

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

(A Sermon Based on Rom. 14:1–15:6)

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One of the great problems confronted by men and women in the world and in the Church is the tension between the individual and the community. This tension is present in almost every aspect of life. One finds it in society, where individuals are doing their own thing by following life-styles and mores which are not accepted by society as a whole. There is the acceptance and practice, for example, of new dress codes and of communal life-styles that indicate an individualism which is opposed to what the community-at-large is doing. The same tension is found on the political level: political institutions are being challenged; laws are no longer accepted as sacrosanct; the rule of the majority is no longer automatically considered as representing the right.

The Church itself is not exempt from this kind of tension. A recent article in a seminary periodical warned local churches that they had better be prepared to accept a different kind of minister from the one to whom they had become accustomed. Such a minister would dress differently. He would introduce new forms of worship. He would insist on certain kinds of involvement in the social problems of the community. He would refuse to be dominated by social structures, ecclesiastical structures, and traditions. Finally, he would demonstrate an independence which would be disconcerting in many ways, perhaps including the acceptance of a new morality which is radically different from that accepted by most Christians.

Obviously this assertion of individualism is a mixed blessing. On the positive side, it is a much needed reaction against that communal conformism which has stifled individual initiative and which has robbed

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the person of his own convictions and worth. In some cases it is also an expression of prophetic courage, for the prophet has always been a lonely voice crying out in the wilderness against the ways of society and even of religious leaders. There have been grievous injustices and errors perpetuated by institutions. When these institutions become demonic, practicing and promoting these wrongs, then someone must speak out against the wrongs and express a point of view which is contrary to that held by the community.

At the same time there is a great danger that excessive individualism will become just as deadly and just as destructive as unquestioning conformity to the will of the group. This is so, of course, when it violates the will of God. When individualism stands against what pleases God, there can only follow anarchy, chaos and destruction. This is especially true in the life of the Church, whose essence is a community of believers which cannot long survive when controlled by an atomistic kind of individualism.

What is needed, then, on all levels of human life, but especially in the Church, is a delicate balance between the rights of the individual and his obligations to the community. Such a balance alone will assure the survival of society as a whole, and of the Church in particular.

In Romans 14:1–15:6, Paul attempts to state certain significant principles which have as their purpose the maintaining and the promoting of this delicate balance between the individual and the community. In doing so, Paul concerns himself with certain areas which are peripheral and ambiguous. They involve problems relating to Levitical laws on eating certain foods or not eating them, and on observing this day or that day for worship. These are problem areas in which there is no clear-cut command of God to the community. Where God's command is clear and unequivocal, Paul would allow for no difference of opinion. But there are areas, Paul says, in which this is not the case; and in those areas he is concerned with working out principles which will guide conduct so as to make possible the necessary sensitive balance between the individual and the community.

In Romans 14:1–15:6 Paul enunciates two basic truths: first, the need for tolerance with regard to certain individual differences; and second, the overriding need for Christian concern for the well-being of the community.

I. Tolerance in Individual Differences

Paul begins by an emphatic affirmation of the principle of individual freedom. He calls for mutual understanding, sympathy, and tolerance. In addition, he wants Christians to realize that there will be differences between them in marginal and ambiguous matters, and he insists that the Church must learn to live with these differences. Uniformity in the Christian fellowship is neither possible nor desirable.

This is a lesson which some find hard to understand and to accept. Somehow they have a strong desire for a uniformity that would avoid differences, factions, and friction. But Paul says that this is not possible even in a genuine Christian community. What is possible and indispensable is the facing of the problem of individual differences with the right kind of attitude.

This attitude is based on two principles, the first of which is the acceptance of the role of God as judge. Listen to Paul: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. Each of us shall give account of himself to God. Then let us no more pass judgment on one another." The thrust of these statements is clear. It is the role of God to judge. It is the role of man not to judge, but to be judged. To stand in judgment on our fellow-man in certain areas is to usurp a divine prerogative. It is to belie our theology in practice, for our theology affirms that God and Christ will be the judge of all men. Moreover, to arrogate to ourselves the judging function of God is to "become God" and thus to commit the ultimate sin.

