

Who Will Judge?

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[0 : 00] Without doctrine, we are like spiritual wanderers, wandering around with no sense of direction, and so it's a gift that needs to be used properly.

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The Rev. Dan Gifford delivered his message from the Book of Romans, the 14th chapter. The title of the message is, Who Will Judge? Eight years ago, while I was living in Pender Harbor, a counselor of a camp that I used to work at as the director called me out of the blue and said, guess what, I'm getting married.

I said, well, that's wonderful. He said, and it has to do with you. I said, well, how is that? He said, I want you to preach at my wedding. And I said, well, I guess that would be a good idea. Where is it?

[1 : 22] And he says, well, that's the catch. It's in a small town in the middle of North Dakota, population 400. And you can't fly in there. He said several planes fly over it during the year.

But they actually don't fly into it. So you're going to have to fly into Minneapolis and spend two days driving and go to this little town in the middle of nowhere to do my wedding.

And I thought about this for a while. And I finally did say yes, because I thought it would be a good way of truly appreciating all that I have in Pender Harbor. And it worked.

So anyway, I went to this little town, drove up there. And something very interesting about this town of 400 was it had two Lutheran churches. And there's many factions within Lutheranism, but it was the same faction that both churches were part of.

And each church had probably a couple hundred people that went to it. One was newer. And I asked, what is the deal with these two churches? People seem to know each other quite well. And why are there two in this little town?

[2 : 25] Well, it wasn't because there was a church plant. They're four blocks apart from one another. The reason was nobody really knew. They knew that there was a disagreement a number of years ago.

And the newer ones split away from the older ones. And they started a new congregation. And both of them are pretty healthy and active. But the thing that is interesting about these two churches is that everyone in the area knows that the reason there are two is because of their conflict.

They're known for their conflict. And I never did find out what the issue was, but that was the testimony to those around them. And I think it compromised their giving out of the gospel in that rural area.

And you know, in the reading today, Paul is very concerned about the possibility of a split like that happening in Rome. And here he's dealing with two factions that have to do with one, Jewish believers who are really worried about giving up the old signs of the covenant of being the people of God.

And secondly, the second group are sort of law-free Christians, people who know about their freedom in Christ and are very crass and sort of insensitive towards the traditional ways.

[3 : 40] And Paul calls the two sides the strong and the weak. The strong, he calls those who know who they are in Christ. They know that all food has been declared clean in Christ.

And they were also not bound by fear that there might be spirits attached to food that was sacrificed to idols. Now, the weak were vegetarians. And we're not saying anything bad to vegetarians.

They were doing it out of the sense of really being concerned that they didn't want to have any evil influence of food sacrificed to idols. And not only that, but food laws were very important.

And the keeping of holy days were as well. So to be careful, they just ate vegetables. And the thing that was important to the weak was having marks of being people of God, being different from those who don't know God around them.

And Paul refers to them as weak in faith, meaning that they haven't been able to really grasp practically yet what it means that Christ has made all food clean and all days holy.

[4 : 42] Now, both of these two sides were sinning. The sin of the strong in this dispute was this disdainful, sort of condescending attitude towards the traditionalists.

They were saying, you know, we know who we are in Christ. We have freedom. We really believe that Christ has made us pure and all food pure. And we believe that all days are holy.

But they still keep the old rituals and the old days. They don't trust Christ as much as we do. The sin of the weak was a bit different.

It was a very self-righteous attitude. They would pass judgment on those eating meat sacrificed to idols. There is this sort of insinuation that you're getting caught up and polluted by the ways of the religion around you.

They alone, they thought, had the true standards of piety and righteousness. They stood in judgment over those who failed to meet their standards. Now, Paul is a wonderful pastor to this situation.

[5 : 43] Remember, he hasn't been to Rome yet, but he has a real insight as to what is going on there. And in verse 14, he actually does side with the strong, who in a sense are right, and they're the majority in the church of Rome.

He says this, verse 14, I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. He affirms that a strong faith would know that there is freedom in depending on Christ.

Yet, if you go down to verse 21, he says, It is right not to eat meat, or to drink wine, or to do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble.

You see what Paul is doing here? He's showing an incredible commitment to those that he disagrees with, and in fact, the majority disagrees with. And that's because he's willing to give up his freedom for the greater principle of love, which is at work here.

It's the principle of love. If the thing that is causing division is not essential to the Christian faith, then out of love, he's willing to let go of it. He knows how easy that human pride and arrogance can get involved in these issues.

[6 : 54] And he also knows how a very good and important doctrine can actually be used as a weapon, and it can actually be used to push people away from what is true and good. I don't know if you've heard this in churches that you've been part of, but often you hear of doctrine being spoken of in negative terms.

