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TO NOT BE LIKE THAT RUG

Romans 14:13-23

Sunday, August 21, the Toronto Blue Jays were playing the New York Yankees. Aaron Judge, a big man who might well be the American League MVP this year because he is having a monster season, came to bat for the Yankees against Alex Manoah, Toronto’s pitcher. Manoah threw a pitch that hit Judge up high on the shoulder. Judge was upset. He immediately reacted and looked like he wanted to go confront Manoah directly. The Yankee players thought it was done on purpose and began to come out of the dugout. It looked like a brawl was about to take place. The umpires tried to keep the situation from erupting. It was clear that Manoah was saying something to Judge, but the situation was extremely tense. Then just before he got to first base, Judge changed direction and walked toward the mound. It looked like things were going to go kinetic. But Judge and Manoah talked, then Judge tapped Manoah, clearly saying, “It’s all right, I know you didn’t mean that. We’re good.” Then he walked back to first base, all was resolved, and the game resumed. I only know of that incident because it showed up all over the Internet. ESPN called it a “feel good” moment.

Why would that be news? Why was that a “feel good” moment? It’s because something about two people who could be at odds resolving their problems and respecting each other, appeals to us. That’s because we long for peace between people, and it warms our hearts to see it. The problem is that peace is not the norm between people. Life tends to pull people apart. The natural drift is toward division and conflict between people, despite what we long for.

God wants his people to live in unity and peace. We want that too. Yet Christians, like all people, will disagree at times. Sometimes they will disagree about things they feel strongly about, and those disagreements can cause conflict and even division. That was happening in first century Rome when Paul wrote a long letter to the church at Rome. What principles can guide is as we deal with our differences and disagreements with others? Let’s look at Romans 14:13-23.

LOOK OUT FOR THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS

Paul says in verse 13 that we should not pass judgment on others, as we saw last week. Instead, he says, “Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.” There is a little word play in verse 13 that doesn’t come through in English. The Greek word for “pass judgment” can also mean “decide.” Paul uses the word both ways in this verse. To get close to how it comes out in Greek you’d have to translate it something along the lines of, “let us stop deciding others don’t measure up, but rather, if you have to decide something, decide not to put a stumbling block in the way of others.”

We have a couple of rugs in our garage. A couple of weeks ago when we got home from church on Sunday and were unloading all the equipment we bring each week, Laurie almost had a potentially painful accident. One of the rugs had gotten twisted by the car and was wrinkled in one place. That wrinkle stuck up several inches. Laurie didn’t notice it, so as she was carrying some stuff into the house she tripped over it. Fortunately she caught herself and didn’t fall down. It didn’t hurt her, but it could have. This verse tells us don’t be like that rug and trip up a brother or sister in Christ.

Typically when we have disagreements and conflicts with others we draw up battle lines. The person we have the conflict with is on the other side. They become the opponent. Our focus becomes proving that we are right and they are wrong. It is about defending ourselves and defeating the other person. Those aims eclipse all other thoughts. Paul tells us we need to shift that thinking. We need to think about the good of the person with whom we disagree. In verse 19 Paul says, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” Instead of caring about ourselves we should be thinking about how we can encourage and build up the other person in their faith.

In Philippians 2:3-4 Paul wrote, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interest of others.” Paul said we should value the other person and look out for their interests. That would certainly mean not being like that rug. Not being a thing they could trip over and suffer a spiritual fall.

Paul said in verse 14, “I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself.” Paul had to be persuaded by the Lord Jesus himself of this principle. As a Pharisee he thought a lot of things were unclean. He thought a lot of people were unclean. All Gentiles were, and many Jews were as well. Pharisees had lots of rules about things one must never eat, and in some cases not even touch. He had adhered to those rules scrupulously all his life. It took the risen Lord Jesus Christ personally confronting him and calling him to go to Gentiles to convince him that all those things were no longer inherently taboo before God. But now he was persuaded, so he says, “All of those things, the things you all are arguing about, don’t matter one way or another.”

