

“Table Manners”

Romans 14:1-23 (read vv. 1-4) ¹

I once read this exchange in a Dear Abby column:

“DEAR ABBY: There is a husband and wife in our church who drive everyone crazy. We live in a small rural area and most of our congregation are simple, modest folk. These people live in a neighboring town in a very pretentious, affluent neighborhood. They drive an expensive SUV and are extravagant in everything they do. Their children misbehave often, and the whole family acts like they’re better than everyone else. They are all spoiled, lacking in discipline, and seem to have behavior or emotional problems. Despite their bravado, they don’t realize that everybody can see through them. Maybe if you remind these individuals that God can see them, whether they are in church or not, they’ll know they aren’t fooling anyone.”

- MISERABLE METHODIST IN NEW YORK

I must confess that at this point, I felt some kinship with “Miserable Methodist” as I drank my coffee, having had some experience with pretentious folk over the years. I found myself remembering Peter’s words: “*Don’t be concerned about the outward beauty that depends on fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should be known for the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God*” (1 Peter 3:3-4). And of course I was inclined to put myself in this latter group. So I did some internal backpedaling when I read Abby’s response:

“DEAR MISERABLE METHODIST: God can see you, too. And God has asked me to relay this message: ‘Happy are they who tend to their own gardens and waste not their time complaining about their neighbors’ shortcomings.’”²

Five-year-old Andrew held his kindergarten class picture and began describing his classmates to his friend. “This is Robert; he hits everyone. This is Stephen. He never listens to the teacher. This is Mark. He chases us and is very noisy.” Pointing to his own picture, Andrew commented, “And this is me. I’m just sitting here minding my own business.”³

Oh, my! That’s *our* tendency, too, isn’t it? It’s pretty easy to look at other people and make a negative judgment about them, while regarding ourselves as above any fault. Many centuries ago, Thomas à Kempis wrote, “We blame small things in others, and pass over greater things in ourselves. Quickly enough we feel and weigh up what we endure from others; *but how much others bear from us we do not notice.*”⁴

When I think seriously about all this, I’m inclined to agree with musician Steve Green when he said, “My tendency is to only let you know enough about me to give you a good impression. **I am a recovering hypocrite.**”⁵ I think I’m with Steve. Can I get an “Amen”?

As we come to Paul’s letter to the church at Rome in our journey through the Bible, we’re focusing this morning on the fourteenth chapter of that powerful letter, where Paul discusses some crucial principles for life in the Body of Christ. While I’m happy to say that our congregation doesn’t have the same level of challenge with these principles that the church in

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 7, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

² *The Bristol Herald-Courier*, January 30, 2004, D4.

³ Kathy Plate, Orlando, Florida. *Christian Reader*, “Kids of the Kingdom.”

⁴ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 1418.

⁵ Steve Green, *Christian Reader*, vol. 34.

Rome was having, I can see myself in these verses, and maybe something I say this morning will be helpful to you, as well.

Paul uses two illustrations to make several points in this discussion, which actually runs from 14:1-15:13.⁶ The first illustration has to do with “table manners,” and the second has to do with the general idea of Sabbath observance; but the principles involved are bigger than just those issues.

As he begins his argument, Paul assumes that there will be differences of opinion about various things in the church. His point has to do with how we manage those differences.

Like most of the other New Testament churches, the church in Rome was composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers, and those believers were affected by their backgrounds, just as you and I are. Although Jesus had clearly declared all foods to be “clean,”⁷ some of the Jewish believers were having a hard time letting go of the dietary laws that had governed their nation, literally for centuries; and some of the Gentile believers were having a hard time believing that it was okay to eat food or to drink wine that came to the markets after having been offered to idols.

At the same time, some of the other folk in the congregation had no trouble with either issue, and these various groups were pointing their fingers at one another, using words similar to “old fashioned,” “tradition-bound,” and “fundamentalist” on one hand, and words like “liberal,” “leftist,” and “libertine” on the other. Is any of this starting to sound familiar?

In his comments on this matter, Paul clearly agrees with the group that sees dietary laws as no longer necessary, but he doesn’t take issue with those who wish to continue to observe those laws, so long as they don’t try to impose those standards on others. He repeatedly makes the point that neither side should belittle the other group and that they should respect one another’s viewpoints, giving three reasons for such accommodation.

In the first place, Paul notes that it is inappropriate to criticize another person’s servant, since that servant is only accountable to his or her master. Since we are all servants of Jesus, then, we are each accountable to Him, not to each other. (This is to make a point. He qualifies this quite a bit in verses 13-22.)

