

ROMANS

Part 28: “The Judgment of Man and the Judgment of God”

Romans 14:1–12

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Sunday, October 16, 2022 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” So then each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom 14:1–12).

Introduction

This year, our church family has been making the journey through the book of Romans, which is the Apostle Paul’s longest and, arguably, his most influential writing in the New Testament. As we enter the fourteenth chapter, it is as if our pilot has turned on the fasten seatbelt light and begun his descent in preparation for landing.

However, I believe these final chapters of Romans are some of the most fascinating in the entire letter. And in chapter fourteen, in particular, we are given a window into how Paul desires the church of Rome to apply the rich theology that he has been unfolding throughout the letter. In fact, of all the chapters of the book of Romans, chapter fourteen may provide the most clues as to *why* Paul wrote the letter to the Roman Christians.

The book of Romans, after all, is not merely a letter filled with abstract systematic theology. The book of Romans is a pastoral letter that is addressing a specific pastoral concern among real people within a real local church.

So what was this “pastoral concern”? The church of Rome was originally founded by Christians who were Jewish in their ethnicity. We don’t know for certain, but it is even possible that the church in Rome was planted by the anonymous “visitors from Rome” who heard the Apostle Peter’s Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 and came to faith in Jesus (Acts 2:10). Whatever the case, we do know that the first-generation of Christians in Rome came primarily from a Jewish cultural background.

However, sometime around the year A.D. 49, the Roman Emperor Claudius expels all Jews from the city of Rome. This means that the only Christians who remain at the church or Rome are gentiles (or non-Jewish people). Thus, although the church of Rome started as a predominantly Jewish church, overnight it becomes a predominantly gentile church, and as the church of Rome continues to grow in converts, it takes on a more gentile cultural flavor.

But then Claudius dies, and the edict that expelled the Jews expires with him. As a consequence, many Jewish people return to the capital city of the empire to resettle. The Jewish Christians come back to the church of Rome, but everything feels *way* different.

The church still worships Jesus, but some of the things that the gentile Christians do and allow are utterly foreign and even offensive to the Jewish Christians. Fellowship and friendship among these fellow Christians become strained, not because of foundational issues of doctrine but because of secondary and tertiary issues of culture. A miniature culture war sparks between Jewish and gentile Christians that threatens to unravel the church, if left unchecked and unaddressed.

But the Apostle Paul hears about these growing tensions in the church of Rome, and the Holy Spirit inspires him to respond. You see, Paul knows just how important the church in Rome is. For there to be a gathering of Christian disciples proclaiming the gospel and worshipping Jesus in the very city of Caesar testifies to the victory of God’s kingdom over all empires of men.

Paul knows the faithful witness of the Roman church must endure. But how will they find unity? The book of Romans can be read as an extended answer to that question.

Paul has reminded both Jew and Gentile alike that, outside of Christ, they stand condemned and plunged under the dominion of sin and death. Paul has shown how Jew and gentile alike possess a deep and cosmic need of redemption that their own works of righteousness cannot attain.

Against this dark backdrop, Paul has announced the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ and his gospel! As he proclaims in the first chapter, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek”* (Rom 1:16).

Now, as we enter chapter 14, we will find that the same gospel that is the only hope for salvation for the church is the same gospel that is the only hope for unity within the church.

In light of our own cultural moment, the message then of Romans 14 is just as pertinent—and *urgent*—to the church of America today as it was to the church of Rome then. And for that reason, we are going to explore this topic over the course of the next two weeks.

Today, we will show how Paul teaches us to resist the enduring temptation to walk in judgment against our fellow Christians by looking to Christ, who alone is the judge of the living and the dead. The title of today's sermon is "*The Judgment of Man and the Judgment of God.*" And those two big ideas will be the two major points that we will now explore from this passage.

Exposition

1.) The Judgement of Man

Now, we should ask what were the issues at play within the Roman churches that were causing tension and division. The first few verses in the text give us some important clues:

"As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom 14:1–5).

Here we seek two different factions that Paul will later in the letter refer to as the "strong" and the "weak" (Rom 15:1). The "strong" believe that they can faithfully worship Jesus without restricting their diet to any certain foods. These are Christians who, for the most part, come from gentile (or non-Jewish) ethnic backgrounds, and they do not feel any sense of obligation to follow kosher dietary rules when it comes to what they eat. In their minds, Jesus already fulfilled all of the ceremonial aspects of the Old Testament law and even declared all foods clean (cf. Mark 7:19; Acts 10).

The "weak," on the other hand, believe that faithfulness to Jesus includes the observance of certain dietary restrictions, especially related to eating meat. Their consciences still feel bound to observe a kosher diet, and they especially want to avoid meat because some of the meat that was sold in Roman meat markets originally came from animals who had been sacrificed to pagan gods. Thus, abstaining from all meat was one way they separated themselves from being complicit in a culture that worshiped

false gods (cf. 1 Cor 8:7). These Christians would have viewed themselves like the Old Testament Prophet Daniel and his friends, who refused to eat meat and drink the wine that the Babylonian Empire put before him, but would only eat vegetables (Dan 1:8–16).

