

Sermon Title: Don't Pass Judgment (Part 2)

Biblical Text: Romans 14:5-12

Teaching Series: Justified by Love

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Romans 14:5-12

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. 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. 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. 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.

The Bible is explicit about many things.

But it's not explicit about everything.

The Bible is unwavering about many truths.

But it also teaches freedom.

The Bible speaks about some things all the time.

But it talks about other things once or twice or not at all.

The Bible is written *to* particular people at particular times.

But it's written *for* all peoples at all times.

This creates a lot of gray areas. These tensions open up space for interpretation. And so, in the space between foundational teachings and secondary liberties, Christians have a lot of decisions to make about matters of conscience. In Rome, while they were learning to agree about the core composition of the gospel, they were also having a hard time loving each other amidst disagreement. And Paul encourages them to not "*quarrel over opinions*" (14:1). That's our situation too. *Isn't it?* While most of Christians (including those in this fellowship) would agree about the nature of the gospel—that Jesus lived, died, was buried, rose, and ascended—we have many different opinions or interpretations about secondary issues.

Paul's encouragement last week was to not "*quarrel over opinions*" but to welcome each other (see Romans 14:1). Despite our differing opinions, we're called to love and resist the urge to despise and judge our brothers and sisters. Today he moves from encouragement to instruction. Specifically he's going to tell us how to form an opinion. Like a thoughtful educator he's doesn't just teach us what Christians think, but also how to think like Christians. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about how we form godly opinions about matters of conscience. On some matters the Bible is black and white. But a lot of spiritual life

is in the gray. *How do we live faithfully in the gray?* I want to talk about morality between the lines. Or what the Scriptures call, *wisdom*.

Here's how we're going to order our time together ...

- Wisdom through *freedom*. (vv.5-6)
- Wisdom through *submission*. (vv.7-9)
- Wisdom through *judgment*. (vv.10-12)

[Prayer]

Movement 1: Wisdom through Freedom (vv.5-6, Isaiah

1:18, Matthew 22:37)

We all live in the gray. We all need to understand morality between the lines. We all need wisdom. While there is freedom to come to different conclusion, Paul outlines a process by which Christians ought to form their opinions. He begins with this freedom in mind. Look what Paul writes in vv.5-6, ***Read Romans 14:5-6 ... 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. 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.*** Notice Paul blends personal perspective and worship. It's a worshipful conviction. This is a paradox, unique from our modern understanding of forming opinions. Usually when we think about personal conviction we think about what we *think* and what we *feel* and what we *want*. We'll get to this more in a minute, but the traditional

view of wisdom is that it comes from outside of us and the modern sense of wisdom is that it comes from within.

But notice a couple things about what Paul is saying ...

- There's a clear sense of autonomy in Paul's instruction. ***One person esteems ... while another esteems ...*** An individual is able to and is even encouraged to think about something differently from someone else in the same church.
- Yet, there's also a clear sense of devotion in what Paul is saying. ***The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord ... the one who abstains, abstains honors the Lord.*** Both individuals with different opinions have made up their minds in a manner that leads both to glory and give thanks to God.

This tells us that Christians are free to think for ourselves.

In the original language that word, *esteem*, means to judge. There's a play on words happening here in Greek. You see, Paul prohibits his readers from judging each other, but he expects them to judge ideas. We're supposed to welcome people. But we're meant to interrogate ideas. Christians, despite our modern reputation, are not supposed to be mindless people. Quite the opposite. Historian Larry Hurtado explained that one of the things that set the early church apart was what he calls their "bookishness." Hurtado says, ***"the ancient practice of reading and discussing scripture texts became so much a regular part of early Christian corporate worship that it led in due course to the creation of manuscripts specifically prepared for liturgical usages"*** (*Destroyer of the gods*, 109). Simple

practices like small groups and using a worship book in our church gatherings, come in the wake of a legacy of Christians who read, wrote things down, and studied God's Word deeply and vigorously. In fact, scholar E. Randolph Richards notes that this would have been very new for many Christians in Rome. Many of them didn't grow up in such a bookish culture. Richards says when they received Paul's letter to Rome they were ***"probably more stunned by the letter's length than by its content"*** (*Paul and First-Century Letter Writing*, 164). Romans is over 7000 words. Over the 14000 or so letters survive from this era the average is about 87 words and even prominent figures peaked at 3000-4000 words. Romans first readers we're not used to such robust 'judgment' or 'esteeming' of ideas. But that's the heritage of our faith.

