

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Romans 14:1-12

Sermon Title: "The Hills to Fight on and to Surrender"

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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I could never understand vegetarians. I try to understand why a vegetarian eats the way he or she eats, but I don't get it. I think that I could become a vegetarian possibly – there are a lot of health benefits to eating greens – but then I eat a plate full of veggies and I feel like something is missing. I have to have meat.

I once knew a vegetarian, while I was studying for my pastoral doctorate over five years ago. JP Morgan was his name, a pastor of a church in New Haven, CT. I could never remember that he was a vegetarian. We would go out to eat after class (together or with other pastors), and he would search the menu for something he could eat that didn't contain meat. I could find meals quite easily, and it always surprised how long it took him to peruse the menu. Our conversation would always come around to talking about food, and I would forget that he doesn't eat meat. Once we were talking about a trip to England he went on, and I asked him if he ever had bangers and mash, which is a meal full of sausages and mashed potatoes. Again, he had to

remind me that he was a vegetarian, and I was completely embarrassed.

Paul talks about food in the first verses of Chapter 14 of Romans. Apparently there were vegetarians during Paul's time, and they might have been viewed as odd ducks. Actually, Paul himself might have been a vegetarian, but only as a foolproof measure.<sup>1</sup> He was a faithful Jew who only ate kosher meals (meat without blood in it), but he was ministering to Gentiles who could eat all the meat they wanted, blood and all. Paul did not want to be rude and not eat their non-kosher foods, so as a failsafe he decided to eat only veggies that have no blood. The Gentiles might have viewed him as an odd duck, and his fellow Jews along with him. There might have been talk, and that talk possibly turned into judgment over who was a real person or not by the way he or she eats.

Then Paul jumps to another category of contention: days of observation. Paul as a reformed Jew would still have observed certain days on the Jewish calendar as days set aside for God. He didn't expect the Gentiles to do the same thing, although he might have told them to keep a Sabbath Day for God. Paul would go off to observe certain days, and the Gentiles whom

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, 360.

he was ministering to might not have understood what Paul was doing. Again, there might have been talk, and with that talk came jumping to conclusions, making strong accusations, causing separation from each other.

Paul tackles the categories of contention, because he may have realized that he was in the thick of the contention himself. Paul basically tells the Romans that it doesn't matter. Who cares? You eat all sorts of meat, and I don't. I observe certain days on the calendar, and you don't. I say PO-tato, and you say po-TA-to. I say oysters, and you say er-sters. So what? "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat," Paul says. "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his [or her] own mind."<sup>2</sup> You do your thing and I'll do mine, and let us live together in peace. Let us stop with the petty bickering, and let us move forward together.

Paul could have ended that segment of Chapter 14 with, "You do your thing, and I'll do mine," but there is more going on here. Paul is addressing a fundamental sin that we all deal with: getting our own way. It doesn't matter who we are, down deep we wish to get

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 14:2, 5.

our own way. There are so many things we would love to change about our society. There are so many things we would change about the world to make it a better place. But we don't really want a better world for everybody – we want a better world for ourselves. Me, and me alone. “I don't care what others think,” we say, “just as long as *I* am happy.” It really doesn't matter what is good for our families, when it comes to wanting to change things. We want to change things to satisfy us alone. Everybody else is going have to deal with it – this is the way I want things to be.

When people don't do things the way we want them to do them, we become angry. We complain, we argue, we fight. We make snap judgments about others, lumping them in with what is evil about the world. And then we get so arrogant as to believe that God is on our side. God is never on anybody else's side. If a person doesn't think the same exact Christian things we think, they are evil. They are to blame. God will condemn them, not me, for acting so evil.

We all do it, vegetarian or no, calendar observer or no. We all judge people in small and big ways. We have certain people on certain lists, and we avoid those people as “non-Christians,” even though they attend church every Sunday and are actively involved. We judge others by the way they look, the way they

talk, the way they interact with us. Yes, sometimes people rub us wrong, and we have to prayerfully discern how God wants us to work with them. But the kind of judgment we are talking about here has to do with non-essentials: what a person eats, how a person walks down the street, how a person washes or doesn't wash his or her hair, etc, etc. We want the world to be a certain way, the way that satisfies me and me alone. Of course, God thinks that way too, right?

Getting what we want is the height of sin. It's what got Adam and Eve into trouble: satisfy me, me, me with fruit and knowledge and power. We were not created to be so selfish, so isolated from others.

