

Guarding Stradivarius

Grey Matters – Part VI

Romans 14:19-21

Introduction

The protection and care of valuable things has become a worldwide industry.

A framed masterpiece painting now hangs in a gallery, linked to a wireless network that can instantly alert security if someone tries to lift it from the wall, touch it, or even vandalize it with a can of spray paint. The tiny sensor attached to the frame, also sends out hourly reports on the temperature and relative humidity of the room.

Several well known art museums, including a pair of Harvard University museums, have adopted this growing technology to monitor valuable works of art – which can include sculptures and even furniture.

One museum has already seen this pay off. They had a sensor on a Louis XIV chest of drawers that had just come back from having a \$10,000 restoration. Every night around 8:30, the alarm would go off and tell security that someone was touching the object, even though the museum was closed. Upon investigating, the security staff discovered that the culprit was a member of the cleaning crew who thought he was only doing his duty by wiping down the antique chest with a dirty rag and a spray of Pledge. The museum was not overly happy about his casual treatment of a priceless work of art.ⁱ

There are just over six hundred authentic Stradivarius violins in the world today. Many of them are never used at all, for fear they might be stolen, while others are only played in special performances.

Antonio Stradivari, the seventeenth century violin maker from Cremona, Italy, died without

leaving anyone the secrets of the way he crafted his violins – each signed and also bearing a special, unique name; such as, “the Duke of Alcantara”. His methods remain a mystery to this day.

Many have analyzed his violins, made of seventy separate pieces of the finest maple. Perhaps it is the wood that produces tones of richness and power. Some think it is Stradivari’s three layers of varnish, which have been chemically analyzed, that make the difference. Some have even tested the water from his local village, while others say it is the way he carved each violin. No one knows for sure, but a Stradivarius violin is in a class all its own with its crystal, pure sounds.

If you have one of these violins, you are one of 650 fortunate people in the world.

If you would like one for yourself, chances are no one will even sell it to you, because of its signature and rarity. One was sold some time ago, for a little more than 3.2 million dollars.ⁱⁱ

However, if you had a Stradivarius, you would probably stay up at night in fear of what might happen to it. Several have been stolen through the years.

Most of the 650 Stradivarius violins are safely hidden in bank vaults and private safes – highly insured and well guarded. They are the priceless possessions of a handful of people.

Someone from our church sent an email to me that tells a funny story of the way one woman acted regarding this issue.

A woman walked into a bank in New York City and asked to speak with a loan officer. She explained that she had traveled to New York to meet with friends, but had to leave, somewhat unexpectedly, for Europe. She needed to borrow \$5,000 for the trip. The bank officer informed her that they would need some form of security for the loan. She had driven to the bank in her brand new Rolls Royce, so she asked if they would accept that as collateral for the loan. She even had the title with her – and everything checked out that she was indeed, the owner. The bank agreed, and as the woman left, the bank president and some of the officers enjoyed a good laugh at the woman who used a \$300,000 Rolls Royce as collateral against a \$5,000 loan. They had one of the bank employees drive the Rolls into the bank’s underground garage, where security cameras silently watched the automobile.

Two weeks later, the woman returned as promised, repaid the \$5,000 loan and the interest, which came to \$15.41. The loan officer and others gathered around her before she left, and the president, chuckling out loud, said to her, “Ma’am, we were happy to have had your business, but we are a little puzzled. While you were away, we did a little more checking with your hometown bank and found out you are a wealthy woman. Why in the world would you borrow \$5,000?”

The woman laughed herself, as she responded, “Oh, I didn’t need the money, but where else in New York City can you safely park your car for two weeks for only \$15.41 and have it waiting for you when you return? Now, have a nice day.”

Without a doubt, mankind has come up with some rather complex and interesting ways to protect their prized possessions.

If the world, with such great care and tenderness, not to mention expense, protects and guards its valuable possessions – like cars that will one day rust and violins that will ultimately decay – how should we care for the people of God who will last forever?!

In Romans chapter 14, Paul is giving instruction to us on the way to treat people in the family of God – specifically, people who have different views than ours on grey areas of life; that is, areas where the scriptures are silent or inconclusive. Thus far, we have discovered two principles:

- the principle of protection;
- the principle of reputation.

