

# *Food Snobs and the Grace of God*

a sermon

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Trinity Reformed Church

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Romans 14:1-12

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A few weeks ago, my wife and I became empty-nesters.

It's been nice!

Sure we love our kids, and miss them. But things are a lot simpler now.

Especially around mealtime.

Now we (and especially Tammi) no longer have to plan around the varied schedules and divergent food preferences of our children. Especially those of our two sons. The big challenge for the last few years has been that our youngest has been a vegetarian, while his older brother loves meat. What to do?!!

Now I must say that Boy Number 1 has become significantly more flexible in his dining preferences. He's learned that he likes vegetables! Who knew? Well, some vegetables he likes. Certainly more than when he was a child. Then, his attitude was best expressed when the pediatrician asked him what he eats that's green and he gave the doctor a funny look. Now days, he's sometimes even been fairly enthusiastic in his appreciation for some of the meatless dishes set before him when he's home.

And Boy Number 2, the vegetarian? He's been easygoing and appreciative when Mom (with limited time and, frankly, little help from the Griswold menfolk) has managed to pull together something fancy with meat while the vegetarian option appeared to be a modest (yet well-prepared) afterthought. (He knows that something likewise fancy would have required his help.)

But in all this, the whole experience of raising three children to young-adulthood and beyond, I now realize that one thing Tammi and I have done, something that fills me with both pride and dread, is that we have managed to raise food snobs.

Yes, it's true. We, the whole Griswold clan, are food snobs.

Now, it's not all bad. I think it's good that our kids know what makes for quality food. And they're actually able to prepare some of it themselves. Tammi is such an excellent cook, I'm not so bad myself, and we have often been an impressive team when putting together a feast for friends. It seems that we have instilled some of that knowledge and appreciation in our children.

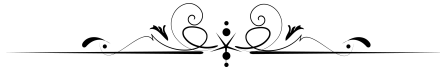
But I hope they're not snobby. At least not obviously so. And food snobs: aren't they the worst?

Well, there are music snobs: prattling on about their favorite artists, and looking down on those who like *those* bands, or *that* style, who laugh at you when they find out your favorite radio station. They're so annoying! And sports snobs: puhlezze. And wine snobs: wow. And car snobs: ugh. And don't get me started on movie snobs!!!

The thing is, for so many this is a sort of pastime, a kind of sport. Including many of us. We just have this urge, this need, to compare and feel superior in the comparing. We can't

resist, it seems, seizing on what's important or meaningful or pleasing to us, and then using it to measure others. And when they don't measure up, we judge them. We see them lower than us, and ourselves superior to them.

That gives us a kind of comfort, one both ugly and sad: because we refuse to see the good in others and in what they love. And we likewise cannot see how blessed we are, and how broken, in *our* loving the things *we* love.



A few minutes ago, I read a part of one of Paul's letters. And like many parts of all of Paul's letters, this part

may sound a bit odd,  
it may be a bit confusing,  
it requires a little explanation,  
it demands a little background.

Because there appears to be some food snobbery going on there, with Paul trying to settle an argument between vegetarians and carnivores. Verse 2: "Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables." Huh? Why? What's going on here?

I mean, to a good many, it probably seems strange, and unexpected, that *vegetarianism* would even appear in Christian scripture.

These days, we know vegetarians who have made that choice for health reasons. We know some who have made it for moral reasons. But I would guess that hardly any of you know any vegetarians who have made that choice for *religious* reasons.

But this really was the case among the Christians Paul knew and to whom he was writing. There really were Christians in Paul's day who, because of their understanding of the gospel, the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, felt that they could no longer eat meat, that it was not right for them to continue doing so. It was not just a dietary need or an aesthetic preference or a moral stance. It was a matter of religious conviction. They believed, they felt, that to eat meat would be a sin.

Now, it is not completely clear who these vegetarians were and why they made the choice they made. But I think it's quite likely that they were converts to the faith from out of the pagan Roman culture, a culture that absolutely loved its many gods and deities and idols. In some places, Roman communities were awash with little butcher shops and restaurants that also served as temples to this god or that one, where the food that was sold had been used in rituals of sacrifice to a god. It was hard, sometimes impossible, to be certain that the meat you just bought for dinner hadn't been part of one of those idolatrous rituals. So, certain conscientious Christians decided that faithfulness to Jesus Christ required that they abstain from all meat.

As I said: it was a matter of religious conviction.

Now, just as strongly convinced were other Christians who didn't have any religious qualms about eating meat. And Paul, for the most part, was one of them. He believed that these so-called gods were no gods, that they had no power at all. And more importantly he believed that Jesus alone was Lord of his life, the guarantor of his salvation, the center of his purpose and devotion, and therefore he was truly free:

free from all that had or would bind him, other than the Lord Jesus;  
free from rules old and new over when to eat, or what to eat, or how to eat,  
free from these so he could be free for serving the Lord Jesus.

