

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Romans 14:1-9

There are indifferent matters, but not indifferent Christians

These verses loomed large in St. Paul's time, because most Christians came out of morally strict Judaism or lax paganism. It was hard for the Jew to understand and accept what seemed to be the frivolity of the Gentile. It was hard for the Gentile to understand and accept what seemed to be the inflexibility of the Jew. Thus, there were innumerable practical questions to be answered. Should Jewish Christians still observe Jewish religious days and eat kosher? Could Gentile Christians eat meat since it was often sacrificed to a god before being sold by the butcher? To what extent could they still participate in the culture, which was pagan through and through? Most wanted an easy answer. Unfortunately, St. Paul was not an easy answer kind of guy. He was a minister of the Gospel, not a lawyer. He was sent to unite Christians under Christ, not to split hairs as he had done under Moses as a Pharisee. Thus, he gives a principle: guided by conscience and God's Word, exercise Christian freedom in Christian love in morally indifferent matters, that is, things that are neither right nor wrong in and of themselves, but beware that indifferent matters are not always indifferent.

These verses loomed large in Luther's time, as the gospel was preached with renewed zeal and rediscovered clarity. As people were set free from man-made laws by the gospel, their consciences were thrown into a struggle to discern what was God's law and what had been added by men over the years. Did they have to observe the days of fasting? Was it wrong to receive both the Body and Blood of our Lord in the Sacrament? What should they retain in God's service? Could pastors marry? Most wanted an easy answer. Unfortunately, Luther and the reformers weren't simple answer kind of guys. They were ministers of the Gospel, not lawyers. They were called to unify people under Christ, not to split hairs as they had done under the papacy. Thus, they gave a principle: guided by conscience and God's Word, exercise Christian freedom in Christian love in morally indifferent matters, that is, things that are neither right nor wrong in and of themselves, but beware that indifferent matters are not always indifferent. Sound familiar?

St. Paul's words also loom large today, as the Church is bombarded with threats, innovations, and new man-made laws from without and within. The Christian must still, even in indifferent matters, always ask, not only if something is lawful, but if it is beneficial and wise. Luther once wrote, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Both are true. Both are taught by St. Paul. Both must be preserved. Both compliment, not contradict, each other. While in doctrine, that is, in the logical and orderly teaching of the Scriptures, we must distinguish between Christian freedom and love, in practice, that is, in our every day life, the two can hardly be separated any less than faith and love, as we heard about last week, can be separated in the Christian life. Faith without works is dead. Christian freedom without Christian love is dead. It is libertinism and self-indulgence instead. In other words, Christian freedom is not an excuse to be act like an inconsiderate fool.

There is an old saying in the Lutheran Church that goes back to the example of St. Paul. It says, "Nothing is an adiaphoron in cases of confession and offense." Adiaphora are indifferent things "neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word." While many things are neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word, nothing is indifferent if it denies a truth of God's Word, compromises our clear confession of the truth, or causes offense to a weak brother or sister through a lack of Christian love.

Our Lord commands us to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. The Church is free to adopt various forms of worship to adorn these actions. In and of themselves, instruments, melodies, gestures, vestments, and postures are indifferent. Yet, while instruments and melodies are indifferent,

would it be indifferent to combine them in a tune associated with immorality? While gestures are indifferent, would it be indifferent to use what would be an offensive finger arrangement on the road for giving the blessing? While the vestments a pastor wears are indifferent, would it be indifferent to preach in boxers and a t-shirt? While postures are indifferent, would it be appropriate to skip about flippantly while administering the Sacrament with purposefully filthy hands? In these situations, the answer is obvious, yet we must practice the same scrupulous caution in other, less obvious matters of life and worship. St. Paul's message is not, "Do what you will," but, "Do what you do according to conscience, with careful consideration, with respect for your brothers and sisters, and, ultimately, to the Lord."

Perhaps the best example of this is how St. Paul handled the issue of circumcision. When he was going to take St. Timothy as a missionary among Jews, he had him circumcised to avoid causing offense and hindering the proclamation of the gospel, exercising Christian love without compromising Christian freedom. However, when some later insisted a Christian must be circumcised, he stood firm and refused have St. Titus circumcised. Giving in would have compromised his confession of the gospel and Christian freedom, and nothing is more unloving than compromising the gospel and thus robbing people of its comfort, or preventing them from coming to know it. Circumcision is indifferent. The Christian is not.

Similarly, a drink is clearly not beneficial or wise for a recovering alcoholic, and so that morally indifferent drink is a sin for him. The casual drinker, however, who exercises his freedom in moderation and with gratefulness to God, may drink that morally indifferent drink to the Lord, as St. Paul urged St. Timothy to do to calm his stomach. It would nonetheless hardly be proper for the casual drinker to drink in front of the recovering alcoholic if it tempted him or caused him offense. Yet, if the recovering alcoholic insisted it was a sin for the casual drinker ever to drink, or that one must abstain from drinking to be saved, the casual drinker would rightly order the finest German pilsner in the house. In the first case, the casual drinker would be exercising Christian love without compromising Christian freedom. In the second case, he would be protecting Christian freedom out of Christian love, because nothing is more unloving than compromising the gospel and thus robbing people of its comfort or preventing them from coming to know it. The drink is indifferent. The Christian is not.

St. Paul writes, *"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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."* Some matters may be indifferent, but may we never be! Some matters may be indifferent, but Christ has not died for those matters; Christ has died for us, to set us free from bondage to sin and the law, that we might live, not for fear of punishment, but for Him. He has died and risen to forgive us for the times we have failed to live to Him. He has died and risen to enable us, as regenerated children of God, to live to Him as He lived to His Father, in even the most mundane matters of life. How good and gracious our loving Savior is, for through His death and resurrection He has redeemed not only our body and soul, but even sanctified our most seemingly unimpressive actions, so that when you drive to work to fulfill your vocation, you drive to the Lord, when you take a test to fulfill your calling as a student and to prepare for future service, you take your test to the Lord, and when you change your child's diaper to carry out your duty as a parent and to model the Father's love, you change that diaper to the Lord. We have many questions when it comes down to all the nuts and bolts and twists and turns of life, but, as you've probably guessed by now, I don't have a simple answer. I do, however, have a principle, which I borrowed from the reformers, who borrowed it from St. Paul: guided by conscience and God's Word, exercise Christian freedom in Christian love in morally indifferent matters, that is, things that are neither right or wrong in and of themselves, but beware that indifferent matters are not always indifferent. Amen.