The Principle of Consideration

Now, Paul delivers more instruction and practical advice that I have bundled together into a third principle that I would like to call, the principle of consideration.

I want to point out to you something in Romans chapter 14. Right in the middle of his remarks, in Romans 14:20a, Paul makes an interesting connection. Notice that he writes,

Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. . . .

So far in this chapter, Paul has been talking about:

- accepting your brother who views life differently from you (verses 1-3);
- not condemning other believers or treating them with contempt (verses 4-13);
- not putting an obstacle or a stumbling block in the way of another believer (verse 13b);
- not hurting other Christians (verse 15a);
- not destroying your brother with your food (verse 15b).

Now, in Romans 14:20, for the first time, and in fact, the only time in any of his letters, Paul refers to these other Christians with the fascinating phrase,

. . . the work of God . . .

They are the “work” or the “ergon” – “the enterprise; the effort of God’s design”. Literally, “they are God’s project”.

Another use of this root word could be translated, “God’s business” or even, “God’s performance”.

In other words, “Do not tear down the business; the project; the detailed effort of God’s own design.”

Christians are the masterpiece of God.

The care and effort put into making a Stradivarius is nothing compared to the care and effort God is putting into the making of a saint. So, if we so carefully guard violins and cars and jewelry and art with such passion, expense, and concern, how should the believer handle his brother and sister in Christ?

In the mind of the apostle Paul – and evidently the Holy Spirit of God – the really priceless treasure on earth is the bride of Christ.

Ephesians 1:14, Titus 2:14, and I Peter 2:9 speak of believers as God’s special possession.

So, how should we treat something as valuable to God as His own church – His own people; the bride of His own Son?

Ways to treat other Christians

In the next few verses in Romans 14 and 15, Paul will answer this question and give at least four ways to treat other Christians; four ways to handle the priceless work of God. Let me give several of them.

1. Number one: Handle other Christians with a spirit of surrender.

Let us go back and read again, Romans 14:16-18.

Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable [pleasing] to God and approved by men.

“Approved,” in this verse, by the way, means, “found to be authentic and genuine by men”.

These verses give the principle of reputation, which we covered in our last session.

Now notice the next phrase, in Romans 14:19a.

So then we pursue the things which make for peace . . .

The word “pursue” is a strong, passionate word. It can be translated, “to hunt down; to follow hard after”. Paul uses the word in Philippians 3:14 when he says, “I am pressing toward the mark.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I am pursuing the goal! Paul’s picture in that text is of a runner who has turned the corner or the post and is now heading down the home stretch where he can see the finish line.^{iv}

Paul tells the Roman church to pursue the things that will bring peace between them and other believers. He is telling our church the same thing today.

Surrender whatever is necessary to capture, to win, to achieve peace. Do not surrender doctrinal purity or moral purity – the context of this verse is in the area of grey issues. Live with a desire to make peace.

The truth is that we typically accept peace if someone offers it to us. Paul says, in effect, you become the one who pursues the offering of it! You be the one who carries the peace treaty around in your back pocket or in your purse. Have it ready as

you deal with other Christians; have your signature already on the peace treaty.

One author put it this way, as he wrote, “The only people you should ever try to get even with are the ones who have helped you.”^v

Hunting down peace is another way of getting even – only with those who treat us well. This is another way of saying that we are to surrender our desire to get someone back.

Oh man, is it ever hard to surrender. We live to stay even, don’t we? How convicting this text is! In large things and in small, we like to even the score.

This past Monday, I left early to go to Pennsylvania to speak to the student body at Baptist Bible College and also, to the students at Baptist Bible Seminary. I drove the eight to nine hours there, spoke seven times, and then, drove back after chapel on Thursday. In the DC area, I hit an afternoon traffic jam and finally made it home Thursday night.

During the home stretch, I came up behind a driver in the left lane who was just dawdling – he was going slower than he was supposed to, especially in the left lane. Other cars in the right lane had hemmed me in, and this driver was not passing them. So, I tapped on my bright lights for a second to let him know I was behind him. He sped up and got over, but as soon as I passed him, he swerved behind me and put on his brights – and just kept them on. It was blinding. I got over in the right lane, slowed down, and as he passed, I honked my horn. I immediately thought, however, “Be careful, he might be bigger than I am.”

