

Transformed into Pursuit of Peace

Spring Sermon Series on Romans

Romans 14:1-23

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

May 15, 2016

TEXT: Romans 14:1-23

We continue in our spring series on the Letter to the Romans, in which we are listening carefully to see how Romans calls us to be transformed by the gospel. It is an invitation for us,

ROMANS

"...PRESENT YOUR BODIES AS A LIVING SACRIFICE, HOLY AND ACCEPTABLE TO GOD, WHICH IS YOUR SPIRITUAL WORSHIP. DO NOT BE CONFORMED TO THIS WORLD, BUT BE TRANSFORMED BY THE RENEWAL OF YOUR MIND, THAT BY TESTING YOU MAY DISCERN WHAT IS THE WILL OF GOD, WHAT IS GOOD AND ACCEPTABLE AND PERFECT."

ROMANS 12:1-2 SERMON SERIES FEB 7 - MAY 29, 2016

upon receiving Christ, to become a different kind of person and together a different type of community. This morning, we look at Romans 14 where we are challenged to become a community that is transformed into the pursuit of peace. Last week, we looked at Romans 13, how the church should function and be visible to the surrounding power structures of society

and how we conduct ourselves out there in the world. I was very proud of Kenwood Baptist Church yesterday as the church was visible in the community by serving our neighbors and supporting people around us in a very concrete way through Go! Cincinnati, making Romans 13 evident for us. Romans 14 turns to the question of how we are to relate to one another inside the church. This is an extremely important topic, because the gospel creates a community of believers. I need to warn you all to realize that the default setting of the human heart, mine included, is not pretty. Jeremiah 17:9 says:

"The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

Do you know that about your own heart? How about Jesus' line in Matthew 7? He says of us in Matthew 7:7:

"If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. The Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, say: "Look out for what lurks in here. It doesn't come out of the box functioning well." In fact, because of our fall in Adam, we tend to be petty, self-important. Ninety percent of Americans rate themselves as above average! We are quick to judge any who do not share our views. We

are gracious with ourselves and demanding of others. We tend to divide and conquer. We search relentlessly for areas of disagreement on secondary issues and then spend the vast majority of our time and energy on those. You don't need the gospel for any of this. The world sees a divided body of Christ. They eventually see closed churches. They hear stories of hurt members, and they continue on their way to hell, unimpressed by Christian doctrine, unaware that Christians are entrusted with eternal life, and unreached by churches who are not engaged in God's mission in the world. That is the danger, and it is a very real danger.

We praise God that Romans 14 calls us away from this direction in the gospel, offering another way—that we are transformed into a new life, a life that pursues peace together and builds up the body of Christ. Romans is born out of the fire of real ministry experience and church life. Romans is written after 20-plus years of doing ministry. Paul knows the ins and outs of how people think in their fallen state and after freshly receiving Christ. He knows what it's like to try to build this amalgam of people, with disparate backgrounds and a variety of points of view, into a single, functioning, living, serving God's-mission-engaging-body in the world. So, we listen wisely this morning to our elder brother who calls us to pursue peace and to be generous with each other over secondary issues on which believing Christians disagree. We want walk through Romans 14 and follow this mature and godly counsel of who we are to become in Christ. It is written with tremendous insight.

Paul begins in Romans 14:1 by saying:

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”

Welcome this brother, but not with any hidden agenda. Don't invite someone over to your home just so that you can engage with them in debate and discussion or air your complaints. I remember as a new pastor in New England arriving at this very beautiful church: small church, family church, white steeple, red door. It had everything you could dream of. I remember my second week there receiving my first invitation from a family: “Come to our house and eat with us,” and I thought: “We’re going to have boiled lobster. I’m going to get to know these New Englanders, and we are going to be rolling here.” After the lobsters were finished, as the conversation unfolded throughout the evening, I noticed that the real purpose of the invitation turned out not to be fresh lobster and get to know each other. The real purpose, as it floated out, was that this family had a complaint, an argument, with another family, and they wanted to get the new pastor on their side early. Don't welcome someone with a hidden agenda. Notice also that Paul says that one group is weak and one group is strong. This will emerge clearly in Romans 15: who are the weak; who are the strong. This pairing of ideas is a set of ideas to describe a different point of view. The weak and the strong can be paraphrased as the rigid and the flexible; the strict and the lenient. We might say the conservative view and the liberal view. Paul recognizes that there are weak and strong. This is not an insult, but it is the

description of a person whose view is less flexible, more rigid, and a person who is more open and more generous on the secondary topics. One of the topics in view becomes obvious in Romans 14:2:

“One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.”

