

26 January 2025

Embracing Our Weird: A Weird Way to Think about Being Right

Romans 14:1-5, 10-15

The internet is a good thing, I've decided. Email lets me communicate quickly and cheaply. Sermon study is easier, too. Google is much quicker than the old concordance. With the internet, we livestream our services to those who can't be here in person. I read all my newspapers and magazines on the internet, and every weekend I do crossword puzzles with a friend in New Zealand. See? It's good. But – and I don't want to burst anyone's bubble, here – sometimes even good things can have drawbacks. The internet seems to be contributing to isolation and loneliness, as people withdraw into virtual worlds; shortening attention spans, making public discourse shallower and meaner; and pushing political opinions on both sides to extremes. Besides all that, there's the Comment Section.

Back when the internet was new (yes, I'm that old) the Comment Section was imagined as a good thing. Magazines would post an article online and provide a space for a community conversation afterwards. People could add their contributions or their different perspectives to the original article, and enrich the experience for everyone. What a good idea. Yeah, no, that's not really what happened. What happened was that people realized that Comment Sections were where you could post anonymous opinions without consequences. You could say anything you wanted. You didn't have to justify your opinions with evidence; you could just write that people who disagreed with you were ignorant. You could call them names, question their parentage, anything you wanted. So people did. Before long, the spirit of entrepreneurship had invented Twitter, which is sort of a 24-hour Comment Section. Soon wherever you looked on the internet, people were posting opinions that nobody had asked for, and abusing everyone who disagreed. To paraphrase the Book of Judges, "In those days there was no listening in the land, and everyone was right in their own eyes."

Now it's probably not fair for me to pick on the internet. This new technology makes it easy to be obnoxious about our opinions, but people have always had different ideas and have always argued. Even in scripture we read arguments. The Apostle Paul had very strong opinions about, well, about lots of things, and often people disagreed. Here's an example of an argument in scripture. I preached on this question about a year ago, but in case you missed it or have forgotten, let me summarize the issue. The early Christian churches were surrounded by temples to Jupiter and Venus and Athena and Diana and so on, and the question came up whether it was all right for Christians to eat meat that had been sold in the pagan temple market – meat that had been previously sacrificed to pagan gods. Did that meat bear the taint of idolatry? Or was it fine, inasmuch as those gods weren't real, anyway?

We read Romans, chapter 14, verses 1-5 and 10-15.

14 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the

Lord is able to make them stand. ⁵Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds.

* * *

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? 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 give praise to God.’*

¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

¹³Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died.

So here’s Paul’s view on the question of idol meat. *It’s fine.* It’s not unclean. It’s not tainted. It’s not a sin to eat it. Go ahead. After all, Jesus himself said in Mark 7, “We’re not made unclean by anything that goes into our bodies from outside; what makes us unclean is the anger and lust and envy and betrayal and dishonesty that bubbles up from within us.” Moreover, Paul’s quite sure he’s right: *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.* He even suggests that that people who are worried about that meat might have an immature faith. They should be moving past such external worries. So what does Paul say to do? “I want you to go right up to those people who think it’s wrong to eat that meat and *leave them alone.* Don’t argue with them. Respect their sincere opinion that you disagree with. If you’re having dinner with them, don’t eat idol meat. Don’t be a jerk, all right? Don’t even *think* less of them, because who are you to think less of anyone for their faith? What, you think you’ve got it all figured out? Give me a break! In summary, Paul’s message to Christians who think that idol meat is fine is this: I think you’re right. And I don’t care. Being right means nothing if you are not loving as well. Jesus died for those people you disagree with every bit as much as he died for you. Treat them accordingly.

