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THAT’S A CRUMMY GAS STATION

Romans 14:1-12

In May of this year a very unusual story appeared in the news. A man named Taylor Grant who lives in Georgia, was at a party at the home of his cousin. He and a number of other guests were playing a game of Uno. Apparently the game became very heated. I find that puzzling. How could Uno be heated? Nevertheless Mr. Grant got into a loud verbal altercation with another man. Things escalated. Grant pulled out a gun and fired a round at the man, hitting him once in the arm, then he threatened to finish him off. At that point others intervened. The wounded man initially told authorities that he was the victim of a drive by shooting, but he eventually admitted what happened. Grant was convicted of aggravated assault. The Assistant District Attorney that prosecuted the case said, “Intoxication seemed to be the catalyst,” but added that was no excuse.

I guess that’s one way of trying to settle a disagreement. Apparently some people think it is the best way. In April of this year in Palm Beach, Florida, a man named Herbert Merritt was walking his dog by a golf course at a retirement village. A man named Robert Levine was upset by the dog’s presence on the golf course. Levine confronted Merritt, an argument ensued, then Levine took out a gun and fired 5 shots at Mr. Merritt, hitting him once in the ankle. Then Levine grabbed a golf club and hit Merritt with it several times.

Disagreements happen. I’m going to say right up front that shooting people is not the way to resolve them. I suspect you already knew that. But what should we do when we disagree with people? That’s a question Paul addressed in Romans 14:1-12. It is a question that has relevance for all of us, because disagreement happens.

PREMISE: People who are clothed with Christ will have love and unity.

In verse 14 Paul commanded that we clothe ourselves with Christ. We saw that Jesus’ whole life was about love. It was one hugely sacrificial act of love. If we clothe ourselves with Christ then we will be clothing ourselves with his love. If we are truly loving each other as he loves us, then there is going to be great unity.

Unity is important to God. When Jesus prayed the night before his execution, he prayed about his followers in John 17:21, “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” One of his last prayers was that his followers would be unified. In Philippians 1:27 Paul wrote, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the Gospel.” Consider the power of that instruction. Paul wanted believers to live in a manner that is worthy of the Gospel. What could ever be worthy of what God has done for us in Christ? Nothing measures up to that galactically enormous gift of grace.

The Greek word translated “worthy” meant “bringing up the other side of the scale,” or “balancing the scale.” If you picture an old scale with a tray on each side, you place the Gospel in one tray and it weighs it down so it drops like a rock. Now Paul tells us to do something that we can put in the other tray that will be of equal weight, that will balance the scales.

Recently Laurie and I helped take care of our grandsons one evening because Michael was flying. The experience caused me to reflect on what Carissa has done for her sons. He pregnancy with Wesley was an 8 month long ordeal that included two upsetting weeks in the hospital. She was sick for the first half of the pregnancy, and never felt good. Fortunately, every pregnancy is different. Her pregnancy with Hunter was different. It was worse. She was sick the entire 9 months. The reward for surviving that was going through child birth. Then come those first months with an infant when the parents are sleep deprived and living in a fog. When we were with Hunter he was fussy and unhappy, and nothing could make him happy. Carissa said he’d been like that all day, and she had no idea why. And this is just the beginning. Being a parent is a long course in sacrifice. Laurie and I are in our “golden years,” and even though we are long past the age to become card carrying members of AARP, we are still sacrificing for our children and now grandchildren. If someone told kids they should live in a manner worthy of the sacrifice their parents have made for them, they will have little to no idea how costly raising them has been. They won’t have a clue what a huge sacrifice it is until they have their own kids.

What God has done for us is infinitely more sacrificial than what our parents have done for us. It is so great that we will never truly balance the scales. It simply is not possible. Yet Paul says there is something that would be worthy. It is that we would stand firm in one Spirit and strive together as one for the faith of the Gospel.

Love and unity are powerful because we all want them, even more than we are aware much of the time, but we can’t do it. The natural state of human nature is conflict and war. We saw in Romans 13 that government is a blessing given us by God. Why is it necessary? Because without it, chaos results. There will be conflict and war everywhere. Why do we have laws, police, courts, home owners associations? Because people can’t live in unity. Left to their own devices, they divide and fight. It is true everywhere all the time. That is because we are all addicted to ourselves, and our own self focused desires keep banging into each other. Our own little kingdoms then end up in conflict.