This is not a first century version of someone who wants to go organic or someone who is strictly a vegetarian. The real issue at stake here is eating foods that are forbidden by biblical law and the person who feels of freedom in Christ to eat anything. This is not what I experienced in the Gordon Conwell cafeteria between two friends, Don and Ken. Ken grew up in a very conservative family. He always wore a pressed shirt and tie. He was an admissions representative of the seminary. Ken packed his lunch every day and brought it to the school. Every time I saw him eat, it was either peanut butter and jelly or bologna on white bread with mayonnaise and maybe a dill pickle and some chips. Don was a classmate, second career seminarian who had traveled the world. He had owned a big business and sold the business to go to school. Don had a much broader life experience than Ken. I remember one day coming into the cafeteria. We had had Greek food the night before, so I had leftover calamari. I sat down at the cafeteria table, and I could see that Ken was feeling wobbly in the knees. He had never seen food like that. It didn't look anything like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, especially the calamari pieces that had the obvious tentacles. You could see that he was just kind of rocking at the table, and, being the kind of person I am, I said, “Ken, would you like one of these calamari?” He said, “No, no, no, no, no!” and he looked like he was going to pass out at the table. Right after he finished saying that, Don came up, sat right across the table, and he said, “I love these, these especially the ones with the tentacles.” He reached in and grabbed one with the tentacles and put it in his mouth. I thought we were going to lose Ken. That's not the issue here. The issue here isn't over food you like, food you dislike. The issue here is about the ongoing role of the dietary laws in the early Christian community and whether or not that would be something that would define the community. This issue had defined the perimeter. It was a test of loyalty; it was at the center of identity. Remember that Jesus needed to tell Peter three times: “All foods are clean.” This was the source of a major argument between Paul and Peter in Antioch, and it is really an issue about what defines the center. Are we going to be flexible? It is astonishing to me that Paul says we are to be flexible on this. We are going to be flexible because the center is something new. The center is faith in Jesus Christ. He notices wisely in Romans 14:3 the attitude that we have towards one another. This is the typical error of the conservative and the typical error of the liberal, if you will. He says:

“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.”

The one who eats is the liberal, more open to all things, the calamari-eating Christian, if you will, who looks over the table at Ken and says: “I just really think low of you.” The liberal view is

always tempted to look down on someone who is not 'enlightened' or not open and is bound up. Paul says to the liberal, the one who eats, the one who in Christ feels the freedom to eat all foods: "Don't despise or condemn or hold in contempt a person whose conscience is on a more narrow view." At the same time, Paul says to the conservative, the who abstains from food, the one who eats only kosher food because that's what they've done for generations: "Don't look down at or judge liberals." Liberals, don't look down at conservatives; conservatives, don't judge liberals. Why? Because God has received them. If God has welcomed them, who are you not to?

In Romans 14:5, he brings up another issue:

"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."

What we talking about? One person says: "I see all days the same." The other says: "I think that one day a week is different from the other days. I think certain days are to be respected for sanctity and holiness." The issue at stake here is the role of Sabbath observance and the festival calendar in the life of the New Covenant community. The conservative view is that the Sabbath matters, that the festivals matter. The first big argument in church history is over the date of Passover and the date of Easter. The conservative view says we should link this up traditionally with the 14th of Nisan, the celebration of Passover. The more liberal view says we need to present Christianity in light of the culture in which we are living and so we want to present the resurrection of Jesus as the true alternative to the pagan celebration of the Spring Festival. So, the church actually went with the more liberal view, and that is why many Christians today don't know we celebrate Easter that the original Easter was in connection with the Passover.

I can tell by your posture that some of you are just not feeling it. You're not feeling the intensity over food laws and Sabbath-keeping. I'm suspecting that I'm addressing a group of liberals because the liberal temptation is to say: "Why are you making such a big deal about that? That's not so important. We're free from all that." That's exactly the liberal view. In reality, Christians today debate issues of secondary importance with just as much fervor and intensity. The dynamics are very much the same. The specific issues may have changed, but the dynamics and temptations for the conservative and liberal view are exactly the same. What about the preferred English Bible translation? Some people feel with tremendous amount of heat that we should use only the King James. Others say we should reach a broader audience and use the NIV. Others say the ESV is more theologically sound. Those who promote the NRSV say the language should reflect gender inclusion. Others say they can't understand the Bible anyway, so let's read a paraphrase like *The Message* or the New Living Translation. What about spiritual gifts for today, speaking in tongues? Some people say spiritual gifts are for today. Others say no. Others say, "Boy, I sure hope this never comes up!"