Peter had a similar experience. It is described in Acts 10:10-15. It was lunch time and Peter was hungry. Verse 10 says, “While the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. Then a voice told him, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’ ‘Surely not, Lord,’ Peter replied. ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.’ The voice spoke to him a second time. ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’” This happened 3 times. Peter was about to meet some unclean Gentiles whom God was going to bring into his kingdom. God wanted Peter to know that all his rules about clean and unclean were now history. They didn’t matter. Those unclean Gentiles were going to be his brothers in Christ, totally loved and accepted by God and fully participating members of God’s eternal kingdom. Notice it happened 3 times. God was pounding it home to Peter.

Paul had been set free by Christ. He wasn’t worried about walking too far on the Sabbath any more. He didn’t freak out about having a shrimp taco at Rubio’s. He said that should be true for all of us. However, he said it is possible to use our freedom like a club that we bash other people over the head with. He said we must not do that. We are never to insist on our rights and our freedom without regard to how it might impact a brother or sister in Christ. That person is more important than the thing in which we have freedom, and we are to seek to build them up, not just use our freedom.

Doesn’t this mean the standards for how we live will be set by the most legalistic person we know? If we can’t exercise our freedom because of them, don’t they then have the power to decide what everyone else can and can’t do? In 43 years of ministry I have encountered Christians who are against just about everything. Some had a big problem with Halloween, for instance. Our only problem with Halloween was what costume the kids would wear. Were we wrong, using our freedom to do something those people were dead set against? I knew a believer who was seriously against all the sports being played on Sundays, so watching a baseball game or football game on Sunday afternoon was wrong.

One of the most personal for Laurie and me was years ago a woman in our church wrote a letter criticizing Laurie because of the clothes she wore. Earlier this year Laurie and I watched a TV show set in the 1880’s old west. This woman’s standard of what was appropriate was pretty much what the women in that show wore. Anything other than that, by her standards, was immodest and inappropriate. She didn’t just write a letter, she let other people know that this was a problem. Does this mean that Laurie (and basically every other woman in the church) was wrong because she wore a dress that didn’t cover her from chin to floor and neck to wrist? Was she wrong because she even wore pants sometimes, and even shorts? Gasp!

This is where we need to pay attention to what Paul actually said and what he did not say. Think about what he did not say. He did not say that you must agree with that person and do whatever they say. He did not say you must be careful to never come close to offending their extreme sensibilities. He did not say you must never upset them.Wait, Rick, he said in verse 15 we’re not acting in love if a brother is sister is distressed by what we do. That sounds like we must not upset them.

We need to keep reading. In verse 16 Paul said, “Do not by your eating (or your trick or treating on Halloween or watching that football game on Sunday afternoon or wearing that dress) ***destroy*** someone for whom Christ died.” Again in verse 20 Paul said the issue was destroying the work of God in another, and in verse 21 he said the concern was that the other person might fall.

That 1880’s woman who wrote the letter to Laurie was not going to come anywhere close to being spiritually destroyed by Laurie wearing a dress that didn’t cover her ankles. She was absolutely convinced that she had God’s truth on that particular standard, and she wasn’t going to waver one inch on it, no matter what anyone said or did. Someone not abiding by her standards wasn’t going to change her mind even a millimeter and it wasn’t going to affect her at all, other than to cause her to be appalled.

The worst that it could do was allow that person to feel superior to and have a judgmental attitude toward Laurie, which is what she had. That was her problem. It was a problem that she needed to fix by backing up to verse 13, which says, “Let us stop passing judgment on one another.” She was not just passing judgment on another, she was majoring in it.

