

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Disagreeing Without Dividing**

#### **Leaving Judging to the Judge**

(Romans 14:5-12)

Study #1

#### **Introduction: Living and loving - in “the grey”...**

Jesus’ followers take their marching orders from Jesus. They live by His commands. They live by the truths found in the Bible. That’s what we aim to do, here. Follow Jesus. Take next steps with Him.

From the beginning, Jesus’ followers have affirmed a few truths about God that are laid out in Scripture, that are affirmed in ancient creeds (i.e. - Apostles’ Creed), and that are affirmed even in our own church’s Statement of Faith.

We believe in God. We believe in the Trinity. We believe that Jesus is wholly God and wholly man. He was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died a sacrificial death on a cross, and rose from the dead.

We believe that all people everywhere are in need of forgiveness and eternal life, which God freely gives to anyone who believes in Jesus. We believe the Bible. We believe basic things like this.

We also all agree on certain things about life with God.

We embrace the primacy of love for all people everywhere. We affirm the worth and the value and the dignity of all people. We hold to the values Jesus affirmed about prayer and worship, generosity, integrity, and sexual purity.

We affirm the importance of a life of submission and service, the deepest submission being to the Lordship of Jesus.

All followers of Jesus will agree with what I’ve just listed. We affirm and live by the bright lights of God’s truth. We reject the darkness.

There is a throat-clearing issue in this, of course. And that is that there is a lot of life that is lived in the grey twilight between revealed truth and God’s silence.

The grey covers those vast areas of life where Jesus gives no explicit commands. The grey covers a large swath of beliefs that aren’t central to the faith. Many are important, but they’re secondary.

In the grey, you and I are free to choose this or that path. And you and I may choose differently.

So, the question arises: How are you and I to get along with each other when we choose different paths? What are we to do when we disagree with each other about secondary beliefs or when we disagree with each other about a lifestyle matter - even one with moral implications! - where there is no, “*Thus saith the Lord?*”

It is that question that will consume our time today and for the next two Sundays, because getting along while disagreeing is a matter of first importance for Jesus’ church.

*Orienting to our theme...*

We will inevitably have disagreements with each other about non-essentials. Our assignment is to look past these disagreements to love and unity.

As the Apostle Paul wrote, we are to be ***[Ephesians 4:3] diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.***

Paul had a lot to say about this very issue in the letters he wrote to churches in the first century.

He addressed it in 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and in Romans, where we'll spend the bulk of our time.

This theme - disagreeing without dividing - presents one of the greatest challenges the church faces today and one of the greatest opportunities for the witness of the church.

I mean, any organization can be loving when everybody has the same general opinions about most everything. But the expression of love and unity in the presence of disagreement hints at the transcendent power of God.

A few months ago, our Care Group decided that we would think together about this theme.

We were all sobered by the breakdown of productive dialogue in our culture in recent years. We wanted to learn how to have productive dialogue with each other - in the church - rather than avoid talking about hard topics, getting into fights, or separating.

We began reading a book together, discussing, learning. The book - Winsome Convictions - has been helpful,<sup>1</sup> precisely because it is based on what Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans.<sup>2</sup>

*Orienting to Romans...*

At the beginning of Romans 14, Paul introduces us to the idea that it is normal for Christians to NOT be in lock step with each other about how to behave in a given situation.

Take food, for instance.

In Paul's day, a pressing issue was, "*Should a Christian eat meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols?*" Paul's answer was a rock-solid, "*Maybe...*"

Some people - those he called "weak" - avoided eating meat sacrificed to idols because they weren't confident that they were free to do so. Scripture didn't say they couldn't. But they weren't sure. So, they didn't eat. The weak have sensitive consciences. They will often restrict themselves from doing things they are actually free to do.

Others - he calls them "strong" - knew that they were free to do whatever Scripture doesn't prohibit. So, they went ahead and ate.

Paul says that both were perfectly fine decisions. Neither was necessarily more moral or spiritual than the other.

Paul continues, providing a new "for instance." He shifts from talking about food to talking about days. The topic now is, "*What days should a Christian recognize as holy to the Lord?*"<sup>3</sup>

### **Diversity of Opinion, Under the Lordship of Christ (vv. 5-9)**

#### **The Importance of Conviction (v. 5)**

*The issue: To observe a day or not (v. 5a)*

***[5a] One person values one day over another, another values every day the same.***

Here again is an issue about which Christians might disagree. And the mention of "special days" brings to mind the Jewish teaching about the Sabbath.

The fourth of the Ten Commandments said that the Jews were to work for six days and then rest on the seventh day.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Winsome Convictions: Disagreeing without Dividing the Church by Richard Langer and Tim Muelhoff. I highly recommend this book.

<sup>2</sup> This (14:1-15:7) is a major section of Romans. There are points of contact between this section and 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and 10:23-33, Galatians. 4:10-11, and Colossians 2:16-17 and 20-23.

