

In Honor of the Lord Romans 14:3-12

We have been working our way through Romans chapter 14 and talking about how to treat one another when we disagree about issues that are important to us. Our goal is to follow God's will in this area and represent Jesus well so that he is glorified in us and in the church, and we don't always do a great job of that when we disagree with each other. In Romans chapter 14 there are three sets of instructions that Paul gives to people who had strong disagreements - last week we looked at the first set of instructions, this week we are looking at the second.

The verses we're going to look at today focus in on one of the divisive behaviors we briefly looked at last week – passing judgement on people who disagree with you. I want to talk about what it is and how we end up doing it so we can guard against it. Oftentimes I think we do it without even knowing it when we feel strongly about something. Paul could see it happening in the churches he worked with and I can see it happening among Christians in our current situation as well. We have so many issues we're dealing with and people feel passionately about the side of these issues they've landed on and in their zeal, they can go too far.

I have a high school friend who on Facebook has been posting all kinds of comments that make it very clear that he despises our current president. That's fairly normal I guess, no matter who's president. But I noticed one day he took his feelings to the next level and decided to publicly announce that he was considering ending his friendships with anyone who voted for Trump. He couldn't understand how a true Christian could do so, like voting for him was too much of an egregious sin for him to handle and continue to associate with people. I was taken back by how far he went with his personal convictions.

In a similar situation I saw a post on Facebook from someone I don't really know from another state who had the total opposite perspective. This person believed that our President is God's way of intervening in America to bring healing and awakening to our land. This too can be fairly common, but he also took his feelings to the next level and stated: *"Your vote in the upcoming election clearly indicates before God himself whether you side with his agenda, or that of the enemy... it's a key demonstration of where you choose to stand spiritually... God is watching who you will choose, him or the devil."*

I'm hoping that as you hear these examples, there's something about them that's troubling to you about both of them – no matter where you're at politically. There's something about them that goes too far, that veers off course and is no longer representing Jesus. Both of these people obviously have very strong personal convictions about who to vote for in the upcoming election, but rather than keeping it as a personal conviction, they turned it into a new standard of righteousness for every Christian to follow: *"The only way a Christian can be right before God is if they vote for the candidate that I believe they should vote for. Those who don't are wrong and guilty and will incur God's judgment."*

The Bible doesn't tell us which candidate or party to vote for no matter how much you or I may think it does and I know wonderful Christians who land in different places in what they believe God is leading them to do. Who to vote for is a personal conviction, but with some people it's being treated like a clear biblical mandate for all to follow. I've seen a similar attitude when it comes to wearing masks... responding to COVID... responding to the race issues in our nation. And I've seen it on both sides of all these issues. So it doesn't matter what you do, you're condemned by some no matter what. Christians have landed on both sides in their own personal convictions, but rather than leaving it at that, many have turned personal convictions into new moral standards for everyone else to follow: "If you agree with me you are right and innocent before God. But if you disagree, you are wrong and guilty before God."

This kind of attitude is very destructive in a church family and in today's passage we're going to see what Paul thinks of it and what he would instruct us to do instead. As I think about our situation, we might not find ourselves as extreme as the examples I shared, but it can be really easy to have a similar underlying attitude toward people who disagree with us, and it's something we really need to guard against and put to death. Paul will help us do that today.

Read Romans 14:3-4

³Let 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. ⁴Who 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.

As we've looked at in previous weeks, some of the people Paul was writing to had the strong personal conviction that they were not supposed to eat meat, and here

in verse 3 we can see one of the major problems in the church is that they were passing judgment on those who were eating meat. As I looked into what it meant to pass judgment it became clear that it meant they were determining that the people eating meat were guilty before God. They believed they were doing something wrong and sinful. They had a strong personal conviction – and that conviction was fine for them to have – the problem was they were turning it into a biblical standard of righteousness for everyone else in the church to follow, and then passing judgment on those who didn't.

Paul confronts them about doing that because God has actually done the opposite – God has welcomed the person who eats meat. God has welcomed them – that means they have been reconciled to him through faith in Jesus and it didn't have anything to do with eating or not eating meat. Salvation was freely given to them because of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Therefore, eating meat had no effect on their righteous standing before God. God had welcomed them, so Paul tells them to not pass judgement on those who ate meat. They're not guilty; God has welcomed them and they're free to eat.

