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Series: *Final Lessons in Neighboring*

Title: *Learning to be Agreeable in our Disagreements*

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Scripture: Romans 14:1-23

I imagine all of us will admit that we Christians aren't always agreeable. Sadly, many churches are well-known by the communities around them for being disagreeable and usually the things we believers disagree about are very silly.

This week I came across a list of the 25 silliest things church members have fought over. We don't have time to share them all, but I will share a few. And remember---this is not made up.

- One congregation nearly split over a discussion of the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard. Talk about "splitting hairs!" Bill, I want you to know that while I am pastor, that will not be an issue at RBC!
- Another body of Christ-followers argued about whether or not to install restroom stall dividers in the women's restroom. I'm wondering what they thought about stalls in the men's room---and if it ever comes up at Redland I want to go on the record as being PRO-stall!
- One church had a 45-minute heated argument in a business meeting over a decision as to what type of filing cabinet to purchase for the office: black or brown; 2, 3, or 4 drawers.
- Another church had a huge fight over the discovery that the church checking account was off by a dime. Someone finally got together ten pennies to settle the issue---which I think makes a lot of cents.
- One group of Christians fought about whether the church should purchase a weed eater or not. They wacked at that decision for two business meetings.
- One church actually split over the type of coffee to serve on Sunday mornings. One group favored staying with Folgers. The other wanted to get a stronger Starbucks blend. The Starbucks people ended up leaving to start another church. I'm thinking they called it: "*His House Blend Fellowship.*"
- In another church a dispute started when someone brought vanilla syrup to the coffee server station. Why? Because it looked too much like liquor. Word has it---the church was the one Beth Moore attends---and she was the vanilla syrup donor. I can neither confirm or deny this.

Funny huh? Not really. Churches lose their witness when neighbors see them fighting over ludicrous things like I've mentioned. When believers can't get along, the people around them don't take them seriously. This brings us to another "final lesson" on neighboring---the importance of our doing that---our being agreeable even in our disagreements. For help this morning I want us to look back to the church at Rome. They were facing potential conflict and Paul wrote to try and nip it in the bud. Take your Bibles and turn with me to Romans 14 and let's read about it beginning with verse 1 and continuing through verse 23. And if able, I would ask you to stand in respect to God's Word as it's read.

1 – Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.

2 – One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.

3 – The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.

4 – Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

5 – One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

6 – He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

7 - For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord.

8 - So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother?

9 - For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 – You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.

11 – It is written: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before Me; every tongue will confess to God.’”

12 – So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

13 – Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.

14 – As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.

15 – If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

16 – Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.

17 – For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

18 – because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

19 – Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.

20 – Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.

21 – It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

22 – So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves.

23 – But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Before we go any further, I want to give you a little background to help you better understand this situation Paul is addressing. First, I need to remind you that in the beginning of the history of the church—in those initial years following the first Easter Sunday—all churches were almost completely made up of former Jews. This was especially true of the FIRST church, the congregation at Jerusalem. You may remember that initially when Paul wanted to start a church he would go to the local Jewish segment of a city and basically help them to see that the long-awaited Messiah had come. He’d show them the messianic prophecies in the Jewish Scriptures—prophecies that Jesus fulfilled.

Well, that church planting strategy worked for a while—Jews became Christians and formed at least the majority of the membership in the very first churches. These early Jewish Christians continued observing the Jewish dietary laws; they met for worship on the Jewish Sabbath; they frequented the Jewish temple or synagogue, etc., because they were all Jewish. I mean, in spite of the fact that they had put their faith in Jesus, the dietary laws and Sabbath day observances were still very important to them.

Well, the Roman historian Seutonius tells us that in 49AD, about fifteen years after Jesus rose from the grave, the Emperor Claudius kicked all the Jewish people out of the city of Rome both Jewish Christians and Jewish non-Christians. With all the Jewish Christians kicked out, the church in Rome took on a distinctively non-Jewish

flavor with the people coming to Christ during that time all being non-Jewish and therefore having no problem with eating non-kosher food and worshiping on different days of the week.

About five years later Claudius died and the Jews were permitted to return to Rome, but the church the Jewish Christians found when they returned was very different than the church they had left, because now it was filled with mostly non-Jewish Christians. Another thing you need to know is this: the Old Testament laws did not say the Jews were forbidden to eat ALL meat—just certain kinds like pork. It allowed chicken, lamb, and beef—but according to Jewish law even this meat had to be prepared in a kosher way and since all the Jews had been kicked out of Rome then the market for kosher meat had dried up and I imagine the kosher slaughterhouses were all gone. So rather than eat unkosher meat some of the returning Jews just decided to give up meat all together, which is what Paul is referring to in verse 2. Think of it this way. Jewish believers in the church at Rome chose to become vegetarians much as the prophet Daniel did when he chose a diet of vegetables because his Babylonian captors didn't prepare the meat according to Old Testament guidelines.

