

“A Unified Calling”

Today we're in the next to the last week in our sermon series on the book of Romans. We've been in this study since the beginning of September. We'll wrap it up next week. If you have your Bibles, go ahead and open to chapters fourteen and fifteen. That's where we are today.

While you're doing that, I trust the time (we've spent in these weeks) has been good for you. I know it has been for me. We don't just study the Bible in order to study the Bible, to find out what it says. We study it, find out what it says, because we believe that what it says, what we study (when we read it) is nothing less than the Word of God for our lives.

In studying it, it speaks to us. In finding out what it says, it speaks into us. And in its speaking to us (and into us), through the work of the Holy Spirit, it has the power to change us. (That's what we hope has been happening.)

Now, we've said (from week one) that Paul's letter to the church in Rome is one of the most theological presentations of the Christian faith we have. He presents our theology, (what we teach and believe about God), in a very orderly fashion. He lays out the basics (the foundation) of what we believe, at the start, and then, from there, piece by piece, he continues to build upon it.

And he does it, (and here's why this matters), not only so we might better understand (in our heads) what's true and what's right (and what we believe)... and that we might better be able to speak (with our mouths) and from our lips, what we have come to know and are called to share...but more importantly, that we might be able to (live out) in our lives what it means to be a follower of Jesus. (I trust you know that.)

That's how the Christian faith works. That's what our faith in Christ is meant to do. It's not just our ticket into heaven because we believe and we trust, and we're forgiven (and made right with God), and someday we're going to be there, which we are. (We don't have to doubt that, not for a moment.) But, beyond that, it's also meant to give us a direction (or a guideline) for life. It's designed to shape and to mold how we live while we're here. It's always for that purpose.

Our theology, our study of Scripture, what we teach and believe, is always done for the sake of informing our lives. It's always done for the purpose of having an impact beyond our lives. And having an impact (in this world) beyond our lives is always in response to what God has done for us in Christ. That's why we do it.

Last week, Pastor Brian led us into a section (in Paul's letter) where the focus shifted from the apostle laying out our theology, what we teach and believe (about God) and what he has done for us, to its application, how it's meant to be lived out in our day-to-day walk.

In chapter 12, Paul dealt with the Christian faith and life and how it's to be lived out in our lives individually. No matter where we go, no matter what we do, (as individuals), there are qualities and characteristics that are meant to be part of each of our lives, regardless.

In chapter 13, he focused on the relationship we are to have (as Christians) in our society, in particular, in relation to the government. Paul says we should be praying for our government, praying for our leaders, even when we don't agree with them, especially when we don't agree with them. We should be praying for our leaders, praying for our president. (Our nation has a lot of work to do in this regard.)

In chapter 14, (and that's where we are today), Paul continues his discussion of the Christian faith and life, but (in this chapter) changes the focus to that of our relationship with other believers. The chapters (in front of us today) have to do with how we relate to others who share the same faith in Christ.

Before getting into our text (and its detail), it's interesting, I don't know if you've noticed, that sometimes in the church, when it comes to the battles we face in the world, that our greatest battles are not always (with the world) itself, but sometimes within the church. Sometimes we have to figure things out internally before we can make any effort (externally) to have an impact on those around us.

Every generation has them. When I was growing up, (as an example), I remember listening to my Dad's folks (my grandparents) talking about how it used to be an issue (within the church) when it came to the

question of dancing. It wasn't just dancing in the church that was the issue. It was dancing (in general) that some thought should be forbidden. If you were a Christian, you shouldn't dance. If you were a follower of Jesus, God forbid that you shake and wiggle those God-given hips. Never mind (the fact) that dancing is found all throughout the Bible and (almost always) presented in a good light.

Other issues (in those days) were playing cards or playing pool. Again, if you were a believer, you wouldn't do those things. Only the non-believers would be caught with a pool cue or a deck of cards in their hands. (Some of you remember what that was like.) I won't ask for a show of hands, but some of you were probably doing those very things, when you were told not to. Shame on you.

Now, I want to be careful here (this morning) in not going too far, because every day, every generation (in every day) has its concerns. Turn back the clock not (too far) and it was drums and guitars (and the like) that were not supposed to happen within the walls of a sanctuary. In a concert pavilion, yes. In a worship setting, not so much.

Even today, people have their own ideas or preferences that they'd like to have applied to everyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus. How you're to dress when you come to church. (That's an issue in certain circles.) How you're to behave or to act, (in the world), and where you should hang out, and with whom you should hang out. (For many, those things are serious.) Depending upon your perspective, I could argue both sides. It depends on the context or the goal.

The point being that there are some things we get (caught up in) and get (worked up) over (in the church) that aren't as clear and straightforward as we might make them out to be. Paul is giving guidance (in these chapters) on how we are to relate to each other (and deal with these questions (or issues) when we end up in different places.

In his day, when the church was just starting out, you can imagine that there were differing thoughts on all kinds of things. They didn't have 2000 years of church history to look back on (like we do) to make their judgments. They were trying to figure it out, trying to sort it out. They were trying to make sense and end up (on the same page) on issues and concerns where they weren't quite yet there.

The two examples Paul gives (in our text) have to do with what foods were right to eat, and which holidays (or holy days) should be observed by believers.