Second, since each person’s behavior and choices grow out of a sincere desire to please Jesus, our Master, we should recognize and affirm that desire in one another, not criticize it. And finally, when each of us stands before the Master to give account of our lives, there will be no question about what somebody else did or didn’t do. Though he didn’t reference this teaching in this passage, Paul may have been remembering these words of Jesus as he wrote to Rome:

“Stop judging others and you will not be judged. For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged. And why worry about a speck in your friend’s eye when you have a log in your own? How can you think of saying, ‘Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,’ when you can’t see past the log in your own eye? Hypocrite! First get rid of the log from your own eye; then perhaps you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye” (Matthew 7:1-5).

⁶ This part of the letter is actually 14:1-15:13, which can be divided into three sections: (1) the problem of self-righteousness (14:1-12); the priority of love and responsibility over personal rights (14:13-23); and the example of Jesus as the model for our own sacrificial living (15:1-13).

⁷ Matthew 15:11, 17-20; Mark 7:15-23

Hmmm. There's that "hypocrite" thing again.

Paul continued making the same points in verses 5-9, shifting his illustration to the observance of "sacred" or "special" days. While we don't know precisely that to which Paul was referring, he most likely was talking about observing the Jewish Sabbath and the Jewish festival days.

First Century Jewish Christians—including Paul—almost certainly continued to observe the Sabbath from sundown on Friday through sundown on Saturday, even as they also worshiped on Sunday, "the Lord's Day." Paul makes no objection to such observance, so long as those who wish to do this don't try to impose similar observance on those who feel differently.

It was not until I moved to Columbia that I saw how we American Christians have tried—and some still try—to impose Sunday "Blue Laws" on our Jewish and Muslim neighbors while we pay no attention at all to the requirements of their own worship and holy days. It seems to me that such "Christian Privilege" is not fundamentally unlike the "White Privilege" of which we are currently trying to rid ourselves.

In making this argument, Paul was most certainly not saying that "anything goes" once we have been "born again."⁸ He spent quite a lot of energy and ink and personal capital defending the essential teachings of Christian faith in his letters, and he didn't mince words while doing so.

His point is that some things are not negotiable, but they may not be so many as we imagine. A great many things are neither forbidden nor required, and we should "cut each other some slack" in those areas, so that the Body of Christ may be healthy and whole . . . and full of love.

Starting in verse 13, Paul identifies two more important principles, one for the group he calls "strong" (those less troubled by regulations) and one for the group he calls "weak" (those for whom regulations were more important).⁹ For those less troubled by regulations, Paul reminds them that genuine love sometimes sacrifices its prerogatives for the benefit of others.

As he continues his argument into what we know as chapter 15, Paul cites the example of Jesus as the Model for such sacrificial love (vv. 1-7). There, Paul seems to be thinking of the kinds of things he would later write to the Philippian church:

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness (Philippians 2:5-7). ¹⁰

Paul reminded those whose scruples were more generous that it is not kind to flaunt one's freedom in front of those whose consciences are not so free. Indeed, such "in your face" behavior

⁸ John 3:3; see 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 1:6-10; 1 John 2:22-23, 4:1-6

⁹ By "weak," Paul is not talking about those with a susceptibility to a particular problem, such as alcohol. While Paul is not here urging the "strong" believer to abstain for fear of leading others into degradation, it seems to me that such an application is consistent with the general thrust of his argument.

¹⁰ Paul continued, ⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!* ⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹ *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:8-11).*

is not only unkind, but might actually cause someone to turn from faith altogether: “If the Christian faith encourages that kind of behavior, then I want nothing to do with it.” Here’s how Paul made that point:

Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. . . . If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. . . . Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall (Romans 14:13, 15, 20-21).

Turning to those who consider themselves to be more constrained, Paul has a gentle, simple, and clear word: “**Everything that does not come from faith is sin**” (Romans 14:23). Elsewhere, Paul wrote, “*So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God*” (1 Corinthians 10:31). His point simply is, **if you don’t feel good about it, don’t do it.**

To say that another way, if we have any doubt in our minds, in our spirits, about whether some action is spiritually appropriate, then it becomes unacceptable for us to do that thing. Christians who are not convinced in their own minds that something is right for them to do—that is, if we cannot understand this thing as an act of worship, pleasing to God—then we shouldn’t do it. Nor should we criticize those who do choose to do it, so long as the matter in question is not clearly forbidden in Scripture.

