



This past week we spent the better part of a day with some friends from our camp counselor days that we have known for thirty years. So you Living Waters staff, imagine hanging out with one another 30 years from now. Kinda scary, isn't it? ;-)

Our friend Joel is a pastor. He had been the pastor of a church for several years and in addition to having changed some of his theology, he was tired of all of the church squabbles and endless church meetings so he decided to plant his own church. That is often a great idea. This church would not be here had it not been for the few who stepped out in faith to start something new.

However, Joel's new church has been around 10-20 people for the past twenty years and that's exactly the way he wants it. Joel has some very firm theological positions. I tend to agree with most of his positions but the one giant flaw in his thinking is that he wants everyone to agree on everything. He wants the church to be small as long as everyone is in total agreement. In this sense, he prides himself on unity in the body. I am not saying it's always easy to have unity with 10-20 people in a church. You can have strong disagreements between two people. Do you know what disagreement between two people is called? A marriage! But I think we would all agree that it's easier to have unity with 15 people than it is with 150 people, right?

But is this really the church? We just did a church survey and it showed that we are not very strong on evangelism. I knew that was true, which is one of the reasons we are holding a summer long evangelism training. I was very encouraged that 50 people signed up and 37 were at the first class. We may be weak in this area but at least we try. Joel's church is perfectly content to stay with his tiny little group because Joel places an extremely high value on unity.

But is this really an expression of Christian unity? To me, the best expression of Christian unity happens when not everyone agrees all of the time. Now you do have to agree on the most important beliefs and practices but you don't have to agree on everything! So if we disagree yet still fully love and accept one another, *that* is unity!

I love Joel and his wife, but I think he is missing something beautiful in the body of Christ. But Joel's church is so much easier. But it's hard to hold onto unity among a diverse group of people. But to do so is more interesting, more beautiful and above all, more Biblical. That brings us to the 14th chapter of Romans.

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. 2 One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3 Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

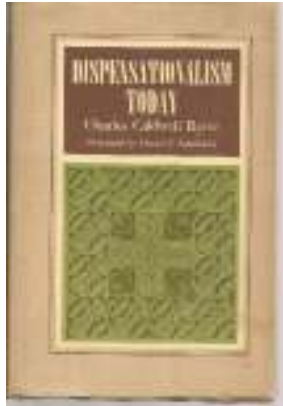
10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; 11 for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God."

12 So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

You can get lost quickly in this passage in vegetables and judgmentalism, so let me give you a lay of the land. There were two groups of people in the church in Rome who had sharp disagreements with one another. They were fighting over non-essential stuff. They were not unified, but they should have been. Paul calls one group the "weak in faith" and the implication is that the other group is strong in faith. But whatever you do, do not call the weak inferior and sinful and the strong. Both groups were right to hold their viewpoints but both groups were wrong to judge or condemn the other.

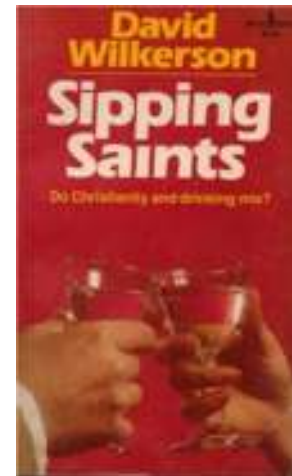
There were three sources of division between these two groups of believers: food, drink and the observance of certain "days." The issue of eating was that one group ate meat and the other ate only vegetables. I bet in Viroqua there are people who could get into a fist fight between meat-eaters and vegans, do you think? Or between organic and non-organic. Or between cage-raised and free range animals. There's no shortage of tension over these topics. But again, we are not talking about debates in the public square. We are talking about nasty infighting among born again believers in a relatively new church in Rome. They were at each other's throats. Not fist fights but silent judgment. One side despised the other and the other side passed judgment. Those are strong words, aren't they-despise and judgment? These were fellow, blood-bought believers and they had silent contempt for one another. And the really sad thing is that both sides were in the right. Both sides had strong convictions yet both sides soundly condemned the other.

We can get that way with one another, even in the church. Or should I say, especially in the church. You see, as believers we naturally have strong convictions about certain things. And that's a good thing! We should be willing to go to the mat over core issues. Do you hold Biblical convictions for which you would be willing to die? If not, I would wonder what you believe then. It's good and necessary to hold strong convictions on the core doctrines of our faith. It's also good to hold strong convictions on issues which are not core doctrines. But there are two ways we fall down. First, we don't have the discernment to know the difference between an essential core doctrine and a non-essential belief. Second, we don't have the love and the patience to tolerate those who disagree with us.



So what we need is discernment without being judgmental. What we need is loving tolerance without being wishy-washy. As I said, Paul had three issues he was addressing—food, drink and observance of days. But for the most part, his issues are not our issues. The only one that is still contentious for us is drinking alcohol.

