

Romans 14:1-12

“Don’t Vex the Vegans!”

Most of us love to see a good food fight – like on the movie *Animal House*, or TV’s *America’s Funniest Videos*. However, some food fights aren’t so funny.

In another recent “food fight,” naked protesters lied down on city streets on styrofoam trays covered with cellophane. They were members of PETA – People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. By mimicking meat packages, they were demonstrating that all animals – including humans – are made of flesh, blood and bone. Their message: Meat is murder.

On the other hand, I know someone who has a bumper sticker on their car with the message: “I love animals. They’re delicious.” Another bumper sticker I have seen asks, “If God didn’t want us to eat animals, why did He make them out of meat?”

It’s the age-old battle of Vegans versus Carnivores, and that battle can sometimes get pretty bloody. But food fights are nothing new. The Apostle Paul stepped into the middle of one, as he was writing his letter to the Romans. However, in this case, the issue was not about the ethics of killing animals, nor did it focus on the health value of a low-fat vegan diet.

Instead, the fight was about judging people. The battle lines are drawn when Paul writes, “One person believes it’s all right to eat anything. But another believer, with a sensitive conscience, will eat only vegetables.” (v. 2) Those were fighting words in the first century, and they remain so today.

Imagine an announcement being made in worship before the beginning of a covered-dish dinner: “When you enter the Fellowship Hall, those who are strong in faith will put their meat and potato dishes to the left, while those who are weak in faith will put their vegetarian dishes to the right.” Food would probably fly, right?!

So, what is Paul really talking about here? Paul isn't really taking a stand on whether or not a person should eat meat. Sure, he would no doubt consider himself to be strong in faith, and able to eat anything. His personal conviction is that there are no food restrictions in the kingdom of God.

But his point to the Romans is that meat-eaters should withhold judgment toward those who are vegetarians, and vegans should welcome carnivores. Paul says, “Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them.”

In other words, Paul says, “Don't vex the vegans!” and “Don't criticize the carnivores!” But why not? We live in a world in which people vex each other all the time. Red state, blue state. Pro-guns, no guns. Liberals, conservatives. Democrats, Republicans. Fox News, MSNBC. Red Sox, Yankees. Our polarized nation is full of groups constantly criticizing each other.

Into a similarly divided Roman church, Paul writes, “Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong.” (v. 1) Focus on welcoming, instead of judging. Put your energy into connecting, instead of quarreling.

And why should you do this? *Because God has done it, that's why.* “For God has accepted them,” it says in v. 3 – that's why!

So how, exactly, do we live in a community of faith with those who are different from ourselves, even those we consider to be “weak in faith?” For starters, *we make a conscious decision to let Jesus be the judge.* “Who are you to condemn someone else’s servants?” Paul asks. (v. 4)

In the first century, servants were judged by their own lords and masters, not by other servants. In the same way, a vegan Christian is judged by the Lord Jesus, just as a carnivorous Christian is going to be “assessed” by Jesus. It is not up to meat-eaters to judge vegetable-eaters, or vice versa. “Don’t judge,” insists Paul. “Let Jesus take care of passing judgment.”

Honestly, this is so hard for us to do, because we love to push back when someone hits us with a political opinion that we find objectionable. We have a hard time holding our tongue when a fellow Christian makes a claim that seems so wrong to us ... theologically, biblically, ethically or spiritually.

But remember Paul says, “They are responsible to the Lord, so let the Lord judge whether they are right or wrong. And with the Lord’s help, they will do what is right and will receive his approval.” (v. 4)

Paul is not saying that every servant of Christ is going to be perfect in word and deed, but he is predicting that they will be upheld in the resurrection by the power of their relationship with Jesus, their Lord. “For we don’t live for ourselves or die for ourselves. Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.” (vv. 7-8)

Vegan. Carnivore. Red State. Blue State. Pro-gun. Anti-gun. Whether we vote Democratic or Republican, we are not our own, we are the Lord’s. So, don’t judge. Just don’t.

Now, let me make a clarification here. I am not saying that Christians should not have opinions, or be reluctant to express those opinions. When Christians encounter those in the faith of a divergent point of view, we must be very careful before we characterize them as “immature” in their faith, or even “outside” the family of God. We can hold the opinion that they are wrong; but we should *not* hold the opinion that they are faithless, godless, backsliding followers of Jesus!

Instead, we are challenged to accept that God wants there to be *a certain amount of diversity within the community of faith*. In fact, the overarching narrative of the Bible is a story of ever-increasing inclusiveness, beginning with the marriage of Boaz, and Israelite to a Moabite woman named Ruth – a foreigner who ends up being the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 1-4).

It continues with God’s call for cultural barriers to fall, and for people of all nationalities to be part of “a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Isaiah 56) This movement only accelerates when Jesus begins his loving and gracious ministry to tax collectors and sinners, and when Paul takes the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul encourages this diversity when he writes “Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord, and give thanks to God.” (v. 6)

Here, Paul acknowledges that a diversity of perspectives and practices can be embraced by the Christian faith, as long as everything brings honor to Jesus Christ.

The old-time preacher, Donald Grey Barnhouse, tells the story of three men cast into the ocean by a plane crash. No one knows their plane has gone down. There they are, treading water, hundreds of miles from land.