It is this posture of self-deification, against which Paul is speaking, which accounts for that cynical and hyper-critical spirit that is bound to destroy the community. It is based on a spirit of false pride, namely, the men involved have the kind of omniscience and holiness which enables them to share with God in His judicial functions. It is to assume that men are little deities who can stand alongside of God and determine what is right and what is wrong for their brothers. Such pride is necessarily divisive and undermines the foundations of community.

The antidote to this kind of attitude is to focus on ourselves, not on the other person; to focus on our own humanity and our accountability to God, not on peripheral differences between us. None of us is divine, says Paul; rather all of us must stand before the judgment seat of the divine. Think therefore in terms of your own judgment. Think in

terms of your accountability to your Master. Think in terms of what God will say about what you have done as His son or daughter. Let God be the judge of your brother. It is not your role to hold your brother in ridicule or contempt because he differs from you in certain peripheral and ambiguous matters. Let God, who is his master and yours, be the judge. For whether we eat or abstain, live or die, we do it, says Paul, unto the Lord.

There is a corollary to recognition of the role of God as judge which, according to Paul, also provides a basis for tolerance toward individual differences, and that is the recognition of the role of the conscience as the arbiter of right and wrong in certain areas. Listen again to Paul: "I know and I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it to be unclean. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes a particular day, or eats, does so in honor of the Lord and gives thanks, while he who abstains does so in honor of the Lord and gives thanks. He who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not act from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."

The statements affirms the significant principle of accommodation in relation to certain matters. They indicate that God, who is the judge, has no absolute standard for right and wrong in all areas of conduct. In God's eyes what may be permissible in some areas for one may be wrong for another, and vice versa. God Himself allows for a certain flexibility based on individual differences. Good and evil, says Paul, must be closely related to man's interpersonal experience with God. And since each individual is different from every other individual, this experience will necessarily lead to some differing convictions.

Thus what Paul is exhorting is that Christians avoid judging others in areas where God's will is not clear. Each one is to follow his own conscience out of trust in God and with a desire to do the will of God. And he should be able to do so with the assurance that he will be accepted as an honest and faithful member of the Christian community. Each must be convinced in his own mind. There are certain matters which only God and the individual knows; therefore, no other person besides the individual involved is qualified to judge in these matters.

Such respect for individual differences assumes that these differences will be open to dialogue based on a teachable spirit. This kind of dialogue can occur only if a community recognizes individual difference and is willing to discuss these differences openly and with mutual respect and love. The presupposition of open communal dialogue is an

appreciation of individualism and of its bases. Individualism has theological significance. It is to be respected not on humanistic or pragmatic grounds, but because God has made men as individuals and because God Himself treats them as individuals. What is needed, then, is the kind of openness and tolerance which will enable us to accept the individual as God creates and accepts him, and to make the individual a vital part of a community which understands, accepts, and tolerates differences. This is one principle which Paul is clearly proclaiming in the passage before us, and it is important that we take his proclamation seriously, because it declares the will of God for us.

II. Concern for the Community

But individualism is not, for Paul, the last word. If a certain practice is right because it is so judged by God, who is the judge, and if God is concerned about the community, then the standard for right and wrong must exceed individual concerns. It must include ultimately God-like concern for the community.

Thus it is imperative to consider the second great truth emphasized by Paul, namely, the need for a sense of responsibility for and toward the community. In fact, when one examines closely the thought of Paul in Romans 14:1–15:6, one finds this second truth to be dominant. Listen again to the words of Paul: “Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling-block, or a hindrance, in the way of a brother.” He continues: “If your brother is outraged by what you eat, then your conduct is no longer guided by love. Do not, by your eating, bring disaster to a man for whom Christ died. What for you is a good thing must not become an occasion for slanderous talk. For the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but justice, peace, and joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. He who, thus, shows himself a servant of Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue the things which make for peace and build up the common life. Do not ruin the work of God for the sake of food. Everything is pure in itself, but anything is bad for the man who by his eating causes another to fall. It is a fine thing to abstain from eating meat or drinking wine, or doing anything which causes your brother’s downfall.”

