Romans 14:10-15:13 Sermon Manuscript

“Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing”

There was a church some time ago that got into an argument over whether they ought to have a Christmas tree at their Christmas programs. Some thought a tree was fine and they understood it in a Christian sense. Others thought “no,” that Christmas trees are of pagan origin and you should not have any Christmas trees. And so when the time came for the party, one group brought in a Christmas tree. The other group dragged the tree out. The first group dragged it back in again. They got into a squabble and actually some fist fights broke out at the Christmas party over the Christmas tree. Eventually, the whole thing was in the newspapers because they ended up suing each other. When I came across this story it reminded me of one of my fellow custodian workers at Grace Community Church, Jonathan telling me a crazy story that happened at a wedding he just came home from. It was a Sunday afternoon and I remember seeing a look of disappointment on his face and I asked him what was wrong and he said he just came back from a wedding of one of his relatives, (his cousin maybe?) but it turned disastrous after the ceremony because Jonathan’s relative got into a fist fight with another relative, tensions were high during that wedding and there was bad family blood brewing during the wedding ceremony. But you wonder when it comes to that church fist fighting each other over the presence of a Christmas tree if there was anything else that non-Christians could conclude but that the gospel consists in whether you have a Christmas tree or not?”

I share these stories because it is an example of not keeping the main things the main thing. This church had the opportunity to focus on Jesus Christ and why He came to earth, to save sinners. That relative of Jonathan had an opportunity to hold his anger and frustration at the other family member until after the wedding was over to talk it over in private with this person he had an issue with out of respect for the newly married couple and to preserve the air of happiness and joy of a new marriage. And yet, that church missed the whole point of Christmas in that Jesus came to save them from their petty squabbling. That man failed to see the whole point of being at a wedding to show honor and respect and have all attention be focused on the couple and not him. They turned a minor thing into the main thing.

Now last week, we went over what it looks like to love one another when it comes to the realm of your conscience and Christian liberty. And I tried to show in the first part of Romans 14 what kind of issues fall into the issues of conscience and Christian liberty. I talked about how the kind of issues that fall into that category are issues that are not explicitly or implicitly addressed in the Bible. Now I realized that what would have made it a little more accurate to say was saying that Romans 14 includes issues that are not explicitly or implicitly “commanded” in the Bible. And that’s the key word for this whole chapter, whether something is “commanded” or not. That’s why eating meat sacrificed to idols falls in this realm of Christian conscience and freedom because it’s not explicitly or implicitly commanded one way or another. But wait a minute… didn’t Paul make it seem like he believed the godlier position was to eat meat with thanksgiving rather than refrain from eating it? Well, not really. If you look closely at what the Word of God says, all Paul is doing in saying that was counteracting the notion that eating meat was sinful because it was defiled by idol worship. If you read the context of 1 Corinthians 8, which dealt with the same issue, you will see what I mean. Leave your finger in Romans 14 and turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 8. 1 Corinthians 8 starting in verse 4: “*Therefore, concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him. However, not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. But food will not commend us to God. We neither lack if we do not eat, nor abound if we do eat. But see to it that this authority of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak*.” As you can see that passage is not necessarily pushing the issue or direction over the other. There’s no “command” here to partake or not to partake (“*food will not commend us to God if we eat or not eat*”). And the reason why there’s no command is because it is up to the individual conscience of the believer. It is up to your conscience. But here’s the kicker…in this passage we are going to see that we have an obligation to not make our brothers and sisters in Christ stumble in what they believe to be sinful in their conscience….which is admittedly the harder task to do. Are we willing to forgo our rights and Christian liberty for the sake of not making our brothers and sisters in Christ stumble?

So turn back to Romans 14 and let’s begin starting in verse 10: “*But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you view your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written****“****For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, to Me every knee shall bow, And every tongue shall confess to God.” So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.”* Paul again stresses the fact of not judging our brothers and sisters in Christ in the area of conscience and Christian liberty. And He stresses it because we are prone to judge one another in those areas. The Gentile or Jewish believers who are ok with eating meat are prone to see in contempt the meat abstaining Jews and Gentiles as legalistic, while the meat abstaining Jews and Gentiles see their meat-eating Jews and Gentile brothers as licentious. But for both groups of people, Paul says, “you are not your brother’s Lord. As Isaiah says in Isaiah 45, it is to “HIM, to GOD, that every knee shall bow…not to YOU!” And every tongue shall confess not to you who judge, but to God! Matters of conscience are between that person and God, not between us and them.

Verse 13 “*Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather judge this—not to put a stumbling block or offense before a brother*.” If you want to judge something, judge this…let us judge that we should not put a stumbling block or offense before a brother! This is the harder of the two…last Sunday we went over how people have liberty when it comes to matters of conscience and issues that the Bible does not explicitly command. That’s the easier one. But the harder one to do is laying down that freedom or right for the sake of other people’s conscience, despite your right or freedom to do that very thing. Verses 14-16 Paul elaborates “*I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is defiled in itself; but to him who considers anything to be defiled, to him it is defiled. For if because of food your brother is grieved, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be slandered*…” And here we come to the most important verses of this whole chapter…verses 17 and 18 “*for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is pleasing to God and approved by men*.”