One of the crash victims is a very poor swimmer. Another is a fairly good swimmer. The third is an Olympic gold-medalist. The gold-medalist may well judge his two companions to be less-than-perfect swimmers. He may even deign to give them a few pointers on stroke and breathing, before setting off on his impossible journey toward land.

What does it matter? The poor swimmer will drown in 20 minutes; the average swimmer in two hours or so; and the Olympian in 15. All of them, left to their own devices in that vast ocean, are bound to die.

So, what these men really need – all three of them – is not a swimming coach. They need a Savior. They need a helicopter, or ship to come by and pluck them from the waves. If all of us – as the Scriptures affirm – are sinners in need of a Savior, then what sense does it make to judge others?

Paul says, *think about how your own acts of judgment will look on the Day of Judgment.* Then Paul asks, “Why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on a brother or sister in Christ? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”

For the Scriptures say, “As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess and give praise to God.” “Yes,” Paul says, “Each of us will give a personal account to God. So, reflect on how your own acts of judging and despising others will look when you receive your final judgment.”

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and

you will be forgiven.” (6:37) Jesus is telling us that we will receive exactly what we offer others in terms of judgment and condemnation.

The way to prepare for the Day of Judgment is to treat others exactly as you would like to be treated, replacing condemnation with forgiveness, compassion and love.

All of our words and actions should be done “in honor of the Lord,” and should strengthen our relationship with Christ. In the end, our goal is to build a community that fits the vision of the book of Revelation, in which there is:

“A vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They are clothed in white robes and they are shouting with a mighty shout, “Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb!” (7:9)

When we stand before *that Lamb of God*, who takes away the sins of the world, we won't be thinking about whether or not we eat lamb chops. We will simply be thankful that we belong to Jesus, the Lamb of God. May God bless you all, Amen.

Sermon Notes

Romans 14:1-2

“Don’t Vex the Vegans!”

- Romans 14 highlights the age-old battle of Vegans versus carnivores. However, in this case, the issue was not about the ethics of killing animals, nor did it focus on the health value of a low-fat vegan diet. Instead, the fight was about judging people.
- Into a divided Roman church, Paul writes, “Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don’t argue with them about what they think is right or wrong.” (v. 1) Focus on welcoming, instead of judging. Put your energy into connecting, instead of quarreling.
- And why should you do this? *Because God has done it, that's why.* “For God has accepted them,” it says in v. 3 – that’s why!
- How do we live in a community of faith with those who are different from ourselves, even those we consider to be “weak in faith?” For starters, *we make a conscious decision to let Jesus be the judge.*
- Paul says, “They are responsible to the Lord, so let him judge whether they are right or wrong. And with the Lord’s help, they will do what is right and will receive his approval.” (v. 4)
- We are challenged to accept that God wants there to be *a certain amount of diversity within the community of faith.* Paul acknowledges that a diversity of perspectives and practices can be embraced by the Christian faith, as long as everything brings honor to Jesus Christ.

- Paul says, *think about how your own acts of judgment will look on the Day of Judgment.* The way to prepare for the Day of Judgment is to treat others exactly as you would like to be treated, replacing condemnation with forgiveness. All of our words and actions should be done “in honor of the Lord,” and should strengthen our relationship with Christ.

May God bless you!

Romans 14:1-2

“Don’t Vex the Vegans!”

The Danger of Criticism

1 Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don’t argue with them about what they think is right or wrong.

2 For instance, one person believes it’s all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables.

3 Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don’t. And those who don’t eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them.

4 Who are you to condemn someone else’s servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let him judge whether they are right or wrong. And with the Lord’s help, they will do what is right and will receive his approval.

5 In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable.

6 Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God.

7 For we don’t live for ourselves or die for ourselves. 8 If we live, it’s to honor the Lord. And if we die, it’s to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

9 Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead.

10 So why do you condemn another believer*? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

11 For the Scriptures say, “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess and give praise to God.*’” 12 Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God.

Call to Confession

Let us come before God with contrite and open hearts, striving to be honest in admitting our shortcomings and open to receiving forgiveness so that we might let go and move on.

Confession

God of us all, we come before you with hearts that are heavy-laden.

We regret that we often give lip service to what we believe, speaking of our beliefs only when it is convenient and non-threatening.

We admit that though we profess tolerance, we do nothing to enhance the lives of those whom others simply do not tolerate.

We profess to being open-minded and fair, yet how quickly we interrupt and take sides before we have even heard both sides of an argument or issue.

We pride ourselves on church attendance and yet refuse to be the church in our daily lives.

We say we are willing to try new ways of worship and yet how quickly we complain that things are not like they used to be.

We quickly volunteer to help with a church project but withdraw our commitment when something better comes along.

We stand for tolerance and then sit down when we are asked to help at a homeless shelter.

We gladly welcome those who are different to our worship and then visit with friends during fellowship hour.

We come before you and confess those things that weigh heavily on our hearts and minds, gracious God; and wonder how you can tolerate us.

Words of Assurance

Hear this good news: Christ came that we might have new life in him. When we honestly confess our sins, they are a burden to us no longer. In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Hymns

Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee

In Christ There Is No East or West

Let Us Now Depart in Thy Peace