

**“Deciding to Love”, Rev. Doug Ashley**  
**May 24, 2020**

Welcome once again to our virtual worship service, I'm Pastor Doug and I'm glad you have joined us this week. Whether you are a part of our faith family or just checking out who we are and what we are up to, we are glad you have gathered with us for worship this morning. We are going to be looking at a passage that on the surface looks to be something we can all agree on, but it is a verse that is easier said than done. Look at 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. (Romans 14:13)*

Would you please join me as we ask God to make himself known to us in his word today? Let's pray. Heavenly Father, would you prepare our hearts in this moment to receive your word? We are distracted people living in a distracted time and so we need you to break up the soil of our hearts and plant it way down deep in us. We want to see Jesus, we need to see Jesus. So help us to see him. Reveal yourself today so that we may wonder together at your beauty and your grace and your glory. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

In elementary school, our PE teacher was tired of dealing with all of our griping about the rules of the game we were playing. The teacher said, fine, I'll let you come up with the rules for the game and hold yourselves to them. Do you know how it turned out? Terribly! With no leader, and no solid set of rules to go by, everybody did whatever they wanted. The boundaries changed, the goal moved, and soon it devolved into chaos. It was the worst game ever! Why? Because nobody could agree and everybody thought they were right. It was not an enjoyable experience.

Welcome to self-righteousness! As brothers and sisters in Christ, when we choose to overlay our convictions on non-essential matters this is what we get. We set ourselves up as judges by our own rules rather than letting God be the judge by His. This was the mindset of the Pharisees, whom Jesus over and over again spoke out against. Let me be clear, I am not talking about the essential matters of faith and the way of life with God that is clearly laid out in Scripture. There are principles and there is truth for us to follow. These are the other things of life and faith that are non-essential. But the way we treat each other in them matters.

There is a way out of self-righteousness, and Paul shows us the way in this passage. He shows us that **because God has decided for us in Christ we must decide for one another in love**. What it comes down to is how do we love each other well when we don't agree?

In the book of Romans, Paul is speaking to a diverse community of believers. They come from both Jewish and pagan backgrounds. We do not know the exact nature of the issue Paul is addressing in chapters 14-15, but he speaks about two groups of people—the “weak” and the “strong”. More than likely, the “weak”—I’ll call them “cautious” Christians—are those who grew up observing Jewish customs and religious practices but now that they are Christians they have had trouble letting go of the dietary and ceremonial laws of Judaism as they follow Christ. The “strong”—I’ll call them “confident” Christians—are probably those who have no such inhibitions with following Jesus. They are freely eating and freely worshipping in ways that honor God but they are not holding to Jewish custom.

Today we need this passage, because as people with diverse faith backgrounds, we too can fall into self-righteousness. Many of us can look back at times in our lives when a certain season or church or pastor or ministry really made an impact on our lives. We keep things from those experiences and we measure all others by them. Without even realizing it, we can self-righteously impose our views our traditions our ideas on fellow believers. What we are going to find is what we need to STOP doing and START doing in order to become the community of love Jesus has called us to be and died to make possible. Deciding to love is not easy, but it’s possible because of what Jesus did. Let’s look and see how.

First, we see that we need to stop taking God’s place as the judge. Romans 4:13 is a part of a section that runs for almost two whole chapters, that is how important this topic is for us. In this verse, Paul starts things off by telling his readers to “stop passing judgment” on one another. He has just spent a significant amount of time challenging these cautious Christians to let go of their need to control the confident ones. Here is what he in verses 10-12:

*Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

Rather than letting their opinions guide them, Paul says we need to separate out the essentials from the non-essentials of faith and stop holding our brothers and sisters to the non-essentials. In effect what Paul is saying is that to love your brother or sister well, you need to stop imposing your sentiments, your traditions, your opinions, your style on their journey with God. Let those things that are not essential be between them and God.

What about the confident ones? Do they have any culpability? Is there anything they need to stop? Yes, they have to stop, too. We see Paul challenge them in chapter 14 verses 15-17:

*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. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Did you see that? He said the kingdom of God is looking at higher things than eating and drinking. Righteousness speaks to a right relationship with God. Peace speaks to a life lived in a flourishing wholeness. And joy is what comes when these are connected through the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit. So what are they called to stop? Those things that cause their brothers and sisters in faith to either walk away in disgust or step into an area that threatens their conscience. At times, we have to give up our prerogatives. As confident ones in Paul's description, we have to let go of our freedom on behalf of those we are called to love. We have to STOP so we can love them well.