Paul’s concern here was that we not use our freedom to turn a brother or sister in Christ into a spiritual dumpster fire. It’s a little hard to see how that might happen. However, if we think about it we can see that there is some danger there. In Paul’s day a Jewish believer in Jesus might be persuaded to ignore the laws he’d believed in all of his life. This could lead to a crisis of conscience, as his guilt begins to eat him alive. That guilt would certainly be stoked by other members of his previous circle who are appalled at his flaunting of the rules they all lived by. It could easily lead to him giving up on his faith in Jesus. Today let’s imagine a young person who thinks it is wrong to drink alcohol. But he sees Christians who happily imbibe and encourage him to join them. But that alcohol begins to take over his life and ruins him.

To sum up, the issue here comes down to not thinking about ourselves, but caring about others. If we disagree with them, we should make sure the message they hear from us is that they matter more to us than the thing we disagree over, and if we choose to use our freedom, we don’t use it in a way that bludgeons them with it.

FOCUS ON WHAT GOD FOCUSES ON

Verse 17, to me, is the heart of this passage. It tells us to think about the things that God cares about. The Kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking. Paul used “eating and drinking” to stand for all the external rules that religion tends to major in. One pastor said that we should focus not on the externals, but the eternals.

How long does it last if you eat some baby back ribs, which is a form of pork, forbidden by the law? Laurie once had a meal of shellfish, also a taboo food, that lasted a long time. She got food poisoning from it. To her, that seemed eternal, and it would have been eternity in the wrong place, since it felt like, well, let’s just say it wasn’t paradise. But she got over that. That food is long gone and so are the unfortunate effects of it. Things like that, all those external rules, have no implications or effects for eternity. Paul says the kingdom of God is not about any of that.

The kingdom of God is about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are the things that matter and that are going to last. Does that mean that we have no laws, no rules, no right or wrong, that we don’t see anything as being wrong? No, Paul was not saying that we should be sort of spiritual jelly fish. We are not to be creatures with no spine, no structure to us, just a sort of floating, shapeless, gelatinous mass that accepts everything and doesn’t stand for anything.

Paul could be quite confrontational when he needed to be. The churches of Galatia were questioning that idea that nothing is unclean in God’s sight, and were thinking they had to keep all the rules of the Law of Moses. In Galatians 3:1 Paul said, “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” That was strong language. He was saying they were being a bunch of idiots. It was so bad the only way he could understand them being this dumb is that someone must have put them under some kind of spell. In Galatians 1:6 he said he was astonished at how stupid they were being.

Paul was very blunt in telling the Galatians they were wrong. He didn’t spare their feelings even a little. How was what they were doing any different than what some in Rome was doing? In Galatia there was a different “gospel” being preached. In Galatians 1:6-7 Paul said the Galatians were “turning to a different gospel, which is really no gospel at all.” In verse 7 Paul said some people were trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. They were saying that keeping the law was required to be in the kingdom of God. Faith in what Christ has done for us is not enough, the false teachers said. Gentiles and Jews both had to also keep the Law.

This was not happening in Rome. This was a matter of some people choosing to live according to the Jewish Laws as personal choice. They didn’t maintain that it was mandatory for anyone who wished to enter the kingdom of God. In other words, they were not compromising the gospel.

This helps us understand what God wants us to stand for, and what he wants us to just accept. We must always stand for the truth of the Gospel of Christ. We cannot compromise on the deity of Christ, the sufficiency of his work on the cross for us, on the resurrection. These are essential to what Paul calls righteousness. We must also not compromise on matters God clearly defines as wrong in the New Testament. Greed is wrong, pride is wrong, unkindness is wrong, sexual immorality is wrong, dishonesty is wrong, abuse of people is wrong. These things we must also stand strong on. But if it is not a matter of these essential and clearly defined truths, we need to put it in the category of not a part of the Kingdom of God, thus an area where we need acceptance of one another’s differences.

I am going to come back to verse 17, but there is one more important point.

OPERATE IN FAITH

Verse 23 states a simple but important principle. “Everything that does not come from faith is sin.” In other words, if you can’t do it without being confident this is what God wants you to do, if your conscience is nagging at you, then don’t do it. For you, it is wrong. It might be fine for someone else, but it’s not for you.

