
Alright. I hope everybody is doing great. I want to welcome all of you at our physical locations and those of you joining us online. I hope you had an incredible Thanksgiving as we kind of kicked off the Christmas season.

At our house we kicked it off by watching the greatest Christmas movie of all time, *Die Hard*. It is a Christmas movie. They voted on it at the Council of Nicaea, I believe, in AD 451.

Really glad to have you guys. We are wrapping up this series that we've been in through most of the fall called *Recalibrate*. This is the eleventh and final week of the series. Kind of hard to believe. It went by so fast.

I just want to go ahead and loop back around to the tension that I acknowledged on week one of the series if you can think back that far. I just want to acknowledge it once again as we wrap up this series, because some of us are like, "It went by so fast." And it did. And the tension, and I acknowledged this on week one, was that it was super aggressive and really naïve to think that we could cover all 433 verses, all 16 chapters of Romans in 11 weeks.

I wasn't even going to try to do that. But what I wanted to do was to cover all four parts of the book. I just want to remind you of what those parts are once again.

Chapters 1-4 Paul tells us the really "bad news."

And the bad news is worse than you think, which is why the first few weeks I had to wear a preaching helmet when I preached.

Chapters 5-8 tell us the "good news."

And if the good news doesn't sound good to you it's because you don't know how bad the bad news really is.

Chapters 9-11 Paul unpacks the implications of the "good news,"

Chapters 12-16 he applies the good news to "real life."

Now remember, once again, the origins of the letter. Paul writes this practical letter filled with all kinds of good theology to a church gathered in Rome that had just experienced a massive, cultural crisis. The Jews got kicked out of the city of Rome. And then five years later they came back to a very Gentile church. And they were divided over all kinds of issues.

So Paul writes this letter to recalibrate their internal compasses back to True North, which is reminding them of what the gospel is and what it isn't and how they need to have unity, not uniformity, but unity in Christ so that way the message of the gospel could go all around the globe.

Now, we find ourselves in very similar circumstances with what we've gone through over the last couple of years, a massive, cultural crisis that has divided so many of us. So we've been using the book of Romans to do the very same thing that it has been doing for thousands of years, recalibrate our internal compasses, as Christ followers, back to True North.

Now here's what Paul is doing as we cover Romans chapter 14 and the first part of chapter 15. He's going to launch into a very helpful, but a very extended discussion on this subject: How do we handle disagreement with people who have different opinions on issues that we feel very passionate about?

Now, he's primarily talking about relationships within the church. But if you've been with us over chapters 9, 10, 11, and 12, he started with relationships within the church and then, like concentric circles, took those principles and applied them outward toward our relationships out in society and the culture.

But he's primarily saying, "Okay, let's start with the church." So how do you have disagreements with people in your small group? How do you have disagreements with people in the areas you serve in? How do you have disagreements when the staff makes a decision that you don't like, understand, or agree with? What are we supposed to do with that?

How do we disagree in a way that doesn't discredit the gospel message? That's what we're trying to get our heads around. And we honestly don't do this very well. The reason why is, as a human race, we don't disagree with each other very well.

Can I just get really vulnerable with you? As a pastor one of the things that I didn't anticipate when I got into ministry and I never get used to it, is when people leave the church. It doesn't matter what reason that they have. Maybe they have very good reasons. I always take it personally and it always hurts even though I know that it shouldn't.

Now, I want to be very, very clear. I'm under no illusion that you should stay in this church for the rest of your life. I am not saying that there is never a good reason to leave a church. God calls people to churches. He calls people through churches for all kinds of reasons.

Contrary to popular belief we are not in competition with other churches around our city. In fact, I'm a huge fan of every Christ centered, Bible teaching church in our city. I'm friends with most of the pastors. We have a text chain and we're encouraging and cheering each other on.

With all of that said, I will say that there are lots of bad reasons to leave a church, meaning there is too much serial church-hopping-and-shopping. And it usually happens when we have a

disagreement, or we don't like something. We have a tendency in our western, consumeristic mindset to treat the church we belong to sort of like the fitness club that we belong to, "I'll stay just as long as it fits me, as long as it meets my needs. But as soon as it doesn't, I'm going to bounce."