Likewise, the weak prefer to worship on the Jewish day of the Sabbath, Saturday. Sabbath, after all, goes all the way back to the foundations of creation, when God rested on the seventh day and made the seventh day holy (Gen 2:3). Moses even includes Sabbath rest and worship within the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:8–11).

However, the strong began to observe Sunday, not Saturday, as the day set aside for worship and Sabbath rest (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2). Why? Because Sunday is the day Jesus rose from the grave. As Saturday was the day that celebrated God's finished work of creation, Sunday is the day that celebrates God's finished work of redemption.

So, you can see how these tensions would have played out. Imagine you were a Jewish Christian who was one of the founding members of the church in Rome. You are used to worshipping on Saturday and eating kosher meals. But after you return after several years from being kicked out of town, the church seems to have no regard for the actual day of Sabbath and at your first church-wide potluck, someone decides to hand you a big fat bacon cheeseburger (which if you did not know, *if very unkosher*).

This collision of cultural norms caused confrontation and drama.

The weak were tempted to “pass judgment” on the strong (Rom 14:3). They would have viewed the strong as unfaithful Christians who didn't take the words of God seriously. In the mind of the weak, the strong were cultural compromisers who did not value the holy standards laid out in the Old Testament law.

The strong, on the other hand, would have been tempted to “despise” the weak (Rom 14:3). They would have seen the weak as judgmental, legalistic Christians who feel the need for everyone else to be governed by *their* overactive consciences.

Now, it is essential at this point out that Paul is treating this disagreement seriously, but he never once questions the salvation of either group.

So, you might ask, why then does he call one group “weak”? The weak are not weak in terms of their character or willpower. They are weak in their *faith*. They are weak in that they have not yet matured to the point that they can apply the truth of God's justifying work to the practical matters of what to eat and when to worship. But, even though their faith is weak, Paul never doubts its presence. Even a “mustard seed” of faith is more powerful than we could ever imagine (Matt 17:20). For it is not the strength of our faith but the object of our faith that saves us.

So, surprisingly, Paul's goal is *not* to convince the weak that the strong are correct or the strong that the weak are correct. Paul's goal is to convince the Christians of Rome to maintain Christian fellowship with one another *despite* their differences and preferences. His plea is that these fellow believers would not allow secondary issues

divide them to the point that they can no longer walk with Jesus together. His command is that we would refrain from despising or judging our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The church of Rome could have unraveled over something as non-essential and non-eternal as what they ate and when they worshipped. I wonder: what are the non-essential, non-eternal issues that would threaten to divide the body of Christ today? What are the issues over which we are most willing to judge—or even despise—other believers? And how should this passage challenge us to think differently?

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul announces that the wall of hostility that stood between Jew and gentile has been broken down by Christ that we might be reconciled not only to God but to one another (Eph 2:14–16). And when Jews and gentiles united as one in Christ, that mysterious union is display of the manifold wisdom of God to the very principalities and powers of this age (Eph 3:10)!

When the people of God are united where the world is divided, it is an announcement to the spiritual realm of the victory of God in Christ Jesus!

2.) The Judgment of God

Followers of Jesus are to refuse the temptation to cast judgment on fellow followers of Jesus, when it comes to issues that are not of foundational and salvational importance. And the way to refuse that temptation is to reorient our thinking in a God-ward direction instead of being fixated in a man-ward direction on the things that divide us. Simply said, the way to overcome the temptation of judgment of men is to direct our hearts and our minds toward the judgment of God.

Let's go back to the text:

“The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.’ So then each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom 14:6–12).

We live and die before God. God alone is our judge. And God alone is worthy to be our judge. Thus, to pass judgment on a fellow Christian is not just an act of mere pride—it is usurping a prerogative that belongs only to God.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again. And when Christ comes again, he will return in glory as the Son of man, upon the clouds of heaven to judge the living and the dead (cf. Dan 7:13–14). The first chapter of the book of Revelation portrays the glory of Christ in a way that conveys the overwhelming reality of his transcendent power and holiness. John writes,

“Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev 1:12–16).

It is before this Lord that we will one day give an account for how we lived our lives and stewarded the grace he has given to us. Such a God is not to be trifled with. To render judgments over issues of Christian liberty and conscience to the judgment of Christ, then, does not lower our standards for what is right and wrong—it *raises* them.

Likewise, when we walk in judgment against one another, we are essentially saying to this glorious God, “Thanks for saving me the condemnation I deserve because of my sin. Now, please move over, Jesus. I think I can handle this judging this person better than you.”

