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Getting Along With Other People Romans 14:11-19

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“Why do you **pass judgment** on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the **judgment seat** of God. For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer **pass judgment** on one another, but resolve instead **never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.**

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. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. **For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.** The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.

Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”

Paul’s letter to the Romans is the longest and most comprehensive of all Paul’s letters and the one in which he expounds for the greatest length in explaining his theology. Paul’s letters tend to begin with theology, with teaching about God, and then move to the application of that understanding of God in our lives. Romans 1-11 covers theology, chapters 12-16 are about more practical matters – such as how we are live as individuals, how we are to use our spiritual gifts, and how we are to act as citizens of a nation. In the passage from chapter 13:8-10 that we heard earlier, Paul says there is a larger obligation which underlies all that a Christian is expected to do. It is the obligation to act in love toward other human beings. Paul says this love of our neighbors is the fulfillment of the law. We are so accustomed to thinking of love as an emotion, a feeling, or what comes over us when we see someone we find attractive, that we sometimes have trouble understanding what Paul is saying about love. We know God loves us not because God has warm fuzzy feelings for us, we know God loves us because Jesus was freely given so that we could be redeemed and have a new chance at life.

What Paul and the rest of the New Testament mean by love has very little to do with emotions and everything to do with actions. To love someone is to actively seek to promote what is good for that person. I show my love as a husband, as a father, as a

friend, as a pastor, by actively seeking to promote what is good for my wife, children, family, friends, and sisters and brothers in Christ. To be commanded as we are by Jesus to love even our enemies means to actively work for that person's good and not harm. It doesn't mean our feelings for that person have changed at all, but love *acts* for the good of the other. That is the love Paul is speaking about, that is the love that is the fulfillment of the law. This kind of love ceases doing things that hurt other another person and does whatever it can to promote that person's good.

When we went through the prophets this winter we saw that they expressed their love for the people by warning them of impending danger. They sought the good of the people. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's love and how did he live his life? **He is a love that gives itself freely for the good of others, even to the point of dying on a cross.** Love is an act, not a sentiment, and it is an act that must be played out in our relationships every day, all the time, whenever we are interacting with others, regardless of what we are feeling. We even might say, the less we feel like acting in love, the less loveable someone is, perhaps the more important it is for us to act toward them with the love of Christ.

Author Scott Peck wrote, *"Love is giving your full attention to someone else."* Invariably when people fall out of love, if you dig deep enough you most often find it is because they have stopped seeking to actively promote the others good, that have stopped giving their full attention to the one they loved, they have started giving their attention elsewhere and promoting what was best for themselves.

Recently I came across an enlightening study about love. A group of professional people posed this question to a group of 4-to-8-year-old children: "What does love mean?" Although the question was not specifically related to our Christian love for one another, the answers from the children certainly show childlike love of the kind Christ taught. See what you think:

- "When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love." (Rebecca - age 8)
- "Love is when you go out to eat and give somebody most of your French fries without making them give you any of theirs." (Chrissy - age 6)
- "Love is what makes you smile when you're tired." (Terri - age 4)

- "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen." (Bobby - age 5)
- "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend whom you hate." (Nikka - age 6)
- "I know my older sister loves me because she gives me all her old clothes and has to go out and buy new ones." (Lauren - age 4)
- "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth." (Billy - age 4)
- "There are two kinds of love. Our love. God's love. But God makes both kinds of them." (Jenny - age 4)

Paul moves from his description of love in chapter 13 to some very detailed discussion about what kind of food and drink are permitted for Christians that at a deeper level is about the problem of self-righteousness and the harm it can cause within the faith community. **Paul knew from personal experience that there was a danger that Christians would make their experience and understanding of the Gospel the litmus test for every other believer.** Thus, among the first Jewish followers of Jesus there were those who insisted that everyone who wanted to become a Christian must first become a Jew and obey the law of Moses. There were those in the church in Corinth who felt that no one was truly a spiritual believer unless he or she spoke in tongues. Even today there are those who use one's views on certain issues as a litmus test on whether or not one is a Christian, even something like which translation of the Bible the church uses. The danger of self-righteousness lies in its tendency make one's own convictions the measure of the convictions of everyone else. Whether in the church in Jerusalem, Rome, Corinth, or America – Paul is encouraging us to act in love toward each other, to act for the good of others, not to judge others or to become a stumbling block to them because we insist they believe and live exactly the same way that we do, and that we love one another. As a church if we are to keep the main thing the main thing that means agreement on the **Essentials of the Faith** – our basic Christian beliefs, then we need to live out our own **Convictions** which sometimes means agreeing to disagree in Christian love about an issue or a topic. For example, Christians believe Christ will come again, that is an essential part of our belief, it is mentioned about 300 times in the New Testament. How and when that's going to happen is a conviction, it is not Hi-Definition clear. Convictions are impacted by