Christians are supposed to think. God even invites us to do so. In Isaiah's prophesy, God says, ***Read Isaiah 1:18 ... "Come now, let us reason together ..."*** My philosophy professor in seminary quoted this verse probably more than any other. *Let's think. Let's consider. Let's use our minds. Let's reason.* Jesus commands us, ***Read Matthew 22:37 ... "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."*** Christians are supposed to use our brains. In freedom we seek to understand morality between the lines when something is secondary and debatable. The gray areas of life. Yet this often is not our reputation. We're not known as thinkers, *are we?* Professor Mark Noll explains in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, ***"To put it most simply, the evangelical [a modern movement of Christianity] ethos is activist, populist, pragmatic, and utilitarian. It allows little space for broader or deeper intellectual effort because it is dominated by the urgencies of the moment"*** (12). What he's saying is that we care greatly (as we should) about action and influence and impact. However, often our attention to doing neglects thinking. Our attention to

pragmatism neglects wisdom. We often ask *can* we do something (are we able) and rarely ask *should* we do it (is it profitable). Or in the language of our passage, we ask things like, *what do I want? What do I think? What do I feel is right?* Rather, *does this honor God? Can I do this with thankfulness in my heart?*

Christians are free to think for ourselves. That's wisdom through *freedom*. But we're only free to think like Christians. That's wisdom through *submission*. That's where Paul heads next ...

Movement 2: Wisdom through Submission (vv.7-9; 12:1,2, Proverbs 9:10, 1 Corinthians 2:12-13)

If you remember, in Rome the gray areas of life they were facing concerned days and diets. Some in the congregation believed eating meat was wrong and celebrating special days was necessary for moral purity. Others weren't convinced. Some think wisdom is about keeping with tradition. Others think wisdom is about remaining open or keeping up with modern society. But both can be mindless. Rather than being fully convinced in their own minds many in Rome were being guided by this tradition, *the way things have always been.* Others were being convinced by modern progress, *the new and more socially acceptable way.* I wonder if the same tendencies aren't prevalent in us today.

This idea is a continuation of what Paul said back in chapter 12. Turn back to 12:2, ***Read Romans 12:2 ... Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*** *This world* is comprised of old and new ways of thinking; traditional and modern approaches to the life of faith. In chapter

12 and 14 the Apostle is telling us, not that one is bad and one is good, but rather ... *Don't be conformed by either expression of "the world." Instead, be transformed by the renewal of your mind. Be fully convinced in your own mind. Christians are free to think. But we're only free to think like Christians.* It's a submission issues.

Because of freedom there are some traditions that are true and beautiful which Christians must not abandon. But because of that same freedom there are some modern ideas which are also true and beautiful which Christians must be open to adopt. We can't mindlessly go with the flow of the past or the present.

We're meant to think.

We're meant to be renewed.

We're meant to submit.

Are you with me?

Paul carries this tension into chapter 14. Look how he continues in vv.7-9, ***Read Romans 14:7-9 ... 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.*** Christians are free to think. But we're only free to think like Christians. We always think as those who belong to someone else. Paul says in life and death as a way of communicating the sum total of our existence. Our whole lives belong to the Lord. Our pursuit of wisdom in the gray spaces should honor and be formed in thanks to God because we belong to God, because Christ died for us, because Christ rose to new life. ***We are the Lord's.*** That's how we make opinions. Wisdom is about our personal conviction as well as our worship, *convinced in our own*

minds, remembering we belong to the Lord. That means wisdom is about *freedom*, but it's also about *submission*.

We face the same need to seek wisdom in the gray spaces of life like those in Rome. And therefore we face the same pressure to submit or be conformed or mindlessly go with the flow of this world instead of the Lord ...

