

Sometimes words carry a lot of baggage with them, and because of that baggage that they carry they affect everything else that we hear. And one word like that is the word "opinions" in the first verse of our reading for tonight. Because we usually use the word "opinion" to mean two different ways of looking at something. I have my opinion. You have your opinion. They're both equally valid. There's no right or wrong. They're just opinions. But because of that way that we think about the word "opinion," that can color this whole passage of what Paul is talking about in the book of Romans. Is Paul just telling us in Romans 14 and 15 something that we already know? That one person looks at things one way, the other person looks at things the other way, and they just need to learn to agree with each other, to just accept that they both have different ways of looking at it. Is that what Paul is trying to say?

Well, if that was the case, then what you do with Paul talking about the strong in faith and the weak in faith? How does that actually fit in? Or when Paul talks about those who approve of what they're doing and those who doubt? Or when he talks about building up your neighbor in order to make him strong? If we insist on our understanding of opinions and allow that to color everything else, you almost have to ignore these things, just kind of pretend that they're not there. But in reality, Christians, what Paul is talking about is not different ways of looking at things. He is not talking about likes and dislikes. He is not talking about two ways to look at the same thing. What Paul is talking about in Romans 14 and 15 is about dealing with fellow believers, fellow brothers in the Lord who are weak in their faith. He is talking about how we should approach those people in love as Christians, the people who do not yet fully understand the truth.

Because the problem in this passage, Christians, was a conflict between two different groups of Christians. You had those who were strong in their faith, and you had those who were weak in their faith. And in this particular case, the strong believed--and rightly--that you could eat whatever you want, that food was just food. Food was not something that was going to make you sin. Didn't Jesus himself say, Mark chapter 7: "Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled? (Thus he declared all foods clean.)" The strong got that. They understood it. They knew the truth of what Jesus was trying to say. But the weak, on the other hand? They struggled with that. They still believed that there were some foods that could make them sin. If they ate meat which had been sacrificed to idols, meat which was connected to false religion, they thought that could make them sin. Or maybe food that was prepared in the wrong way, that would be a sin too. It was a hang-up that they had from their former lives as Jews. They grew up that way. From as far back as they could remember, that was always what they believed. And now they had to give it up. That was really hard to do. I think we can all appreciate and understand how hard it is to break a habit, especially when that habit is something we consider good, something that we consider beneficial. And for that reason, then, they only ate vegetables, because with vegetables there was no chance of sinning. There was no way that it could be unclean. It was a foolproof way to avoid the problem.

But these two groups were attacking each other. The strong were despising the weak. Why can't they just see the truth? Why can't they just see this for what it is? I can eat what I want when I want. Jesus himself said that this is okay. Why can't they just get that? It's so easy. Why can't they just get on board? But the weak, on the other hand, were condemning the strong. They said, why are you doing something that's wrong? And more importantly, why are you trying to get me

to do something that I consider to be wrong? So instead of trying to work to help each other, instead of trying to build the weak up so that they would become strong, they were simply condemning each other. And in that way, they were tearing down the Church instead of building it up. That was the problem that Paul is speaking to in our passage for tonight.

So what are we supposed to do, then? How do we deal with this situation? First of all, Paul says, by recognizing that all of us have to answer to the Lord. Verse 4 of our reading, he says this: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand." So in other words, what matters is not what other people think. What matters is what God thinks, what God thinks of me. And I have to act according to my conscience. I have to act according to what I believe to be right. I cannot go against that. And in this case, both of these groups thought they were doing the right thing. It's not like the strong realized that what they were doing was wrong and did it anyway, and it's not like the weak realized they were doing something wrong and did it anyway. They're not sinning in that way. They are both convinced that they're doing the right thing. They are acting according to their conscience. Paul doesn't say that they're both right. In fact, he says that one is right and one is wrong. But what is important here is that they both believe that they're doing the right thing, and that's important because both of them have to answer to God for what they have done someday.

But that's also important because--and pay attention to this, Christians--if I do something that I think is wrong, it is a sin, even if it actually isn't a sin. This is what Paul means when he says in verse 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." So if I'm convinced in my conscience that what I'm doing is wrong, even if it isn't actually a sin, if I do it anyway it becomes a sin, because I have gone against my better judgment. I have gone against what I know. As Paul says in verse 23: "Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."