When we zoom out of our disputes and differences…out of our limited myopic human perspective, and see the church from God’s perspective, we will see that the kingdom of God is not about the business of sabbath days, dietary restrictions and what kind of clothes we wear, or the style of music we sing at church, etc. the church is about the business of the salvation of sinners. Christ didn’t die for food, or worship styles but He died for our sin. It is about “righteousness,” the righteousness from God that alone can make an unrighteous sinner righteous in God’s sight through faith. It is about the “peace” that comes from this being reconciled back to the Father through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. And it is about the “joy” of knowing that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus! It is about the joy of knowing the forgiveness of the gospel in which God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son so that those who believe in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. And it is a life that is marked by this righteousness, peace, and joy that serves Christ and is approved by men as a genuine faith. Verses 19-23: “*So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed is he who does not judge himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin*.”

Paul is not talking here about eternal condemnation, but about being found guilty of breaking one’s conscience. And if someone is forced to act against their conscience on a grey area matter and he believes it’s a sin to do so, then it’s sin because he is not trusting and holding onto what he thinks is pleasing to God. Chapter 15, verses 1-13: *Now**we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighborfor his good, to his building up. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.” For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through the perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God of perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, “Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, And I will sing to Your name.” And again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.” And again, “Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, And let all the peoples praise Him.” And again Isaiah says, “There shall come the root of Jesse, And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, In Him shall the Gentiles hope.” Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*.”

If you notice, Paul began chapter 14 with the command to accept one another and he ends this section also in chapter 15 verse 7 with “accept one another” making that command a book ends of this subject. And Paul reminds his fellow Jewish and Gentiles believers from the Old Testament that salvation history was pointing to and building up for this moment where the Messiah would unite Jewish and Gentile believers under his banner of salvation from sin, and when we lose sight of that…that’s when we tend to focus on our differences and it can lead to division in the church. And that’s why it’s Paul’s prayer in verse 5 that the God of perseverance and encouragement would grant us to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one voice, not differing voices, but with one voice we would glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. As I mentioned before this isn’t the easiest passage to understand, nor is it an easy passage to apply to our 21st century American context. I think in all this, the key question that will help us understand and rightly apply this passage better is asking this question, “if eating meat sacrificed to idols is objectively not sinful, but someone in their conscience thinks it is a sin, how is eating meat for that person a sin objectively speaking?” (And you can replace “meat sacrificed to idols” with whatever freedom issue that we deal with today). How you answer that I think determines a lot of your understanding of this difficult chapter.

And I believe the answer to that question is well “it’s not a sin objectively speaking.” If it was a sin in God’s eyes, then there would be a command to do or not to do that act. For example, it is objectively a sin to murder someone. There’s an explicit command written in the 10 commandments, “you shall not kill (or better translated) you shall not murder.” It’s a sin objectively to murder no matter the circumstances and no matter the times, it’s true for all times and all places. So whether to murder or to not murder someone is not a conscience or Christian freedom issue, but a moral command found explicitly stated in the Bible. But if it’s not an issue that we see directly addressed in Scripture and one where we can’t even find biblical principles from the Scriptures that seem to point it in either a positive or negative direction, then it is up to the person’s conscience to decide whether doing that is sinful or not, or beneficial or not to their spiritual well-being.

Now I tend to be a perfectionist and the perfectionist side of Teru tells me, “*but God I want to be 100 percent absolutely certain that every single conviction I have and what I do is positively, definitely not a sin in your eyes. But I can’t do that for the grey areas of life. Why God…did you design the Christian life to be like that where we can’t be absolutely certain on everything*?” God probably would respond back to me saying, “wait and see Teru. When you are in heaven with me, then I will tell you the reason why.” I think all of us would admit that this area of the conscience and liberty of the believer is a mystery to us in that we can’t quite grasp why God left it up to our consciences instead of telling us, “this kind of clothing is sinful, this kind is not…” this kind of worship music is not glorifying to me, but this kind is… etc.” We like answers and it’s just in our creatureliness to want to have easy answers to everything.

But I have a sneaky suspicion that the reason why God left the grey areas of our life to be dictated by our conscience is so that we can truly be stretched in our love and acceptance of one another despite our differences in ways of life and opinions. And I think connected to that, the fact that we are called to be people not divided over issues of conscience but that we are people who still fellowship with one another and are united because of Jesus Christ and the gospel magnifies the grace, glory, and power of the gospel than if we fellowshipped and were united with one another because we all liked the same movies and entertainment and hobbies, and we all liked dressing the same way, and we all liked singing the same style of music, and Jesus happens to be the cherry on top.

When unbelievers see the church, they should see the massive differences in lifestyle, personalities, and ways of thinking to where they think to themselves “how could they possibly get anything done together or come to any agreement on anything?!” But you know what kind of a response they should also have??? They should respond also in awe of the power and love of this Jesus these Christians preach and proclaim in being able to unite billions of people to preach the same old message from 2000 years ago; that of “Christ and Him crucified.” Bethel, let us be a church that is known to keep the main thing the main thing, that of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Let’s pray