- For some of us, it's easy to be conformed by tradition rather than renewed in our minds. We're comfortable with an understanding of a past which we believe was much less corrupt and much more rooted in timeless truth, morality, and stability. And so, we submit to the past.
- For others of us, we're more susceptible to be shaped by modern society rather than renewed in our minds. We're drawn to the progress of a modern world that seems increasingly open, inclusive, and loving. And so, we submit to the present.
- Now, this isn't always that clean of course. For many of us, there are some things we're traditional about and in others we're fairly modern. After all, we're reading a two thousand year old letter. But many of us are reading that letter on a device that's connected to a satellite. We submit to both.

What Paul is saying to us then is that real wisdom, the way Christians think ... is not about submitting to the past nor the present, but rather submitting to the Lord. I think what we're being taught is that we should stop looking to people first and foremost to cultivate wisdom. Proverbs teaches us that, ***Read Proverbs 9:10 ...***

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy

One is insight. "Wisdom begins by looking at the Lord. Not at the past. Not at the present. Not at institutions. Not at Twitter. Biblically, wisdom is rooted in knowing God, specifically in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When Paul was writing to the wildly unwise church in the first-century city of Corinth, he was sure to impress upon them this understanding. Their traditionalist and modernist were at odds, just like in Rome ... just like in Chicago. Paul tells them, **Read 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 ... "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual."** The spirit of the world does not shape Christian wisdom. That's foolishness. The Spirit of God imparts wisdom to interpret the world around us.

Before he told us to renew our minds, Paul said, **Read Romans 12:1 ... I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.** You and I are living sacrifices. There's a great paradox. Sacrifices are something put to death in worship. But this sacrifice is living. Our lives are about dying. That's paradox. That's wisdom. Wisdom is often about learning to hold paradox in tension. Richard Rohr speaks about the many paradoxes we learn to embrace in the Christian faith. And without holding these paradoxes in tension we lose the mystery and beauty of our story. Christ is divine and human. Mary is virgin and mother. God is three and one. We find life through death. We are free, to submit. *Are you with me?*

Paul says, *this is why Christ died.* To free us from the bondage of submitting to sinful legalism and sinful lawlessness. To free us from slavery to the wisdom of the past and slavery to the wisdom of the present. But he did not free us to do as we

please, think as we please, and live as we please. We have been freed to please the Lord. We have been freed to submit to him. You see, Christians are free to think for ourselves. But we're only free to think like Christians. And as in the previous passage, the reality which grounds us in this wisdom is neither the past nor the present, but the future. The day we'll stand before the judge.

Christians are free to think for ourselves. That's wisdom through *freedom*. But we're only free to think like Christians. That's wisdom through *submission*. Because one day God will judge our thoughts. That's wisdom through *judgment*. Paul finishes there ...

Movement 3: Wisdom through Judgment (vv.10-12, Proverbs 21:2)

Paul's cautioning his readers not to pass judgment. Particularly that we shouldn't judge because God is judge. And one day God will judge. Keeping this in mind when we consider the gray is foundational to biblical wisdom. *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; 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.*** One of the wisest things you can do when forming an opinion or interpreting Scripture is remember that your thoughts, opinions, and interpretations will be judge. Now for some this creates apathy. *God's going to judge all this one day so it doesn't really matter what we determine about gray areas and secondary issues.* But that's the wrong attitude. Wisdom never leads to apathy. Wisdom always leads us to humility.

And as we considered last week, what God will come to judge is not the accuracy of opinions, but the heart of your opinion. Not, did you think correctly but did you think like a Christian. Paul is not preparing his readers to one day find out if those festivals and abstaining from meat were really all that important. But rather whether or not they actually thought about why they believed what they believed. Rather whether they honored God and thanked him in their particular perspectives. As the proverb explains, *Read Proverbs 21:2 ... Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the heart.* There is great wisdom that comes from knowing that God will judge or weigh our hearts one day. That though we might be convinced and think we've done and thought rightly about something, he will set all things to rights.

This posture promotes unity and love in our church even when our opinions about the gray areas are different. What we think might be different, but how we think is identical. Christians are free to think for ourselves. That's wisdom through *freedom*. But we're only free to think like Christians. That's wisdom through *submission*. Because one day God will judge our thoughts. That's wisdom through *judgment*.

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This creates a lot of gray areas. May we think and submit and love like Christ there.