And the reason this happens, Christians, is because if I'm convinced that something is wrong and I do it anyway, that's going to lead to more sin. I have done something I thought is wrong, and so I'm going to continue doing more and more wrong. Sin always builds on itself. It always grows. It becomes bigger and bigger. One thing leads to another, and pretty soon I'm doing something I never thought I would ever be doing, because that's how sin works. And by sinning against my conscience, by sinning against what I know, I am falling into sin. And in this way the Church is torn down and not built up.

So by attacking each other in this way, by constantly fighting with each other, they were creating opportunities for sin. Because they were causing them to stumble, causing them to sin against their own conscience, especially with the weak. Because when the weak saw what the strong were doing, when they saw them eating things they thought they shouldn't be eating, it would cause them to stumble either because they would condemn their brothers for what wasn't actually a sin, or because they would start doing it themselves, even though they thought that it was a sin. By eating it, they were sinning and that led to more sinning. And their fighting was creating sin and creating problems when there wasn't any before. That was the issue that was happening.

Now, I do have to be clear here. Paul is not talking about things that are actually sins. If I think something isn't a sin when it actually is, when it clearly is in God's Word, it doesn't matter what I think. It's still a sin. I can be trying to get around what God says. Or even if I'm just misinformed in this case, even if I just think wrongly, the right thing to do in that case would be to correct it immediately, to put an end to it right then and there. But that's the case of things that are actually sins.

I'm talking about things that we only think are sins, things that we only think are wrong when in fact they aren't. Let's use one real common example, the issue of alcohol. I'm sure you know of people, or maybe you've only heard of people, who believe that alcohol is a sin, that it's always wrong to drink alcohol. And maybe they came to that conclusion because they had a bad experience in their childhood. Someone abused alcohol and that caused them to have a very negative experience, and so now they think that if they drink alcohol too that it would be a bad thing. Or maybe they just believe that drinking alcohol is a sin. This is something that people do think. People do come to this conclusion, even good Christians. But what you do in that case? How do you approach that problem? Do you say, "I can drink a beer if I want to! And I'm going to drink it right here in front of you, because I am free to do this. You can't tell me what to do"? But how is that not the strong despising the weak?

Or to use another example. People these days often get involved with lifestyle changes, like diets. They get totally wrapped up in it. They're totally convinced that this is the way that you should live. And sometimes people even go so far that they start looking sideways at anybody who doesn't do the same thing. That you're a bad person for eating the things that you do. There are people who do think like this. Perhaps you know someone. What do you do? How do you deal with the situation? When they say that you're wrong for eating meat or you're wrong for eating sugar or you're wrong for eating carbs, whatever it may be. Do you say well, "I am free to do this. You can't tell me what to do. I'm going to eat it here anyway right in front of you"? But is that not a case of the strong despising the weak?

So what should we do? Paul tells us, verses 20 and 21: "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. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother stumble." As Christians we are called to be willing to give these things up for the sake of our weaker brother. That in itself shows you that this is not about just opinions, about likes and dislikes or just two ways of looking at things. But rather we are called as Christians to give these things up for the sake of the other. If something that I do causes my weaker brother to stumble, or if something that I eat causes him to sin, then I must not do it. I must be willing to give it up so that he is not led into sin. Seeking to build him up instead, seeking to show him the truth so that together, someday, we both can do this in good conscience with the Lord. That's what we are called to do as Christians. But what if my brother never comes to be strong? What if my brother is always struggling with this, is always weak? What am I supposed to do? What if this is a lifelong thing? In that case, Paul says, it is better to never do it, to give it up entirely for the sake of my brother rather than insisting on my own way. Because in that way I am seeking after peace. In that way I am seeking after his good, seeking Christ together as one body in the Lord.

Paul says in verse 1 of chapter 15: "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." And we have this obligation, Christians, because of the example of Christ himself. Because Christ did not come to please himself, insisting on his own way, but humbled himself so that we would become strong. Christ did not come insisting on his own way to please himself, but humbled himself so that we would be united together into one. Christ has welcomed all of us into his body, into the Church, so we are called also to welcome one another. No longer condemning each other, no longer looking down on each other, no longer insisting on our way at all costs, but becoming like Christ also to my weaker brother so that he too would be saved. Is that going to be easy? No. The way of self-denial is never easy. But Christians, it is the way of love in Jesus Christ our Lord. It is the way we are called to live together as his body in the Lord.

So let us no longer condemn one another. Let us not please ourselves. But let us seek to build each other up in harmony and in peace. And in this way, Christians, we will glorify God with one voice in all that we say and do.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us together into one in the body of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to be patient with one another, to bear with one another, and to seek the good of each other, so that we may glorify you with one voice in all we say and do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.