So, in the church at Rome there were these two camps: Christians that Paul referred to as “WEAK” because they stubbornly continued to hold on to the Jewish dietary laws and still observed the Jewish holy days and the other “camp,” which was made up of stronger—more spiritually mature Christians, mostly non-Jews. This second group felt they were under no obligation to live by the old customs and laws because they believed that as Paul said in Romans 10:4, **“Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”** And as I inferred earlier, the members of the church at Rome who were **“weak in the faith”** were causing problems. With their legalistic mind set they were criticizing the Gentile believers for not behaving as they believed a REAL Christian should. I think their philosophy is summed up well by this anonymous poem:

*“Believe as I believe — no more, no less,
That I am right and no one else confess
Feel as I feel, think as I think
Eat what I eat and drink what I drink
Look only as I look, do always as I do,
For then and only then, will I fellowship with you.”*

And in case you missed it—please understand that the issue here was not an essential belief. This was not an argument over whether or not the Bible is the inspired Word of God or whether or not Jesus was born of a virgin or rose from the dead. No—this was an argument over non-essentials. Sadly, most church arguments are. Paul was dealing with relational difficulties that stemmed from an honest difference of opinion over what he referred to as “disputable matters.” In this portion of his letter he’s reminding the more mature Christians in Rome that as a believer grows, such that they allow the Holy Spirit the freedom to lead and guide and empower the, well, over time there is a gradual weaning from the legalistic approach to life. Over time, the believer becomes guided and motivated from WITHIN, instead of by the old EXTERNAL rules and regulations.

Here’s an example to help you understand this principle. When we were in seminary, Sue was hired as a nanny for the Joneses, a young family where both parents worked full-time in the family business. The Joneses had two children—a small baby boy named Stephen and his 5-year-old sister, Stephanie. Well, we developed a friendship with this family. I guess by now The Joneses are great-grand-parents! About a year after Sue took that job, Daniel was born and in those initial weeks and months Sue and I were SO SERIOUS about our parenting. We read all the books on newborns and we knew all the “rules of caring for a baby” and we worked to obey them to the NTH degree. For example, if Daniel were to drop his pacifier on the floor, it had to be boiled five minutes before he could use it again. That’s what the BOOK said! So, we always carried a sterilized extra pacifier or two in a zip lock bag. Well, about a month or so after Daniel was born the Joneses

invited us to dinner and with our eyes newly opened by all our “vast” experience in parenting, we noticed the Joneses were far too loosey-goosey when it came to their child care. Why—if little Stephen dropped his pacifier on the floor they just put it right back in his mouth!!! Of course, we didn’t tell the Joneses how we felt but Sue and I exchanged some knowing glances during the meal and I still remember our conversation on the way home.

We judgmentally talked about how lax they were with their child and how he would surely grow up fighting one infection after another. We discussed all the other parenting RULES they broke. In our proud minds the Joneses had so much to learn and weren’t behaving like REAL parents should. Of course, by the time Becca came along—we were just as lax as the Joneses. If she dropped her pacifier and we didn’t see anything crawling on it—we gave it right back to her. Over the years we matured. We learned that you don’t have to obey every parental rule to the NTH degree to be good, loving parents. But, in our early legalistic days we thought WE were the strong mature knowledgeable parents and the Joneses were the weak immature ones—when in truth it was just the opposite.

Well in a similar way Paul is saying that immature “weak” Christians are the ones who start out their Christian lives very mechanically, very legalistically, very RULE-oriented. They line up all the rules of Scripture which is a good thing—but they also embrace all the man-made rules of the fellowship and are critical of other believers who don’t. And, lest any of you “STRONG, MATURE” believers out there get the big head—the truth is we can sin in this area as well. We can embrace WRONG attitudes even when we are RIGHT. We can become judgmental and critical over the truth and our adversary is more than willing to use our self-righteousness to hurt our weaker brothers.

With that in mind I want us all to look at four specific principles that will help us when it comes to learning how to be agreeable in our disagreements about the non-essentials.

(1) First, we must remember that every Christian has a HERITAGE.

