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Sermon 31 January 2021

Resolved 4: Your Neighbour as Yourself

- A very good Sunday morning to you all---we are so thankful that you have joined us for our online service today and trust that it has been a blessing to you
- This is the last Sunday in our four-week sermon series called “Resolved,” and so tonight at 6pm via Zoom we’ll meet for our Second Helping Bible study and we hope you’ll join us for that.
- I want to begin today by telling you about a news story I read this week. It was in the Guardian on Wednesday, and it was about the Facebook social media platform. Most of you will know what Facebook is—and many of you probably use Facebook—our church has a page and it’s a great way to communicate with people about what’s going on.
- But lately Facebook and other social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram and Pinterest have been making an effort to reduce or prevent certain kinds of messages and sentiments that people might express in their posts and comments—on the one hand, they’ve been cracking down on false information about things like COVID and the vaccines, but also about other conspiracy theories—and that’s certainly a good thing—it’s good to try to make sure that what gets posted and repeated in your community and on your platform is true and factual
- And they’ve also been trying to combat what’s known as “hate-speech”—language that is dehumanising or belittling or bullying and targeted against a certain person or members of certain groups—and so there are certain words—words that are used to

insult certain people—rude names that people may get called—and these words are certainly offensive and inappropriate for sure—these are words that no one has any business ever calling another person, and certainly no Christian ought to ever call another person any of them—and so Facebook has said that if you use these words in a post or a comment, it'll be removed—and you can even get banned from Facebook if you ignore these rules

- But there has been a slight hiccup—a tiny problem that has come to light—and that's what the news story I read this week was about—you see, it seems that there are some towns and villages, some locations here in the United Kingdom—nice, picturesque, respectful, even historic places, whose names contain one of those words that Facebook has said you can't use because they're hateful and inappropriate. This story was about 2 of them in particular down in Sussex.
- And the problem that has arisen is that if a person makes a post or a comment that mentions one of these places—if a person says "I've lived in —this particular place and they use the name of the place—for 50 years," or if they say "'the name of this particular place' has lovely seaside views," then Facebook flags their language as problematic and edits it or removes it—and this can be a problem not only for folks who visit those places but it's a real hindrance for folks who live there—just imagine not being able to say the name of your town—we wouldn't be able to say "Welcome to LargsNaz," or "we have the most exciting church, with the most faithful and dedicated congregation in all of Largs" for fear that we'd be unwelcome in the Facebook assembly, that we'd be judged as inappropriate or unworthy by those who impose a certain standard as a test of our worthiness to be a part of their community.

- And so Facebook is going to have to figure out a way to stop passing judgement on folks with criteria that exclude people for reasons that really don't matter—a way to stop saying that folks have offended their community standards and should have a hindrance put in the way of their participation. And I hope they do, because I am sure that the residents of those offensively-named towns have valuable contributions to make to the conversation.
- If you've been joining us for the past three weeks, you'll know that we are looking at 4 passages of scripture that have the word "resolved" or "resolve" in English in them, and we are encouraging each other, as members of the body of Christ, collectively and individually, to make 4 resolutions for this new year. These four resolutions are based on the four commands that Jesus gives to us when he tells us the greatest commandment in Mark chapter 12, verses 28-31. Those four resolutions are:
 - First, let's resolve to love the Lord with all our mind--that addresses the mental component of a person, the intellect, our thinking
 - Second, let's resolve to love the Lord with all our strength-- that addresses the physical component of a person—that bodily aspect
 - Third, let's resolve to love the Lord with all our heart and soul--that's the spiritual aspect of a person
 - And then finally, we said that we would resolve to love our neighbour as ourselves—and that addresses the relational aspect of what it means to be a person
- On the first Sunday of this series we took a look in the first chapter of Matthew, where we found the familiar story of Joseph, and we considered how he resolved—how he planned and carefully and thoughtfully considered and reconsidered what he

should do about the fact that Mary was with child—and we heard about the effort he put into planning and how after he had planned and determined his course of action, he went to sleep, and in his sleep the angel of the Lord came to him and enlightened him about the situation and told him what he should do.