As one example, while I myself am not a strict Sabbath keeper, even on Sunday, I don’t mow the yard on Sunday. At the same time, I have a Christian friend who always mows her yard on Sunday, because for her—though not for me—mowing the yard is a joyful activity that she finds worshipful and restful.

As another example, some years ago, our church in Louisville sent a mission team to work with a church in Denmark. Our folk were surprised that some of the Danish church folk drank beer with their meals, and the Danes were surprised that some of our church folk thought smoking cigarettes was okay for Christians to do. They got past all that, but both sides eventually found the cultural differences amusing.

After all, I expect that most of us, as the years of our lives accumulate, can point to things that we once thought were critical but now, not so much; and some things that we once thought not-so-important we now regard far more important than we used to think.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel frequently told his students, “When I was young, I admired clever people. As I grew old, I came to admire kind people.”¹¹ That’s the kind of thing I’m talking about. It’s been said that “We grow too soon old, and too late smart.” The keystone of Paul’s discussion is that true spiritual maturity is governed by sincere love and concern for the well-being—spiritual and otherwise—of fellow believers in the Body of Christ.

This example didn’t involve a religious consideration, but it makes a similar point to what Paul says in our text. Last year’s Rugby World Cup competition was held in Japan, and during that competition, Samoa’s national rugby team wore shirts that covered up their extensive tattoos. Tattoos are a significant part of Pacific Islander culture, but in Japan, tattoos are associated with organized crime. The manager of the team commented, “We have to respect the

¹¹ Harold Kushner, *Living a Life that Matters: Resolving the Conflict between Conscience and Success* (New York: Knopf, 2001), p. 5.

culture of the land we are in wherever we go. We have our own culture as well, but we are not in Samoa now.”¹²

These days, we in America have developed an ugly propensity to criticize, demean, and show contempt for those we perceive to have different political commitments than our own. I’m afraid we say things, write things, and post things about one another that erode the strength of our nation and diminish the witness of Christ’s Church.

David Holdaway tells a story about a man who went to see his doctor in a state of acute anxiety. “Doc,” he said, “you have to help me. I’m dying. Everywhere I touch, it hurts. I touch my head and it hurts. It touch my leg and it hurts. I touch my stomach and it hurts. I touch my chest and it hurts. You have to help me, Doc! Everything hurts.”

After examining the man, the doctor said, “Mr. Smith, I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is that you are not dying. The bad news is that you have a broken finger.”¹³

That’s our situation today, I think. Each of us has a broken finger—the one we use to point at each other.

Jesus told us, “*Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. Stop criticizing others, or it will all come back on you. If you forgive others, you will be forgiven. If you give, you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full measure, pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, and running over. Whatever measure you use in giving—large or small—it will be used to measure what is given back to you*” (Luke 6:37-38). And Paul added, “*So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing*” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

Well, we’re about to come to the Lord’s Table, and after we’ve thought about such things as these, recognizing afresh that we are all “recovering hypocrites,” we may find ourselves hesitant to approach the Table, especially if we remember Paul’s words that:

“anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God’s judgment on yourself. That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died” (1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

When Paul wrote about “honoring the body of Christ,” he wasn’t talking about how we handle the bread and the wine or juice. He was talking about whether we recognize and honor the Presence of Jesus *in each other*, whatever else we might disagree about. Those are the Table Manners that really count.

When Tony Campolo was a boy, his pastor had read Paul’s words before Communion, and afterward Tony became aware that a young woman in the pew in front of his family was sobbing and shaking, her head in her hands. When the Communion tray was passed to her, she waved it away and lowered her head in despair. But Tony’s father leaned over to her and said powerfully, “Take it, girl! It was meant for you. **It was for you.** *Do you hear me?*”¹⁴ And she did.

¹² Hardik Vyas, “Rugby: Tattooed Samoans don skin suits to avoid offending Japanese hosts,” *Reuters*, 9.17.19.

¹³ David Holdaway, Kincardinshire, Scotland.

¹⁴ Tony Campolo, “Why the Church is Important,” www.christianitytoday.com (May 1, 2007), excerpted from *Letters to a Young Evangelical* (Perseus, 2006).

The Good News, my friends, is that, hypocrites though we are, the Lord's Table has been prepared for the likes of us. That's why Paul concluded this section of his letter with these words:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

May it be so, O Lord.

Amen.