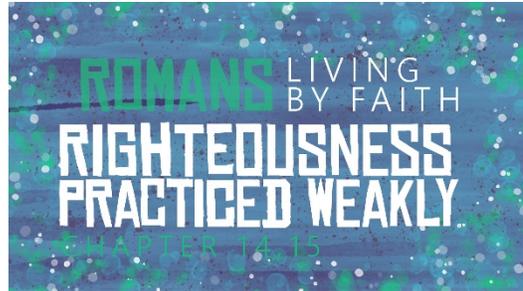


## Righteousness Practiced Weakly

How do you like the title for today's message that I have up on the screen?



For some that sounds about right. *Once a week*, on a Sunday morning. That is our routine. Others think that a more occasional, drop-in-from-time-to-time approach is good enough. Hopefully most think of a much higher frequency... like all-the-time and every-day, when it comes to practicing righteousness.

But, of course you will notice, that is weakly with an **A**.

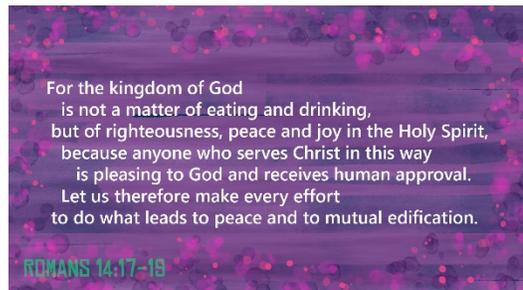
That sounds about right too... our feeble-and-often-failing attempts to practice righteousness: **weak**.

But that isn't precisely what I'm getting at either. Or, more accurately, that is not precisely what we are seeing in chapter 14 of Romans.

Here is a key passage:

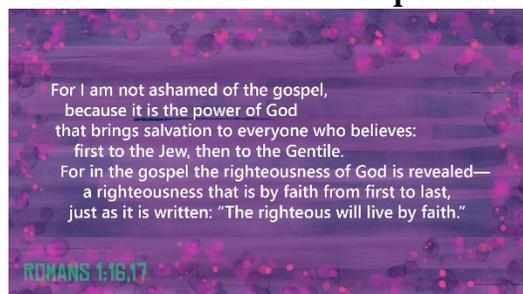
<sup>17</sup>For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, <sup>18</sup>because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

<sup>19</sup>Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. <sup>20</sup>Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.<sup>1</sup>



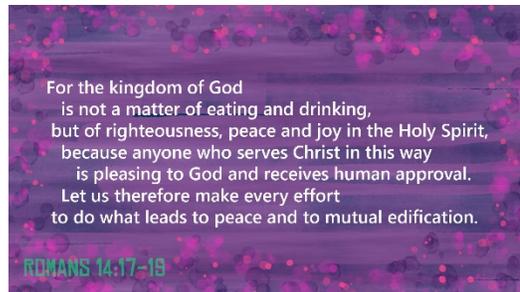
Righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit... that is the Kingdom of God! Sounds pretty good, doesn't it. This is the invitation of the Gospel. Righteousness that is by faith alone (from first to last), not because of our work but because of God's love. Righteousness *revealed* by God and *ours* by faith.

With that kind of righteousness, that great gift... what could possibly be our response other than **peace and joy**?



<sup>1</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 14:17–20). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

This is the Kingdom of God: Righteousness, peace and joy **in the Holy Spirit**. The citizens of the Kingdom of God are **led by, empowered by, overwhelmed by, and baptized by** the Holy Spirit. These extraordinary people, these citizens of the Kingdom of God, please God and men. This is the good life!

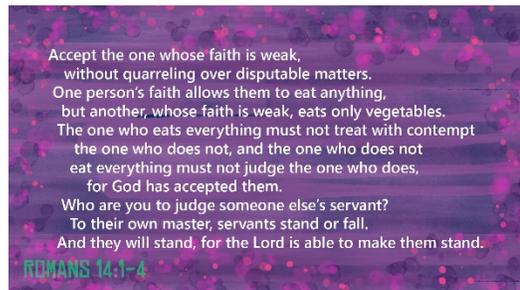


Righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit... with this as our foundation and calling, then let's *live that out* making "every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." **Edification** is a *church* word (I know it isn't necessarily just a church word, but I can't remember the last time I've heard it or read it in any other context). It simply means to purposefully build up ourselves, in this case **one another**... fortifying and encouraging and strengthening one another.

So that is what the Kingdom of God **is**... but what about what the Kingdom of God **isn't**? Here it says that it "is not a matter of eating and drinking." Of course it is a matter of **eating**, or else we are really doing it wrong here because we love to eat! What the text is getting at is that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of the **rules** we might have about eating and drinking.

