



CARD TABLES

Sunday 5 June 2022

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

We've been looking at 'the table' - the idea that some of the great spiritual moments in life happen around the table as we enjoy a meal with people or so forth. And we've extended the metaphor to 'extending the table' to maybe connecting with people we're less familiar with, people from a different background, from different cultures than ours.

But you can imagine that sometimes you might invite someone back to your home, someone you don't know well, for a barbecue or something. It's all going along well. You've got the sausages sizzling along nicely on the barbie, and you go to reach in the fridge for that nice bottle of chardonnay that you've had chilling for the purpose, and you hear one of the people say, "Can you imagine that there are some Christians who even drink alcohol!" So, you let your hand just slip past the chardonnay, and you grab that bottle of kombucha as if that's what you were really after all along...

How do we deal with situations where we disagree? As with many things, even as Christians, we can disagree with each other. We can disagree over whether it's okay to drink alcohol. We can disagree over what movies are appropriate for Christians to go to. I often get into conversations with people who are from a more liberal background who think maybe you can pick and choose which bits of the Bible you want to follow, whereas I believe all the Bible is God's Word. Recently I've had a few discussions about whether it's okay for Christians to have the Covid vaccine - that's an interesting one. The Prosperity Gospel is one that comes up a lot. Do you remember a while ago, there were big debates about whether Christians should read Harry Potter? And the old favourite of what's appropriate to wear to church: should you come to church in bare feet and so forth... Many areas where we disagree, and some of those things are just judgment calls, but for some of them there is a right or wrong answer in the

Scriptures – so how do we deal when we've invited people to the table but there's an area where we might have a difference of opinion?

First, I want to look at a few verses from Romans chapter 14. If you've got your Bible, we're going to look at the first four verses because Paul's dealing in the whole of Romans 14 and even into chapter 15 with areas where we might disagree. So let's see what we can learn from Paul. Romans 14 verse 1 says, *"Accept the one whose faith is weak without quarrelling over disputable matters."* This is one of those jam-packed verses that you've almost got to pull out every word, word by word, to get what it means.

The word 'accept' in the Greek means "to receive kindly or hospitably, to admit to one's society and friendship, to treat with kindness". So treat kindly, welcome someone and, even if you have disagreements, accept them into your friendship. Accept them with kindness. Treat them kindly. Accept the one whose faith is weak.

Just to remind ourselves what faith is, Hebrews 11:1 says, *"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."* The word there for 'confidence' is the word 'aftopepoithisi' in the Greek. It means "like a foundation, an underpinning". So faith is trusting and believing God and trusting and believing God's Word so much that it's your foundation, that you can stand on it, you can live on it. That's what faith is.

So he says, *"Accept the one whose faith is weak."* So what is weak faith versus strong faith? Weak faith is when you believe God's Word but struggle to completely let go of your old beliefs. All of us, when we come to the Scriptures, when we come to Christ, we have our old set of beliefs. There might be cultural beliefs. They might be from our religious background. They might be beliefs from the world. And as we put our faith in Jesus, we put our faith and trust in what God says; but some people struggle to completely let go of the old views. Take the alcohol thing: if you were brought up in a religious background which was very legalistic and they said Christians are not allowed to drink, and then you hear the good news about Jesus, that by His blood he set us free, we're free in Jesus, we're no longer under the law – but some people think, "But if I let go of that rule maybe I'll go a bit crazy and end up an alcoholic, so maybe I'll believe in Jesus, but I'll just keep that rule just in case..." That's weak faith. Strong faith is when you fully believe the Word of God: you're able to let go of your old beliefs and stand on the Word of God.

Now, the good news is both weak faith and strong faith get you saved! You're saved when you put your faith in Jesus. If you believe that Jesus gave His life on that cross to pay the price for your sin, you put your trust in Him; you're saved. And the truth of the matter is: we all have strong and weak faith in different areas. In some areas we're strong; in some areas we're weak; and we're all on a growth journey towards stronger and stronger faith.

