

Advanced Techniques and Tips for Jesus' Disciples
A Sermon on Romans 14:1-12 by the Rev. Philip Major
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It's September! Today is the first day of *Godly Play* classes for our children at St. Paul's. Most school age children started school this past week. As I drive to work, I see children walking to school with their parents, and school buses picking up children to take them to school. So I have been thinking a lot about the children this week.

Children need adults who treat them with respect, and nurture them as individuals. They need to be allowed to make their own decisions and mistakes. They need to be allowed to tell the truth about what they see and feel and experience. Children need friends to play with. They need to be encouraged to use their power to think and learn and make good decisions. This is what children need.

When children grow up with adults who take care of them and respect their individuality they grow in confidence and self-understanding. They grow to be strong and resilient. They respect others and they have self-respect, which means they understand that they have the right to have their own feelings; they have the right to make their own decisions.

One of the tragedies of human life, now and in all times, is that some children experience trauma or emotional or physical abuse. This often derails the child's ability to develop a healthy amount of self-respect and self-understanding.

When I was a teacher, I learned that the stages of healthy human development are like giant stepping stones in a deep, rushing river. The task for each person in the course of their life is to make it to the other side of the river. If one of the stages of healthy development is missing for us it's like a stone is missing in the river, and we get stuck. It often takes years of work, usually with a trained, qualified therapist, to continue the journey to become a person with a healthy amount of self-respect and self-confidence.

Our hope is that by the time they are teenagers, children have healthy self-respect, and can advocate for themselves. We want our teenagers to be able to say, "This is important to me", or "This is the way I feel right now." Healthy children develop a strong sense of what is important to them and are able to express what is important to them.

Healthy teenagers pay a lot of attention to their own needs and interests. A healthy fourteen year old spends most of their time on their needs and things that are important to them; they devote most of their attention to their friends and activities. But our emotional and spiritual development is not finished when we are teenagers. An adult who is twenty-four or thirty-four and has the same kind of focus on their self as a fourteen year old is often headed for trouble.

We encourage and nurture the children and teenagers in our lives to become aware of their gifts and potential and responsibilities. We want them to feel strong and resilient, and have strong awareness of their independence and power. But we encourage our young people to be independent and empowered as children and teenagers partly because they will face more difficult challenges as adults. They might end up deliberately giving up some of their power and independence in order to grow into spiritually and emotionally mature adults. This is especially true for those of us who are followers of Christ Jesus.

When Jesus was twelve years old, he did what healthy twelve-year olds do. He asserted his independence. *Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents were unaware of this.* This is a story about Jesus being fully aware of who he is, and exercising his independence. The twelve-year old Jesus was empowered and self-aware.

But Jesus' spiritual development did not end when he was twelve. Jesus' most important work was not an action of empowerment and independence. At the end of his life, Jesus gave up his power in order to complete the work that had been given to him. On the night he was betrayed Jesus went to a place called Gethsemane and prayed. He said, *"My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want."* Over the next 24 hours, Jesus gave up his life for the sake of others. In the end, we do not live for ourselves.

This is what Paul is talking about in the fourteenth chapter of Romans. Paul begins this chapter by pointing out that we are not all the same. We have not all had the same experiences in life. Many twelve-year-olds have not been treated with the same respect that Mary and Joseph showed to Jesus when he stayed behind in the Temple.

Some of us who strive to be followers of Christ have experienced some traumas and tragedies. Many of us have experienced times when we were not supported in our need for empowerment and self-definition. It is not our job to pass judgment on each other.

It is also true that each one of us is striving to be spiritually mature. Paul is not criticizing anyone; he is encouraging each member of the church in Roman to learn and follow the path of spiritual maturity given to us by Christ Jesus.

I have this comic book version of the Bible in my mind. In my comic book version of the Bible each of the books is given a truthful but humorous subtitle. For instance, the Book of Kings should be titled, "The Book of Kings: One Hundred Reasons Why You Never Want to have a Human be Your King. Ever." My title for the Book of Romans is, "The Book of Romans: Advanced Techniques and Tips for Jesus' Disciples from an Experienced Preacher."

Chapter fourteen is another one of those advanced lessons in discipleship found in Paul's letter to the Romans. *We do not live to ourselves.* This is not a message we are trying to teach to our fourteen year old nieces and nephews and friends. It would not be developmentally appropriate. It's not even developmentally appropriate for some adults.

We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If this message sounds a little strange or backwards to you, perhaps come back to this chapter another time. Chapter fourteen is a message for those who have a healthy amount of self-respect and self-confidence.

We do not live for ourselves, for our purposes, for our enjoyment. We do not live for ourselves, because it's a kind of poverty. Living for my needs is not the point of life. Living for my purposes, living for my enjoyment is not a good life. It's the path to despair, because we know how this ends. In the end, I will be dust.

We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we have life, we are alive 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 possession. I read these words at the beginning of our memorial service for Mary Hastings on Monday, just as I read these words at the beginning of Harry's service, and Neva's service, and Carolyn's service, and June's service, and Dave's service and all of the other memorial services for our members who have died.

We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we have life, we are alive 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 possession. When we look back on their lives, we realize this is true. Their lives and their love were large and powerful because they were not living to themselves. They were the Lord's possession. They were living to the Lord of love. Harry, Neva, Carolyn, June, Mary, Dave and all the others did not live to themselves, they lived for others.

In small and large ways, they gave their lives for the sake of others. The love and energy and examples they gave us will remain with us for the rest of our lives precisely because the love they shared wasn't about them. These disciples were steady and persistent in a way that made a bold pronouncement: "It's not about me."

We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves. If we have life, we are alive 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 possession. This is our purpose: to live not for ourselves and our purposes, but to live for the Lord of love and for the purposes of God's love. This is our goal in life: to be the Lord's possession.

Being the Lord's possession sets us free. That might sound completely upside down, but just look at those who follow the example of Christ. When we live to the Lord of love, we are released from the sins that hurt us most: greed, selfishness, pride, bitterness, and hatred.

This is why the church is the most important part of life for me, and possibly for you too. You can study Paul's letter to the Romans on your own. You can learn many important lessons about the life of discipleship from reading and studying the Bible. But this congregation is the place where we practice the lessons of spiritual maturity. This congregation is the place where others support us as we strive to live, not to ourselves, but to the Lord.

If we have life, we are alive to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. This is one of the advanced lessons of discipleship. We have to practice. We learn from the examples of those who have been practicing for twenty or forty or sixty years, because Harry, Mary and all the others were intent on practicing. God has brought us together in this place so that we can practice together, living, not to ourselves, but to the Lord.