

Adding the Third Crayon

Grey Matters – Part IV

Romans 14:13-15

Introduction

I have learned that there are 3.8 million Americans afflicted by a physical malady known as color blindness. Color blindness affects nearly 1 in 12 people; which is cause to consider if you design web sites, advertising pieces, clothing, or even maps. Maps, I have discovered, are a particularly challenging issue for the color blind.

It seems that this malady does not like men. While only 1 in 200 women are color blind, 1 in 10 men are. That probably explains why we dress the way we do!

Actually, this particular handicap, properly called color deficiency, can eliminate many people from vocations of their choice. It is easy to imagine what this means to someone who cannot distinguish all the colors in such fields as cosmetics, photography, textiles, electronics, decorating, and even telephone repair.

I discovered in my research that certain things can improve a person's color sensitivity; such as, diet; the abstinence from certain foods and substances.

One of the men on our church elder team has a form of this disability. If I see him on Sunday morning and comment that he looks sharp in his suit and necktie, he will say, "I wouldn't know. I'll take your word for it."

For those who suffer from this disability, the world is not necessarily sympathetic. And our world is a world of color.

I found it interesting that America has more people with this condition than any other country in the world. I also found that the most commonly confused colors are red and green – which happen to be the colors chosen for – what? Traffic lights.

The first man to scientifically study this physical malady was John Dalton, a 19th century English chemist, who happened to be – color blind.

Dalton was also a devout Quaker, which helped immensely since most of the clothing he wore to church was rather bland. On one occasion, a practical

joker had a little fun by secretly trading out the old Quaker's somber gray knee socks that went with his black knickers. So he showed up to prayer meeting one night, unknowingly wearing a pair of bright red knee socks. Can you imagine?ⁱ

My sixth grade daughter, along with her friends at school, are wearing a type of multi-colored knee socks with loud, wild, bizarre, bright stripes. When I see her in the morning wearing a pair, I think, "Man, she's going to help her teacher stay awake today."

Imagine Quaker John Dalton coming into the meeting house with socks that stretch all the way to his knees – in bright red! On the front, they have embroidery that reads, "Go Wolfpack!" Okay, I made that part up. Without meaning to, John Dalton created quite a stir that night in church.

It would not be the last time the church has gotten stirred up over an inability to distinguish color.

A healthy church is completely and utterly color blind. The bride of Christ is a world of color and the saints do not seem to notice. All the nations are present – black, brown, yellow, cream, tan, and for the rest of us with Irish blood who cannot stay out in the sun very long – reddish-pink, except when we are mad and then, it is hot pink.

On one hand, a healthy, maturing believer never really notices color.

On the other hand, a healthy, maturing believer sees more than two colors – black and white. He learns to distinguish a third color that makes up most of the world around him; he is sensitive to this color and is able to spot it, mark it, and make a note of it. The third color is grey.

I get the idea that in a very practical way, throughout Romans chapter 14, Paul is exhorting the church to add a third crayon to its box – a crayon of the color grey. He is teaching the church why it is important and how to live with it.

So far, we have covered the first 12 verses of Romans 14, as Paul has clearly stated that some of the past life of the Jewish nation is no longer an issue of separation. Times and seasons, festivals and Sabbath days are now an issue of personal

preference. He has reminded us all that one day, we all will stand before the Lord of the Sabbath and give an account – seeing our lives through His eyes – and receiving rewards for everything we did for His glory.

Now Paul becomes even more focused on the issue of grey matters. He will deliver, what I believe to be, “Nine Principles for Balanced Living,” or “Nine Ways to Work Through Grey Issues,” or “Nine Guidelines for Coloring in Grey”. I could not decide. By the time we finish this series – some time in the, uh, future – I will make up my mind!

Principle of Protection

The first principle for balanced living is the principle of protection.

Paul writes in Romans 14:13,

Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore, . . .

What does this imply? It clearly implies the church in Rome had been judging one another.

Paul says, “Let’s all decide together, to stop judging one another.”

In other words, “Let’s make a resolution; a pledge to one another that we’ll all add to our crayon boxes, the color grey.”

There is a wonderful play on words in this verse that is lost on the English reader. Paul uses the same Greek verb (“krino”) twice in one phrase. The verb basically means, “to judge, or to render judgment”. However, Paul is using a play on words with this verb.

In the first part of the phrase, Paul writes,

. . . let us not judge one another . . .

This carries the idea of censorious judgmentalism, which he has already addressed in earlier verses.

In the second part of the phrase, Paul uses the same verb again, with a different connotation. Notice it is translated,

. . . but rather determine this . . .

This could be translated, “be careful to judge this”.

Paul is saying, as he plays off the different nuances of this verb: “Don’t be judgmental, but instead, use sound judgment.”ⁱⁱ

There is a vast distinction in the ways this word is used. There is a world of difference between

passing judgment on someone and using sound judgment, is there not?

