

Justification Strong (Romans 14)

14 As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ²One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸For 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. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall confess to God.”

¹²So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

-- Romans 14:1- 12

This week our sermons here at Seminary are about *spiritual weaponry*. This does not mean that we are speaking about things that are not real as if they were. What is spiritual is more real than what is material. It does not mean that we are trying to make life in Christ sound as admirable as training for international sports at the highest level. It does not mean that we are trying to make the gospel ministry sound like a job that is as noble and important as military service. No. In fact, it means that we are using the easier example of athletic training to indicate how determinedly we must practice our faith in order to discipline our Old Adam, which is a far cry from aimless shadow-boxing. Having been enlisted by our Lord, we must suffer – truly suffer in our lives and bear His cross, for every Christian vocation in this life is a vocation of taking up His cross and the ministry of the gospel is a work of suffering until the day we are taken to be with Jesus in Heaven.

What is next in our spiritual weapons briefing week? At first reading, it sounds like our text is about food and not spiritual weapons at all. Hearing the powerful sermons this week – Dr. Weber's manly sermon about boxing (especially about African and German boxers defeating American boxers, I noticed!) and Dr. Böhmer's powerful sermon about Baptism, suffering and the ministry – I felt disappointed to receive a text about food. I too wanted to preach a brave, manly sermon.

Well. Paul's words here in Romans 14 are in fact quite *muscular*. Or perhaps our wives and sisters in Christ in the congregation would like to remind me that they are a fine instance of *flexibility training*. In the United States our army has a theme that I am drafting for today's sermon on spiritual warfare. The US Army theme is “Army Strong”. My sermon theme is

Justification Strong

St. Paul has targeted today's text to one single point. "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 turn the apostle's declaration that we belong to the Lord is the tactical outcome of his entire letter, which is a field manual concerning justification.

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

Do you believe this? Well, Paul gives us the drill for training ourselves to believe the doctrine of universal justification. It has to do with everyday matters, with food and daily objectives.

Now I am not a combat veteran, but in my regular volunteer service under the auspices of the US Air Force I get to work with military veterans quite a bit. In particular, I have a couple of colleagues who are retired Senior and Chief Master Sergeants. Let's think of Paul this way, not as an officer delivering a briefing, but as a seasoned sergeant who shows us how to think and how to act as soldiers of Christ, day in and day out, here in the trenches. Chief Master Sergeant Henry Dotson is a friend that I have been privileged to work with for the past two years. I have immense respect for him as a person and as a career military man. His job specialty was food services. An army travels on its stomach. So I am thinking about Chief Dotson as I tell you that in order to make us "justification strong" Paul orders us to consider food.

What can we learn from food? "Food is a common human need, we must eat to survive. But humans add a cultural dimension to food that goes beyond nutrition. Food traditions play a role in societies." I read this in a display at the MuseumAfrica when Paula and I visited Johannesburg on Saturday. Food can be used to teach; food can be used to propagandize. Food can be used as a weapon.

For example, a member of Christ's congregation in the first church I pastored told this story about her experience as a little girl under the Nazis. At lunchtime the teachers would instruct the children to pray, *Vater unser im Himmel, ... Unser tägliches Brot gib uns heute*, "Our Father who art in Heaven ... give us this day our daily bread". Then they would make the children sit silent at their desks for a long time, hungry. At last the teachers would instruct them, "Now, children, pray "Our Fuhrer, give us this day our daily bread". At this point, boxes full of bread and cheese would be brought in for lunch.

By contrast, Paul uses food and eating to exercise our faith in *justification*, that is, mealtimes provide an occasion to put on the full armor of God and drill in the reality that salvation is by faith alone in God's unilateral action of justifying us and thus making us His honored household servants with the full rights of sons. Suppose, Paul writes – suppose that someone in your congregation is very picky about what they eat because they are nervous about committing a sin. Or, suppose that you are very picky about what you think a Christian ought to eat or ought not to eat. "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ² One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³ Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him."

The Christian who is picky about food, who thinks that every believer ought to abstain from or not eat certain things, is wrong. He is *weak*. But it does not follow from this that you who are strong in your biblical understanding that there are no longer kosher rules, and so on for God's people, ought to teach him a lesson. On the contrary, there is a deeper reality here. The reality is the value of each Christian in terms of justification. The truly important thing at mealtime is not the food, not the diet one follows, but

each person him- or herself *because God has justified every single human being* by His incarnation, death and resurrection. For the same reason, when a person weak in his faith and thinking maintains that one day of the week, say, is more important than the other six – which is biblically inaccurate – we need to deploy the doctrine of justification. First, we deploy justification to remind ourselves that everyone in the discussion, weak or strong, is justified by Christ and therefore is His soldier, His servant and is not under our command. Second, we deploy justification to help strengthen the weak person in the confidence that he or she is justified and therefore needs to upgrade his biblical training.

So, look at the other person – whether you are weak and mistaken yourself, or whether you recognize that he is weak – not as someone to be defeated and brought to heel, but in this way. Let me preach as a good drill sergeant would instruct you.

There are two realities to keep in mind, soldiers of Christ! Number one, these people are *immortal*! Get this through your twenty-first-century skulls. Read C. S. Lewis's essay, *The Weight of Glory*.

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption which you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours [...] our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner—no mere tolerance or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses.

Here is the second thing to keep in mind, soldier of Christ! These people around you in church and seminary are redeemed and *justified*! The book of Romans is an army manual, it is God's *Uniform Code of Military Justice*. This is your Bible, soldier! Memorize it! Keep it in your jump bag! Use it, soldier!

For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

Be Justification Strong!
Amen!

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