

GOING FORWARD IN GRACE**Romans 14**

INTRO: My head is spinning. The world seems crazy. An incident of police brutality resulting in the death of a black man scrapes open a racial wound that's been festering for hundreds of years too long. Racism and injustice needs to be dealt with; that is certain. Was the response over the top? Yes. Riots are never justified. To seek an end to violence with violence is absurd. But the ones oppressed must be heard and systemic sin, whether its racism or hate or violence or disregard for human life, and the list goes on, all must be dealt with. The easy answer is, **THE WORLD NEEDS JESUS!** And a truer statement could not be made. But the reality is, obviously, the world is not there yet. In the meantime, the evil must be addressed, and we as Christ Followers need to take the lead in going forward in grace as we do.

Now, as I considered this talk as we made plans to reengage in onsite worship here at ABC, I actually came up with that title (**GOING FORWARD IN GRACE**) long before I knew which texts I would use. That is a practice that is a major no-no for preachers. We have quite number of preachers at ABC and if we had all been together in this room this morning I'm sure there would be a collective gasp as they realized that Pastor Keith admitted to coming up with an idea and then finding scripture to back it up. But I did and I believe it was Holy Spirit led and by the end of my talk you'll agree. Let me explain.

I'm going to read all of Romans 14 and then I'm going to read an extensive blog post from a fellow pastor and then a few follow-up comments and we will be done. Let me put this into context:

It was Friday the 13th. Yes it was. The morning of Friday, March 13, 2020. I was at a meeting of the Ashland County Ministerial Association. We had our agenda set but it was set aside to hear a talk from our Ashland County Health Department Director. Her message was grim. COVID-19 was coming. Many Ohioans would be infected and people would die and prudent steps needed to be taken. I got worried. I spent the rest of the day consulting with our Church Board about whether or not we should cancel services on Sunday, March 15 and many other churches were doing. It was unanimous. We would cancel two Sundays and wait a couple weeks and see what things were like at the beginning of April. I went home and wept. Fortunately my joy was somewhat restored when Jason called and we got Zoom up and running and it really has been a God-send. But who'd a think it would be three months until we could open up again?!

At our May Board meeting our agenda was mostly for the purpose of deciding when and how we would return to this room. It wasn't an easy meeting. No, we weren't fighting and glaring at each other on our Zoom Computer screens – it's just that it was not nearly as easy to open back up as it was to close. One person wisely said that there was potential schism in how we handled this process. The truth was then, and the truth is now, we must go forward in grace. Some people think we should never have cancelled services, some people think we could have come back to this building last month, some people think next week's date is just right and some people think *"What's the big hurry?! We don't know what's going to happen with this virus and we need to be cautious."*

All those thoughts, and more are articulated by this wonderful community called Ashland Brethren in Christ Church. We are a family and we have disparate views. Wouldn't it be boring if we didn't?!

But then we have the potential divisiveness of varying opinions relating to the racial divide in our country and the resulting violence and unrest. What it does is provide a perfect opportunity to look into the Word together and learn and grow and be more like Jesus rather than allowing disparate views to divide us. When that happens Satan wins. Instead, we must go forward with grace.

My friend Andy, posted this on Facebook the other day: *"Seems a lot of people expect others to think like them. They try to achieve it by yelling at the ones who don't. How's that going?"* Paul dealt with a similar struggle with the Christ Followers in Rome, so he addressed it in Romans 14. Let me read it to you because it's the basis of the remainder of this talk.

Read Romans 14

Now, listen to this very long piece by Pastor Lynn Pryor entitled

WHEN WE DISAGREE OVER COVID-19

"Hoo boy. You'd think Christians would be elated to be coming back together after so many weeks of physical distancing and online services. We're coming back together—but we're not happy.

Some in our churches think it's just plain stupid to cower in fear, hiding behind masks instead of hiding in the shelter of God's protection. Where's your trust in God, people?!

Some in our churches think we're being hasty to bring the church family together when there's still so much at risk. Why do you think trusting God means you can be foolhardy?!

Some despise the "snowflakes" who are afraid to do anything without first bathing in hand sanitizer.

Some judge the callous, non-mask wears who don't care who dies.

I don't think there's been this much dissension about meeting together since Sue Ellen Johnson wore that pantsuit to church in 1972 ... or David Clark brought that pair of drum sticks into the sanctuary in 1987 ... or, well, come to think of it, we've been fairly consistent in finding fault with the way others have approached life in the church and life as a believer.

