

Title: Stuff doesn't last, people do

Text: Romans 14.13-23

Theme: Working through debatable issues

Series: Stewardship 2007

Prop Stmt. If we fight over what doesn't matter we will ignore what does.

Read Text:

Vladimir Putin's Russian political party is expected to stay in power with recent polls showing that his party enjoys a close to 70% majority. President Putin's platform has basically been this: I will give you prosperity if you give me your freedoms. The Russian people have been handing them over to him.

The nation of Belarus (map) is now closed to those coming into the country with religious visas. What this means is that the door is effectively closed to missionaries and mission trips. You can only enter on a business or tourist visa and the Belarus government prohibits preaching and teaching on those visas. Yuri Sipko (president of the Baptist Union in Russia) believes that the Russian government is not far behind Belarus in creating the same policy. Religious freedoms along with other freedoms are gladly being handed over to the Russian government in exchange for the promises of prosperity and protection that a nanny-state claims to be able to give. Nanny-government promises that if you give them all your freedoms and resources that they will protect you and give you a comfortable life. A number of European countries have experimented with this only to see their birthrates decline so low that the current generation is not able to support the elaborate social programs designed to take care of everybody. In addition to that, the for the most part, the only groups in Europe that are enjoying a dramatic increase in population are Islam. And if you have been paying any attention to the application of Islamic law in Europe and in our own local communities, you know that we are at just the beginning stages of some enormous challenges.

I am neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet and I work for a non-profit organization, but I don't think it takes a rocket scientist to see that in our country, we have been doing the same sort of thing. In the name of security, we have been giving away our freedoms to the government. Give us your money, give us your freedoms, give us your beliefs and we will give you protection, health-care, jobs and prosperity. Candidates appeal to us on the basis of who can do the most for us. The times, they are a changin'. Life as we have known it is changing. And while Christianity has enjoyed a measure of protection in this country, that window of freedom may be starting to close.

Now, I may be overreacting. It could be that our country and our world is actually about to enter a time of great peace, freedom, tranquility and opportunity for the gospel. I doubt that to be the case. And in a sense, I welcome the changes because history has shown that for followers of Christ, pressure has usually resulted in purifying the church and advancing the gospel. I believe that life for us is changing. I know that life is short.

Most every November I preach a series of messages on the subject of living for eternity because life is changing and life is short. You have a limited amount of time and

resources now, and you have an eternity to reap the harvest of blessings or the consequences. My appeal is, don't waste your life on what does not matter. Part of the emphasis that I have been pushing has been based on the fact that our material things do not last, but people do. Stuff is not eternal, people are. But people are not only more important than stuff, they are more important than some of the issues that are at the moment important to us. A little context may be helpful. Before the Reformation, religion, like political power was extremely centralized. One of the biblical truths recovered by the reformation, was the priesthood of the believer. Followers of Christ did not have to go through a priest in order to have access to God, because we have access to God through Christ. In fact, we are a kingdom of priests. That is true, and that is good. However, some have taken that truth to an unbiblical conclusion, acting as if, since I am my own authority, I can do whatever it is that I want. If I don't like what you are doing, I will just leave and start my own church. Which is precisely one of the reasons why there are not only so many denominations, but within the denominations there are so many different groups that it is well-nigh impossible to stay up with all of them. The bottom line is, we live in a time when we have learned to run from conflict resolution. And quite frankly, the church has often organized itself in a way that accentuates and encourages some of these divisions. Working through a disagreement is challenging because the actual point of disagreement is usually minor in comparison to the way in which we work things out. Here is the big idea of this text that we need to continually work on: A maturing believer is committed to guarding the unity of the body by working through disagreements in a God-honoring manner.

