

It's hard to define "coffee" today. When I was growing up there was basically one kind of coffee that was sold by just a few coffee suppliers like Folgers or Maxwell House. That coffee came in a can, which we dug out with a spoon and put into a metal basket inside of a percolator filled with water, which we put on the stove or if you could afford an electric percolator plug it into an outlet. Today there are seemingly hundreds of kinds of coffee made by hundreds of different suppliers, which now normally comes in a bag or plastic container which can be made at home in all sorts of kinds of coffee makers – or you can stand in line at one of the many coffee houses that have been established in just about every town or city and place your order for one of the endless combinations available to suit your liking. You can choose from having your coffee fully caffeinated as opposed to "decaff" or "half-caff." You can choose to have milk put in your coffee, and if so - whether it be nonfat, low-fat or full fat or some sort of soymilk - or if want they will leave room for you to put your own milk in. The combinations are just about endless, depending on your preference - so much so that I feel kind of out of place when I just order a cup of decaf coffee instead of a grandé-decaff-non-fat-extra-hot vanilla-latte-without foam.

And so it goes without saying, if you go to a coffee house, you can just about get any kind of coffee combination that what you want. But, when you attend a worship service at a church on Sunday morning, you probably will *not* get that combination what you want – because we are the church, which is the body of Christ; and we are the family of God, and we are all an endless combination of different people who all have different preferences – which means none of us will get *exactly* what we want on Sunday morning or at any time in any way in the church, *because* we've all been called together by God to live out our common faith in Jesus together.

Today, as we continue to walk together through the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome, we find ourselves stepping into Romans 14. And its here, in Romans 14-15, that Paul finally gets to what he really wants to say to the church of Jesus Christ. In the big picture, Paul used Romans 1-11 to prepare the way for God's *general* instructions to the church in Romans 12-13, and now we will see that the apostle has been using all of Romans 1-13 to prepare us for the way for God to give His *specific* instructions in Romans 14-15. It has been said that the letter of Romans flows like a cascading stream into the lake of Romans 14-15. But the reality is that Romans 14-15 seem to be the least preached on and appreciated. I think that's true because when we look at any of the earlier chapters of Romans 1-13 in isolation, we can focus on our *individual* relationship with God. But Romans 14-15 will not let us do that, as here we will see that *God values our unity in Christ over own personal preferences*, by the means of our sacrificial love.

Before we start walking through this chapter we need to clarify three words. We will be dealing three different concepts today: *preferences, convictions and conscience*. "Preference" means "a greater liking for one alternative over another; favor shown to one person or thing over another or others." When we show *preference* toward someone or some things we are choosing it over another someone or something *because* we like it better. The bottom line here is that we prefer some people or things over others because those people and things give us pleasure, in that they make us feel good about ourselves and they fulfill our *personal expectations*. The expectations of our own preferences are the foundation, the building block, of our *convictions*.

A "conviction" is "a firmly held belief or opinion." The only place we literally see the word in our text for today is Romans 14:22: "*The faith (conviction) that you have, keep between yourself and God.*" Both contextually and grammatically the word "*faith*" here means *personal convictions*, in that the *context* is about a personal convictions that threaten the unity of the church - and the *grammar* of the sentence demands that our conviction is to be kept "*between yourself and God.*"

The apostle Paul deals with the matter of the personal convictions in Romans 14. Our personal convictions are strongly held beliefs and opinions – *but* that doesn't mean that our personal convictions are right or true. Because our personal convictions are based on our own personal preferences, our personal convictions are then tainted with our own personal prejudices and theories and opinions. There are some people who are convicted that a grandé-decaff-non-fat-extra-hot vanilla-latte-without foam is the best coffee to drink, but I am convicted that a cup of decaf coffee is good enough. Some people are convicted that taking vitamin C on a regular basis reduces one's chance of getting sick; while some doctors are convicted it's a waste of time. Some people are convicted that men are better drivers than women; others just know better than to make that statement in public. Our convictions can sometimes get us into a lot of trouble. But where we should not get into trouble is in our personal convictions about the truth of the Bible. We should all be convicted by Romans 3:23: *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