I did not know what to do. Obviously the spiritual thing to do was nothing, but I was not in a spiritual mood. As we traveled into the area where the highway split off, I could tell he was going to take the other interstate. As he bore off to the right, I turned on my brights.

I got him back! It felt so good – I got in the last word!

However, I then thought, “Wait a second! I’m a pastor!”

All I can say is that I hope that driver does not go to this church. If so, I want you to know that I apologize. If you are bigger than I am, I want you to know that I am really sorry!

As I began studying this phrase concerning the pursuing of peace, I knew I was the perfect illustration of how to do it completely wrong.

Perhaps you are struggling with something far more significant than highway rudeness.

I have read over two thousand testimonies of current, active members of this church. Some of your stories are filled with minor and major offenses. Some of you have been betrayed, abandoned, robbed, misused, abused by others who call themselves Christians.

What do you do?

Paul tells us, whether it is a small hurt or a large offense, follow hard after or,

... pursue the things which make for peace .
..

You cannot turn the clock back, but you can turn your heart forward. Treating other Christians with a spirit of surrender releases you from being hemmed in – waiting for an opportunity to get back; to get even. Those who do the offending, the misusing, the abusing, the robbing are truly the only lasting victims in your story.

Surrendering to others becomes your ticket to peace on the inside. And possibly, it becomes your ticket to peace with those on the outside too.

Matthew Henry, whose commentaries have been read for more than one hundred fifty years, was once accosted and robbed of all his money. That night, he entered into his journal,

Let me be thankful for these things:

First – I have never been robbed before;

Second – although they took my wallet, they did not take my life;

Third – although they took all I had, it wasn't very much;

And Last – it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed.^{vi}

This is another way of living with a spirit of surrender.

2. Number two: Handle people with spiritual reinforcement.

Paul writes in Romans 14:19,

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

What might seem repetitious is actually introduced for the very first time in this letter to the Romans. This is the first time Paul uses the words “building up,” which is later translated in Romans 15:2 as “edification”.

“Building up” comes from two Greek words, “oikos,” for “house,” and “demo,” which refers to the process of building. When these are put together, it gives the idea of building up a believer as you might build up a house.

If you want the right kind of house, you have to start with the right blueprints, lay a good foundation, use the right materials, follow the best schedule, and pursue the right goal.^{vii}

Paul loved to refer to the church as the building of God. In I Corinthians 3:9, he wrote,

... you are ... God's building.

In Ephesians 2, Paul becomes even more explicit as he writes,

... you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

In Romans 14, Paul wants to remind us that the believer is the building project of God. And He intends for us to work alongside Him in the lives of other believers. We are called to be, as it were, construction workers.

What are we building into the lives of others? What kind of tools are we bringing to the project?

Everything might be permissible, but not everything is constructive.

After having spent time with you, does a person feel encouraged to live for Jesus Christ, or discouraged?

Donald Grey Barnhouse, who, after leading his Presbyterian congregation through a study of Paul's letter to the Romans, compiled his sermons into a four volume set which I have the privilege of owning, illustrated this particular text. He told of an occasion in which a missionary ransacked the scriptures and compiled a list of things that destroyed other believers, rather than edified or built them up. The things that brought destruction, rather than construction, included:

- Self-seeking
- A pharisaical spirit
- Playing God for others
- Hypocrisy

- Failing to appreciate others' gifts
- Lack of patience
- Not sympathizing with others' infirmities
- Evil speaking
- Assuming, without grounds, that others are at fault
- Suspecting the motives of another
- A domineering spirit
- A rebellious spirit
- Snobbery
- Hatred
- Grumbling
- Arguing
- Murmuring
- Maliciousness
- Being nosy
- Greediness
- Bitterness
- Resentment
- A sense of inferiority (that is, not resting in the Lord, not being satisfied with the gift He has given you)
- Instability
- Timidity
- Spite
- Laziness
- Economic freeloading
- Lying and slander
- Jealousy
- Thinking too highly of oneself
- A critical spirit toward others
- Carrying on controversy

The missionary also made a list of activities that edified the believer. This list is as convicting as the first list. The tools he listed that we should work with, not only in our own lives, but in the lives of others, included:

- Willingness to be in subjection to others
- Considering others better than oneself
- An understanding spirit
- An intimate relationship with Christ

