

Now, About Those Who Differ 2022
Romans 14:1, 7-10, 15:5-7, 13 & 33

Romans 14:1, 7-10, 15:5-7, 13, 33 (New Revised Standard Version)

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.

I believe that one of the more wonderful blessings of following Jesus
can be the people we encounter, the people God brings into our life
whose influence helps to form, develop and shape our faith
through observation, experiences & interactions with them.

For better or worse the people we encounter do make a real difference.

Growing up, there were many people from our church and community
who cared and were deliberate in their teaching and guiding me,
directing me toward faith along of my spiritual journey.

Today I am most grateful for their faithful and caring support---
--- for I was blessed, nurtured and encouraged all along the way.

And of course the many writers who poured out their faith in books,
whose ideas taught and influenced my theology and understanding,
and especially those who helped by challenging me to go deeper.

And even those with whom I most questioned and disagreed with,
were critical in helping me clarify my own thinking by forcing me
to defend, tighten and support why I thought they were wrong.

It is important to recognize that faithful Christians do not always
read every Bible passage the same way or draw the same conclusions.

It is important, that as it turns out, God's grace is broad enough
that we don't all have to agree on every detail and perspective.

It is the faith we share in Jesus Christ that makes us all one,
and often it is in fact differences in our views and understandings
that helps us to think more deeply & get beyond just our own ideas.

As I studied our Romans text while preparing this sermon,
I thought about the many years I have looked out from this pulpit,
and how the Lord's faithful servants of this congregation
have so blessed & influenced my life, my ministry & faith
as we've tried to fulfill our mission together over the years.

Today I find myself remembering, appreciating and reflecting on
the many who have strived to live out their faith in this place.
Though many of them have passed on into God's Kingdom,

yet their influence lives on, a continuing blessing.

I still see their faces and commitment, hear their voices & council
as with deep gratitude I am thankful for how they each contributed.
I am convinced that God intentionally brought them all into my life
knowing that their influence would deepen and strengthen my faith.

The passage we read also reminds me of back in my college days,
when some Christians I knew decided to rent and share a house,
so that they could live together just like the early Church.

They agreed that they would eat together, everyone share everything
and were totally committed to living out the words of Scripture,
just like the earliest Christians living in faith-community.

And sure enough, it did turn out exactly as what happened back then.
Before long there were arguments, conflicts and hurt feelings,
disagreements, jealousy, divisions & struggles to get along,
just like the churches Paul addresses in his epistles.

If you ever thought that the first Christians had it all worked out,
reread the Book of Acts or go through the New Testament epistles,
for the early Christians struggled just as much as we do today.

Addressing the Christians in Rome, in the passage we read,
Paul is concerned about their disagreements and divisions.
It seems that some were very strict and rigid in the ways of Judaism,
and others were not at all... though all were trying to be faithful.

Some of them were more mature Christians – stronger in their faith,
and others were less experienced – weaker in their faith.
Their cultural backgrounds were different,
some were Jewish, others had been pagans,
some were wealthy and others were slaves,
some well-educated, others not at all.

With all those stark differences it wasn't always easy to get along,
**and nothing less than the gracious love of God through Christ
could possibly bind them all together as one in their faith.**

Listen to how Paul instructs them to handle their disagreements, vs. 1
Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

According to Scripture, there are essential elements of our faith,
and other things that are not critical nor made clear and certain.

Too often Christians have majored in the minors and permitted
differences of little consequence to override our unity in Christ,
issues hardly worth the people of faith tearing themselves apart.

As Paul explains the issue, it's not about us or our preferences,
but the sole and critical truth is what God has done for us, vs. 7-8,
*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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.***

Clearly Paul opposes their attitudes against each other, vs. 10,

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?
For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

That last statement used to absolutely terrify me --- the idea that everything I've ever done, or said, or even my most secret thoughts fully revealed right in front of God and everybody – Yikes!

The word translated as “the judgment seat” is very significant here. It can refer to the dais where the judge or ruler stands, and it's often seen as a terrible place of harsh judgment, of threat, wrath & punishment **following our mortal lives...** ... and the way some describe it, it's as if Jesus becomes an angry Rambo.

But consider how Jesus related to sinners in the New Testament, the stories of Jesus like the woman caught in adultery to be stoned, Zacc. the tax-collector, the sick and even the demon possessed. In every story Jesus treats them with patience and loving grace, and he heals their broken woundedness, and he forgives their sins...
 ... isn't that who Jesus Christ the Son of God is?

As it turns out the word βηματι (judgment seat) also refers to the place where athletes received their prize after winning a competition. It's a place of celebration, joy and reward, of hope fulfilled.

Listen for how the Kingdom of Heaven is described in Revelation 21:3-5,
 God himself will be with them; **he will wipe every tear** from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. ... “**See, I am making all things new.**”

That doesn't sound much like wrathful judgement and punishment, for in fact, it's describing our God **renewing what's been broken.** The Greek word for *new* also means to restore what has been damaged, returning to the condition of just as God originally intended.

We read in James 4:1,
 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from **your cravings** that are at war **within you?** ...

James is explaining that our **outward** hurtful deeds & harsh words are really expressions of our **inward** wounds and brokenness, and often our response to wounds and harm we've had to endure.

Internal brokenness has led me to say, do and think dreadful things, which will all be fully revealed, **and then resolved** for the purpose of gracious healing **made whole toward the good that God intends.**

Putting these Scripture texts together about what will happen, it is a picture of all the truth being fully revealed before God, but **the focus on our mortal past isn't about wrath & retribution.**

The point isn't to condemn and punish but it's to expose the truth, so we can receive the healing power of God's love, grace and mercy.
The purpose and final goal is to heal my sinful and selfish nature.

When we stand before God with all our deeds, words and inner thoughts, the point is to heal our wounded nature that has caused us to sin, so that we can live in the Kingdom of Heaven with no more sadness,

no more guilt, tears, regrets, pain or motivation toward evil.

I love that image of that wonderful and joyful gathering for healing,
perhaps among the many people we've known whose influence
has so blessed and so enhanced of our lives and our faith...

...the truth exposed toward renewal, understanding and gratitude,
maybe revealing secret things that others did on our behalf.

In Romans, Paul moves to a blessing of hope and peace,
as we welcome, encourage, affirm and delight in each other,
just as Jesus has welcomed and blessed each one of us, vs. 5-7.

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you **to live in harmony** with one another, in
accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord
Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, **just as Christ has welcomed you**, for the glory of God.

The truth is you can't have harmony from one note from one voice,
but rather **harmony is the blending of difference and diversity.**

So as we come to the Lord's Table this 2nd Sunday of Advent,
be grateful for those God has used to bless & enhance your life.

And as a practical application and soul-feeding exercise,
I suggest that between now and Christmas Eve,
that you might send notes or make phone calls of appreciation,
to those who have blessed, informed and enhanced your faith,
and thank them for enriching your life and walk with God.

Begin your message with this: **"I thank God for you because ..."**
and then be specific and explain the "why" of your gratitude,
and I'm pretty sure that you will make their day
with your Christmas blessing of thankfulness!

Paul concludes with this benediction of peace, vs. 13 and 33,
May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the
power of the Holy Spirit. **The God of peace** be with all of you. Amen.