

Sunday September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Romans 14:1-12  
“To Eat or Not to Eat”

In the irreverent comedy Monty Python and the Holy Grail, which is a send up of the King Arthur tales, there is a scene where one of the knights, Sir Bedevere, who is confronted by a group of villagers. It seems they have grabbed one of the local women and claim she is a witch. It's obvious that her long crooked nose is fake and has been tied on and she's been dressed up to look like a witch. Sir Bedevere questions the evidence, and the people confess that they made it all up. But they still want to burn the woman as a witch.

You know, we may not judge people as witches anymore, but we do judge them by everything else under the sun. We judge people by their clothing, jobs, friends, the kind of car they drive, the music they listen to, their hair style, their family and even where they live.

We love jumping to conclusions, don't we? Sometimes that's ALL the exercise some of us get. That's what normal people do, right? But don't forget. As, I stressed last week, we're not the normal people. We're the abnormal people. That's right. I've said it. We are abnormal. We have given our lives to Christ. And through Christ, we are called to live by different standards. God calls us to love each other and treat each other the same, no matter what.

We are not called to live in the Judgment House where doors are locked and bolted; where there is no handle on the outside of the door, and you can only get in if somebody lets you in. We are called to live in the Grace and Mercy House, whose door is always open, and a welcoming committee is there to greet you. And if they aren't there when you enter, it's not because you are not welcome, it's because they have gone out in search of others like you who need a place to live.

All of this makes Paul's framing of Romans 14 particularly helpful. In great wisdom, he frames this passage not in terms of finding out who is strong or weak, to compare and cancel, but in terms of seeking to discover who has diverse thoughts, backgrounds, and experiences to care, support, and mutually edify. Paul is encouraging readers to discover and then to honor the differences among the faithful, practicing compassion and even deference to those with radically different conceptions of holiness and discipleship.

As we look at Romans, we see what Paul has to say about judging others and where we should live. Paul, in essence asks his readers, “Where Do You Live?” In which house do you reside? Do you live in the House of Judgment or the House of Mercy and Grace? Like many of Paul's subjects, it is a subject most of us don't want to hear about. Paul point-blank talks about standing in judgment of others. You can almost hear the disbelief, sadness, and spiritual amazement in his voice as he writes: Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?

Why would he write something like that? Well, you must remember that the early church was made up of two distinct groups of people, the Jews, and the gentiles. The Jews were those who had been raised with strict dietary laws, especially concerning meat offered to idols. In Rome, most of the butcher shops were run by the pagan temples. You offered an animal sacrifice, and the meat was then sold to the public in their butcher shop.

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The money went into the temple coffers. For practicing Jews, eating that meat was a giant no-no! It was tantamount to worshiping the idol yourself. They also lived by a strict, hard and fast rule that the Sabbath, which was the seventh day (or our Saturday) was a day of rest. The gentiles, were raised without any knowledge of dietary laws and most of them, initially, had no concept of what Sabbath was all about. But when they accepted Christ, they began worshipping together not on Saturday but on the first day of the week.

Which was Sunday, the day which coincided with Christ's resurrection. And they gathered on that day to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ. Every Sunday was seen by the early church as a miniature Easter.

So, in the early church, you had a group of well meaning, knowledgeable people, old timers who'd had a religious awakening. They were stirring up the newcomers, the new baby Christians, who were still growing, not just in their faith but in their knowledge of the faith and WHY certain things were done. The old timers were not being mean spirited. They simply thought they were right. That's the way they'd always done it in the past.

This controversy about eating meat from idols and which day was the Sabbath, was getting out of hand. The issues were tearing the early church apart. So, Paul writes this portion of the letter to address that issue. Now I can guess what you are thinking right about now. "So What?" What difference does all this make to us today? Well, not much really, at least in answer to the questions of meat sacrificed to idols.

I can't remember the last time I went to a pagan temple to buy steaks. The Sabbath question has pretty much been answered over the years simply by practice. But also due to what Paul writes here. Paul was clear, it's not about the day or the food. It's about honoring God. He writes"

*[5] Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. [6] Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also, those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord, and give thanks to God.* Paul tells us basically, Quit fighting about the inconsequential. Our activity and attitude about everything, is to be directed at honoring God.

Unfortunately, as we all painfully know, we still pass judgment on others all the time, even in the church. I just read about a pastor in Virginia who was confronted by a man after church one day. "Preacher," the man said, "I have two complaints about you. First, when I was chairman of the trustees, you tried to tell me how to do the job. You should just let the church leaders do their job the way they want."

"What is the second complaint?" asked the pastor. "Well," said the man, "I don't like the hymns that the choir director picks. I wish you'd would tell her to pick more of the old ones." Obviously, the man was not aware of the mixed message. He wanted the pastor to refrain from telling leaders people how to do their jobs, but he wanted the pastor to tell the choir director which songs to sing. People are amazing, aren't we?

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Paul says we should be careful about how we judge one another because “each of us will be accountable to God. We will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” Paul only reiterates what Jesus said and reminds us of one of the basic tenets of our faith. “Judge not lest you be judged.” And that’s not just a catchy phrase to put on a T-shirt or put on a bumper sticker. It’s supposed to be a way of life and a mark of who we are. It’s supposed to be one of the signs that we’re different from the world.

