

Love and Judgement

Menno Mennonite Church

September 13, 2026

Purpose: To examine the connection between the shared love of the kingdom and the human inclination to judge that which we do not understand.

Message: As we are united in Christ's love we are called to lay aside our personal judgment and recognize God's just accountability in the fullness of time.

Scripture: Romans 14:1-12 (I will read); Psalm 103:8-14 (Please read)

Synopsis: Opinion is a bit of a pastime. Our media invites comment and evaluation at all points. The debates of who we are and what we believe is also tied into how things are done or not. While this is nothing new it is a growing part of our life and living. Here Paul invites us to live in the Spirit and lay aside the judgements as a part of the response to God's grace. We are reminded that it is God's love that matters far beyond the opinions that we might bring to bear. We are invited to discern that which is the essential and that which is opinion held up to God's love.

Romans 14:1-12

14 Welcome the person who is weak in faith—
but not in order to argue about differences of opinion.

² One person believes in eating everything,
while the weak person eats only vegetables.

³ Those who eat must not look down on
the ones who don't,
and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do,
because God has accepted them.

⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servants?

They stand or fall before their own Lord
(and they will stand,
because the Lord has the power to make them stand).

⁵ One person considers some days to be more sacred than others,
while another person considers all days to be the same.
Each person must have their own convictions.

⁶ Someone who thinks that a day is sacred, thinks that way for the Lord.

Those who eat, eat for the Lord, because they thank God.
And those who don't eat, don't eat for the Lord,
and they thank the Lord too.

⁷ We don't live for ourselves
and we don't die for ourselves.

⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord.
Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to God.

⁹ This is why Christ died and lived:
so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ But why do you judge your brother or sister?
Or why do you look down on your brother or sister?
We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God.

¹¹ Because it is written,
*As I live, says the Lord,
every knee will bow to me,
and every tongue will give praise to God.*

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

When you are part of a tradition that stretches across millennia there are some things that you begin to take for granted. While there may well be central understandings and visions of faith that start at the very beginning and continue on to this day, we can wonder what might connect us back to the very beginning of the faith. Among my favorite imaginations of what it might be like to uproot someone from an ancient context and show them around ours to see their amazement, pondering what they might notice. Were we to do that with a Christian of the first century I wonder how that might go. Sure; there would be obvious dislocation of time, space and environment as they would have to wrap their heads around a world they could not even imagine (starting with explaining that there is such a thing as the other side of the world and they were on it). Through the centuries of evolution, change, embrace of some ideas and relinquishing of others surely there is not a whole lot that we have to connect us all the way back. The technological, social and theological environment surely must have altered so much that it would be hardly recognizable.

But I suspect that the church may well be recognizable. The ways and means of faith have changed but the fundamentals basically have not. The big stuff—the essentials around which the church is organized—will basically be there. We would profess the same basic understanding of the world and that Jesus Christ will in time come and judge the living and the dead as the creeds put it. I suspect, too, that so would many of the conversations and struggles of the early church and our time. The issues of how to do church, who is in and who is out, what does it mean to be a child of God and the consequences of receiving God's grace would look awfully familiar to the observer from another time. It would take different shapes and sizes and the terms may well look rather different one to the next as far as appearance and particulars, but by in large I suspect the underlying resonance would be undeniable, ready to be recognized across the centuries. How do we come together, and what happens when we do has been the work of the Spirit from the very beginning and will only reach its conclusion in the fulness of time.

In case it has been a while since you have last read Romans through cover to cover in a sitting (as it has been for me) there is a unifying arch to the way things come together. The book, as a whole is written to people facing the problems of coming together across differences and how to make it work. In Rome, it was the unity of the sizable Jewish Christian community that had found itself in the city and the new gentile believers joining with enthusiasm. We often turn

to Romans for our theological statements of what it means to be reconciled in faith and the ways that things do or do not work within God's grace. That is right and proper because it is among the most full throated and well argued expressions of faith through grace we have in the biblical text. There are really two parts to the whole thing: The first part- through chapter 11—where Paul takes great pains to redefine that it means to the people of God in the context of the new covenant. He works both sides accounting for the alterations found by those who started out Jewish as well as those who come to faith from the gentile. Both get welded together for Paul by the logic of Christ's sacrifice that is sufficient for all. The second half is the consequence of this message of grace. This is what we have been sitting with over the last several weeks in Romans—the real world consequences of being bound in love to this new things together. Together it speaks loudly: because we are church we therefore do these things in hope and grace. Paul was building a bridge of the body that we must still traverse to this very day.

