

People of God, in the book of Romans, St. Paul writes one of the most wonderful works of theology ever penned by the human hand. He begins his letter talking about how everyone, both Jew and Gentile are under the curse of sin and the law. And that Jesus Christ came to save everyone from that curse, both Jew and Gentile. By faith in Jesus Christ, a person is justified, declared a righteous member of the covenant people of God, because when they are baptized they become united to Christ, just as everyone else is who believes in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile. The problem we all still deal with of course, is the problem of indwelling sin. But the salvation we have in Christ is not just a get out of hell free card, salvation is deliverance from our slavery to sin, making us instead, slaves of sins and free to live according to righteousness.

Now in the midst of this discussion the Apostle Paul takes a dive into some deep theological waters when he starts to talk about predestination, and election, and glorification, and the like. And many people get really excited by chapters 8 and 9 of Romans because of all its heavy duty high powered Theology of God's sovereign Grace.

But chapters 8-9 are not the climax of the letter. Romans wasn't written to give people the deep thinks about decretal election and predestination. The real highlights of the book of Romans begin in chapter 12 and move through to the beginning of 15. And the reason the letter was written was to give some theological background for how it is that people who are very different from one another are to live together in peace in the same church.

Chapter 12:1 begins this way, *"Therefore, I beseech you brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present you bodies as a living sacrifice."* Every

time you see the word therefore, you are to see what it is there for. And the therefore in Rom. 12 serves as the hinge of the whole book. After going through all the theology of chp. 1-11, what are the practical applications of our theology that are going to change that way in which we live? Because that is where it really matters.

So he begins by saying that you are to present body as a living sacrifice to God, holy, and acceptable, and pleasing to Him, which is your spiritual worship. And the chief way in which you are to do that is by making sure that you are *not being conformed to the world, but you are being transformed by the renewing of your mind, so you may discern what the will of God is.*

Being transformed by the renewing of the mind in order to discerning the will of God means, that Jews and Gentiles, who are very different from one another, must figure out how to live together in peace in one body. That is what Romans is addressing.

Now, if there is anything that we humans are, even as Christians, and despite all our differences, it is this: we are all prideful and arrogant and selfish people who want the preeminence. But as our minds are being renewed, as we are being transformed, and as we present our bodies as living sacrifices to God discerning what is the good, and acceptable and perfect will of God for us so we can live together in peace, what does Paul urge us to consider first?

Rom. 12:3 – *I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*

So, rule number 1 of how to live together in the church with people who are very different from you, and who still struggle with indwelling sin, is, don't think too highly of yourself. Pride comes

before the fall. Understand that the way in which the church is going to maintain its peace is if first of all, everyone has a sober judgment about themselves and does not take themselves too seriously. You are not the bees' knees. The Church does not revolve around you.

Rather, "*For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.*" So we recognize that each has a gift. And your gift is meant for the good of other members. Your gift is not meant for you to boast in it and use it for your own self-glorification, but so you can help build one another up.

*Let love therefore be genuine.* Yes, you are to *abhor what is evil; and you are to hold fast to what is good.* But you are to do so in such a way that you are actually *loving one another with brotherly affection.* That means, in your hating the evil and loving the good, you are not to do so in such a way that is pompous and proud and arrogant and self-serving.

Do you understand what I mean? There is a way in which we can get so caught up in our own little crusades against evil, that we end up making that thing what we are all about, and anyone who does anything different than you is therefore a compromiser and half hearted and not as committed as you. This is the fall of many people in the church who become committed to an idea, rather than to a person and his flesh and blood actual people.

Rather, you are called to abhor evil and love the good in such a way that you love your brother. And one of the ways in which you can love your brother is by, Rom. 12:10 - *outdoing one another in showing honor.* Which is really hard if you are on a personal crusade to

expose the evil deeds of the some such group people and other people aren't as excited about that crusade. And so you can start to slander your brothers in Christ because they are compromisers who aren't as committed to the cause as you are. But Paul says, *outdo one another in showing honor*.

This is extremely important and just as difficult for prideful arrogant sinners. Remember, we are living together in the same body with a bunch of people who are very different from us, and none of us are yet totally redeemed. We still each have our own peculiar indwelling sins, and we can still see traces of the fall in our fellow brothers in the Lord. We still find inconsistencies in one another; we can find slander and pride and bitterness and resentment and anger and envy and all manners of short comings. If you are looking to find something to be disappointed about in a person, it won't take you long to find it.

But this is not how we are to treat one another in the body of Christ. We are instead to overlook one another's sins, short comings, and failures, and we are to seek to *outdo one another in showing honor*. That means, learning to show honor and respect to those very people whom you likely see short comings and imperfections in, and who may have even sinned against you. And that is really hard.