The very first Christian book I read as a believer was this one—Dispensationalism Today by Charles Ryrie. We were in a Christian bookstore on our one day off from guess where—our camp counselor jobs! I didn't know who Charles Ryrie was nor did I know what dispensationalism was, but I bought the book and read it.



But the second Christian book I ever read was this one: Sipping Saint by David Wilkerson. And it had this exact same cover. So this topic can still be divisive for Christians. But there are many others as well. We disagree about all kinds of media habits—movies, TV, music, video games. We disagree about school choice—whether we should send our kids to the public school, a Christian school or homeschool them. We disagree about worship music, about clothes and modesty. I am sure if I took a survey we could drudge up a long list of things about which we disagree and some of these topics we hold dearly. And I haven't even mentioned doctrinal positions. But the issues that Paul listed are what we typically refer to as “lifestyle” issues. We may not get emotional about our position on the rapture but we will get emotional about the topic of school choice.

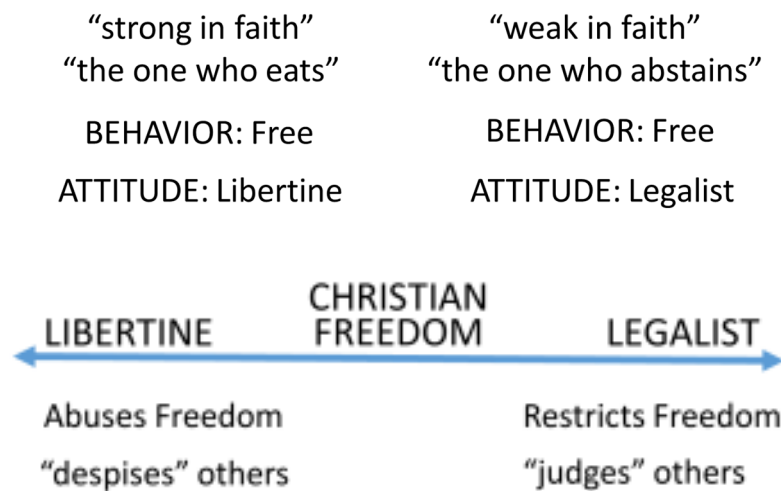
So our responsibility is to have good discernment and lots of love. Romans 14 is roughly divided into these two responsibilities. The first half of the chapter is mostly about good discernment and the second half is mostly about love. But they are all mixed together and not possible to neatly divide.

Before we dig into the principles, let me diagram this for you so that it might be more clear. As I said, the two sides are those who are “strong in faith” and those who are “weak in faith.” The strong are the ones who eat anything they want and the weak abstain from eating meat and eat only vegetables. Paul said that both sides were in the right. Neither were sinning by what they

did. Both sides, both parties were in the realm of Christian freedom. We have freedom when Scripture does not expressly condemn a behavior.

In this case both sides had behavior that was well within the boundaries of Christian freedom. Neither were sinning by what they did. But they were sinning by what they thought. Their attitudes were corrupted by their prideful positions on which they stood. The strong despised the weak because they thought that they should be more free to eat. The weak passed judgment on the strong because they thought they were sinning. Therefore, the weak saw the strong as libertines. A libertine is one who abuses Christian freedom. The strong saw the weak as legalists. Legalists, as many of you know, restrict Christian freedom.

So the behavior of the strong was free. They were free to eat, but they had the attitude of a libertine. And the behavior of the weak was free. They were perfectly free to eat but they had the attitude of a legalist. So again, the behaviors of both were not sinful but their attitudes were sinful.



Let’s take drinking alcohol as an example. I disagree with David Wilkerson on this issue. I hold the position that drinking alcohol in careful, loving moderation is within the realm of Christian freedom. Some will choose to completely abstain from alcohol and there are excellent reasons for doing so. Anyone who has struggled with alcohol or alcoholism should most definitely practice abstinence. Others will choose to drink occasionally and in careful moderation for health and enjoyment reasons. In my opinion, both sides fall within the realm of Christian liberty but both have their downfalls. The abstinence crowd can quickly adopt legalistic attitudes and those who choose to drink can look down on the abstainers and despise what they perceive as legalistic ways. Both have appropriate actions but both have sinful attitudes.

So what do we do with these differences within the church? My friend Joel planted a new church, but I think there is a better way through the principles in this passage.

1. God has welcomed him.

Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Stop despising and passing judgment and the reason? “For God has welcomed him.” That’s a simple way of saying that if God

approves of what he is doing, who am I to disagree with God? Now you have to be careful here when you apply this principle. Christians are often saying that God told me to do such and such. Saying that God told you to do something is the ultimate trump card. “God told me that I am supposed to marry you.” Or the inverse of that—“God told me I am supposed to divorce you.” If you want to win an argument quickly, just say, “God told me to do this.” So if you rip this principle out of context—God has welcomed him—it is like saying “God told me to do this.”