Those who have been rescued by grace alone should have no place for such arrogance in thinking. As the Protestant reformer John Calvin remarks on this passage, *“As then it would be absurd among men for a criminal, who ought to occupy a humble place in the court, to ascend the tribunal of the judge; so it is absurd for a Christian to take to himself the liberty of judging the conscience of his brother.”*¹

Moreover, this theme of our final judgment also brings us back to what has been one of the most important themes in the book of Romans— *justification*.

Justification is the doctrine that we have been declared righteous through faith in Christ alone. We do not earn righteousness through our good works; we are made righteous through the perfect work of Jesus Christ. Justification means that for those who have faith in Jesus, the verdict of our final judgment has already been rendered because Christ has taken all condemnation for our sin and he has given the gift of his righteousness to all who trust in him.

This passage reminds us that justification is not only crucial in terms of Christian doctrine. Justification is also crucial in terms of Christian living.

¹ John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 501.

For if we do not rest in justification alone, our hearts will try to find justification through other means. And one of the false means of justification is walking in judgment upon others. We create a list of actions and beliefs that we believe makes us righteous and —it could be what we eat, what we drink, how we worship, or how we vote. Then, we compare ourselves to others based on that list. But such a mentality is not justification on faith.

We are not justified through what we eat or what we drink. We are not justified through how we worship or how we vote. We are justified through faith alone in Christ alone. Thus, we must zealously refuse to judge one another ground but Christ, for all other ground is sinking sand.

Conclusion

Christ is the one who has saved us, and Christ is the one and only one who can unite us, despite all the ways that the powers of this world would seek to divide us. This is why Paul is calling the Christians of Rome, as he is calling us as well, to see Christ for who he is the issue of first importance.

I was reminded of this truth recently when Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research released their semi-annual report entitled the State of Theology, which examines the theological beliefs among American adults at large, as well as the theological beliefs of those who identify as Christians.

One of the most haunting findings of the 2022 report is that those who identify as Christians are far more likely to share the same political and cultural beliefs than they share the same beliefs about the nature of Jesus Christ. In fact, when asked to agree or disagree with the statement “*Jesus was a great moral teacher, but he was not God,*” 43% of self-identified evangelicals denied the divinity of Jesus. In light of this data, we must be reminded: our task is not to wage war against our culture. Our task is to testify to the truth of Christ.

Nothing is more central—nothing is more essential—to the Christian faith than the truth of Christ. Yet, tragically, it is all too easy to look away from Christ and focus and prioritize the things that divide us. Now, don’t get me wrong, there are plenty of moral issues outside of Christ that deeply matter. But, for Christians, Christ must be first and foremost.

It’s for this reason that Paul ends this passage of Romans by quoting Isaiah 45:23: “*for it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God’*” (Rom 14:11). This is the same text that Aaron Reyes preached from last Sunday. Isaiah 45 is a vision of the Lord God of Israel revealing himself as the one who will both save and judge the nations. However, when Paul quotes Isaiah 45, he is not just talking about God the Father—he is saying that Isaiah 45 is talking about Jesus.

Paul is beckoning the Christians of Rome to know Jesus is Yahweh! Jesus is the judge!
Jesus is God! Jesus is Lord!

For when we see Jesus for who he truly is, our natural and necessary response will be humility before his glory and humility toward one another. Before the glory of Christ, we will learn to see one another as fellow servants of the Lord and we will find unity under his Lordship.

It is interesting to note that there is only one other place in the New Testament that Paul quotes, and that is in Philippians 2. Just like in Romans 14, Paul is quoting this text as an appeal to unity among Christians who are dividing.

The fact that this issue occurs so often should in itself show us that division and drama among Christians are not in any way unique challenges. The problem of Christian division is not new and neither is the solution to Christian unity. As Paul writes in Philippians 2:

“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:1–11).

Redeemer Christian Church, may we be those who live in humble love toward one another and in holy fear of Christ our redeemer and judge. May we live in light of the day when we will give an account for all lives before our God, and may that thought provoke us unto holiness in our thoughts, words, and actions. But may we also find the peace that comes from trusting and resting in God’s justifying grace that Christ has accomplished for our sake.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) *Read Romans 14:1–12. In this passage, Paul addresses a live pastoral situation causing tension and division within the church of Rome. Based on the text, what is the nature of the conflict happening in Rome?*
- 2.) *What are the current issues over which Christians today are most willing to judge—or even despise—other believers? And how should this passage challenge us to think differently?*
- 3.) *In this passage, Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23, which references the day of our eternal and final judgment. Why is it important to remember our eventual judgment before God when Christians are tempted to judge one another?*
- 4.) *The only other place in the New Testament where Paul references Isaiah 45:23 is Philippians 2:10–11. Read Philippians 2:1–11 in light of Romans 14:1–12. How should a vision of Christ’s glory practically promote unity within the church?*