Everyone has baggage from the past that affects their values and opinions on things. Remember this when dealing with difficult, disagreeable people. Try to understand WHY they believe and behave as they do. One thing that helped make the weak Jewish believers cling to their Jewish distinctives was THEIR heritage—especially part of their heritage that had been strengthened in recent history. You see, about 180 years before Paul wrote this letter, the Jewish people had experienced horrible suffering at the hands of the Syrian King Antiochus IV. He persecuted them for their refusal to eat pork and to abandon the Sabbath. Because of this Jewish dietary practices and Sabbath observances became a kind of badge of loyalty for God’s people. One historian says, *“To abandon food laws and Sabbaths was to betray everything which had been most compelling and moving in the Jewish history of the past two centuries.”*

And he’s right. It’s no wonder they clung so tightly to these Jewish religious practices even after they put their faith in Jesus. Well, Paul is saying to the STRONG believers, *“You have to remember this kind of thing. You have to understand where these people are coming from and cut them some slack.”* Everyone has some sort of background that follows him or her like a shadow into the fellowship, and Paul says that in view of this fact, we must accept them anyway. In verse 14 he says in essence, *“I know that in the Lord Jesus nothing is unclean in and of itself. I know that. I know we don’t have to be meticulous and scrupulous about those things. But these weaker people aren’t freed up yet—so be patient. Everybody has a heritage. Sure—he’s putting too much emphasis on a small thing—but he’ll grow one day.”*

In other words, we need to hold back judgement on disputable issues—matters on which the Scripture is not clear. We must not argue over non-essentials. The Kingdom of God is so much more than being right over non-

essentials. As Paul says in verse 17, ***“...the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”***

And you and I need to hear this principle because even in our day we still have these disputable issues---these deeply held convictions that can cause division if we are not very careful.

- Should we home-school our kids or send them to public school?
- Is it okay for Christians to drink alcohol?
- Should Christians dance?
- Should ministers wear robes?
- Should ministers wear ties?
- Should Christians be compassionate Republicans or conservative Democrats?

And so on. Well, when we “bump into” a believer who has a non-essential conviction that we don’t share—we need to accept them anyway. I like how J. B. Phillips puts it in verse 1, ***“Welcome a man whose faith is weak, but not with the idea of arguing over his scruples.”***

Everyone has a heritage---so remind yourself of that before you get impatient or judgmental with someone else. Remember, UNITY and MINISTRY are much more important than DISPUTABLE matters! Who cares if Bill grows a beard?

(2) Here’s a second thing we need to remember. Every Christian will give an ACCOUNT before GOD.

Look at verses 7-8 and 10-13, ***“For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: ‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before Me; every tongue will confess to God.’ So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.”***

Paul is saying that it is wrong for us to judge each other on these disputable matters because we don’t report to each other in the first place. God ALONE is the judge. As I said last week, HE is the boss—not us. In short, Paul is trying to relieve the Christian community of the burden that comes from trying to determine who the spiritual all-stars are, based on these non-essential external issues. Paul says, ***“Some of you Roman believers can be rigid and legalistic and others can be loosey-goosey but it doesn’t bother me and it shouldn’t bother you---because every individual is going to give an account of his own life to the Lord some day.”***

And Paul is right! Remember—when we judge or condemn other people for their opinions, we are putting ourselves in the place of Christ. Hebrews 10:12 tells us that after Jesus offered the sacrifice for our sins on the cross, He ***“...sat down at the right hand of God,”*** — the seat of judgement. And in 2nd Timothy 4:1, Paul says that Jesus, ***“...will judge the living and the dead.”*** 1st Corinthians 4:5 says ***“Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.”*** In short, as Lord, Jesus is the only One who has the right to judge any person. Plus, He’s the only Being with the ability to know what is going on. He can see what we can’t!

I’m reminded of the story of two journal entries made by a wife and her husband as they reflected on the same day’s events:

Her Journal:

Tonight, my husband was acting weird. We had made plans to meet at a nice restaurant for dinner. Conversation wasn't flowing, so I suggested that we go somewhere quiet so we could talk. He agreed, but he didn't say much. I asked him what was wrong. He said, "Nothing." I asked him if it was my fault that he was upset. He said he wasn't upset, that it had nothing to do with me, and not to worry about it. On the way home, I told him that I loved him. He smiled slightly and kept driving. When we got home, he just sat there quietly, and watched TV. He continued to seem distant and absent. Finally, with silence all around us, I decided to go to bed.

About 15 minutes later, he came to bed. But I still felt that he was distracted, and his thoughts were somewhere else. He fell asleep. I don't know what to do.

His Journal:

Rough day. Boat wouldn't start, can't figure out why.

Well, Paul is reminding us that only God has the proper perspective to see and judge the human heart, and with that knowledge, He will judge all people in His perfect time. Judging is GOD's job, and it's not a job that he shares with the likes of you and me.

(3) Here's a third principle Paul gives. Every Christian must remove STUMBLING BLOCKS.

