

Absolutely Right but Still Wrong 2020
Romans 14:1-4, 7-10, 13-15, 19, 15:1-2, 5

Romans 14:1-4, 7-10, 13-15, 19, 15:1-2, 5 (New Revised Standard Version)

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus.

We were gathered for a men's breakfast at the church one time,
and when the food was ready,
our host and chef asked us to stand in a circle for prayer.
So we closed our eyes, we bowed our heads and waited, and we waited.
Finally, after more silence and waiting, I looked up and asked,
"Bob, are we waiting for me to say grace?"

Waiting for someone to say grace. ^{2x}

What an appropriate description of our world and culture...
... waiting and hoping that someone will reflect God's grace,
that someone will show mercy, forbearance and compassion.

And rather than intolerance, hatred or an attempt to crush & destroy,
choose instead to make room for healing, peace & hope, to listen
with an earnest desire to understand toward reconciliation.

To receive grace --- it's a longing that all humanity shares.

If you follow the news these days, much of it is pretty grim & chaotic.
The culture around us has become callused, cold, cruel and harsh,
way too quick to judge and condemn, to separate and attack,
to accuse and assign motives, and very hesitant to forgive,
or to accept that it's ok for someone to see things differently.

But when Jesus Christ called us to be his Church,
and declared that we are his own beloved and precious people,
he also sent the Holy Spirit to guide and equip us
to live-out **a counter-cultural alternative view that is**
by being a people and place of justice, mercy and healing.

That is the chief business, the purpose and mission of the Church,
i.e. to reflect and share with others **the same love and grace,
hope and healing that we ourselves have so freely received.**

But it's not always easy to live up to that Christian ideal,
for even in the New Testament the churches struggled
with conflict, misunderstanding and divisive issues.

If you read through the letters that the Apostle Paul wrote,
all of them were about **how** the power of God's saving grace,
can change how we live and perceive the world around us...
... as those empowered by the Spirit toward peace & reconciliation.

One of the major issues that led to conflict in the early church,
was the question of whether or not Christians should eat meat,
which Paul addresses in both 1st Corinthians and Romans.

In the ancient world, butcher shops & grocery stores did not exist,
and any meat for sale in the marketplace was almost always
meat left over from animal sacrifices at pagan temples.

And for recent gentile converts from the idolatry of paganism,
it felt like that meat had somehow been tainted,
**and eating meat possibly previously sacrificed to pagan gods
seemed like they were still participating in pagan worship.**

But other Christians, with a more informed understanding,
knew that since idols were just inanimate and lifeless objects,
they had no power to change the meat in any way,
and so they felt free to eat whatever they liked...
... seeing it as a sign and proclamation of their Christian freedom.

In truth, an idol depicting a false-pagan god crafted by a human
could do nothing to make the meat "unclean" for a Christian to eat,
and to eat it was in no way deference to a pagan god.

But as Paul explains, vs. 14:14-15,

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.

As Paul writes, it was a matter of personal choice, vs. 2-4

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.

**Paul's point is that there was far more at stake
than just having the right Bible knowledge and theology.**

We can be absolutely right factually and theologically correct,
yet by our actions & treatment of others, **be totally in the wrong.**

Meat offered to idols was a difficult issue for the early Christians,
**and Paul's solution was less emphasis on the issue itself,
and more focus on our unity as Christians through Christ.**

**Paul's perspective was that the issues dividing them
were far less important
than the greater sin of damaging the body of Christ.**

The fellow-believers on both sides of the issue and conflict
were in fact, **all** God's own beloved and precious children,

each one called, healed & saved by grace through Jesus Christ...

...which means, if we are truly living-out God's grace and compassion,
then of course we will extend that same grace and compassion,
especially in our dealings with others of Christ's Body.

His argument is that as Christians, we all belong to God by grace.

So it's not about us or our opinions and preferences.

It's all about God: who God is and what God has done for us.