I knew a pastor who refused to preach an evangelistic sermon in a country that had just fallen from communism and there was an open door of ministry. He refused to preach, though he was invited, because the person who spoke before him spoke in tongues. So, he did not offer the gospel to all of these former communists for that reason. What about this one? What kind of music should we have in church: hymns; praise songs; a cappella singing; instruments; no instruments; how loud should it be; should it be light; should it be dark; should we sing from the hymnal or from the screen; should the lyrics be taken only from the Scripture or not; should we use a fog machine? What about baptism? What is the proper mode of baptism: immersion; sprinkling? Should infants be baptized or only adults? What about the days of creation? Are they 24-hour days, literal days, figurative days? What about the Lord's Supper? What kind of bread should we use: leavened bread; unleavened bread; flatbread; raised bread? Wine or grape juice? Who should receive communion? Does the Bible permit women in ministry or are they excluded? What kind of language should we use in the worship service? This is an issue that many ethnic churches face. What should be the dominant language in the service when we are in a community that speaks diverse languages? Should Christians wear jewelry? Should they drink alcohol or not? Should they date one another? How should the church be governed? Should it be governed by regional bishops, denominational officials, local authority? Within the local authority, should it be governed by elders and deacons, the congregation, the staff, a combination of all things? Are you feeling it a little bit more? I'm going to keep going. What about view of the millennium: a-mill, pre-mill, post-mill? How many of the 50,000 people driving by Kenwood Baptist Church today will even know the difference? How do God's sovereignty and man's responsibility relate? Predestination and free will? What's the relationship between evangelism and missions? Should every kind of outreach include a gospel call for conversion? Are you feeling it? Are you mad? We get mad over secondary topics. The conservative position, those who always think of themselves as strong because they're holding on—because they are in a continuous flexed muscle, so they're strong, but Paul says actually that's weak. Conservatives hate that. Liberals feel open, sometimes open to too many things, but Paul says that's the strong position, just in the sense that it tolerates a wider view. This list could be multiplied easily, but we often debate with each other over matters of doctrine and practice: what practice defines conversion; when do we gather; how is our common life together shared? We see the same issues in Romans of the food we are going to eat, what festivals are we going to keep, and what the role circumcision is, are not very far away from us at all. What is the alternative? How are we supposed to live?

Romans 14 gives us a very compelling, mature vision forward. Let's look at it. In Romans 14:6, Paul says:

"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.”

So, whatever you're doing, do it for the Lord. None of us lives for himself. That's what really changes the dynamic, right there. Whatever you're doing, whether you're keeping the Sabbath or not, whether you're eating the calamari or not, you do it for the Lord. Whether you are reading the King James Version or the ESV, you are reading the Bible to know the Lord, and none of us, that means every single one of us, are living for ourselves. That's so important, and that pulls up a toxic root. In Romans 14:7-8 we read:

“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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.”

Living for the Lord changes the dynamic, and living for the Lord is an overwhelming, take-all-of-your-energy kind of thing. If you are going to really live for Jesus Christ, that will take most of your energy. If Kenwood Baptist Church is going to get serious about living for Jesus Christ, that will absorb most of our energy. I guarantee it. If we are spending a lot of energy getting upset with each other on secondary things, it is probably because we're living for ourselves and not for the Lord. Paul says that we all stand before God's judgment seat. In Romans 14:11, quoting Isaiah 45:23, one of his favorite passages that he quotes multiple times, Paul says:

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.”

In Romans 14:12, he says:

“So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”

That is so important. To whom do we give an account? You give an account to God for yourself. Look out for yourself. When the liberal, more open-point-of-view person looks down on the other, they are wasting their energy trying to fix their neighbor, fix their brother. When someone who has a stricter view on something is exhausting their energy trying to correct their brother, they are not paying attention to themselves. Paul says: “Look you're not going to give an account for him. You are going to give an account to God for yourself and how you've conducted yourself in the world.” So, he says in Romans 14:13:

“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.”

