

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

September 17, 2023

Living and Dying

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 21, 2023

Romans 14:1-12

One of the most common retorts I hear from people who don't feel a connection with the scriptures that we have in the Bible is something like, "It's too outdated, it doesn't really apply to me or the world we live in today." And there's a modicum of truth in that experience in that the scriptures are old, several thousand years old. But in the same way that old friendships can be the most cherished ones, these old texts continue to speak to us and impact us as we grow and change, and as the world grows and changes.

Someone once said to me, "I'm not into all those stories about kings and stuff." But if we enable ourselves to look more deeply into the texts, we see them not just as accounts of "kings and stuff," but of God's story with His people and with the world. The stories about kings might just be stories about what God expects of those who hold power and authority. The stories about disease and plague and struggle that we could never fathom might just be about how God brings humility to

the arrogant or how he empowers his people to endure through hardship and pain, and often about how he brings about comfort and healing. And the words, like the words that we've read in this morning's scripture might not be just about food and what we choose to eat or not, but might be about the life we choose to live and for whom we choose to live it.

There are a few important things to remember about when Paul first wrote these letters to the church in Rome. First, Rome as you might guess, was at the heart of the Roman Empire, and thus, arguably perhaps the most important and powerful city on the planet at that time. Second, Rome was a hot seat of culture and religion. In general, it was a place where people worshipped several gods representing all parts of both public and private life. Judaism, however, had been present and accounted for in the empire for many years, and Christianity was the new kid on the block. This meant that anyone who would convert to, or consider converting to Christianity would likely be well acquainted with a variety of customs, traditions, and culture from some OTHER religion.

Let me put the impact of this into perspective. For those of you that have ever been in any sort of long-term relationship – have you ever disagreed with your partner because you both had particular ways of doing something? It could be as simple as how long it's okay for dishes to remain in the sink, or it could be about how you spend your time over the holidays, or it could be about how you discipline your kids, or the type of community you want to live in. In the end, we so often default to something like, "Well, that's just how I'm used to doing it." And if you and your partner disagree, then you're left to decide what's *actually* important.

Is it important that we go to this exact house on Christmas morning, or is it simply that we spend time together as a family? Is it important that your children go to a top-ranked college, or is it simply important to learn the skills necessary to navigate adult life safely and successfully? These are important questions – and these are the sorts of questions that new Christians in Rome were asking. Is it important that we adhere to a strict religious diet, or is it simply important

that we are grateful for the food we have? Is it important that we celebrate each of the holy days, or is it simply important that we have a consistent habit of worship and prayer?

Paul steps into the conversation to offer the words that he does in verses 5 and 6 – “One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.” Do you hear how he finishes each one of these thoughts? “Whoever regards one day as special *does so to the Lord*” “whoever eats meat *does so to the Lord*” and “whoever abstains *does so to the Lord.*” It sure seems like what he’s getting down to is that it’s less important what particular decision you’re making, and much more important for whom you’re making it. Are you making the decision for yourself and your own comfort, or are you making the decision *to the Lord*?

Do you see? This ancient and “outdated” text isn’t just about the food customs of early Rome, it’s about how the people of God choose to live their lives. Just as true today as ever. And if it still hasn’t hit home for you, Paul hits us with a slap in the face of accountability in the very next verse, verse 7 – “For none of us lives for ourselves alone and none of us dies for ourselves alone.” Pause with that thought for just a moment ... we do an awful lot of “living for ourselves,” don’t we?

How absolutely radical would this community become if we shifted our motivations and our logic away from ourselves and toward God?

“Why’d you move to this district?” – I did so because of the Lord.

“Why’d you get all those volunteer hours before your Senior year of high school?” – I did so because of the Lord.

“Why’d you choose that investment strategy?” Because of the Lord

“Why’d you get that new addition on your house?” Because of the Lord

“Why’d you choose that school, pick that career, work like you did, vacation like you did, retire when you did?”

Are you getting the point?

It feels ridiculous to answer these questions this way because it feels so far from the norm. We’ve become so accustomed to living for the comfort of ourselves and the few people in our inner circles that a life truly lived for the Lord would likely mean a radical upheaval of so much of who we are and what we’ve worked for. For whom are you making your decisions? For whom are you living your life?

I’m going to poke at this just a little more because I think there is something really important about all of this. We, because we are a bunch of intelligent and articulate people, do an excellent job of justifying our decisions – softening the blow when we know that we make decisions for myriad reasons other than for the sake of Jesus. If I’m correct in my

guess, and if I know this community as well as I think I do, a whole bunch of us answered all of those above questions with the following answer: “I did it for my family – I did it for my kids.” Something like that. It makes me wonder if “for my family” has become an acceptable replacement for all sorts of otherwise self-centered behavior.

To point out the obvious, there might very well be a difference between making a choice for your family and making a choice for the Lord. That’s probably, at least in part, why Jesus said what he did in Luke chapter 14, “if anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” And no, this isn’t, as a college professor once argued to me, an “anti-family message,” but it’s a reminder of the proper ordering of lordship in our lives. You can have your local law, you can have your family tradition, you can have your individual joy – and, as a matter of fact, scripture strongly holds up each one of these things, but standing head and shoulders above any of those things must

be the will of Christ in your life. This is how Paul puts it in verse 8: “If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or die we belong to the Lord.” Our living and our dying and everything in between must be for Christ.

I can't hold any of you accountable to these things. That's the work that you'll have to do. That's between you and God, and it is right where Paul is pointing us in these verses. It's not about the decision itself, it's about for whom you make the decision.

Moving on to verse 10: “You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.” Lacking the ability to open up the books of your heart and mind, I could never be the one to tell you exactly where or how God has called you. Now, I believe that there are a handful of universal truths – that we are called to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. That we are called to

love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love others with the same love we give to ourselves. That we are to forgive those in the ways that we hope God would forgive us. Outside of that, the details get really fuzzy. I can't tell you how you ought to live your life. What district you should live in or what you should do with your weekend mornings. I can't tell you how you ought to spend your time or money. How you should retire or how much you should squirrel away for a rainy day. But it's clear to me that however you do it, your best bet is to do it for the Lord. For "we will all stand before God's judgment seat."

Friends, the freedom that we have in Christ allows for this congregation and this community to be as diverse as the human body; with parts that look nothing like one another, with jobs, and roles, and responsibilities that feel as disparate as night and day themselves. But even that analogy relays a truth to us; you'll quickly note that both night and day, summer and winter, freeze and thaw hold deeply important roles in Creation. Our lives are not meant to be mirror images

of one another. But they are meant to be reflective of who Jesus was, is, and is to be. We are called to live our lives through him and for him.

Imagine, imagine how radically beautiful this community would become if we lived, died, and did everything in between with just one answer: "We did it for the Lord."

Amen.



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