This does not mean that you are not to *maintain your zeal* or lax your standards of what you believe to be sin. *You are to be fervent in spirit, and you are to serve the Lord*. You are to maintain the zeal for what is good, true, and beautiful in yourself even when you see others failing to do so. Other people's sins and short comings, even at your expense, do not justify you speaking ill about them. You

are still to be zealous to do what is right, even when a fellow Christian, or even a church leader fails you in some way. As Christ our Lord demonstrated, *When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*

*Rejoice therefore in the hope that is yours collectively with your brother who still has his own sins and failures. Be patient in your tribulation. And be constant in prayer for them. And while you are at it, contribute to the needs of the saints, and show hospitality. For in this way you will be known as a person who blesses and not curses. As Paul says, bless those who persecute you, bless them and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.*

If you do these things, then you will not have time to allow yourself to focus on abhorring the evil that is still left in your brother, or will you have time to take so much offense at your brother that you slander him, because you will be too busy focusing on your abhorring the evil in your own heart, and you will be seeking to live a life of love with others, by showing honor to them, which will create and foster that harmony and peace that is to characterize the body of Christ.

Learning to live together in harmony with people who are vastly different from you, and who struggle with different kinds of sins and have different personality types is the practical manifestation of what it looks like when you start to be transformed by the renewing of your mind, and the presenting of your body as a living sacrifice to God. We become a living song, where we are all brought into a beautiful four part harmony to glorify the Lord, when we reckon others as more significant than ourselves.

Just like in the Silmarillion, It was Melkor who sought the preeminence and in so doing created discord in the song of the Ainur. He wanted to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself, and so his part began to clash with the rest of the harmony of the Ainur. That is quite the image to consider when thinking about how to live together in harmony with other people. The best way is not to increase your own part and seek the glory, but rather, to consider how you can give glory and honor deference to others.

Our life together is more than just about thinking the right theological and cultural ideas. It is about learning how to treat one another as a community and a body of believers who are united together by the One Spirit in One Body of Jesus Christ.

So, Paul continues, *do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your eyes. And do not repay evil for evil.* If a fellow Christian speaks ill of you, and expresses disgust and disdain at something they perceive to be a short coming and sin in you, DO NOT to respond in kind, and drag their name through the mud and talk bad about them and to everyone who will listen. For then, not only is your reputation slandered by that person, but then you also added to such slander by giving it some credence in the horrible and immature and ungodly way in which you responded to their offense.

How should you respond instead to a person's attack against you? *Do not repay evil for evil. But give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.* And as Paul already said, *out do one another in showing honor. Do not curse, but bless.* If a person speaks ill of you, respond

by saying something like, “You know what I like about such a person, is how good they are at doing XYZ. They have been so helpful to me in this regard.” And then move on. And perhaps you might even want to take some time to see if what they said about you has any bearing, and then if so, fix it and move on, thanking God for his servants.

Charles Spurgeon, the great London Baptist Preacher from the 1800’s, whenever someone criticized him, he did not take offense and insult and criticize in return, he thought to see if there was indeed anything true in the criticism, so that he could become better. He esteemed the criticism of other men more important than his own sense of self righteousness. And if there was nothing there, if it was a false criticism that had no basis in reality, he just moved on. Learn to do that. *Do what is honorable in the sight of all.*

*For if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. And do not avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord.” To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. For in this way you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good.* This is how we outdo one another in showing honor, this is how we love one another with brotherly love, and this is how we live together in peace as one body.

For the only thing that we owe to one another is love. *For the whole law is summed up in this commandment – you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is fulfilling of the law.*

Do you hear how all these things that Paul writes to us are in the context of how to live together with people we disagree with and who disagree with us? Do you hear how love and honor is to be the prevailing attitudes of hearts when we are accused of wrong doing, justly or unjustly? It is not about defending yourself from your attacker. It is not about getting your vengeance. It is about letting God do that, while you do the one thing that is commanded of you to that person who is your brother in the Lord, and that is, you love and honor and bless them. That is what Christ did, and that is who the Spirit of Christ is transforming you into.

The second major issue that can bring division in the body of Christ is this: Christians of one cultural background can judge other Christians who have different cultural practices, and they can break fellowship with fellow believers because of secondary issues. Paul's example in Rome was this: He had Jewish and Gentiles Christians in the same church body. The Jewish Christians, because of their background and customs, kept certain food customs – like not eating pork, or shell fish. But the Romans loved to eat pork chops and lobster tail. Or, one person is a vegetarian, while another only eats meat.

So what are you going to do during fellowship meal? Are you going to show contempt and disgust at one another for these secondary issues? One person believes he may eat anything he wants. And another person only eats 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. Why? Because God has welcomed you both. And so you are to welcome one another.*

*Do not quarrel over your opinions, and do not pass judgment on the servant of another. It is before his own master that he stands or falls. You are not the other person's master. The faith they have as an individual is between them and God. You do not have their conscience. And they do not have yours. Therefore we are not to bind one another's consciences concerning secondary issues, making a person feel inferior or not welcome to the church because of our individual and personal beliefs about secondary issues.*

Paul gives another example of holy days. If a person wants to observe a holy day in honor of the Lord, and another person does not have such a conviction concerning the importance of observing the day, then fine. The one who observes, observes in honor of the Lord. As does the one who does not observe. The one who eats, does so in honor of the Lord. As does the one who abstains. The most important thing here is that God is honored and thanked in the practice, and that a person's conscience is clear before God.

