

Pursuing Peace, Not Opinions

Romans 14:13-23

Series: Romans, Spring 2023: Walking Out the Truth

Preaching Date: April 30, 2023

Text: Romans 14:13-23

Worship: Walking in Faith

Key Sentence: Pursue what makes for peace and mutual edification.

Outline:

I. Don't be a stumbling block to what others pursue (Romans 14:13-16)

II. Do pursue peace and edification (Romans 14:17-21)

III. Pursue what comes out of your faith in God (Romans 14:22-23)

Romans 14:13–23 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.

¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. ²⁰Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

²²The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Pursuing Peace, Not Opinions Romans 14:13-23

How many of you remember Ken Sande? There was a season here at Trinity where Sande's *The Peacemaker* was a major teaching emphasis. The material is still good, giving techniques and attitudes that tend to reduce or resolve conflict. Sande himself did everything he could to pursue peace between individuals and in churches. I remember my first impression when I read *The Peacemaker*. I felt that most topical question teaching begins with a set of ideas, and then picks and chooses Bible verses to attempt to support those ideas. But *The Peacemaker* feels like it starts from the Biblical ideas and teaching and then builds techniques and attitudes firmly grounded on that biblical teaching.

In the decades since writing *The Peacemaker* Ken Sande has not only continued to teach these truths and coach these techniques, but he has moved beyond a narrow focus on conflict to a broader focus on God-honoring relationships. This material is called *Relational Wisdom* and he compares it to the secular concept of emotional intelligence. Biblical teaching is richer, he says, because it's three dimensional. We not only have relationships with others around us, but we have relationship to God, and also a relationship with ourselves. Relational wisdom is to be God aware and engaged with God, to be self-aware and engaged with self, and to be other aware, and engaged with others.

Last week we began to examine Paul's teaching in Romans 14 on opinions, or on disputable matters. Theologians call these adiaphora, and I'll occasionally use that term. There is, both in last week's text, and in this week's a reflection of Ken Sande's model for relational wisdom. When dealing with adiaphora, Paul requires that we be engaged with God, engaged with self, self-aware, and engaged with others, aware of the relational needs of others.

In Romans 14:1-12 Paul said one thing. It was so simple that if you were here you probably remember it. Don't fight over opinions. After saying this, Paul explained that we don't despise or judge the opinions of others but we do what we are fully convinced honors the Lord, because our accountability is to God. Notice the relational wisdom in those truths. Because of other awareness and other care, we don't fight over the opinions of others. But because of self-awareness and self-engagement we do what we are fully convinced honors God. And because of God awareness and God engagement we recognize that our accountability is to God and God alone. It is him that we serve. The same kind of observations can be made in this week's text, Romans 14:13-23, where Paul moves the discussion forward.

Our key sentence is simple: pursue what makes for peace and mutual edification. The outline is also simple: I. Don't be a stumbling block to what others pursue (Romans 14:13-16); II. Do pursue peace and edification (Romans 14:17-21); and III. Pursue what comes out of your faith in God (Romans 14:22-23). Let's begin with Romans 14:13-16 *Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.*

Paul had said in verse 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. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?” Here he emphasizes this again: “Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer.” Paul has some reason to believe they already are passing judgment. It may be that he has received a report from Rome on just this point.

This passing judgment, we said last week, is to play God. Because a person disagrees with me, I conclude they are cursed or subject to punishment. I conclude that they are “not really a believer.” I believe the worst about that person. Sadly I can think of several examples of times when I have believed the worst about someone just because they had a different idea on how things should be done, or how ministry should be run. I hate that, but it's true. One of the worst moments on the elder board of Trinity was a time when we passed judgment on someone for a perceived inappropriate behavior pattern, and concluded that person was probably not a believer and shouldn't be involved in a particular ministry. The person was deeply hurt. This censure confirmed all their negative concerns about Christians and our church. They left and have never really gotten involved in a church since. I was deeply troubled, feeling like we had passed judgment with no real evidence. We did try to repent and confess and apologize, but as you can imagine, the damage was already done. It's time to stop passing judgment on disputable matters.

