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Romans 14:1-12
“Transformed: Living and Dying to the Lord”
Transformed Sermon Series: Week 4 of 4
September 13, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

This is our fourth and final week in our series on Romans chapters 12-14 called, “Transformed,” where we have considered our lives in the light of the transforming grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have covered sacrifice, vocation, living peaceably with others, and last week we discussed government and citizenship.

This week, we conclude our series by discussing what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 14, verse 8: “For 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.” It’s a beautiful verse. It’s a very profound verse. It captures the perspective of our faith so well, encompassing everything about life, and death, and all eternity.

But what I find so fascinating this week is the thing that actually causes the Apostle Paul to ruminate on a large and profound topic such as life and death with our Lord Jesus Christ. And so we back up a few verses to find out just what it was that caused him to remind those Christians in Rome of their eternal perspective. And the answer is... vegetables. Or to be more precise, the Christians who insisted on eating only vegetables and the potential quarrels they got into with those who chose to eat meat.

Now, on one hand you have something so small and particular like whether to eat meat or not, and on the other hand you have something so large and universal like eternity with Christ. It’s an odd pairing and yet this is precisely what our lives are like. A constant living in both the now, with its exasperating oddities at times, as well as the not yet, the certain hope of our bright and glorious future with Christ. And so, when Paul juxtaposes these two things side by side, we see an accurate and realistic picture of what our transformed lives in Christ are truly like.

So, let’s take some time to understand both of these. Let’s first understand the small and particular. What was going on in that day that would warrant the Apostle Paul talking about whether to eat meat or only vegetables? Now, we don’t know if this was an actual problem in the church in Rome or simply a hypothetical example he was using. But what we do know is that what one ate as a Christian was an actual issue in the early church, especially between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul addresses it on numerous occasions throughout the New Testament, and so it was likely that Paul’s words to the Romans were very relevant.

The issue wasn’t a debate over vegetarianism, or what was the best heart-healthy diet, like the debates we might hear nowadays. Instead, it was a debate over whether a pious Christian should eat meat or not for religious reasons. The concern was that much of the meat you would find in the marketplaces was originally from an animal that had been offered as a sacrifice to a pagan god. Therefore, if you were a faithful Christian, were you offending the one true God by eating meat that had possibly been offered to an idol?

The Apostle Paul settles this quite clearly in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 8). He says we all know that an idol has no real existence and there’s no such thing as a god other than the one true God. So, as Paul says, “We are no worse off if we do not eat [it], and no better

off if we do” (1 Cor. 8:8). When it’s not something that’s morally wrong, a Christian is free in Christ to do what they think is best.

But Paul then focuses on that notion, *what we think is best*. Because for Paul, a Christian’s primary concern should not be using your freedom in Christ for your own benefit, but rather a Christian’s primary concern is using your freedom for the benefit of your neighbor. In other words, now that you have this freedom because of what Jesus has done for you, how will you use it to love and serve those around you?

Regarding the issue Paul is addressing in our Epistle Reading, to the one who is strong in their faith, that is, the one who knows full well that we have the freedom to choose whether we want to eat meat or not, Paul says not to despise the one who may not yet fully understand all that (14:3). Avoid quarreling with him and instead welcome him (14:1).

And to the one who is new or weak in faith, but feels quite convicted that a Christian should not eat meat offered to idols because it might offend God, Paul says not to pass judgment on the one who chooses to eat meat, because that person has the freedom to do so (14:3). And this doesn’t only apply to food, mind you, as Paul goes on to apply this to the dispute over which day is considered most holy (14:5). So, the application of this principle is truly endless.

As long as what a Christian is doing is not something that is morally wrong, then they have the freedom to choose what they are convinced is right. And as that person looks at other Christians, and they look at him, they should not pass judgment on each other, because they are both the Lord’s. And ultimately they will answer not to each other, but to God. We will all stand before the judgment seat of God and give an account, so we ought to make sure what we are doing isn’t for our own honor, but for his (14:10-12).

If a Christian chooses to observe a particular day, or eat a particular way, or does anything else, he should do it for the honor of the Lord, giving thanks to God. And if another Christian chooses *not* to observe a particular day, or chooses *not* to eat a particular way, or does anything else, he should also do this for the honor of the Lord, giving thanks to God (14:6).

And that’s where Paul then comes to our overall theme for today, starting in verse 7, “For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For 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, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living” (14:7-9).

You see, Paul has worked this problem backward to the fundamental starting point of our lives as Christians. That Christ has died on the cross to redeem us, the lost and condemned sinners that we were, and has lived again, he has been restored to life forever. And because of his death and life, he is now our Lord. But he isn’t our Lord only in this life, on this earth. He is Lord of our eternal lives. No one is lost to the Lord, not even those who have died. We will always be the Lord’s. That’s how complete his salvation for us is, that even when we die, we will always live.

