



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Live to the Lord Romans 14:1-12

Fr. William Klock

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Most of us know a vegetarian or two. It's become a common thing in our culture. There are different reasons someone might become a vegetarian. I know one person who has trouble digesting meat protein. I know a number of people who point out that livestock production has a very large carbon footprint. They don't believe eating meat is environmentally sustainable. But usually the argument is that eating animals is unethical in itself. One friend says that she won't eat anything with a face. Another says he won't eat anything with a mother. We've all seen the slogan, "Meat is murder". Ancient people would have found that sort of thing very strange. This is the sort of attitude that arises amongst people who have become distant from their source of food. Up until the last couple of generations no one would have thought it was cruel or unethical to eat meat and they slaughtered their cows or pigs or sheep the same way other people would pick an apple or cut a squash. But that doesn't mean there weren't vegetarians in the ancient world. Now, the issue for those people wasn't meat itself. They were perfectly fine with the idea of eating meat. The problem for them was getting the right kind of meat. Was it from a ritually clean animal? (Pork was the chicken of the Greco-Roman world.) Had the animal been slaughtered in the right way? And, once it was slaughtered, had it been cooked in the right way? These were all things of concern to Jews, for example, and if you were a Jew and lived in Rome, you might just become a vegetarian to make things simpler.

This is the background we need as we read Romans 14. Now, Paul doesn't specifically name Jews or any other ethnicity at this point. If he'd done that, some people probably would have just tuned him out. He'll name the specific people and groups later. For now he talks in general terms. He's been talking about love, first how Christian love each other and then how our love spills out to the world. Now he brings us back into the Church and talks about how we deal with our differences. This is what love looks like acted out amongst brothers and sisters in Jesus, but Paul's biggest concern and biggest reason for saying all of this is that Jesus is Lord. That's the gospel message we proclaim and how we deal with each other witnesses it. With that in mind, let's look at 14:1-3.

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.

Brothers and Sisters, don't shun those who are weak in faith. Paul assumes that most of the people he's writing to are "strong in faith". But they didn't become strong overnight. The same goes for us. Neither you nor I became strong in faith overnight. And it should go without saying that you and I may not actually be the giants of faith we sometimes think we are. We all need to be discipling each other into stronger faith. So welcome those who are weak and don't drag them into fights and arguments over issues that aren't essential to the faith.

Now, what does that mean? This is the hard thing. Some people consider one thing an absolute essential and someone else thinks it's something indifferent to the faith. There are some things that the Bible spells out in black and white. There's no room for

differing opinions on those things. God has already spoken. Sexual ethics fall into that category, for example. Paul tells the Corinthians that they need to excommunicate one of their members because he's in a relationship with his step-mother. There are some things, again, already spelled out in black and white, over which there can be no difference of opinion. Other things aren't always as simple. One of the things Paul has mentioned several times in Romans is the need to work out the implications of our faith and the implications of the cross and how it impacts the way we live. That sort of thing takes time. Some people work it out more quickly than others. Some people may never work it all out. And some people may work it out a little differently. But the key is that whether our faith is weak or strong, we share the same faith in Jesus and we need to welcome each other and lived out the unity we have in Jesus.

In Paul's first example, the strong brother eats meat while the weak brother does not. Paul doesn't use the word "Jew" at this point, but that's the clear implication. In the Greco-Roman world, most meat didn't go from the pasture to the butcher to the consumer. It went from the pasture to the temple. The animals were offered as sacrifices to the gods, butchered in the temples, used in pagan rites, and then sold to the public. To eat meat that hadn't been slaughtered according to Old Testament regulations, that had then been offered to idols, and that was handled by unclean Gentiles—this was completely out of bounds to most serious Jews. In that setting, some would have just chosen to be vegetarians. Just because they became Christians didn't mean those taboos disappeared. First, Christianity wasn't a "new religion" over against Judaism in the way we've often been taught to think of it. Jewish converts, like Paul, didn't stop being Jews. They simply came to understand, as he had, that Jesus was the fulfilment of the faith they already had. But as Paul has already said—one of his central

themes in Romans—justification is by faith, not by works of the law. That was always the case, but it’s really been driven home by Jesus himself. The works of the law—things like circumcision, diet, and sabbath—may have marked out the Jews as Jews, but they were not what marked out the people of God. Faith in Jesus now does that. There’s no reason Jews have to drop these ethnic markers, but there was also no reason they had to keep observing them. The law was good, but it was given at a time when God’s people were a single nation. In Jesus the family has been enlarged and the ethnic markers are no longer relevant.