Instead, Paul says, “decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” The two words “stumbling block,” and “hindrance” imply either intentional or unintentional judgment on a person's behavior. This is Ken Sande's category of self-awareness. It's easy to convince ourselves we don't have ill-will toward a person or their opinions. But if we examine ourselves more deeply, in the presence of God, we may identify the unintentional ways in which we are tripping someone up because of their opinion.

It also has his category of self-engagement, the discipline to “decide never” to put a stumbling block or hindrance in someone’s way. No matter how weak their argument, no matter how strong my case, I do not belittle or despise or pass judgment that causes them to falter in their Christian life. Finally notice again but this is a brother, a brother or a sister in Christ. The implication is that there is at least a basic level of agreement on the gospel. The central beliefs about sin and salvation, about the nature of Christ and the Godhead, about redemption and forgiveness are not being questioned here. When those core beliefs are questioned, it’s a whole new discussion. But differences of opinion, even when each is supported by Scripture, are not to divide.

Paul gives an example from his own life. “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.” For Paul there is no more need for kosher. He understands the teaching of Jesus and the revelation to Peter which we looked at last week, and the revolutionary nature of taking the Gospel to the Gentiles to rule out any scruples about what a Christian will eat. Even on the question of meat offered to idols Paul says “Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.” But he also says if someone, an unbeliever, says to you, “‘This has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— ²⁹I do not mean your conscience, but his.” In other words, don’t give someone the false impression that their idol is as good as your God.

In the case of a believer, if your brother thinks that meat or other food is unclean, then it is unclean to him. Something can be perfectly fine for you and a stumbling block to someone else. Again, notice the deep other-awareness and other-sensitivity implied by Paul’s words. I don’t think only of myself, but I think of how my behavior is going to impact others. That’s relational wisdom.

Verse 15 “For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.” Paul has pulled all the stops out in this verse. It hangs first on the law of love, Romans 13, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” If you love someone you won’t harm them by grieving them, even by causing them to have pangs of conscience. That would violate the law of love. Furthermore, Paul ties this command to the sacrifice of Christ. We have to remember that this brother or sister is one for whom Christ died. Did Christ love this brother or sister enough to die for them, and shall we not love enough to refrain from wounding their conscience? Did Christ sacrifice himself for her well-being, and shall we assert ourselves to her harm? Did Christ die to save him, and shall we not care if we destroy him?

The word destroy, by the way, is used for everything from eternal destruction in hell to the tearing down of a wall or of a city. In this case it's probably something closer to "tearing down." Don't "tear down" your brother for the sake of food or ceremonies or other opinions. Verse 16: "Do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil." Paul is saying "you don't have a problem eating meat; you don't feel compelled to keep the kosher food laws or the Jewish holidays, but if you despise your brother for doing so you harm him. So don't flaunt your freedom in such a way that it harms the weak or brings disrepute to the name of Christ.

Paul's first point is don't be a stumbling block to what others pursue. Don't pass judgment on the opinions of your brother or sister in Christ. Ken Sande would add "especially when you don't know the whole story. He tells of a woman named Anne. On the previous Sunday, Anne had dropped a prayer card in the offering plate asking her pastor to stop in and pray with her when she went to the hospital for some minor surgery. When he failed to come by, she called the church secretary and learned her pastor had been to the hospital that day to see another church member. "So he has no excuse!" she thought. "He was in the building and knew I needed his support, but still he ignored me. He's resented me ever since I told him his sermons lack practical application. Now he's getting back at me by ignoring my spiritual needs." After brooding over this rejection for three days, Anne sat down Saturday evening and wrote a letter confronting her pastor about his pride, defensiveness, and hypocrisy.

The moment she walked into church the next morning, one of the deacons hurried up to her. "Anne, I need to apologize to you. When I took the prayer cards out of the offering plates last week, I accidentally left your card with some pledge cards. I didn't notice until last night. I'm sorry I didn't get your request to the pastor!" Before Anne could reply, her pastor came up with a warm smile. "Anne, I was thinking about your comment about practical application as I worked on my sermon. I hope you notice the difference in today's message." Anne was speechless. All she could think about was the letter she had just dropped in a mailbox. This is an example of the need for relational wisdom. We put ourselves in the place of another person, give them the benefit of the doubt. We neither despise nor judge, and thus fulfill the law of love.

