

Trusting God to Judge Well
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I think I was drawn into engineering out of HS because it's solutions-oriented. Engineers fix problems. I'm kind of like that; I like to fix problems. And even though it's been many years since I put my engineering to work, that's still part of my makeup; I like to find solutions to problems.

Disharmony within the body of Christ is a problem. And when you encounter this problem you ask, "what's wrong?" Something needs to get fixed! And our most natural tendency in those situations, especially when it comes to relationships, is to see the problem outside of us. We're very good at pointing the finger. They are what's wrong; what she's doing is wrong; what he's thinking is wrong. We usually don't say, "I think I'm what's wrong," do we? That's pretty uncommon; in fact, for some of us, we are not even willing to entertain the idea that we could ever be wrong. We might say, "I was wrong," but it's usually followed with, "But he's more wrong than me." And when that's our disposition, chances are we will be angry with each other; we will judge each other. And there will be no peace.

How can we move past these kinds of thoughts and actions? How can we be free from a critical spirit that usually looks at others, along with their differences, as the problem? Last week, we began a series in Romans 14 called *A Community at Peace*. Friends, we will never be a community at peace with a critical eye and spirit against our brothers and sisters. We learned a few things in our first sermon; let's briefly highlight those lessons.

1. We learned that in the pursuit of holiness and faithfulness brothers and sisters will have different opinions on how best to do that. Opinions is a key word. That's not a word I'm making up; it's right in vs. 1. Don't quarrel over matters of *opinion*. We're not talking about God's law here; we're not arguing over clear commandments. We have a difference in opinion that the scriptures don't answer definitively. When the Bible doesn't give definitive direction, we are going to have differing opinions. Let's not turn that into WW3.
2. We also learned that oftentimes those differences are legitimate and acceptable attempts to live lives of worship to God. Praise, honor, and worship of God is always our goal. Two sisters are both seeking to honor God and they have different opinions on how best to do that. Respect the differences and look how you can be supportive rather than critical. I need to qualify this a tad at some point (so I'm going to start now) because I don't want us to have the impression that feedback, correction, challenges from our brothers and sisters is always inappropriate. You should want the help of a brother or sister even in matters of opinion; loving and corrective feedback from a friend is a gift of God in our paths towards holiness. Only a fool keeps screaming "Don't judge me!" every time a brother or a sister comes with helpful words of correction and feedback. A godly person knows they need correction in many things and is glad to receive it.
3. Finally, we learned that we're going to be tempted towards judging and despising each other for our differences. Those with a more sensitive conscience might judge those whose consciences are more permissive. Those who are more permissive might despise and find their more sensitive brothers or sisters contemptible. We will never be a community at peace

if we judge and despise each other. (Listen to last weeks message if you missed it because it lays the foundation for this entire months' of preaching.)

To be this community at peace, the first thing we need to do is trust the power, grace and righteousness of God. That seems to be always the first place to start: God is our solution. Paul is going to tell us today that when we see God rightly, we will stop judging and despising one another. It's not the only thing we need, but it's the first thing we need. So, let's read our passage (READ Romans 14:10-12)

You can see in vs. 10 that Paul is addressing both the strong and the weak brother, not just one of them. As a reminder, the weak brother is tempted to judge because his conscience is convicted something is wrong; if it's wrong for me, he's going to be tempted to think, it's wrong for others. The strong brother is tempted to despise his weak brother because he will feel presumed upon and limited in his freedom in Christ; that might make him angry. Paul points both of them to the same place, the judgment seat of Christ. Vs. 10 says, "For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." The fact that the Lord is our judge is repeated various times. He says it again in vs. 11 when he quotes Isa. 45; "every knee will bow to God; every tongue will confess to God... he's the judge." The conclusion in vs. 12 again summarizes this point; each of us will give an account before God. He is our judge. Look at vs. 4 (READ), we all stand before God; God will make the judgment.

There's something implied in this message that I want to make explicit. Here it is: God will do right in his judgment. Revelation 16:7 says, "Yes, Lord God the Almighty, true and just are your judgments." God is always right in his judgments. He never gets it wrong; he never makes mistakes. His judgments are always right. When we judge there's this implicit or subconscious belief that God needs our help; that he can't do the job. Sometimes, we're actually trying to be helpful. Is it so crazy for me to think that if I struggle in a particular way that my brother struggles that way, too? No, that's not crazy. But what's not helpful is presuming my brother must be struggling the same way I am after he's told me otherwise. When we slip into that mindset, we've presumed God's role in a person's life. We can trust God to judge rightly; we don't need to do that for him.

Knowing that God is the judge helps both the one tempted to judge and the one who is tempted to despise. First, let's talk about how this helps the one who judges. Paul has two important truths he wants such folks to see. The first point is rather simple: your sister doesn't answer to you, she answers to God. That's what vs. 4 means when he says, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?" Now, it's not that we shouldn't hold each other accountable; and it's not that we don't have certain obligations to one another within the body of Christ. But it's very important for us to remember that Paul is talking about matters of opinion; he's not talking about the commandments of God. So, in matters of opinion, where the "right answer" isn't so black and white, don't feel the responsibility or burden to be the moral compass for other people. You're not responsible for someone else's faith. Your sister has a judge and his name is Jesus.

