

## Accounting

Isaiah 45:22-25  
Romans 14:1-12

In the first four verses of Romans 14, the Apostle Paul talks a lot about eating. “One believes we may eat anything, while the weak one eats only vegetables.” And, “Let not one who eats despise one who abstains, and let not one who abstains pass judgment on one who eats...” I will follow his advice in at least one matter. I would **never** take a shot at vegetarians. Many of you know why, some do not, but I will drop only one hint: my discretion has nothing to do with godliness and everything with wanting to continue to eat at home. Besides, this passage is not really about eating. It is about judging. Paul makes this clear in verse four: “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?” We all serve Christ. We must not judge one another. He will judge us all. And praise God, Paul promises that while we deserve to be convicted of our sin, “...the Master is able to make (us) stand.”

Paul writes to a church, to a group of Christians gathered to worship and to serve Jesus Christ. Though at the time he writes he has never yet personally visited them, he has heard of certain disputes among them. Commentators agree these disputes probably included one common friction point in the early church: the rub between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Diet often served as a flash point in the early church, specifically the Kosher diet in the Mosaic law the Jews followed. While many meats were Kosher—permitted—the factions in the Roman church were still judging

each other over diet. But again, this is not about eating.

Romans 14 is about judging. Specifically, this chapter is about ***who gets to judge and what consequences follow that judgment***. Paul broadens his metaphor in verse five, speaking of days of the week. Almost certainly a reference to which day ought to serve as the sabbath, Paul writes that it does not matter. Whatever you believe, “let all be fully convinced in their own minds.” I paused in my own writing here for a few moments to think of things Christians have sincerely and passionately advocated to me as requirements for worshiping and serving God properly. I have been told that unless I was baptized at my own request after I became old enough to know what the sacrament meant, I was going to hell. Another man argued that because I did not tithe I was depriving God of God's due and my family of the blessings that must always result from giving a tenth of my income. That galled me, because I actually tithe. Which proves the point that we often judge on the basis of incomplete information.

In a previous sermon I have confessed that I also judge others. None of us is pure as the driven snow. But we are not the focus here. God is the focus. Whether we eat or do not eat, observe one day or another, Paul writes, we do it all “to the Lord”. “None of live to ourselves, and none of us die to ourselves,” he continues, for “...whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.” Christ died and rose from the dead, proving his Lordship over all “Regardless,” as commentator Everett Harrison writes, “of which side of the veil we inhabit.” Alive or dead, we belong to God. Judgment also

belongs to God. "Why do you pass judgment on your brother (or sister)?" Paul asks. "Or you, why do you despise your brother (or sister)?" The answer in a word, is fear.

We judge because we fear we are not good enough ourselves. We judge because we somehow hope that by tearing down others we will look taller. We judge because we feel threatened by the capabilities of others. And we do it regardless of how good, tall and capable we may be. Quincy Jones came up as a trumpet player in Lionel Hampton's big band. He played with the Dorsey Brothers, Elvis, Dizzy Gillespie. He arranged music for the groundbreaking Thad Jones (his brother) and Mel Lewis big band, an integrated ensemble before that was common. He became the first African American to become a vice president of a major music label, Mercury. He arranged scores for many films, winning Academy Awards for his work. He composed the theme music for the television hit, Sanford and Son. He produced movies starting with the groundbreaking *The Color Purple* and its eleven Oscar nominations.

Quincy Jones produced albums for Sinatra, Leslie Gore, Diana Ross, and most of the Motown talent roster. He composed and directed the musical theme for the 1998 FIFA World Cup. Working with Michael Jackson, he produced two of the seven highest-selling albums in history. And a few years ago he said to David Marchese, writing for *New York Magazine*, "(The Beatles) were the worst musicians in the world. They were no-playing \*(^\$@#. Paul was the worst bass player I ever heard. If they'd been black they never would have gotten to America." To this reader it was

immediately apparent that his comments sprung from jealousy of the band that had produced four of the seven highest-selling albums in history—double his own total. Quincy Jones is one of the most accomplished entertainment business figures of all time. He has written deeply insightful pieces about racism based on his travels around the world starting at the age of 19. He is widely respected and even beloved. Yet his fear that the world esteemed the Beatles greater than it did him caused him to judge their talents.

If Quincy Jones cannot help judging others, what hope have we mere mortals? As we occasionally say in our liturgy, “Our hope is in the name of the Lord.” Our hope is not that we can stop judging, nor stop sinning in general. No, our hope is in Christ. But we must not become too comfortable with this. Paul again: “For we shall stand before the judgment seat of God...each will give account of himself before God.” No one can believe this and fail to quake in his or her boots. Paul often wrote of his own “thorn in the flesh”. He did not specify precisely what he meant but he did make clear it was something about himself that was corrupt and horrid, something sinful. I can say that I have done things so terrible I have wondered if I have a split personality. We are all sinners and we shall all be judged by one who has not, who cannot, sin. If you believe this the only honest response you can have is, “Oh my God.”

Or, perhaps we can find our hope in the name of the Lord after all. Near the end of this passage Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah. Or as substitute preacher and King-of-all-trades Alan Harder correctly pointed out last month, Paul quotes *Second* Isaiah.

This anonymous prophet and author lived around two hundred years later than the original Isaiah. With all the Chosen People, Second Isaiah had seen how history had turned against them. First the Assyrians, then the Babylonians and finally the Persians had brutally defeated the Hebrews, killing many in battle, enslaving others, and leaving the rest to starve. Actually, the prophets interpreted this not as history, but as **God** turning against the people. They had sinned by worshiping foreign gods, neglecting the poor and much else. They heard God telling them to tell the people, “You *will* be held accountable for your sins.”

But Second Isaiah heard a different message. He heard God telling him to tell the people, “Your punishment is complete. Now I offer you hope.” Having paid for their sins, the people could now take comfort in the promise that God, in eternal faithfulness to his covenants of old, would resume blessing them. They would return home from their various places of exile. They would grow bountiful harvests. They would have children and—the greatest blessing of all—grandchildren. When every knee should bow and every tongue confess the holiness of God, “In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory.”

It turns out that the judgment of God does not constitute the whole of God's work on us. Once God has judged us righteously, once God has held us accountable for our sins, we can look forward to “triumph and glory”. Blessing follows God's judgment. Instead of saying, “Oh my God” we can therefore with genuine hope say, “Praise God!”

I believe God is judging our nation for its inability to root out racism from its structures and its networks. God is holding us accountable for this. God is forcing us to list our sins, to enumerate them, to **account** for them. Once this uncomfortable and in some quarters controversial process plays out, I believe God will bless us. I believe that even now many people of various skin colors are reaching out in good faith, sowing the seeds of reconciliation that will bear fruit in whatever future God has in store for our nation. Many of them are people of faith. This is not a coincidence.

I believe God is judging those who have taken cover under the righteous banner of fighting racism to use violence to try to intimidate others they hate into silence. God is holding them accountable for this. God will force them to confront their own guilt, sooner or later. The judgment may come from a trial and conviction in a court of law, or from the spiritual practice of confession and repentance. The final and total resolution of this particular issue will require spiritual power.

And I believe God will judge the church if we do not live and speak the Gospel in these harsh times. God will hold us accountable if we do not break out of our protective bubble to engage with the world outside. If we do, I believe God will bless our faith and our courage with new vitality in our own spirits, greater spirit in our churches, and healing in our culture.

Blessing follows judgment. Judgment must come first. It does not come last. Church, confess your sins. Then wait for the blessings. I believe they **will** come.