So far in chapter 14 Paul has mostly given negative instruction: "Don't do this. Don't fight over opinions." Now, in verses 17-21 he gives positive instruction. Pursue peace and edification. *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* ¹⁸*Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.* ¹⁹*So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*

²⁰*Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.* ²¹*It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.* Paul is at times accused of neglecting the kingdom of God, which was so central to Jesus' preaching. The truth is he talks about it quite a bit, at least 17 times as the kingdom of God, and many more by implication as he expounds the kingship of Jesus and the ethics of kingdom people. That's his focus here. The kingdom of God isn't a matter of eating and drinking. It is not a matter of externals. Jesus would totally agree. He often taught that the Kingdom of God was about the heart and what went on within us.

Paul's three heart level indicators of the presence of the Kingdom of God in our lives are righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Righteousness, of course, is one of the things Jesus taught. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied." We know that righteousness in God's eyes is the outcome of salvation, particularly of justification. We are made right in God's eyes by the sacrifice of Jesus. To hunger and thirst for that righteousness, and to find it in Jesus is a characteristic of Kingdom people. This righteousness is also part of sanctification. As the Holy Spirit works in justified people he makes their hearts more and more like the character of Jesus, more and more righteous and holy as his heart was. So the Kingdom of God is righteousness we receive from Jesus and righteousness we learn from his Holy Spirit so that we can be like Jesus.

Peace is also a characteristic of the heart, and of the Kingdom of God. Paul had taught us way back in Romans chapter 5 that "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." In the Old Testament, as we've said often, that peace is shalom, more than just the absence of war, but the positive environment of human flourishing, where needs are provided for, relationships are healthy, and hope is a present reality. But the internal peace Paul is talking about here is also shalom. It is the peace of God that surpasses understanding that comes when we give our anxieties to God. It is also the freedom from the pangs of conscience associated with failures in the area of eating or drinking or what days you celebrate.

Finally the Kingdom of God is joy. Like peace, joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It's more than happiness and not just a side effect of wellbeing. It is a joy in God and about God that transcends circumstances, good or bad, and leads to gratitude to God. I think it is this internal work of the spirit that allows us to avoid fighting over opinions. When we have righteousness and peace and joy then the potential of external circumstances to bother us goes way way down. And I don't think we fight about things that we are not anxious about.

Do you agree? We began last week with a list of things that have been divisive over the last several years: racial issues, presidential politics, COVID shutdowns, masks, vaccines, etc. I believe much of the heat in these debates has come from fear. We have been worried about potential outcomes and therefore have been easily aroused by differing opinions. But if we had more righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit we would not be so easily aroused.

Verse 18: “whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.” Once again that is a pretty strong statement by the apostle Paul. If we are serving God not based on external agreement with everyone around us but based on internal righteousness and peace and joy, we not only live in a way that pleases God, but in a way that is acceptable to the people around us. Do you know people like this? Sometimes the word used to characterize this kind of person is irenic. Not ironic, irenic, from the Greek word Eirene, peace.

I’ve been reading a spiritual biography of Tim Keller. You may agree with Tim Keller or not on several issues. We don’t need to fight about our opinions of Tim Keller. But I will say this: what appeals to me about Tim Keller is his irenic spirit, willing to discuss issues with a goal of bringing people together, not creating division. Collin Hanson, the author of the biography, has a whole chapter called “Disagreement without Being Disagreeable.” He shows what influenced Tim Keller, and it came as no surprise that part of the influence was John R W Stott who Keller calls “the most irenic man I’ve ever known,” and who has always struck me the same way. There is a peaceful way of going about things. The opposite is what I call “shrill.” If you send me an article or opinion piece and I come back and say “it was kinda shrill” you can be pretty sure that I was not fully impressed. But “irenic” I like. I think Paul does too.

Verse 19: “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” This is the heart of Paul’s positive command. “Do what makes for peace.” When you look at a situation where there is conflict, or there are differing opinions or disagreement, don’t ask “what can I do to prove I’m right” but “what can I do to pursue peace?” “What can I do to edify or build up this other person.” This is powerful. When you pursue peace and mutual upbuilding the odds of getting in a fight go way down. I’m not saying you give up doctrinal truth or anything central to the faith, but you do give up opinions. Ken Sande tells a story about a post he published. It had a sentence about marriage that was not well thought out. Several of his readers thought he was stepping away from Biblical teaching. One reader sent a harsh e-mail condemning Sande for this and ending with “get thee behind me, Satan.” Another reader sent an email that said “I didn’t know how to interpret your thoughts on when to accept a divorce. My impression has always been that you fight hard to save marriages.

