

Why so much judgment? (Romans 14:1-12)

Because language matters, careful teaching and preaching matter.

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Because language matters, careful teaching and preaching matter. The writer of Hebrews characterizes the word of God as “sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:13). Exegetes, therefore, must be careful with language like that found in this week’s epistle reading, the language of “strong” and “weak.”

Descriptions of some believers as strong and others as weak, in the wrong hands, can wreak serious havoc in churches, where we have a habit of stratifying each other and vying for position. It doesn’t take too many minutes together in conversation before many believers will start automatically dicing each other into camps of holier and less holy, more faithful and less faithful, strong or weak, mature and immature. If you don’t believe it, have the misfortune of being around when someone mentions party politics or women in leadership or whether drinking is permissible for believers. The grouping and judging start nearly instantaneously.

Of course, this is not unique to today’s church. The Jesus community in the first century had the same issue, just ask Diotrephes and the super apostles (see 3 John 9-11).

All of this makes Paul's framing of Romans 14 particularly helpful. In great wisdom, he frames this passage not in terms of finding out who is strong or weak so as to compare and cancel, but in terms of seeking to discover who has diverse thoughts, backgrounds, and experiences so as to care, support, and mutually edify. Paul is encouraging readers to discover and then to honor the differences among the faithful, practicing compassion and even deference to those with radically different conceptions of holiness and discipleship.

What a thought: humbling ourselves enough to understand others, so that we can moderate our own opinions and seek to understand rather than to domineer.

Specifically, this passage raises the questions of sabbatarianism and kosher-keeping. But it isn't hard to envision the other battle lines that we have drawn against other believers over generations—though God has always called us to emulate the Prince of Peace.

"Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?" asks Paul. "Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?" (v. 10). These are explosive, exposing questions. How different might life be if we asked ourselves these questions in the mirror as often as we interrogate others with our litmus tests and inquisitions?