I recall a funny memory from a trip to Disney world in Florida 11 ago with our then single adult children that exemplified the problem. On our flight home we had an intermediate stop in Houston. As we were on our descent Toby drew my attention to an impressive high school football stadium he saw out the window on the other side of the plane. I looked out the window to see it. Seated across the aisle from us was a dad and his little daughter. When the girl saw me looking out the window she slapped her hand on the window in an effort to block the view and said, “You can’t look out my window!” Her dad shook his head and said, “She’s been told all week she’s a princess, and now she’s impossible to live with.” She was obsessed with herself and what she wanted. That was her window! How dare I try to use her window?

That’s one little example of the fact that when people focus on just what they want, unity is going to be lacking. Unfortunately, focusing on what we want is endemic in humans. It’s always there. That reality means there is going to be a problem.

PROBLEM: The church will always deal with disagreement.

This is about conflict due to disagreement. We dealt with when someone has wronged you back in chapter 12. The people of the church in Rome in Paul’s day were disagreeing. Verse 2 says, “One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.” They had a vegan contingent in the church? And they were causing division by telling the carnivores in an accusatory tone that meat is murder? No that wasn’t what was going on. It wasn’t about health and nutrition. It was about theology. There was a theological debate over what God wanted them to eat and not to eat. I could have settled the debate. I know he wants us to eat Mexican food. And doughnuts. And peaches. Food was only one of the points of dispute. Verse 5 says, “One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike.” What was going on there?

There were both Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus in the church. The Jewish believers observed dietary restrictions that were part of the Law of Moses. They were not to eat pork or shellfish, and they were not to eat non-kosher meat. Another complicating factor was that in that pagan city people often made sacrifices to idols. Only part of the sacrificial animals would be burned. Often the remaining meat would be sold in markets. To Jewish people, eating that meat would be tantamount to participating in the worship of idols.

In addition to that, those Jewish believers still observed their holy days, the Sabbath and all the feast days. The Gentiles, however, had no interest in any of that. They also were totally uninterested in the Jewish dietary laws. I’m like them. I like having bacon with my eggs. In fact, bacon makes most things better. I like baby back ribs. I also don’t have any desire to observe Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur or Succoth, or the Sabbath for that matter. The believers in Rome disagreed about those things, and when Christians disagree, guess what comes next. They argue and typically end up dividing.

These are not issues we disagree over today for the most part. But we still disagree and that has real potential for division. It is common for people to have a hard time being close to people they have disagreements with. I have been dismayed at how divisive the recent pandemic was. The pandemic was enough of a curse on us all, but one unpleasant side effect was all the disagreements we had over treatments and vaccines. People dug their heels in on their positions in many cases and became quite passionate about them. I saw relationships damaged by disagreements over the issue.

That’s just one example. I read a story about a church that was impacted by disagreement when a couple of young high school guys started coming to church wearing baseball caps. Some people in the church insisted that was disrespectful, so they complained to the elders. The elders talked to the pastor. He faced a conundrum. There was nothing in the Bible about wearing baseball caps in church. He felt it was more important that the boys were making the effort to come to church. He decided the way to handle it was to talk to the boys and ask them not to wear the hats out of a desire to avoid being a problem for some other people in the church. The parents of the boys were upset when that happened, and the battle lines formed. In the end, 15% of the congregation left the church over the issue. I could cite tons of examples of churches dividing over the most absurd issues.

Christians disagree over many peripheral doctrinal issues, like spiritual gifts, eschatology (the end times), baptism, the sovereignty of God versus free will, even young earth versus old earth theories, and many more. Christians disagree over politics. I disagree with Patrick Parks, who has maintained steadfast loyalty to the perfidious football team once known as the San Diego Chargers. People are going to disagree. Even husbands and wives disagree. Laurie and I are a lot alike, and after 43 years of becoming one, we are more so than ever. However, we are not the same. She loves chocolate, and I am the weirdo who doesn’t like it. She likes coffee, and I can’t understand why anyone would drink it. She cannot comprehend why I would watch a football game between two teams I have no rooting interest in, while if I had my preference I’d watch 3 in one day. Disagreements are part of life, even for two people who love each other madly. People disagree over a nearly infinite plethora of points, and every one of them has the potential for dividing us. Given that disagreement is going to happen, how can we deal with it in a way that doesn’t result in division?