Are you changing your position, or am I mis-understanding what you've written? If you have the time, I'd appreciate being able to discuss this issue." Sande says he learned two things from this. One is clarity. He didn't say what he meant nor explain by emphasizing his commitment to the biblical teaching. But the other thing was charity, or what he sometimes calls charitable judgment. We could call it "seeking peace and mutual edification." That's what the second email did and it gave him space to clarify what he'd said. The positive version of "don't fight over opinions" is "seek peace and mutual edification."

In verses 20 and 21 Paul restates his analysis. "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble." Don't do anything that causes your brother or sister to stumble. That's tough. It requires wisdom. Sometimes I need to challenge my brother because what he's thinking doesn't have self-awareness or other awareness or God awareness. These are times when he is already stumbling and I may be able to help him catch his step. But I have to have enough relational wisdom to see if the disagreement is over opinions. I need to not push back because I might cause him to stumble.

So far today Paul has said don't be a stumbling block to what others sincerely pursue and do what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. Finally, in your own life choices, pursue what comes out of your faith in God. Verses 22 and 23: *The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. ²³But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.*

These closing comments are about being comfortable in your own skin. Have you heard that phrase? It means "I know who I am and I know how I'm going to be and what I'm going to do and that's how I live." Except that in Paul's formulation it's not just self-awareness but God awareness. "I know God's will for me well enough that I've got peace with what he wants me to think and do in these matters of opinion." Verse 22: "the faith that you have, keep between yourself and God." You don't have to hop on every social media post to give your opinion on every issue, even if you have a conviction on that issue. Instead Paul says you're accountable to God, and you live out your conviction before God, not before people. This is like the teaching of Jesus who said that in matters of prayer or giving or fasting we should do what we are called to do to be seen by God alone, and not by people.

Paul calls us to integrity in this: “blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.” In other words, be sure of what you believe and don't put yourself in a position of doing something that you will later feel guilty about, second guess yourself on, or regret. This, Paul says, is the path to blessing, a rare use of the beatitude word by Paul. On the other hand, verse 23, “but whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Charles Cranfield explains this well in his commentary “[a person] may sometimes do something because everyone else is doing it. He may do it because he does not wish to stand in a minority of one. He may do it because he does not wish to be different.” Paul's answer is that if, for any of these reasons, a person defies their conscience he or she is guilty of sin. “A neutral thing only becomes a right thing when it is done out of faith, out of the real, reasoned conviction that it is the right thing to do. The only motive for doing anything is that a person believes it to be right. When a thing is done out of social convention, out of fear of unpopularity, to please men, then it is wrong.”

Let me close with an example from my own life. It's not a particularly profound example, but I think it illustrates some of these things. Back in verse 21 Paul includes the idea of drinking wine as one of these disputable matters. Many years ago I made a commitment not to drink alcohol. I made this commitment not from a conviction that there was anything wrong with a glass of wine or a beer from time to time, but from a conviction that drunkenness is sinful and harmful, and that alcoholism is tragic. So I came to the conclusion that I did not want to be an example to others who would find these things truly harmful. I stopped drinking alcohol entirely. My wife, coming from an Italian family does enjoy a glass of wine from time to time in company. Some of my kids too, in moderation. But I'm okay with that, and I've never felt the urge.

Actually, there was one time. When Gail and I were in England doing research for my book, we went to a pub had had a beer. First glass of beer I'd had in 30 years. I didn't like it but I felt that research for a book set among Christians in 1940 in England had to recognize that a lot of conversations we're going to be held at a pub over a beer. So I did it. My point is but there are times when you have to be self-aware enough and other-aware enough and God-aware enough to make a commitment on matters of opinion and stick to it for yourself without imposing it on others and without fighting about it.

Don't fight over opinions but pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. Paul will continue this thought and finish this section next week in chapter 15.