Personal convictions are a good thing, we'll see that in verse 5 – each person should be fully convinced in their own mind – but when something isn't clearly or consistently taught in Scripture, we can't turn our personal convictions into new biblical standards for righteousness. We can't condemn people as being wrong and guilty before God when they don't land on the same side as us. And it's really easy to think that way when we feel strongly about something. If you believe that you shouldn't eat meat, that's fine – don't eat meat, but don't pass judgment on those who do. Don't turn your convictions into a new standard for righteousness.

Shouldn't we have that same attitude when it comes to who we decide to vote for? How about whether or not we should wear a mask? Can we feel strongly about the issue without passing judgment on those who disagree? How about what we think about racial issues in America? I have seen people turning their personal convictions into biblical requirements in these things and then passing judgement on those who disagree with them, and it's so damaging to relationships and the church. It's fine to have strong convictions about these things, and it's fine to share those with others and even debate your perspectives, but it's not ok to condemn those who disagree.

Paul further confronts this behavior in verse 4 by asking them, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?" They don't answer to you, they

answer to God and it is before God that they stand or fall. He explains this in the following verses by bringing up another divisive issue in their situation...

Read Romans 14:5-9.

⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸ 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. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

When we pass judgment on fellow believers for not agreeing with our convictions, we are putting ourselves in a position that only belongs to Jesus. Notice how many times Paul refers to Jesus as Lord in these verses... 7 times! I think Paul is trying to make a point. Jesus is Lord. And when it comes to personal convictions, he is the one that we answer to – all of us. And that doesn't always mean we're going to agree. Each of us answers to Jesus, and for that reason it's not our place to turn our personal convictions into biblical standards and pass judgment on those who disagree with us.

Instead, what Paul calls all of us to do in these verses is to be fully convinced in our own minds that whatever we do, we do it in honor of the Lord. He says in verse 6 if you observe one day as better than the rest, do it in honor of the Lord. If you eat meat, do it in honor of the Lord. If you abstain, do it and honor the Lord. Paul was fine if they landed in opposite places as long as they did what they were doing in honor of the Lord.

The same thing applies in all of the issues we face. If you decide to vote for Trump, be fully convinced that you're doing it in honor of the Lord. If you don't, be fully convinced that what you're doing is in honor of the Lord. If you wear a mask in certain situations, do it in honor of the Lord. If you choose not to, do it in honor of the Lord. When it comes to how you respond to the pandemic and the racial issues that are tearing our nation apart, whatever you decide, do so in honor of the Lord. In each of these decisions you face, ask yourself: "What will honor the Lord most in this situation?"

He points out in verses 7-9 that Jesus died to be the Lord of both the living and the dead. None of us lives to themselves or dies to themselves. As we live, we live to the Lord and as we die, we die to the Lord. We belong to him and in these choices that come before us, we must bring them to him and seek to proceed in a way that honors him. That's the standard God has given us all to live by.

And if we have that attitude toward ourselves and our brothers and sisters in Christ, it opens the way for there to be harmony in our relationships, even when we disagree with one another. We may not agree with what others decide to do, but we're entrusting them to the Lord. We're not despising and passing judgment on one another for our differences, we're welcoming one another and encouraging one another to follow Jesus our Lord. Let him be responsible for the choices people make in these disputable matters because he is, and that's how Paul finishes this section.

Read Romans 14:10-12.

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; ¹¹ for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." ¹² So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

God is the one who sits in the judgment seat. Not us. It is before him that we stand or fall and each of us will give an account to God. Therefore we need to stop passing judgment on one another and despising one another. Instead, we need to examine our own hearts and decisions to be fully convinced that what we do is in honor of the Lord.

What kind of messages are you posting on Facebook about your personal convictions? How are you communicating with people? Are you leaving room for them to make their own decisions before the Lord without condemning them? What is your attitude toward the people who have disagreed with you about these important issues? Is there despising or passing judgment in your heart? Have your personal convictions become new biblical standards for everyone else to have to follow?

Let's avoid these attitudes and behaviors and practice graciousness instead.