Which is how we come to this injunction we are given here: Bear with one another across the many things, but unite within the essential. The issue of judgement is as relevant today as it ever has. We are invited, always, to give our opinion about whatever we might find to respond to in the width of the world. Whether it is social media or the headlines of the denominational press there is always something to pronounce their take on the thing and decry the rest. Emily and I will occasionally find ourselves reading the news at the breakfast table after the kids have gotten out the door. When we find ourselves particularly distressed about one thing or the other that has gone on, one of us will ask "You read the comments, didn't you." I don't often go there because generally I don't often have the time to get beyond the headings, and often feel rather amazed when witnessing the depths of anger that passes for discussion. We know this well. It is certainly not a modern phenomenon: human beings like nothing more than making sure that their way is known to be the right and proper way, even if it takes arguing with strangers along the way.

Were we to take time to survey the various versions of the English text we have here, I am guessing we would have a wide menu of words to choose from when it comes with what Paul refers to as "Disputable items". The NRSV and others say "opinions". Largely Christians have historically agreed on the essentials of faith when it comes to the notions of who Jesus is and the work he comes to earth to do with us. What we argue about is what is essential and what is not

as well as the nature of the unique things we hold and whether they make us more or less righteous.

Baptism is the perfect example. The argument that defined the protestant reformation and the Anabaptist movement in particular was not really about the WHY of baptism. It was accepted as a sign and sacrament of God's grace. What defines the argument is the how and the methods of baptism along the way. I have been notified that my salvation is not valid because I did not receive the right form of baptism (immersion, not immersion, the trinity spoken of in the right way) every bit as much as I have been confronted about being baptized as an adult. Of course we argue about what is opinion and what is essential and we can go around and around about this ad nauseum. There are many more examples where these came from. I am sure you can recall them without my suggestions.

Paul, realist that he is, does not dismiss the reality of our judgy arguments. They are acknowledged and understood. But they are reframed. They are put within the context of judgement and where it ultimately belongs. The ethic of love that grows from God's grace that is for everyone must extend to the ways that we talk each other and how we bear with one another. In the context of the Roman reader it is the translation of Jewish to Christian and what needed to be retained of the traditional way and what could be shed in a new life and understanding of being in Christ. The questions of the rituals and ways of being Jewish (which of course is what Christianity is after all—a post messianic Judaism that has adopted a way of thinking about YHWH through the lens of Salvation). Translating that work is no easy transition, and is right up there with how one is to live and move right to this very day.

Judgement is placed where we ourselves are placed: in the only essential reality that must be confessed. That what ever else might be at play for us and in our world, we are each one in the hands of the one who loves us best and will ask us, finally of where we have found ourselves. Those whom we're tempted to condemn are, by God's grace, the Lord's "servants". No image-bearer of God is another image-bearer's master. God is, for Jesus' sake, Lord. As a result, God's servants take our marching orders not from our fellow Christians, but from God. We are, what's more, accountable to God alone. Our ethics are not about other people; it is about living God's kingdom life now and already. That is the life that we are called to. That is the life that we will in time present before Jesus as Lord. That is all that we need worry about. Ever.

The ethics, the how of our ways of life in the world is how we incarnate the way of God in our lives and in the world. It is how we bring the kingdom of God to life now, and not just in the by and by of the eventual. But we cannot confuse the ethics, the stuff that we use to make life workable and visible, for the God that they are meant to reflect and serve. We have often leaned so hard on doing things right—with the right clothes, the right attitudes, the right ways of being in the world—that we have yielded to the temptation to make those things the issue and not the basics of the God we serve. We are invited to bring our judgement and to place even that within the love of the one who calls us each home, and each into love.

May we seek the best in each other, and live out the way of love even in how we judge one another. Amen