How do we have disagreement and the staying power to say, "You know what? I'm going to be committed even though we don't always see eye-to-eye on what we might call secondary issues."

Last week, in chapter 12, verse 16 Paul says this, "Man, live in harmony with each other." Great. How do we do that? How do we live in harmony? There are a lot of unhealthy ways to do that. We can avoid conflict and avoid hard conversations in the name of harmony, but that's going to eventually catch up to us and that's not a healthy way to deal with it.

How do we live in such a way where others see that we are honorable even in the way that we have disagreements? And much of the rest of the world looks at the church and says, "You guys are just as divided as anybody else is. So why would we want to be a part of that?"

See, in this world of algorithms, echo chambers, and tribalism, this has never been more important. And honestly, at times we see disagreement as a threat. We live in a world where, "If you don't see things the way that I do, then I'll just cancel you, unfollow you, block you, and villainize you."

I read a book earlier this year called *The Coddling of the American Mind*. And it was basically saying that we've created this society, especially with younger generations, where it is emotionally unsafe to have any sort of disagreement, so we don't know how to do that in a constructive way.

And rather than setting an example for the rest of the world on how to do this, unfortunately, we end up just mirroring the division that we see everywhere else in the world.

This was happening in the church in Rome. They were deeply, deeply divided. Here was the issue that they were facing. The new Gentile Christians, they were brought into the faith at a later date than the Jewish Christians, they just simply didn't know what to do with all of the Old Testament laws, rules, and regulations that their Jewish brothers and sisters felt so passionate about. And that was what was dividing them.

Now, in order to understand the context of Paul's teaching in Romans 14 I need to introduce you, or reintroduce you, to this simple phrase right here:

Freedom in Christ

And honestly I don't think we talk enough about it. I grew up in church and I can't think of very many messages that I heard on the subject of freedom in Christ.

In fact, for some of you it may be a brand-new concept because from your perspective it sort of looks like Christianity is just a bunch of rules and regulations that are constraining. But the gospel says the exact opposite. We actually have more freedom in Christ than what we probably realize.

Paul addresses this in another one of his letters. In Galatians 5 verse 1 he says this: *“So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don’t get tied up again in slavery to the law.”*

Well, if you’ve been here during this series you know that we’ve said the purpose of the Old Testament law was to be a mirror. It’s to show us that we are sinners in need of God’s grace. It’s to show us the standard that we all fall short of, and we could never live up to. So we rest everything on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

What Paul is saying here is, “Don’t take Jesus *and* all of these other things to try to justify yourself before God. You are saved by grace alone. You have freedom in Christ.”

What was happening in the church in Rome is the Jewish Christians were looking down on the Gentile Christians living in that freedom, and the Gentiles were looking down on the Jewish Christians because they weren’t participating in the freedom of Christ that was theirs.

So look at what Paul says starting in verse 1 of chapter 14. He says:

“Accept...” the word here is to receive each other, receive, *“other believers who are...”* here’s his description, *“weak in faith, and don’t argue with them about what they think is right or wrong.”*

So a couple of words of explanation here. Paul is going to say, “Hey. There are two groups that are divided in the church in Rome.” And he says, “There are some who are weak in faith and others who are strong in faith.”

Now, intuition would say, “Since the Jewish Christians had been following God a whole lot longer, then they would be the ones who would be strong in faith.” But it’s actually the exact opposite. He’s saying that the Gentiles were the ones who were strong in faith. Why? Because everything was resting on the sacrifice of Jesus. They were being justified in God’s eyes through their relationship with Christ.

And ironically, he’s saying that the Jewish Christians, those who had been following after God a whole lot longer, are weak in the faith. It’s not a statement of judgment, it’s a statement of description, because they were taking Jesus plus all of these other Old Testament regulations trying to justify themselves.

He’s essentially saying to the Gentiles, “Hey, don’t get into an argument with them about what they think is right or wrong.” Now, those words right and wrong maybe a way to describe this would be this little phrase right here:

Disputable matters

And a disputable matter.... What Paul is saying here is there are some issues that we will just disagree about, and it should never cause division within the church because in the long run they are of no real consequence. The Greek word is *adiaphora*. And basically what that means is things that don't really matter. They are not really commanded in Scripture, and they are not forbidden in Scripture. Actually Scripture is silent on them.