culture and experience, such as drinking alcohol or eating meat on Fridays. Then there are our **Preferences**, such as what kind of music we like in worship. **We are never to take our list of Convictions and Preferences to judge and measure other people's spirituality.** The Pharisees did this and unfortunately Christians in America are far too guilty of doing this all the time. **People tend to fight about convictions and preferences more than essentials.** If you are the kind of person who likes fighting over preferences and convictions, then this is not the right church to be in. If you believe God's message of grace and love is true and you want keep the main thing the main thing, this is the place to be. Getting along with other folks is easier when we focus on Essentials and don't give offense in regard to our Convictions and Preferences.

Paul is speaking strongly to the church here to say, "Don't let your convictions about Christian obedience become a stumbling block to others in the church, rather, focus on your responsibility to love others, serve others, and to get along with other people and to honor God."

There are few matters more practical than getting along with other people.

Sandy Snyder who is one of our Deacons, sent me an email this week which was a devotional written by Jon Walker titled, **The hard work of getting along.** It was based on Romans 14:19. It said this about getting along with other people, "If you have children, you'll know exactly what I mean: Some days you look into their faces, and you see the attitudes of angels; on other days you want to scream, "Why can't you just get along!" as they get into a ridiculous argument about who moved a toy 1/32nd of an inch. Sometimes these opposite attitudes shift back and forth six times in five minutes! But let me ask you this: Do you think God ever looks at us – we adults, believers in community together – and sighs, "**Why can't my children just get along?**"

There are dozens of reasons we don't get along with each other – with the sin of pride right at the top of the list. But I think another huge reason we fail to live in authentic, consistent, committed Christian community is because it's too hard. It requires real effort to work through our differences, to remain transparent and honest, to confront and to pay close attention to each other. Frankly, it's easier to keep relationships superficial, to "demonize" one another when we don't agree, to cut and run at the first sign of trouble rather than commit to each other.

Yet God placed within us a need for “stick-with-it” commitments; his commitment to us is unbreakable, and he wants to see us extend the same commitment to each other (2 Corinthians 8:5). But this kind of commitment takes time – something that has become far too scarce in our lives today.

God knows we will live in a healthy, Christian community if we will commit to living our lives together beyond our weekly meetings, if we will make each other a priority - sharing our lives over coffee, after work, at the ballpark, in the hospital. The only way for us to become a “friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24) is when we focus on the quality of our relationships, not mere quantity or mere acquaintances.

“You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.” (James 3:18 The Message)

Love is such a fundamental thing for Christians. After all, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." (1 John 4:8.) In fact, the expression of Christian love is to be such a part of our lives that it's the way other people can identify us! "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one another." (John 13:35.)

An article in yesterday's Cape Cod Times Business section yesterday included quotes from Dan O'Connell the state's new secretary of housing and economic development who spoke about affordable housing at a breakfast meeting Friday morning with more than 35 business leaders at a Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce gathering at the Radisson in Hyannis. High on attendees' lists of concerns was the pressing need for affordable housing.

"We realize that if we can't build that housing, we're going to lose some of our best and brightest in the commonwealth," said O'Connell.

Our church is seeking to show love for our neighbors by sponsoring the building of a house in Brewster. Take a look at this video that illustrates the impact that putting our love in action can have on the lives of our neighbors as well as ourselves.

We showed a video about the Habitat for Humanity and the work they do that featured volunteers, donors, and home owners.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” **Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.**” Romans 13:8-10