Look at verse 13, ***"Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."*** In 1st Corinthians 8:13 Paul puts it this way, ***"If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall."*** Paul is saying don't deliberately act in such that you complicate the faith of a struggling brother or sister. Stop doing anything that would cause them to stumble into sin.

My pastor in college was Steve Taylor. Steve was young and right out of seminary and the fact that he was young made the older members of our very traditional church suspicious. They thought that a preacher should be older, more mature, with less hair and more wrinkles. But the CAR Steve drove made them even more upset. You see, Steve drove a convertible VW THING like this one and many of the people of that church thought that a VW THING was just too sporty a car for a pastor to drive. They felt that to drive a sports car—especially a convertible—was just way too worldly for a man of God. So, when Steve was seen driving it around town the gossip mills started. Now, Steve could have dealt with this issue from the pulpit, he could have "looked down" on the weaker believers at our church and explained that the VW THING had a top speed of 55—when going downhill with a strong tail wind. He could have proved that it was anything BUT a sports car. He could have criticized them for their immature judgements, but he knew that to do so would have damaged our fellowship, and he knew that to keep driving his THING would prevent many from listening to his sermons.

So, he sold the car and drove a VW beetle HARD TOP instead, which pleased everyone but one guy who worked at the local FORD plant! Just kidding—Steve refused to let his car be a stumbling block to his ministry or a hindrance to our fellowship. And I for one loved his THING. I was sad to see it go—but he was right. If driving or not driving a certain kind of vehicle will preserve unity, it's worth it isn't it? If getting rid of any "THING" will open a door for us to share EVERY thing about God's love in sending Jesus shouldn't we get rid of it? Of course we should! We mustn't put stumbling blocks in people's path. And this leads me to mention one final principle.

(4) Every Christian must pursue that which EDIFIES and brings unity.

Look at verse 19 ***"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."*** The word, "edification" is a construction term that was used to describe the process of making a building stronger and Paul is saying that we are to interact—even with those Christians with whom we disagree---in ways that make the church stronger, and people stronger.

I remember going on a retreat with our SINGLES group when I first came to Redland and in the guys' dorm that night a dispute arose over some issue. One person said something negative about the other person—and immediately almost in chorus all the other singles, led by Gary Moore, shouted out, “EDIFY! EDIFY!” I learned later that this was a custom in that group. They believed it was wrong to tear each other down and when anyone crossed that line they reminded them by saying, “EDIFY! EDIFY!” They believed Christians should, “...*build up or shut up.*” And they were right!

Perhaps we should bring that custom back to Redland, because unfortunately many of us are much better at tearing people down with our judgements and criticisms, than we are at building them up.

I'm reminded of another anonymous poem:

*“As I watched them tear a building down
A gang of men in a busy town
With a ho-heave-ho, and a lusty yell
They swung a beam and the side wall fell.
I asked the foreman, ‘Are these men skilled,
And the men you’d hire if you wanted to build?’
He gave a laugh and said, ‘No, indeed,
Just common labor is all I need.’
‘I can easily wreck in a day or two,
What builders have taken years to do.’
And I thought to myself, as I went my way
Which of these roles have I tried to play?
Am I a builder who works with care,
Measuring life by rule and square?
Am I shaping my work to a well-made plan
Patiently doing the best I can?
Or am I a wrecker who walks to town
Content with the labor of tearing down?
‘O Lord let my life and labors be
That which will build for eternity!”*

Well, which are you—a wrecker or a builder? If you want to obey the clear teaching of God's Word and be less of the former and more of the latter—here are some exercises will help:

- Make a list of the people who bug you.
- After you finish, look through the names and find the common denominator. Are there some traits or attitudes that annoy you?

Ask God to help you get over this and learn to see these people from His perspective.

- Pray for the problem people in your life for two weeks.

I guarantee that your relationship with people who irritate you will radically change if you pray for them by name for the next 14 days!

- Ask God to change you. As hard as I might try, I can very seldom change someone else.

The problem is not people, the problem is more personal – it's me...and I can ask God to do something about that.

- Let go of grudges and forgive faults.

Release your grip on a grudge or it will strangle you. The longer you hold on to it, the more it gets hold of you. Is there someone you haven't forgiven? It's time to let go of your grudges.

- Restore a broken relationship. What one positive step can you take this week to mend a fractured friendship? Do you need to make a call and have someone over?
- Perform an act of service. Loving feelings tend to follow loving actions.

If you wait for the feeling, you may be waiting a long time. When you serve someone who bugs you they'll be surprised and so will you!

- Say something nice about someone to a third party, send them a note, or serve them in a way that they'll never know about.

LET US PRAY