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<sup>3</sup> In addition to Sabbath concerns, Paul's concern about days here also would have had to do with the observance, or not, of special days of the Old Testament ceremonial law. He may have also had in mind Gentile holidays.

The Sabbath was God's gracious gift to His people, so the Jews were serious about honoring the Sabbath Day (Saturday).

Frequently, one of the biggest changes for a Jew who came to faith in Jesus was the change of the day of worship from Saturday (the Sabbath) to Sunday. That changed because Jesus's empty tomb was discovered on a Sunday morning.

Well, when Paul wrote to the church at Rome, some Jewish Christians still felt that honoring the Sabbath - Friday evening until sundown on Saturday - was important.

So, these Jewish Christians continued to worship God on Saturday rather than on Sunday, because, well, the Jews had always worshipped on the Sabbath.

Other Christians understood that they were free from the Mosaic Law and were free to worship on Resurrection Day (Sunday).

These two groups disagreed. There were two "camps." Which one was right?

Before answering that, we listen as Paul writes, "**another values every day the same.**" (v. 5) Here's another way of looking at things. Some Christians viewed every day as special to the Lord. For these believers, it didn't matter when you gathered for worship.<sup>5</sup>

Today in San Antonio, most churches meet on Sunday. But there are lots of churches that hold services on Saturday. There are Jewish Christian fellowships that meet on Friday evening.

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<sup>4</sup> In Exodus 20, the rationale given for the Sabbath is that God rested on the seventh day of creation. When Moses repeats the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5, the reason given for taking a Sabbath rest is that the people of God never had a day off when they were enslaved in Egypt. I find it interesting that the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in some form in the New Testament is the commandment to keep the Sabbath.

<sup>5</sup> Paul would never have said what he says here about days or food, had he been living the life of a righteous Jew under the Mosaic Law. This is a uniquely Christian discussion.

And at least one church I know of used to hold services (pre-pandemic) on Monday night.

So, who's right? The Sabbath worshippers? The Sunday worshippers? The any-old-day-works worshippers?

There were - and are - lots of opinions. That can be confusing. And Paul wants us to know that the issue - what's the correct day for worship? - really isn't the issue.

And if the issue is not the issue, then what is the issue?

What are the essential guiding truths we need to keep in mind when it comes to when we should gather for worship? What are the guiding principles when we have to make decisions about other things where Scripture doesn't make things crystal clear?

In what follows we discover that there are two key ideas that are to govern both our decision-making process AND our dealings with each other, when we are living in the grey.

First, when we are confronted with a lifestyle issue where Scripture is silent or vague, we are each to develop personal convictions before God.

(Again, to be clear, this "acceptance" is not about issues where the Bible is explicit and clear. You may have an opinion that stealing is OK, but that opinion is not OK, because the Bible says that stealing is sin.)

*The issues behind the issue (v. 5b)*

***[5b]...Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.***

### Personal conviction

Whatever path you choose to follow regarding a practice that is not addressed by the Bible, you are to choose that path because you have personally become convinced that path is right for you.

It's *interesting* to know what everybody else thinks, but that's not the essential thing. It can be *helpful* to know how things are usually done, but that's not essential.

But the essential thing is that we each prayerfully think things through and reach a personal conviction.

So far, we've looked at a couple of first century examples. What about 2022?

Well, here are some issues we may face in 2022, where the Bible doesn't give explicit guidance. In these - and in many other matters - we must each come to our own convictions.

- The Bible says very little about social media. So, what level of involvement will you decide to have with Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok?
- Same with movies. What kinds of movies will you watch?
- The Bible is silent about public, private, charter, and home-schooling options. Which will you choose for your school-aged kids?
- How much of your money will you give to support what God is doing in the world through our church or missions or other agencies? (The Bible is not specific about this. Really. It isn't.)
- What ministry involvement will you pursue? (No one can do it all, so we've all got to learn to say both "Yes" and "No")
- What kind of a car will you drive? (How new? All the bells and whistles?)
- In what sort of home will you live? (Square footage? Price tag?)
- Then, there are public policy issues, covid issues, politics, non-essential (but important) doctrine - and on and on we could go.

No verse in the Bible will tell us, "Drive a Ford" or "Boycott Snapchat." So how do we come to a place of conviction on these important issues?

Well, we'll consider a variety of things: what we like and don't like, our station of life, our personal history.

We'll also consider biblical principles that we can bring to bear on our decision. We'll want to get wise counsel from people we respect.

Then, after reflection, study, and prayer, we eventually become convinced that "Plan A" is the wisest and most God-honoring path for us to follow in this or that realm of life. Plan "A" is the plan that sets us free to a courageous, joy-filled life before God.

But if you adopt Plan A, know for certain that some of your Christian brothers and sisters won't.

