something else we need, too. And it's love. Real love. Sacrificial, earnest, I'm-willing-to-die-for-you kind of love. Sloppy *agape* love isn't going to do it. What's sloppy *agape* love? Emotionalism, good intentions and apathy that is unwilling to make sacrifices for others; love that's unwilling to bleed. That's our focus this morning so let's see that in our passage (READ Romans 14:13-19).

Our section begins with the command not to pass judgment on each other. That makes sense; we've just been told that God is our judge and he will hold everyone accountable. Notice the next phrase: *but rather* decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. Can you hear the contrast? Don't do this, but instead, do this. The negative command is "don't judge," and the positive command is "decide to never be a stumbling block or hindrance to a brother or sister." Let that positive command ring in your ear; Jesus commands me to decide to never to put a stumbling block in the way of my brother. That's not a matter of opinion. That's what we've been talking about, right? Matters of opinion. Well, this one isn't a matter of opinion. This a command. Don't say, "Well, Jesus kind of wants me to try to avoid being a hindrance to my brother." No. He's commanding you not to be a hindrance to others even at the expense of your own freedom in Christ. This is a non-negotiable.

Now, what does that mean: be a hindrance? A stumbling block? And how does that work? How can I even do that? These are important questions.

First of all, notice the various ways Paul describes the way a person strong in faith can hurt the faith of their brother or sister.

- Vs. 13 ~ stumbling block and hindrance
- Vs. 15a ~ If your brother is grieved.
- Vs. 15b ~ do not destroy the one whom Christ died
- Vs. 20 ~ Do not... destroy the work of God

Paul is trying to lead you and I to a particular conclusion: this is a big deal. The word for stumbling can mean "cause of ruin". Ruin. Destruction. These are terms that should heighten your concern about what's taking place. There's a lot a stake over these matters of opinion. I may not be forbidden from X or Y, but it's possible for me to ruin my good sister's faith by doing them.

How can that happen, though? How can the exercise of my freedom in Christ put my sister at so much risk? Do I really have so much power over someone else? And aren't we all responsible for our own actions? Suppose your friend, Judy, believes that God commands her to keep the Sabbath day. She *must* go to church on Sunday; it's a rule, no working or shopping on Sunday. She's explained it to you; the OT is clear that followers of God must keep the Sabbath; it is a holy day. She's shown you the punishments and they are severe. But, you know that God has fulfilled the law in Christ. There is no obligation to keep the Sabbath. (That, in fact, is the point of vs. 14. Paul says, "I know and I'm persuaded by Jesus himself that nothing is unclean in itself. The food isn't unclean. The days aren't holy." Paul's agreeing with the strong at this point; he's throwing them a bone. "You're right," he says, "on the facts of the matter;" the food is clean. There are no special, holy days that we need to keep.) You obviously see the importance of attending church regularly; it's your habit. But if you miss a Sunday for traveling or a special family gathering, your conscience is clear.

Here's how you have the power to destroy Judy's faith. Suppose you say to her, "Judy, I'm taking you shopping after church. I know you don't think you're supposed to shop on

Sunday, but Jesus will forgive you.” Or “I know you don’t think it’s OK to miss church, but to make the noon kickoff at the Packers game we will have to skip - Judy, it’s not an option; you’re coming with me.” And through your consistent persuasion and persistence you get her to skip church; you get her shopping on Sundays. And you kind of feel good about yourself; you say, “I’m freeing her from her legalism.” She feels guilty at first for doing these things because it violates what she sees in the scriptures, but in time that slowly goes away. And in due time, Judy is a lot like you, at least on what she does on a Sunday. Do you know what you taught Judy to do? You taught her and encouraged her to ignore the impulses of the Holy Spirit in her life. You encouraged her to disregard and pay no attention to the voice of God instructing her soul in obedient faith of her Master. Friends, that’s a very bad thing; you have not served your friend. There’s just one sin you won’t be forgiven for; that’s refusing to turn to God when he’s calling you to repent. And that’s what Judy became numb to; she became numb to the voice of God saying, “Don’t go there, Judy.” That’s how persuading a sister to ignore what faith in God is telling her to do destroys her.

That’s a big deal. We don’t want to be that kind of friend. It may not be unclean to you (maybe it’s not even unclean in and of itself), but look what Paul says in vs. 14, “but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean.” That’s a very important truth from Paul that he’s going to talk more about later and we are going to spend more time on that next Sunday. But feel the sense of urgency; it is a very destructive thing to put a stumbling block in the way of a brother or sister.