Here's how chapter 14 begins:

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. <sup>2</sup> One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>2</sup>



And now we get to the point of my not-so-clever title (Righteousness Practiced Weakly). This is a matter of practicing our righteousness, living our lives as citizens of the Kingdom of God, **out of weakness**... and with different kinds and various levels of weakness.

There is a key phrase there that we must be careful not to miss: **disputable matters**. There **are** disputable matters. How often do we consider that there are, indeed, disputable matters?

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<sup>2</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 14:1-2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Is church a place where we usually consider disputable matters? It seems to me that a church like ours is more often the context in which we focus on **indisputable** matters... where we deal in matters of right and wrong, good and evil, black and white, often not even giving room for *grey areas*. We might even find it a bit uncomfortable in a context like this to work in grey areas? Do you find it odd, maybe even disconcerting, that we might focus on such grey areas, such disputable matters?



Friends, there **are** disputable matters... when it comes to life and work and politics... and even when it comes to theology and church.

This is vitally important. It was important in the specific context of this letter to the Romans because the Apostle Paul was writing to a diverse church in Rome. This was the church in the capital of the Empire. As far as they were concerned, Rome was the center of the civilized world. We can assume that Rome, and the church in Rome, was quite diverse, just as our major cities of today are diverse.



The diverse church in Rome was *living out* the vision spelled out in the New Testament... a church of all nations, classes, and cultures. They were the body of Christ, where the members of the church were as diverse as the parts of our human bodies... a church in which the members **needed each other** in order to be whole and vibrant.

This is an important word for us, here at Northshore. We are a diverse church. Even in this body, in which a mere *couple of hundred people* call this home, there is rich diversity:

- Culture – many are foreign born, many who spoke languages other than English in their childhood, and there is racial diversity here.
- Wealth – some live quite comfortably while others struggle.
- Education – there are several with advanced degrees and others with a pretty basic education.
- Age – we have young and old here.

- Occupation – some are white collar, and others are blue collar. Some make their livings primarily with their minds, others primarily with their hands, and even some who make a living primarily with our mouths.
- Viewpoints – there are Republicans here... and Democrats too.

There is diversity in style and taste and experience, and there is a lot of diversity of **religious backgrounds**. Some come from a rich Christian heritage that has spanned generations in their families, others are new to our faith. Some come from no faith at all, while others once held to entirely other religions. And among the Christians, there are those that have always identified with the doctrinal streams of Northshore and the Assemblies of God, while many have different Christian backgrounds.

We are a diverse people, and we want to continue to be a diverse people. We are growing and changing, and as we grow in numbers and influence, we should expect to grow in diversity. We should *hope* to grow in diversity.

That likely sounds good, but this isn't generally the way *church* is. While the Church (universal) is certainly diverse, individual churches often are not. It has often been said that Sunday morning is the most segregated moment in American culture. That is often said in terms of race... but it is often true in most every way. Our individual churches often are made up of people from similar backgrounds, with similar viewpoints, of the same socio-economic mix.

There are well-defined strategies of church growth that embrace this sort of **uniformity** as they identify a niche and target that market, developing a church culture that intentionally gathers a certain kind of people.

While that might be an effective business strategy, I'm concerned that such uniformity misses something vitally important. While such churches might enjoy a *certain kind* of unity, that unity is really something more like *uniformity*... lacking the rich diversity that should mark the Body of Christ.

So if we are determined to not settle for mere **uniformity**, then we should expect some hard work to achieve **unity with diversity**.

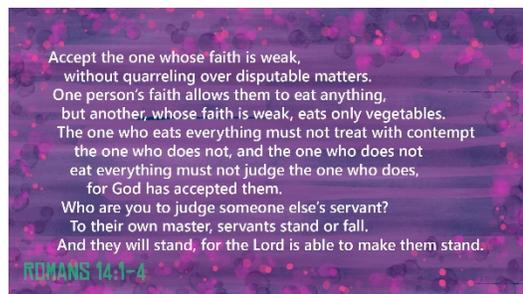
We must acknowledge that within the diversity of the Body of Christ there are, as Paul said, **disputable matters**. And if there are disputable matters, then we need a Biblical understanding of how to navigate disputable matters. And that is what we have here in our text from Romans.



In our text, the Apostle acknowledges that there **are** disputable matters, and then, as an example for us all, deals specifically with matters that were apparently being disputed among the Christians in Rome.

He starts with matters of food:

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. <sup>2</sup> One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. <sup>3</sup>



Apparently there was some concern (dispute) over what was permissible to eat. I'm pretty confident that in this case, the ones who were only eating vegetables were the Jewish Christians and those Christians who were adopting Jewish customs. The reason they were only eating vegetables in Rome was the same reason Daniel was only eating vegetables in Babylon, that since they were not in a Jewish culture they could not be sure that the meat was *Kosher*, so they opted to only eat vegetables.

