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Nit Pickers & Stumbling Blocks

Romans 14

As we turn to chapter 14 in Paul's letter to the Romans, I want to start in the middle-verse 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.

Take a look at this. (Cement block). This would be what Paul calls a "stumbling block." An impediment that, if left in the middle of a pathway, could cause someone to trip and fall. Not necessarily intentional. It's not like you are trying to cause someone to trip. But it is careless. You should have known better and, if you'd thought about it, for the sake of the person who is going to walk that path after you, you would have picked it up and moved it to the side.

Then there's this. (Rat trap on a flower stand). The word in the verse is "hindrance." But in Greek, the word is *skandalon*. What does that sound like? Scandal. *Skandalon* means "trap." It is set intentionally for one reason. To snare someone in their bad behavior. To trap them. To be able to cry out, "Gotcha!"

So...whether by stumbling block (careless) or *skandalon* (conniving)...the outcome is the same. Someone trips and fall. And both of these arise in the Church from the same behavior which Paul condemns. Did you hear it? Judgmentalism. "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." Paul is writing to a Roman church filled with very different sorts of people...rich, poor, Jew, Gentile, slave, and free...and he warns them NOT to get judgmental with each other!

Now let me say this. "Judgmentalism" and "judgment" are not the same thing. As followers of Jesus, we are called to hold each other accountable for living God's way in God's world. Every letter Paul wrote included instructions on how Christians should behave. In fact, in the last part of the previous chapter...Paul writes, "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy."

Obviously...Paul says that Christians ought not live like pagans: drunk, immoral, jealous and petty. SO...if we AREN'T supposed to live that way, surely we have to exercise judgment as to when our behavior crosses the line into that which does not please God, right? We are called to exercise judgment...we cannot live Christian lives in Christian community without exercising judgment.

What we are FORBIDDEN to do is to be judgmental. The words in our verse, "pass judgment," are almost always used to describe what God, alone, is qualified to do. Judgmentalism is not saying, "Your behavior is destructive to you and your church family." That's appropriate. It is the reason we have Celebrate Recovery. That's not Judgmentalism. Judgmentalism is playing God; deciding who is and is not Christian by what they do and what they wear...and usually, on the basis of silly non-essentials.

Tomorrow/today represents an important milestone for our church. Six years ago, on June 3, 2012 we were received into the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. One of the things that attracted us to this denomination was its list of seven theological essentials. Things like the authority of the Bible and the Trinity and the resurrection of Jesus. THESE are non-negotiables and, if you can't affirm them, the EPC is not the church home for you. They are essential.

But another thing that we loved about the EPC was its motto: In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity. This idea—that there are a few essentials to which we must agree ...and a whole bunch of non-essentials that are NOT salvation issues... that combination of clarity and grace has provided for us a wonderful home.

It is easy to forget how rare that combination is. For some churches, there are no theological essentials. And for other churches, everything is a theological essential. It's hard to find the balance. Apparently it was hard to find the balance in Paul's time, too, as we discover in the first part of Romans 14.

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. 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.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God...(10) Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God..."

I grew up in Westminster Presbyterian Church in Yakima. I was there 15 years so I got to know the church pretty well...including its family squabbles. One of the skirmishes was between the teetotalers and the tipplers. One group... the teetotalers... alcohol never touched their lips. Our friends the Hulls were in that camp; so were we. The Toones were teetotalers. We never had alcohol in our house and that had a significant impact on my life. A few years ago, Cyndi wanted to BBQ a "beer can chicken"...and I remember walking to the cash register of Thriftway with a single 32-ounce can of Old Milwaukee...feeling so self-conscious that I would almost have preferred shoplifting it to being seen buying this huge can of beer. Teetotalers. Any???

Then there were the tipplers –the ones who didn't see anything wrong with a cocktail or glass of wine. I was amazed to discover, as I got older, how many tipplers there were in our home church. How could this be? Christians don't drink, right? But here they were, drinking! And I was pretty sure they were Christians. It was confusing!

Church skirmishes like this have been going on forever! There was a group in the Roman church who were strict about a lot of things. They insisted on worshiping only on the Jewish Sabbath, for instance. And they were vegetarians... and teetotalers...and with good reason. In Rome, when you bought

food, you got the best deal if you purchased meat and wine that had been offered as sacrifice to pagan idols. Like recycled meat! This was the Roman version of Costco...the best bargain. So the only way to be SURE you weren't consuming idolatrous food and drink was to be a teetotaling vegetarian.

Paul has an interesting description for this group of religious rule-followers. He calls them "weak in faith." That seems kind of harsh, doesn't it? And maybe the opposite of what we would think. After all, these people were scrupulous about everything in order to please God. They were careful about what they ate and drank and what day they worshiped because they wanted to make God happy. If you gave up ribeye steak and beer and watching football on Sundays...wouldn't you want some spiritual extra credit for that! Yet Paul calls them "weak." What's that about?

