

If you haven't been with us, we have been working our way since last September through this incredible book of Romans written by Paul to everyday followers of Jesus who were living in Rome. And if you have just listened to this passage and are not sure what's going on, let me summarise where we are at.

So, if you think of two lines – a vertical line and a horizontal line, we can very quickly understand this book. The first 11 chapters think about what God has done for us. How Jesus has come, God on this earth, and he has loved us so much that he was willing to give everything, even his life for us, so that the path is available to eternal life. Jesus has conquered the power of sin and death so that we don't receive what is due to us. And then from chapter 12 we have the horizontal line – it's our relationship with all those around us. Because if we understand fully the depths of love that God has shown to us, it then affects how we love each other. So that's a summary of the book of Romans.

And this young church in Rome is no different to any other church. It's got messiness, and disagreements and fractures. And the primary thing that is going on in this church is that there are **two groups of Christians**. Yes, they all confess that Jesus is Lord, but one group has a background in Judaism which means they would have all kinds of religious rituals that they would keep in order to demonstrate their faithfulness – things like sabbath and food laws. So, the question for them is this – how much of our previous lives do we keep living now that we have heard about Jesus. Should we keep our food laws and our ceremonial laws?

Then you have this other group of Christians who have come from a gentile background. So that's everyone who is not a Jew – so we are gentiles. Gentiles would not have followed God's laws. But now that they have heard the Gospel, they are changed people, they are followers of Christ. And again, they have got to think about their previous lives and what they keep.

So, you have 2 groups of followers but they have differences. And we are going to see today Paul asking how we are going to treat each other when we disagree with each other. So, here's a little experiment, if you are a Christian, raise your hand if you have ever had a disagreement with another Christian. And by that I don't mean with your spouse, I mean with someone else. If you are in one of our home groups, it might be that you have been listening to a viewpoint of someone else in the room, and you might not say anything to their face, but when you get home you reflect that their view and yours are different. Or it might be that you have heard something preached in church and you don't agree with it. So, hand up if you have ever had a disagreement with another Christian. So, there's always going to be tension. And it's no surprise really, because in this room right now there are all kinds of backgrounds, all the different understandings we have here about politics, and culture, economics, and entertainment. And so we all come together with differences but in some kind of unity under Jesus – that's what Paul is addressing here. You have these people who have different ways of living, and now they are all trying to follow Jesus, and Paul is asking what we do when we disagree over issues.

So, in verse 1 he says "**Accept the one whose faith is weak**". Now it's important to say what Paul is not saying. He's not saying that some of us are better than others – some are strong, and others are weak when it comes to our faith. But what he's saying is whilst you might consider that someone else's views are different are different than yours, you should accept them. They must be welcomed into the church. Now I know that in some churches

that will raise all kinds of issues. And in some respects, I wish Paul might have made a statement that the Jews were right or the Gentiles were right but he doesn't do that. He just says, don't argue about those things.

Verse 2&3 he says **“One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The 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”**. Paul is setting up a contrast between these two groups of people. But he's saying just let each group go about how they do things. Don't sweat the small stuff. Each group is genuinely trying to follow Jesus. Paul is not saying that one group is better than the other. He's recognising that there already these two groups of people and don't argue over these matters.

I wonder have you stepped into a church and thought to yourself, this place is weird in how they do things. I know for our Josh who is in Aberdeen studying in his first year he spent a lot of time going around different churches to find the right one – some things he liked in a church, other things he didn't like. And I kept saying to him that he would never find the right one, because they all do things different. Even when it comes to our 2 churches, we do things differently, and I wouldn't ever want them both to be the same.

And I think what Paul is saying here is this – all of us can have our preferences. There's no issue with that, but let's make sure that you don't make your preferences the Gospel. Don't make your style the thing that you follow after. Don't suddenly become a consumer Christian that chooses what suits you, and when something in it changes, you move to somewhere else because it's not your preference. Accept that even in a place like this where you choose to worship, there will be things that you won't like. But if the Good News of Jesus Christ remains the central aim and focus, then that's the most important thing – not the differences that everyone will have.

So here's a question – **have you turned your religious preferences into your Gospel?**

And the truthful answer is that we likely all have. And it's ok for you to have your preferences but you cannot dictate that your preferences become what you judge everything on. The Gospel of the Lord Jesus and our desire to follow him at whatever cost must be our focus.

I remember growing up living with my mother and we moved home and attended a new church. As we came out on the first morning, a man at the door told my mum that she would be very welcome back in church next Sunday, but she must wear a hat. It felt very conditional in the issue of welcome, and mum decided that it wasn't for her. The hat had become a major issue of behaviour for that church, and yet the issue of belonging and welcome had been neglected. But I'm not saying who was right and who was wrong. I'm just saying what are the things that we sweat over and what are the things that really matter. Should we be judged on those secondary issues?