With that in mind, we know full well that we are not our own. We do not live or die only to ourselves, as Paul says. In both life and death we are the Lord’s. Therefore, everything we do in this life, and everything we will do in the life of the world to come, is done to our Lord Jesus Christ. This then is what leads the Apostle Paul to conclude that, regarding the issue of whether or not to eat meat, it isn’t so much a matter of who is right and who is wrong, but rather, who is the one honoring Jesus by how they love and serve their neighbor.

So, Paul says to the person who feels convicted in their Christian conscience to abstain from eating meat that they should not pass judgment on the one who does. We all are attempting

to serve the Lord the best we know how, and that will inevitably look different from one another. You are free, Paul says, to do what you're convinced of in your own mind. But because of our Lord Jesus who lived and died and lived again, we now have "harmony with one another" and together we "glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:5-6).

And then Paul says to the person who uses their Christian freedom to eat meat that they can choose to love and serve their fellow brother or sister in Christ by protecting their conscience. Paul says later in this chapter that if eating meat ends up being a stumbling block to your brother or sister, you should even go so far as abstaining from meat altogether (14:13). He says, "For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died" (14:15).

So, then, what does that mean for us today? Well, the question of whether or not to eat meat isn't a controversy in the Christian Church today, not so far as I know. But I hope you can begin to see how this might apply in many of the things we do encounter. These are guiding principles any time we approach our fellow brother or sister in Christ in a matter where there isn't agreement. And I know, church members who don't agree on something? That's a shocker! But it happens occasionally, I promise.

What immediately came to my mind as I thought about this were all the decisions our church leadership has had to make over the past several months in light of the coronavirus pandemic. We had to discuss how to resume in-person services, how to make it as safe as we could, how to sit, how to handle communion, whether or not we should sing, whether or not we would require masks. And we have the Christian freedom to make these various choices; it's not a matter of what's right and wrong, but rather, it's a matter of what's best for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

And I can truly say that everyone involved in the committees, the Elders, and the Council have done a fantastic job deliberating and debating the various points. Do we all agree on everything? No. Are there churches who have used their Christian freedom to do things differently than us? Yes. Do we know that are as many opinions about what we should do as there are people? Of course. That's what life is like in this world.

But what became the most important thing was finding a way to return God's people to the weekly gifts God provides us in both Word and Sacrament, and not judging each other or offending each other's consciences along the way. So, if it means wearing a mask when we would rather not, we do so, for the sake of our neighbor. If it means holding off on singing when we would rather sing, we do so, for the sake of our neighbor. We always keep in mind who it is that we serve, that we belong to the Lord. Therefore, we do not insist on living only to ourselves, but rather we live to Christ, and also to our neighbor, just as Paul told the Romans.

Of course, all of this doesn't only apply in light of the decisions surrounding the coronavirus. Any time we face a situation where we must live and choose among a plethora of possibilities, which let's face it, is every day on this earth, all of this holds true. And so, when we face a choice, we run through a checklist of sorts. First, we ask if God's Word specifically addresses this issue, letting us know if something is morally right or wrong.

And then if we find that many different things would be permissible, then we have the Christian freedom to choose. But we exercise our freedom not for the sake of ourselves, but for the sake of the one who died and lived again for us, giving thanks to him. And because of him, it means we will also exercise our freedom to love and serve those around us, just as Christ loved and served us.

And as we do this, what we begin to see in our own lives is exactly what we saw in Romans 14. It's this juxtaposition of the small and particular, the everyday living and loving and serving our neighbor by our thoughts, words, and deeds, side by side with the large and universal, our Christian hope that transcends this life.

Our sinful nature and Satan always want to keep us divided. To keep us judging each other over matters that are not issues of right versus wrong, to keep us separated from one another. All of which eventually leads to physical and spiritual death. But Christ does not allow his Church to be divided or killed. He became the once-and-for-all sacrifice, the antidote to the division and separation that sin causes.

Earlier in Romans, Paul said, "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor power, nor height or depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:38-39). That's the kind of power Jesus has over sin, and Satan, and death. And by that power, Jesus unites us so that we might be one. One with God and one with each other. Which then plays out in our transformed lives in both big and small ways.

Listen to how Paul describes this transformed living in a different letter he wrote, this one to the Philippians, which we'll actually hear in our Epistle Reading next week: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account" (Phil. 1:21-24).

Do you hear Paul acknowledging both the small and particular right alongside the large and universal? The acceptance that on one hand, we live in the now, that we labor in Christ to serve one another. And yet on the other hand, we are certain of what is not yet, that our eternal future is secure.

That's what it means to have a transformed life in Christ. That whether we live or whether we die, we live or die to the Lord. Either way, we are the Lord's, because he lived and died for us. And because we are the Lord's, we are free to live... and even die... for each other, because even in death we are always the Lord's. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**