Some of them will adopt "B" or "C" or even "D" when it comes to how to deal with social media, schooling options, and more.

Paul says that you who hold to "A" are to graciously "*accept*"<sup>6</sup> others who disagree and have come to their own, different convictions.

#### Loving acceptance

I am not to hold up my own convictions on matters where the Bible is not clear as the universal standard for all Christians. Neither are you to hold up your convictions as normative for all believers.

I am duty-bound to develop, before God, my own convictions. Same for you. We are not to force our convictions on each other.

Instead, we are to give each other freedom to think and to process so that we can all come to our own personal convictions before the Lord.

Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to love each other while some of them ate meat, and others didn't. The hope was that those who worshipped on the Sabbath (Saturday) would respect those who worshipped on Sunday.

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<sup>6</sup> In ancient times this word we translate "accept" was what you did when you welcomed someone into your home or into your closest circle of friends. It is an open-armed, hold nothing back, loving embrace.

And the hope, here at Northwest, is that we will accept each other despite our diverse convictions about matters where there is no clear, *“Thus saith the Lord.”*

We are different, so we’ll see things differently. But it is helpful to realize that very often, the issue is not the issue. The most pressing issues are **personal conviction** and **loving acceptance**.

Loving acceptance of people who see things differently. Loving acceptance of people who disagree. Loving acceptance of those whose convictions are opposite your own.

We could say that **loving acceptance** is to be our default setting in the Body of Christ.

Listen to Paul describe his default setting when it comes to how he views the behavior of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

### **Living under the Lordship of Christ (vv. 6-9)**

*A “default position” of acceptance (vv. 6-8)*

***[6] The one who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and the one who eats, does so with regard to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and the one who does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat, and he gives thanks to God. [7] For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; [8] for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.***

#### We will choose to believe the best

I love Paul’s confident tone. He takes it for granted that his brothers and sisters have developed their convictions in light of the Lordship of Jesus. His default position is to assume the best.

As I was reflecting on Paul’s confidence, my mind drifted over to another of his writings. There is a passage that contains a phrase that used to trouble me.

In 1 Corinthians 13, he wrote and love, and included these words, ***“[7] [love] keeps every confidence, it BELIEVES ALL THINGS, hopes all things, endures all things...”***

Have you ever wondered what Paul meant when he said that love ***“believes all things”***?

It might sound like he was saying that the one who loves is the ultimate simpleton, believing everything he reads in The Babylon Bee or in The Onion, falling for every scam that comes down the pike, gullible to the max?

(By the way, did you know that they removed the word “gullible” from the dictionary...?)

Nope. He didn’t mean that. So, if love ***“believes all things,”*** doesn’t imply gullibility, what does it mean?

I think ***“believes all things”*** illustrates what we have just read in Romans. Paul’s default opinion is a picture of *“believing all [good] things”* about why his brothers and sisters have come to the convictions they have.

#### We choose hope over cynicism

Try this on for size:

Assume that your brother / sister who disagrees with you about a matter of conviction, is walking with the Lord.

Your default setting is to believe that your Christian friends are following Jesus into deeper and deeper discipleship - unless you have hard evidence to the contrary.

Fight the temptation to think that someone who has a different conviction from your own clearly doesn’t love Jesus.

This default position of assuming the best doesn’t make us naïve or gullible. It simply requires that we exercise the grace of HOPE. We dare to hope for the best when we see differences.

Now, will our hopes sometimes be dashed? Yep.

Sadly, we will sometimes be disappointed. To choose to hope the best, to ***“believe all things”*** opens us up to the possibility of grave disappointment.

But I believe that it is infinitely better to hope and be disappointed than to cynically expect the worst.

And there’s one more thing. I think it’s about the most exciting, challenging, risky, and productive part of our look at Romans today.

We are to talk. Not talk TO or AT or ABOUT each other. We are to talk WITH each other.

We will agree to talk WITH each other

We don’t attack.<sup>7</sup> But when we come to different convictions in the grey zone, we will speak to each other as friends. We are family. We speak lovingly, respectfully - and honestly.

You approach your brother or sister with something like this: *“So, I see that your conviction on ‘x’ (movies, social media, schooling option, etc.) is different from mine. I would love to hear how you arrived at your conviction. Tell me about it. I’ll tell you how I arrived at my own conviction.”*

When I hear how my friend arrived at his convictions, I’ll learn about him and from him. Both of those are wins.

When we talk with each other, we may become aware of blind spots we didn’t even know we had. I might re-think my convictions based on what you tell me about how you arrived at yours. I might change one of my convictions and adopt a more God-honoring view.

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<sup>7</sup> Imagine how productive it will be when you approach someone who has a different conviction than you on some grey area with this: *“Hey bro, I’ve noticed that you and I have come to different convictions about ‘x.’ By your conviction I can see that you are clearly not submitting to Jesus!”*

There is a world of benefits to speaking WITH each other, non-defensively, about our differing convictions.