ACCEPT ONE ANOTHER

Paul says we are to accept one another. But what does that mean? A common view today is that to accept another person you must approve of whatever they happen to be and do. Condone all their choices. It is then claimed if you don’t do that, then you are judging them. That’s it. You either applaud everything they are or do, or you are judging them, which is an unforgivable sin.

The Greek word that is translated “accept” is a compound word. The root of it is an interesting verb that can mean either “take” or “receive.” I learned that verb in my very first Greek class, and I remember thinking it had a kind of unusual range of meanings. It seems to me that taking something and receiving something can be very different things. I suppose if someone is offering you a gift, then taking it and receiving it mean the same thing. However, taking seems to me to be an active kind of thing, while receiving is passive.

There are two things about the verb as used in verse 1 that clarify its use here. The first is that the preposition “to” is tacked onto this particular word, so it is “take to” or “receive to.” What really ices it is the verb is a middle voice verb, which carries the reflexive sense of “take to yourself” or “receive to yourself.” So what this means is that when we have these people that we disagree with, what we are to do is take them to ourselves or receive them to ourselves.

When Toby decided he wanted to be a doctor he had to get into med school. What a stressful experience that was. He initially applied to 22 schools. The first one he got an interview to was University of Texas, San Antonio. He went there and interviewed. But very early in the process he interviewed at UCSD, which was his first choice. A few weeks later they accepted him. That seriously attenuated his interviewing process. They received him into their school.

For us to accept people is to receive them into our lives and our love. It doesn’t mean we agree with them or applaud everything they are or do. It means we receive them into our lives and love even if we don’t agree with them. We value them more than the thing we might disagree with them about, or the thing we might not applaud in their lives. Wesley is a cute, winsome little guy that makes me smile most of the time. However, he’s still two. He loves toy trucks and cars. At one point we were on their patio and he was playing with some of his cars and trucks. One of them was a toy car transporter truck that he wanted to run back and forth along the edge of the table. But at one point he said, “Bapaw, fix.” He wanted me to fix the truck. But there was nothing wrong with it. I said, “It looks fine, Wesley. What’s wrong with it that you want fixed?” He repeated, “Bapaw, fix.” I checked a couple of things, but it was fine. I said, “Wesley, there’s nothing wrong with it.” At that point he clouded up and began crying. He started moving into meltdown territory, all because I wouldn’t fix something wrong with it that I couldn’t see. I moved the truck a little to see if there was something wrong that I couldn’t see, but there was nothing. However, suddenly Wesley got happy. Somehow, I had fixed the problem. I still don’t know what it was. That thing of melting down is not something I approve of or agree with. But that doesn’t affect my relationship with Wesley at all. I still accept him in my life and my love. He’s way more important to me than anything he might do that I don’t like. That’s what it means to accept someone. You receive them in your life and express to them they are more important to you than anything you might disagree with them about or might not approve of.

Paul said they should accept each other without quarreling. Our tendency is to accept people with the purpose of trying to convince them that they are wrong. We sort of accept them, but really we are just trying to convince them that we are right and they are wrong. When we disagree with someone over something that matters to us, we often find that the disagreement looms large and blocks the relationship. It becomes important to us to get that block out of the way, and of course the way we do that is by convincing the other person to see things the way we do. They think the same thing, which means a quarrel is inevitably going to result.

Paul mentions in verse 1 a person whose faith is weak. Typically we think the person who has the most convictions is the one with strong faith. The most religious person is usually the most rigid person. Paul says that’s not right. The one with strong faith is the one who understands with total clarity that he or she is set free by the grace of God. The work of Christ has made that person completely righteous in God’s eyes. The person with weak faith believes this, but struggles to accept its full implications.

It’s not hard to see how the strong person might have had disdain for the weak person who was still trying to add to what Jesus did by keeping laws. It’s also easy to see how the person with weak faith might have felt superior to the other person, because he kept God’s laws and the other person did not.

Paul says the grace of God is big enough to cover them all. So the strong person doesn’t need to save the weak person by showing them how they need to depend on God’s grace, not themselves, because God’s grace does cover them due to their faith in Jesus. The weak person doesn’t need to worry about the “strong” person because that individual is saved by God’s grace. They both need to accept each other just as they are, because that’s what God has done.