Paul’s play on words demands that we should never pass judgment on fellow believers in areas of grey; that is, areas in which the scriptures are either silent or inconclusive. Instead, we should use our best judgment to help each others.

We should not follow the example of a judgmental person that Jesus Christ referred to. He challenged His disciples to not be like the man who says to his brother,

. . . “Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,” when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck [or splinter] that is in your brother’s eye. (Luke 6:42)

Imagine a man coming to church with a log sticking out of his eye! The word the Lord used referred to a beam that was used to build roof structures in His day.

So this man comes to church with a beam sticking out of his eye. He somehow gets past the greeters without being noticed. He walks down the hallway and every time he turns his head, he knocks someone over. He is oblivious to it; unaware of the way it is blocking his own vision, but he is convinced he is able to spot the tiny splinter of offense in someone else’s life.

He is a fantastic splinter spotter. Now that is a ministry for you! He thinks it is his spiritual gift.

The truth is, as Jesus implies in the text, people do have specks in their eyes. We all have blind spots, so let us work together by living pure lives for God’s glory and then, help others to do the same.

Paul says, “This is a personal pledge – let’s help one another out!”

“How, Paul?”

Paul writes in the last part of Romans 14:13,

. . . determine this – not to put an obstacle or stumbling block in a brother’s way.

Paul says, “Don’t put either of two things in your brother’s walk of faith and growth in the Lord – an obstacle or a stumbling block.”

These are two different words denoting two very different actions:

- The first action is an innocent hindrance, which is the idea behind the word “obstacle”.

- The second action is an intentional hurt, which is the idea behind the word “stumbling block”.

“Either way,” Paul writes, “stay alert so that you don’t innocently hinder your weaker brother’s faith, and certainly don’t intentionally hurt your brother’s weak, uncertain, infant steps in the Lord as they grow from infancy to adulthood.”

This is the categorical principle of protection.

This is like a prepared North Carolinian – you have taken your umbrella to work because you are experienced enough to know that it might rain. Then, it does – suddenly, there is a downpour. So you are walking down the street and you see one of your younger brothers or sisters in Christ who did not think ahead – in fact, they do not even know how to use an umbrella yet – and they are standing out in the rain.

This younger brother or sister is not used to being pelted with a hundred different issues and opinions and decisions in their new walk with Christ. They are becoming more and more miserable in the process of getting soaking wet!

Go shelter them. Do not:

- make it harder on them;
- go over and splash more water on their shoes;
- make fun of the fact that they do not know how to use an umbrella;
- show off your new rain coat;
- point your finger at them and say, “You look terrible standing there in the rain!”

Protect them!

Paul writes a little later,

. . . you are no longer walking according to love. . . .(Romans 14:15a)

Let us go back and take a closer look at the two actions whereby we fail to protect our weaker brother.

Circle, in Romans 14:13, the first word “obstacle”. This is an action that is not necessarily done on purpose; it is unintentional, unplanned. This is when you do something that a weaker brother or sister sees and it becomes an obstacle to them.

This word is the Greek word “proskomma,” which carries the idea of bumping or stumbling. The verb can be translated, “to stumble against”.ⁱⁱⁱ

Have you ever walked through a room in the house in the dark? Did you stub your toe? Perhaps there was something the kids left out on the floor. There is nothing like stepping on Barbie’s pink convertible – that can do some damage!

Your younger brother or sister stubbed their toe on something you inadvertently left out in the open.

Circle the second action word, in Romans 14:13, that is translated “stumbling block”. This is a much more serious matter.

While an obstacle might have been an innocent hindrance, a stumbling block is an intentional injury. It comes from the Greek word, “skandalon,” which gives our word, “scandal”.

In Greece, this word was used for the trigger on a trap. If you put a piece of cheese on a mousetrap and the mouse is caught, the trigger that sprang the trap was called the “skandalon”.^{iv}

I have with me, a large mousetrap to demonstrate setting the trap. The yellow piece is the trigger that springs the trap – it is the “skandalon”. Before I set out a trap like this, I put some peanut butter on it – so the mouse can have a nice final meal. Let me trip the trap with a pencil.

This is serious damage – this is not stubbing a toe, this is breaking a toe. The younger brother or sister is becoming crippled; devastated in their faith.

Paul is saying, “Don’t do something that might spring a trap and catch an unsuspecting believer and then, bring about confusion and great spiritual harm.”

Protect them from traps set out by other believers. Our job is to clear debris from our fellow believer’s paths.^v

We are not add to the difficulty of a younger believer’s walk – which is sometimes in the darkness of uncertainty, when they are not familiar with the paths of grace and liberty – let alone, try and trip them up.