- Not insisting on our rights
- Willingness to confess a wrong spirit
- Sincerity
- A generous spirit
- A sympathetic spirit
- Trusting others
- Having faith in Christ, not necessarily in others
- Joyfulness
- Prayer
- Discretion
- A critical spirit toward oneself
- A gentle and quiet spirit
- Humility
- Using our gifts for one another
- Remembering our own mistakes and not the mistakes of others
- Christ-centeredness
- Love, in word and deed
- Fair dealing
- Integrity
- Recognizing one's place
- A forgiving spirit
- Doing things decently and in order
- Conscientiousness
- Faithfulness
- Being responsible to perform the tasks assigned to us
- Not misusing our authority over others
- Being willing to follow those in authority over us^{viii}

These are the tools of construction – bringing into the lives of other believers the instruments and equipment that edify.

Now, this does not mean you never make someone feel poorly or accountable. Paul rebuked Peter to his face when he learned of Peter's hypocrisy before the Gentiles. The events are recorded in Galatians. Evidently, Peter was eating with the Gentiles until Jews arrived from Jerusalem. Then, Peter began to avoid the Gentile believers for fear of being looked down upon. Galatians 2:11 records that

when Peter arrived in Antioch where Paul was serving, Paul,

. . . opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

Edification does not mean we just try to make each other feel better. It means that we are committed to helping one another live better.

We are either in the business of construction or destruction.

Handle people with a spirit of surrender.

Handle people with spiritual reinforcement.

3. Number three: Handle people with a sense of caution.

Paul writes in Romans 14:20,

Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.

In other words, “Be careful not to tear someone apart that God is putting together, especially over something as insignificant as food or drink.”

Paul says that all things are clean; that is, in this area of grey, all things are permissible, but not all things are constructive. Some things can hurt, destroy, confuse, and as Paul writes in this verse, offend another believer.

The opposite enterprise of building is demolition, right? The Christian is to be careful with others – he is not in the business of spiritual demolition. And if you can imagine it, the wrecking ball, in this context, is labeled “liberty”.

Here you go, swinging around your liberty; flaunting your freedom – knocking over young Christians right and left.

Paul writes in Romans 14:21,

It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.

In other words, “Listen, these weaker believers are the work in progress of God – be careful!”

Treat weaker believers like an antique piece of furniture – or like your brand new car, which for the first few months, you will not park near any other cars because you do not want any dings in the doors. You do not buy a portrait by Rembrandt and toss it onto the back seat of your car – you treat it carefully!

This is the principle of consideration – handle people with a sense of caution. Do not give them something that can hurt them.

Like a wise parent, you do not leave scissors on the ground where your two year old is playing. In fact, you have probably child-proofed your living room – your coffee table has absolutely nothing on it. There is nothing in your house below three feet that cannot withstand hurricane force winds! You do not give your three year old a box of crayons and say, “The house is all yours.” There are protections and guidelines and cautions for the young ones.

We put sensors on rare items; we protect our valuables; we watch out for precious things; we guard our heirlooms. Will we treat the precious treasure of Christ in one another rudely or carelessly?

Part of our sense of caution is patience. Be willing to wait, while your brother or sister grows up. In fact, be willing to adjust your life so they will.

Paul writes to the strong because the strong can get frustrated and impatient with what they already know is acceptable. Maybe there were some then, as well as now, who were muttering under their breath, “I’m tired of playing it cautious. I’m weary of reinforcing their lives when they offer me so little in return.”

Perhaps you are tempted to say, “Just give me fifteen minutes alone with that weaker brother – I’ll show them in the word; I’ll teach them where they’re immature. Just give me ten minutes and I’ll give them the knowledge they’re missing!”

Warren Wiersbe, in his comments on this text, challenged my thinking when he wrote that children who are afraid of the dark are never helped by more knowledge.^{ix}

I thought, “That is so true.”

Paul never tells the stronger brother, in Romans 14, to take his Jewish friends on a crash course in dispensationalism. He never says to overload them with the distinctions between the Old Covenant and Israel, and the New Covenant and the church. He never suggests to give them essay questions to fill out. He never says, “We’ll get them over their dietary restrictions so you can go buy meat from the pagan temple and never have to think another thing.”

The answer is not knowledge.