- And we saw how intentional, critical thinking wasn't just suggested by the greatest commandment—it was commanded—and so Joseph taught us that thinking is an act of worship—and we ought to do it deeply—but even as we do, we need to remember that we don't know everything, and that in the end we need to remember to let God have the final word about the goal and the purposes of our thinking.
- And so we resolved to Love the Lord with all our minds.
- On our second Sunday, Pastor Tasha shared how Daniel had “resolved” not to defile himself by eating the food that Nebuchadnezzar provided—and how, when it came to his identity as a member of the people of God, Daniel was set, fixed, determined, resolved. And Pastor Tasha showed us that the Hebrew word that is translated as “resolved” literally means “to set or to place or to assign,” and we saw that God's power and authority was demonstrated through Daniel's faith— even when the power of the throne set or placed or assigned Daniel into the lions' den-- even when he was **set** into a situation in which he was powerless, in danger of being exterminated, in which he had reached the end of his strength, his *me-od*, his muchness—God was with him and transformed the situation. And so Daniel showed us what it means to love the Lord with all our strength.
- Last week we considered the third resolution—Resolve to love the Lord with all your heart and soul—*kardia* and *psyche*—and we looked at Paul's resolve to leave Ephesus—

but we also saw how Paul and other followers of Jesus cooperate with the Holy Spirit— and we learned that we can all resolve to be of the same heart and soul with the body of Christ, with the fellowship of believers, to be set in the Spirit, --*etheto en to pneumati* -- determined, resolute, faithful—but also to set our plans into the wind of the Spirit, who lifts us up, empowers us and directs us in new and surprising and unexpected ways.

- And this week we are looking at our final “resolved” scripture, the last of our scriptures that contain that English word “resolve.” And as we look at today’s scripture we’ll also be considering what it means to resolve to “love your neighbour as yourself”---that last commandment Jesus gives us in Mark 12.
- Now we have talked before about the radical hospitality that Jesus is talking about there—loving your neighbour *as yourself*—it is a tall order--and we know that if we look elsewhere in the New Testament we can find out just who our neighbour is, that one that we are called to love with that self-emptying, Godly love that is called *agape*, and the short answer to that question—who is my neighbour, is this—it’s anybody who isn’t you. Family, friends, strangers, even enemies fall into that category of “neighbours” we are called to love.
- Surely the only way we can expect to obey this second of the greatest commandments is by obeying the first—loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength because unless we have a relationship with God that enables us to say “I no longer live but Christ lives in me,” unless we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to love others as Christ has loved us and gave himself for us, there’s simply no way we’re going to be able to love our neighbour as ourself.
- But if we do have that vertical relationship with God, if we can say in all honesty that we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, then

that love will be lived-out in our horizontal relationships with other people, and we **can** love our neighbour as ourself.

- And so Jesus commands us to put others in the place of ourselves, to put ourselves in their place and to **love** people, to treat them and to consider them and to talk to them and to listen to them and to build them up and to teach them and to visit them and feed them and care for them—in short to SEE them, to JUDGE them, as if there were no distinction between them and ourselves—as if we were one and the same—because in God’s eyes, that is the situation—all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, all of us, every one, stand in need of repentance and forgiveness, and not one of us deserves it, not one of us is worthy of it-- but every one of us is ALSO a precious soul made in the image of God and for whom Jesus died and was resurrected—because God so loved **the world** that he gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.
- Our love for God is lived-out in the way we are related to others—in the way we see people, in the way we treat people.
- In Mark 12, Jesus is talking about our relationship with all people, all our neighbours, but this morning we’re going to look at a passage of scripture in the Epistle to the church in Rome, in which the Apostle Paul addresses one specific relationship—that of believers, followers of Christ, with one another—the relationship between Christians and other Christians.
- And Paul has a resolution for them, a suggestion about what they ought to “resolve” to do.
- Now it often comes as a bit of a surprise to folks who begin to dig deeper in their Bible study that any given specific word in English, like a word such as

“resolved,” doesn’t always correspond to the same word in the original language—in the Greek or the Hebrew—in every place that it appears.

- And we have seen that over the past 3 weeks, in fact—we have looked at these 3 different scriptures that used the word “resolve” or resolved,” and each time, the word that was translated into English was a different word, with different nuances of meaning.
- When we looked at the first chapter of Matthew, where Matthew writes that Joseph “had resolved” to dismiss Mary quietly— the word there was *enthumeomai* (en-thoo-meh'-om-ahee)—which in the Greek means to ponder and think long and hard about something.
- Then in the book of Daniel we saw that Daniel “resolved” not to eat the rich food rations that were provided by Nebuchadnezzar, and the Hebrew word there was *way-ya-sem*, and it’s a form of the word *sum* or *sim* that means “to put or to place or to set”—to appoint or assign
- And then we saw how in the book of Acts that when Luke writes that Paul had “resolved in the Spirit” to leave Ephesus, Luke uses still **another** word in the Greek that is translated into English as “resolved,” and that word was *etheto*— a word that’s similar to the Hebrew that’s used in Daniel, meaning “to set,” but we saw how even in English, the word “set” can refer to things or situations that are fixed and determined and static or to those that are unpredictable and changing and in motion.
- And today we come to our final occurrence of the word “resolve” in this sermon series. We are looking at Paul’s epistle to the Romans, the 14th chapter, where he writes in verse 13: Let us therefore no longer pass

judgement on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another.

