Romans 14 and Physical Distancing
by Sean McCoskey

We have been witnesses to an onslaught of unfortunate rhetoric surrounding this Covid-19 crisis, which is a common feature of the marketplace of ideas when crisis strikes. Cerebral whiplash can set in from all the various recommendations handed out from the many reputable *and not so reputable* news sources always surrounding us. Perhaps chief among the unfortunate choices of wording we’ve heard is “social distancing.” Physical distancing is probably a better turn of phrase for obvious reasons.

With Easter’s arrival this weekend, we recognize that many of our families might be struggling to know exactly how to relate to one another as we get into the thick of this virus’ spread. Mine certainly is. Perhaps grandparents are struggling to know how much time they should be spending around their children or grandchildren. Perhaps parents are wondering what trips to the store should look like. Perhaps you’re wondering whether you should invite your friend group for a walk in the park to shed some cabin fever. With societal tensions already high, misunderstandings, and hurt feelings are more probable now than at other times.

In an effort to guide you with wisdom for how to navigate the coming days, I’d like to spotlight elements from Romans chapter 14 that I think will be very helpful for us. The Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Roman house churches to share the gospel in great depth as well as to help settle for Jews and Gentiles how to worship together as one church. Remember, the scandal of the gospel is that for the first time in history, non-Jews were now truly part of God’s people. This created very high tensions between those Jewish Christians who still followed very many civic and ceremonial laws and those Gentile Christians who didn’t. Romans 14 can greatly help us with knowing how to relate to those who have a different perspective than we do.

1. 14:7-8, “For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.” Dear brother and sister in Christ: the core commitment we have as God’s people is not to preserve our lives and lengthen our days, but to give our lives for the Kingdom of God. We do not live for ourselves but for God. This does not mean we should be reckless, but it does mean we shouldn’t be afraid. If the news is scaring you, turn it off. God has not given us a spirit of fear, but one of power, love, and sound judgement. Don’t be driven by fear. Be of good cheer, we have overcome by the blood of the Lamb.

2. 14:19, “So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another.” There will be opportunities for you to condemn others. Don’t. We are dealing with a particularly divisive moment in our history. A gracious spirit promotes much peace. If a particular family member is not comfortable going certain places, that’s ok. Maybe some of your family is gathering for Easter, if someone decides they’d prefer not to join, don’t judge them, extend understanding and grace to them. It will bring peace where there otherwise might be painful division. If you decide not to participate in something, you can graciously bow out without coming across as the bossy pants who gets to tell everybody else what they should do and
when they should do it. Humility and grace look good on you!

3. 14:15, “For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died. Therefore, do not let what is good be slandered.” Paul’s issue surrounded whether to eat certain foods from the butcher if the animal it came from had been sacrificed to an idol. Mature Christians in Paul’s day knew it was just meat, but some younger believers in faith, recently converted from a life of pagan worship might’ve been wounded by seeing such meat purchased and eaten. Though our situation is different, the wisdom still stands strong. You will be surrounded by people whose consciences will be different from yours, and that’s ok. Be gentle and thoughtful toward them. Consider those around you who are not Christians. Protect them, preserve them, don’t put them in harm’s way, so that by the grace of God they might eventually come under Christ’s liberating grace. Death is gain for the people of God, not so for those who sadly still walk in darkness. Love them well. Also, love the immunocompromised, love those who are at-risk. Love asthmatics. If you’re poor at hand-washing, be unselfish and wash your hands for the sake of those who are more at risk than you. We mirror Christ when we become servants and consider others more significant than ourselves.

4. 14:23, “But whoever doubts stands condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that is not from faith is sin.” This passage is often misconstrued. The point is that if you are a Christian, you have the Holy Spirit, and in certain moments He graces us with a spirit of doubt, to indicate that we maybe shouldn’t follow through with something we’re considering. When we can doubtlessly move forward with a plan, after spending time in prayer, we know we’re in the right. If you’ve got a feeling deep in your gut that you should not do something you had planned, or conversely, if you sense that you should faithfully do something you were planning on avoiding, then you should follow the Spirit’s guidance. Prayerfully decide how you are to live, how you are to practice physical distancing, and let others know what your conscience permits. This is a loving thing. What this allows you to do is to proceed in faith, free from what might be future regrets. Make a workable plan, put it in God’s hands, and follow through joyfully.

5. 14:22, “Whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God.” Very often, the best option is to be silent. There might be little extraneous sound bites floating in your head that you heard from your news source of choice. Many of those thoughts should probably just stay where they are, locked away. It’s a sign of Christlikeness to know when its best to stay silent. Be gracious, be patient, be understanding. Don’t feel like you need to capitulate to the whims of others if the Spirit has guided to stand strongly on a certain position, but be of good discernment to know when your helpfulness is giving way to hurtfulness.

Please don’t socially isolate yourself (Ephesians 4:25), but have the grace of Christ for one another as we all determine how and to what extent we physically distance. Perhaps we can be an aroma of peace and joy in the midst of chaos, sadness and panic.