We can go all the way back to the first century. Jewish Christians struggled with letting go of the old dietary laws and judged the Gentile believers for being "too loose" in what they ate. Meanwhile, the Gentiles despised the Jewish believers for being so backward and not joining them in a pulled pork BBQ sandwich.

Paul jumped into the fray taking place in the church in Rome.

"Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters. One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him" (Romans 14:1-3).

Paul did not rebuke either the "carnivores" or the "vegetarians" for what they believed, but he did rebuke them for their attitude.

The "weak" group was condemning the other side.

The "strong" group was despising the other side.

Paul also addressed their squabble over the disputable matter of observing certain days as holy. While Paul had a definite opinion on the matters, he didn't argue for his viewpoint. Instead, he said that, whatever you do, be convinced in your own mind and do it unto Christ.

"Whoever observes the day, observes it for the honor of the Lord. Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and he gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Romans 14:6-8).

Whatever we do, we do it to honor Christ—and we do it with a heart of thanks. As Paul said elsewhere: *"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God"* (1 Corinthians 10:31).

OK, Paul, we get it: accept one another. But Paul isn't through with us. Just leaving each other alone in our respective views is not enough. We must also work to build the other person up

"Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister.... For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died" (Romans 14:13,15).

The world's way is to tell the other person to grow up and get over it. But the law of love says to stop what you're doing for the sake of the other person—even if your viewpoint is right. We face something far more important than being right. The most important thing is to act with love.

"Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:16-17).

Let me put this in the context of the debate entering the church over COVID-19. The kingdom of God is not a matter of facemasks, distancing, and hand sanitizer, but living in the righteous, peace, and joy found in the Holy Spirit.

Incidentally, Paul kept referring to the weaker brother or sister. In the debate raging about how to come back as a church, who is the weaker person? With whatever issue we face, it's always the other person, right?

OK, so let's assume that, regarding COVID-19, you are right and you are the more mature believer. As the "stronger" person, your responsibility is to not put a stumbling block in the path of someone else.

Don't judge the other person. Build him up.

Don't despise the other person. Build her up.

We're going to get past all this COVID-19. And when this is all past us, what will matter is how we loved and treated each other. (END QUOTE)

Conclusion: AMEN!!! What matters in the end is how we loved and treated each other. I've heard derisive comments about the person driving in their car wearing a mask. I've seen condemning Facebook posts about the

number of people who had the audacity to walk into Drug Mart or Walmart or Buehlers and didn't deign to wear a mask, or worse yet, took their kids along! The fiery darts fly back and forth from both sides. The same with the discussion about the George Floyd controversy. The point is there needs to be conversation rather than condemnation.

Let me give us some take-aways from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 14.

- Going forward in grace means we must *Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.* Romans 14:1-3 (The Message). And never forget, that maybe YOU ARE the one who is weak in the faith department.
- Going forward in grace means we will take comfort in the fact that *If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.* Romans 14:4b (The Message) Nuf said on that one!
- Going forward in grace means we realize, *It's God we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.* Romans 14:8-9 (The Message). We can just love on each other instead.
- Going forward in grace gives us permission to *Forget about deciding what's right for each other.* Romans 14:13a (The Message) Allow the Holy Spirit to do that.
- Going forward in grace gives us the simple truth that *God's kingdom isn't a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness' sake. It's what God does with your life as he sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy. Your task is to single-mindedly serve Christ.* Romans 14:17 (The Message). So whether someone wears a mask and you don't, or we ask you to social distance for the time being here at ABC, or if someone forgets to use hand sanitizer, it all comes down to the truth that we must single-mindedly serve Christ, first and foremost.
- And finally, going forward in grace means we will . . . *agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other. Help others with encouraging words; don't drag them down by finding fault.* Romans 14:19 (The Message).

In my Bible just across to the left is the last half of one of my favorite chapters in the Bible – Romans 12. And Paul tells us there, *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.* Romans 12:9-10 (NIV). The King James renders verse 10 this way, *Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another;* Romans 12:10 (KJV). We are coming out of a quarantine, let's be devoted to one another in love as we emerge. We have various solutions to the racial violence and resulting protests and violence, let's be devoted to one another in love as we discuss them. Here's a big one that I have not even touched on and there's absolutely no time left this morning: we have a presidential election this year and our nation is divided more than ever, let's be devoted to one another in love as we walk together.

ABC, be kindly affectioned to one another in brotherly and sisterly love! IN HONOR PREFERING ONE ANOTHER! That ABC, is going forward in grace. Amen.