The command of God is to walk in love; listen to vs. 15 (READ). While Paul doesn’t say this explicitly, it’s clear that he sees walking in love as a goal. If you grieve your brother, *you’re no longer walking in love*. What’s the implication? Walking in love is fundamental! It’s essential! Since walking in love is essential, I just can’t grieve my brother or sister. Love won’t permit it.

That’s how we are supposed to live our lives, I think. The scriptures marvelously lay out for us these non-negotiables, these fundamental truths and goals and values that we just say, “I’m not walking away from this.” That’s what Paul is doing in this passage; let me show you. Look at vs. 17, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Paul is assuming something here; he’s assuming that we live for the kingdom of God. He’s assuming that the kingdom of God is of greatest consequence to us. And, that’s a right assumption. Listen to Jesus in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (our daily needs) will be added to you.” If you’re thinking, “That sounds like the kingdom of God should be my priority,” you’re hearing that verse correctly. So, Jesus is saying and Paul is assuming in Romans 14 that the kingdom of God should guide our living; our priority of the kingdom helps us shape the kinds of lives we live.

But there’s more to ask, right? The next question is, “Well, what’s the kingdom of God about? If I live for the kingdom, what will I do?” And that gets us to the point of our passage. Here’s what you won’t do. You won’t prioritize eating and drinking what you want. You won’t

prioritize your consumption of media. You won't value your freedom to go to the lake on Sundays since the Sabbath law has been fulfilled. Why? Because that's not what the kingdom of God is about. Do you see that in vs. 17? "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking" what I want and when I want it. It's not a matter of watching the movies and TV shows that I like. Jesus didn't die for me so that I'm free to live for me.

And can I be honest for a moment friends? I think that's how a lot of us live. I know that's how I live. I know that when I'm not battling my selfish desires that's what I live for. Even more, it's what I think God wants for me. I think God's love for me is proven by giving me unfettered access to everything I want. That's why I get so crabby when I'm sick or when I injure my back or my ankle playing basketball or stuff like that. My crabbiness is a protest against God that I can't enjoy what I like. Why didn't he save me from the injury, from this sickness, from the obstacle of me getting what I want? I thought he loved me! And that kind of living imagines that the kingdom of God is for eating and drinking; it's about me getting what I want. That's not what the kingdom of God is about.

I'm guessing you can see how that kind of living will lead to a community at war. If the kingdom of God is about me eating and drinking what I want, then anyone who gets in my way of enjoying my food and drink to the fullest is a problem. They are an obstacle to run over; they are a barrier to plow through. And Paul is saying, "You are no longer walking in love when your view of the kingdom is like that."

So, what does the kingdom consist of, or what is the kingdom about? He tells us: it's about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. So, what are those? I think he means these terms to be understood in a communal context; remember, he's trying to help us find peace with each other in spite of our differences. To do that we need righteousness. Righteousness means, "good works towards each other." Sometimes in the NT, righteousness means "the imputed righteousness of God." Meaning, when we are born again and trust in Jesus, God gives to us the perfect record of Jesus' righteousness as our own so we are clean. That's not the righteousness here. And it makes sense, right? When we are looking to do good works to each other, we won't be fighting over our differences.

The kingdom is also a matter of peace, peace with each other. There's a peace with God that we have because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but the peace we have with God should translate into peace with each other. That's the peace he's talking about now. Look at vs. 19, "So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding." So, put 2 and 2 together; since the kingdom of God is a matter of peace let's make sure that's our pursuit.

Finally, he says the kingdom of God is about joy. I wonder what this joy is? There's a part of me that wants to see this in a communal context, too. That's been the focus the entire time, right? But what would that joy be in or about? Well, certainly not the joy of getting my way (that's what he's trying to fight back). Maybe mutual joy in God and what he has done for us.

When I marvel at what God has done and is doing in us, I rejoice. I rejoice in God, but I also rejoice in you, too.

All of these things, though, are done “in the Holy Spirit.” That means it’s done by God’s power and God’s strength. The Holy Spirit is the one who works the good works, the harmony and the joy we have in each other. So, all praise to him! It’s his work among us so let’s keep trusting and relying upon him.

Look at vs. 13; notice how he says, “*decide* never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” I’m hoping we all go home today ready to make that decision. We all have to make a point of this. We all have to say, “I’m going to decide to prioritize the kingdom - prioritize good deeds, harmony and joy together - rather than the free exercise of my freedom in Christ.” I’m going to decide to live my life in sacrificial love for my brother and sister. That will make a huge impact on whether we are a community at peace or not.

Key verse ~ Romans 14:17

#### Questions for the week

- How big of a deal is it to be a hindrance to one’s brother or sister? What stood out to you about the impact we can make in each other’s lives?
- What keeps you from walking in love?
- How does Paul’s description of the Kingdom of God in vs. 17 change your path and priorities in life?