

Salt Life

Part One: How to Talk with Those Who Don't Agree With Us Romans 13.14-15.13

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Intro to the Series

In anticipation of our offering and then the message, let me take about five minutes to do a bit of an overview of where we'll be going in our conversation as a church this month.

This morning we begin a new four part sermon series called *Salt Life*.

As you know, 2024 promises to shape up as an interesting year in our public life. If the harsh exchange of words between President Biden and Former President Trump over the past few days is any indication, this will be a year of lots of incivility and hostility in our public and political life.

Add to the pyrotechnic uncertainties of an election year the horrible destruction and loss of life in Israel and Gaza, the pain of which is rippling all around the world and coming even to our doorstep - literally. A few weeks ago one of our staff members came to the church building and found a protest sign taped to the door.

And those are just two of many potential places of tension in our nation and in our world that are likely to remain difficult and divided in the coming year.

As we come into what promises to be a fiery and fractious year, we thought it would be helpful to remind ourselves who we are as the people of God and of some of the ways God calls us to relate across lines of difference.

Jesus says to us as his followers

Matthew 5:13

You are the salt of the earth.

What does it mean to live a salty life?

There's been a lot of emphasis in evangelical teaching on the *preservative* quality of salt in the ancient world. In a world without electricity, packing food with salt was a way of preserving it, keeping it from rotting.

But while that is certainly true about salt, it misses what I think were some of the other important ways that people of the ancient world would have thought about salt.

Salt was one of the most highly valued and most sought after items in the ancient world. Throughout the ancient Near East it was worth more than gold. Why?

Because it was understood to be necessary for *life*. Salt represented growth and healing and the potential of new life.

You are the salt of the earth. You are of inestimable value to this world and necessary to its life.

But there was another dimension of salt that I think was even more central to the way people thought about it in biblical times, and that is as a symbol of connection, of hospitality, and welcome.

The table was the primary metaphor for connection and relationship. When you ate a meal together, strangers became friends. Think of Revelation 3.20.

And salt was the primary metaphor for generosity at the table, for commitment to another person, for sacrificial connection, for costly relationship, because when you shared your salt with someone you shared with them what was most valuable of all to you.

So salt represented especially the loving, life-giving, costly connection between people who were committed to honor each other. That's why salt was used as a mark of friendship and a sign of a covenant.

When he calls us to be salty, that's what Jesus calls us to in our dealings with one another in the body of Christ – to a commitment to live in love and peace with one another.

Mark 9:50

Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.

And that's what Jesus calls us to in our dealings with the people God places around us in this world – a generous, gracious welcome.

Colossians 4.6

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Either way – in here, out there – we are called to live salty lives as the people of God. More than merely preserving our culture, important as that is, we are called to be this world's life and light.

That's why I'm wearing this cool looking t-shirt from Salt Life clothing company.

That's why Michelle and Esther came up with these cool looking bookmarks and stickers that we'd like you to take with you into the year, as reminders of God's call for us to live in life-giving, love-giving ways in a contentious culture.

Salt Life

This morning we start out by wrestling with how to talk with those who don't agree with us in the church family

Next Sunday, my friend Mark Labberton, who just retired as the president of Fuller Seminary, will come and talk to us about how to welcome those who don't look like us in our community

And the final two Sundays we'll look at how to love those who don't act like us and how to share faith with those who don't believe like us

Lord, we offer our hearts back to you and our resources back to the church in support of the shared ministry and mission to which you've called us.

Message

In the first message of this series we're wrestling with *How to talk with those who don't agree with us*, focusing specifically on disagreements we might have within the body of Christ over different matters of faith and practice.

The passage we're looking at is Romans 14.1-15.7.

Before we walk through the passage, which is sort of a longish one, let me bring us to the heart of the issue Paul is addressing and give us a bit of context.

In Romans 14.1 Paul raises a concern about the church quarreling over "disputable matters."

He raises here something that I think is really important for us to understand as believers.

You could take all the things we believe as followers of Christ and divide them into two categories.

Essentials

The first one might be what Paul calls "sound doctrine" in II Timothy 4.3.

For centuries, going all the way back to right after the Reformation, the church has referred to these as the "essentials" of the faith. These are the doctrinal beliefs that 1) are central to our faith, 2) are ones on which Scripture speaks clearly, and 3) are ones on which the church has essentially agreed over the centuries.

These are the core beliefs about which all Christians are expected to agree.