One missionary explained how one act of Christian liberty in his country, can literally trap young believers and bring doctrinal confusion. If you can believe it – it all revolves around the manger scene at Christmas time.

In the area where he serves overseas, the people are heavily influenced by the Roman Catholic belief in the birth of Christ – which is certainly biblical – but something else is thrown in the mix. Displaying a manger scene at Christmas time is the practice for nearly everyone, but businesses and homes alike follow the priests tradition in what becomes nothing

less than idolatry. New believers in Christ alone, regardless of merit or good works, have to make a decision early on in their new walk with Christ concerning this issue.

Shortly before Christmas in this country, people take the pieces of their manger scenes to be blessed by the priest. They have to stand in line for hours and even pay the church for this special blessing as the priest makes the sign of the cross over these figurines and then sprinkles them with holy water.

It is only after their manger pieces are blessed by the priest that the people openly display them in their homes or in their places of business. The figurine of baby Jesus is not placed into the scene until midnight on Christmas Eve, where He is believed to be “reborn”. The people believe they can pray to the figurines, which, having been blessed, have mystical power to grant blessing in return.

This missionary went on to explain the problem. A new believer wants to get rid of all of the superstition and mysticism and welcomes the truth of scripture alone for faith and practice. But, as sometimes happens, if he goes into the home of an older believer who knows it is all make believe and really does not matter, yet has a manger scene set out in his home, it causes confusion to the younger believer. The younger believer associated manger scenes with superstition. They are immediately thrown into mental anguish and sometimes verbal, “How can you do something that will associate you with false religion? Are you praying to those figurines too? How can you carry that into the church?”

This was the problem in Rome.

A new believer is invited to an older believer’s home for steak and mashed potatoes. They say, “This is excellent rib-eye. Where did you get the meat?”

“I bought it today from the temple priest.”

“You’re eating meat purchased from the temple; from offerings to idols? How can you associate with false religion? Are you praying to the idols too?”

You could argue, “But wait! Certainly you have the liberty to eat that rib-eye . . . or have a manger scene in your own home!”

This missionary said, “Our liberty needed to be evaluated in light of our younger brothers in Christ.”^{vi}

This is the principle of protection.

Paul adds a personal testimony to this principle. Notice Romans 14:14.

I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

You might read this verse and be tempted to think, “This grey area thing is great! Anything goes as long as I don’t think it’s wrong!”

That is not exactly true.

The word “unclean” translates “koinos,” or “common”. It is the word used to describe the Greek of the New Testament period – the “koine,” or “common” Greek language.^{vii}

The Jewish community used this word to refer to things they believed were secular – or common – earthly, unsavory, even “unspiritual”. So when Paul says that he does not personally think anything is common, or unsavory, he is obviously not speaking of God’s moral law, but ceremonial law – the laws of diet and ritual; the regulations of Sabbaths and seasons. In other words, when it comes to matters of which the Bible does not command or allow or prohibit, Paul is saying that it is not clean or unclean, acceptable or out of bounds – unless your conscience believes it is out of bounds or unclean.

This then, takes me back to what I said earlier, “This grey area is great! Anything goes as long as I don’t think it’s wrong!”

No. Paul is saying that although he knows there is nothing wrong with what he is eating or doing, what *he* thinks is not the issue – it is what his *brother* thinks that matters.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians along these same lines,

. . . All things are lawful, but not all things edify. (I Corinthians 10:23b)

In other words, “All things are lawful, but all things do not build up myself or the body.”

So even though I have the right to do anything I want as long as my conscience remains pure, I must be willing to restrict my rights; I must be willing to limit my liberty for the sake of the conscience of another Christian.

You might say, “But that’s not fair! I know the truth and there is nothing wrong with what I’m doing. I’m right!”

Ladies and gentlemen, Paul is trying to tell us that when it comes to grey matters, there is something more important than being right!

Notice what Paul says in Romans 14:15.

For if because of food your brother is hurt . . .

You might say, “So what! They’ll get over it!”

Paul pleads with us,

. . . you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

It is as if to say, “Look at what Christ sacrificed in order to *pardon* your brother. Will you not sacrifice something to *protect* your brother?”

This is a much heavier burden, is it not?! It is so much easier to follow the rule of law than it is to follow the rule of love.

I would rather go back to only seeing things in black and white. This third crayon – the color of which is grey – is labeled grace and is more challenging than I ever imagined!

It is no wonder that Martin Luther, the reformer, wrote a treatise entitled, “On the Freedom of a Christian Man”. And he began it by writing, “A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to no one. A Christian man is a servant of all, subject to everyone.”^{viii}

How subject are we to be? Go back to the beginning of Romans 14:15, where Paul tells us not to *hurt* our brother.