Now, with that said I need to be really clear. Paul is not saying that there is never a time to divide or never a time to part ways over a disagreement. Take a collective look at all of Paul's writing in the New Testament—we'll talk about a couple that we see most clearly.

In Galatians he says that if anybody teaches a false gospel, if anybody teaches that Jesus isn't the Son of God, that we're not saved by grace through faith... he doesn't say, "Well, just shrug your shoulders and say, 'We'll agree to disagree.'" He doesn't say that. He said to actually send them packing.

In 1 Corinthians Paul actually addresses open immorality that people were unrepentant of. He's not talking about general sin. We're all going to sin. He's talking about open immorality that they were not turning away from. And he doesn't say, "Well, I say tomāto, you say tomāto." He didn't say, "Well, who am I to judge?"

No, he actually says this. He says, "With compassion and grace but directness, remove them." Not excommunicate forever, remove them. Hopefully for the purpose that they can be received back in.

So, yes. There are times to draw a line in the sand. The point Paul is making in Romans 14 is that not everything should escalate to that level. There are more things that we could put into the category of disputable matters than not.

There is some discrepancy over who said this. Many think it is attributed to Augustine. But it's so helpful. He said this:

"In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty [or freedom]; in all things, love."

And that's a helpful principle for us to understand in Romans 14. So what are the essentials to the faith. Theologian Michael Bird breaks this down. These are really, really helpful. Basically they are divided into three categories. He said there are some things that are:

Essential to Salvation

Primarily the person of Jesus and process of salvation, that is essential. Then he would say, "Here's a category of things that are really important, they have implications." They are:

Important, but not essential for salvation

So it's like: view of God's Word, definition of marriage, gender, and moral issues. These first two categories by the way, Scripture is really, really clear on. But there is a third category, and the third category would just be:

Non-essential to salvation

So this is preferences, opinions, and debatable issues. We'll get into a little bit of a more exhaustive list here in just a minute. It's going to be fun. But primarily, it's like should Christians get a tattoo or not? Should we participate in Halloween?

Preferences the Bible doesn't command, and it doesn't forbid. It's a debatable issue. See, here's the deal. Many of us have deep-seated opinions on all sorts of subjects, which is great. We just need to acknowledge that most of those opinions are not necessarily backed up with a chapter and a verse. We don't have a *thou shalt* or a *thou shalt not*. Therefore, if we don't, we don't need to escalate it to the level of division or villainization. It is an opinion and that's all that it is.

In fact, the Greek word for opinion, I think, if I'm pronouncing this correctly is: Twitter.

Right? It's just an opinion.

Now, you have every right to have an opinion. In fact, I want to hear your opinions, I want to learn from your opinions, I have had my mind changed by many of your opinions, but we've just got to recognize that that's all that it is.

And opinions change. You likely have had opinions in your life during a different season of life that now you don't. Things change all of the time. Now, I'm talking about non-essentials here. I'm not talking about essentials to salvation.

Remember this important little phrase right here, especially when it comes to the church: Methods are many, principles are few.

Methods always change, principles never do.

And oftentimes, even within the church, we can get so hung up over methodology and we divide over that rather than the principle behind it.

Let me give you an example of this. I remember hearing about this. This is decades ago, but there was a small, traditional country church that got into a huge debate over worship style. And it wasn't over whether or not to worship with drums and guitars. This goes back even further. It was whether or not to bring a piano into the church.

This was at a time where pianos were seen as the Devil's instrument and the reason why is because saloons had pianos in them. This is why whenever you watch country western movies, there is always a piano in the saloon.

So the church decided to bring in a piano for worship and the church divided over it. They were like, "We want to bring this piano in," because all of the people they were trying to reach were hanging out in the saloons. This was going to be familiar to them. And ironically enough, a lot of the hymns that come out of our hymnals were bar tunes that we changed the lyrics to so that way they would be familiar to non-Christians. How ironic.

So this church gets divided over the fact that there is a Devil's instrument on stage, the piano, and so here's what half of the church who didn't want it did. They stole it. And they hid it. And for a year, nobody knew where the piano went.

Finally, one day, the janitor was doing some cleaning and he went down into the baptistry to clean out the baptistry, which was empty, by the way, there was no water in it because the piano was in the baptistry covered up with blankets.