Therefore Paul says, *“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord. 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.*

*So then, why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God, and we will individually, each of us, give an account to God. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil because of the way you treat others who do not practice the same thing as you. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Now, all that being said, we do not have a food issue here at CTR. That is not the thing, I think, that could cause a rupture in our fellowship and sow division in the body. Sure, there are those among us who have different things they chose to eat and abstain from, some for health reasons, some for other reasons. Neither eating or abstaining commends us before God, and we know that. That is not our issue. In fact, I think we do a good job of showing food hospitality by helping to provide people who have diet restrictions the food they can eat.

What is happening among us instead, is a cultural practice that some have brought to this church which has not been the custom here in the past, and that is the practice of wearing head coverings. And as the practice becomes more widespread, people are going to be wondering, and perhaps even are wondering why do you do this? And, do I have to do this? And as the conversation develops, women who practice wearing headcoverings are convinced that the Bible tells them to do this practice as a means of showing honor to their husband.

Nobody who wears headcoverings in our church, that I know of, has ever said, or suggested, that because she wears a headcovering as a means of honoring her husband, that a woman who does not wear one is not honoring her husband.

If you study the Scriptures with your husband and become convinced of the practice to such a degree that you then believe that in order to be obedient to God and honoring to your husband you should do this particular thing, then you should do it, if your conscience tells you it is a sin if you don't.

And if it is not a sin for you not to wear one, then why would you wear one? Simply because other ladies are doing it? That is a bad reason to adopt a custom that is foreign to you.

And likewise, if you are convinced that the Bible does not require you to wear a headcovering, for you believe that your long hair is sufficient, then do that to the glory of God and honor your husband. And do not pass judgment on other women who came to a different understanding of this passage and who practice it differently.

For what is more important among us? That headcoverings are universally worn, or universally not worn, or that each has their own individual faith with God concerning this issue, and that everyone honors and respects each other, and there be peace among us? The Kingdom of God is not a matter of headcoverings, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

And unity and peace and love and honor and harmony among us is more important than any one cultural practice. This is why when I counseled Nate and Lilly before they got married, that Lilly respect Nate's wishes and cultural practice or lack thereof, and not wear the headcovering. She came from the Anderson family where that was an acceptable practice among them. Praise the Lord. But Nate's family didn't do that.

So how weird would it be for Lilly to say that she is going to wear the headcovering as a means of showing honor and respect and obedience to Nate, when Nate wasn't comfortable with practice because that was not his custom? Nothing says obedience and honor like rebelling against your husband, right? So what does Lilly

now do, she does not wear it. Because she is seeking to honor her husband truly, and not just in a symbol.

So the point is, that whether it is headcoverings, or if it is an issue concerning the observance of a holy day, or the eating of food, or anything else of a secondary issue, the most important thing is that we are convinced in our minds that we are honoring the Lord in this practice, or in our abstinence of a practice. Are we honoring the Lord?

And secondly, we need to make sure that we are not causing division and sowing strife and disturbing the peace in our church because of it. Because if you say you are honoring God by wearing headcoverings, and at the same time causing all manners of strife in the body, making all the sweet ladies who don't wear one feel guilt tripped because they don't do this practice, then you are not loving the body, and you are not honoring God in your practice of it. You are destroying the body of Christ for the sake of your own liberty. And vice versa.

The faith that you have with God, let it remain between you and God. And do not try to bind a person's conscience to observe or not observe a practice which is a secondary issue. *Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever doubts is condemned if he practices, because his practicing is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.*

So, if your conscience tells you that if you do not wear a headcovering you are sinning against God and your husband, then by all means, wear one to the glory of God. And likewise, if your conscience is clear that you do not have to wear one to honor God and your husband, and that your hair is covering enough, then

praise be to God, do not wear a headcovering. Jesus Christ must be the Lord of your conscience. Do not allow the practices of others determine your own practice. Be guided by the word of God and the Holy Spirit and do what you believe to be your obedience.

That is how we have to function as a church if we are going to maintain unity and peace concerning this issue, and a host of other issues that we will discover along the way. Are we going to force everyone into the same mold of belief concerning issues that are not about salvation? No. We have a certain measure of freedom.

But let each of you consider how to use your freedom, or refrain from using your freedom, to serving the good of the whole church. We must consider others as more important than ourselves. We must consider other people's reputations as more important than our own. We must seek to honor each other as a body before we make use of our freedom.

In the Church, we must be concerned about maintaining the peace and well being of the church, and strive to show honor to one another, before we maintain our rights and freedoms at their expense.

So, if your freedom to believe a secondary or tertiary thing becomes the source of stumbling for others, and if it rises to the place where it is causing strife and dissension and trouble in the body, then you need to knock it off immediately. If your words and actions concerning secondary things are bringing an unnecessary bad reputation on the rest of the members of the church, then remember the words of Paul who said to reckon others as more important than yourself.

And, also consider Paul's words in 1 Cor. 3:17 - "*If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you collectively are that temple*" (1 Cor. 3:17 NIV).

Seek to build one another up with the gifts God has given to you. Do what is honorable in the sight of all. For the kingdom of God is about love, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit. Amen.