Paul tells the Romans: You aren't going to get your way. That is not the point of our faith in Christ. Our faith requires us, demands us, to do what God wants, to surrender ourselves totally to the life God has for us. We let go of ourselves, and let go of any preconceived notions and false accusations. "None of us lives to ourselves," Paul says to the Romans in verse 7, "and none of us dies to ourselves." We aren't the center of the universe. The world doesn't revolve around us, vegetarian or no, calendar observer or no. The point of life is not to get our way. If we live, we live

for the Lord. If we die, we die for the Lord.<sup>3</sup> The Lord is the Center of our universe. All things, including us, revolve around God. So we do whatever God wants us to do. We don't look at others and judge them by the way they look or speak, although it's very hard to do. We could be judged by that same yardstick. We live and breathe and have our being in the Lord, who thought of us so much as to live and die for our eternal security.

Tomorrow we will observe Martin Luther King Day. During the day tomorrow, whether we get the day off from school or work or not, we will not be able to keep ourselves from thinking about the struggle of civil rights. We will think in some ways about the equality of all human beings, the rights of free people to live in a country that doesn't hold people back from succeeding because of their skin color or nationality.

Although tomorrow marks a day to remember freedom and civil rights, as we read Paul's words to the Romans in Chapter 14, we discover a paradox occurring here. We discover that we are not free to do whatever we want to do. We do not have unlimited boundaries that allow us to say, think, and act in whatever manner pleases us. In fact, according to

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Romans 14:8.

Romans 14, we are slaves to God. We are eternally attached to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. It doesn't matter what our nationality or skin color or gender or age might be, we are bound to God not just because of our faith in God through Jesus Christ, but more strongly through the dead and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christ rose and died, so that he would be the Lord of both the living and dead, Paul says. This means all things, both living and dead, *must* submit themselves before Christ. They must bend the knee, bow the head, open up the arms, and fall on the ground in perfect surrender, handing over everything to Christ to take control of. We are more than willing to give up everything for Christ, because only Christ could do for us what we could never do for ourselves: make broken people whole. He has filled in the gaps of our lives with love. He heals us of every sin and disease with righteousness. He makes us perfect before God, a perfection that is being made perfect each day until the day we come face to face with God our Father.

Because Christ did this for us, we are bound to him forever. We are servants together of God who may never leave his presence. We cannot leave the presence of each other, either. We are slaves who never get to go free and sin as we would like.

So if a person eats certain kinds of food, he or she does it for the Lord. Eating might be a mundane thing: we do it every day without thinking about it. We put food in our mouths, chew, swallow, and repeat the process. But even the most mundane things like eating and sleeping and breathing are done for the Lord. Everything we hand over to him, Paul says. Everything.

If a person observes one day over the others as holy, he does so for the Lord. If a person observes all the days just the same, she does so for the Lord. One person says PO-tato, and another po-TA-to; and they both do so for the Lord. One person cheers on Georgia, and another Georgia Tech, and none of them are right or wrong. They celebrate their teams for the Lord.

When we have to make decisions that will affect our families, we make those decisions for the Lord. When we deal with people on a daily basis, we do so for the Lord. When we have to interact with people who are difficult to interact with, we do so for the Lord. When we go out with our friends on a Friday night, we do so for the Lord. When we date somebody, go out to a movie and/or dinner, we do so for the Lord.

It doesn't matter if we are in church or in the



office, in school or on the field of play, at a dance club or at a movie, there is never a time that we are not bound to the Lord. There is never a time we don't treat people as brothers and sisters, fellow children of God. God the Father owns us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we will never escape that. Thank God, for it is Christ's death and resurrection that save us from ourselves.

We are the branches, and Christ is the vine. We are the clay, and God the Father is the Potter. It is very difficult to take ourselves out of the equation, to remove the spotlight from shining on us. Yet, if we see ourselves a servants together of God, the spotlight should always be on God by what we do or say. We may be more content with who we are in him.

If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. Whatever we do, live or die, we are still the Lord's possessions, the Lord's people. Who are we to judge another servant of God? Why do we show contempt toward a brother or sister in Christ, since we all stand before the judgment seat of Christ? It is to our Master that we stand or fall. Indeed, we will be made to stand, every one of us, for God is able to make us stand."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 14:8, Romans 14:10, and Romans 14:4, respectively.