So, *"accept the one whose faith is weak without quarrelling over disputable matters."*

Accept the person warmly and receive them into your fellowship, the person whose faith is weaker than yours, without getting into arguments and debates over things that are disputable. What are disputable matters? The word for 'disputable' is the word 'diacrisis', and it means "the faculty of distinguishing and estimating" - so disputable matters are those matters where you need to make a judgment. Some things in the Bible are absolutely true - some things are clearly right or wrong - but for others, you need to make a judgment call. There are a number of things that we need to make a judgment call on. Paul is about to go on and talk about food sacrificed to idols -there's a judgment call to be made. What day should we worship on? It's a judgment call. Should we worship on Sunday, or should it be Saturday, the Sabbath, or is it okay to worship on Friday night? That's a judgment call. What religious holidays should we celebrate? Do we have to celebrate the Christmas season and Easter? It's a judgment call. Whether to drink alcohol or not - the Bible says we're free to but is it always the best for us? Judgment call. What music should we sing? Surprisingly, it's a judgment call. There's no right or wrong.

So, "*accept the one whose faith is weak without getting into arguments about disputable matters.*" Receive kindly, hospitably. Welcome them into your society and friendship. Treat them with kindness, the person whose faith is weaker than yours, without getting into arguments over things that are disputable.

What goes on in verse 2 says, "*One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another whose faith is weak eats only vegetables.*" So a person who's saved out of a background of idolatry where they offer meat sacrificed to idols says, "I've been saved. I've given up those idols. I now put my faith in Jesus." But when someone serves up meat, they might say, "I'm not going to eat that. I've come out of that background. I'm only going to eat the only vegetables." Another person who's saved out of idolatry might say, "I now know that Jesus is Lord and that idol is just a block of wood, so it actually doesn't matter what I eat." One person will call it one way, and another person will call it the other way. One person's faith may be a little stronger than the other person's. So how do these people get on if they disagree? How do they get on when you've invited these people back to the table, but now there's this disagreement?

In Romans 14, verse 3: "*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.*" See, it's entirely possible for the person who's stronger in faith to look down on the one whose faith is weaker and say, "Well, they're not quite as good a Christian as me. They're not quite as strong. They're weaker than me," and you could look down on them. But Paul says: don't do that! And the person who's got the weaker faith could look at that person who's stronger in faith and say, "Look, they eat meat sacrificed to idols. They drink alcohol. They're just not as good a Christian. They're more sinful than me. They're into all these other things," and they can judge the person who has stronger faith. But we mustn't do either. Why? Because God has accepted them!

So, here's the wonderful news: when you put your trust in Jesus, when you look at Jesus and recognise He gave His life on the cross to pay the price for your sin, and you say, "I'm going to put my faith in Him," God accepts you! He welcomes you into His family. He welcomes you in as His precious child, and He accepts you, whether your faith is weak or whether your faith is strong. Whether you've got all your doctrine right or wrong, He accepts you as soon as you put your faith in Jesus. So we mustn't look down on someone God accepts as a precious child of God. So don't judge them or treat them with contempt.

In Romans 14, verse 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."* See, if a person has faith in God, they're God's servant. So we mustn't judge one of God's people, one of God's servants; even if they are weak in faith and even if they're wrong in many areas of the Scriptures, God will make them stand. So here's the good news: one day, we will all have perfect doctrine. One day we will all have perfect faith. We will perfectly believe everything that's in the Bible when we get to Heaven. But in the meantime, we are all on a journey towards that. God has us all on a journey - a journey He's planned for all eternity. A plan that will get you to more and more accurate thinking, stronger and stronger faith - but the journey is different for each one of us. We all start at different places, and we all take different paths to get there. He's got us all on a journey.

So, with that said, how do we go about extending the table to people we might have disagreements with? A little bit further down in Romans 15:1-3, Paul says, *"We who are strong are to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbours for their good to build them up, for even Christ did not please Himself, but as is written, "the insults of those who insult you have fallen on Me"."* Each of us should please our neighbours for their good to build them up. See, the goal of connecting with people is to build them up. That's the simple goal: to have them leave your table stronger in their faith, more encouraged, and in a better place than when they got there. That's the simple goal, and the good news is: you don't have to correct everything about them that they get wrong. That's the good news! You don't have to fix everything about them. You just have to have them leave your table better than when they got there - to build them up, to strengthen them up. And to do that, you may have to bear with some of their weaknesses and some of their failings.