There is a desire in many churches to do away with doctrine because it's so divisive and because it has been imposed on people harshly. And that's because doctrine has been, in some churches, taught in an unloving way.

It has been taught with a goal of being right rather than humbly and lovingly articulating the wonderful truth of who Jesus is. And this is how verse 16, the situation of verse 16 can come about, that your good is spoken of as evil.

And that's a sad thing because doctrine that is true is a gift. It articulates the good news of who Jesus is and what he's done for us. And it keeps us from false teaching, which is so destructive spiritually.

Without doctrine, we are like spiritual wanderers who are wandering around with no sense of direction and no compass. And so it's a gift that needs to be used properly.

[8 : 14] And Paul here models how this is done. In fact, he does it throughout his letters. When the issue is essential, like the resurrection or clear moral issues from the Bible, Paul is absolutely uncompromising.

He's very frank and strong. But he is also good at recognizing what is non-essential. And certainly the issue of what one eats and drinks is non-essential, in which holy days were kept.

And so Paul clearly says what he believes is right, yet he bends over backward to accommodate and to accept people who think differently in Rome.

And that's because he lives out his teaching of the incredible importance of living for others, which is really his theme here in these last few chapters. He's very aware that for some people, for various reasons, they will not be able to sort of internalize the true doctrine very quickly.

And he's patient and loving as he deals with them. And this is so important for us as a church to look at and learn, because it's very easy to become prideful about non-essential issues.

[9 : 28] We distance ourselves from people who think differently, and we stop accepting them. And when one reaches this point, it's very difficult to love and to live for others.

In fact, it's quite possible to have the perfect, right theological position, and yet completely fail in your relationship with other Christians. It's possible to do that, to be right, and yet to fail in your relationship with other Christians.

So very simply, Paul is telling us in this passage that if it's non-essential, be willing to let it go for the good of your relationship with other Christians. Now, I know of a dog that's very, very small.

You might have seen this happen in your own life, that you throw a bone for that dog, and it comes back with the bone, but he will not let it go. And in fact, it is such a firm grip he has on that bone that you can pick up the bone, and the dog comes up with it.

And in fact, you can swing the dog around like this with a bone. I've been very tempted to see how far I can throw the bone with the dog attached. And in fact, dogs will do that. They will hold on to it no matter what you do.

[10 : 41] And Paul is saying, don't be like the dog with the bone with non-essentials. And here's why. There's three reasons. The first is that your brother and your sister in Christ are welcomed by God.

So you must be welcomed. If you go back to chapter 14, verse 1, Paul starts out this whole thing by saying, as for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him.

And that word welcome isn't just sort of accept or tolerate this person. It's a strong word that means bring that person into the circle of your friends and your acquaintances.

Draw that person in to your fellowship. And it really implies warmth and this kindness of love. It's the same word that Jesus uses when he talks about welcoming you into heaven in John 14.

And imagine doing that to somebody who you strongly disagree with on some issue, that you welcome them. That's the command that Paul is giving here. And at the end of verse 3 is the big motivation for it.

[11 : 47] God has welcomed him or her. Paul knows that in the Roman church most people are Christians. And he says to them, you have to now look at each other in a new way.

You have to look at each other as the fact that Christ has welcomed one another on each side of the issue by dying and rising for them. And in verse 15, if you look down at that, you see Paul drive this point home when he says, Do not cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.

And this is a powerful teaching. Paul is saying that the implication of Jesus' death is that person who you are against is closely identified with Christ. In fact, so closely identified that when you despise them, you are despising Jesus.

And when you love them, you are loving Jesus. That's what Jesus meant when he said, When you have done this for the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me.

It's a very sobering teaching. And there are bound to be people you disagree with on non-essentials in the church. We're from many different backgrounds. It's very likely that at some point you will disagree with somebody in your Bible study or in a social activity that you're part of, or maybe even a minister like a Dave or Felix.

[13 : 07] But in your disagreement, you must remember that God has welcomed your fellow Christian, that person that you are disagreeing with.

And conflict over non-essentials is a dangerous thing. It has ruined many Christian relationships. It has split many churches. And so much of this would never have happened if people held the truth firmly in mind that their opponent belonged to God and was united to Jesus.

Because they would have known they had no choice but to treat them with love and respect in their disagreement. And the second reason why we should be willing to hold loose to non-essentials is that you and your neighbor are going to be judged.

So you can't be the judge. I was recently at a teaching session with a very good instructor who talked about change and difficulty in churches. And he kept saying at the beginning, There is a God and I'm not him.

And then he started saying, There is a God and you are not him. And that's something he says over and over again when he goes to these churches that are in difficulty. It is reminding us that we do want to play God.