The apostle Paul deals with the matter of the personal convictions of *Christians* in Romans 14 – and most specifically about the *convictions that govern our behavior*. Conviction here is not as much a decision about *what is true*, as it is a decision about *what we should or should not do*. Christian convictions do not define what is "right" and "wrong." God's Word defines what is right and what is wrong. Convictions are not necessary concerning murder. Murder is sin; it is also against the law, both God's Law and human law. Convictions are conclusions we reach when there are no hard and fast answers, no moral absolutes. Convictions, by their very nature, are presumptive and conjectural, and so our convictions are almost always the extension of certain beliefs *we hold to be true* and relevant to a given circumstance. Our convictions then determine what our conduct should be in areas not specifically addressed in God's Word. Our convictions draw the line between what we will and will not do within our Christian freedom.

Its here we must take note that our Christian liberty – our freedom in Christ – is not about our rights or preferences or convictions, but rather about the freedom from sin and death we have been given by God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – so that we might humbly and passionately and sacrificially live out our lives for God through Jesus Christ. In Christ we have been freed from the condemnation of God's wrath, so we might fully live out God's purpose. In Ephesians 1:7-10 we read that: *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."* And so as God's people, the body of Christ, the church, we are to be about the business of *uniting all things in Christ* - by fulfilling the Greatest Commandments to love God with all of our hearts and minds and souls and strength and to love others as God has loved us; by making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that Jesus has commanded us; by fulfilling our Lord's call and command that we be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth; as we live in such harmony with one another, each in accord with Christ Jesus, that together we with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:10; Mark 12:30-31; Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; Romans 15:5-6).

In 1 Corinthians 6:12 the apostle Paul wrote: *"All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything."* The context of this verse is written in the same context of our text for today - *Paul again speaking about issues of personal conviction*. Within the category of *"all things are lawful for me,"* there would have been things which would not have contributed to Paul's own spiritual life or his growth or the life and grown of others. Paul would have had to decide what kind of an affect his own personal preferences and convictions would have had on others. This would be an issue of "conscience."

Christian convictions are matters of *conscience*. Paul also spoke about this in the first part of Romans 13 which he opened by stating: *“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment ”* (Romans 13:1-2). He then went on to say that we should humbly submit in obedience to God’s authorities *“for the sake of conscience”* (Romans 13:5) *because* submission to God and to those in authority over us is much more a matter of *conscience* than the fear of painful consequences of breaking the law. God’s Word tells us that everyone, Christian and non-Christian, has a conscience because God’s Law is written on every human heart. But for those of us in the family of God, the mere outward compliance to the directives given to us by those whom God has put in authority over us is not enough. God desires from us a much more humble, deeper, obedience from the heart a *conscientious subjection*—submission out of loving obedience to God.

This is the Law of Love we looked at last Sunday in Romans 13:8-14 where we saw that we are to obediently live out the righteousness of God we have received through Jesus Christ by seeing *obedience as a loving response* of gratitude in who God is and what God has done for us - and a loving response of joy in the law of God, the commandment of God, to love others as God loves us. Remember the Greek word Paul used for *“love”* is *agape* which is God’s faithful, covenantal love towards us, the apex of which is Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross for ours sins, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and cleansed and restored back to be with God forever and ever – and *agape* is also used in terms of restored humanity’s reciprocal love for God, which joyfully responds in obedience to extend *agape* love to others. The apostle then challenged us by telling God’s people that we need to wake up and get moving and do the things that need to be done. He then names six different vices that we will struggle with as we seek to fulfill God’s call for God’s people; he specifically addressed the first four and left the last two, which are most prevalent in the church - *“jealousy”* and *“quarrelling”* - for us today in Romans 14. And so after ending Romans 13 by saying: *“Let us walk properly as in the daytime . . . not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”* (Romans 13:13-14) the Word of God tells us today how we can address the issues of *“jealousy”* and *“quarrelling”* within the church in the context of a united loving response of gratitude in who God is and what God has done for us; and a united loving response of joy in the law of God, the commandment of God, to *agape* love others as God *agape* loves us.