I want to look at a few practical ways we can go about this, and I want to change the analogy slightly. We've been looking at the idea of sitting at the table with the idea being we're having a meal with someone. But there are other things you can do at the table, and one of the things you do is play a game of cards. So, I want to look at five 'cards' you can play when you're sitting at the table. Now I realise I'm on shaky ground here because there'll be some weaker brother or sister who will say, "I don't think Christians should play cards." If that's you, I apologise - just take these as five suggestions... So, here are five cards that you can play at the table:

You've invited someone along, and differences of opinion come up. The first card is a card I don't suggest you play - this is a bad card. Don't play this one. It's called the **'self-delusion card'**. 1 Peter 2:16 says, *"Live as free people but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil."* Live as God's slaves. Don't delude yourself. Sometimes we think, "I'm a strong Christian. I've got stronger faith. I can drink," when in actual fact, you just really like a drink a bit too much. That's not stronger faith. Don't delude yourself, don't kid yourself. And when a difference of opinion comes up, at least consider the possibility that it might be you who is wrong...

Matthew 7:3 says, *"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite. First, take the plank out of your own eye, and then you'll see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."* Deal with your own stuff first. Look at yourself first before you try and help others because the good news is: if you take the plank out of your own eye, if you deal with your own stuff and take that plank out, then you are ideally placed to help someone else because you've got the maturity. You've got the humility to be able to them. So deal with your own stuff first. Don't play the 'self-delusion card'. I mention it because I think we play that one a little bit too often sometimes. So that's a bad card - don't play that one.

The second card we can play is the **'give up your freedom for others card'**. Romans 14:20-21 says, *"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 do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. So if you have someone over to the table and something you're doing is a stumbling block for the other person or causes them trouble or difficulty in their faith. Maybe it's best just to give up your freedom for the sake of the other person. Maybe you should just not do it for their sake. If your drinking causes someone else a problem, maybe don't drink. If eating meat sacrificed to idols - I thought that was just a historical example until I talked to Gus and Audrey the other day at our Small Group, and that's a really relevant issue in Taiwan. So if something you're doing causes the other person to stumble, maybe you should have enough love to give up your freedom for the sake of the other person and just not do it. Some people say, "Isn't that just being a hypocrite?" No, it's being loving. It's being loving and caring. So maybe we've got to give up our freedom for the sake of the other person.

The third card I think we need to play a fair bit is the **'just let it go card'**. Romans 15:1-2 says, *"We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbours for their good to build them up."* This happens frequently. You get into a conversation, and someone will say something that you just know is wrong, and it's a bad error. But sometimes, it's not the time to take it on; it's not the time to deal with that. Sometimes you just have to let that one go; just let it fly by

because it's not the time.

There are a number of reasons why it may not be the time. Sometimes, people will say something, and it's just the tip of the iceberg. The roots of that problem may go much deeper, and maybe God has to deal with its origins before you're ready to deal with the tip of the iceberg bit - and maybe that's a bigger process than you can take on right there and then. It's like a weed: sometimes you pull a weed out, and you just snap the top off and accidentally leave the roots. There there's no point to that. Sometimes it's not the time because you haven't developed the relationship with that person enough to take that one on. It may be deeper than the level of your relationship, and you may need to build more trust before it's appropriate to take that one on. Sometimes their relationship with God is not deep enough yet. Sometimes for deeper issues, they have to build up their relationship with God and strengthen their faith in Him before they're ready to deal with that one. So sometimes you just have to let things go... I think we have to play that card reasonably frequently.

The fourth card is the complete opposite. It's the **'speak the truth in love card'**. Ephesians 4:15 says, *"Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him who is the head - that is Christ."* Sometimes it's exactly the right time to speak the truth in love, to take that issue on, to speak into it. See, that issue may not have deep roots. They might say something, and it's just that they don't know what the Scriptures say. Maybe you can just educate them, tell them what the Bible says, and it's all dealt with. Or maybe it is a big issue, but they've gone through a whole series of dinners with different people, and you're just the last one on the chain, and you're the one who's there ready to deal with it and take it on. So there is definitely a time to speak the truth, to say the truth to that person in love.

So there are two errors we can make: one is to take on every issue all the time, and the other error is to never take on any issue - and there's a time for each. There's a time to just let it go, and there's a time to speak the truth. And wisdom is to know which one it is at the time.

