

Romans 14:1-6

Women in the Kingdom: Space & Grace

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / May 29th, 2022

(S1) When I finished my sermon on a hybrid view of women in ministry, I asked a couple of questions: How might we walk by faith and extend grace to each other in this issue? How can we make room for each other? How can we follow our consciences and enable others to do the same? Here's how I want to phrase it today:

(S2) How can we give each other grace?

We return to this question today because it's how I want to end our Women in the Kingdom sermon series. Just because the sermon series ends today doesn't mean this church wrestling with this issue ends. This series and the resources we've posted online are a foundation for further conversation. What you do with this series and this topic is up to you, the church body. But, just like we began this series with a variety of perspectives, we're probably ending it that way as well. And so we ask: how can we give each other grace?

(S3) We can give each other grace by giving each other space.

I want to look at two different passages today, but each of these passages is connected, tied together in a common theme of giving grace by allowing for space. Our first passage is familiar because we were just in the book of Acts for an entire series. Much of Acts is about ethnic tension between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) and how they see life, theology, the church, and their faith. Their beliefs and convictions produce a lot of conflict, so much so that the Jewish Christians have a hard time accepting that Gentiles can become Christians. So eventually, the leaders of the early church call a council to discuss the issue.

(S4) The Jerusalem Council – Acts 15

All the superstars of the early church were there: Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James. But there was also a faction of Pharisaical Christians who argued that Gentile believers had to obey the law and adopt Jewish ethnic identity to become true Christians.

(S5) Acts 15:5 (NIV)

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses."

These Pharisees were gatekeeping Christianity. Not just, "You don't love coffee unless you drink it black," but "You're not a Christian unless you get circumcised and stop eating pork." And this upset Paul. Things got so heated Paul "opposed [Peter] to his face..." Peter stopped eating with Gentiles for fear of the Jews, and Paul called him out.

Peter repents and reminds the council how God has worked through his preaching to bring the Gentiles to faith. Everyone gets quiet. Everyone listens. Everyone hears the Holy Spirit moving. I hope you as a church will quiet yourselves, stop and listen, and sense where the Holy Spirit is leading with the issue of women in ministry at Cornerstone. It will take further study and prayer. James, the brother of Jesus, gets up and speaks.

(S6) Acts 15:19-20 (NIV)

"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰ Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.

So, the church comes together and declares that the Gentile believers are just as much Christians as the Jewish believers, but to help their Jewish church family, they should abstain from eating food sacrificed to idols, from sexual activity outside of marriage, and from eating animal blood. The food rules honored the Old Testament laws, and the sexual immorality rule is simple obedience to God's sexual ethic.

What do we see here? We see a church coming together to discuss a vitally important issue, and each side makes concessions to the other, enters into dialogue, and ultimately comes up with a solution that both permits freedom for the Gentiles and honors Jewish sensibilities. The goal was not for the Jews to win or the Gentiles to win, but for grace to win.

Was one side biblically wrong and the other side biblically correct? Perhaps. But there was also a context, a Jewish culture, and Gentile believers, and they had to work it out. Sometimes I think God is not as interested in the outcomes as he is in how we get there. It's not that the ends justify the means but that the means might justify the ends. That when we walk by faith and extend grace and space, maybe God counts that for good.

But here's the funny thing. You ever tell your child to do one thing, and then they go and ask the other parent, and that parent gives a different answer? Creates chaos, right? Well, Paul kind of does that.

(S7) Paul & Freedom – Romans 14

The Deacon Phoebe carried the letter of Romans to the church in Rome, and potentially she or one of her associates explained it to the church (Romans 16:1-2). One of the issues Paul addresses in his letter is Christians disagreeing about secondary issues (doesn't risk your salvation) like eating food sacrificed to idols and honoring the sabbath. He approaches the topic through the lens of faith.

(S8) Romans 14:1-3 (NIV)

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ²One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them.

So first, Paul seems to be contradicting James and the Jerusalem council. They said, pretty clearly, in an edict from the superstars of early Christianity and the church in Jerusalem, "Abstain from food sacrificed to idols." But Paul says here, and in 1 Corinthians 8, you can eat anything, just eat by faith. So the Jerusalem council's prohibition was for a specific time and a specific place. Thus, it's not unbiblical to say maybe there are other commands in scripture, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, 1 Timothy 2:11-12, which might also be limited to a specific time and place or have principles that are permanent (order and respect in worship) but prohibitions that aren't (eating food sacrificed to idols, women not preaching or leading). I'm not sure.

