**Maintaining Unity in the Church, Part 3**

**Romans 14:13-23 (ESV)**

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We’ve been studying through the book of Romans for a couple years now. And this passage has to do with how we deal with the fact that inside the church, there are different opinions, strong opinions, about specific applications of the Gospel; how we would live out the Gospel in our daily lives. So how can we glorify God in view of that fact? And so Paul is going to give us some instruction underneath the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. May God speak to us as we listen to His Word together!

***13*** *Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.* ***14*** *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.* ***15*** *For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.* ***16*** *So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.* ***17*** *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* ***18*** *Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.* ***19*** *So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*

***20*** *Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.* ***21*** *It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.* ***22*** *The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.* ***23*** *But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.*

May God help us to live by faith every day of our lives!

As we open up Romans chapter 14 beginning with verse 1, we read:

**Romans 14:1-4** As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only 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, for God has welcomed him…

The members in the church at Rome were having trouble embracing each other as brothers and sisters because they disagreed about certain applications of the Gospel. Their devotion to one another was being stretched thin by their lifestyle behaviors regarding the Gospel. The specific issues confronting them were not clear commands of Scripture, but rather were principles that they were drawing from their reading of the Word. So they were trying to be genuine, to be authentic in the way that they lived. But as they lived out the Gospel, they began to recognize that they were coming to different conclusions about what the Gospel meant, in specific ways. So there were resentments that were building over these disputable matters. Each group in the church felt a bit more pure, a bit more godly, than the other group. And they wished that the other group would simply change their mind or simply fade away.

Paul specifically confronts the strong in faith. The strong in faith are described as those who believe they have greater freedom in Christ. And he says to the strong in faith, “You guys are despising those members in your own church who have more scruples regarding diets and regarding observance of the Sabbath day.” And the strong, we could imagine, were whispering among themselves, “Man, those folks are ruining our church. I wish they could get their act together so we could all enjoy our freedoms.”

The weak in faith were also not innocent in the disruption of fellowship in this church. Paul confronted those who had more limitations on their diet and upon the Sabbath observances and he said that they were passing judgment upon those who felt more free. And we can imagine this group whispering, “Can you believe those folks call themselves ‘Christians’? They don’t seem to have any care and concern for true godliness.”

Each group wanted to have a kind of church in which the other group was confronted and in which the other group didn’t quite feel at home. So they were keeping their distance from one another. They were not welcoming each other. They weren’t embracing each other. They weren’t moving together in fellowship.

Today, our disputable matters are typically not related to diet or to Sabbath observances. But we still struggle with the same issue. We want tocreate a kind of church where our own opinions, our own strong, emotional opinions about certain matters, are affirmed and affirmed by everyone. The problem is that disagreements in the church over some applications of the Gospel create emotional distress in us. These things are important to us. And when we realize that others in Christ’s own family don’t agree on those issues, we get distressed. And so we ask the question: How should we respond to this emotional distress? It’s going to happen! How do we respond to it?

Of course, our flesh responds with excluding, with judging, with condemning, with gossiping, with despising those who disagree. But is this the way the Lord Jesus taught us? Of course the answer is an emphatic “No!” That’s not the way the Lord Jesus teaches us to deal with the emotional distress over disputable matters. The main idea of this passage is that the way to overcome the problem of disagreements over disputable matters is not to enforce our own specific opinion. That’s not the solution! The solution instead is to prioritize true righteousness, authentic peace, and a glad joy in the Holy Spirit.

This morning, I am going to begin with an unorthodox activity. I want to “purify” our church of people who may differ from others on disputable matters. We need to purify the church. This exercise is very facetious. In other words, it’s silly, with a point.I’m going to ask you all to stand, and I’m going to ask a number of questions regarding your views of some modern day disputable matters. And I’m even not touching on the things that are really troubling to many people. I’m trying to keep it light here. If you don’t fit a specific condition, please sit down.

First, if you use the New Living Translation or a paraphrase in your daily devotions, please sit down. Boy, we are already purifying this church! (Laughter!) If you believe that hymns should be sung with the tune in which they were originally written, please sit down. Okay! There we go! (Laughter!) If you eat unhealthy foods like donuts for breakfast, please sit down. Oh boy! Oh my! I know what sermon series to preach next! (Laughter!) If you wear jeans to church, please sit down. (Laughter!) Okay. There we go! If you place confidence in essential oils, please sit down. (Laughter!) Okay! If you hunt cute animals for sport, please sit down. Alright! If you’re older than 40 and you love to dance at weddings, please sit down. (Laughter!) Oh man! I lost my wife in this church! (Laughter!) If you’re younger than 40 and do not like to dance at weddings…Okay. Well, there we go. If, when your children were young you talked about the Tooth Fairy and put money under their pillow, please sit down. Alright! Now, we have two left in our church. How does a “purified” church feel?

