

Romans 14:1-12 – Handling Differences in Christian Community

Hello everyone – it's really good to be with you today, although in a slightly different way. Wherever you are, I really hope you are doing well, and that you are taking good care of yourself in this slightly strange time.

Today I want to talk about how we are to handle our differences in Christian community, and also how it's important for us as God's people to live in unity – I think this is something that is especially relevant to us at this particular time.

In our passage Paul is dealing with division that has been caused by disagreements within the church in Rome. And the reason for the division was because the church consisted of some very different groups of people who had very different convictions. On one hand we have the Jewish Christians who believed it was really important to observe the law, and on the other, we have the Gentile Christians who lived free from the law - and they end up allowing their differences to divide them.

This is exactly the opposite of what Paul is telling them to do. In chapter 12, Paul tells the church to “love one another with brotherly affection, (12:10 ESV). Then in chapter 13, he says that, “...love is the fulfilment of the law,” (13:10 NIV). And then in chapter 15, he says: May God...help you [to] live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus (15:5 NLT). We can see that Paul's heart is for the believers in Rome to live in unity, and this is the same for us! God's heart is for us to be a people who are unified in faith, which means that we should not allow our differences to divide us.

I. The Danger of Division

It's important that we understand that here Paul isn't talking about central gospel issues or even moral issues, but he's talking about the grey area of life. He's saying that we should not be divided over matters of opinion, but that we are to instead accept one another in spite of our differences. That's v. 1, which says: “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters.”

The disagreements within the church in Rome are actually quite interesting. The first disagreement was over the Jewish food laws. We are told in v. 2 that there were some Christians who avoided meat – probably because they were worried that it had been offered to idols. But then there are other Christians who understand that all food is actually clean (v. 20), and they don't feel the need to restrict what they eat.

The other disagreement is mentioned in v. 5, and it was over whether certain days were more important than others. And again, the different opinions that people held caused division. In the Old Testament, the Jews were told to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy (Ex 20:8). And so here the Jewish Christians, they believe that the Sabbath was the most important day. But then for the others, it says that they “consider every day alike” – it doesn't matter which day they worship God, because they can worship God every day... And so what does Paul say about this? He says in v. 5, “Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind,” then he goes on to say in everything you do, do it in honour of the Lord (vv. 6-8). In other words he's saying: follow your conscience. Live according to your convictions. Know where you stand, but in whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

When I was at university I got into the habit of playing badminton with some of my friends after church, and I had this one friend who would always refuse to come, because she said Sunday was the Sabbath. And she said to me: "You shouldn't be playing sports on a Sunday. Sunday is the Sabbath – it's the day of rest. You go to church in the morning, then you go home and sing hymns and read your Bible, and then you go to the evening church service." I must admit that I did feel judged for not being as devout as she was. Yet at the same time, I was thinking: "Wow... that's a bit legalistic. You need to chill out!" And so we spent a lot of time trying to change each other... We both criticised and looked down on the other person. But then what does this passage tell us? It says to accept each other. Don't force your own convictions on other people. Don't be divided by your differences... You know, when we force someone to change their convictions, to change the way they behave or the way they think, we are actually rejecting them, and we fail to accept them as they are. And that's what division is. Now here's the part of the passage that I found really convicting. When there is division amongst God's people, we are actually rejecting someone that God has accepted. That's what it says in v. 4. "Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval," (NLT). And so if God who is our master, has accepted someone, who are we to reject them?

Now the disagreements mentioned in this passage probably aren't that relevant to us today, but there are certainly lots of other issues that we may disagree on. For example, it could be about how we do church. We might have our own opinion on how a church service should be run. Some of us like it to be lively and full of energy, whilst others prefer a quiet space for contemplation. There could be strong opinions over the music or the style of worship. Some of us love the traditional hymns, and others would rather have more contemporary songs. How about the way we dress to go to church. What would you think if I turned up in t-shirt, shorts and sandals? What if I preached in t-shirt, shorts and sandals? How would you feel about that? Unfortunately, some people even end up dividing over minor and peripheral theological issues, and I actually think it's very sad when that happens. We know that "knowledge puffs up, but love edifies, (1 Cor 8:1). And we know that Jesus says: "By this all people will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another," (John 13:35) - and so it's not by how much we know or how sound our doctrine is. It's not by how great our church services are, or how in tune we can sing... but it's by our love for one another.

And so there can be discussion, there can even be disagreement, but there should never be division over these issues. We are not to be divided even though we are a very different and diverse group of people. Which leads to my second point.

II. The Delight of Diversity

So the other thing I want to say is that diversity should be celebrated. It's a good thing that we are all different. Yes, we are called to unity – but that does not mean we need to all be the same. Unity does not mean uniformity.

How amazing is it that we are a church consisting of a diverse group of people, but we are also one family in Christ? We are all unique, yet we are all made in God's image, and because of that we are able to show each other things about God that we would not see if we were by ourselves. And so our diversity is used by God to show us more of who He is. Our diversity will even remain with us in heaven. It says in Revelation that a vast crowd

from every nation, tribe, people and language will stand in front of the throne before the Lamb (Rev 7:9).

I think I've actually tasted what that's going to be like during my time at uni. I was part of a very multi-cultural life group with people from China, and Singapore and Norway, and from many different places around the world. There was one time during prayer when people suddenly decided to pray in their own native languages, and we had no idea what each person was saying, but we still felt such a great sense of unity in the room, because we knew we loved each other. And so unity is what we are called to, and diversity is to be celebrated.

Right now we are physically divided, not out of choice, but because we have to be, but we can still be united in one heart and mind. We might not be able to engage with each other face to face, but let's not give up! Let's not be discouraged, but continue to keep in contact online or by picking up the phone, and let's keep praying for each other.

I want to finish by sharing with you something I've recently read:

"It has been so encouraging to see churches continue in worship, serving the vulnerable, loving the stranger and praying for our world in these uncertain times, This is what walking the way is all about. God in the everyday, even when the everyday looks very different. Churches are not being closed. Buildings are being close. You are the church! You are to remain open."