The word means “to be grieved”. It could be by passing remarks [of their immaturity]; by acting superior around them; by making fun of them and their views.^{ix}

One author wrote,

A weak Christian can be hurt from watching another Christian say or do something he considers sinful. The hurt is even deeper [still] if the offending believer is someone the [weak Christian] admired and respected. A weak Christian can also be hurt when, by word or example, he is led by a stronger brother to go against his own conscience. A Christian whose careless use of his liberty causes such hurt to other believers is no longer walking according to love.^x

By the way, this “hurt” is not a matter of being slightly miffed; of having your feelings hurt over

some slight thing. This word actually refers to being deeply grieved.

The word is, in fact, the same word used of grieving the Holy Spirit by willfully sinning (Ephesians 4:30). It is also used to describe Peter’s emotions after the Lord asked him three times if he loved Him – Peter was grieved (John 21:17).

Furthermore, the word Paul uses when he writes in Romans 14:15 to not *destroy* our brother, is a word that refers to utter ruin.

[This is] not spiritual being, but spiritual well-being.^{xi}

This does not mean because of you, they are now eternally damned. However, it does mean because of you, they are spiritually devastated. Their faith is being shaken.

Perhaps at this point, you are saying, “Wait a minute! Let me ask:”

- Does all this mean that my brother’s weakness in faith is to determine my lifestyle?
- Are you saying that I have to subscribe to my weaker brother’s views?
- Must I limit the enjoyment of my knowledge of grace to his ignorance?^{xii}

These are great questions! They reveal some of the difficulty of this issue to us all.

Let me answer them by giving a warning to both sides – to the weak, or young in the Lord, and to the strong, or mature in the Lord.

1. First, a warning to the weak, or young in the Lord.

If you hear yourself saying such things to other believers as:

- “You shouldn’t do that, it offends me.”
- “You shouldn’t go there, it isn’t right to me.”
- “Don’t act like that, it hurts me as a believer – and remember, Paul tells you to stop doing whatever offends another Christian.”

My friend, you are tipping your hand. You are as good as admitting out loud that growth is needed in your life.

Accept the challenge – dig into the word, test your views with the scriptures, struggle through the issues of grace.

It is not easy, but learn to color with that third color; add it to your crayon box, along with the white

crayon and the black crayon, for many things in life can only be colored in grey.

2. Secondly, a warning to the strong, or mature in the Lord.

If you are in the habit of saying things like:

- “I have the right to do that as a Christian.”
- “I’ll debate anyone regarding my liberty in this area; I dare anyone to tell me I’m out of line.”
- “Anyone who thinks I’m wrong for acting like this is just a weaker brother – they need to grow up.”

You are tipping your hand too. You are not walking in love. You are giving no thought to this principle of protection.

I recently read that when Harry Truman became president, he worried about losing touch with the everyday, common American – so he would often go out for walks. Those were obviously simpler days when the President could take a walk like everyone else.

One evening, Truman decided to take a walk to the Memorial Bridge on the Potomac River. He became curious about the mechanism that raised and lowered the middle span of the bridge. He actually made his way across the catwalks and through the inner workings of the bridge, and suddenly, he came upon the bridge operator, eating his evening supper out of his tin pail. The man showed absolutely no surprise when he looked up and saw the President of the United States. He just swallowed his food, wiped his mouth, smiled, and said, “You know, Mr. President, I was just thinking about you.”

It was a greeting that Truman never forgot and treasured above any other greeting he had ever been given.

I think the Apostle Paul is saying something similar. In whatever we do – should another believer come across our path, we should be able to say, “You know, I was just thinking about you. The things I’m doing, enjoying, saying, experiencing, I’m actually thinking about you.”

Living the Christian life is very much like walking a tightrope. As you walk the rope, you hold the balancing pole in your hands. On one end is your Christian freedom; on the other is care and concern for your brother.

On one end is liberty . . . on the other end is love.^{xiii}

ⁱ Leroy Koopman, Beauty Care for the Eyes (Zondervan Books, 1975), p. 75.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Romans: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1994), p. 290.

ⁱⁱⁱ Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 946.

^{iv} Woodrow Kroll, Romans: Righteousness in Christ (AMG Publishers, 2002), p. 223.

^v Ibid., p. 223.

^{vi} Dr. Tony Beckett, Notes on Romans 14, section 1b, p. 1.

^{vii} Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, vol. 2, (Zondervan, 2002), p. 84.

^{viii} R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Righteousness from Heaven (Crossway, 1991), p. 267.

^{ix} R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of Romans (Augsburg, 1936), p. 836,

^x MacArthur, p. 293.

^{xi} W. E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words (Thomas Nelson, 1997), p. 294.

^{xii} Roy L. Laurin, Romans: Where Life Begins (Kregel, 1988), p. 462.

^{xiii} Hughes, p. 269.