- And although the word there in English is “resolve,” the word that has been translated from the original language is not the Greek *enthumeomai* that we saw in Matthew; it is not the Hebrew *way-ya-sem* that we saw in Daniel, nor is it *etheto* as we saw in Acts.
- The Greek word that Paul uses here and that is translated as “resolve,” is *krinó*—and it means to judge. It means to make a decision; to choose one thing instead of something else
- *Krino* is the word Jesus uses when he says “judge not that you be not judged,” but it’s also the word he uses when he says “if anyone wants to sue you—to take you to court—to *krino* you—to pass judgement on you-- and take your tunic, give them also your cloak” that’s because
- *Krino* can refer to a judgement in a court of law or to a judgement that we might pass in everyday life—its root literally means to “separate” and if you think about it that makes sense, because to judge something, for instance to find someone guilty of a crime, is to separate them from people who are innocent—
- A few years ago I had the distinct and unforgettable privilege of being a judge in a tomato sandwich contest—and if you don’t know it already, I think that a tomato sandwich, made with home-grown Southern heirloom tomatoes on fresh-baked sourdough bread with just a little salt and pepper and Duke’s mayonnaise—well that is just about one of the best things to eat in all of creation—and I got to taste a half dozen of them that had been made by some of the best chefs in the Augusta, Georgia area—some of the best chefs in all

of the Southern US, really—and they were all top-notch—but I had to use my judgement to determine which one was the best—which one would be separated out from the others—so I had to impose some criteria on them—which tomatoes taste better, and which bread was the most delicious, and how much mayonnaise they used, or if they used mayonnaise at all, and whether they put some other ingredient like pork belly or avocado or something weird like kale or whatever. And in some cases, I could say about what the chef had made that not only was this thing not a good tomato sandwich, but maybe it wasn't a tomato sandwich at all—maybe it wasn't even a sandwich at all—and there was one or two like that in the bunch, but it was my job to separate out the offerings that I thought qualified as good and then to choose the best, to decide which one was different from the others—it was my job to pass judgement.

- But passing judgement on tomato sandwiches is one thing—and passing judgement on people is quite another.
- And passing judgement on one another is what the Apostle Paul is asking the church at Rome not to do, but to resolve—*krino*—not to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.
- Now you might be thinking, “isn't it interesting that the word for resolve there means to judge, to make a judgement—*krino*—when what Paul is asking the Roman church NOT to do is JUDGE one another?”
- And you would be right—that is interesting. And it's even more interesting when you realise that the Greek word Paul uses that is translated as “judge” when he says “don't judge each other” is ALSO *krino*

- So what Paul is saying here is “don’t *krino* each other—don’t pass judgement on each other—but *krino* this—pass this judgement—that you will not put a hindrance in the way of another.”
- Now the context into which Paul is writing this admonition is this. You’ll remember last week that when Paul was in Ephesus he said he wanted to leave there and to visit several other places, and then eventually arrive in Rome.
- Well, when Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome, he had not been there yet (he tells us that in chapter 1) and the Christians in Rome had learned about Christianity from someone else, maybe Peter.
- But on his way, probably from Corinth around the year 57, Paul decides that it’s important to write to the church in Rome, even though he is dealing with some difficulties of his own—and the letter he writes to the Christians in Rome, as you may know, stands as one of the most influential works in all of the history of Christianity—names like Martin Luther, John Wesley, Augustine, and Karl Barth all point to Romans as transforming and shaping their theology, and in turn, the theology of the church at large.
- And one of the issues that was affecting the church in Rome was an issue that had been affecting the early church for years—and that was the question of how Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians could get along and come to agreement on how their traditions would affect their beliefs and behaviours as Christians.
- You’ll remember that early on, there were those folks called Judaizers in the Christian church who held that it was necessary to adhere to Jewish

regulations about circumcision and dietary restrictions in order to be a Christian—even if you were a Gentile.

