

## **We Live to the Lord**

### **Romans 14:1-12**

Maybe you have heard the story of the stranger who came into a small town one day and stood in the center of the town square. He had on a very strange coat. It was black, and sewn onto it were patches of cloth of all sizes, shapes, and colors. As word spread of this strange visitor, the townspeople gathered around in curious silence. Finally a brave soul dared to ask about the significance of the unique coat.

The stranger immediately began to point to different patches and explained that they represented the sins of different people of the town. Embarrassed, some people left the square. Indignant, others shook their head in denial of the accusations. After explaining every patch and denouncing every sin, the man turned around and headed out of town. On his back was a dark patch of cloth that covered almost his entire back. The townspeople wondered out loud what, and whose, sin that patch represented. Suddenly a voice rang out loud and clear; "That represents his own sin, for he is willing to point out the shortcomings of others and yet fails to see his own."

The Gospel of Matthew puts it this way: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matt. 7:3 NIV). Scripture warns us about being quick to judge others in light of our own opinions and ways. As believers we are called to live in community. Paul insists we receive into the community those who may be weak in the faith, and those who see things in different manners.

**Gilberto Collazo**

Romans is the only one of Paul's undisputed letters that he did not write to a church he had founded and knew well. He wrote the letter to introduce himself to the Roman Christians and to establish his authority as an apostle. In brief, Paul declares that the one God redeems all of humankind through the one man Jesus Christ and that we have access to that redemption—not through our practices, but through faith. In our scripture Paul focus on the issues: how are vegetarians to relate to meat eaters when the Roman congregations gather for communal meals?

Earlier in the letter Paul had wrestled with the relationship of Israel to the Gentiles in God's great work of salvation and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the church. Why is he talking about food? One modern rabbi suspects that Jewish dietary practices are at play. When he goes to a restaurant, he says that his best option for eating kosher is to choose a vegetarian menu, where issues of proper practice are less likely to arise.

Whatever the exact details behind the dispute, it is clear that some believers in Rome refuse to eat meat and other believers carve away quite happily. We often think that strong Christians are those who follow the clearest set of rules for right behavior. For Paul, the "strong" Christians are those who are less obviously scrupulous, and the "weak" Christians follow a longer list of rules. For Paul what seems to make a strong believer is a trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ that does not depend on particular practices.

If you trust in God's grace, you are free to buy a roast on Sunday, cook it, and eat it enthusiastically. What you are *not* free to do is lord it over your fellow believers whose practices are different from your own. The strong are to welcome the weak, and the weak are to welcome the strong, because God has welcomed them all (v. 3). The fundamental reason that believers

cannot lord it over each other is that there is one Lord—and to that Lord, and that Lord alone, weak and strong alike owe allegiance.

Those who eat meat and those who abstain from meat alike give thanks and blessing to God when they eat or when they abstain. "Strong" Christians and "weak" Christians alike will be judged by God in the final judgment. Since it is God who judges, who are mere mortals to judge one another? Both vegetarians and meat eaters—both weak Christians and strong—are God's own possession, ransomed, redeemed, and claimed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

If Christ is Lord of both the dead and the living, if in his death and resurrection he has broken down the barrier between those who live and those who die, then surely he can do what is easier—he can be Lord of both the weak and the strong, those who abstain and those who indulge. "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.... For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living" (vv. 8, 9). Vegetarians and carnivores, Jews and Gentiles, the living and the dead are all subject to the lordship of Christ. **David L. Bartlett**

We have controversies about which we too are so passionate that we cannot honestly avoid portraying our opponents as confused in faith, issues considered so significant that they sometimes serve as a basis for rejecting fellowship: homosexuality, abortion, evolution, creation-ism, ordination of women, universalism, authority of Scripture, the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Whatever your side, if you see any controversy dividing today's church as a basis for exclusion of fellowship, Paul is speaking to you.

Paul is not suggesting that we should stop advocating for our respective views. Paul's concern and passion here is the *spirit* of Christians who are arguing, not of their position on the issue. Our spirit for and toward those

with whom we bitterly disagree is Paul's focus. Unfortunately we don't know how to have a good fight. Not only is it increasingly common to see people hating both what they consider as sin and the person they consider a sinner; it has become all too common for us to regard people as personifications of some particular sin or evil.

Once we stop seeing another person as a child of God and view him or her instead as the personification of a sin, it becomes easy to enjoy our self-righteous opposition. We can become so self-righteous that we care nothing for the feelings of the child of God with which we disagree. We might think we are losing ourselves for Christ's sake, but instead from this "spiritual" posture, right actions are not righteous, defense of Christian ideals is not Christian, and attempts to build up the *koinōnia* are not labors of love. Paul says: "whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (v. 8). We are family because we are each a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ and God's transforming grace.

Paul never forgot that. If that grace had not been extended to him, a powerful enemy of God, he would still and ever be Saul, persecutor of the innocent, watching the coats while stones break Stephen. Certainly Saul was wrong. Certainly Saul was an enemy of God, an unrighteous oppressor. Certainly one would argue vigorously with and oppose Saul. However, even in this extreme case, God (and presumably Stephen, whose face shone like an angel's) loved Saul, loved Saul with the love that loves enemies. **William Greenway**

As additional people come into our church bringing with them other experiences, rituals and traditions, songs and practices, how do we react? Do we act strong and try to impose our ways on them? Do we embrace the beauty of diversity and look forward to the new experiences that might bring

new joy to our lives as we live as a community of faith? God calls us to live as a community that embraces all and sees all as equal, so that together our knees will bow before God. In life and in death we belong to God. **Gilberto Collazo**

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