

Living in Light of Christ's Eternal Rule

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God's Greater Story / Peace; Rule; Love / Romans 14:1–12

- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning, Paul's words to us are strange. Strange, in that he joins two very different things together. In just a few short verses, Paul moves from talking about food to talking about the return of Christ.

St. Paul begins by talking about eating. Not eating as in partaking of the Lord's Supper, but eating as in consuming daily food. Some Christians in Rome are eating only vegetables and others are eating all things, without discrimination. This matter is so small and so specific that scholars today have trouble understanding it. It seems there was an argument about whether or not Roman Christians should keep Jewish food laws. Could they eat meat that was not kosher? if in doubt, should they abstain from meat all together? So, on the one hand, Paul is writing about something small and temporal. He is delving into the details of our daily dishes. But then, in just a few verses, Paul speaks about that which is large and eternal. He asks us to remember that we all shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ. We will give an account to him for our lives. Here' Paul's vision expands. He sees the return of Christ and the Last Judgment. This judgment embraces life, all of life, both now and forever.

In just a few short verses, Paul moves from the food on your plate to the judgement seat of Christ. From the small and the temporal to the large and eternal. This raises a question. What does eating have to do with the judgment seat of Christ? How are these two joined together? For Paul, the return of Christ is not something distant from God's people. The rule of Christ is woven into the details of our daily lives.

In 1306, an artist depicted this reality. In Padua, Italy, Giotto Di Bondone painted the walls of a church. The church is called the Arena Chapel, because it was built on land that stood next to the Roman arena. When you enter the chapel, you are surrounded by frescoes that tell the story of God. The life of Christ and the life of Mary are painted on the walls. Three levels of paintings. While the frescoes are beautiful, what I want you to consider is what happens when you turn around and leave the chapel.

In some of our congregations, you will find a sign posted by the door. "You are entering the mission field," it says. The letters are small and only those who are literate can figure out what it means. In this chapel, however, the entire back wall is covered with a fresco. A picture of the return of Christ. There is Christ, seated in the center, the largest of all the figures,

surrounded by a halo of light. His left hands grasps at the edge of the halo as if he is about to enter into your world. He is returning in judgment. Dividing the sheep and the goats. As you walk out of the chapel, the artist reminds you that the world you live in is not your own. You are part of God's kingdom and Christ is returning in glory to judge the living and the dead. Whatever your plans for the day, the artist wants you to see them through the eyes of Jesus. Your daily life is woven into his kingdom and everything you do, eating or sleeping, working or playing, is ruled by God.

As Paul writes:

For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

In Baptism, God has claimed us as his own. He has joined you to Christ. This Christ has risen and ascended and promises to come again. Until that day when he returns, you are his. Your daily life has been woven into his kingdom and his loving rule is expressed in the details of your daily life. Paul, like this artist, wants Christians to know that God has woven his loving rule in the details of our daily lives.

Unfortunately, this is a truth that we sometimes forget. In the corner of the painting there is a terrifying vision of hell. Demons are torturing humans and you can see the figure of death, seated, devouring everyone he can get his hands on. Even more terrifying, however, is one small figure. A lone man, journeying, with a bag on his back. He is not terrified. He is just walking...toward death. He is taking his time and yet he being led by demons to the pits of hell. There is always the danger that we will forget that we live in God's kingdom and end up on the road to that leads to destruction.

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus gives us a picture of the problem. It is hidden in the background of a parable that he tells. In His parable, Jesus contrasts two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. In the kingdom of God, all debts are forgiven. In the kingdom of this world, all debts must be paid by the one who owes them. A servant is brought before his master with fear and trembling. He comes with fear and trembling because he lives in the kingdom of the world. All debts must be paid by the one who owes them and he has a debt to his master. A huge debt. If a talent was worth about 20 years of labor, ten thousand talents was worth 200,000 years of daily labor. This debt was one he could never repay. He comes before his master in fear because he lives in a kingdom where debts must be paid and there is no way he could ever pay this debt. His wife and children could be sold into slavery, his property dissolved, his life ruined and he still would owe a debt to the master.