Why is this important? It is simply because inside you feel that there are some things God wants you to do and some he wants you not to do. What is happening when you ignore those pangs of conscience because other people seem to be able to do something freely? You are choosing something other than God as the Lord of your life. Perhaps it is what other people will think, how you might look, or maybe it’s just some selfish desire. That thing has become more important to you and is overpowering God’s rule in your heart. The thing itself may not be important at all, but the choice to let something usurp God’s place in your heart is disastrous. That is the sin Paul refers to here, it where all sin begins.

Our consciences and our thinking about what God wants us to do and not do is not infallible. In fact, they are seriously flawed. We all know that the world is loaded with people doing terrible things, life destroying things, all while certain this is what God wants for them. We have an astounding ability to justify almost anything. Any time we make something other than God pre-eminent in our lives, it is sin, and by definition sin does harm. So the message is we must make doing what we believe to be God’s will always rule. We should do that no matter what other people may do.

When I first started out as a pastor I faced a financial question. Pastors are allowed to opt out of the Social Security program. Many pastors I knew were doing so, and I heard several financial advisors say it was a good idea. It was appealing to me because we had no money and could use every penny we could keep from the government. I got the IRS forms that one had to file to opt out of the program, but as I filled it out I ran into a snag. The form required that I make the claim that I had a religious objection to government programs like Social Security. I had no religious objection to it. I talked to several friends who had opted out and asked them about that. They said that they believed it was bad use of the money God entrusted to them, that it was poor stewardship, so they objected to it. I wanted to opt out too. But I couldn’t personally make that claim in good faith. I felt that objection was for me a financial one, but not a religious one. I didn’t think God cared about it or had spoken clearly on it in his word. For me to sign that would have felt wrong. I felt it was fine for others to make that choice because they didn’t have the conviction that I had. But I had to choose to do what I felt God was telling me to do even if it cost me some money. What is not of faith is sin. So for the last 43 years 15.3% of every dime Laurie and I have been paid has gone to the government. On the other hand, some of that money is now coming back because I’m getting Social Security checks. That feels better, but it’s not the point. The point is, don’t compromise what God is telling you to do.

IMPLICATIONS

As we think about the implications of these verses I would like us to focus on verse 17. Here Paul tells us what the Kingdom of God is about. In other words, these are the things that matter to God, thus the things that ought to matter to us. There are 3: righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. They are built on each other. There is a progression in these 3, which I hope you’ll see as we think about them for a few moments.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Righteousness is a central theme in Romans. Go back to the very first chapter. In 1:16-17 Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes; first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For the gospel is the righteousness of God revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, ‘The righteous will live by faith.” The gospel of faith in Christ is the power of God, for it is the righteousness of God revealed.

Righteousness is about being right with God, accepted by him, given his stamp of approval. This is at the heart of the Kingdom of God. It is all about us being right with him. God is seeking to make everything right with him. If it is not right with him, it is evil. It is destroying life and good. It turns out that righteousness is one of the deepest and most basic needs for every human being. All of us have a sense that there is something not quite right with us and that we aren’t what we ought to be. This never leaves us alone, so we go through life trying to convince ourselves and others that we are all right, that we have value and that we are not as flawed as we feel we are. Though we don’t even know it, we are looking for someone to declare finally and definitively that we are approved, worthwhile human beings. What we are looking for is righteousness. It is basic to everything.

Many years ago when I was about 25 years old I received a bad accidental blow to the side of my head that blew out my eardrum, caused some damage to my inner ear and gave me a severe concussion. Combine the concussion with the inner ear damage and the result was I completely lost equilibrium. Everything was spinning, and I could not find vertical. I’d try to stand up and would immediately fall over. It just got worse. Even lying down everything was spinning. This resulted in me becoming very sick to my stomach. Without that equilibrium I ceased to function in any meaningful way. I literally could do nothing but throw up. I ended up lying in a hospital bed staying absolutely still. Even turning my head slightly to the side would bring on another bout of vomiting. The ability to find the vertical hold is a pre-requisite for actually being able to live and function as a human being.