There are a number of these. If you go to our website to the page called "What We Believe," you'll see the four that we consider most important of all. Those have to do with the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the spiritual plight of humanity and the saving work of Jesus on the cross, the authority of Scripture, and the missional calling of the church.

Those beliefs and ones like them are things about which the believing community has had essential agreement since its beginning over two thousand years ago.

There are others that we could name as well, core beliefs about God's nature and character, and the nature and value of human life, and the purpose and work of the church, and God's design and moral code for relationships and marriage and sexuality, and so on, but those are the most central ones.

According to the New Testament, what are church's leaders called to do when they encounter a brother or sister in the church family who doesn't have the same view related to one of the essentials of the faith?

As James says in 5.19

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth ... bring him back.

And Paul says in

II Timothy 2.25 Correct [him] . . . with gentleness.

II Timothy 4.2 Correct [him] . . . with complete patience

In other words, when it comes to these essentials of our faith, we are all expected to agree.

Non-Essentials

The church we encounter here on earth would be a whole lot tidier if God spoke with equal clarity about every single issue and we all agreed on everything, wouldn't it? But he didn't.

There are a number of other areas the bible addresses but without sufficient clarity or thoroughness for us to be able to say, "This is *the* definitive biblical position on this issue."

In Romans 14.1 Paul calls these "disputed matters." That's also been translated "differences of opinion." For the past five centuries these have been called the "non-essentials" of the Christian faith.

These are areas where others who love Jesus more than we do and have studied the scriptures more carefully than we have come out in different places than we do.

These would include doctrinal issues such as our view of the end times, the proper governmental structure of the church, what we should believe about the supernatural gifts of the spirit such as healing and speaking in tongues, the manner in which we experience the presence of Christ in communion, the role of men and women in positions of church leadership, and so many other issues like those.

Into this category we could also put practical areas where faith and life intersect in our contemporary culture, such as:

Our view on how best to raise up our children in the way they should go: public school versus home school versus Christian school.

Drinking alcohol.

Working on Sundays.

Watching R rated movies.

Listening to non-Christian music.

Getting a tattoo

Or letting your kids read Harry Potter

And so on.

I would argue that we should also include virtually every single political position in this area of non-essentials.

Our political positions will obviously be informed by Scripture, and built on essential beliefs, but it's difficult for anyone to make a compelling case that there is only one biblical view on any given political issue.

Virtually all political positions are positions on which devoted followers of Jesus disagree, citing different passages of Scripture to support their different views. That's because applying biblical truth to a secular culture is incredibly challenging, and leads to all sorts of different ways of understanding how to do that.

Let me give you an example. As evangelicals and as brothers and sisters in this church we agree without hesitation and without qualification that human life is precious to God and should be protected. That's an essential.

Having said that, what is the best way to bring that conviction to bear in a culture that doesn't recognize the authority of the Bible? Through laws? Through women's care centers? Through evangelism? What are the implications for the military and war? For the use of lethal force by the police? For the death penalty? For medical emergencies that jeopardize the lives of both mother and a child in utero? For adoption of older at risk kids?

So there are two categories of beliefs, those on which Scripture speaks definitively, and on which the church has unity, the essentials, and those on which the Scriptures aren't as clear, or for which the implications aren't as clear, the non-essentials.

As we turn to this passage, let me just mention that one of the challenges in having this discussion is that there are three pretty significant temptations when it comes to essential and non-essential beliefs.

First is the temptation to take an essential area and try to make it a non-essential on which we can agree to disagree. The example that comes to mind here is a biblical understanding of God's design and moral framework for marriage and sexuality and gender. There are a lot of people in the wider church today who are saying either that we got this one wrong, or that we don't need to agree. But the church has had a clear and consistent biblical understanding of marriage, sex, and gender right up until recent years, a view that the majority still affirm.

A second temptation is the opposite one. That's to take a non-essential area and insist that it is actually an essential doctrine on which we should all agree. So many of the divisions that have happened in the Protestant church are the result of this sort of confusion, leaving churches dividing over things like whether or not to use leavened bread for communion or which version of the Bible to preach from or which political party you should be part of.

During the start of the pandemic we had someone call the church and say, “I have a question. It’s the most important thing I can know about your church. What is your policy on wearing masks?” That’s an example of elevating a non-essential to the place of an essential.