Let’s think about how the Spirit of God binds us together as the people of God in love toward Him and toward one another. Think of our common faith. We are a people who believe that God exists. We believe that He is personal, that He is good,that He rewards those who seek Him with a whole heart. We believe that He has spoken to us through His Word, and His Word is 100% true and authoritative and a source of certainty regarding life and doctrine. We believe that we are sinners. We’re not basically good. The very core of our soul is corruption and that we deserve God’s eternal wrath.

We believe that God in love sent His only begotten Son from heaven to earth. We believe His Son took on human flesh, that He is fully God and fully man. We believe that He lived a sinless life and that He died upon the cross as an atoning sacrifice for sin. We believe that by the power of God, He was resurrected bodily and that He then ascended into heaven and He sits at God’s right hand. We believe in His promise that He will return to earth to rule and to reign over His creation.

We believe that no good works which we do can possibly ever gain us acceptance before God. It is only the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith in Him, that would gain us access into God’s presence, that would bring us adoption into God’s family. We believe that we must repent of our sin and wholly trust in Jesus’ name in order to be saved, in order to be justified. We believe that Jesus is our Lord. We believe that we are to submit all of our lives to Him. We believe that Jesus sent His Holy Spiritand that this Holy Spirit now dwells in us.

We believe that God created His church and that Jesus builds her. We believe that Jesus gave us, His church, a mission to accomplish in this world. A mission to go into all the world and make disciples by proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord, proclaiming Him as the Messiah, the Savior to whom everyone must come in order to find life in God. We believe that all of life is for one purpose and one purpose only. And that is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever and ever. It is our shared life in Jesus binds us together.

So in view of these precious truths, we ask:What kind of church will be left to fight the devil, to win the world to Christ, to worship the Lord in joy, to equip the saints for the work of God in this world, to proclaim Jesus in our neighborhoods and in our places of employment, if we allow disputable matters to divide us and to break our fellowship? What kind of church would be left? I tell you it would be a very small, very weak, very miniscule church that is unable to proclaim that God is the solution to this world’s problems.

This passage that is in front of us today…again, keep your Bible’s open. We’re going to walk through it…presents three personal commitments to building unity in the family of God so that we can be the people of God, so that we can proclaim Christ, so that we can enjoy God together and we can glorify Him.

**Commitment #1: Do not let your participation in the family spiritually harm your brother/sister.**

So as we participate in this precious gift of God’s family, let’s make sure that we don’t bump into each other in such a hard and bruising way that we hurt other brothers and sisters.

***13*** *Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer,…*

It was already happening. He says, “Stop it!”

*but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*

The members of this church were already tearing into each other through gossip over these disputable matters. Each group was feeling spiritually superior to the other. The group that believed they were free to eat every food rolled their eyes at the group that believed they were to eat only vegetables. They said, “Oh brother! When will these folks get a clue?” The group that believed they were limited to eating only vegetables, glanced with furrowed brows at their brothers and sisters who were eating all sorts of foods and saying, “Oh brother! When will these people resist the world and start becoming committed to following Jesus? And to both groups, God has a simple message. And that message is, “Stop it! For the sake of all that is good in My family, stop it! You are hurting each other and your church will die if you do not cease from this kind of attitude immediately!”

I emphasize that judgment based upon the clear commandments of Scripture is necessary. So Paul is not saying, “Don’t make any judgments about any moral issue.” What is clear in Scripture should be clear in the church. Practical righteousness feeds the soil from which a church grows.So for instance, in 1 Corinthians chapter 5, God says:

**1 Corinthians 5:1-2** It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

He says, “You’re arrogant! You’re boasting about how accepting you are. Just get on your knees and weep in repentance for being so careless in regards to your obedience to Christ.” There are some kinds of judgments that are tied to clear commands of Scripture and that must be made in order for a church to be healthy, in order for a church to glorify God. God is not condemning the kind of judgment that submits to God’s clearly stated commands. ButGod is condemning the kind of judgment over issues that are not clearly taught in Scripture; that are derived by way of our thinking, by way of our reasoning from Scripture, perhaps, but are not absolute commands.