So Paul explains, cut each other some slack, give it some time,
and most of all don't be a hindrance or an obstacle, vs. 14:13,

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

The Church, the body of Christ, by definition,
consists of those who have received God's Spirit and gracious love,
and who are called to reflect that truth and mercy of the Lord,
by demonstrating the reality and blessing
of the Spirit's presence and power **in our lives.**

So among the questions we must ask ourselves,

**is my focus on God and on building-up the body of Christ?,
and allowing God's grace and forbearance to flow through me?**

When I was in seminary, typically after two years in the classroom,
students would go somewhere to serve for a yearlong internship.

One of the internships that I considered
was among the Anaktuvuk Eskimos at Point Barrow, Alaska
some 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

Among the Anaktuvuks, alcohol abuse is a devastating problem.

When I spoke with the pastor who would have been my supervisor,
he told me during the phone interview that if I served there,
no alcohol was permitted, even when I wasn't working.

He went on to explain,

that even though I might not have a problem with alcohol,
for the sake of those I'd be serving as their pastor,
I was expected to abstain all while I was up there.

The Apostle Paul would have fully endorsed that way of thinking,
of putting the needs of others and the good of the community
well ahead of our own needs, wants, rights and desires,
by accepting limitations imposed by Christian love.

Some of the early Christians were allowing their understanding,
or maybe their desire for a nice steak or chicken burrito
to do harm toward those they were called to love as family.

So Paul urges them, vs. 14:20, 15:1-2

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat. We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.

His point: we can be destructively locked into our own understanding,
and insist on having our own way to the detriment and harm of others,

even though **the more important consideration
ought to be our impact on others of the church,
on others who are also loved by the Lord ... vs. 14:15**

If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.

**Sometimes we settle into of our own opinions, plans and perspective,
and forget or ignore that the person we so adamantly disagree with,
is also precious and much beloved by the Lord God,
important enough, that Jesus sacrificed all for them.**

**Those other people are in fact, far more important to God
than any issue or argument we're trying so hard to win.**

In his letter to the Christians living in Corinth,

Paul describes the appropriate standard for Christian behavior:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; ... it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul is saying, even more important than our knowledge & certainty,
is our ability **to live in community** and be at peace with others,
appreciating, and not crushing the rich diversity among us,
or trying to force someone to believe and behave our way.

**Paul's principle is to be willing to limit our own freedom & opinions
because our relationship with God calls us to live out our faith
by reaching out with forbearance, grace & love toward others.**

Because God's love guides us to love our fellow believers,
we would not knowingly hinder or disrupt their spiritual journey,
but motivated by God's gracious love, we strive that all
we say and do serves to build up God's people & church...
**... always having an attentive concern for our impact on others,
and that seeks to bring out their best gifts and blessings.**

Paul is saying that we have to take into account and consider
those who are affected by our words and actions and our attitude,
because the health of the body of Christ, the Church
takes priority over our own knowledge and freedom...

**... for even if we are absolutely correct in our understanding,
faithful means living within limits imposed by love and grace...**

... for God has called us to live and to serve together as his Church,
and our call is to hold our convictions **with humility**,
and to be committed to a love & grace that builds-up the body...
**... which means, given the choice between
being loving or being right, let us be loving.**

And here is the practical application of that important truth,
as Jesus said: John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

And we are not seeing much love, grace, mercy, forbearance or peace,
or acceptance in the world, or in culture or in the news right now.

It is easy for us to get caught up in the chaos of our society,
and comfortably acclimated to the defective culture around us
as long as it attacks the opposition and supports our opinion...
...so it might be wise and beneficial to pause, reflect and reconsider.

We are a community of faith called to love and care for one another
and one measure, is the impact that we are having on other people,
all of whom are also loved and precious and matter to the Lord...
**... and bear in mind that it's especially hard to focus on God
while we're busy being upset and offended by other people.**

As we are informed in Colossians 3:12~14,

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness,
and patience. Bear with one another and, above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in
perfect harmony.*