The third temptation is the temptation to insist that our view on a non-essential area is the right view and the only acceptable view because, of course, it is actually God’s view. I’ve got this all right, I see it all clearly, there’s no chance I’ve missed something or gotten this wrong. This is the sin of pride and presumption.

As we’ll see as we jump into this section of Paul’s writings, the only healthy way forward in this area of non-essentials is the way of humility and what one scholar has called a posture of “theological modesty.”

The Issue:

So as we saw, the primary issue in this passage is introduced in chapter 14 verse 1, where Paul speaks of “quarreling over disputable matters.”

The Governing Value:

The thing that matters most when it comes to this issue, the goal and desired outcome, the governing value that determines how the church should respond to this problem, is unity. That’s the thing Paul says matters most to God when it comes to how we handle non-essentials. Our unity. As we’ll see, this comes through in a number of places in this passage.

As one example, in Romans 15.6 he speaks of the church being characterized by one mind and one voice, and he says that’s what will glorify God.

The Solution:

So non-essentials divide us. And unity is one of the aspects of our shared life that God values most. So the solution?

It seems pretty obvious, doesn’t it? Everybody should just come to the place where they all have the same views on everything.

And at a quick glance, it *seems* like that’s exactly where Paul ends up. If you flip ahead to chapter 15 verse five, you see Paul praying that God would give them “the same attitude of mind.” Literally it says “the *same mind*.”

So at first glance Paul seems to be saying the solution to our disunity and our quarreling over various issues is to get everyone to the place where we think the same, where we are of the same mind on all these issues.

Which is pretty consistent with how secular society views our differences of opinion. This is how our culture teaches us through social media.

1. I arrive at a view on an issue
Which is, of course, is the right view, because it is my view, and I wouldn't hold the wrong view.
2. I find others who share my view, pulling together into a group of likeminded people who mutually reinforce each other's views
3. I label those who don't agree with my view as the enemy, and I pull back from them, and I see their disagreement as disrespect, or even hate, and I break relationship with them because they are wrong
4. I receive people from that other camp back into relationship when and if they change their minds and arrive at the right view, which of course is my view

That's one solution. But it isn't the biblical one.

All right, let's quickly walk through this passage, following the thread of Paul's argument, and noticing some things along the way.

Romans 14.1

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.

This is the theme our passage begins and ends with. *Accepting one another*. You find it here and in 15.7.

You may remember this is a word that's made by joining together two other words in Greek – one that means moving toward the other person, the other that means drawing that other person in toward you. Paul says that should be our first impulse.

Quarreling, obviously, is the opposite impulse. When we quarrel, we pull back and push away. The original cancel culture reflex, which resides in all of us when we feel hurt or offended.

Paul says that reflex is not the right way to respond when it comes to these disputable matters.

Next he gives an example of one of them, a specific non-essential issue over which the church in Rome is quarreling and dividing. Romans 14.2:

Romans 14.2-3

One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. [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.]

To make sense of what Paul is saying here, it's helpful to know that in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, the dominant religious view was paganism. Most people believed there was a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses related to every part of your life. And when you wanted things to go well in your life, you tried to please those gods.

The primary way to please them was to offer sacrifices to them. And one of the main ways you did that was through the food that you ate at your meals.

When you went to the market to buy meat for your family's meals, almost every vendor in the marketplace had already offered that meat as a sacrifice to the gods before he sold it to you.

And when you went to visit your pagan neighbors, the meat they served as part of their meal was almost always dedicated to the gods right before it was served to you.

That nearly universal pagan practice created a huge conundrum for the early church. Should I just become a vegetarian and never buy meat in the marketplace, so as not to offend God? And should I isolate myself from the surrounding culture and say no to every invitation from a neighbor to come over for a meal, so there is no chance I would displease God by participating in a sacrifice to the gods and be misunderstood to be a fellow pagan believer? That posture of isolation and separation was the approach that some believers took, a narrower or more strict approach.

Other believers, taking a wider and less restrictive approach, reasoned that the gods who were being sacrificed to didn't really exist in the first place, which meant there was essentially no meaning to the sacrifice, so they could eat anything they wanted as long as their own hearts were right with God. And being in neighbors' homes and around their tables was an important part of living out our faith.

So there were two different views in the church.

Now Paul names what is a virtually universal reaction among believers whenever they encounter a difference of opinion with other believers.

If someone takes a position that is *more strict or narrow* than our view, we tend to treat them with *contempt* as brothers and sisters who are narrow-minded and fear-driven. Oh those narrow people who are so uptight about not eating meat, they are so legalistic.