And the tragedy of that story is that churches that divide over non-essentials don't introduce very many people to Jesus.

See, we've got to be really careful about dividing over methodologies. The longer that you're a Christian, and I can say this because I've been a Christian longer than not... here's the deal. The longer that you're a Christian, the more deep-seated your opinions become to where you begin to confuse your opinion with God's Word. You end up giving it the same weight.

Here's what I want you to understand. Spiritual maturity is not developing convictions based on how much you know. Let me say that again. Spiritual maturity is not developing convictions based on how much you know. It is learning to show restraint in the weight that you give those convictions.

In other words, we don't elevate our opinion over non-essentials to the Word of God and then hold them over other people. We've got to acknowledge that the Bible is silent on so many issues. What the Bible gives us is principles which it wants us to apply to specific situations. And the reason why God does that is because He wants us to mature.

And this is the goal of parenting. When you have little kids you start off telling them what to do in every specific circumstance. But as they grow older, you start to move back and give them a bit more freedom. And by the time they are adults, young adults, hopefully, you've instilled enough principles and you've modeled those principles to them so they can begin to make decisions themselves. You don't have to hover over their shoulder when they are 30 years old telling them what, specifically, to do.

In a very similar way, God wants us to grow and mature. That's why the Bible is silent on so many issues.

So, Paul is going to give some examples of what they were dividing over and then we'll make application to us. So verse 2, he says:

"For instance," or we could say, "For example," "... one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them."

So once again, going back to our two categories, the weak in faith and the strong in faith, he says that the strong in faith are the ones who eat meat, the weak in faith are the ones who only eat vegetables. And I'm going to show you an incredible amount of restraint here and not make a joke about that at the expense of our vegetarian brothers and sisters, alright? I'm not going to do that. Here's why. Because this isn't about Paleo, Keto, of the Carnivore diet.

The issue here was that the city of Rome was filled with pagan temples to false gods. And so everybody was going in and they were offering sacrifices to these false gods and many of those sacrifices were meat. And since an idol is an inanimate object, it doesn't consume steak; it would just be left there.

Eventually somebody would come through, collect all of the meat that had been offered to these idols and they would recycle it and sell it in the marketplace. And you didn't know if that ribeye that you were purchasing was legit or if it had previously been offered to an idol.

So here's the division in the early church. The Jewish Christians who weren't really fans of meat anyway, they were like, "You can't purchase any of the meat at the marketplace because how do you know if that was formerly offered to an idol? And if you eat that meat then you are unintentionally participating in idol worship." So they just said, "No meat whatsoever."

And the Gentile Christians weren't down with that. They were like, "Wait a second. Those idols in the temples are false gods with no power. There is only one true God and His power overrides all of the nonsense.

Besides, in Acts, chapter 10, didn't Peter have a dream from God where God lowered this sheet from heaven that was filled with all of these animals and He said, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."? We have a chapter and a verse, so pass the bacon. That's what they were divided over.

Here is the other issue that were divided over in verse 5. He says:

"In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable."

What's he talking about? Well, a couple of things. First of all he's saying that the Jewish Christians felt very, very strongly about the tradition of their Jewish holidays since God was the One who established them to remind Israel of His various promises throughout the year.

In addition to that, they felt very, very strongly that the day of rest and worship should be on the Sabbath, which is actually our Saturday, not on Sunday, Saturday. And they said, "This is the way that it has been throughout history for 1,500 years, so why should we go changing that now? And we actually have a chapter and a verse as well, Exodus, chapter 20, verses 8 through 11:

"Remember to observe the Sabbath day..." their Saturday, "by keeping it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God."

It's kind of interesting, several years ago when we started a Saturday night service I got some people kind of upset about it. Ironically, when we stopped doing Saturday night service, I had people upset about that.

I remember getting an email from a lady. She was upset that we were starting up a Saturday night service. She said, "Pastor, the Sabbath is not Saturday, it's Sunday." I was like, "Technically, it's Saturday." And we end up dividing over stuff like this, right?