There's great freedom in this, friends. There's great freedom in knowing that my brothers and sisters have a master and it's not me, it's God. Do you how that's liberating? I don't have to carry that burden. That's God's job. When I remember that God is the master and not me I am free

to be a blessing, to be a help, to be an encourager and even one who offers correction. So, in matters of opinion, I'm free to be a friend who challenges, who debates, who supports and who encourages and trust that God is doing his work in my friend's life; that I don't have to bear the burden or weight of making sure my friend sees life like I do. Therefore, our friend has a judge; his name is Jesus. That means I don't have to assume that role.

Paul gives us another great piece of information to help us when we are tempted towards judgment. Let's just say that you can't shake the concern or the belief that your friend is not making the right decision. Let's say your friend loves to dip; he loves his tobacco. You've seen the pictures; you know the damage of tobacco. The cancer, the surgeries. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, you know from God's word, and you're concerned for your brother and his health and witness. You plead with him. He politely says, "Thank you for caring, but my conscience is clear." You plead with him again. He asks you, "Why do you drink soda if you're so concerned about your body being the temple of the Holy Spirit." Good point, but you're still concerned. What do you do? The answer is trust in the Lord. But trust what? What do I trust God with? Look what Paul says in vs 4 (READ).

Look at the encouraging words in that verse. First of all, Paul says, "your brother will be upheld." I know you're trying to serve your brother; I know you're concerned. But he will be held up; he will be supported. By who? By the Lord! Paul says, "For the Lord is able to make him stand." Do you know what Paul is saying to these Roman Christians? Trust God! He's working. He's not blind to what your brother needs. Maybe you're even right; maybe your sister should change her ways. But she's not. Guess what? God is able to make her stand. God will lift her up. He will help her with what you fear will make her fall.

Our God is so gracious. I'm pretty sure that someday I'm going to look back over the years of my life and be astounded at how God lovingly, providentially, upheld me; how he kept me standing when I should have fell. Our God is a loving, merciful God. It reminds me of the statement from Jesus in John 10:28 when he said, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." Friends, rejoice in the grace of God that keeps us from falling. And can I add: one of the ways God keeps us from falling is the loving correction or challenge from a sister in Christ. I really want to make sure you're hearing this: don't despise the words of a friend. Resist the knee jerk reaction to say, "Don't judge me." Sometimes that happens and it's not right to do (that's what we're talking about), but also, don't be so sensitive when a friend brings a word of warning or caution. It might be the very word God has for you to keep you standing.

The revelation that God is the One True Judge is also a good word for those tempted to despise. Remember, when we are tempted to despise, we're tempted towards anger and contempt. "I can't believe so-n-so is like that; what's their problem? It bothers me that we have to put up with so many immature people in our church." That's contempt. Here's the word: God is *your* judge. He's not just *their* judge. He's your judge. And when you're filled with anger, rage and contempt, don't imagine that's being ignored by God.

Jeremiah 17:10 says, “I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.” Angry outbursts, rude words, and quiet contempt are not appropriate responses even when others might be judging us or are expecting us to live up to their conscience. In fact, contempt and anger are actually forms of judgment. We might be angry that others are judging us, but that’s what we’re doing back in our contempt. Here’s how it works. Anger is pronouncement and punishment of guilt. It’s our way of assessing someone’s behavior and punishing it. Contempt is our way of being the judge, jury and executioner. But again, what did we learn today? Who’s got that role? That’s God’s role. And if that’s God’s role, it’s certainly not my role.

So, what can you do about all of this? Tomorrow, when you wake up in the morning, how does this help you? And what should you actually change? Remember, everything we heard today is meant to help us resist judging and despising one another; it should help us live at peace. Knowing, believing and celebrating that God is the judge of all the earth contributes to our experience of peace with one another. That means, then, that we should look for ways to cultivate a renewed awareness and love of God as our judge. Make sure you’re reading God’s word comprehensively because, believe me, you’ll see this truth time and time again.

You’ll see that God is a merciful judge. Read the story in Matthew 18 about the unforgiving servant. While the point of the parable is that our forgiveness flows from knowing the forgiveness of God, within the story we learn just how generous and kind Jesus is in his judgments. The king (the figure for God) forgives the debt of a man who could never in his wildest imaginations ever pay him back. But the king forgave; that’s what our God is like. Be glad!

Read the story of God and Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. God humbled King Nebuchadnezzar, but through that humility God brought grace. And listen to what Nebuchadnezzar discovered through his experience (READ Dan 4:34ff)

Doesn’t it sound like Nebuchadnezzar is amazed and astounded by the greatness of God, the greatness of his ways and judgments? It does to me. And I’m convinced this renewed awareness made a huge impact in his life. So, seek the same kind of renewal, my good brothers and sisters. Seek a right picture of God as judge and I’m confident you will become a person who contributes to the peace of this church family.

Key verse: Romans 14:10

Questions for the week

- Is it good for God to be the judge? Why or why not?
- How do we balance the message of Romans 14 (the need to resist judging and despising) with our need for the correction and care from others?
- What do you want God to change in you as a result of this message?