The Jewish roots of our faith were not exactly ready for diversity. Consider how *foreign* the idea of *a diverse people of faith* would be to the Jews. Sure, there were occasional converts, but the Jews were predominantly an ethnicity... they were the descendants of Jacob (whom God renamed Israel). Even the converts were conscripted into a **culture** defined and

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<sup>3</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 14:1-4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

distinguished by an exhaustive set of rules and customs. They were defined by a land, and by what they ate, and how they behaved.

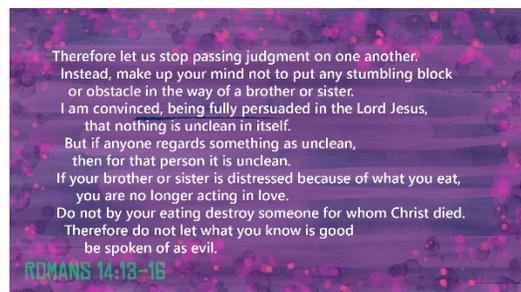
But the Gospel fulfilled all of that to which the customs pointed. And with the Gospel came freedom from such matters as the Gospel opened wide the door for all people.

Yet, many in the early church were clinging to the Jewish customs. Furthermore, many determined that since Christianity originated with the Jews and in many ways was built on a Jewish foundation, new Christians should adopt the Jewish customs and culture.

Hence, in Rome, there were Christians who were following Jewish dietary laws (keeping Kosher) just as the Jews had for years in Rome.

How does Pastor Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome, go about solving the problem? It seems that there were two factions, *meat eaters* and *vegetable eaters*, red states and blue states, and there was a dispute. I think it is safe to say that the matter was not solved the way either faction had first hoped. I suspect that what each side wanted was a *ruling*; they wanted to know who was right and who was wrong. They wanted to establish a Christian culture. But the Apostle did not declare that everyone should eat meat or not, he didn't make a rule for the church, but rather taught vitally important principles.

<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. <sup>14</sup> I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. <sup>15</sup> If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.<sup>4</sup>



On the other hand, we are not going from house to house doing *refrigerator checks* to call out those who might make different choices for their home than the choices we've made for ourselves, or even as a congregation. There is room for people to make choices, based on their approach and conscience. There is room for diversity in culture.

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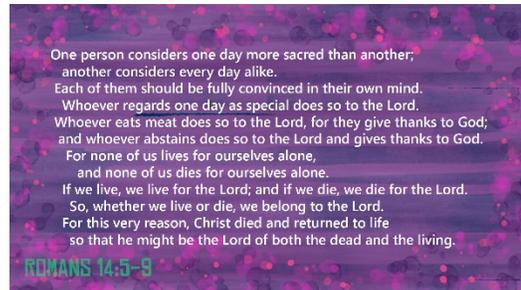
<sup>4</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 14:13–15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

These disputable matters of eating and drinking are a good example of how a diverse church deals with disputable matters. Paul offers another example:

<sup>5</sup> One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.

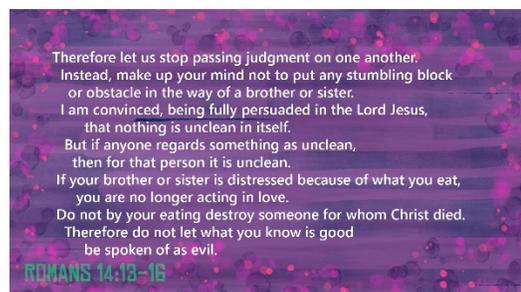
<sup>6</sup> Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord.

Again, I'm confident that Paul was addressing Jewish custom, this time in terms of keeping Sabbaths and other special days. In the Gospel, Jesus fulfilled the strict Sabbath laws. These matters of religious practice were now among this category of *disputable matters*. For those worshipping by keeping some or all of the Sabbath laws, the Apostle instructs to *let them be*. These are matters of conscience, disputable matters.



We have diversity in regard to religious practice as well. There are different preferences of style and order and such. I suppose there is even diversity in terms of frequency, some who think *regular* church attendance is something like monthly (or seasonally), while others wish we would have more services each week so they could be here more often. Whatever our conviction, the Scripture instructs us to *make room* for one another.

In all of these cases of disputable matters, the Scripture is clear, those who consider themselves stronger are charged with the responsibility to make room for those who are weaker.