Once we accepted Christ, we were evicted and moved out of Judgment House. And we’re challenged to move into the Grace and Mercy House. Because living in the Grace and Mercy House proves “we live to God and not to ourselves.” It’s only in the Grace and Mercy House that we can “Live to the Lord.” You see, it’s only through the Grace and Mercy of God that we were able to leave the Judgment House. But we can’t do it on our own. We must be set free by Christ.

The movie Coach Carter, starring Samuel L. Jackson, is based on a true story of a basketball Coach who locked his players out of the gym and the game until they focused on their schoolwork. But in the process taught them how to play, how to succeed and how to be champions on the court and in life. There’s one scene where, after quitting the team, Timo Cruz wants back on, but the price to rejoin the team is impossible to pay. Coach Carter requires him to do 2500 push-ups 1000 suicide sprints within a week. Committed, Cruz hits the deck and begins.

The week is over, and Coach Carter goes to Cruz to give him the assessment of his work. Carter tells him, “I’m impressed with what you’ve done, but you’ve come up short. You owe me 80 suicides and 500 push-ups. Please leave my gym.”

Cruz is crushed. He’s worked hard every day to try to complete the impossible task, but he failed. Coach Carter turns to his team and says he’ll see them tomorrow. As the coach turns to leave the gym, one of the players says, “I’ll do push-ups for him. You said we’re a team. When one person struggles, we all struggle. One player triumphs, we all triumph, right?” He goes to the floor with Cruz and begins doing push-ups.

A moment later, another teammate says, “I’ll do some. I’ll run suicides too.” And then, one by one, every player, but one, has begun to do push-ups or run for Cruz. And even though he is weary beyond belief, Cruz continues to participate along with his teammates. And finally, the last player chooses to join in as well, saying, “I’ll do some...” While Carter is encouraged by their attitude, he doesn’t let them off the hook. He tells his assistant coach to, “Keep countin’. Call me when it’s done.”

But as he leaves, you know he’s proud of the boys. And you know they finally get what being a team is all about. That scene teaches us a couple of things. One, like Timo Cruz, the task of standing accountable and blameless before God is impossible. There is no way we can be perfect and not sin in a fallen world. We can give it our best shot, but we will always come up short and alone.

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But the Good News is that we don't have to do it alone. Christ Jesus stepped into the scene and said, "I'll take his burden of sin. I'll take her burden of sin. When they triumph, we all triumph." Or as the apostle Paul writes:

[7] We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. [8] If we live, we live 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. [9] For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

We need Christ, but the second thing is that we need each other, too. Not only can't we bring about our own salvation, but we can't live in the Grace and Mercy House alone. One of the keys for living in the Grace and Mercy House is to constantly show Grace and Mercy. That's how we "live to the Lord," as Paul says.

A certain pastor was visiting one of his parishioners, and as they were talking the conversation began to lag. The lady of the house, wanting to pick up the conversation, pointed out her window to her neighbor's back yard where the wash was hanging on the line. She said: "See that lady next door and the wash she hangs out, see how dirty it is, she never hangs out a clean wash."

The pastor felt somewhat uncomfortable and tried to change the subject and quickly drew the visit to a close. As he was departing from the house the lady of the house walked out on the front porch with him and again the wash next door was clearly visible to both. They both realized while this wash was sparkling white, just as white as any wash could ever be. The truth began to dawn on them that it wasn't the neighbor's wash which was dirty, rather it was the window through which they had viewed the wash.

How clean are your windows? Where Do You Live? Which house do you live in? The Judgment House or the Grace and Mercy House? Even when we think we are more enlightened than a brother or sister, we can still cause a great deal of damage. This theme of being cautious with our "knowledge" and the freedom we believe it gives us, arises again more clearly in 1 Corinthians 8. There Paul writes:

**8** *Now when it comes to meat offered to idols, we know that 'We all have knowledge'. Knowledge puffs you up, but love builds you up! <sup>2</sup> If anybody thinks they 'know' something, they don't yet 'know' in the way they ought to know.*

<sup>7</sup> *The problem is that not everybody has this 'knowledge'. Some have been accustomed up to now to eating idol-food with the assumption that it really does belong to the idol. This has left them with a weak conscience, and now that conscience will be polluted. <sup>8</sup> But the food we eat won't recommend us to God. We won't be any worse off if we don't eat, and we won't be any better off if we do.*

<sup>9</sup> *But you must take care in case this official right of yours becomes a danger to the weak. <sup>10</sup> Look at it like this: if someone with a weak conscience sees you, a person with 'knowledge', sitting down to eat in an idol-house, that conscience of theirs is likely to make up its mind to eat idol-food, isn't it? <sup>11</sup> And so, you see, the weak person – a brother or sister for*

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*whom the Messiah died! – is then destroyed by your ‘knowledge’. <sup>12</sup> That means you’ll be sinning against your brother or sister and attacking their weak conscience; and in doing this you’ll be sinning against the Messiah. <sup>13</sup> So, for this reason, if food causes my brother or sister to stumble, I will never ever eat meat, so that I won’t make my brother or sister trip up.*

You and I have been challenged to deviate from the world, to be abnormal. We’ve received a prescription for holiness, and we’ve put on Christ. And now we are called and challenged to LIVE TO THE LORD. But we can’t do it by ourselves and we sure can’t do it in Judgment House. We can only do it in Grace and Mercy House.

How clean are your windows? Where Do You Live?