

Romans 14:1-12

^{14:1} Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. ² One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. ¹¹ It is written:

“As surely as I live,’ says the Lord,
‘every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.’”

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

As I prepared to consider how the scripture intersects with our lives today, I was transported back to college when I was in business school. I had a marketing professor named Ray Haas and he taught me explicitly a great deal about marketing. He was an excellent professor, but it was oftentimes his more subtle and persistent ways of interacting with us that really made an impression on me. One of the things he did in the very first lecture, after speaking for about 20 minutes, was to turn to one of the students and he asked this question: “Student, was that a good thought?”

The student was caught off guard, sort of stuck with the dilemma that a student faces when a professor asks an opinion. Do I agree with the professor and somehow curry favor, or do I disagree with the professor, stand up for myself, and maybe set a bit of space between me and my “A” that I'm aspiring to receive?

The student stumbled and stumbled and, finally, very hesitantly said, “Yes?”

He said “Wrong!” and the student melted in a puddle. He said, “From now until the end of this course, if anyone ever asks you a question; to evaluate an idea, or a thought, a process, a conviction, your first answer shall *not* be ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Instead: ‘What are your criteria?’”

What he meant by that was if somebody asks you “Is this a good idea, is this a an important thought, is this something we should be focused on?”, our first answer should not simply try to engage the question. But try to get behind the question to say “What's important to this person? What are the values that they are trying to understand and clarify by asking me this question?” So instead of saying “Yes” or “No,” simply ask, “What are your criteria?”, and then that takes the conversation a very different direction, doesn't it?

He had a habit every time we would talk: if you gave an answer that pleased him in some way, he would say, “Thank you. That made my day!” Now, throughout the lectures throughout the semester, he would ask these questions over and over again. And I with all the other students really struggled to remember to stop and think and say, “No, what are your criteria?”

Until one day, in middle of a course, one young lady finally remembered. And he said, “Student, was this an important thought in this lecture?” and she said, “Well, what are your criteria?” He threw his arms in the air, he smiled ear to ear and said, “You made my day!” Because, finally, someone started to understand that when we look at our lives, when we look at our ideas, when we look at our world, it is through a very specific lens. It takes a certain amount of humility and courage to step out of our own mindset and to step out of our own framework into someone else's mind or someone else's heart and see the world through someone else's eyes.

So to ask that question over and over again, I think, points us in some ways to what the Apostle Paul is talking about today. The Apostle is talking about the self-righteousness that tends to come from us when we look at our convictions as the last and final word of right or wrong. That that self-righteousness is something that we should monitor. It's something that we should keep in check.

We've heard often enough that two wrongs don't make a right and ethically that makes complete sense. Biblically, we stand on a solid foundation when we say, “Yes, two wrongs don't make a right.” “Don't repay evil for evil.” Paul even writes about that in his letter to the Romans (Rom. 12:17).

But, sometimes, we also seem to think that a jumbled-up version of that is true. Where there are two folks who believe they hold the right, one of them has to be wrong. So, then we come to the conclusion that we have to winnow out who's right and who's wrong – and the deck is always stacked in our favor, isn't it? Because what makes something right, as often as not, is because I already believe it and I've already accepted that.

So Paul is speaking to a church today emphasizing – again – the importance of Christian unity within a fellowship that holds diverse convictions, diverse perspectives, differing histories and

backgrounds and sources of faith formation. It must, in a world that is pulling them apart with subtle and explicit forces, find a way to hold together in the midst of that diversity.

Sometimes, when we look at verse 1, we focus on the second half of that. In the NIV, it's translated as "without quarreling over disputable matters." It's just four little words in Greek, but it's a lot of thinking. It's a complicated thought and so the different translations actually talk about it differently.

- "Accept the one who is weak without quarreling over disputable matters." That's how the NIV translates it.
- The King James says, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations."
- The NRSV says, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions."
- *The Message* says this: "Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. Don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with – even when it seems that they are strong opinions but weak in the faith department."

Though we like to move to the back and try and figure out what's worth arguing about - maybe you've already gone there yourself - I want to remind you that the imperative of that verse, the imperative of that sentence is found at the beginning: a word that's translated "accept," "receive" and "welcome" It's the same Greek word that Paul uses one chapter later in chapter 15, verse 7, when he writes, "Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

Accept. Welcome. Receive. The standard of our welcome is not what we think someone might deserve, but instead what we ourselves have encountered by accepting that relationship God offers in Jesus Christ. In welcoming our sister and brother, as different as he or she might be, we honor God.

So, in the church in Rome, there were some who would not eat meat and others who said, "We're free to eat whatever God has offered." There were some who thought there needed to be the rigorous keeping of a sacred day (presumably for the Sabbath) and others who would say, "No, every day is a gift of God and we should live it to the glory of God."

And Paul says, "Welcome one another in the midst of those convictions." But instead of falling into a world where everything is lawful, everything should be accepted willy-nilly, the Apostle lays new guidelines guardrails for us to evaluate our conversations. The criteria that the Apostle lays out for us are found:

1. In verses 1-4. Christians are members of God's household. It's improper to disrespect or reject a common member of that household. They are accountable to the master, not to another servant.

2. In verses 5-9, he reminds us that even though Christians' practice will differ in response to the grace that's offered them, what matters most is the examination of the common root: that they seek to honor God. Is this person earnestly trying to honor God with their words and their actions and living out their convictions?
3. Then, lastly, in verses 10–12, to reject one another supplants, that is – undermines and removes – God as our final judge

Three new guardrails, three criteria by which we can examine *ourselves* and the relationships we share with our neighbor. We live in complicated times, don't we?

What we eat, what we wear, what appliances we buy, where we travel, how we're going to spend our money, how we're going to spend our time, what kind of company we keep, who were going to vote for, what we're going to put out there on the Internet, how we're going to respond as households and as a church to the pandemic – all of it has invited differentiation, has showed us the differences in conviction that we share.

But instead of using this in some way to clobber our sister and our brother, the Apostle reminds us today that our first step is to ask *ourselves*:

- Do my words and my actions in relationship to them reflect my very best understanding of how God has welcomed me, from Scriptural perspective and from my own personal experience?
- Do my words, do my actions, do they flow from a desire to honor and love God with all my heart, my soul, my strength and my mind?
- Do my words, do and my actions, set me up as judge jury or executioner of another believer's relationship to God and do I step into God's place?

In the end, you are the one who has to make that call, as the Spirit leads you and gives you insight.

Now, is this good counsel?

What are your criteria?