Do not hurl insults, points of correction, lob them like theological Molotov cocktails at each other. In Romans 14:13, it is very clear in the original. He says: “Do not judge one another, but *rather judge this*.” The ESV obscures this by translating it *rather decide this*. What he says is: “Do not judge **this**, but judge **this**.” If you are going to make one judgment, make this judgment. If you are going to make one thing that you are rigid, firm, fixed, decided on, intractable,

unmoving, I have no flexibility on this issue, I've made my decision, he says, make this decision: to never put a stumbling block or a hindrance in front of your brother. That's where we should all be inflexible. I'm committed wholeheartedly to not exercise my rights. I'm committed wholeheartedly to not cause my brother to stumble.

There is tremendous freedom in Christ, but the freedom that we achieve and gain in Christ is not the freedom to do whatever we want to do at the expense of another. The freedom that we have in Christ is actually the freedom that we don't have without Christ. It is a freedom to not exercise our rights. Isn't that an amazing freedom, actually? It requires us to think hard on that. It is a freedom that says: "I am free to eat whatever I like, but because this bothers you, I am free to not eat it." It is like going out for an event and someone tells you that alcohol is served. Some Christians think Christians should have a drink, and some Christian say it was grape juice at the Last Supper. We won't get into that right now, but the issue is that while we have freedom in Christ, the real freedom is to not assert your right to do whatever you want. The real freedom comes from saying I am going to restrain my freedom for your sake. Now, that's Philippians 2, isn't it? Jesus, though He was God, restrained and emptied Himself, became a servant of all. Paul says in Romans 14:15:

"For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died."

If we exhaust ourselves trying to secure alignment on secondary things, the church will be divided and its witness in the world severely compromised. Paul says literally in Romans 14:16:

"So do not let your good be spoken of as evil."

What he means to say here is that we must not let this phenomenal, extraordinary reality that is the New Covenant people of God through faith in Christ, don't let that be blasphemed. Don't let people look at that and think that looks bad. Have you ever known anyone who was hurt by their church experience and doesn't want much to do with it anymore? I have. You will meet people who say: "I'm atheist; I'm agnostic. I don't have faith in Christ." You'll also meet a whole cluster people that say: "I was really burned and hurt because of how people related inside the walls of the church." We should never allow that to happen. Don't let your good be spoken of blasphemously. Don't discredit the gospel by your conduct with one another. Why? Because the Kingdom of God is not about eating and drinking. It is not about the version of the Bible. It is not about who uses spiritual gifts. Paul tells us in Romans 14:17:

"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Paul continues in Romans 14:18-19:

"Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us

pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”

To *pursue peace* is an active verb. It means that peace is what you have to spend your energy on. If you get just one tank of gas, if you will, to run this life on, then spend it on pursuing what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. Exhaust yourself in trying to move together. How do we do that? How does a group of people commit themselves to pursuing peace? The very ending of the chapter gives us some practical ways to do that, and I am going to list just a few of them.

Number one: ***We have to be clear about the core.*** What is the core of Christian faith if it is not calamari? The core is in Romans 14:9:

“For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”

That is an overwhelming statement that defines a community, that defines the Christian church against all other religions. This verse alone. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, writing to a church that was really at each other—and I praise God that we are not in this state at Kenwood, but in some ways this message is like a vaccination—says:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”

What is of first importance? Not calamari! Calamari does not make this list. I would submit that there are five things that are hills I would die on. I was looking at a sister church in our city who has in their constitution what they call: *Seven hills we would die on*. I came up with only five:

#1 – The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ forgives our sins. Do you believe that?

That defines us in a very central way.

#2 – His death and resurrection happened according to the Scriptures. That means that all of the Scripture is central in our life. Do you believe that? I do.

#3 – That we are justified by faith in Christ’s atoning death. That is how we all, every one of us no matter what our background, become right with God. I believe that. Do you?

#4 – That we are transformed into Christ likeness by the power of the Holy Spirit. I believe that. Do you?

#5 – That the church is to be an international, interracial community of faith living for Christ’s return. I believe that. Do you?

When you commit yourself to those things, that defines the perimeter around the people of God: The death and resurrection of Christ; the centrality of Scripture; being justified by faith in His death; being changed into His likeness by the power of the Spirit, and an international,

interracial community living in real expectation of His return. I would die on any of those hills. Those hills create a community within which, I would say with all due respect, I don't really care what Bible version we use. We have an abundance of riches that we even have so many to choose from. Do you know how many countries there are where there is only one choice? If we are going to pursue peace, we have to define the core.

