

ROMANS (14:1-4)

The Weaker Seeker

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CONDEMNING CARNIVORES

Let's say that a satanic cult constructed a snake altar in Burlington, and they sacrificed animals to a big golden idol.

Butchers carefully cut and packaged the meat afterwards, and sold it in the grocery stores ... at *greatly* reduced prices.

Q: The question is: would you buy the meat?

- Raise your hand if you'd buy the bargain meat.
- Raise your hand if you'd pay extra for un-sacrificed meat.

This is the very issue that was facing the early church.

The Jewish believers, who saw nothing wrong with eating meat sacrificed to non-existing gods, were annoyed by the ignorant arrogance of those who condemned their actions as immoral.

The Gentile believers – many of whom were freshly saved from those dark pagan practices – were *shocked* when Jewish Christians ate what had been dedicated to their old idols.

And to complicate matters, it wasn't always clear which meat was which, so if you wanted to avoid unknowingly eating it, you had to avoid eating meat altogether (unless you raised it yourself).

Q: So, who was right ... and who was wrong?

Let's read what Paul has to say:

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. – *Romans 14:1-4 NIV*

Paul makes it clear that the one: “whose faith is weak” is the one who takes the strictest approach here and “eats only vegetables”.

Q: Why would Paul label the “vegetarian” as having *weak* faith?

Q: Personally *I* wouldn’t buy the meat (because I wouldn’t want to financially support the cult), so is *my* faith weak?

There’re a few things at play here:

- A. They were *compensating* for the lifestyle they used to lead, which made the act a lack of trust in God’s grace.

We can’t compensate God for our past sins.

Q: You ever try to do that? Overzealously overcompensate for a sinful pleasure-seeking past? That’s weak faith.

- B. They weren’t *totally* convinced that their old gods didn’t exist (“You know - maybe they’re just *lesser* gods”).
- C. So, their conscience condemns them for *betraying* Jesus.

Paul addressed this exact topic to the Corinthians:

For us there is but one God ... and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ ... But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to [their] idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. – *1 Corinthians 8:6-7 NIV*

Notice that Paul calls this faith “weak”, but he doesn’t call it “sin”. These folks are doing what they’re doing (misinformed as it may be) out of loyalty and devotion to the Lord.

So, instead of scolding them, he warns the sturdier believers to accept them: “without passing judgment on disputable matters”

A “disputable matter” is any issue that’s open for argument because the Word of God doesn’t provide an explicit principle. We all have a custom list of do’s and don’ts; some come from personal experience, some are inherited, some from tradition.

I’m going to give you some classic disputable matters, and you’re going to raise your hand to reveal your position. You have to participate, because *not-raising* your hand will indicate a position against the disputable matter.

If you think, "It depends." just think of a scale from 1-10. If you're a 1-5 you're against it; if you're a 6-10 you're for it. Okay, raise your hand if you think it's okay for a believer to:

- A. Have a huge tattoo ... on their face.
- B. Wear a bikini in public.
- C. Spank their children.
- D. Go dancing in a bar.
- E. Get their tongue pierced.
- F. Go to a casino; *work* at a casino.
- G. Work on Sunday.
- H. Go to a secular psychiatrist.
- I. Go to "R" rated movies.
- J. Smoke cigarettes ... smoke cigars ... smoke a pipe.
- K. Drink beer ... drink *hard* liquor.

Q: You know why it's so awkward to answer these questions?

A: Because, believers pass judgment on disputable matters!

This is such a healthy exercise for us, because it emphasizes a very important truth that we hold to tightly to in this church:



- Unity of relationship over uniformity of opinion.



We all come to the faith with different backgrounds, different baggage, and different perspectives.



We shouldn't feel threatened, we should *rejoice* in the incredible freedom of diversity the Lord *allows* in His church.

- We're not expected to believe or behave exactly alike.



And it doesn't matter which side of the debate you're on:

The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does (14:3a)

- A. The carnivores "looked down" on the herbivores.
- B. And, the herbivores "condemned" the carnivores.



Both sides were perturbed by the other. The strong saw the weak as legalistic and harsh. The weak saw the strong as liberal and careless. And both were convinced that their limited perspective was the appropriate lens through which to view the other.

The first word in this chapter is the key to everything Paul is trying to get across: “Accept”. We’re to “accept” those who think differently; not “put up with” or “correct” or “belittle” or “nag” or “label” or “mock”.

We’re free to disagree, but we gotta respect and accept. The liberal believers need to accept the conservatives. The Bush supporters should accept the Kerry supporters. And everyone’s gotta hug the Green Party! And do you know why that is?

For God has *accepted* [them] (14:3b)

The very meaning of being a Christian is justification by *faith*. The loosey-goosey believers and the rigidly-religious are accepted *by* grace *through* faith in Jesus ... baggage and all.

Who are *you* to judge someone else’s servant? (14:4a)

There’re two things we *need* to hold each other accountable for: violating scriptural commands; and violating our own convictions (on disputable matters). Other than that, we lack the insight to judge disputable matters, because: We can’t know the inner motives behind the outer actions.

I read about a woman who bought a pack of cookies (and a cup of coffee) while at an airport. She set the coffee on a seat between herself and an older gentleman, and then went to check the flight schedule. When she got back the pack was open, cookies were missing, and the man was chewing. She pulled the pack closer, ate some cookies, drank her coffee, and read a magazine. Then she noticed him sneaking more cookies! And when he reached for the last one, she glared and said, "Really!" He broke it in half and slid a piece toward her; which she irately stuffed into her mouth and stormed off. Now, she could’ve been a lot less judgmental and a lot more gracious; and later she really wished she had; when she opened her purse, and found her unopened pack of cookies!



If I’m going to judge a life, let it be my own! Jesus said to first take the cookies out of your own purse! If I’m going to judge a life, let it be my own!

To his own master he stands or falls. And he *will* stand, for the Lord is able to *make him stand* (14:4b)

Each of us will give an individual account of how we fulfilled our created purpose - how we trusted and loved our Father, and how we obeyed and displayed His excellence.