The master, however, lives in a different kingdom. A kingdom where debts are forgiven. And so, out of mercy on his part, he forgives this man his debt. That moment of forgiveness is not just a transaction. It is an invitation. An invitation by the master to live in a new kingdom. The master invites his servant to live in a world where debts are forgiven. When the servant leaves, however, he forgets that he lives in this new kingdom. Coming across someone who owes him

a little, he demands it all. And without knowing it, this servant has walked into prison himself, choosing to live in a kingdom where everyone pays his or her debts and he too, now, must suffer in prison until his debt is paid. Forgiven by God and invited to live in a kingdom where debts are forgiven, this man chooses to live in a world of judgment where everyone has to pay their own debt.

With this parable, Jesus is inviting his disciples to live in God's kingdom, a kingdom where their debts are forgiven, their sins are paid for not by their own hard work and effort but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God has opened the door for all of us to live in this kingdom, this kingdom where sin is forgiven in Jesus Christ. Yet, like this foolish servant, we sometimes choose to live in a kingdom where people have to pay their own debts.

That's the problem concerning Paul. God's people in Rome have been all forgiven in Christ. God has brought them to new life and they live in Christ's eternal kingdom. But, for them, Christ's kingdom does not change how they live with one another. Right now, they are fighting over food. Those who are strong in faith are despising those who are weak and those who are weak are passing judgment on those who are strong. God's church is divided, broken apart, filled with despising and judgment...especially in today's world rather than forgiveness, forbearance, and love. God has saved them all in his act of dying love and yet that love is dying. They no longer see it, nor live it, but despise and judge one another over something as small as food. I just wonder what Satan is using today.

Unfortunately, such fighting didn't end with the first century. It continues even today. The church has long remembered the death of its saints. Many of them were martyred. Killed by the world as they witnessed to the faith. In their death, we see the dying love of Christ. Sometimes, on their shields, you will find the instrument of their death. So, for St. Peter, you have a cross, turned upside down. For James the Less, you have a saw. Tradition has it that at 96 he was pushed off the roof of the Temple of Jerusalem and when he continued to live, he was clubbed to death and his body sawn in pieces. The church remembers these saints and the instrument of their death as they died in conflict with the world.

Yet not all Christians are martyred outside the church. We have those who have been martyred in the church as well. They're there, you know. These martyrs of the faith, martyred in their own congregations. They're there because we have a way of killing our own. We don't make shields to remember them. Rather they tend to be buried in the records. People who were once quite active in the church but now mysteriously have stopped coming or even stopped giving and even more mysteriously no one asks why. Were you to ask them, I am sure they might tell you. They have stories of battles they fought within specific congregations. Over their heads, we could place instruments of their death, like hymnbook changes, building projects, renovations, ministry expansion, the number of times communion is offered in the month, gossip, social media posts, and nowadays a mask. Even something as small as a church recipe that never made it into the church cookbook. Yes, the things we fight over can be small, almost inconsequential, like eating vegetables or meat, but the damage that is done, the division

of Christ's body, the way in which God's people turn away from his rule of love, is huge and can lead into people turning away from God and being lost for eternity.

This is what Paul was concerned about in Rome. And this is a concern that still confronts the church today. How do we live with one another? Do we receive one another as people for whom Christ died? Do we live in the love of God that has brought us into his kingdom and will lead us all to eternal life with him?

Today, we can be thankful for God himself comes among us and forgives our sins in Christ. As the apostle Paul writes:

9 For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

When Christ Jesus entered this world, he came in humility. He gathered about himself those who had accumulated great debts. Tax gatherers who were stealing from God's people, women who had taken their bodies and sold them. Those who had wandered far from God's ways and were living in a distant country, in debt, and unable to set themselves free. These are the ones that Jesus gathered around him and these are the ones for whom Jesus died.