So the Gentile Christians were like, "It's all fine and good that you want to worship on that day, you want to keep some of those traditions and holidays. But listen. All of that is part of the old covenant. And Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection releases us from all of that, so it is non-essential. In fact, we have a chapter and a verse too, Colossians, chapter 2, verses 16 and 17 says:

"So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths. For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality."

So they were gridlocked over these two subjects.

Here's what Paul doesn't do. Paul doesn't say, "Well, you're all right." He doesn't say, "Well, why don't you just agree to disagree?" And he certainly didn't say, "Those of you who want to have a cheeseburger on a Sunday afternoon after church, why don't you go down the street and start your own church—Second Romans Community Church." He doesn't do any of that.

Interestingly enough, Paul actually had an opinion on both of these subjects as well. In addition to what he writes in Colossians 2, go on down to verse 14. He states very clearly, he says, "On the authority of Jesus, no food in and of itself is wrong to eat. So if you wanted to eat that steak that had formally been offered to an idol, Jesus makes it clean. You're not sinning by doing that." Paul was very, very clearly on team bacon burger on Sunday afternoon.

He's also like, "Hey, man, you want to worship? It doesn't really matter what day you do it. With all sincerity do it. Do it in spirit and truth."

So here's what makes this discussion so helpful. Paul didn't side with the Gentiles and point his finger at the Jewish Christians and say, "You guys need to grow up." That's not what he does. In fact, he actually turns to the Gentiles and said, "Hey, man, you have this freedom in Christ on all of these issues, but you know what? In order to build up the church you might need to lay those freedoms down."

He shows us how to maintain unity and love as a church family even when we disagree on things that we feel very strongly about. Now remember, I'm talking about non-essentials. I'm not talking about the person of Jesus or the process of salvation.

So in these areas, for the sake of mission to get people to Jesus, we have unity. We're not going to condemn others on matters of conscience. And we're not going to feel superior to others on matters of conscience.

Whether or not to eat meat and what day of the week to worship on, not really hot button issues today that divide us. We've just replaced them with a whole bunch of others.

Let me dive into this and throw a few of these out. I guarantee you probably have an opinion on all of these things. But on all of these things, the Bible is rather silent.

One that comes to mind is how should we dress when we come to church? There are some people who are of the opinion that when you come to church you wear your Sunday best and here's why. We're coming to worship God. We're coming before Him, and we want to present ourselves to Him in the best way that we can.

And they would use this analogy. If you go to meet royalty, you dress up then, so why wouldn't you dress up when you go to church? Not a bad point.

Others come back and say, "Yeah, but I'm not meeting royalty. I'm meeting my Heavenly Father. And I just want to come as I am. And the Scripture is very, very clear that man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. So, I'd actually rather make sure that my heart is right when I come to church." Hey, very good point.

Who's right? It is a disputable matter.

Here's another one:

Music

Specifically this. In the church I grew up in, and I know a whole bunch of you can relate to this—I grew up hearing that all secular music was bad and sinful, especially heavy metal or hardcore rap. We watched videos in youth group about how when you played heavy metal songs backward there were secret messages from Satan. And I didn't even know that until I watched

that documentary. Then I went and tried to play all of the records backward so that I could hear it.

I remember my parents were like, "You cannot listen to any sort of heavy metal," but they didn't really tell me why. There is a really good reason why. We've talked about it in this series. We want to be formed more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus. Is listening to that very helpful for your growth, the processes of your mind and heart? But they didn't really say that. It was just bad.

Here's what that did for me as a rebellious church kid. It just made me want to listen to it all the more. When Metallica's *Enter Sandman* video came out, that was forbidden in my house, so I just watched it in secret. I would turn on the TV and I would have my hand on the remote and be looking down the hallway just to see if they were walking in, and if they walked in I'd turn it over really quickly to Nickelodeon.

So it was like, yes, what we fill our heads with, that is the process of sanctification and discipleship, but is it sinful to listen to all secular music? Well, that is a debatable issue. And there are actually really good points on both sides.

Here's another one:
Alcohol

Any of you grow up like me? I grew up in a household and a church of total teetotalers. We abstained from all alcohol. I actually thought to have a sip of alcohol was sin. My wife grew up in a very similar environment. We got married and we moved to California and started a church about an hour away from Napa Valley.