- And you might think that this question would have been discussed and a decision made and the matter would be put to rest, but in the real world that was not the case—because people talk, and they get their own ideas, and they misunderstand things—and there was no email or even printing presses that could be used to distribute a final word about Christian doctrine—people relied on letters and personal evangelism--and so questions about traditions and restrictions come up again and again in different places—we see these issues in places like Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where in chapter 2 Paul talks about the way he called Peter out to his face for forcing Gentiles to follow Jewish customs—and then calls his audience “you foolish Galatians” because they’ve been “bewitched” into believing a kind righteousness based on works and not faith.
- And in Paul’s letter to the Romans we hear these same issues—though Paul seems to have mellowed a bit in the decade between Galatians and Romans.
- But we know that in Rome, Christians were meeting in house-churches—and some of those house-churches were predominantly Jewish and some were predominantly Gentile.
- And if you know anything about human nature you can tell right there that there are gonna be problems. People from different cultures do things differently, and when other people want to do things in a different way—people will bow up and start talking about what’s “right” and “wrong”—
- If you want to see evidence of this you need look no further than discussions on social media about whether pineapple goes on pizza or when you should

put your Christmas tree up or when you should take it down—or tell someone from South Carolina that you like to put sugar in your grits—you’ll find out real quick that people can get real “judgy” when you start talking about food and holidays, and they will let you know that what you’re doing is wrong.

- And that’s the situation in Rome. Here in chapter 14 Paul is addressing the situation that some Christians are eating whatever they want, while some are abstaining from certain foods, and some are saying certain days are sacred while others are saying “all days are alike.”
- And members of each of these groups of Christians are passing judgment on the other.
- And Paul uses the term “those who are weak in the faith” to refer to those whose rules are more strict—but notice what Paul doesn’t do—he doesn’t say “those who are weak in the faith are wrong and they need to act like those who are strong,”—no, he tells the Christians in Rome to welcome those who are weak in the faith—but NOT for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions, not to argue with them; no, he tells those who are strong in the faith to act in such a way that they will not hinder the faith of those who are weaker.
- He doesn’t tell one group “you are right and they are wrong,” no—he says “you are strong and they are weak, act in a way that helps them”—in essence—love them as you love yourselves.
- Paul says “if your brother or sister is injured by what you eat, you’re not walking in love.” Don’t be driven by your desire to be right, or to prove your way is better—be guided by love for your neighbour—put them first.

- And Paul tells us that he can give this advice because, in verse 14: I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.
- “Nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”
- Now you might think that William Shakespeare wrote that—and he did indeed write, in Hamlet, Act 2 Scene 2, “there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” Hamlet says that to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about Denmark being a prison.
- But Paul wrote ““Nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” a LONG time before Shakespeare.
- And I want to take a minute to think about what that means—and more importantly what it doesn’t mean.
- Now you may hear people say “there’s nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so” as an excuse for unethical or immoral or sinful behaviour—but let’s be clear—Paul is not telling the Christians in Rome that they should be tolerant of just any behaviour or belief or attitude that someone might exhibit—Paul is not saying, “if your Christian brother thinks it’s ok to lie, cheat and steal, and you don’t, you just need to tolerate that,”
- Paul is not advocating getting rid of accountability for the sake of unity—he is not giving the church in Rome an excuse to ignore sin or overlook immorality
- But he is saying that there are some things—like dietary restrictions and traditions—certain things that people do or don’t do—that are neither here nor there as far as salvation is concerned—and when you disagree with your Christian brother or sister about one of these non-essential matters, don’t let it

cause you to judge them, to exclude them from the family of God, to cause disunity in the body—put them first and do what is edifying to them—help them to grow in grace and to be strengthened in their faith.

- Can you imagine what would happen if the members of the body of Christ today would spend as much time and energy building up those who are weak in their faith as we do pointing out those places where we disagree—if we resolved not to place a hindrance in the way of their development but let God be the judge?
- If we resolved to stop using non-essential criteria to determine who's a real Christian and who isn't? If we truly realised, as Paul writes in verse 17, that the kingdom of God is not food and drink, not matters of opinion, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
- Let us then, as Paul writes in verse 19, pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification.
- Let's resolve today to love our neighbours as ourselves. Let's never let matters of opinion damage the unity of the church—let's be one body made up of many parts—that the world may look to the church and see peace and joy and righteousness and say "I want what they've got."
- I believe we will as we are guided by the Spirit, and as we do I believe we'll see revival in Largs, in the UK, all across the Eurasia region and into all the earth.
- I hope you'll join us tonight for our Second Helping Bible study, and we'll see you then.