DO NOT JUDGE

Pay attention to verse 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.” There are two powerful words in that verse. They are the words judge and contempt. It is very easy for those to become involved when we disagree with someone.

Those two words are connected. The person with freedom because they truly grasp the grace of God might easily have contempt for someone who does not have that freedom. They obviously don’t have real faith in what God has done for us in Christ. But the person who sticks to the old laws might easily judge the person who doesn’t follow them. Obviously they are not serious about doing God’s will. Both contempt and judging involve looking down on the other person. Judging means you have deemed them falling short, not doing what God has commanded. Contempt basically says, “I’m better than you, you are lesser than me.” It is an attack on the worthiness of a person.

Dr. John Gottman, psychologist at the University of Washington, says contempt is the most destructive negative behavior in relationships. He identifies it as the number one predictor of divorce in a marriage. He says when he spots contempt in the marriage he knows it is doomed.

Verse 4 asks a key question. “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.” Judging is a deeply ingrained trait in humans. We all do it. It’s fun. It makes us feel better about ourselves. As a result, we almost do it as our default. It’s like it just happens. Unfortunately, it is a destructive habit thoroughly rooted in pride.

People judge so often, and their judgments are often way off base. In 2017 after the NFL draft, a writer for *USA Today* fairly harshly judged one of the NFL teams for their actions when they traded up to draft a quarterback. He wrote that calling this player a project was “a major understatement. He’s nowhere near ready to play in the NFL. And, honestly, he may never be. Between his inconsistent accuracy due to poor mechanics, his tendency to bail from clean pockets and his lack of field vision, he’s going to leave as many big plays on the field as he creates. This is a risky pick.” The team was the Kansas City Chiefs. The writer gave them a C minus grade for their draft. The player he claimed would never be ready to play in the NFL was Patrick Mahomes. He is now generally considered to be one of the top 3 quarterbacks in the NFL. In 2020 he led the Chiefs to their first Superbowl win in 50 years and was named the MVP of the Superbowl, the youngest player ever to win that award. Yeah, I’m thinking that writer didn’t judge that one right. In fact, he has proven wrong in nearly every aspect of his assessment.

I guess you could say that writer’s job was to judge how good of a job NFL teams drafted, so he was doing his job. He just did it poorly. But we have a tendency to do the same thing with people. Years ago Laurie and I were on vacation. Our first couple of days in the area of our vacation overlapped with the last couple of days of vacation for some friends who were also there. We made a plan to get together for dinner before they left. We picked a time, and they gave us directions to the condo where they were staying. The husband had decided he would stand out on the street by the entrance so we could see him. As we drove up I saw him standing there talking to a person I didn’t know. But I immediately recognized what was happening. This guy looked like a street person. Throughout my years of ministry I have had many encounters with people like him asking for money. We parked our car then I went over to my friend and said, “Who was that?” even though I already knew the answer. He said, “He’s a Christian who lives down the street. He was walking to a Bible Study near here, and when he saw me standing here, he stopped hoping to tell me about Jesus. When I told him I am a believer, he invited me to come to the Bible Study with him.” Ouch. On the basis of a quick look at the guy’s appearance I had judged him. I was totally wrong.

There is a serious problem with our judging of others. When we do it, we are putting ourselves in God’s place. He is the Judge. When we judge others we are saying we can and should do God’s job instead of him. Here is a quote we should remember. “The mentality that separates us from God is our desire to take his position.” That was Satan’s problem, the one he spread to Adam and Eve in Eden. And when we judge others, that’s just what we are doing.

Does that mean we can never deem anything to be wrong? No, it doesn’t. In Matthew 7:1 Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged.” That is our culture’s favorite verse, maybe the only one they salute. They insist it means we can’t ever call anything wrong. But Jesus went on to say in Matthew 7:6 in that same speech, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs.” Often people interpret that to mean we should understand when someone is never going to listen to the gospel because they are so hardened to it. We shouldn’t throw our pearls of spiritual wisdom to them.

But if that’s true then Jesus was calling people dogs and pigs. That’s after just saying we shouldn’t judge anyone. Don’t you think it just a bit judgmental to call someone a pig? That clearly cannot be what Jesus meant. This is another example of Jesus’ sense of humor. He would have had people chuckling at the very least here at the image of tossing pearls into the sty for some pigs to eat. But he was not calling people pigs or dogs. He was using an illustration. How smart would it be to toss some expensive pearls to pigs for them to eat? That would be idiotic. You’d have to be as dumb as a box of rocks to do that. The pearls are precious and the pigs absolutely wouldn’t be interested in them. They don’t eat pearls. What Jesus was saying is “Don’t be stupid.”