The whole question around what to eat – the issue (Paul is referring to) had to do with whether a follower of Jesus should (or should not) include meat in his (or her) diet. (That was the question.) And for Paul (or for them), it wasn't a health concern or an animal protection issue. It had to do with the fact that there was a chance (in the market places) of their day that the meat that was being sold might have been the same meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Some of the pagan practices (in those days), involved that very thing. The meat of an animal would be sacrificed to whatever god (or gods) they believed in. Some of it, in the sacrifice, was burned (and was gone); the part that wasn't burned (and was still there) was sold in the markets. For some of the Christians, there was this concern that (if you ate meat) and it had been part of this sacrifice to the gods, that if you went to the market and bought, there as a chance, without even knowing it, that it had been part of their sacrificial ritual, and so you shouldn't take the chance.

As a result, for some, there was the camp that said you couldn't do that. For others, there was the camp that said you could. It all depended upon your perspective. It all depended upon what you thought about (or believed) in relation to these other (so-called) gods.

If you were new to the faith (or young in the faith), which many of them were, they didn't want to take the chance. (You shouldn't eat it.) If you were further along in your faith, (more certain in what you believed), you knew that there really is only one God, and who cares what others might have thought or done with the meat. (It's OK to eat.) It doesn't matter. (There were different perspectives.) That was the one issue.

The other issue, surrounding holy days, was what you should (or you shouldn't) do on certain days as a Christian. It was different (in those days), the particulars, but not too different than what we find in certain parts of the Christian community even today. That whole "don't eat meat on Fridays" rule that is part of what many people today (especially in the Roman Catholic Church) continue to practice is an example of the same (kind of) question they were wrestling with back then.

Paul says, if that's your practice, and you believe (in your relationship with God) that it's important, then do it. If it's not and you don't, then don't feel obligated to take part. It doesn't matter. It's not essential to

your faith. What matters (he says) and what is, is what you do (and how you relate) to those who are believers, who are doing things (in their lives) in a way different from what you (are doing) in yours.

He says, “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.” The word he uses for disputable matters is not too different from the word we use when we talk about things that are “adiaphora.” Adiphora means things that are indifferent; things from which we have no direct command from God.

Where we have a specific matter mentioned in scripture, there is no argument for the Christian. God’s word (in all things) is our authority. (We need to follow it.) But where there is no (direct word)...there are innumerable questions about the Christian life which are not specifically permitted or prohibited by the Bible. In those things, if there’s no direct word from God, (no command that speaks to it), then let’s not pretend that there is and require every believer to do things the same way.

Paul says, (verse 5), “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” The one who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. The one who eats meat, eats to the Lord, and (in doing so), he’s giving thanks to God; and the one who abstains (he says), in her own way does the same thing.” (In other words, it’s all good.) It doesn’t matter. What’s not good (and what does matter) is when we begin to look down on or judge the believer whose practice is different than ours.

The other thing he says (and then I want to pull this together and make a few applications) in (verse 13), he says, “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. As one who is in the Lord Jesus (he says), I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself – no holy day is a requirement of the faith – but if anyone regards something as unclean (or holy), then (for that one) it is. (And now listen), “If your brother is distressed by what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not (by your eating) destroy your brother for whom Christ died.”

In other words, as Christians, if something falls into the category of being “adiaphora” – there’s no command from God and it doesn’t really matter, then let’s not act as if it does. Don’t turn something into a law that’s not meant to be. There’s liberty or freedom in the Christian life. We’re not bound (as believers) by a set of rules that determine what we can and cannot do. Don’t live as if we are.

But if, (and here’s where it all leads), if, in our freedom to act a certain way, we end up putting an obstacle or a barrier or (a stumbling block) to the faith for someone else, then our liberty or freedom to do what we choose, should always give way to love, and (in so doing), cause us to make a different choice.

Let me give you an example. You invite someone over to your house who (you know) is still convinced (in their own faith-walk) that Christians should not drink any alcohol, then for the sake of that sister or brother who’s still in that place, even though you might (be convinced) and believe that’s it’s OK, you should make the choice (out of love) to not have anything to drink while they’re there.

You find yourself at work with a sister in the faith who is abstaining from eating meat on Friday, maybe as a sign of support and encouragement, (even though you know you can) and you feel differently, if you’re having lunch together on a Friday, then maybe you might (out of love), make the choice to refrain yourself.

Here’s the rule Paul is setting forth, and it’s all based upon our theology, and the example we’ve been given in Christ. In things that are essential to our faith, (what the Bible says, what God’s Word has told us) we need to be united, have unity. In things that are non-essentials, (where there’s no direct word from God), then there’s liberty or freedom to make a choice. In all things, no matter what they are or who might be involved, we need to live and to act out of love.

In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love. In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love. (Say it with me.) In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love.

As so, here’s the deal, and let me close with this. We said, at the beginning (today) that our theology, our study of Scripture, what we teach and believe, is always done for the sake of informing our lives. We said that it’s always done for the purpose of having an impact beyond our lives. And (we said) that having an impact (in this world) beyond our lives is always in response to what God has done for us in Christ. That’s why we do it.

And so, here’s the deal. In the things that matter for us (that are essential), our faith in God, what’s he’s done for us in Christ, the forgiveness and promise we have in him, we must never compromise. They are and they (always will be) what brings us together, our unity.

In things that don't matter for us, (that are non-essentials), what we eat, how we dress, what worship style or preference we might have, we must always be willing to bend.

In all things, for the sake one who loved us all the way to the cross, and for our commitment (because of Jesus) to have an impact beyond our lives, we must always (in everything we do and say) act out of love.

In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, love. Amen.