This attitude toward being right was probably always a minority view, but in our day, with our internet teeming with angry disputes between people who are all absolutely certain of their own rightness and deeply disdainful of anyone who thinks differently, Paul’s attitude is nothing short of weird. We should be that kind of weird. Let me give you two reasons to not argue with each other. First, a practical reason. Here is what I have learned from the Comment Sections: most people who argue are not interested in what anyone else says and are certainly not listening to them. They’re not there to learn, but simply to announce their own obviously correct opinion to the admiration of the world. No one’s mind is being changed; they’re all just talking to hear themselves talk. There is nothing to be gained by joining them. Second, a biblical reason, which Paul alludes to when he says, *It is before [our] own lord that [we] stand or fall ... each of us will be accountable to God.* There are only a few descriptions of the Last Judgment in the New Testament, and all of them come from parables or in symbolic visions, so please don’t put too much weight on the details. But in general all those pictures have this in common: No one is going to be judged by God based on whether they were *right*. Having correct opinions never even comes up. But everyone will be judged on how they treated others. That’s the only standard

that is named. We are not right when we are correct; we are right when we are in right relationship with others.

Let's do some application. The whole meat-offered-to-idols thing is so first century, so let's go somewhere else. Let's say I meet someone who deeply and fervently believes that the Bible must be interpreted literally and that, based on that literal reading, the earth was created just over 6000 years ago in six literal days. Now, I think that's wrong. I think that's a misreading of Genesis 1, which I see as a theological poem about the nature and unity of God, not an eyewitness account. What should I do when this person announces his opinion that I disagree with? Begin by listening. Why does he believe that? All our minds work differently. Mine is attuned to poetry and comfortable with the idea that in its own way poetry can be true as much as science. But that's not how every mind works. At this point in this person's life, he might *need* to see Genesis 1 as scientifically and historically accurate in every detail. So listen first, don't jump in to correct him. Do I pretend to agree with him? No. If he asks – and that's a crucial *if* – then I tell him my different view of Genesis 1. But I don't argue; I don't belittle; I don't judge. Christ died for him; I should treat him accordingly.

Okay, let's up the stakes a little. Now let's say I'm talking to the same person, or maybe someone else with the same view of scripture, who announces that homosexuality is an abomination, that it's nothing but a sinful choice that some people make and that they just need to repent of. Now I disagree with this, too. I am aware of the scattered specific verses in scripture that condemn homosexuality, but my own reading of scripture as a whole along with my own reason and experience leads me to very different conclusions. This one's harder, isn't it? I have friends and family members, church members and colleagues, who are gay or lesbian or transgender, so this person's opinion is not just an intellectual thing. It feels like an attack on people I love. What do I do? This *is* harder. But I do the same thing. I listen first. I hear their story. What is behind their view? What has been their experience? Do I argue with them? Do I point out the flaws in their approach to scripture? Well, let me ask this: what is the chance that I would change their mind by doing so? Probably about the same chance that they will change my mind, which is to say, roughly zero. So, no, I don't argue. Do I pretend to agree? No. If they ask – and *only* if they ask – I tell them my view. But I don't argue; I don't belittle; and though it's harder, I *try* not to judge. Christ died for this person, too; I should treat him accordingly.

One more, but this one's homework, for you to resolve on your own. We began a new presidential administration this week. Now, people have widely different views of our new president. At one extreme, some believe that Donald Trump will be the salvation of America, that he was appointed by God to lead our nation. At the other extreme, some believe that he is the embodiment of evil and will destroy our nation. Now, I don't know anyone who is just *Meh, I don't really have an opinion about President Trump*, so I'm going to guess that everyone here feels that one of those extreme positions is dead wrong. Here's your assignment. A longtime friend whom you know shares your faith announces to you that opinion that you think is absolutely wrong. What do you do?

As I said, I'll leave that one to you, but one reminder before you start. Even if you are absolutely, 100% sure that you are right in your view of President Trump, remember that in the end – literally in the *end* – nobody cares if you're right. In the weird world of following Christ, right does not mean being correct, it means walking in love.

* * *

Not everyone fights the way we do. There is an ancient Jewish tradition called “The Argument for the Sake of Heaven.” It consists of two rabbis who have opposite opinions on how to interpret some point of scripture coming together in front of others to set out why they believe as they do, after which they embrace each other as beloved friends. The point of the exercise is not to prove who is right, and it certainly is not to show who is wrong. Rather it is to allow those who are listening to hear the wisdom on both sides and decide for themselves. I know, right? A bunch of weirdos! Maybe we could be that weird, too. But know ahead of time that it only works if you start out already loving your opponent.