How many dads have tried to solve your child’s fear of the dark with a lecture? You went into your child’s room, where they were crying and saying, “Daddy, I’m scared of the dark . . .” and sat down on

their bed and said, “Now listen, sweetheart, the absence of light does not automatically mean the presence of danger . . .”

That is pretty good, isn’t it? You could tell your child, “Here, why don’t you write that down on your Etch-A-Sketch, ‘The absence of light does not automatically mean . . .’”

Has your child ever said, “Daddy, I’ve never thought of that before, but now that you’ve expanded my thinking about the neutrality and non-aligned status of darkness, I can go to sleep. You can turn off the lights now, even my nightlight, and you can even shut the door – I know I’m safe now!”

Ladies and gentlemen, you cannot take a young believer and say, “C’mon, let me give you the facts . . . write them down . . .”

No, they do not need knowledge at times, as much as they need reinforcement, love, and time.

Conclusion

This is the principle of consideration. We are to:

- handle people with a spirit of surrender;
- handle people with spiritual reinforcement;
- handle people with a sense of caution.

Paderewski, the world renowned pianist, was to play in a piano concert in America. He was both a respected statesman as the prime minister of Poland, as well as the famous master pianist.

The magnificent concert hall was packed and everyone was waiting in anticipation. One particular mother, wishing to encourage her young son’s progress at the piano, had sacrificed dearly and bought tickets for them to attend the performance. They had found their seats near the front of the concert hall and were waiting, along with several thousand other people, for the start of the concert. This young boy was awed, of course, by everything. – the massive theatre, the huge crowd, and not the least of it all, the twelve foot grand piano of a kind he had never seen before and certainly never played. There that piano sat, waiting on stage for the concert to begin.

During the wait, the boy’s mother was engaged in conversation with those around her. While she was talking, the boy slipped away. Suddenly, to the surprise of everyone, the sound of piano playing was heard. The audience immediately hushed and when they looked toward the stage, it was the young boy sitting on the piano bench, innocently playing, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

The crowd laughed and went along at first, although his mother nearly fainted! Then, however, recognizing the possible disturbance to the piano – the keys and who knows what else – the crowd started to become somewhat agitated. Besides, the little boy could aggravate the great master who was actually backstage at that moment, picking up on what was happening on stage. Finally a few people began to shout, “Get that boy off the piano.”

Before the mother even had time to recover from her shock and find her way onto the stage, suddenly Ignacy Paderewski appeared on the stage and quickly walked toward the little boy. While many thought the boy would be soundly rebuked and the mother as well, instead, he leaned over the boy’s shoulder and whispered, “Don’t stop – keep playing.”

Then, reaching around with his left hand, Paderewski began filling in a bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the other side, encircling the child, to add a running obbligato. Beautiful music filled the hall – all spontaneously composed. Together, beautifully, the old concert master and the young boy held the crowd mesmerized. All the while, Paderewski kept whispering, “Don’t stop, son, don’t quit.”

When they finished, the people jumped to their feet with cheering and a long standing ovation.

What so moved this audience was not the way the old master handled the piano, but the way he treated the young boy. The masterpiece was not his improvised composition; the masterpiece was what he did with the young student.

Ladies and gentlemen, you happen to be the priceless enterprise of God. We are all under construction. God wants each of us to treat each other as a work in progress.

It is no wonder that Paul tells us to live out this principle of consideration. So, how do we live it out? By treating each other with a spirit of surrender, with spiritual reinforcement, and with a sense of caution.

We are to accept the fact that we are His masterpiece in the making – each one of us, unique and original. We are under the direction and energy and work and effort of none other than the Master Builder; the Master Painter; the Master Composer – our Heavenly Father – this One who has called us His precious possession and is making us able to bring forth the praises of Him who called us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/12/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ The Boston Globe (Apr. 12, 2004).

ⁱⁱ The Amarillo Globe-News Online (Feb. 27, 2001).

ⁱⁱⁱ William R. Newell, Romans: Verse by Verse (Moody Press, 1938), p. 514.

^{iv} Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 558.

^v Steve May, The Story File (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 186.

^{vi} Stepping Stones, Volume 3 (Bible Broadcasting Network, 2006).

^{vii} James Montgomery Boice, Romans: Volume 4 (Baker, 1995), p. 1789.

^{viii} Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans: Volume 4 (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 21.

^{ix} Warren Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary: Volume 1 (Victor, 2001), p. 560.