The opening verses of Romans 14 clearly reveal that there was conflict going on in the church. The truth is - disunity has always been a major problem with God’s people. The Old Testament speaks of civil wars and family feuds among the tribes of Israel, and almost every local church mentioned in the New Testament had divisions to contend with. The New Testament tells us that the Corinthians were divided over human leaders, and some of the members were even suing each other; the Galatian saints were *“biting and devouring”* one another, those in Ephesus and Colossae had to be reminded of the importance of Christian unity, and in the church at Philippi, two women were at odds with each other and were splitting the church. Thus the cry of the psalmist in Psalm 133:1: *“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!”* In the times of the New Testament, most problems stemmed from the backgrounds of those in the churches: the Jews were saved out of a strict legalistic background that would be difficult to forget and the Gentiles came from a number of pagan backgrounds with idol worship – and as those two groups sought to live out their faith in Christ together, they often butted heads. The conflict within the context of Romans 14 rose up when those in the Roman church became divided over special diets and special days. Some thought it was a sin to eat meat, so they ate only vegetables. Others thought it was a sin not to observe the Jewish holy days. Now if each one had kept his or her convictions to his or herself, there would have been no problem - but they began to criticize and judge one another, as one group saw the other group as being unspiritual.

We still face these same issues today in the there are a number of “gray areas” of life that God’s Word does not specifically address. Yes, the Bible is quite clear about what is right and wrong in many areas of life – but there are times when we find ourselves dealing with issues that are not so clear as to what is right or wrong, which more often than not are the issues that cause the most problems and the greatest “*quarreling and jealousy*” in the church, – but rather the issues of preferences, convictions and conscience. Its here where God, through the apostle Paul, gives us His Kingdom principles to guide us when we disagree with one another.

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Romans 14:1-3

Paul opens by addressing those were “strong” in their faith in that they understood their spiritual freedom in Christ and were not enslaved to diets or holy days. The “*weak in faith*” were those who were still a bit immature in that they still felt obligated to obey legalistic rules concerning what they ate and when they worshiped. It is somewhat ironic in that many seem to think that the Christians who follow strict rules are the most mature, but we clearly see here that this is not necessarily the case. In the Roman church, the “*weak in faith*” were those who clung to following the Old Testament Law because they did not understand the true freedom that had in Christ. The “*weak*” Christians were the ones who were judging and condemning the “strong” Christians, which made the “strong” Christians despise the “*weak*” Christians. And so Paul told the “strong” Christians that they should “*welcome*” those who were “*weak in faith.*”

Why should those who are “strong” in their faith “*welcome*” those who were judging and condemning them? *Because differences in personal convictions are not an acceptable basis for excluding someone from being in fellowship with the family of God.* When we do so we set up restrictions, which go beyond the Word of God. Paul tell us here that are not to “*quarrel*” over personal “*opinions*” – because just as God has “*welcomed*” the “strong”, they are also to “*welcome*” those who are “*weak*” and have not yet come to know true freedom in Christ. Now this doesn’t mean each and every person in the church has the freedom to press their convictions or force their opinions on the church. God’s Word does tell us that “*all things should be done decently and in order*” in the church (1 Corinthians 14:40). We are to set up a system of authority and order and governance that is biblical and glorifies God and allows the church to fulfill its mission. And while we will have differences of preference and conviction on many things, we are not to create conflict and division regarding those differences *because* just as God’s Word is *gracious* in allowing differing convictions in the church, God’s Word is just as equally *condemning* when those differences of conviction cause conflict and division within the body of Christ, the church.

It is significant that Paul describes those who are “*weak*” are the ones who “*judge*” others and that those who are “strong” are the ones who “*despise*” the judgment of the “*weak.*” In a one sense they are both *judging* - as are both looking down on each other because they were both thinking pretty highly of themselves. In every church there are weak and strong, mature and immature, followers of Jesus Christ. The *strong and mature* understand spiritual truth and practice it, but the *weak and immature* have not yet grown into that level of maturity and freedom. The *weak* must not condemn the strong and call them unspiritual. The *strong* must not despise the *weak* and call them immature. God has “*welcomed*” both the mature and immature into His Kingdom and we are all, each and every one of us, to do the same with each other.