This is one of the critical areas where the authenticity of our gospel is put on display and it is tough sledding. We are people who naturally like rules. We want to make our religion all about rules and structure. But, when you understand that the gospel is based on grace, while that initially sounds wonderful and soft and inviting, grace goes against the grain of our hearts. We like rules because we want to be able to prove to God and others that we can do things all on our own. We like rules and external benchmarks because we can use those to show our progress or to show our advancement against others. But the gospel of grace is incredibly humbling. The gospel teaches that I am a sinner who deserves the wrath and judgment of God. But, instead of eternally pouring out his wrath against me, God instead chose to pour out his righteous wrath upon His Son, Jesus Christ who died in my place. I am forgiven and declared righteous in the eyes of God by faith alone in Christ alone. And my faith to believe, according to Eph. 2.8-9 is even a gift from God. I can not even take credit for the faith. My forgiveness and justification is something for which I cannot take credit. All of the glory goes to God because He is the author and finisher of the faith. Since, I am saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, I am called to live a life that reflects this gospel of grace. My view of others and my relationship with them is to be marked by grace. The way you live with others gives you many opportunities to see whether or not you understand this.

My responsibility is to help you mature as a follower of Christ. I need to force you to think through these issues and apply them consistently. Our church needs to reflect these in a consistent manner as well.

For example, one of the issues that has been a source of contention in many churches centers on the style and form of music. Now, I could pick out a number of issues, but I want to focus on this one because there is not only a high degree of personal taste with this, but this issue tends to be extremely emotional, simply because music by its very nature connects with us on many different levels, emotions being one of them. Ok, let's take a poll, I am going to ask you three questions: how many of you prefer the more contemporary sounds and songs that utilize a little more guitar, drums, band, and tends to be more expressive and demonstrative in terms of clapping or how many of you prefer a more traditional sound that is more organ, that is less demonstrative or how many of really don't care either way? (take poll)

Now, let's say that those who are age 68 and below like the tamer version, while the rest like the more expressive form. Should we start a service for those 68 and above so they never have to sing other songs and therefore, never have to relate to another part of the body of Christ that doesn't agree with their taste? And should we start a service for those who are under 68 so they never have to relate with those who prefer a different style? While that may initially make people happy in that each one gets what they prefer, it short circuits the process of working together and learning from each other and growing together. If you want to, you can get very upset about a style of music, a color of the carpet, and a host of other things. The question is, should you? Is that something worth fighting about? The second part of that question is, how should the different groups view and relate to the other about this matter?

Now, please understand this. Many of the issues that we have to work through in our life as a church family are not in and of themselves eternally important because they are not necessarily germane to the gospel. But, the way we work through those issues and the way we treat each other is critically important because they do reflect whether we understand what it means to live lives of grace. We are a body of believers. We are different parts. We are not robots or machinery. We are each part of the same body, and each part has to work in harmony with the rest. The fact that we have differences is an obvious indication of the fact that none of us is the whole body and that we have a part to play. Therefore, differences are going to arise. A healthy church is going to have internal differences. The question is, what does a healthy church do about them? Here is what the text says:

1. **If it does not matter in eternity, it does not really matter** – v.17

Here is a good rule of thumb to ask one's self and to ask the church. Will this matter in eternity? Does what you eat matter in the kingdom? NO! Does what you drink right now matter in the kingdom? NO! 500 years into the kingdom will it matter if the morning service began at 9.30 or 10.30? No. Will it matter if the music was loud or soft? NO! 500 years into the kingdom will it matter if I wore a suit and tie, or if we had stained glass windows, carpet instead of tile, pews instead of chairs, banners, organ instead of piano, robes on the choir, a robe on the preacher, an offering at the beginning

of the service, or an offering in the middle of the service, or an offering at the end of the service, or an offering received at the doors on your way out or all of the above? NO!

Now, go back to my question: What is it that you would change about your life if you could? Is that an issue that has eternal ramifications? Are you focusing way too much energy on something that really does not matter? We have all seen people pull out verbal nuclear warheads in order to destroy situational anthills. (example)

Question #1 – Is this really worth fighting about? It may be worth discussing. You may need to learn something and someone else needs to learn something from you.