Paul is calling us to arrive at our own personal convictions and he is calling us to lovingly accept each other. When we pursue both of these, the pressure to go witch-hunting dissipates.

We can agree to disagree, love and serve together, accept one another - all in submission to the One who is Lord of all.

*Our Lord - The one and only Lord of all! (v. 9)*

***[9] For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.***

One day, when Jesus returns to the earth, everyone will see that He is Lord. Until then, His Lordship is exercised in the church - in the community of those He has saved.

His Lordship is most evident when we, His subjects, love each other *despite* our differences. So, what must we each do?

We must each learn to identify what is a biblical mandate and what is a matter of personal conviction.

We must each come to convictions before God that what we are doing is right for us at this time in light of Scripture.

We must not try to press each other into a particular mold.

We must each lovingly accept those who approach things differently from the way we approach things.

After all, it is not our place to judge.

Judging, though, is right for Someone. And in the final section of our passage, Paul wants us to think about a time when we will stand before the Lord Jesus (v. 9), who will be our Judge.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Highlighting the sobriety of this meeting with the Lord at the end of time, Paul mentions the brotherly relationships that we sustain here in the Body of Christ by writing “brother” twice.

## **Leaving Judgment Up To the JUDGE! (vv. 10-12)**

### **Judgment? For Christians? (vv. 10-11)**

***[10] But as for you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you as well, why do you regard your brother or sister with contempt? For we will all appear before the judgment seat of God.<sup>9</sup>***

***[11] For it is written,  
“AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, TO ME EVERY KNEE WILL BOW,  
AND EVERY TONGUE WILL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD.”***

Only the Lord Jesus knows the secret motives of the heart.

I don't know what's motivating you to do what you do. You don't know what's driving me to do what I do. Therefore, you and I have no business judging each other in the grey zone.

Go downtown to the County Courthouse and you will find judges dispensing judgments all day long. Men and women leave Bexar County courtrooms having heard, “*Guilty*” or “*Not guilty*” either from the jury foreman or from the judge himself.

The same thing happened in Rome in Paul's day. And the Romans who were getting this letter were familiar with the sight of a man standing before a judge awaiting his verdict.

That reality is going to be played out in the experience of every Christian after this life is over.

### **The Judge will Judge (v. 12)**

***[12] So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.***

On that Day, I won't be asked to give an account or an explanation for you. God won't ask my opinion about anyone else. Nobody else will stand in my place. Same for you.

We will each sing solo before God.

At this judgment, the issue will not be Heaven or Hell. If you have trusted Jesus for salvation, you are eternally saved. Period.

But at this judgment, the Lord Jesus will evaluate your life.

And the purpose behind this searching evaluation is to determine rewards that you will receive, or rewards that will be withheld that might have been yours.

He won't condemn you because there is no condemnation for those who are His (Rom. 8:1). However, He will reveal and reward you - and me - (or not!) for the deeds we have done in this life.

Sinful deeds, or deeds sinfully motivated, will be burnt up (see 1 Corinthians 3) and will result in no reward. Righteous deeds, faithful deeds done to the glory of God by the power of God will result in rich reward.

So why did Paul point us at this moment to the Judgment Seat of Christ? Here's why.

Since the Judge of ALL is going to Judge us all, we have no business judging each other for the decisions we make about matters where the Bible gives no command.

### **Conclusion:**

It would be hard to overstate the variety and diversity and distinctions you would find among the members of a first century church.

Members would have been free or slave, Greek, Roman, or Jewish, male and female, rich and poor - and from every broken background imaginable.

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<sup>9</sup> In other places, this meeting is referred to as the Judgment Seat of Christ. (2 Corinthians 5, for instance)

This variegated congregation's members would have had different opinions and convictions on every matter you could think of, involving faith, family, politics, fashion, music, art, food, and more.

And if you were a member of a first century church, you would not have the option of moving down the street to another congregation that was friendlier to your way of thinking.

For a long time, in any given city, there was a church - ONE church - per city. So, it was critical that the members of each congregation learned to love each other despite their differences.

We have many potential dividing lines, today, too. So, let's take Paul's wise counsel to heart. Arrive at your own convictions before God. Then, assume the best, accept, discuss, and love.

Our world hears nothing but, "*Blah, blah, blah,*" when we speak about Jesus out of one side of our mouth while we judge each other for our differing convictions.

But people will sit up and take notice when they see us who have come to different convictions loving each other and serving each other.

Paul held that accepting others' different convictions was so important that he included this extended passage in Romans and brought it up in other letters.

If it was important to them, it is important for us. If it was important then, it is important now. If unity among believers who disagreed with each other was a testimony to the truth of the Gospel then, it is today, too.