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. Romans 14:4

Here Paul condemns an immature Christian for standing in judgment of a mature Christian who understood his or her freedom in Christ *because when we stand in judgment of someone, we are taking the place of God over that person*. God is the only one who can judge; He is the ultimate judge of all. Our success in the Christian life does not depend on the opinions or attitudes of each other or others. God is the Judge, it is before Him that we will “*stand or fall*.” The word “*servant*” here suggests that if we are truly doing what God has called us to do, we wouldn’t have the time or inclination to judge or condemn other Christians. People who are busy sharing Jesus Christ don’t have the time to share their differences of convictions with other people.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Romans 14:5-9

The word “*Lord*” is found seven times in these verses. And with these words, Paul redirects our focus to cease from judging others in the family of God and concentrate on examining ourselves before God. In repeating the name of the “*Lord*” God’s Word is also emphasizing that convictions are not a matter of public scrutiny or debate; they are a private matter between each believer and God. We have no right to play God in someone’s life by demanding our preference or conviction be manifest in the church. It shouldn’t matter whether we do or do not practice a given freedom, but whether we are to exercise or refrain from our freedom so *as to the Lord*. “*For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's*.” Our first responsibility is to the Lord. If we would go to him in prayer rather than going to others with criticism, there would be a lot more people who know Jesus.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? 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 confess to God.” So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.
Romans 14:10-12

Paul now speaks of the pride of preferences and the self-righteousness of convictions that can cause us to judge one another – and he again emphasizes that God is the ultimate judge and someday we will all stand before Him. How can we prepare for the “*judgment seat of God*”? By making Jesus Lord of our lives and faithfully obeying Him by loving one another rather than judging each other. Rather than judging other Christians, we had better judge our own lives and make sure we are ready to meet Jesus. And the reality that our sins will never be brought up against us should not encourage us to disobey God by judging others. Sin in our lives keeps us from serving Christ as we should. Lot was not walking with God as was his uncle, Abraham, and he lost his testimony even with his own family. When judgment finally came, Lot was spared fire and brimstone, but everything he lived for was burned up. Our lives on earth do count; we will have to give an account of ourselves to God regarding our attitudes and actions in this life.

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. 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. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. Romans 14:13-15

Everything we think, say and do affects each other and others. Choices we make can cause others to stumble, hurt, or fall. We must not use our freedom in Christ if it causes someone to stumble. Those who are strong in their faith should practice sacrificial agape love in making loving decisions that might affect others - and those who are weak in their faith need to lovingly consider showing sacrificial agape love in their judgement of others. Both the strong and the weak should consider Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 8:1 "*knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*" and 1 Corinthians 10:31: "*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*"

So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Romans 14:16-18

Because the body of Christ has a history of majoring in the minors, we need to remember what is truly important. Not the *externals*, but the *eternals* must be first in our lives. When the Holy Spirit is truly preeminent and working in our midst we will know God's righteousness, peace, and joy. When we each yield to the Spirit and major in a love we will not have quarrels and jealousy over major or minor matters. When Jesus is our priority, we will be united in love.

So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. Romans 14:19-21

We need each other to grow in our walk of faith with Jesus. Both strong believers and weak believers need to grow in love and grace. Since we are still all work in progress, must lovingly be forgiving and patient with each other. But if we truly love God and love each other as God loves us, we will not do anything that will hurt any of us when we have a weak conscience.