2. **If it matters in eternity, then it really matters now.** – v.18

“because anyone who serves Christ in this way” in what way? The text is saying that anyone who serves Christ, that is, who works on solving problems with a view toward the kingdom is pleasing to God and approved by men. The kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking. Those are not issues to fight over. But, righteousness? Peace? Joy? Those are very important. But, if you are so busy fighting over incidentals like food (or as I am pointing out – musical taste) then you will eventually not fight over things that do matter. Righteousness matters! Peace matters? Joy matters! Those are things worth fighting over and expending your energies upon.

500 years into eternity, will it matter then, if you believed the gospel? YES! 500 years into eternity, will it matter then if your kids were taught the content of the gospel by your words and the priority of the gospel by your actions? YES! 500 years into eternity, will it matter if we worship in spirit and in truth? YES! 500 years into eternity will it matter then if we preached the gospel now and lived the gospel now, and gave witness to the gospel? YES! 500 years into eternity will it matter then if we love each other and care for each other and are committed to each other? YES! 500 years into eternity will sin matter? YES! 500 years into eternity will it matter if you live with joy? YES!

So, what is it that really matters?

3. **Work for what really matters.**

A. **Unity matters.** – (19)

The text says, “make every effort to do what leads to peace.” You have to do this. You have to work for peace. Now, I believe that the focus of these verses is on those who are strong in their faith on this issue. Whenever there is an area of disagreement, those who are mature in the faith must initiate the process of reconciliation and restoration, because God is glorified by the unity of the body. Unity matters because it is a visible and tangible expression of the unity that God enjoys.

So, make every effort to do what leads to peace. What exactly is that? Go to the source of the problem as you perceive it. You do not know everything. You are not aware of what others are thinking.

Question #2 – Is it possible that I do not know the entire story?

If you are so committed to pointing out the other person's failure or so committed to proving that you are right, you blind yourself to your own opportunity to learn and to your own failures.

B. Maturity matters. – (19)

“Make every effort to do what leads to mutual edification.” What is mutual edification mean? It means that both sides are becoming more like Christ as a result of working through the differences. Of course that also means that both sides have room to grow. If you have room to grow, it means that you do not know everything. When you are talking with another person, your goal is not only the unity of the body, but your goal is to be on helping that person grow as a follower of Christ. Therefore, your ultimate goal is not to be right, but to be growing.

C. Other People Matter (20-21)

Let's Review:

- People are more important than anything but God and truth.
- Disagreements are inevitable in the body of Christ.
- Unity must be worked on for the sake of Christ and His body.
 - o Walking away is not an option for an obedient believer
- The way we work things out is often more important than the issue itself.
 - o Humble yourself (you probably do not know the entire story)
 - o Make mutual maturity your goal.

Conclusion:

We will always have to work through relational challenges on a personal level, but there are two larger reasons why I wanted to preach on this particular issue. We have some generational gaps that we can work on. For years I have talked about the desire that we have for the next generation to run faster, fly higher and go farther than us. If they continue to do that, what should we expect? Shouldn't we expect them to push us and pull us? If they continue to do that, shouldn't we expect their lives and passion to influence the way we do church? From my perch this is what I hear and observe. I see from some of the younger generation (anything under 45 to me) a strong desire to live their faith. There is a longing for personal authenticity and relational integrity that is very exciting because it is biblical. I see a fire for missions, that not only wants to send, but wants to go. Therefore, much of this is seen and expressed in a worship style that captures this. They want to participate. They want to stand, and shout, and clap, and

sing, and pray and raise their hands, and connect with those around them. It is more than simply being a new or different sound or contemporary sound, it reflects their desire to live all out for God.

On the other hand, I see an older generation that has stayed the course. From my perch I watch their personal loyalty and commitment to the church. They have weathered the storms of life and have a seasoned faith, that while it is not always talked about, it is steady. They have seen movements come and go. They have seen people come and go, but they are here. In some cases, this is seen and expressed in a worship style that captures this. Some of the younger generation cannot see why we have a choir and some of the older generation cannot see why we have a band. To a younger person, the choir is something that is done for you, instead of with you, while to an older generation, the choir is one of the markers of the church that reflects consistency in a trendy world that has lost its anchor.

Quite frankly, on the surface, we have done okay on this issue, but we can do so much better.