Don’t judge people, but don’t put your brain in a safe deposit box somewhere either. Not judging people does not mean never assessing anything to be wrong. It does not mean saying, “Well, I guess that is Deshaun Watson’s chosen lifestyle. I’m sure he meant no harm. Who am I to judge?” No, Jesus would tell us that’s tossing pearls to pigs. If God says it’s wrong, then that behavior is wrong. We don’t reject and destroy the person, but we do judge the actions to be wrong.

Doesn’t that mean the strong person should judge the person who keeps the old laws? Hasn’t God said we are not under the law and we are free in Christ? Yes, he has. And if that person begins pushing the law on others, claiming it is God’s way, then we must deem that wrong. Paul did that with the Galatians. But if they are just personally choosing to live by those laws without promulgating them to others, we disagree with them, but we value them and receive them into our lives and our love just as they are.

APPLICATION

BE A GRACE STATION

Earlier this year I was running low on gas in our car and I drove into a gas station to fuel up. I was in a hurry so I was pleased that there were no other cars there so I had no problem finding an empty pump. I pulled up to a pump and discovered that it was out of order. No problem, I just went to the next one, but found it was also out of order. I don’t know what was going on there, but none of the pumps were working. It was a gas station where you could not get gas.

God wants us to be grace stations. He does not want us to be grace stations where people can’t get grace. We must start with living in God’s grace ourselves. A huge effect of knowing we have life by God’s grace and only by his grace, is that we are humbled. I have nothing to be proud of. I only have God’s grace that I do not deserve in my favor. That being the case, I don’t look down on anyone.

Not long ago Laurie knocked over a large cup of water. It was weird, because it looked like something in a TV commercial that happened kind of in slow motion. I saw it happening and had this sort of “Nooooo!” response, but couldn’t stop it in time. Water went all over the table and onto the floor. A common reaction to that would be to say, “Laurie, what in the world were you doing?” I didn’t react that way. That’s because I’ve done at least as bad. This week I was putting dishes in the dishwasher, picked up a glass and started to put it in upside down, only somehow I missed the fact that it was full of water. I splashed water all over the kitchen floor. I couldn’t believe how far it went. My own foibles mean I have zero reason to be critical of Laurie’s failure.

As I live in the reality of grace I am free from the need to prove something about myself, free from the need to feel I am superior to someone else. I see others as needing exactly what I need, which is God’s ever flowing grace. So I let it flow through me. The result of that is that I will not judge others or ever have contempt for them.

BE A LIFE AFFIRMER, NOT A FAULT FINDER

Criticism is so easy, so familiar, so comfortable. But it is also a long ways from being poor in Spirit, and Jesus said the poor in spirit will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. To be life affirmers we’re going to need to value the person more than we value whatever point of disagreement we have with them. We need to receive them, major in love for them whatever our disagreement.

Here is a big help in that area. We don’t have to fix people. It’s not in our job description or our tool kit. Paul said in verse 4 of those we disagree with, “They will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.” Do you believe God is able to make this believer in Jesus stand, even if he or she doesn’t get what you get? If you do, then you can trust them to him.

I think about that writer for *USA Today* who put out that scathing evaluation of Patrick Mahomes for all the world to see. I’ll bet he wishes he could have those words back. The last thing we want to have happen is we do that to others, and then have it blow up in our faces because the Lord is able to make them stand.

Laurie and I know some people who have a young son who has a bizarre hair cut. Every time we see pictures of him we both ask why they would do that? Why have your son wear his hair like that? I don’t know why, but it doesn’t matter. He doesn’t live his life for us. He answers to his parents, and what they think matters. What I think is utterly irrelevant. And that’s how it is with the Lord of all. He is the judge. When we judge we are saying to God, “Move over, I’ve got this because I’m better at it than you.”

LIVE FOR THE LORD

Paul says in verse 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.” That is key. The Lord is the audience for our lives. We need to keep that straight in our minds. Just as he is the audience for my life, so he is the audience for the life of others, including those I disagree with. I need to always remember they don’t answer to me, they answer to him.