The same is true of righteousness. Until we are given that acceptance and made right with God, we will not be able to truly function as human beings. We will always be spinning, unable to stand up, and it will make us sick. The kingdom of God is about that righteousness. It is about that because everything in the universe, including human beings, needs to be related to God correctly. All is related to God rightly except human beings and the things we touch and do.

The great news is in Christ God has made it possible for us to gain that righteousness. It is given to us as a gift of grace in Christ by faith. It is important for us to keep in our minds that the Kingdom of God is about everything being rightly related to God, and that happens for humans by faith in Jesus. All of the rest of the stuff that we do, the stuff that occupies our hearts and minds, the things we differ and divide over***, can never relate us properly to God***. Trying to fix that problem by our efforts to prove our own worthiness, or by following religious rules, or by gaining approval from other people, or by being impressive or successful or intelligent or talented, would be about like when I had my head injury trying to fix the problem by giving me a popsicle. The popsicle might be fine, but it would have zero effect on the real issue.

Understanding that the kingdom of God is about righteousness and that it comes by grace through Christ impacts everything. It changes how we see ourselves, what is important in life and what we pursue, and it certainly will put the things we might have conflict with others in a very revealing light. Is this thing that we differ over going to make anyone righteous before God? Absolutely not, so maybe it isn’t all that big of a deal.

PEACE

Peace is crucial for us. It is one of the most desired, most precious things we can have. In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, Frederick Buechner wrote, “part of the inner world of everyone is this sense of emptiness, unease, incompleteness.” He said that all humans live like children on Christmas Day opening presents. We open one after another in the hope that the next present will finally be “the one we have waited for so long, the one that fills the empty place, which is the peace that passes understanding.” In other words, we need peace.

I’ve been through an interesting time lately. More than a month ago I had my annual physical. The doctor looked at a spot on the top of my head that caused him a lot of concern. He thought it was melanoma. He took a biopsy. He said it would take a week to get the pathology report back, but as soon as he got it he would send it to our dermatologist and that I would need to get the thing excised immediately. That was not a good day. I have done two funerals for people who died of melanoma when they were younger than I am. That’s the sort of thing that gets your attention. A week later I was quite anxious, expecting that day to get results, but I heard nothing. I called my doctor and they said the results were still pending, so nothing yet. We kept calling. Then they told us the lab was having trouble making a definitive determination so they had sent it to another lab for a second opinion. We are still waiting. I had one of those nights where I woke up about 2 in the morning with those dark thoughts. I faced the fact that this thing very possibly could end my life. It was not a pleasant night. The interesting thing about that is that in the absence of information my mind came up with ominous scenarios. I got a graphic and unpleasant illustration of the truth that having no peace is miserable. It is not a way anyone wants to live.

Our God is the God of peace. His kingdom is all about peace. It is about peace with him first of all, then it is about peace with ourselves, peace with other people, and peace with what is happening in our lives. In the end, ***if we are not rightly related to God there will be no peace***. Not being at peace with him will leave us with that nagging sense of something missing, something wrong, with guilt, with that insatiable thirst for righteousness that will dog us every day, and it will fill our world with fear. We won’t be able to be at peace with ourselves, and that will lead to conflict with others, and, of course, the world will present us every day with reasons to not be at peace. In other words, peace is built on righteousness. We will never have peace until we are right with God.

The kingdom of God is about peace. In his kingdom there is true peace. It is about living in God’s presence. It is about having our relationship to him settled, about having our identity and our worth settled, about seeing how others need peace and seeking to bring it to them. It’s about knowing that God is in control in this world and has a good plan, even if it isn’t our plan.

No amount of obeying rules about what we eat or about days we observe as holy, no amount of convincing others they are wrong and we are right, can give us peace. No amount of money, success, approval or acclaim from other people, no achievement, talent or personal ability, can give us peace. That only comes from living in the kingdom of God, from our hearts, minds and lives being the place where he rules. Where God rules there is peace. Living in and for his kingdom is where we will find peace.