Now notice what Paul did not do. He knew that Christ had set him free, even so free as to not worry, not even give a thought, about where his meat came from. For he knew that his salvation depended on Jesus, not on his diet. But even with this deep conviction, what Paul did not do was trod into this argument between Christian meat eaters and Christian vegetarians with insults and rejections and condemnations and rules, to tell those who would not eat meat that they were wrong and those who would eat meat that they were great.

Well, that's nice. How polite of him.

But it goes deeper than that. It goes deeper than nice.

Because Paul knew that faithfulness to Jesus meant acknowledging, in the very ways we treat each other, that our salvation was secured by Jesus and did not depend a wit on anything we did, that it was all about God's grace. And for Paul, all our oh-so-religious and moral judgments about others were nothing more than shabby attempts to convince ourselves that *we*, in and of ourselves, and what we *do*, all by ourselves, are why God loves us and is merciful to us.

This turns salvation into self-achievement.

This turns divine mercy into human merit.

And that is a *lie* Paul could never accept.

It is a lie, because it denies the grace of God made visible and effective in the Lord Jesus. It is a lie, because it contradicts the truth that it is *in spite of* who we are and what we do that Jesus died and rose and by that resurrection power joins us to himself. It is a lie, because it rejects the work of Jesus, and puts in its place our own work.

For Paul, this lie must be rejected by believers not only with words and thought and logic but even more with deeds, in their behavior, in how Christians treat each other when they disagree. The lie must be rejected right when it comes down to matters of principle and deep conviction, because that's when it becomes both harder and more essential for siblings in Christ to acknowledge that neither of them are saved by being *right*, but instead they're saved by Jesus Christ. And that acknowledgment opens the possibility, and really the necessity, that both of them understand their own positions with humility and the other's with compassion.

Paul talks about the strong and the weak. I think he could have, if they had existed back then, put those in quote marks. Who is "strong?" Who is "weak?" Isn't it instead really the case that in Jesus Christ we are *both strong and weak*, ever strengthened by Christ *and* always dependent on him? Truly, once I claim only one of these for myself, I then pass judgment on others, a judgment that risks making me the food snob that denies the grace of God.

When it comes to food snobs and God's grace, Paul had no doubt which was truer, purer, lovelier and more loving.



It is so tempting, so easy, to judge other Christians

for their behavior,  
for their attitudes,  
for what they do or don't do.

to measure them by yardsticks we have made,  
to weigh them on scales of our own design.

It is so easy, it comes (almost) naturally and (surely) readily to us, so that we engage in comparisons that make us feel

good,  
and right,  
and superior,  
and blessed,  
and holy.

Of course, it's not just with matters of Christian faith that we do this. It comes up with all sorts of other things. And, of course, it's not just Christians who do this. People everywhere, in churches but not only there, judge others about

how they look,  
or what they wear,  
what they do,  
or how they talk,  
what they think,  
or what they drink,  
and, of course, how they vote.

But this ready habit people have to look down on others, to pass judgment on others, is an especially serious matter in the household of faith, among sisters and brothers in Christ. Because it stands in contradiction to God's love and mercy and forgiveness which we have in Jesus.

And that forgiving love, that loving forgiveness from above? We don't deserve it. We don't earn it. But we have it. What does that say about our habit of judging others, judging each other, over our differences?

Some Christians seem unable to accept that there is not one possible way of faithfully being a Christian. Some appear to be so bothered by the variety of ways in which other Christians differ from them that they expend a tremendous amount of effort trying to correct the perceived faults of others.

Here's the thing:

To be free in Christ is to be willing to walk with the Christian with whom I disagree.

To be strong in Christ is to be willing to serve the Christian whose position I reject.

To be free and strong in Christ is to accept that my strength comes only from Christ, and he gives it to me only as I acknowledge my absolute weakness, laying down every yardstick I might use to measure others and find them not measuring up.

If you are strong in your faith in Christ, you are strong enough to stay with the weak, lovingly to remain in conversation with him, humbly to challenge her, lovingly and humbly

to receive back the challenge and questions that this sibling in Christ may pose to you about your own sincerity and fidelity to Jesus.

For one person, freedom in Christ means that wine and beer are among the creaturely blessings we can enjoy out of gratitude for God.

But for another, freedom in Christ means freedom from the bondage to alcohol one had known.

For one person, freedom in Christ means freedom from every expression of sexuality that is not traditional marriage.

But for another, freedom in Christ means freedom for a committed, mutual, lifelong partnership that stretches the traditional definitions.

And into those and other divisions among Christians, the path I most truly desire is not division, but conversation, that those who disagree will question each other and listen to each other and, in the end, still love each other.



This is not easy. None of this is truly easy, once we get into the differences between Christians about how we live out our salvation in our everyday lives.

But here's what I hope for us, and pray that we will do, that confessing both our strength and our weakness in Christ, we will

love each other,  
accept each other,  
challenge each other,  
bless each other.

*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.