Although he had no debt of his own, Jesus used his priceless life as payment for sin. Not his sin, but ours. Our lack of love for one another. Our willingness to judge and despise those for whom Christ died rather than forgive and forbear. These sins...all sins were laid upon Jesus and he died in payment of their costly debt. Today, Paul proclaims this wonderful truth among us. Jesus Christ died and lives again for you. That you might be his own and live under him in his kingdom. That he might be Lord of the living and the dead. We who have been baptized into Jesus have been baptized into his death and now our lives are his and his kingdom is ours. His kingdom is eternal, established in the heavens, and no one on this earth can ever take it away.

This is the kingdom that Jesus describes in a parable this morning. This is the kingdom that Joseph, by faith, lives in. When Joseph's brothers came before him, they knew they had sinned against him. They had sold him into slavery. They lied to their father, acting as if Joseph were dead. And now, after their father is dead, they lie to Joseph, telling him something their father never said, hoping to live by a lie they put on the lips of their dead father. Yet Joseph knows of their sin, their deception, and their lies. And not only is Joseph wise, he is also strong. He rules over the people of Egypt, second in authority only to Pharaoh himself. Joseph could have sold them into slavery. He could banish them from his sight. He could rule over them in vengeance, yet Joseph chooses to rule over them in love. They try to live by a lie they put on their lips of their father, but Joseph invites them to live by the truth that comes from their God. Joseph lives by love not hatred. BY doing that, he invites them into a different kingdom, a kingdom greater than Egypt. A kingdom ruled over by someone greater than Pharaoh. Joseph invites his brothers to live with him in the kingdom of God. Here, God is alive, and sins are forgiven and God's people live with one another in love.

do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones."

Jesus foretells this kingdom in a parable to his disciples. Joseph foreshadows this kingdom in love to his brothers. Paul now proclaims this kingdom in Christ for all people. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has brought us into his kingdom. He forgives our sins and he invites us now to live with one another in love.

What does that look like? Well consider with me one last glance at the artist's painting of the Last Judgment. As you look at the painting, you can see that Jesus central to our vision. He hangs there in the air, surrounded by light, about to break through this halo and enter the world. Until that day, however, we need to go forth as his people. We cannot stay here forever in this building (or on our screens or phones). We need to go out of this building and into the world. Since that is the case, the artist has strategically places a symbol over the door that leads out of the chapel and into the world. Everyone who leaves the chapel and enters the world does so by walking underneath the cross. Here, we are invited to live by faith.

Christ Jesus rules over all and there will be a day when everyone sees this. He will return to judge the living and the dead. On that day, he will fulfill his promise and raise us to live with him in a new creation. Until that time, however, we live by faith in this one who loves us. Although Jesus doesn't appear in the heavens right now to reveal his rule, he does appear in small ways on earth through the lives of his people. God's people reveal Christ's rules by living in this world in self-sacrificial love. Through the cross, Jesus has brought us all into his kingdom and until he returns, we live by his love.

Whether the Christians in Rome are leaving their house churches, the family of Enrico Scrovegni is leaving this chapel, or we are leaving the church this morning, we do so only and always by the grace of God. God's grace. Our lives are now part of God's loving kingdom. Daily events are moments for us to reveal the forgiving love of Jesus. Not only in how we treat one another but in how we treat others out in the world.

Over these past few months, the apostle has told us God's greater story. God the Father sent his Son Jesus to live, die, and rise again to forgive all sins. Ascended into heaven, Jesus now rules at the right hand of the Father. He sends his Holy Spirit into our midst. God, the Holy Spirit, through baptism, brings us to Jesus. Jesus then brings us forgiven to His Father, and the Father makes us part of the people of God. We live now no longer **by ourselves** but **with God's Holy People**. We live now no longer **for ourselves** but **for the purposes of God**.

God has a greater plan for you. That you live in light of Christ's eternal rule. He gathers you to hear his word and live by his proclamation. He offers you Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins and he sends you forth to share his love in your daily life with others. God has woven you into his kingdom and your daily life is part of his loving rule. Whether you live or whether you die, you are the Lord's. And one day, Jesus will come and bring about a new creation, for you and for all who trust in him. Until that day, in life and in death we say, "To this God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory forever and ever. Amen."

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.