

Reboot

1. Reframe Differences

June 6, 2021

Now that we're beginning to emerge from 15 months of Covid-life, our city is slowly coming back to life, people are remembering what it is like to be around others, and the gears of society are starting to move again. It's like someone pressed a giant reset button and we're all readjusting. Followers of Christ can ask, what are God's purposes in this new season? What is the Holy Spirit doing?

In this message series, we're going to take a look at the ways God can reboot us spiritually so that we are ready to fulfill his purposes in the new season ahead. In order to be in step with what the Spirit is doing, we will need to be unified as a church family. So, please turn in your Bible to Romans 14. Today we're going to look at how God reframes our differences.

I need your help with the message today, and you won't even need to say a word. Everyone please stand up and move to the center aisle. OK, now I'm going to ask you to indicate your choice to some either/or statements by moving to one side of the room or the other. Let's try it:

Which is better, country music or rock? If you think country music is better, go stand against the left wall; if you think rock is better, go stand against the right wall. (If you like a different type of music, notice I didn't say which music is best – just which is *better...*)

OK, next option: *Cats or dogs – which do you choose?* Cat people to the left, dog people to the right. Clearly we have a difference of opinion here.

Next: *Would you rather travel 100 years into the future or 100 years in the past?* That could be a discussion-starter.

Ninjas or pirates – which are cooler? Clearly, we're not all of one mind.

Now: if you say "Jesus is Lord," move to the middle. Now we all stand together! OK, you can have a seat – thank you for help.

Our nation has been through a very divisive time, and it even affected the Church in the United States as Christians have disagreed with one another over a number of issues. But I believe the Lord wants to reboot how we handle our differences so that we are prepared for the Kingdom growth opportunities that lie ahead.

About 2,000 years ago, the Christians in Rome were also divided over a number of issues. In **Romans 14**, the Apostle Paul wrote about how to deal with those differences.

He starts out: *1Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.* **Romans 14: “Don’t divide over disputable matters.”**

The church in Rome was made up of both Jewish-background believers and non-Jewish (or “Gentile”) believers. Evidently, some Jewish believers still clung to some of the religious convictions they were raised with, and the Gentiles didn’t have those traditions. That caused some friction. They were arguing about issues that were not at the heart of the Gospel; verse 1 calls them “**disputable matters.**” What’s a “disputable matter?” Disputable matters are issues that are not essential to salvation, and sincere Christians can differ on them.

Many years ago, I saw this a diagram and it stuck in my mind. It outlines several different types of issues. First, in the center circle are **Absolutes**. These are truths and biblical commands that are central to our relationship with God and embraced by all Christians. Examples could be:

- Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world and rose again
- We are saved by grace through faith
- The moral authority of the 10 Commandments

These matters are absolutes because they are the same any place in the world and in any era of history.

The next circle out represents another category of issues: **Interpretations**. These are explanations and application of scripture. When someone says, “This is what those verses mean...” – you’re hearing an interpretation.

The next circle out represents **Deductions**. These aren’t tax write-offs; these deductions come from looking at *several* passages of scripture and drawing conclusions.

Finally, there are **Preferences and subjective opinions**. These vary widely from person to person. As an example, let’s apply this grid to the topic of Communion. First there’s the *absolute*: Jesus commanded us to celebrate communion. He said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” We can call this an absolute because it is a command of Jesus and Christians at all times and places have celebrated Communion.

When we explain what we think Communion *means*; now we have an *interpretation*. Not all Christians believe exactly the same thing about Communion. Some say it is only a symbol and a way to remember what Jesus did. Other Christians say it is a sacrament and that Jesus is present in a special way. Still others say the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Jesus. Different interpretations.

Then there are *deductions* about communion. Some groups have studied passages about communion, church government, and leadership and conclude that only duly ordained ministers can lead communion. Other groups come to the conclusion

that any believer can serve. Some say only those who are part of their group can take communion with them, others say anyone is welcome. Different deductions.

Then there are Communion *preferences*. Some people like to take Communion with the packets of individual little cups and pellets of bread. Others prefer to take communion with an actual loaf of bread and dip it into the chalice. Some prefer a lot of liturgy when they take communion and others don't. These are all subjective preferences, which is fine.

Where we get in trouble is when we treat Preferences as Absolutes because *the further we get away from the center of the bulls-eye, the more disputable the matters become*. Some people by nature have strong opinions about most things, so they tend to see most issues as absolutes.

Decades ago, a guy made an appointment to me to see me in order to tell me that he was deeply troubled because in our Communion services we used bread with yeast in it instead of unleavened bread. He was not sure he could worship in a church that did that. What was he doing? He was turning a preference into an absolute matter that divides. He wanted communion with unleavened bread and assumed everyone should.

Our unity as the family of God is not based on having the same personal preferences or subjective opinions. Our unity comes from the absolutes of Christ. On the other hand, we also get into trouble when we make *Absolutes* into *Preferences*. Then we lose track of the substance of the faith.

