

Respecting Differences Under One Roof

Romans 14

In the series “Family Strong: Building a Home that Works”

Think about the people you love the most. Chances are, they are also the people who sometimes make you wonder, “How can you possibly think that?” One person wants a plan for everything, while another says, “We’ll figure it out when we get there.” One person is comfortable with the thermostat at 68, while another thinks 74 sounds about right. One person wants to talk through a disagreement immediately, while the other needs an hour of silence before they can put two sentences together.

And those are the easy differences. Families also disagree about money, parenting, schedules, priorities, traditions, politics, where to spend the holidays, how much time together is enough, and how much time together is too much. Parents and their grown children can look at the exact same situation and see two completely different things. Two siblings can remember the same childhood in two completely different ways. None of that means something has gone wrong. It simply means we are human, and we are different.

*Differences do not have to divide us.
The real question is what we do with them.*

When Difference Turns Into Distance

The real question was never going to be, “Will we have differences?” Of course we will. The question is what we do with those differences. Usually, things start to go wrong when we stop saying, “I see this differently than you do,” and start saying something sharper: “Clearly, I’m right.” “You’re being ridiculous.” “If you really cared about me, you would see it my way.”

That is the moment a simple difference starts becoming something more corrosive: judgment, contempt, and distance.

That is exactly the kind of situation Paul is writing into in Romans 14. The Christians in Rome were at odds over food and sacred days. Some believed they were free to eat anything, while others felt that faithfulness required them to abstain from certain foods.

Some treated particular days as especially holy, while others did not. To us, that may sound like a small thing, but to them it was tied up with identity, tradition, conscience, and faith.

What is striking is that Paul does not begin by settling who is right. He begins by talking about how they are treating each other. Welcome one another, he says. Do not turn this into a contest of opinions. The one who eats should not look down on the one who does not, and the one who abstains should not sit in judgment over the one who eats. In other words, stop turning a difference into a reason to reject each other.

That may be the first thing some of our families need to hear. Not every disagreement needs a winner. Not every preference needs to become a moral principle. Not everyone who sees something differently than you needs to be corrected.

Paul's starting point is simple: make room for one another.

Before you make your case, make room for the person in front of you. That might sound like, "Help me understand why this matters so much to you," or, "I do not think I agree, but I want to understand where you are coming from."

That is a very different opening than, "You're wrong," and it changes everything about where the conversation can go.

Be Curious Before You Get Critical

The harder part is that we do not just disagree about what someone did. We start assigning motives for why they did it. "You don't care." "You're selfish." "You did that on purpose." "You never think about anyone but yourself."

But most of the time, we do not actually know. We are filling in the blanks, and when we are hurt or frustrated, we rarely fill those blanks generously.

Picture someone walking past a sink full of dirty dishes. One person sees dishes. The other sees evidence: "They don't respect me." "They think I'm the maid." "They don't care how much I already have to do."

A family rarely falls apart over one dirty dish. It gets into trouble when every dirty dish becomes proof that somebody is unloved or unseen. The practical problem is the dishes. The relational problem is contempt.

So one of the most useful habits we can build is this: be curious before you get critical. Ask yourself, "What am I assuming about this person that I do not actually know?" and, "What might they be seeing that I am missing?"

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That does not mean everything is just a matter of taste. Romans 14 is not saying that every issue is negotiable. There are real matters of harm, dishonesty, abuse, injustice, and sin that need to be confronted directly. Love never means looking away from what hurts people.

But a lot of what we fight about is not that. It is preference, habit, personality, tradition, and different ways of doing things. Paul's point is simple: do not confuse those differences with the things that actually matter most.

Love Without Control

Then Paul asks a pointed question: who are you to judge someone who answers to God and not to you?

In plain language, you are not in charge of everybody else's life.

That is actually good news, because a lot of us quietly take on a job we were never given: fixing everybody, correcting every opinion, and making sure everybody sees life exactly the way we do. That is not our job.

There is real freedom in that. You can love someone deeply without needing to control them. Love says, "I care about you." Control says, "And because I care about you, you need to become like me."

Those are not the same thing.

Parents learn that as their children grow. Adult children learn it with aging parents. Spouses learn it over and over again. Church families learn it too.

We can hold real convictions. We can speak honestly. We can disagree. And we can still allow another person to be responsible for their own choices and their own relationship with God.

“Though We Cannot Think Alike, May We Not Love Alike?”

That is where an old Christian saying becomes helpful: “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.”

It is often attributed to John Wesley, although he never actually said those exact words. Still, it sounds very much like Wesley.

In his sermon *The Catholic Spirit*, Wesley asked a question that still deserves to be heard: “Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?”