For people raised with these markers, thought, it was no small thing to drop them. I had a friend who was raised a Seventh Day Adventist. She’d been a Christian for many years, but still gagged involuntarily whenever she saw pork. It was also no small thing to work through the implications of the good news about Jesus as it regarded these ethnic markers. Even the apostles had disagreements about these things. Paul had worked it out—and it doesn’t seem like he did it overnight, but that it took time even for him. Even though Paul counts himself amongst the stronger brothers and sisters, he warns the other: don’t despise your weaker brothers and sisters because they haven’t yet worked this out for themselves. But he also warns the weaker brothers and sisters—and this may be the more difficult—not to judge the stronger. It’s difficult, because the weaker may often see himself as the stronger. To him God had said not to eat unclean meat and from his perspective it looks like these people who consider themselves strong in the faith are disobeying God. This is why it’s helpful that Paul has chosen examples that show us how to determine whether an issue is essential or not and given us some principles to work with.

For Paul, the point when it comes to non-essentials is that both the stronger and the weaker share the same faith in Jesus and, through Jesus, God has welcomed both and united them. There are some issues that undermine the gospel itself. There are points of doctrine that are essential to the faith and others that are not. Differences on those matters will necessarily divide. But if we share the same faith in Jesus, we need to welcome each other without fighting over these things in a way that disrupts the fellowship of the Church. Look at verse 4:

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.

Paul gives us an image of a slave passing judgement on the slave of another. It’s a silly picture. It’s not the slave’s job to pass judgement on someone else’s slave. The same goes for us. We are the Lord’s servants. God will judge or vindicate his people accordingly and when the time is right. When Paul says “make him stand”, that’s a clear reference to the resurrection. God will take care of these matters. The fact is—and history and personal experience bear it out—Christians arguing about what a Christian can or can’t eat or drink are far more destructive to the unity of the Church than Christians simply eating and drinking different things.

Paul gives a second example in verse 5. It’s another thing, like eating, that has to do with the distinction between Jew and Gentile, although Paul doesn’t point that out explicitly at this point.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.

Many Jewish Christians continued to observe the feasts of the Jewish calendar as well as the Sabbath.

Gentiles, as a general rule did not. We know from Acts that Paul observed at least some of these Jewish feasts. It’s also worth noting that he didn’t see this as a matter of indifference when writing to the Galatians. The difference in that case was that in the Galatian churches, certain people were forcing everyone to revert to the Jewish calendar. Paul wrote that they might as well become pagans if that’s what they were going to do. It was one thing for Jewish believers to continue to observe the Sabbath and Jewish holy days, but to force Gentile believers to adopt these Jewish ethnic markers was to undermine the fact that justification is by faith, not works of the law. We see something similar in the way he dealt with circumcision. When he wrote to the Corinthians, circumcision was a matter of indifference, but when he wrote to the Galatians, who were requiring Gentile converts be circumcised and become Jews before becoming Christians, he condemned what they were doing. Again, justification is by faith, not works of the law. There’s nothing wrong with works of the law, but works of the law are not what mark out the Christian.

The problem in Galatians was what some have called the “tyranny of the weaker brethren”. In Rome Paul saw the opposite problem. Those who were strong—or thought they were strong—were looking down on and judging the weaker. The solution, he writes in the second part of verse 5 is that:

Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

What he means by that is spelled out in verse 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.

The key is that whatever we do, we do it with the intent to honour the Lord. Again, this wasn't an issue of sin. You can't sin and honour the Lord through it. This was an issue over something indifferent. The Christians who refused to eat meat that came out of the pagan temples did it because they wanted to honour God. They weren't comfortable eating meat that had been offered to pagan idols. Maybe some Gentile converts had once taken part in the temple meals as they worshiped those gods and they no longer wanted the connection. Some Christians continued to observe the Jewish holy days that they'd grown up observing. They may have been devotional aids, reminding them, for example at Passover, of God's promises and of his faithfulness. That was fine.

Others happily ate meat that had almost certainly passed through a pagan temple, but they honoured the Lord as they gave him thanks for his provision and as they acknowledged that he is the sovereign Lord of all. As much as eating meat from a temple was for one person an unhealthy reminder of a past life spent carousing in temples, it was for another a way to—so to speak—jab a stick in the eye of paganism and affirm that Jesus is truly Lord and that the God of Israel is the one, true God.

I'm reminded of two friends of mine. Both have very non-Christian pasts that they've left far behind them. One won't touch alcohol. It not reminds him of the past he left behind. As far as he's concerned, alcohol is the invention of the devil and Christians should have nothing to do with it. In his rejection of alcohol, he is honouring the Lord. My other friend with a similar background, in contrast, gets together with men from his church on the great feast days of the year and has written drinking songs

that they sing to Jesus to honour his resurrection, his ascension, and his lordship, lifting a glass to the King. They celebrate God for having created fermentable fruit and grain that, as the Psalmist writes, "makes the heart glad". Both of these men honour God and that's what Paul's getting at.

This is what Paul says to *do*. He explains the *reason* behind it in verses 7-9:

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.