One disputable matter the Romans were arguing about was eating meat.
Romans 14:2 *One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.*

In those days meat often came from sacrifices made at pagan temples. So, some believers felt it was wrong to eat meat that might have been sacrificed to idols. They felt strongly that they were standing up for the faith. They were suspicious of other believers who didn't see it the same way they did. Others felt like eating meat that might have come from a sacrifice didn't make them want to serve pagan gods. They enjoyed a good burger.

So the believers were dividing between those who would eat meat and those who eat only veggies. Of course, we don't struggle with that issue today. However, over the last 18 months we've seen other issues become flashpoints among Christians; issues like: who to vote for in the Presidential election, wearing masks and getting vaccines. You could probably list more.

But none of those are biblical absolutes, so, they should not weaken our commitment to each other. Christians can and do differ in how to respond to them.

Paul's message to the Romans was to stop judging each other. *³The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.*

The Roman believers were treating the issue of meat as an absolute. Maybe the veggie-eaters were threatening to start their own church: "The Church of the Holy Salad" and the Meat-eaters were going to rename theirs "The Burger Saints." I don't know, but Paul says, "No, this is just a disputable matter, not an absolute." His main point is that we shouldn't judge others who look at a disputable issue differently than we do, because God has accepted them.

It is easy to look at those who hold a different opinion than we do and think "How could they be so deceived? God is obviously not happy with them." But Paul says, "God accepts them." Why? Because we are made right with God by grace through faith, not by our stance on a disputable issue.

God accepts people who trust in Jesus regardless of whether they eat a burger or not. And God accepts people who trust in Jesus regardless of their stance on vaccines, masks, or voting. If God accepts them, so should we. After all, if Jesus is our Savior and Lord, we will be in heaven together for eternity!

⁴Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. We are servants of the Lord, not of a particular issue or viewpoint.

Then Paul turns to another disputable matter. *⁵One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike.* He could be referring to the various Jewish feast days or the Sabbath. Some Jewish-background believers may have said "God commanded to observe these days so every believer should do that." Gentile believers may not have seen the need.

Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Notice that Paul does not try to get the people to all think the same way about the issue. He says it's OK to have an opinion, as long as you are trying to honor and obey the Lord, and you don't look down on those who think differently.

Here is a key principle: think of others. *⁷For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.* It's not just about me and my stance. I am to take others into account. When it comes to a disputable matter, we are to think not only of our own interests, but also the interests of others. And ultimately we submit to the Lord who says, "Don't look down on your brothers and sisters."

*⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. **So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.** 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 sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? 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 acknowledge God."¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Paul told the Romans they will give an account of themselves to God, not so much about the disputable matter of whether they ate meat or took Saturday off, but rather how they treated their brother or sister who thought differently. That is of more concern to God.

¹³Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. Paul calls us brother and sister, reminding us that we are family. Since we are FAMILY, we make allowances for each other and we make that more important than our opinion about a disputable matter.

To settle a disputable matter, **Adjust for the other person's sake.** Paul didn't tell the Romans to settle their dispute by making the other side see your point of view. No...

*¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. ¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, **you are no longer acting in love.** Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.*

Paul was spiritually comfortable with eating meat, but if he was around someone who wasn't, *he didn't eat it.* He was more committed to showing love than demanding his right to eat meat. Love is other centered. The person is more important than the issue.

What if I said, "My mother didn't vote the same way I did, so I'm not going to visit her until she changes." You would conclude that I love my political viewpoint more than I love my mother, and you would be right. "Do you mean I am supposed to change what I eat because someone else doesn't get it?" Yes. Love does that.

I have a nephew who has severe peanut allergies. My favorite food is peanut butter. I eat a peanut butter sandwich most days. What would you think if my nephew came over to our house and I ate my sandwich like normal? If I served peanut butter sandwiches just because I like it? I could say, "Why should I change what I eat just because he is not strong enough to do what I do?" Because that is what family does. That is what love does. That is what mature Christ-followers do. Don't trip up each other over disputable matters.

17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, Some believers get the idea that the more issues they are willing to fight about, the more spiritually mature and discerning they are. Verse 17 says that's not true. God's highest will for our lives is not that we eat meat or not eat meat, it's not to observe a religious day or not observe it. God's call is to love and obey Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness; not the readiness to fight another believer over a disputable matter.

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. When it comes to disputable matters, the question is, "What can I do to be a peacemaker? What can I do that will build up everyone on what matters most?"

Romans 14 tells us that the Church is not a gathering of people who have the same opinions, it is the family of God that is committed to Jesus as Lord. **Verses 11-12** remind us that when we stand before the glorified Son of God who was slain for the sins of the world from before the foundations of the earth; when we are staggered by the brilliance of His glory and hear the thunder of praise from angels and the throngs from all the ages bowed down before the throne, it won't matter whether we ate a burger or wore a mask. So let's live with that perspective now.