We must make applications to biblical truth wherever we read it, but we must at the same time, be careful not to demand universal agreement with our specific applications, especially when biblically informed believers may disagree with us about those applications. The truth is that God’s Word is 100% true and authoritative. And yet, at the same time, our own applications are not. We don’t carry the same weight of authority in our applications, that we carry to our reading of the Word of God in Scripture. We are right to be confident when we read the Scripture, and we are right to be humble when we begin to make applications of Scripture. When we make our own applications of Scripture as authoritative as Scripture, we are actually undermining the authority of Scripture. We are placing ourselves and our reasoning on the same plane. And that’s what must not happen! It creates trouble everywhere. It’s creating trouble in this church.

***13*** *Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*

This section of verses 13-22 specifically encourages the strong. Remember the “strong” are those who have a broader application, greater freedom. It encourages the strong not to hurt the weak. The “weak” are people who have more limitations in their behaviors, their life. Now, while it does address the strong hurting the weak earlier, the tenor of this passage also, however, addresses the fact that the weak, those with limitations, can hurt the strong as well. Look at verse 3.

**Romans 14:3** Let not the one who eats (the strong) despise the one who abstains (the weak), and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

So the application, whether we’re in a group that is the strong or whether we’re in a group that is the weak, the application is, let’s be careful not to harm brothers and sisters in the family.

In college, my brother had a friend who was a wild character. He was off the rails almost in every aspect of his life as a college student. By God’s grace, he heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and it pierced his soul with power.He gave his life in faith to Jesus and he was born again. He was transformed. And so, what is he to do? He didn’t have a church home, and so he decided, “I’ll just go with my parents this week to the church where they’re attending.” That church that his parents attended was a Romans 1:16 church, but it was not a Romans 14 church. In other words, it was a church that you’d hear every week, “I’m not ashamed of the gospel. It’s the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes.” But it was not a church that was leaning in to what we’re learning in Romans 14 about welcoming those who disagree over disputable matters. So that first Sunday he was there, he was told by church leaders that he needed to cut his hair and lose his earring, or he wouldn’t be welcomed back the next Sunday. And it damaged his faith. Now, he survived it, but it damaged his faith. It was absolutely what Paul is talking about here in regards to how not to treat a brother or sister who is coming into the assembly.

Notice the phrase in verse 13:

***13****…decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*

A stumbling block is something carelessly placed where someone else trips over it and is injured. So a 10 year old boy rides a skateboard and leaves it on the sidewalk. And a person walking down the sidewalk, not expecting to have a skateboard on the sidewalk, doesn’t see it, trips over it, and is injured. That’s a stumbling block. A hindrance is something deliberately placed with forethought to capture something. So a hindrance is like a mouse trap that is baited and set in a specific place in order to catch a mouse.

The idea is, one is intentional; the other is not intentional. And the principle here is that God holds us responsible for anything we do or we fail to do that leads to the spiritual harm of a brother or sister, regardless of whether we intended to bring harm or not. Our intention is not in view. What is in view is that we did something, we acted in a way whether with forethought of malice, or whether just with carelessness, that brought about harm to a brother or sister in the church. He says, “Don’t do that!”

***14*** *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself,…*

In this, Paul is showing his cards. He’s letting us know where he stands on the issue, the theological issue before him. Are Christians allowed to eat all kinds of food, or are Christians limited in their diet? He says

***14*** *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.*

In other words, if a person eats against their conscience, then they are sinning against God. They’re not acting in faith. He goes on to say

***15*** *For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.*

If your brother is harmed or injured or trips over that stumbling block, or intentionally, he gets caught in that trap, you’re not walking in love anymore. He says that’s what the church is about. Think about this! You have a Savior who died for you and He died for that brother and sister. He says, “If your Savior could love to that measure, can’t you love enough to just simply say ‘I don’t want to put a harmful influence in this person’s life. I just don’t want to hurt them.’”

On a biblical level, Paul agrees with those who believe that there is freedom to eat more than vegetables. Yet this is not what Paul presses home. He says it, but then he moves on past it. Paul doesn’t press his opinion. He presses his heart! What’s valuable in our response to each other is not to get everybody on the same page in regard to right opinions. What’s vital is that we get everybody on the same page in regard to a right heart. It is possible to be right and yet be terribly wrong.

***15*** *…By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.*

Look down at verses 20-22 now.

