

BLUE, GREY, AND GREEN AREAS, ROMANS 14-15:13

Pax Romana #32

Intro: Have you ever heard of Blue Laws? In early America, which was predominantly Christian, there were a host of rules about what you could do on Sunday, whether you were a Christian or not. They were called Blue Laws first in Connecticut where one version of them was printed on blue paper. Thomas Paine, in 1804 wrote, "The word sabbath means rest...but the blue laws of CT make a *labor* of rest for they oblige a person to sit still from sunrise to sunset on a Sabbath day, which is hard work." One historian tells of a man arrested for traveling on his horse on Sunday. He was released after he explained that he had been delayed and was traveling to his own church in New York. That man? George Washington.

Maybe you experienced some blue laws growing up. I did. Shopping on Sunday was a sin, and going to a restaurant was too because you were causing others to work on Sunday, which itself is clearly against the 4th and 1/2 commandment: thou shalt do nothing but nap on the sabbath! Although at one place we lived, also in CT interestingly, the Baptist church all went out to the same restaurant after worship on the premise that their wives were not allowed to work on the sabbath!

1. Paul isn't talking in our text today merely about Blue Laws, but about **grey areas** that might be disputed among Christians on any given day of the week. **What is a disputable matter?**

A. Something not clearly revealed in God's word, or a difference among Christians that would not keep someone from salvation

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through Christ. Some Christians are pro-veggies. The 7th Day Adventist school I attended in Kailua, HA was. Our school picnics boasted of vege-turkey sandwiches and soy burgers. I remember wondering why we were trying so hard to imitate something that was considered a sin to eat. And of course, this group of fellow Christian people chose to worship on Saturday, since it is the seventh day of the week. There are a lot more grey areas or course: mom and dad have never been in a theater because it was drilled into them as a sin when younger. They rent dvds, and let the kids go, however. The Bible doesn't talk about movie theaters. Some Christians commit to avoiding alcohol because it leads to drunkenness according to Paul, while others happily recall that Jesus made wine. Our denomination was historically opposed to card playing and dancing, and very against secluded dating because it could *lead* to dancing! A church in town uses no instruments but the human voice. Others prefer organ as the only proper church music. For a long time our denomination sang only songs in the Psalms of the Bible thus the name Psalter Hymnal. Some consider it an abomination for a woman to preach the Gospel. Others affirm ordaining women. Now, a helpful question here might be, Would any of these keep someone out of heaven? Consider this: would being a greedy person keep you out of heaven? If you answer yes, not one man of us is fit for eternal life. If you answer no, can we condemn people for some of these less direct issues? The issues in Paul's day with the Roman

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Church were whether or not observing certain special days was necessary, and whether or not one could eat meat, most of which ended up in the shops *after* being sacrificed to pagan gods. And that brings us to our text...

B. Now if there are disputable matters, grey areas, it is also evident that there are indisputable matters and areas that are clearly black and white. Paul is not preaching that all religions are the same, or that being greedy is not a sin, or that anything goes in the Christian life as long as you feel convicted about it. Not at all. Neither did Jesus tell the woman caught in adultery (John 8) that it didn't matter. He told her he did not *condemn* her, but that she should stop her sin.

If I were to tell you that I really don't have a problem sampling a candy bar in the Payless while shopping and not paying for it, or if I were to tell you that since God is the owner of all and I am his kid, I don't mind helping myself to your tools when you're not looking –you would undoubtedly object, and rightfully so. For the command of God not to **steal** is clearly and forcefully repeated throughout the Bible. If you caught me in a **lie** but I told you that as long as you have good reasons it really doesn't matter, you would be right to object that Christians believe in telling the truth. This is not a disputable topic in Jesus' teaching or the rest of scripture. Paul is not talking about such as these.

Paul here is continuing his application of the first two sections of his letter. 1) That humanity is dreadful fallen and sinful, every

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one of us, and unable to save ourselves or amend for our evil before a holy God. 2) That Jesus Christ made all necessary amends by dying for us, completely apart from any merit on our part, and then rising again to defeat our inner evil, and death itself! Believe in him and your life can change! In light of all this he has been urging us to fill the world with goodness, to overcome evil not with more evil, but with goodness, and as we saw last time, to even be willing to accept being wronged, and to limit ourselves for the sake of filling the world with the love of God. Chapter 14 is a further application of Christians setting their own rights to the side for the sake of not causing others to stumble as they follow Jesus. So point number one:

2. Do not let disputable matters keep you from accepting your brothers and sisters in Christ.

It appears as a command twice in our text: 14:1 and 15:7

"Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgment..." and

"Accept one another then just as Christ accepted you..."

A. Paul's injunction is to accept each other, like Christ accepts us. How does Christ do that? Well, let's remember that Christ accepted us with great tolerance, mercy and undeserved patience. Can you imagine what it'd be like if Christ would only save us *after* we corrected all our sins? ("Sit up straight, quit talking with your mouth full, no more fibs! Just think, I might decide to save you one of these days!") But that's not what Jesus did. He decided before we even sinned! And knowing our sins!

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"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8, NIV.

So that's how Christ did it. Christ sees in us someone to love, someone who will eventually arrive at actual holiness if he lives with us. Christ sees what he can make us into, but first has to rescue us from the death of sin. So Christ went through the suffering necessary. Can we do that? Yes and we must.