We started inviting all of these people over to our house for dinner. And they would bring a bottle of wine. And it totally freaked us out. We had no idea what to do with it. We had no idea that they were bringing it over as a gift to open up and share at the dinner table. We offended so many people because we just kind of took it and stuck it on a shelf, didn't open it because we were total abstainers.

Now, as I have grown and am in a different season, and as I've studied Scripture on this, I see that the Bible doesn't forbid alcohol. It forbids drunkenness. But, genetically, one out of seven people have a predisposition to alcoholism, which means we don't want to trip them up and make it more difficult for them. We have freedom to do this, but it isn't always wise.

Here's another one since we are having fun:
Yoga

Some say that's a practice connected to Eastern Mysticism, which makes it hard to separate the practice of it from its origins. In its original form it was about clearing your mind and finding oneness with things around you, which is hardly what Christ taught.

But others will say, “No, no, no. Wait a second. We can redeem the practice and use it to take care of our bodies with stretching. There’s nothing anti-God about letting your mind relax and learning some good breathing techniques.”

Who’s right? It’s a disputable matter.

You might have freedom. Is it always wise? People go back and forth on this. I won’t even get started on yoga pants, alright.

Here’s another one:

Home Education, Christian Private, or Public School

Man, who needs the UFC? If you want entertainment, just put three Christian families who have deep-seated opinions on all three, throw the subject out there, get a bag of popcorn and watch it go down.

Here’s another one:

Politics

We would say, “How can you be a Christian and be left-leaning? Don’t you care about Biblical values like sanctity of life and limiting the government’s reach into private lives?” And others would say, “Well, how can you be a Christian and be right-leaning? Don’t you care about social justice and economics that don’t just benefit the privileged?”

See, both sides are guilty of using Jesus’ name when it conveniently fits their agenda, and they are manmade government parties. Jesus is not a Democrat or a Republican.

Who’s right?

So we may not be arguing over food sacrificed to idols or what day of the week to worship on, but we’ve got our issues to which we need to apply these principles today. And here’s why—for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If the world looks at the church and just sees the whole war, why would they ever want to be a part of it?

So here are five principles and then we’ll be done. Principle number one if you’re taking notes: Conscience Matters!

It really does. Both yours and theirs. Look at what it says starting in verse 5 and following. It says:

“You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable. Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God.”

In other words, he's saying all of our life is an act of worship. Remember last week we said we want to be living sacrifices of praise. He's basically saying this. On disputable matters, everything we engage in or refrain from should be an act of worship.

So he says if you really feel in your conscience that you shouldn't eat meat (this is what he's talking about with them) and you're doing it to honor God, then by all means that's what you should do. Or if, "I'm going to bless this meat and thank God for what He's provided," then by all means do that to the honor of God.

He's saying that we don't want to take advantage of our freedoms to indulge in anything we want for selfish reasons, but we're not refraining in an effort to earn something from God either.

Here's the principle of conscience. If you sincerely feel like something is wrong and you do it anyway, then it's wrong to you. And Paul specifically addresses that on down in verse 23. Look at what he says:

"But if you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning."

In other words he said, "Even if it's not wrong in and of itself, if you sincerely think that it is wrong, and you do it anyway, you just violated a personal conviction, which ends up making it wrong. Now, with that said, not wrong enough for you to hold that conviction over other people, but wrong because it violated your own conscience.

Now, what is our conscience? What role does it play? It is really dangerous to violate your conscience because your conscience is a gift from the Holy Spirit. It is a form of moral intuition where you know something before you're fully able to articulate it.

The etymology of the word breaks down into two:

Science: to know

Con: with

What that means is that before your head knows it, your heart feels it. That is a gift of God. Your conscience is like guardrails. So early on in your growth as a Christ follower, the guardrails on certain issues in your life, depending upon your predisposition, your struggles, or your genetics may need to be brought in a little tighter than other people simply for the sake of keeping you from veering your life off into a ditch. Technically it's not a sin, but technically it's not beneficial either.

So although we have freedom to have a glass of cab with our steak, is it beneficial, especially if you have a predisposition to drunkenness or if you're with somebody who does? You bring those guardrails in.