***20*** *Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.* ***21*** *It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.* ***22*** *The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.*

At first, it was on the individual. Now, this is on the greater work that has to do with the individuals. It broadens it. He says, “You can actually not just damage this individual, but you can damage the mission of the whole church by violating love in regards to these disputable matters.” Again, he tips his hand. He says, “Okay. If you want a theological argument, I’m going to concede it. Everything is indeed clean, but it’s wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.” The most severe limitation is worth it if it keeps us from damaging another person’s soul. If you want to go home and eat whatever you want, you’re free to do that. But just don’t flaunt it in a way that damages the soul of your brother and sister when you’re in fellowship together.

This is very similar counsel to the word God brings to the church in Corinth. In Corinth, they were differing in that church over whether or not Christians were free to eat meat that had been offered to pagan idols. So let’s read this and see the similarities. I think they’re different in the disputable matters that are spoken of, but they are similar and the same in principles.

**1 Corinthians 8:4** Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.”

In other words, he says there’s not really such a thing as a false god. And we know that. So if it’s offered to an idol, it’s really offered to nothing.

**1 Corinthians 8:7** But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

Before they came to Christ and acknowledged Him as Savior and Lord, they were eating these foods that had been offered to idols. And if that’s the case, we can understand why they might have a hard time eating food offered to idols as a Christian. If they eat food that is offered to idols and they feel guilty about this and don’t think God is honored by it, but everyone else is eating, so they will too, he says their conscience becomes defiled. They’ve broken something that is very precious, which is their conscience before the Lord. He goes on to say

**1 Corinthians 8:8** We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

He says, all that really doesn’t matter.

**1 Corinthians 8:9** But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

He’s talking about tripping them up in the faith.

**1 Corinthians 8:10-11** For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

Again, he emphasizes, think! This is what Christ sacrificed for us and for your brother. Can’t we sacrifice little in love for the sake of the health of their soul?

**1 Corinthians 8:12** Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

In other words, Christ has union with His people. He’s not separated from His people. If you sin against a brother or sister, you’re sinning against Jesus. That’s remarkable, by the way! That is a totally different way of thinking about the body of Christ. When I sin against a brother, I’m sinning against Jesus, Himself.

**1 Corinthians 8:13** Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

He says, “If that’s the effect of every time I eat meat, that my brother begins to be wounded in their soul, I’ll never eat meat. It doesn’t make a difference to me.” It’s right to use our freedom in a way that strengthens faith and worship in Jesus’ church. It isunrighteous to exercise our freedom in a way that would damage faith and love among our brothers and sisters in the church.

When my oldest son was small, he had a penchant for an overly literal view of the truth. So when I would joke with him through intentional exaggeration or silly humor, he believed I was lying. I was trying to convince him about, “This is a joke, and when it’s used in this context, it’s okay,” but he was really having a hard time. So for instance, when he lost a tooth, I’d say, “Now you know that if you don’t put your tongue in that hole, it’ll grow back a gold tooth.” And of course, I would always say that to all my boys about all their teeth. And people can’t do it. It’s impossible not to put your tongue in the hole. So it’s never really tested. But Alexander, as he was growing up said, “Well, dad, that wasn’t true. You told me a lie.” And so, eventually then, I saw him try to enter into that, but he was doing it in a way where actually his conscience was being broken. So God said, “Ritch, what you need to do is stop joking in that way. It’s kind of fun for you. It’s part of your personality. But you need to stop for the sake of this little boy, so he doesn’t think that breaking his conscience in this regard is right.” This week, I talked to him about it and he laughed and said, “That’s true, dad. But then as I was reading the Bible, I realized that Jesus often did the same thing. That’s what caused me to realize it’s okay.”

So anyway, it’s important to limit our freedoms in order to keep ourselves from hurting another brother or sister. The law of love governs Jesus’ church, not the law of individual freedoms. Love always limits its own liberties. It always does! The first commitment is don’t let your participation in God’s family spiritually harm your brother or sister.

**Commitment #2: Embrace your responsibility to build up the faith of your brother/sister.**

***17*** *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* ***18*** *Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.* ***19*** *So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*

The word “pursue” describes an intentional, focused and spirited hunt for a treasure. It’s a lot of energy. And he’s telling us to apply energy. So there’s application for every one of us. God calls us to pursue something intentionally, focused, spirited. The picture is of a hunter tracking down a deer after he has shot it. He’s just wounded it. It’s bleeding in the snow. And if you know hunters, that’s a terrible position to be in. And they’ll go to great lengths to focus and intentionally exert energy to track that deer down. They don’t want it just to be left out in nature, wounded. And so, that’s the idea. Pursue like that hunter would this deer that is wounded, pursue what makes for peace and pursue what makes for mutual upbuilding.