That is not a call to stop caring about truth. Wesley had deep convictions. He cared about the Triune God. He cared about Jesus Christ. He cared about grace and forgiveness. He cared about hearts and lives being transformed. He cared about love becoming practical: love of God, love of neighbor, and seeking the real good of another person.

Wesley also understood that unity does not require everybody to have the same opinion about everything.

"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." – Rupertus Meldenius (1627)
"Thou we cannot think alike, may we not love alike?"
– “The Catholic Spirit,” John Wesley

More Than Tolerance

That helps us make an important distinction between tolerance and love.

Tolerance is better than hostility, but it is a pretty low bar for a Christian family. Tolerance says, “I guess I can put up with you.” Love says, “You belong here.” Tolerance says, “I will endure your difference.” Love says, “I will seek your good.” Tolerance keeps its distance. Love stays in relationship.

Tolerance says, “You do your thing, I’ll do mine, and we will try not to bother each other.” Christian love goes further. It says, “I may not agree with you. I may not understand you. But I will still listen. I will still honor you. I will still make room for you. I will still care what happens to you.”

That is much closer to what Paul is asking for in Romans 14. Not mere tolerance. Not polite avoidance. Love. Real love. The kind of love that refuses to turn differences into rejection.

Pursue What Builds Up

That leads to what might be the heart of the whole chapter. Paul writes that what matters most is not food or drink or the smaller things people were fighting over. What matters is something bigger: righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Then he says, “Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”

Notice the shift. The question is no longer, “Who is right?” The question becomes, “What actually builds this person up?”

That is a much better question for families. Before you say what you are about to say, ask: Does this need to be said? Does it need to be said right now? Am I trying to understand, or am I just trying to win? Will this help? Will this build up?

Because you can win an argument and still lose something much more valuable. You can win the argument and lose trust. You can win the argument and create distance. You can win the argument and teach somebody that it is not safe to be honest with you next time.

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Paul says to pursue peace. Not wait for it.

Peace does not usually just show up. Sometimes we have to go after it, and sometimes it costs us something. Paul goes on to say that we may be completely free to do or say something, but love asks a second question: what effect will this have on the person I love?

That is a more mature question than, “Can I?” Maturity is not proving that you can do whatever you want. Maturity is becoming secure enough that you do not have to.

That may mean changing the subject at a family gathering because you already know exactly where that conversation is headed. It may mean holding onto a tradition that does not matter much to you because it matters deeply to somebody you love. It may mean skipping the sarcastic comment. It may mean deciding that not every opinion needs to be

spoken out loud. It may mean giving someone more time than you think they need. It may mean simply saying, “I love you more than I need to win this.”

Give Grace in the Gap

Here is another phrase worth holding onto: give grace in the gap.

There is almost always a gap between what we expected somebody to do and what they actually did, and we get to choose what fills that gap. We can fill it with suspicion: “They knew better.” “They did that on purpose.” “They don’t care.”

Or we can fill it with enough grace to ask, “Help me understand.”

That is not pretending everything is fine. It is not ignoring destructive behavior. It is simply refusing to assume the worst before we know the truth.

So here is something to try this week. Think of one relationship: a spouse, a teenager, an adult child, a parent, a sibling, a friend, or someone in the church family. Think of a difference that has slowly started building into a wall.

The next time that issue comes up, try asking a different question.

Instead of asking, “How do I prove my point?” ask, “How do we stay connected while we work through this?”

Ask before you assume. Listen before you prepare your rebuttal. And try one simple sentence: “Help me understand why this matters to you.”

That sentence will not fix everything overnight, but it can change the whole shape of the conversation.

A Strong Family Is Not a Same Family

A strong family was never a family where everyone thinks exactly alike. It is not a family where everybody votes the same way, spends money the same way, responds the same way, or agrees on every single issue.

A strong family is one where people know, deep down, “Even when we disagree, I still belong here.”

Think about the image we have used throughout this series: a house built from many different pieces, different shapes, different colors, none of them identical, and yet together they form one home.

Maybe that is what real strength looks like.

Not everybody becoming the same, but learning to stay connected when we are not. Listening before judging. Understanding before correcting. Giving grace where we once handed out criticism. Making room before making our case. And loving instead of merely tolerating.

The goal was never simply to be right. The goal is to build a home where love is stronger than our differences.

And if we can learn to do that around our own kitchen tables, maybe we can learn to do it in the church family too. And if we can learn to do it there, maybe we can show a divided world a better way to live: people who do not agree about everything, but who refuse to stop welcoming each other, refuse to stop listening, refuse to stop loving, and refuse to stop building each other up.

So before you correct someone, before you roll your eyes, before you rehearse your argument one more time in your head, pause and ask yourself one honest question:

Am I trying to win this moment, or am I trying to build this relationship?

Am I trying to win this moment, or am I trying to build this relationship?

Then choose the thing that makes for peace.

Choose the thing that builds up.

Choose love.