When I was in college, I was in a church worship service sitting alone. My fiancé was a few thousand miles away at school and I was feeling sorry for myself. So the guy next to me, who had his arm around his girlfriend was really bugging me. I despised him. Then he started rubbing her shoulder in such a way that it made the material on her dress make this "fingernails on a chalkboard" sound to me. It was not only annoying, it was now aggravating! Now I despised THEM. Then, all of a sudden, the girlfriend looked over to me and whispered, "Excuse me, you're tapping." Without realizing it, in my irritation, I had begun bouncing my foot and it was making this tapping sound on the pew. I was unaware of it in my annoyance at this couple. I didn't recognize what I was doing, but once it came to light I had to stop. I'd been judging them so long I didn't see that I was the one who needed correcting!

In order to love your brothers and sisters well, God may be asking you and I to stop something. To the cautious ones among us, he may be saying: Stop imposing your opinions. Stop judging others by your non-essential standards. Stop despising your brothers and sisters who don't see things your way. To the confident ones among us, he may be saying: Stop flaunting your freedoms without regard for those around you. Stop despising your brothers and sisters who still struggle with fully embracing God's grace for them.

We have seen that **because God has decided for us in Christ we must decide for one another in love**. Sometimes this means we stop some things. We STOP in order to love our brothers and sisters who see things differently from us. But we also need a new START.

At the middle of verse 13, you remember Paul says "but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. In other words, he wants us to start letting God's love take the lead. Paul is doing something remarkable here. He is using that same word he used to correct them to stop judging one another and now he commands them

to “judge” or decide to go a different route. With the gospel there is always a “start” that follows a “stop”. Why? Because of the decision God made to send his Son into the world to take on sin and to offer perfect righteousness. Jesus stopped something and started something at the same time. And in Christ, because of what Jesus has already done we are able to STOP following the judgmental and despising ways of the world and START moving into the loving and grace-abounding way of God. Now, how does this work?

Paul gives us two ways to start when it comes to deciding for one another. First, he says we need to start by deciding not to put a stumbling block in the way of a brother. A stumbling block is used here as a metaphor to indicate intentional placement of something in someone’s life that their conscience opposes. That word “put” is key here. Paul is highlighting the INTENTIONALITY of the stumbling block. The “on purpose” word or action meant to cause harm in the conscience of another follower of Jesus. But remember, Paul is telling us to decide or to START something here.

But how do we decide to never to do this? How do we make this new START Paul is talking about here? We have to KNOW our brothers and sisters. Really know them. We have to invest ourselves in their lives, and actively listen to what’s going on in their hearts in order to discern the ways we can love them well, without creating stumbling blocks for them. Are there addictions they struggle with? Are there past memories that guide their thinking? Are there wounds that cause them to take offense in certain situations? We start deciding to love well by getting to know our brothers and sisters more and more deeply. And we have to let them do the same with us.

Paul gives us another start with another metaphor. He says that we also start to love well by “decid[ing] never to put a hindrance in the way of a brother”. The word “hindrance” could be translated “trap”. Decide never to set a trap for your brothers and sisters. How do we have the potential to set a trap for them? Well, again, the issue here is intentionality. We can’t know all the time how we are hindering another person in their faith journey by the things we choose to do or say. However, as people who love Jesus and are learning to love those who love Jesus, we are growing in our desire to love others well. We are growing in our desire to pay attention to ways that we can help them flourish in Christ, not thwart their progress. We don’t want them getting stuck in non-essential matters because of us. We want them to grow in Christ.

A man working on an ATM at a bank in Corpus Christi, TX had a rough afternoon a few years ago. He was repairing a lock on an ATM when the door closed and locked him in with his phone in his truck. There was no way for him to call for help and no way to communicate to anyone outside of the ATM verbally. But he did have something he could use. Paper and a pen. So he began to write notes asking for help of customers who came by through the receipt slot. The notes said: "Please help. I'm stuck in here and I don't have my phone. Please

call my boss." Some thought it was a prank and so they just moved on without doing anything, but one kind person called the police and released this worker from his ATM trap. All because this person believed someone needed help. The truth is we all need help. And we are crying out for it in the ways we relate to one another. With words and actions, we are slipping little notes through to our brothers and sisters all the time without knowing it. We can decide to help each other by paying attention and taking steps to help by really listening and seeking to really know one another.

Right here and now, God is giving us an opportunity to love others well. To love our brothers and sisters well. To stop thinking the worst and start thinking the best of one another. To stop imposing our views and start regarding the viewpoint of another. It's a decision we make to love because God already made HIS decision to love us in Christ. We know that we will disagree, but when we do may we be a people who are more and more decidedly loving because Jesus decided to love us first. May we together rest in HIS love. Let's pray together.

Father God, thank you for deciding for us in love by sending your Son. Thank you for pursuing us further with the gift of your Spirit. We need our Savior and we need your Spirit in order to become the people you have called us to be—people of love. And to that end, and for that glorious purpose, we pray together today the prayer that Jesus himself taught us to pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.