

JESUS IS LORD! pt. 5

There is an old story of a visiting admiral chatting on the deck of a U.S. Navy ship with some enlisted men. "What would you do if another sailor fell overboard?" A sailor promptly replied: "I would raise the alarm and toss him a life preserver, sir." The admiral asked a second question: "What would you do if it were an officer?" At this, the enlisted man paused and thought before answering: "Which one, sir?"

"O Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way!" I love that song... because judgment of others within the Christian community is the precise issue that the apostle Paul centers on within these last chapters of Romans. For the last five weeks, we've talked about the definition of sin, which is separation from God. We've talked about idolatry,

which Paul sees as the root of all sin, not honoring God or loving God, but setting up our own gods in the place of our Creator. We've talked at length about the saving story of God in the Bible for all humanity that is mired in the tar pits of sin and idolatry...we have no choice but to continue living apart from God. With Jesus came a choice, through his life, death, and resurrection we can now choose to live a life with God or live a life apart from God.

A life apart from God means separation from God, serving your own idols, and finally being eternally separated from God. A life with God by faith means that you serve God and God alone, that you are now a member of Christ's household, a servant of God but even more than that, a beloved son or daughter of God who will live in the house of the Lord forever!

Finally, last week we talked about the definition of love for those who serve God. Selfless, self-sacrificing, unyielding love is what Christ showed us on the cross as God gave his Son for us. This is what it means to love, in God's vocabulary; every other meaning of love is just a pale shadow of God's agape love.

Now we come to the end of this incredible letter to the Roman church from the apostle Paul. His final admonition and teaching is about unity in the church born out of love, born out of the freedom that only Christ gives, and with that freedom and rights in Christ, we have great responsibilities.

Here's the argument that sets all this up. Apparently, in the first century church there were people who loved to eat meat, drink wine, worship God on Saturdays or Thursdays, and there were those who ate only vegetables because that

is how they were raised, they worshiped God on Sundays, they never touched wine because of the association of worshiping Roman gods and goddesses. Both of these groups have been saved by grace, these people are loving servants of God who truly follow Jesus in all parts of their life, yet each group wants to tell the other the "appropriate response" to God's love given through Christ Jesus. You must worship with your head covered...no, no, no you worship with your head uncovered. You must not eat this or drink that if you are a Christian...no, no, no you can eat and drink whatever you want. You must sing hymns in church...no, no, no, you must sing Christian praise music and Christian rock music in church to be a true Christian disciple. C'mon now...I'm meddling in some contemporary stuff...

But here's the truth: Both groups love God and love their neighbor, both groups are saved by the grace of God, both groups are wonderful Christian people born of the Spirit of God...so who's right? According to Paul, both are right! The questions Paul asks are: Do you love Jesus? Is what you do for the sole purpose of honoring God? If those two criteria are met, then who cares? Who are you as a servant of God able to judge another servant of God? All Christians will be judged by God, not for salvation, but by how much you love one another and follow the example of Christ Jesus.

So if someone wants blue hymnals in the church instead of red...oh well. If someone wants to honor God by dancing in church, to praise God with a drum solo, to quietly sit and pray silently in worship, to eat veggies only, or bacon...mmm...bacon...as long as we love one another as

Christ loves us...all of this temporal responses to God's grace will pale in comparison to the glory we will give to God on our Resurrection Day!

The second point Paul makes here in chapter 14 is that even though we have the right and the freedom to eat what we want, to praise God how we want, to serve our community in Jesus' name how we want...we must not abuse that right and freedom in the face of someone else's cultural and familial heritage. For example, if your Christian brother or sister grew up only eating veggies and they absolutely loves them, but hate meat and carbs, and you know it...you should not go sit next to them in the restaurant and order a thick rare steak piled high with onion rings and a giant baked potato. Just because you have the freedom and the right to eat what you want because of Jesus, there

is the responsibility dictated by God's agape, self-sacrificing love that directs us not to abuse our rights in Christ. To rub someone's face in it means that you are better than others, and the tar pit of sin has just sucked you back in again.

Make sense?

Here's another example: Jesus and his disciples used many cups of wine in the Passover meal. The Roman Catholics have used wine in the Sacrament of Holy Communion for thousands of years. Pretty much every church in Christendom uses wine for Eucharist, except our denomination. We use grape juice. The reason we use grape juice is not that we have any prohibitions against alcohol; under Christ, we can responsibly drink alcohol because there are no banned foods or drink. However, some people don't drink alcohol, either by choice or because they suffer from

addiction to it. So what do we do? We serve non-alcoholic wine, or what is called grape juice. Why? Because we love our brothers and sisters in Christ so much that we choose to drink unfermented wine instead of fermented wine for Eucharist.

We choose not abuse our freedom in Christ Jesus and rub people's nose in it by accusing them of not be Christian enough or properly responding to Christ's love...we choose the Holy Spirit instead of the god of selfishness that we so often fall prey to and fall back into the tar pit of sin and death.

We choose to honor God with the thoughts of our hearts and minds and let the tongue move to speak words of love... we don't choose hateful thoughts that look down at others and our tongues speak words of evil. For Jesus says that it is

not wine or meat or veggies or rock bands or hymns or grape juice that defiles a person and separates them from God...it is the thoughts of a person's mind and heart that defile them and cause them to speak all kinds of evil and hate.

"O Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way." I know I love that song, because it points out to me all the times I want to tell someone how to respond to Jesus' love, that the way they've been doing it must be wrong because they don't do it like I do.

How about changing that song to..."Lord, I want to be a Christian, in my heart, in my heart, Lord I want to be a Christian in my heart." Yeah, that's better.