Paul is writing about very specific areas of disagreement. He states clearly that to eat and drink or not to eat and drink is acceptable. But the Bible may or may not speak directly to the topic that you are considering. This is where discernment is so necessary. You need to put on your Biblical thinking cap and do some hard work. But too often we would rather react than think.

Before I was ordained, one of the areas that I took some time to finalize for myself was my position on miraculous gifts. I studied every Scripture on the subject. I read books and I attended two conferences that were related to the subject. At one conference, the main speaker was teaching people how to prophecy. Now mind you, I was really trying to be as open-minded as possible without checking my discernment at the door. He had one woman stand up and he spoke some sort of prophecy over her for about a minute or so. The woman was delighted with the word she spoke and completely agreed with everything he said. But I was not convinced. You see, to me, what he had told her was of such a general nature that it could have been true with at least half of the people in that room.

Later in the day I had an opportunity to talk to the speaker about that prophecy class. I told him my observations—that what he said was very general and could be applied to almost anyone. Here’s what he said. “Yes, you’re right.” I was shocked at his honest admission. Here he was saying to this woman “God is telling you to do such and such” and then he turned around and admitted that what he said was basically bogus. But the really frightening thing is that it seemed that every other person in that room was hanging on his every word! Some people—sadly some Christians—cannot think their way out of a wet paper bag. I just shocks me that so many are so blind. And it saddens me that this man would deceive so many.

Charles Spurgeon has this very quotable quote about discernment. “Discernment is not knowing the difference between right and wrong. It is knowing the difference between right and almost right.” Yes, there is an enormous amount of Christian liberty but please exercise the utmost level of discernment before you move forward.

2. Each person is accountable to God.

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Now here is a verse that people like to rip out of context. This is what they think it says. “Who are you to pass judgment on another person? How dare you judge me, you judgmental, hateful person.” The fear of being labeled judgmental is a powerful weapon. But the fear of being labeled judgmental has left us with a lack of good judgment.

Now here is where we finally get to the topic of the Supreme Court’s decision. How do we move forward in light of this tragic decision? Like many of you, I have read about a dozen responses

from Christian leaders of one stripe or another. I did not plan to nor did I have time to preach a whole message on this topic as the news just broke Friday morning. However, this passage certainly has relevance to the issue.

So what do we do with this phrase- *Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?* This is what the people say to us on the issue of gay marriage, whether explicitly or implicitly. Aside from the fact that they are judging us when they call us judgmental, let me show you why this phrase does not mean what they say it means.

First of all, Paul is saying this in regard to an area of Christian liberty. Remember, their behavior was not sinful but their attitude was sinful. It was the prideful attitude of their heart that Paul was calling out.

Second, do not miss the fact that in saying, *Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?* What was Paul doing? He was passing judgment on the strong and the weak! In order to even say this, Paul had already passed judgment on both sides and determined that their attitudes were sinful. "Do not pass judgment" never means:

1. You can do whatever you want. No one believes that, not even the people who call us haters.
2. There are no standards by which to live. Again, everyone has some kind of standard.
3. You should never challenge or encourage a fellow believer. Otherwise, I could never preach another sermon! All preaching and teaching is itself a form of judgment.

This is what we do when we preach and teach the Scriptures. First, we look at God's standards. We seek to know God's plan for us. Second, we take a look at our own life and figure out how it compares to the Word of God. This whole process is called judgment. We attempt to judge ourselves by the standards of Scripture. This is not being judgmental or hateful, it is precisely what God tells us to do. And it is the very thing that the Supreme Court rejected on Friday and what tens of millions of Americans had already rejected. Actually, most Americans reject God's standards, not just those who disagree with us on this issue.

Just last night Ryan told us the story of one of the students who is serving in the internship with him. This young man had been a practicing homosexual until about two years ago when Jesus radically saved him. Another young woman got saved when one of their interns befriended her at a gay pride event where the interns went to serve. The gospel of Jesus Christ alone has this kind of power.

I don't have any hope in the courts. When the Supreme Court uses the 14th amendment to declare that race is the exact same thing as homosexuality, there is no more hope. They say that religious institutions are not in any danger because we are protected by the first amendment. But what do you think is going to happen as soon as one person challenges that first amendment protection? The first and fourteenth amendments are going to duke it out and I am quite certain that the courts will make sure that freedom of worship is sacrificed on the altar of expediency.

No, I have no hope in the courts but my hope is as strong as ever in the gospel. I don't like the fact that my message on civil disobedience may be more real than I had imagined but I am willing to trust God for the outcome. What about you?

Rich Maurer
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