Now I want to say that I know it's likely in this gathering some of you, or some of your family have been hurt by Churches and Church leaders, and many of us have been hurt by Christians. But for this church my deep desire is that we would be a whole bunch of broken

people with all kinds of opinions, but we are not known for what we are against, but rather for what we are for. So, we all agree that we need the forgiveness of our sins and that can only come through the Lord Jesus Christ, and that he wants us to live lives that are holy and obedient to him. But then there will be other things that we are free to disagree with.

And so Paul says in verse 4, **“Who 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”**. Have you realised that you are not going to stand before any other Christian at the end of time and give an account. You are not wholly accountable to anyone else. You are accountable to Jesus. The danger is that when we stand in judgment over other Christians, we take the place of the Lord in their lives. Now that doesn’t mean that within the Church family, we don’t hold each other accountable and build one another up. But it’s not your place to tell someone that they must live like you.

Verse 5 **“One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind”**. Paul is recognising the differences, and yet so often in society people rise up in anger and now hatred with each other because their views are different. You see that’s the problem with society now – people have lost that ability to disagree with one another in love. But what if the church was the place where things looked differently to society, where we say, we want to live through our differences – Now here are some things that we hold on to which are not up for debate – for example we believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God and the only authority for faith and practice, or we believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ Alone, revealed by Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. So there are things like that were they are non-negotiable, but then other things are really not worth judging each other over.

So, whatever we do in the life of our church and in us, we are always focused on honouring the Lord, but we don’t allow specific preferences to become our Lord.

Verse 7 & 8, **“For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. 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”**. So, folks, hear this, there is more freedom available for you in Jesus Christ than you will ever imagine. And for some of you today, maybe you’re trying to fit a certain mould that someone else has set for you. Maybe your daily life is living to please someone else. Maybe someone has created a mould of how you are meant to live.

If that’s you, you need to be free to follow Jesus today and no one else’s plan or mould for you. I think for some people I meet their lives are tied up in trying to meet the comparison of others rather than saying “I live for the Lord”. Isn’t it liberating to be able to say that I get to live for Jesus, and not be defined by what others want me to be.

You see if we get this wrong, it’s the thing that kills a church and it’s the thing that kills Christians. But Paul is saying to us, let the Lordship of Jesus Christ be the central message of the Church.

Verse 10 he asks, **“You then, why do you judge your brother or sister?”** Why? When you and I are both bowing before King Jesus on that judgment day, will that dispute, that difference really matter? Will that secondary issue matter? When a church becomes more known for the secondary issues rather than the proclamation of the Gospel, then we have a bigger issue folks. It doesn’t mean we compromise on God’s word; it doesn’t mean we

reinterpret God's word. But we don't allow the secondary issues of practice to become the be all and end all.

You know, so many churches today hide under the carpet and never talk about the judgment of God. We will all one day stand before him in judgment. And before the judgment seat of God, we will not be asked about the style of music that we used, we will not be asked about the version of the bible we used, we will not be asked about our regular giving to the church. **We will however be asked whether we followed the Lord Jesus, we will be asked whether we submitted ourselves to the Lord Jesus as our saviour recognising that my sins were buried with him at the cross and grave, and he resurrected for me.** That's good news. The only account that will truly matter is saying that Jesus Christ is my saviour, he bought me and purchased me by his blood.

The facts are this as I finish. We aren't going to agree with everyone. But wouldn't it be good if we can agree on the first principles – on those things that are non-negotiable. And yes, there will be people today in a liberal multi faith culture who will not accept those, and there will be things in scripture that will offend people, but let's not make it that people are offended at us with our judgmental attitude. Yes, they will be offended by the Gospel, but the Gospel is truth. There will be times where we need to challenge others, but there's also the need for Godly wisdom when to do that and how to do that in love, so as it doesn't look like you are stronger, and the other person is the weak one. It's good at times for someone to show me the log that's in my own eye before I deal with the speck in the others. Our heart needs to say, "Lord help me not to think I'm right to pass judgment on the other. Give me the maturity to know when to speak". I pray that in this week ahead we each will be a witness of God's love for everyone even in the differences that exist, and that God gives you the wisdom for each and every situation.

Let's pray.

Lord help us to be overwhelmed with your grace towards us, help us to think about how merciful you have been to us. Help us to think about the cross and how you shed your blood for our faults. And Lord we come here together with our brothers and sisters. You know our love for each other is imperfect, but Lord we want to love like you do. We want to grow in our faith so that we are truly loving to others in the way you do. We know there's a day of judgment coming before you. We know we don't deserve your grace and thank you Lord Jesus that you cover us by your blood. And so help us to pour out that grace and love around us. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.