JOY

There is no peace without righteousness before God, and there is no joy without peace. I can tell you when it’s the middle of the night and you have no peace, it is not joyful. You don’t look back on those times with great fondness and say, “I wish I could experience that again. How I long for that joy.” If there is no peace, there will be little or no joy, and what little there is will be very short lived indeed.

When we are declared righteous before God we can find peace, and when we have peace, joy becomes a real possibility for us. Peace is a crucial component of joy. Both peace and joy are inevitable results of living in the Spirit of God. They are the fruit of the Spirit.

There is a truth that people often miss. God’s kingdom is about joy! Where God is, there is joy. God is full of joy, and wants people to share in that joy. He is not dour, scowling, angry, condemning, disgusted with us. All through the Bible you can see that he wants us to rejoice, that joy is found in his presence, that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

How can we experience joy? The more we live in the reality of God’s grace, the more we live for God’s glory and his kingdom, the more we live in his Spirit, the more we give thanks, the more we live in his presence and seek him, the more joy we will have. ***The more we live for our kingdom, our desires, our glory, the less joy we are going to have***.

There are some things we can do to experience more of God’s joy. Lee Horton and his brother Dennis were convicted of robbery and murder and sentenced to life in prison. They maintained that they were innocent. Last year after more than 20 years in prison they were granted clemency and released. Horton says of his experience in prison, “When you take away everything, everything becomes beautiful to you…When we got out…we went to the DMV to get our licenses. My brother and I stood in line for two and a half hours. We heard all the bad things about the DMV. We had the most beautiful time. All the people were looking at us because we were smiling and we were laughing, and they couldn’t understand why we were so happy. It was just that being in that line was a beautiful thing. I was in awe of everything around me…I’ve been having epiphanies every single day since I have been released.” In Christ, we have been released from prison. If we remember the truth of what God has done for us, we are going to be like that. We will also find joy in every small nuance if we believe this is the day the Lord has made and we rejoice in it. Can you imagine experiencing joy by doing the beautiful thing of standing in line at the DMV?

Andrew Klavan is the award winning writer of many crime and suspense novels. He was raised in a non-practicing Jewish home. He says for the first 45 years of his life he was a philosophical agnostic and a practical atheist. Today he is a follower of Jesus. He didn’t come to Christ because he ended up drunk in the gutter. Rather over years he was touched by people who knew Christ. He said he came to understand that Christ’s life, words, sacrifice and resurrection formed the hidden logic behind every novel, movie or play that touched his deepest mind. He was reading a story when that logic finally kicked in. He was lying in bed reading one of Patrick O’Brian’s seafaring stories. One of the characters in the book that he admired prayed before going to sleep. He said he thought, “Well, if he can pray, so can I.” He whispered a 3 word prayer: Thank you, God. He was thankful for the people he loved and the life he had. He said, “It was a small and even prideful prayer, a self impressed intellectual’s hesitant experiment with faith. God’s response was an act of extravagant grace. I woke the next morning and everything had changed. There was a sudden clarity and brightness to familiar faces and objects. They were alive with meaning and with my own delight in them. And it came to me every time I prayed. Naturally, I began to pray every day.”

It is so easy to forget, to take for granted the miracle we have in Christ. The more we revel in what God has done for us in Christ, the more we revel in God, in who he is and his love for us, in the freedom and hope he has given us, the more joy we are going to experience.

If it’s not about righteousness, peace or joy, it is not about the kingdom of God, because that’s what his kingdom is about. If it’s not about the kingdom of God, it’s not worth getting upset or uptight or obsessed about. And it definitely is not worth arguing, fighting, or dividing over. Let’s focus on the kingdom of God and what it is about, and our differences are not going to matter very much, if at all. Lord, let your kingdom come, first in our hearts, then in the world.