Now, the word peace is a Jewish idea of “shalom.” It’s not just simply the absence of conflict. Peace means pursue relationships in your own local church that are meaningful, that are purposeful, that are deep, that are committed, that are loving, that are affectionate. Pursue those kinds of relationships. When God places us in a church, He gives us a responsibility not just to be a passive observer or member, but to be an active participant in the body life, in the family life. And every one of us has the opportunity to build up peace, the depth of relationship that this church family has, as we pursue it. He also says, “mutual upbuilding.”

Mutual upbuilding happens when healthy relationships benefit everyone. He says this group called the strong and this group called the weak, right now they’re turned against each other and they’re pointing spears at one another. Don’t they realize that if they turned upward toward Christ, that they would actually gain and benefit great joy from one another? They would be strengthened in faith, strengthened in hope, strengthened in love, strengthened in their worship, strengthened in their mission through the relationships that they have, that they presently have a hard time enjoying.

God has given me the opportunity throughout my life, to meet with young Christians to discuss how they can grow, how they can walk with Christ, how they can serve Him. And when I meet with young Christians who are now a fire of faith for the Lord, but they are very young, very untested, very unknowledgeable of Scripture…When I meet with them to talk with them through the Scriptures, almost always, I feel that I receive more upbuilding than I give. And that probably would surprise them to hear that. But almost always, their questions, their enthusiasm, their passion to share the Gospel, their desire to obey everything that God commands them to do, all of that is like, “Man, I love being around this person, and I’m strengthened! Here is this young Christian, but I’m being built up.” It’s always mutual. It’s called the mutual upbuilding. Just because one person is mature and one person is young, doesn’t mean there’s not mutual upbuilding. He says pursue that! Chase after that! Experience that in this church. Pursuing godliness calls us to take responsibility for the spiritual support, encouragement and improvement of others in our local church.

Now, just to clear up one possible confusion, Paul is not saying that our conduct must be dictated by the legalistic demands of others in the church. Our conduct is led by Scripture alone, not by man-made rules. We note that there is a wide difference between a weaker brother whose conscience is wounded through our use of freedom and a legalistic brother whose self-righteousness is offended by our use of freedom. Those two are two totally different situations. One is a weak brother whose conscience is wounded; the other is a self-righteous brother who is offended.God is not urging us to feed legalism in His church by submitting to its demands. Jesus often offended the Pharisees. He’d talk about the Sabbath and He’d act in certain ways on the Sabbath that would cause fire to rise up among the Pharisees. And Jesus didn’t back down just simply because there were people who were offended. A healthy church does not revolve around man-made rules, but a healthy church does devote itself to loving Jesus and to loving the brothers and sisters God places there. So Jesus is building His church.

***20*** *Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.*

If we worship Jesus, we want to be part of that work. We want to say, “Jesus, You’ve promised ‘I will build My church.’ And we say ‘Amen’ to that! Show me how I can join You.” Every Christian has that passion. “Show me how I can join You. I want to be part of that work of building Your church. That’s what you’re doing.” The last thing we who love Jesus desire to do is destroy the work that He is accomplishing. God is teaching us to major on the major issues, to minor on the minor issues, and be careful of doing anything that would tear down what Jesus is building.

***20*** *Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.*

I remember when I was in fourth grade, I had a friend named Mark. And we spent the whole afternoon working with his Lincoln Logs. He had a number of sets and we put them all together. We had this massive Lincoln Log mansion that we were building. We were nearly finished with it. His older brother discovered in his room that my friend Mark must have done something that irritated him. He stormed out of his bedroom really angry, and he saw us there. We were building this huge mansion with Lincoln Logs. And he came over and with one kick, he just sent all the Lincoln Logs sprawling. And we were terribly troubled by that. (Laughter!) This is our work! We were building this, and all he did was come in and destroyed what we were building.

Now, to destroy a Lincoln Log mansion is really a trivial thing. It’s not going to be eternal. We were going to have to dismantle it by the end of the day anyway to put all the Lincoln Logs back in the boxes. It was a very trivial thing. But I want you to think about Jesus in this world of sin and darkness, building His church with the devil fighting Him at every moment. Jesus is powerful and overcoming the devil. He is doing the work inside flawed people like you and me. He is building, building, building, and then a brother, because they’re upset about some disputable matter, comes over and kicks it down. Don’t, for the sake of your opinions, destroy the work of God.

