

Love Where the Rubber Meets the Road
Romans 14:1-15:13
#66 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – May 13, 2007

Introduction

Many of you have had the experience of teaching your children how to drive. When we get in the car for the first time there are steps that we go over that relate to the immediate task of turning the car on, learning what the controls are, and so on. But once we get beyond those basics, there are pearls of wisdom that we often begin to share with our kids.

There was one thing in particular that I wanted to impress upon my kids. I told all three of them, “Drive like you are the only sane person on the road.” That was not intended to make them paranoid but I wanted them to drive defensively. “Be alert because you don’t know what the guy in the lane next to you is going to do.” You probably have things you’ve told your kids for similar reasons.

What we are trying to do is shape the way our kids approach being behind the wheel of a motor vehicle. You’re not going to be with them in each situation, coaching them through how to act. So you give them some general advice and hope that they apply it appropriately.

In some ways, we’ve just come through a section of Romans that is like that. While Paul has addressed some specific situations, chapters 12 and 13 are filled with life-principles that we are to use to shape our responses to real-life situations. There is an emphasis in chapters 12 & 13 on the need for us to love others. What Paul has written is intended to help us form a way of looking at other people. In chapters 14 & 15 Paul applies the principles to a specific situation.

As we will see, the circumstances were somewhat unique, but not so unique as to be detached from aspects of life that you and I deal with. This morning I want to look at the big picture in this section, and focus on the main point that Paul is making. Then we’ll come back for two or three weeks and look at some of the issues that are raised in this passage.

What’s Going On In Rome?

I need to ask you to use your imagination this morning. Transport yourself back to the world of the first century Church. You’re in Rome and are a part of the church that met in that city. It is likely that there were large-group gatherings for teaching, but there were also smaller home-based meetings as well, and those gatherings often involved eating together.

When the church was first birthed, it consisted mainly of converts from Judaism. The pattern seemed to be that when the early Christian missionaries went into a city, they began their ministry in the synagogues. There they would find an audience – both Jewish people and Gentile converts to Judaism – who would be familiar with the Old Testament and they would begin to show how Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament.

Those who went about preaching the Gospel did not confine their ministry to the synagogues alone, and as we see in the case of Paul, he often engaged Gentiles in the lecture halls and meeting places of the cities in which he preached. Soon a church began to meet, comprised mostly of Jewish converts, but with a growing number of Gentile converts.

We're in Rome. In 49 AD the emperor, Claudius, has decreed that all Jews must leave the city. In the years that followed that decree, the church continued to grow, and was now almost if not exclusively Gentile. After five years, Claudius died, and Jewish people began to make their way back to the city. As Jewish Christians came back to their churches and fellowship, they found that something significant had taken place. They were no longer the majority, they were clearly the minority.

If you were a Jewish convert to Christianity, you would be facing some significant questions, because your Jewishness was not just a matter of religion, but of ethnicity and culture. So how were you supposed to relate your Judaism to Christianity? All throughout the Church in the world of the 1st century, there were Jewish people struggling with this question. What was to be left behind and what could stay?

This was even a hot topic among the leaders of the church. In Acts 15 we find the record of a meeting of the apostles and other church leaders in Jerusalem, at which they discussed the question of whether it was necessary to be circumcised and obey the law in order to follow Christ. Read Acts 15:1-21.

The conclusion, then, was that following the Law was no part of the Gospel, and that God had clearly accepted Gentile people without their having kept the Law. But in deference to the fact that many if not most churches had a significant Jewish population, Gentiles were asked to be sensitive to some issues that were important to Jewish Christians.

Here in Rome, however, it appears that neither side has really been following this. There are some who, while not saying that the dietary laws and observing Jewish holy days were a must, clearly felt that they were best. Good Christians kept Kosher and observed the special days that the Old Testament prescribed. If you didn't do those things, you weren't a good Christian. Others – probably mainly Gentiles – not only disagreed, they were sharply critical of those who followed the Law.

The decision of the church leaders in Acts 15 was intended to enable people from very different cultural backgrounds to co-exist in peace. But instead of peace and harmony, the church in Rome was divided.

Your small group is gathering tonight. And you know Tacitus. He's bringing a ham. A ham wrapped in bacon. It's true that pork is a favorite meal in Rome, but you wish he'd knock it off. Because Benjamin is only going to nibble on a roll. Tacitus will make a wise-guy remark about the babies who won't eat, and Benjamin will pitch a fit and we'll be off to the races again with these two guys judging each other's spirituality. A great way to start the night.

Finally the table is cleared and a few more people have come in. Your leader announces that the church has received a letter from the Apostle Paul, and that one of the things that he writes about is this conflict that is driving a wedge between people. Let's see what he says in 14:1-15:13.

So who was right? According to Paul, both and neither. Was it right to avoid eating what had formerly been forbidden? Paul says it is as long as it was done out of a desire to honor God. Was it right to enjoy what had formerly been forbidden? Again, as long as it was done out of a desire to honor God, there is no problem. Read 14:6-9. So given that this was a non-essential, both sides were free to pursue their preferences.

But while both had the freedom to do what they were doing, they did not have the freedom to impose their standard upon the other, nor to look down on the other because of the choice they had made.

How do We Deal with Differences? A Summary of 14:1-15:13

Now I will grant you that when we have our next pot luck we're not going to battling over whether it was right for so-and-so to bring pork chops. But that does not mean that we are immune to conflict. As long as we have people of a) different cultures or b) different generations, we are going to have opportunity for conflict. And often it can be over the most insignificant things.

Not only that, but this passage raises some issues for us that I want to look at over the next few weeks.

- One of them relates to today. Is there anything special about Sunday. Is Sunday the Christian Sabbath? Are there things that Christians should and should not do on Sunday.
- Another has to do with the subject of judging. We're told not to judge each other. Are there times when Christians can rightly criticize other Christians or is the motto "live and let live" a good rule to follow?
- Finally, what about Christian liberty? What factors govern my choices when I am part of a community of believers with different convictions. This passage has been abused by those who want to impose artificial standards of spirituality on others. But it has also been abused by those who feel that they can do whatever they like.

Getting along with each other is a must. It is a must for the health of a church and it is a must for the reputation of the Gospel. So let me close by summarizing the three big points that Paul makes in this section that are to govern our relationships and are indicators that we are truly loving each other:

1. Don't look down on legitimate preferences and practices of other Christians who are trying to reflect a desire to bring honor to God in their choices. That is the heart of 14:1-12. Judging is wrong because only God is the judge, and we'll all be facing him at some point.
2. Don't do that which will cause a fellow believer to be tripped up spiritually. My freedom is not as important as the wellbeing of another Christian.
3. We are to be living examples of the way God deals with his children who have different preferences. He welcomes all of us without reservation.

Responding to God's Word

It was a year ago on Friday (5/11) that Phillies' center-fielder Aaron Rowand took off after a ball hit over his head and after making a spectacular catch, ran head-first into the metal bar that was at the top of the outfield wall, breaking his nose.

My kids got me a picture of the catch and there is a small inscription at the bottom. It contains his answers to two questions he was asked after the game. "For who? My teammates. Why? To win."

I love that spirit, and I think it has a lot in common with the spirit behind much of what Paul writes, especially here when he talks about the choices we make.

"For who? For my brothers and sisters? Why? For the glory of God and the sake of the Gospel." How close is that to what motivates your choices and behavior?