I have a friend who was a prominent music DJ—played on the radio back in the late 80s early 90s. He gave his life to Christ and went into ministry, and he said for a season of his life he had to completely stop listening to any sort of secular music, not because it was a sin for everybody, but because it would set him back in his growth as a Christ follower. He brought those guardrails in, and it was a matter of conscience and conviction for him.

Are you tracking with that? Am I making sense?

So be careful about numbing yourself to your personal conscience and convictions because if you do you'll gradually become desensitized to it. Just use wisdom. You don't take that, because you feel so strongly about it, and end up looking down on others with the same standards because they may be in a very different season of growth than you are.

Here's number two:

Avoid giving your conscience the same weight as God's voice in the lives of others. That's what happens, man. We develop a deep-seated conviction about music, yoga, alcohol, politics—whatever it is, and we end up elevating our opinion to have equal weight with God's voice and we use that to browbeat other people. Look at what it says in verse 7:

"For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honor the Lord. And if we die, it's to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead."

That is just a very long way to say that we live our lives for an audience of One. We live our lives primarily accountable to God. So decisions that we make about non-essential issues are made out of our understanding at the time and where we are in our growth as a Christ follower at the time.

And since we all belong to God, it is out of place to question the decisions of others on matters of conscience, when it's not a matter central to our faith.

Here's principle number three:

Be patient and kind towards those who see things differently.

In other words, don't look down on others and don't condemn others. Look at what Paul says in verse 10. He goes:

"So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For the Scriptures say, 'As surely as I live,' says the LORD, 'every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will declare allegiance to God.' Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. So let's stop condemning each other."

He's saying, "Hey, eventually, regardless of what you feel about God on this side of eternity, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess. And we will stand before the judgment seat of God, and we'll give an account of the way that we lived our personal lives before God.

One of the most sobering passages, I think, in all of the New Testament is 2 Corinthians 5:10. It says this:

"For we must all stand before Christ to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in this earthly body."

Now, that's not necessarily a judgment of salvation, because our salvation is not based upon our good works or bad works. Our salvation is dependent upon Jesus' work for us. But he's saying, "Yeah, there is such a thing as rewards. There is such a thing as God saying, 'Hey, let's take an account of the way that you lived your personal life.'" This is a judgment, not of salvation, but of character.

So he's saying this, "Hey, man. We can do really, really good things with not so good motives." And the only One who knows would be God, Himself. God judges the motivations of our heart. So, when it comes to disputable matters let's refrain from being judge and jury of everyone else's life. That role is God's.

I like how theologian Michael Bird summarizes it. He says this:

"Paul is bent on stressing that Jesus is Lord of the weak," who is the weak? "(i.e., teetotaling, Sabbath keeping, vegan Jews) and the strong (i.e., bourbon-sipping, Saturday-shopping, bacon-munching Gentiles)."

And he says, "If God has justified them, they cannot condemn each other. If God has raised them up, they cannot put each other down. If they belong to the Lord, they belong to each other. If everyone calls him 'Lord,' they must call each other 'brothers and sisters.' If God has accepted them, they must accept each other."

Principle four:

Prioritize the spiritual health of others over your personal "freedoms."

Yeah, you might have freedom in Christ to do that thing, but it may not be beneficial or wise. And for the sake of your brothers and sisters you'll refrain. Paul does the best job of explaining this, so let me just read what he writes. He says, in verse 13:

"Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall. I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. And if another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it.

"Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink,

but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too.

"Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another believer to stumble. You may believe there's nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don't feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right." Romans 14:20-22 (NLT)

"We who are strong must be considerate of those who are sensitive about things like this. We must not just please ourselves. We should help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord. For even Christ didn't live to please himself." Romans 15:1-3 (NLT)

In other words he says, "Part of spiritual maturity is never saying this, 'Well that's just their problem. They're just going to have to get over it.'" No, we're part of a body and we should be building each other up.

Here is what Paul is saying. Paul is saying to the Gentile Christians with whom he shared the same opinion, he is going, "Hey guys, you've got to stop bringing your tenderloin sandwiches to small group. You are freaking your Jewish brothers and sisters out."

And they would say, "But Jesus died so that we could enjoy bacon." And he goes, "True, but Jesus died for them too. And actually, you need to prioritize that over your personal freedoms."