We are called to love people who may have very bad ideas. We are called to imitate underserved patience and understanding. We can fight the idea, but we must love the person. Do you find yourself disliking an individual because they like something you find offensive? How fast do you write someone off once you know they have different political views than you? Or even tastes in music! *Think of a person you don't admire much, maybe even think poorly of. When was the last time we prayed for that person?* This is to be our general approach to those we have disputes with.

B. Paul is specifically targeting the church people. He is preaching that there should be unity among believers for unity honors God.

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." Romans 15:5-7, NIV.

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It is our adherence to the indisputable truth of the Gospel that make us followers and family of Christ! We must let the Gospel unite us! Look, he's talking about disciples who are all trying to follow Christ! Watch for the phrase "to the Lord".

"He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." Romans 14:6-8, NIV.

So the main thing is not the title you were raised under (Methodist, Episcopal). The main thing must not be a tradition you've always kept, or a doctrine you're against. These things have value and need intelligent discussion. But the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. And that is that Jesus is Lord and we live for him.

2. How do we promote unity that comes from acceptance, in the Church? It's disappointing that there is so much division among people all of whom are in love with Jesus and want to please him. There are over 24,000 denominations in North America! Somethings is wrong with that. There are hundreds of churches in Lafayette that believe Jesus is the one true God, but most of them don't seem interested in cooperating with each other. I say this as a member of the Greater Lafayette Gospel Association which actually seeks to reverse that. What can you and I do to follow Romans 14? Here are some of Paul's ideas:

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A) Don't elevate your disputable issue. Elevate Christ! Let's go for a really big example that hits close to home. Let's just take being a Christian of Reformed theology since that's our church. I know Reformed people who will not cooperate with churches that are not. In fact, Reformed Christians have gained a reputation for that! The church I served in Highland which began in 1908 had middle aged members who told me their parents actually told them to walk on different sides of the street from say, Baptist kids! The church people created the divisions! Conversely there are folks who stop coming to our church when they discovered we have Reformed understanding of Scripture. As a third example, I've heard church planting discussions that said, "we should plant a church in such and such a town so that there is a Reformed witness there." Really? Why? Now don't get me wrong. I agree with Reformed theology because I think it best represents Biblical theology. And it's not all easy to grasp (cf Rom.9-11). But shouldn't we be planting a church in such and such a town *so that people can become Christians there?* Isn't that the *real* reason? Isn't that greater than whether it's Lutheran or Reformed?

~~Another example: The Bible speaks of baptism both in terms of sprinkling with water (Ezek.37) and in terms of immersion (Col.2). History too demonstrates is was practiced in various fashions. Isn't the point that we use water to obey Christ in a spiritual event, mark members as belonging to Christ, and to declare again the Gospel that Christ's blood washes away sins? Around here we'll baptize you any way you want. (Except maybe a swirly.)~~

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~~But this issue alone (how we do the ceremony) has divided a great many Christians over the years!~~

A 2010 Super Bowl commercial for Audi helps make the point.

It's about the Green Police and the politically correct emphasis on energy consumption. Take a look... The humor of course is that the single issue has been elevated and exaggerated to the point of supremacy. Christians must not do this with disputable issues.

B) Don't look down on your neighbor. (3,4,10,13) This is clearly part of it but since we spent time on this in chapter 2 I'm going to skip over it now. However our study of that is on our website if you'd like to think more about it.

C) Bear with the other; withhold yourself. (15:1) This is where we limit our own freedoms for the sake of others. If someone coming to the party is offended by alcohol, or lets say has struggled with alcohol, well then we just don't have it at the party.

We're looking out for them even though it is our right to have a beer. One commentator said that Christians have "an inescapable obligation to help to carry the infirmities, disabilities, embarrassments and encumbrances of their brothers..." (Cranfield) He's saying we ought to be mature humans.

What might this look like? *Well there's that lady at church who never makes eye contact with you, who knows why? You can avoid her. You can decide she's rude. Or you can speak kindly and directly to her, and ask her about her week. *There's that Christian brother who hurt your feelings, or who thinks the

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church should do x and you think that's just horrible. How are you going to talk together about the issue. Will you heave and sigh? Will you raise your voice? Will you turn and walk away? Will you get in a fist fight? Jesus' way is to bear with, suffer with (com-passion), and to deny self. How well are we doing that? See, this is all building on the command to love our neighbor in chapter 13, isn't it?

D) Build up; don't merely put up. (15:2, 14:20,21) This is another step in case we start to think that Jesus is pleased that we "put up with" all sorts of folk and pat ourselves on the back for it. This is deeper than toleration. Followers of Jesus want to help others know Jesus better. Followers of Jesus want other disciples to develop, progress, find peace, conquer sins. Followers of Jesus wonder how they can contribute to other people's lives because that what Jesus does for them! Jesus does not merely tolerate you! He died for you! He's after relationship of love with you! He left heaven not to put up with you, or me, but so that we could live with him eternally! Jesus mission is the outpouring of the fathers love. Friends, that is your mission too.

Conclusion: Lets see: blue laws, grey areas, green police. We've covered a lot today. Maybe the color motif will help you remember that your Christian sister is more important than a disputable religious tradition and our brother's spiritual growth is greater than our personal rights. Something highly unAmerican, but very much like our savior!