

Looking Within: Letting Grace freely flow

Romans 14:1-19

Romans 14 sounds a bit like a food fight we often see lived out on bumper stickers. You've probably seen them: PETA (people for the ethical treatment of animals) who promote vegan eating and the responders P.E.T.A (People Eating Tasty Animals). Vegans versus carnivores. The battle can get pretty nasty.

But food fights are nothing new. Paul stepped into the middle of one as he was writing his letter to the Romans. In this case, the issue was not about the ethics of killing animals, nor the health value of a vegan diet.

Instead, the fight was about judging people.

You see, the issue at stake is not really taking a stand on whether a person should eat meat. The point Paul is making to the Romans is that meat-eaters should withhold judgment toward those who are vegetarians, and vegans should welcome carnivores.

To the meat-eaters Paul insists: "Don't vex the vegans!"
And to the vegetable eaters: "Don't criticize the carnivores!"ⁱ

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. Tea Party, coffee party. Democrats, Republicans. Fox News, MSNBC. Cubs. Brewers. Our polarized nation is full of groups constantly criticizing each other.

Into a similarly divided Roman church, Paul writes, "*Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.*" (v. 1). Focus on accepting and 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. Verse 3 says: "*For God has welcomed them*". End of story. So how, exactly, do we live in relationship with those who are different from ourselves, even those we might consider to be "weak in faith"?

For starters, we make a conscious decision to let Jesus be the judge. Paul asks in v. 4, *"Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?"* 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 his 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. "Just don't do it. Let Jesus take care of passing judgment." This is so tough for us, 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.

But remember: *"It is before their own Lord that they stand or fall,"* says Paul. *"And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand"* (v. 4). Paul's not saying that every servant of Christ is going to be perfect in word and deed, but Paul is reminding us of the gospel promise – that through our faith in Jesus Christ, we are saved.

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

Now, this is NOT to say that Christians should not have opinions, and it is certainly not to say that Christians should be reluctant to express those opinions. It IS to say that when Christians encounter those with a divergent point of view, we must be very careful to not think our way is superior or to characterize others as immature in their faith or even godless. A diversity of perspectives and practices can be embraced by the Christian faith, as long as everything brings honor to Jesus Christ.

So, we need to **major in the majors and minor in the minors**. Don't bend on the essentials of the gospel but be open minded on the non-essentials.

For me the major thing is to know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who lived a sinless life and willingly went to the cross to pay the debt of our sin, he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven where he reigns as Lord of all. It is by God's grace that we have been saved through our faith in Jesus and all he has done for us. We are called to follow his example in our lives – an example that shows us loving God and loving others is the way to live.

That is what is key for me. Each of us needs to determine for ourselves what is most important giving your full attention to what God is doing in your life.

Cultural issues shift constantly but the underlying gospel remains. The quality that will build up our relationships – in our families, our church, our community, our world - is Love.

Jesus taught us to “*Love one another as I have loved you.*” (John 15:12)

How can we show love in spite of different opinions? Don't bend on the essentials of the gospel but be open minded on the non-essentials. Determine where you stand, but offer grace to those who may feel differently. Concentrate on things that encourage peace and assist others' growth. Filter whatever you do through a two-fold grid: Is this going to encourage peace? Is this going to hurt and offend or help and strengthen?ⁱⁱ

Instead of vexing vegans, we should focus on welcoming them. Rather than criticizing carnivores, we should show them Christian hospitality. 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 community and relationships. So, “Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” Let our lives be marked by love for Christ and love for each other.

ⁱ Kaylor, Bob. “Don’t Vex the Vegans”

http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040842

ⁱⁱ Swindoll, Charles R. *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through New Eyes*. Insight for Living, 2002.