[14 : 18] But we aren't God. We want to judge and determine the fate of others as the Romans were doing for one another. And each side was saying, You know, that person is not a real Christian. That person is hypocritical.

Something bad is going to happen to them. But Jesus is the only one who saves. He is the only one who judges. And that's why verse 11 says, As I live, says the Lord, Every knee shall bow to me, And every tongue shall give praise to God.

So each of us shall give account to God. And that puts us all, No matter what side of the dispute we are on, In the same place. We will all be judged.

We will all depend on the goodness of Jesus Christ When we come to heaven and to judgment. And our job as Christians is not to be judged. It is actually to help one another be prepared for that day.

Our job is to build each other up in our faith. To help each other towards the destination of heaven, Which is actually ours in Jesus Christ. And we go against that mandate completely If we are tearing one another down in our disagreements, Or causing other Christians to stumble.

[15 : 30] Verse 13 is an interesting play on words. It's on the play on judgment. Paul says very strongly, Let us no more pass judgment on one another, But rather decide, And literally this word is, Make a judgment To never put a stumbling block or hindrance In the way of a brother or sister.

It's a decision, A judgment that says this, I'm not going to judge them, I am instead determining Never to put a stumbling block or hindrance In the way of a brother or sister. And the positive side of this Is the third reason Why we hold loosely to non-essentials.

Not only has Christ accepted And made friends And welcomed one another, Not only will he be our judge, But the whole point of the kingdom of God Is simply not about non-essentials.

It is about building one another up. Look at verse 17. It all has to do with what Jesus has done for us. For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink, But righteousness and peace and joy In the Holy Spirit.

And those three words are important. Because Jesus has made you right and holy. He has given you his righteousness. Secondly, Jesus has made peace Between you and God.

[16 : 49] And thirdly, Jesus has given you joy Of his presence And his commitment to you. A relationship with God That extends right into every circumstance Into eternity.

There's a joy from his commitment to you. And those three things That we have in Christ We are meant to actually mirror to one another. So because you're made righteous, You ought to live righteously or rightly Towards one another.

To honor and respect them Because of your respect for Jesus Christ. Honoring them because of your honor for Jesus. And secondly, because you're at peace with God, You ought to strive for peace And be reconciled with one another.

To seek to live in harmony. And that's why Jesus is so strong About forgiveness when he teaches. He says, as you are forgiven by God, So you ought to forgive one another.

If you don't, you won't be forgiven. He is incredibly strong on forgiveness. He is asking us to be at peace with one another. Because he has made us at peace with God.

[17 : 53] And then thirdly, because you rejoice In the certainty of Jesus' commitment to you, You ought to bring with you A joy that comes by being committed To other Christians.

You bring joy to others In your commitment to them. There is a joy where people are working hard At making relationships right In Jesus' name. And that commitment that brings joy Is spelled out in verse 19.

And it is a command, again, By Paul. Let us then pursue What makes for peace And for mutual up-building. And that word pursue Is a sense of being relentless.

Go after this kind of relationship With everyone. Work really hard at it. The kingdom is about Building up other people in Christ. It is about right relationships So that others can know Christ And be brought in To that circle of relationships.

It is about being committed In a loving way To helping others Even those who you disagree with To make it to heaven. To be ready For the coming of Jesus Christ. By briefly reminding you That all of us And this is a way of really bringing home to us What Paul is talking about tonight.

[19 : 10] We, in a few minutes Will all come to communion. That we are all welcome to. You will kneel Or stand next to other Christians. And you are going to receive the signs Of what Jesus has done for you.

His death And his resurrection. And it is an opportunity I think To remember two things. The first is That we are all dependent upon Jesus. And the things that have to do with him Are what are truly essential.

He alone makes us right before God. He alone judges us. And he alone gives us peace And joy in believing. That is what the kingdom of God is about.

And that is what our minds and hearts Should be turned to. And secondly We turn to the person next to you Because the person next to you Belongs to Jesus Christ. If you are committed in love to Jesus You will be committed in the same way To the person who is next to you.

Even if they disagree with you. Even to the point of giving up Certain rights and freedoms in Christ. And that is what this passage Calls us to tonight.

[20 : 18] It is to know what Christ has done for us. And to extend that grace To those around us. To know without a doubt What is essential. And to hold loosely To those things that are non-essential.

For the sake of the up-building Of Christians. For the sake of bringing other people To be made right Before Jesus Christ When he comes again. God give us grace To help one another be ready For that day When we will see Jesus.

Amen. Amen. This digital audio sermon Along with many others Is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website At www.stjohnschaughnessy.org That address is www.stjohns.org On the website You will also find information About ministries Worship services And special events At St. John's Shaughnessy We hope that this message Has helped you And that you will share it with others.

And that you have For the first time God bless the various friends Of Christians Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.