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Romans 14:22-23

Spiritually mature Christians do not force their convictions onto others. Yes, there are certain truths that all Christians must accept because they are the foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ. But areas of honest disagreement about issues which Scripture does not clearly address must not be made a test of fellowship. While the possession of one's convictions is personal and private, the practice of our freedom in Christ is not. Therefore, while we are urged to hold our convictions firmly, we are also not urged to practice every freedom that our convictions allow. We are instead to keep such convictions between ourselves and God because our Christian convictions are necessary because of the grace of God. Paul emphasized the grace of God all throughout the book of Romans because it is the opposite principle of works or legalism. Legalism has a rule for every occasion and the Jews of Paul's day had interpreted and applied the Old Testament Law into an intricate system of rules. But God's grace transformed God's Law *from legalism to love* when Jesus sacrificed his life on a cross for our sins. When the legalism or liberalism of liberty threatens to infect those in the church with quarrels and jealousies - Jesus, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth, the One from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace - will anoint and empower the people of his church to embrace a humble obedience and united loving response of gratitude in who God is and what God has done for us; along with a united loving response of joy in the law of God, the commandment of God, to agape love others as God agape loves us.

Contrary to what we might like to think, it would seem that our most sovereign God has eclectic tastes. He loves Jews and Gentiles who love Jesus; He delights in the worship of each. He accepts those who eat meat and those who don't, those who honor certain days and those who don't. God our Father loves the diversity of his families - all tribes, tongues, peoples and nation and their various approaches to him. If his people are loving Him, worshipping Him, serving Him, loving each other, honouring each other and serving each other - then God finds their approaches acceptable. God loves the church and someday His entire family will be worshipping Him together. In the meantime it is His desire that would all grow up into maturity of faith so that we share his appreciation of the beauty of our diversity. God wants us to be free—free to enjoy him and free to embrace others who enjoy him differently that we each enjoy Him.

The gospel declares that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, who unites all men and women from all cultures. There is also one God, one Spirit and one family of God. The gospel brings us together and thereby declares to all creation that God is reconciling all things to himself. "All things" includes all things in the church - all kinds of people, all kinds of prayer, all kinds of music, all kinds of ministries, all kinds of serving, all kinds of personalities, all kinds of singing, all kinds learning, all kinds of loving and obeying and forgiving and sacrificing for the cause of Christ.

Jesus sacrificed his life on a cross so that you and I might be forgiven, redeemed, cleansed and restored back to God. Jesus sacrificed his life on a cross so that we might be part of the family of God. Christ did not die on a cross so that we could eat what we want, when we want. He did not die on a cross so that we could worship however we want, whenever we want. He did not die on a cross so that we could have old music or new music in church. He did not die on a cross so that we could have short services or long services. He did not die on a cross so that the church would embrace our personal preferences and opinions and convictions. Jesus died on a cross so that people who have different ideas about old music and new music, and short services and long services - with all kinds of personal preferences and opinions and convictions could unite together under his lordship and reflect the love and grace and glory and joy of Jesus Christ.

God our Father is pleased when he sees his children making sacrifices for the sake of each other. God builds His church through the sacrificial decisions of his people, as they love each other. He started his church with the greatest and most loving sacrifice of all— that of his Son. While it is true the church is God's church and that Jesus is really the only one who builds up the church, it is possible for us to tear down the church when we value personal preferences over agape love. Personal preferences are not worthy to be compared to the value of God's church, which Jesus purchased with his own blood. Neither old music nor new music nor short services nor long services nor personal preferences fulfills the law. *Only love fulfills the law.* God, through the words of the apostle Paul, is not so much *commanding* our *behavior* as He is *cultivating a heart attitude*. God wants us to be willing to sacrifice our preferences, opinions, and convictions for each other. For the most part, God doesn't command any specific actions to do so - perhaps to the chagrin of those of us who want some simple rules to follow. Instead of giving us rules, he gives us the love and grace of Jesus that we are to share with each other.

Like all churches, Arrowsmith has had its share of struggles and conflict in the past - and we have also been experiencing some over the past number of months. Some of us have also had some personal issues between each other; some of you know Jack Tsai and I have not been getting along for sometime. You need to know that I have reached out and met with Jack twice over the past two weeks - and I have his permission to let you know that we have made the commitment to try work things out between us - for our good and for the good of God's church and for the Kingdom of God. May the Law of Love eliminate any and every kind of disunity of judgment in our midst. Amen? Amen!

2015-08-09

Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church