Second, Paul acknowledges that there are some debatable issues where Christians have the freedom to live a more restrictive life or to walk by faith. My goal isn't to say, "The complementarians or the egalitarians are weak in faith," but for all of us to walk with more faith. In Paul's context, he wants believers to apply their faith to secondary issues, eating food sacrificed to idols and honoring the sabbath. We read further:

(S9) Romans 14:5-6 (NIV)

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God

So the ends do not justify the means, but the means may justify the ends. How we make a decision (in faith) can matter just as much as the actual decision, assuming it's not a decision that disobeys God. But the

question is—is the issue of women in ministry, preaching, and church leadership an issue we can disagree with, or is the Bible clear enough to make a definitive choice? And that’s what this series is about. Some of us are going to walk away from this series and say, I’m convinced the Bible presents a complementarian view of gender roles. Others are going to walk away with a more egalitarian or hybrid perspective, or maybe just living somewhere in-between. The question, then, is how can we extend grace to one another?

(S10) We give each other grace by giving the space to walk by faith.

We need to give each other the space to follow our convictions, and that’s really tough in a church body. There may be some issues where we can’t affirm each other’s convictions, especially with sexual ethics or not caring about the poor. But with this women's issue, there seems to be more tension and less clarity. If this is indeed a secondary issue, how can we operate with more grace?

(S11) Romans 14:10, 13-14 (NIV)

¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat....

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. ¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.

God is our judge. We don’t have to pass perfect judgment in this life. So we need to be careful not to treat each other with contempt because we’ll all have to give account for our life. Let’s each try to go out of our way not to put a stumbling block in front of a brother or sister in Christ and allow them to walk by faith with their convictions.

(S12) What does this look like for those in Christ?

What does that look like in a small church? Aren’t the two at odds? I have believed for a long time that women should be allowed to preach and lead at Cornerstone, but I’ve been here, serving and working in a church structure that did not permit it. What if we switched? Would you be willing to stay? In our current structure, if the elders permit it, women can preach, but they can’t serve as elders. Hugenberger believes that complementarians should be able to be a part of egalitarian churches and egalitarians a part of complementarian churches. When women are put up for elders, complementarians should vote for men, and if they lose, have clean consciences. Likewise, Egalitarians should not get offended if a female elder candidate receives less than 100% of the vote, and they should be able to attend a church with all-male elders.

I will say this to the complementarians in the room. I believe if this church ever revisits its bylaws, you could, with a clear conscience, vote to permit women to serve as elders so that others in the church can exercise their consciences. But when it comes time to vote, vote your conscience and vote for men. And if you feel like women shouldn’t preach, then volunteer in the nursery that day. And egalitarians, you should not get offended when complementarians volunteer in the nursery the week women are preaching. And if complementarians feel like they cannot permit women to preach or serve as elders ever and can’t let others have that choice, they need to vote in line with that. What are some concessions each side could make to allow the other side to continue to worship together?

How can we give each other grace? Let’s give each other space. We give each other grace by giving the space to walk by faith. Jesus died and rose again to save a church of diverse people who are united in Christ and what we believe about him. Lord Jesus, help us to walk by faith with grace. Amen.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA. You can listen to his other sermons at CornerstoneWestford.com.

Cover Photo

<https://pixabay.com/photos/girls-children-tulips-red-tulips-739071/>

Service & Sermon

You can watch the full service on Facebook or only the sermon on YouTube (coming soon).

Discussion Time

Ice-Breaker – Which is your favorite and least favorite sport?

Prayer – Do you have a prayer or praise you'd like to share?

Bible – Read all of Romans 14:1-23. What do you notice? What is a “disputable matter?” (v1) How do we know? What are some “disputable matters” in the church, and what are not?

Application – How might we walk by faith and extend grace to each other in this issue? How can we make room for each other? Should we? Or should we insist on one particular view? How can we follow our consciences and enable others to do the same?

Recap – What's your one-sentence takeaway from today?

Follow-Up

Dear Church,

Thank you for finishing our *Women in the Kingdom* sermon series. You can find the [whole series online here](#) as well as [some additional resources here](#). If you'd like to continue studying, you could re-read Acts 15, Romans 14, and add 1 Corinthians 8. God bless our church as we study, pray, listen, and discuss.

- Pastor Jonathan