Well...think back to all we've learned in Romans. Remember, Paul taught that every person falls short of what God expects. There is nothing we can do; we can't be religious enough, spiritual enough...to please God. We are all sinners. And it's only by God's grace that we are saved. So...for Paul...anything that smacks of legalism... anything that smells like it is about people earning God's salvation by proper living...he considers that an offense to the gospel. After all, that was the life he had been saved from! Paul was a Pharisee...a super-duper rule-keeper ...until Jesus saved him by grace!

If Christ has set us free why would you return to a life of legalism? For Paul, anyone who felt the need to live their lives by a code of laws and rituals had not yet fully discovered their freedom in Jesus. If you wouldn't drink wine...or eat meat...or worship on a Sunday...for Paul, that wasn't a sign of spiritual strength. It was weakness.

But, although Paul didn't agree with the teetotalers...what was his message to the rest of the Roman church? WELCOME THEM! And whatever you do, don't pick a fight with each other over these things! It was the Westminster battle between the teetotalers and the tipplers all over again! The meat-eaters were disgusted with the legalism of the vegetarians. The vegetarians thought the meat-eaters were second-class Christians... if they were Christians at all. The liberals despised the legalists and the legalists judged the liberals. And Paul says, "Stop it! Stop it, all of you!" Why?

Because everyone belongs to the Lord...and only the Lord can rebuke his own. Paul asks, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls." How many ever had a stranger chastise your child in public? He might have deserved it. But he's not their kid! You might have said the same things to him or harsher...but they have no right to talk to your child that way!

That's how God feels about his children—the teetotalers and the tipplers both. He may have harsh words for each group. That's his right; he's the dad. But no one else better say the same things; because they have no such right!

And yet... we are quick to pass judgment on non-essential things, aren't we? In the past those things included alcohol and Sabbath-keeping and wearing lipstick and going to dances and card-playing (by the way, the Toones are VICIOUS Pinochle players! We just don't drink while we play!) THESE non-essentials get turned into salvation essentials...and became "gotcha" traps for those who don't believe the same way.

We still have issues, don't we? They're just different issues. I asked my LifeGroup to share THEIR prejudices...the things they get judgy about. For one, it was tattoos, for another piercings...for

another, smoking, and another, low-hanging pants. You won't find much about those in the Bible...there's no commandment that says, "Thou shalt not revealest thy butt crack in public." But these are the prejudices my friends admit to.

What are yours? The things that irk you...not salvation issues... but things that might cause you to look with judgy eyes upon your brothers and sisters in the Lord? In verse 20, Paul says, "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God." We could replace "food" with "alcohol," "cigarettes," "tattoos," "hats in church," "piercings," "gauges" ...or any number of other external things that have NOTHING to do with whether or not we love Jesus...and yet become pitfalls set for new believers.

For those who abstain...and for those who don't...Paul gives us the same underlying spiritual principle. WHAT? The Lordship of Christ. V. 7: "We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

The issue is not so much how we act or what we believe or what we wear. The issue is whose we are. If we have really given ourselves to Jesus, he is going to work his righteousness in us. We are going to act more and more like him because he is so much a part of us that we begin to take on his attributes. We become less concerned about what OTHER people are doing that bugs us...and more concerned with what WE are doing that might bug God.

AND we become less focused on our "rights" and more willing to give things up for the sake of those we might otherwise trip up. When we have an attitude of selfless, non-judgmental love...instead of causing the church to splinter over petty non-essentials, it allows us the grace to come together around the only thing that matters: Christ's love for us, his death for us, his salvation for us and his Holy Spirit at work within us. St. Augustine once said, "Love God and live as you please."

So where are you in this passage? Are you more of a Teetotaler? A rule-keeper? A nit-picker? Are you tough on yourself? Tough on others? Tough on your kids? Tough on your spouse? Maybe tougher than God? Maybe you need to be reminded of God's grace... God's amazing grace...and that you will never earn his love.

Or maybe you are more of a tippler. Not very rules-oriented. Comfortable in your freedom. But do you understand that your freedom in Christ is not license to simply live as you please? You belong to Jesus. Does the way you exercise your freedom honor Christ...and point people towards him?

When I picked apples as a kid, we used to store them in "C.A."... Controlled Atmosphere warehouses. It might feel safer...more predictable... if this building were a spiritual C.A. But that's not how God does it. He brings together all sorts: teetotalers, tipplers, rule-followers, rule-benders, neat and messy...and says, "You are ALL my children. Focus on me. Love my Son. Listen to my Spirit. And let ME worry about the judging!"

Communion is a perfect reminder of this. Use this time to reflect upon where YOU are...don't worry about your neighbor...where YOU are and where God wants you to be. Because in life...and in death...you are the Lord's.