And if someone has a view that we see as *wider or looser* than our view, we *cast judgment* on them as people who are compromising their faith and dishonoring God. Oh, those liberal people who are so careless about eating meat, they are so disobedient and sinful.

Romans 14.2-3

One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 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.

As followers of Jesus there is only one person we need to answer to, and there is no one who needs to answer to us.

Romans 14.4

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.

We answer to God, not to our fellow believers, in these non-essential areas.

Then Paul brings up another example of a non-essential belief area about which believers had different views, and still do today – how do we honor the Sabbath?

Romans 14.5-6

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. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Since these are both areas of doctrine on which God has not spoken with sufficient clarity in Scripture for us all to have the same view, what's important is that we do what we believe is honoring to God, with grateful hearts, eager to please him.

Romans 14.7-9

For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

His rule over us is what should have the last word in our lives and in our views. Not the opinion of the person next to us. It's his opinion, not their opinion, that should carry weight. We should study scripture diligently, and seek his heart intentionally.

Romans 14.10-12

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God." So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

Romans 14.13

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.

We put a stumbling block in front of a brother or sister when those who take a looser view insist that their view is right, and they cause their brothers and sisters to think they are compromising their faith and displeasing God, and they begin to pull away from the Lord because of their guilt and shame.

And we put an obstacle in front of a brother or sister when those with a stricter view insist that *their* view is the only right view, and they cause their brothers and sisters to feel judged and condemned, and they begin to pull away from the church because of their anger and resentment.

Bottom line: according to Paul, what matters when it comes to non-essentials is *not* that everyone sees these things in the same way. What matters is that we all see *one another* in the same way – with eyes of love and hearts of acceptance.

Romans 14.14-16

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. 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. Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil.

Romans 14.17-18

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

The kingdom – the relationship we have with Jesus the King as his faithful subjects, submitting to his loving rule – the kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking. That is, in the kingdom the most important thing is not all of us seeing all these issues in exactly the same way.

It is about *righteousness* – which means being rightly related to one another and treating each other in the right way – and it's about peace, which means enjoying loving unity in the family of faith, and it's about the joy of the Spirit, which is what comes when we let God have his way in our midst, forming Jesus in us and between us, and accepting one another in our differences.

Romans 14.19-21

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

We are mistaken if we think unity will be the result of persuading one another to have our views. Unity will be the result of showing patience and deference to one another in spite of our different views, putting our non-essential differences aside and loving one another in spite of them.

Insisting that our way is the right way to see things when it comes to non-essentials doesn't strengthen the church, it undermines it and weakens it and has the potential to destroy it.

Romans 14.22-23

So whatever you believe about these things [let that be] between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Romans 15.1-3

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

Romans 15.4

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

That's the sort of unity that pleases God and strengthens and builds up the church and puts the loving rule of God on display in this world – not when we *think* the same way, but when we *love* the same way. Not when we see the issue the same way, but when we see each other the same way.

Romans 15.5-6

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So here is Paul's solution to the problem of our having different views on non-essential issues: being one minded, yes, but not having identical thoughts, not having the exact same way of thinking about every secondary issue. Instead, having the same *outlook*, the same humble and loving posture that marked Jesus.

And what was that? He brings us back to the place where he started.

Romans 15.7

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Move toward others, and draw them in toward you, then, just as Christ did with you. That's what will honor God and bring him glory.

Or as Jesus says to his followers in

Mark 9.50

Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.

Stop and think for a moment. How did Jesus accept you?

How did he move toward you and draw you in even when you had turned your back on him? How was he loving, welcoming, patient, kind toward you in spite of your unkindness toward him?

What would it look like for you to replicate that posture the next time someone disagrees with you? To move toward them with love and respect, with curiosity and humility and a teachable heart?

To say: I find that really interesting. Tell me more. What were some of the things that shaped your view?

Not: How can you call yourself a Christian and have that view?

Covenant Church is part of a denomination called the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Many of you know that the denomination's motto is

**In essentials, unity.
In non-essentials, liberty or freedom.
In all things, charity or love**

That captures beautifully the spirit of unity and humility that Paul encourages us to adopt with one another, as we live out the call of our King to live a life of love, when it comes to these non-essential areas.

God wants us to be known for having the same mind. Not the same view. But the same heart. They'll know we are Christians not by our identical views, but by our love.

Benediction

Romans 15.5-6

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.