The fifth card - my favourite card - is the card I think we need to play a lot. It's called the **'Colombo card'**. I got the name of this from a book. It's an apologetics book by a guy called Greg Koukl called 'Tactics'. Great book! I recommend it to everyone. He has this tactic he calls the Columbo tactic. Do you remember Colombo used to be a TV detective? He had his raincoat on, and he was this stumbling, bumbling guy, his hair everywhere. He'd walk in, scratch his head, and be all confused. He'd ask questions, "So, hang on. Where did you say you were on Thursday? You were over here?" And he just asked a lot of questions until eventually he'd look really confused and say, "But, hang on, you're over here on Thursday... But I thought you said you were over there on Thursday?" and it catches them out. And so the Colombo tactic is just to ask questions. James 1:19 says, *"My dear brothers*

and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry." The 'Colombo card' is just to ask them what they think. Ask them what they believe. Take an interest in their beliefs. All it takes is enough love and interest and care to be interested in them, to ask questions like, "What do you think? Why do you think that? How did you come by that?" And the beauty of it is everyone loves to be listened to. Everyone loves it when you take enough interest in them, listen to what they think, and listen to their opinions. And the beauty of it is: as you're clarifying your understanding of what they believe, you're helping them clarify their understanding of what they think - and so many things come out as you do that.

It's a good thing to use evangelistically too. Just a couple of examples: I frequently get people saying to me that something happened that was just "meant to be," and I always find that a strange thing. So I always ask them, "Oh, what do you mean by that? How or why was it meant to be? Do you believe in a god who meant it to be, or what do you mean by it?" Many people have never thought about this before - they just have this idea: "Oh, well, I just feel like the universe meant it to be." So I'll ask, "Oh, so do you see there's a personality behind the universe that meant it to be?" And people at that point usually just say, "I don't know. I just think it was meant to be," and you can sense they've closed it off - in which case you just say, "So, what are you doing on the weekend?" You change the topic if they close it off. Have the politeness to let it go... But at least you put in their mind the possibility that if something was meant to be, there must be a 'meaner' out there who means it to be.

Another different thing that has come up: I was talking to a Muslim guy once, and I asked, "What have you been up to?" and he said, "I've been on the pilgrimage to Mecca." Well, I was interested in that - I don't know much about that. He said, "We retraced the steps to where Abraham sacrificed his son Ishmael." That surprised me. I said, "Don't you mean he almost sacrificed his son Isaac?" And the guy said, "No. You know the story: Abraham sacrificed his son Ishmael." And I said, "Oh, as Christians, we follow the Jewish Scriptures where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac, but God stopped him." And then he was surprised, so now we both learned something just by asking questions. And, of course, I was able to go on and say, "And as Christians, we see that as a foreshadowing of when God sacrificed his Son Jesus on the cross to pay the price for our sin." I was able to share the Gospel comfortably and easily just by asking him what he'd been up to and what his beliefs were all about. The 'Colombo card' is a great card! I encourage you to play that all the time - ask them what they think.

So, the big question, of course, is: how do you know what card to play at what time? Galatians 6:1-2 says, "*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently but watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ.*" The only way you can ultimately know what card to play and when is to be led by the Spirit.

See, the Spirit is the One who is doing the building up and the growing of that person. The Spirit is the One who's got them on the journey and knows the process ahead of them. As we follow the Spirit, we need to pray - maybe before they come over to lunch or maybe while we're having the conversation - we need to pray and ask for the Spirit's guidance, "Show me where to go with this conversation," then we need to listen to the Spirit as well as to the person to understand them better. As we listen and understand them and as we seek the Spirit, often it will become clear which way we should go and which card we should play. Sometimes it's not always clear, but if your goal and your aim is to build the other person up and you're seeking to hear the Spirit, God will usually steer you the right way to go.

So can I encourage you, as you extend your table or as you extend your conversations to those around you, to seek the Spirit's guidance and seek to have that person leave you in a stronger place than they were when they first came.

Let's pray: *"Father, we just praise you. We praise you that we are all on a wonderful journey that will ultimately lead us to that perfect place where all of our thinking is in line with yours, where all of our faith is in line with yours, where all our behaviour is in line with yours. I thank you that all of us will get there, and I thank you for the rich and wonderful privilege it is that we can be involved in helping another person a little way along that journey. So, I give you praise, and I pray that you give us the wisdom, love, and sensitivity to the Spirit that we might be able to gently, lovingly, and caringly help those people around us, strengthen them, and build them up. We thank you for this privilege. In Jesus' name. Amen."*