Next he adds in the significant words of the beginning verses of chapter 15: “Those of us who have a robust conscience must accept as our own burden the tender scruples of weaker men, and not consider ourselves. Each of us must consider his neighbor and think what is for

his good and will build up the common life. For Christ too did not consider himself, but might have said, in the words of Scripture, 'The reproaches of those who reproached thee fell upon me.' For all the ancient Scriptures were written for our own instruction, in order that through the encouragement they give us we may maintain our hope with fortitude. And may God, the source of all fortitude and all encouragement, grant that you may agree with one another after the manner of Christ Jesus, so that with one mind and one voice you may praise the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

What high and noble and lofty words are these! They express the ultimate concern of that person who is a genuine member of a Christian community. They are spoken by Paul because he is a hard-headed realist. He knows that his call for mutual tolerance and understanding will not, and perhaps cannot, be heeded by all members of the community. There then remains the question as to what should be done about those who do not have them. The answer, says Paul, is that those who are strong, which in this particular case means those who are tolerant, should assume a special obligation toward the rest of the community.

Paul expresses this obligation in terms of a number of interlocking concerns, each of which could be discussed in its own right: the concern that one be guided by love; the concern for the work of Christ on the cross and for the work of God; the concern for the Kingdom of God, which consists of justice, and peace, and joy inspired by the Holy Spirit; the concern to be a servant of Christ and acceptable to God; the concern for making peace and building up the common life; and the concern for being like Christ, who considered others rather than himself. These areas of concern ought to be uppermost in the life of the Christian believer who is a genuine member of the community of Christ.

These concerns have a common thrust, namely, that even though in some areas an individual could follow certain practices because they are allowed with his own conscience, if these practices cause his brother to stumble, his ultimate obligation must be not to himself, nor to what is right in his own eyes, but to his brother, because he then shows that his ultimate concern is for God and Christ. For members of the Christian community, what is more important than doing one's own thing is doing God's thing and Christ's thing.

Thus Paul's analysis is clear. It is a question of priorities. What comes first? What should dominate our lives? You should, Paul said, allow for individual differences. Mutual tolerance is necessary. The strong should not despise the weak and the weak should not censure the

strong. But if the weak are bound by their scruples and the strong have the option of following their own consciences and offending their weaker brothers, or following the course of restraint, then, says Paul, follow the course of restraint. That is the Christian's priority. It is more important to avoid the spiritual shipwreck of a weak brother than to follow a course of action which is allowed by one's own conscience. It is more important to focus on our obligations than on our rights. It is more important to be concerned for others than for ourselves. It is more important to honor and to promote the purposes of Christ's death on the work of God than it is to follow our own desires, although they may be right in themselves. It is more important to edify members of the Church than it is to do everything which our relationship to God permits. It is more important to be like Christ than to be individualistic and broadminded.

Thus Paul has a twofold word for our day in regard to those practices which are peripheral and on which there is no clear word from God. There is the need for mutual tolerance on the part of all of us. The voice and the conscience of the individual should not be stifled, otherwise God-given individuality is negated and necessary changes are not effected. But there is something beyond individualism. What we need even more in our day is a Christ-like concern for others which will encourage restraint on the part of each member of the Christian community, and, in fact, each member of society.

The need for such restraint exists in the Seminary community. Before we criticize other members of the Seminary community, on the basis of personal preferences, we ought to ask, "Will this criticism contribute to the growth and improvement of the community, or will it divide and destroy the community?" And before we judge someone who differs from us or who is critical of us, we should not only consider whether he may be justified in his practice, but even if we decide he is not, perhaps we should allow for the fact that he may be expressing honestly his own conscience and convictions as a servant of God.

What is needed, then, as members of the Christian community and as ministers of the Gospel, is a combination of openness and self-control. We need openness to individual differences and to change where central and clear matters of Christian faith are not involved. We also need self-control when the Christian community and the Gospel of Christ are jeopardized by individual convictions which may be justified in themselves. These two must be kept in proper balance and tension if the Church is to survive and to thrive. The message of Paul is that such a

balance is possible, providing that individual preferences are subordinated when necessary to the loving concern for the common good.

The story is told by John Wesley, in his journal, regarding his meeting with someone who was well-skilled in controversy, and apparently quite fond of it. He argued his own differences of opinion at some length with Wesley, and Wesley admits that perhaps there was some value in it. However Wesley adds, "After I had spent an hour in discussion with him, I said, 'I advise you to dispute as little as possible, but rather to follow after holiness, and to walk humbly with your God.' "