He says it so clearly in Galatians 5:13-14. He goes:

"For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom..." here it is, "to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command:" all 613 laws, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Last one. Let me just share this. Here's why we have unity:
We're not trying to win a debate, but a war.

And the war is not with other people, the war is not with culture or society, but with the principalities and powers of this dark world. It is the reality that people are dying every day with a Christless eternity. And remember who our enemy is. We have a mission that is critical. And eternity is on the line. And people are desperately looking for hope not our opinions about disputable matters.

He sums it up in verse 19 and he says:

"So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up. Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat."

In other words, don't be so legalistic that people can't see Jesus, because it is His grace that is transformative.

I'll just share this one story before we close. Many of you know that one of my preaching heroes is a guy by the name of Martin Lloyd-Jones. He was this little five-foot-five Welsh preacher. He preached in London during World War II. I have every single one of his books. I've listened to hundreds and hundreds of his sermons. I read his biography. He's one of my preaching heroes.

He died in 1980, but he had two daughters who are still alive. They were in their 80s about six or seven years ago.

Lindsay and I were in London and through mutual connections, they knew that I was a big fan of Martin Lloyd-Jones, and they arranged for us to have lunch with one of his daughters.

This was like me getting to have lunch with one of my hero's kids. I never had a chance to meet him, obviously. I'd read all of his books. Got his biographies. And I sat down with her, and it was just this great conversation. I asked her this question. I said, "I've read your Dad's biography. What is it that wasn't included in the biography that you'd want me to know about him?"

And she said, "I'm so glad you asked because there is this one story that I think captures his heart as a man of God. But they didn't include it in the biography."

She said, "When my daughter, his granddaughter, was 14 years old she was not yet a Christian. She had grown up listening to her grandfather preach in a church in London." And she said, "She was also a big soccer fan." Obviously, they call it football in Europe.

And she said, "There was this big tournament coming through London, but it was going to be on a Sunday morning. And she really, really wanted to go. And I told her, 'No,' because she needed to be in church just like she always was. And she got so mad at me. We got in an argument. She slammed the door."

And she said, "I went over, and I told my dad about it. And I was expecting him to side with me and tell me that I was being a good mother." And she goes, "Instead, he said, 'Why would you do that? Why don't you let her go to the soccer tournament?'"

And she said, "Dad, she needs to be in church." And she said, "He calmly looked at me and said, 'Honey, she is not yet a Christ follower. She's been in church every single week. She is listening to me preach every single weekend,' and he said, 'You can let her go to a soccer tournament one Sunday.'"

She said, "I was totally shocked. I didn't think he was going to say that." She said, "So I went in, and I told her that she could go." And she said, "My daughter's demeanor changed. She was

shocked as well.” She said, “Ironically, the weekend of the tournament came. A big storm rolled through London, and they cancelled the tournament. So she went to church anyway.”

But she goes, “My daughter told me that that was the turning point, ‘When Granddad told me I could go to the soccer tournament, it opened up my heart to the gospel of Jesus Christ.’” She said, “They didn’t include that in the biography, and I don’t really know why.”

Here’s the thing. We can disagree with others we love and care about and win the debate but do it in such a way that we both lose. Jesus’ dying prayer in John 17 was that we would be unified. Why? So that the world might know....

And the unifying thing that Jesus did, the example that He gave us right before His arrest and crucifixion was the Lord’s supper. So what I want to do is I want to lead all of our campuses right now in a time of communion. Hopefully, if you’re a follower of Christ, you were able to grab the communion cup when you walked in. We’re going to take this together.

On the final night of Jesus’ life, He gathered His disciples around a table, and He broke some bread poured some wine that represented His body that would be broken on the cross and His blood that He would shed for you and me. And He said, “As often as you do this, remember Me.” In other words, keep your eyes fixed on Me. This is the main thing.

So we’re going to do this together. I want to ask you to go ahead and open up the side with the bread and just hold it in your fingers because we’re going to take it together in unity. Jesus would break off the bread and say, “This represents My body, broken for you.” Let’s take it together. And then Jesus poured some wine and He said, “The wine represents My blood, that I’ve shed so that you can be reconciled to Me.”

What I’d like for you to do right now at all of our campuses is just spend a couple of moments in reflection of that. And after a moment or two, I’ll conclude us by taking us to God in prayer.