It doesn't seem like we should put much effort into determining who is the weaker and who is the stronger. Labeling the stronger and the weaker is not the point at all. Think about it. Whatever the position we take on such matters, we generally believe **we** have the stronger position. In the case of the Romans, I'm pretty confident that those who were keeping Jewish custom in regard to dietary and Sabbath laws considered themselves to be the stronger ones. Good for them. The rule still applies, the stronger should make room for the weaker out of love. So... it doesn't really matter who is stronger or weaker at all.

We've spent a lot of time considering disputable matters. There is, of course, an important, complimentary, implied point. There are **indisputable** matters. Not everything is a disputable matter; there are vitally important indisputable matters. If you are wondering what those indisputable matters are... consider the first 13 chapters of Romans.

I think we can sum up those 13 chapters with what we have identified as the key verse of Romans:

in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”<sup>n5</sup>

That means that we are weak... each of us and all of us; our **weakness** is an indisputable matter. The Gospel includes the realization that we have no

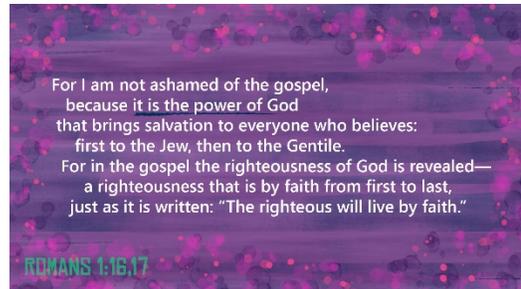
righteousness on our own, we are weak when it comes to our standing before God and we are weak when it comes to living out these Christian lives. But thanks be to God, we have the Good News of the Gospel that declares that in spite of our weakness we are strong when we believe in Jesus. Thanks be to God, He gives us the Holy Spirit to lead us and strengthen us.

So whether we consider ourselves weak or strong on any topic or in any moment, we remember that it is an indisputable truth that we are all weak and are only righteous **by faith**.

It is important to know what we believe... and not only *what* we believe, but *why* we believe.

Here's the thing... we tend to make our **identities** out of *disputable matters*. We stake out a position, form a team, and build our identities out of disputable matters... often with no further scrutiny.

We do it with religion, and we do it in lots of other areas of life as well.



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<sup>5</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 1:17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We do it with politics. You'd never know it these days based on what we see in the news, but it turns out that Democrats and Republicans agree on most things. There is a great deal of overlap in all that we believe; it is called being an American.

Ever see one of those *man on the street* experiments? Some reporter goes to a college campus and reads a quote that they attribute to Donald Trump... everyone hates it... until the reporter indicates that there was some confusion and the quote was actually from Bernie Sanders of Barack Obama... then, of course, they love it. Or some other reporter just flips the circumstances, this time in the halls of an NRA convention. The substance of the quote is the same, but the support is based not on the *substance* but the *messenger*. Our approval may not be based on the content, but rather identity.

The most astute observers of the human condition are not generally pastors; they are comedians. I've heard Jerry Seinfeld observe this same phenomenon when it comes to sports. Why do we so love and admire an athlete when they are on our team, but when they are traded away they become a *bum*. (I'll admit it; I'd probably not be a big fan of Richard Sherman if he were a Ram.) Are we admiring the athlete or merely the uniform? That is fine with sports, because rooting for the home team is all part of the fun.

But let's not merely identify with a club when it comes to matters of faith. Let's understand and believe. We want unity... but let's be sure that it is based on substance, not merely uniformity. I want people to identify with us at Northshore... but it must be more than merely adopting a culture.

Here's some wisdom from Augustine, a father of the Church who lived over 1,600 years ago:

In essentials: unity.  
In nonessentials: liberty.  
In all things: charity.



There are indisputable matters of faith, and all sorts of disputable nuances and disputable matters of behavior. As with all matters when there are shades of grey, we might not even always be able to tell the difference. But in all matters there is this rule: charity. In all matters we are to be ruled by love.

Let's end where we started off.

Righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit... that is the Kingdom of God!

Don't you want to be a part of the Kingdom?

FOR those who believe:

- Don't let disputable matters define us. We must not make matters of behavior crowd out matters of faith. If we find ourselves more concerned about our practices of worship than the person we worship, then we must examine ourselves and get our priorities straight.
- Don't let disputable matters divide us. We must make room for diversity... even if it encroaches on our comfort. We need each other and the various perspectives we bring. Let's not mistake uniformity for unity.

For those who have yet to believe:

Don't let disputable matters be a barrier. I remember the way I thought before I came to faith as a young adult. I wondered if I would fit in. I doubted that I wanted what I perceived as a bunch of silly rules. I'll admit it; Christians like us can be strange. Don't let our strangeness keep you from faith. Make today your day and believe the Gospel, and don't worry so much about the disputable matters.

We all come at this from a position of weakness. That is the Kingdom of God! Through our weakness, the strength of God is on display.