**Commitment #3: Seek first the kingdom of God in the family of God.**

***17*** *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

This verse has meant more to me in this past year than I think any other verse of Scripture. It’s so simple, and yet, it’s very profound. God is building His kingdom. It’s not our kingdom; it’s His kingdom. And we should assume that the priorities that dominate God’s kingdom are God’s priorities. What is important to God is what happens inside His kingdom. And what’s important to us is not necessarily going to be part of the kingdom, because it’s God’s kingdom.

As we go around and visit one another in each other’s homes, sometimes, just on the basis of what we see there, almost at first glance, we recognize what is important to that specific family. Sometimes we realize just by what we see in the home, that that family really loves sports, or that family really loves cooking, or that family is really into gardening, or that family really loves antiques, or that family really loves to restore old cars, and on and on. Now, if we went into the home though, and we saw for instance that this family really prioritizes gardening and we begin to mow down the garden and start planting and laying sod because we like sod there, you’d say, “Wait a minute! Time out! We’ve spent a lot of time on this. What are you doing?” “Well, I think your garden would look a lot better with sod!” You’d be rightly upset by that because I don’t have the right. It’s not my house! And so I have no right to go rearranging according to my own preferences.

And so, here, what God is saying. He says, “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking. I know those things are really important to you. I know you get really emotional about those things. But that’s not what the kingdom of God is.” We might really want it to be about eating and drinking. But God says, “Tough! It’s not your kingdom. You don’t own it. You don’t have a right to tear up My garden in order to plant your sod. You don’t have a right to do that. And I’m telling you what’s important to me. What’s important to me is not eating and drinking. It’s not these disputable matters. Here is what is important to Me.” I love this! It’s so simple. It’s so pure. It’s so lovely. He says, “Here’s what’s important to Me. What’s important to Me is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” I want you to just let that sink in for a moment! This is what God has for His church. It’s what He has for all of eternity. It’s righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

I don’t know what else is happening in your home, in your life, in your family, but wouldn’t you like to experience that? Regardless of what else is happening, what your hobbies are, what your preferences are, what your priorities are, wouldn’t you love to simply have a home where there is righteousness here? In other words, there is this goodness of life about the way we treat each other, the way we think about what’s right and wrong. And there’s a consistency to it. And there’s peace here. In other words, there’s a wholeness. The relationships aren’t broken. They’re not fractured. There’s not conflict. There’s just a peace. We really enjoy each other and we’re really committed to each other. And all of us look at each other and say, “You don’t have to worry about me breaking fellowship with you over trivial things. I’m going to be with you and you can count on me.”

And then, joy. I love that joy is part of this list because it’s God saying, “Don’t think the kingdom of God is all about hard, hard, hard, hard, hard.” Of course, there’s some hard things in this world as the kingdom of God is invading the kingdom of this world, as we press into the kingdom of God. But he says it’s really about joy. It’s about a deep contentment. It’s about a deep satisfaction. And all that is in the Holy Spirit. So what seems unreachable for us in our life, in our families, in our local church, that seems unreachable…righteousness, peace, and joy…he says, “I’m bringing them down by the Holy Spirit and by His power. If you depend upon My Holy Spirit and live in view of the Holy Spirit, this is what will be yours. This is your birthright. This is what My kingdom is about. It’s going to be about that forever and ever.”

Righteousness begins with Christ Jesus. It’s Christ’s righteousness that brings us into right relationship with God. It’s a righteousness that becomes ours through faith. But then when it becomes ours, it begins to transform us so that our lives will begin to reflect Jesus’ righteousness and then our community reflects Jesus’ righteousness together.

Peace begins with Jesus. He is the author of peace. He brings peace between us and God through His atoning death. But then it’s a peace that invades our relationships with one another so that we’re whole even though we’re very different.

And then joy gives us access to true contentment, true satisfaction. Everything else in this world offers it, but fails to deliver it. And He says, “Here’s joy and it’s yours. I’ve come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly. I’ve come so that you would have joy and I’m offering it to you as you live in Me together for the sake of My Name.” How good the kingdom of God is!

And this is where I close. Here’s what Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything else you ever dreamed about will be added to you.” Everything else you need will be added. So seek first His kingdom. Don’t seek after the issues of eating and drinking. Seek after God’s kingdom. And the kingdom of God is about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

So ask yourself this question if you’re part of this assembly, or if you’re part of another assembly elsewhere. Ask the question: What is God leading me to do in order to pursue actively, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, in my church? The measure of our worship for the Lord is the measure of God’s kingdom being our priority and our seeking after it with a whole heart. Praise God that His Gospel makes it accessible to us here at Bethany today.