Paul grounds his reasoning for all of this in the heart of the gospel—in the affirmation that Jesus is Lord. Jesus the Messiah died on the cross and rose from the grave and in doing that was declared by his Father to be Lord of all. Lord of the living. Lord of the dead. Lord of the Jews. Lord of the Gentiles. Lord of Creation. He lived and he died for us and so we no longer live for ourselves. (How much of the time do we live for ourselves? That's something to think about!) We no longer live for ourselves. We live for him. We die for him. Paul draws on the slave metaphor again and points to the fact that Jesus has bought us by his death and resurrection. We belong to him. But the key point for Paul here is that he is Lord—and not Lord of this or Lord of that, but Lord of *all*. Jesus is Israel's Messiah, but he has reconstituted Israel in himself. He's opened the door to God's family to everyone and redefined what it means to be the people of God. The gospel announcement that the crucified and risen Jesus is Lord of all is a call to unity across all barriers of ethnicity and customs.

In Jesus, God welcomes everyone who believes. The Lord will make each of them to stand. The Lord is the one before whom we live and do everything that we do. That's especially true when we give thanks to God and act to give him honour. The Lord is the one we live or die for. The Lord is the one to whom we belong. And that's because Jesus the Messiah died and rose again to be declared Lord of all. This is the sequence of Paul's argument and it leads into verses 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; 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.

Paul points to two Christians. One is judging the other and the other is despising the one. Here's the weak judging the strong and the strong despising the weak. Paul confronts them in the middle of their argument and points them to the judgement seat of God. Can you imagine arguing over one of these issues while standing in the heavenly court? Think of one of those courtroom reality TV shows where you see two idiots arguing angrily with each other before the judge. It's pointless. It won't solve anything. The whole reason they're in the court to begin with is so that the judge can render a just verdict and solve the problem.

These two Christians bothers are just as foolish, arguing with each other while Jesus looks on from the bench. Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23 to remind them who's in control. The Lord announces, "Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess." Isaiah, in the larger passage there, was pointing to the revealing of God's righteousness

that would take place in and through the Messiah. These squabbling Christians are the ones called to proclaim and to witness that righteousness. In Jesus, we've been assured a favourable verdict on the day of judgement, but that doesn't mean we should take God's judgement any less seriously. Brothers and Sisters, Paul calls us to live as people who know God's judgement is coming. That means proclaiming and living out the implications of the gospel. Part of that living out is not taking it upon ourselves to judge our brothers and sisters ahead of time.

Paul doesn't need to go this far to make his case, but the fact that he refers to Jesus as Lord eleven times in such a short space and then talks about the coming judgement is to make a point that will grow in importance as he goes on. Paul is stressing to the Christian in Rome that they belong to a different kingdom and to a different King. Remember: to declare that Jesus is Lord was also to declare that Caesar was not. To declare that Jesus is Lord is to declare that God's kingdom has been inaugurated and is breaking into the world. It's to proclaim that every other kingdom and every other lord is on its way out. Paul stresses this here because the Roman Christians, which seems to have been divided between Jews and Gentiles, needed the reminder that they were an outpost of the kingdom of Jesus, Creation's true Lord. Caesar forced unity on different people's and cultures with the sword and because of that he claimed to be lord and peace-bringer and even divine. But Paul knew the powerful witness of the Church to the true unity and peace brought by Jesus through his death and resurrection. These Jewish and Gentile believers were living right under Caesar's nose. Their unity was about more than maintaining peace in the Church. Their unity was a witness to the lordship of Jesus. Christians who align themselves with or divide themselves over lines of ethnicity or

culture or language are not living in the kingdom God; they're living in Caesar's kingdom. Bp. Wright puts it this way, "[A] church that all too obviously embodied the social, ethnic, cultural, and political divisions of its surrounding world is no real challenge to the Caesars of this world. It is only when representatives of many nations worship the world's true Lord in unity that Caesar might get the hint that there is after all 'another king'. To settle for comfortable disunity because that way we can 'be ourselves' and keep things the way we have always known them is to court disloyalty to the one Lord and failure in the church's mission to challenge the gospel of Caesar with the gospel of Jesus Christ."¹

Think about that, Brothers and Sisters. Our unity in Jesus, a unity that holds us together despite our disagreements and despite our difference, whether they be ethnic, cultural, social, or economic, makes the church a witness to the good news that the crucified and risen Jesus is not just our personal Saviour, but also the true Lord of all. It's not a unity we create. That's a mistake that Christians have often been guilty of making. Our unity is forged by Jesus. He is the source. We're simply called to live in that unity. As we do so—in the local church, as the church in our country, and as the global church spread across the world—we witness the renewing and redemptive grace of Jesus and his cross and the sovereignty of Creation's true Lord.

Let us pray: Our Father, you've forgiven us and made us new through the work of Jesus and the Spirit, but we admit that we can still be cantankerous and disagreeable. You have made us one in Jesus, but we often undermine that unity with disagreements over non-essentials. Give us wisdom to know what things should rightly divide us and what

things should not. Remind us always that Jesus is Lord, that he unites us, and that he will judge when the time is right. You have made us one. Keep us one, we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ *Romans* NIB (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), page 750.