Number two: ***We also have to be careful not to destroy God's work in someone's life over secondary issues.*** Four times in this passage, Paul says *don't judge*: verse 1 – Don't argue over opinions; verse 4 – Who are you to judge another servant?; verse 10 – Why do you pass judgment on your brother?; verse 13 – Do not pass judgment on one another. Three times he says *don't wreck God's work over calamari*. (That's the 'New Living Translation'!) Three times he says don't wreck the work of God over your food. Don't do that. Can we not do that? Let's not do that, but instead, let's pursue peace and build up the body. Don't let your preferred translation; don't let your view of women in ministry; don't let your view of baptism or church music, leadership structures, or anything else, be in the center. These do not define Christian faith. I'm not saying that those things don't matter or that they are inconsequential or that they are not worth talking about. They are, but don't put them in the center, and don't assume if you are going to spend all your energy on those topics that you're really living out of the center. If you stand on the conservative side of any issue, watch out because your temptation will be to judge the person that you think has a wider view. If you stand on the liberal side of any of the secondary issues, watch out because your temptation is going to be to hold that person in contempt. Those who revere the King James translation believe they are holding on to the last standing, holding on to God's truth. There is a church in Cincinnati whose sign says: "Use the King James; God did." If you are over on the liberal side, don't look at that and think: "You narrow-minded, person, you wouldn't eat a calamari if you saw it." Don't think that way. If you're over on the conservative side, don't condemn someone. This is so wise, such mature counsel, and we need it. Why do we need it? It's because we've got those Jeremiah 17 hearts that are being remade.

Number three: ***We are to pursue peace and building up the body.*** Paul gets very concrete at the end of the chapter, and I want to close with this. He says that the kingdom is not about eating and drinking; it's about righteousness, peace, and joy. Pursuing what makes for peace and mutual up-building is played out together in the behaviors described at the end of the chapter. In Romans 14:19, he says that we have got to respect our brother's conscience. He says:

"Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats."

Paul says everything, in his mind, is clean. He is a calamari eater, and yet he says it is wrong for anyone to eat it and to make someone stumble by what he eats. In Romans 14:21, he says:

“It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”

We have to restrain our own freedom. We hold our rights back and not cause our brother to stumble. In Romans 14:22, Paul says:

“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.”

There are times to keep your opinion between yourself and God. In other words, there are times to keep your mouth shut, right? At the same time, he says in Romans 14:23:

“But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”

Don't act in a way that violates your own conscience. We have got to be honest about that. Don't invite someone to do that, and don't do it yourself.

At the very end of verse 23, he gives this general rule, which is just so wise. He says that whatever does not proceed from faith, that is sin. Whatever you are doing and living to pursue peace, just make sure that what you are doing, how you are speaking, how you are acting, the restraint that you are exercising, speaking up for your own conscience at times, holding the body together, pursuing peace, building one another up, holding onto the core, he says: “Let that just flow out of faith.” This is a great test. When you are in a debatable issue, ask yourself: “Am I acting out of my faith in Christ? Am I expressing my confidence that I am purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ, that this brother or sister is purchased with the blood of Christ and that we stand together, justified by faith, made members of one body through faith in Jesus Christ?” That is the most definitional statement of any. There are no labels that we should apply to one another that even come close to the weight and significance of saying, *I put my faith in Jesus Christ*. Have you? I have trusted in Him for eternal life. Have you? If you have, then you are members of this one body on mission with God in the world, and that is our calling together, to announce to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord. He is Lord! Jesus is risen from the dead! Does anything come close to the significance of that? Every knee bows, every tongue confesses, not their theological convictions, not their preferred mode of baptism, or how often communion should be celebrated. Every knee does not bow, every tongue does not confess over what their preferred style of music is or the color of the carpet, or what the nature mission and outreach is. That seems not to be the main line. We get one sentence, and what do we confess? We get one thing. We say **JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!** and that makes us a church, and that's it. Anything else that we want to discuss, debate, search Scriptures over, is underneath that. Jesus Christ, promised Messiah, come! Exalted Lord, calling all to Himself. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we confess that You are Lord. You are risen from the dead and You are Lord. Jesus, we want to bow this morning before You, and we want to confess with our mouths that You are

Lord. Father, I pray for Kenwood, that we would be a community that knows Your Lordship, that is defined by the Name Jesus Christ, that's generous with each other on secondary topics, and that is deeply committed to the center, which is faith in You. We love You, Lord. We thank You for Your kindness and patient instruction of us through Your Word.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.