

FROM COMMANDMENTS TO COMMITMENTS



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston
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Romans 14: 1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those 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. Who 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.

Some 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. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also, those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

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.

Why 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. For it is written,

*"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God."
So then, each of us will be accountable to God.*

This is the word of the Lord.

I remember when I was 12 years old, I had a best friend in my neighborhood and her name was Anna. Anna was Catholic and I was protestant. I can remember how different Anna's home was from mine. Whenever I was in her home, I would notice crosses on the walls in their home with Jesus hanging on them. It was the first time I had ever seen a crucifix. I learned very early that protestants focus is more on the resurrected Christ (empty cross) while Catholics (who also affirm the risen Christ) feel it is important to remember the suffering of Christ.

I remember walking with Anna to her Catholic church and waiting on her while she went in and confessed her sins to the priest. Very different. My pastor never asked me personally about my sin. I remember one time being so curious as to what Anna had done that was so bad that she had to go tell her priest about it – and I remember Anna laughing and telling me that the priest was given the power of God to forgive her sins. And, of course, as protestants we believe that no pastor has the power to forgive sin – we believe that God alone does this through Jesus.

Differences in religious practice have plagued every generation. It is why we have so many denominations and differing faiths. Each one with differing views.

For the Israelites, their religious practice was complicated too. Out of the 10 commandments given by Moses grew 613 commandments called the Mitzvot. It was the function of the priests to monitor all these commandments among the people so if a commandment was broken the priest made sure that the children of Israel paid for their sin with the right sacrifice or performance of a correct ritual.

The prophets were sent by God to remind the people of their **commitment** to honor God rather than strict adherence to **commandments**. Here is a short summary of what the prophets were concerned with:

- Jeremiah said that the priests were ruling by their own authority – not God's. Remember it was Jeremiah that said that God's covenant is one that is written on the heart. Jeremiah 31:33 "*This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,*" declares the

LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."

- Amos reminded them of social justice as an expression of God's covenant. There are **commitments** we make to justice that honor God's covenant.
- Hosea focused on the Israelites reliance on military strength rather than God.
- Isaiah claimed that the cause of the wars was due to their failure to honor God in not seeking justice for all people.
- Zephaniah told the Israelites that they were practicing idolatry and oppression which did not show their **commitment** to God.

Jesus constantly addressed issues with commitment to honoring God over the commandments that the priests were attacking him with. The priests accused Jesus of breaking the sabbath. It was the chief priests who accused Jesus of so many faults before Pilate. They were so wrapped up in their commandments that it was impossible for them to see the face of God in Jesus Christ and honor God who was standing before them in the flesh.

Jesus taught us that it was never God's plan to save us through commandments and rules. Jesus would say to the priests, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and all sort of herbs and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone" (Matthew 23:23).

Now we are reading in Romans where people are coming to know Christ and believe that he is God's son sent for our salvation, but they are coming with certain dietary restrictions. Those who were raised strict in the Jewish custom have rules about eating while Gentiles coming to faith do not. Here is Paul, just like Jesus, just like the prophets saying not to quarrel over these differences. It is not the practice that matters. What matters is bringing honor to God. Your commitment to God is what is important.

A Funny:

A Rabbi and a Roman Catholic Priest were sitting next to each other at an Inter-faith event. When dinner was served someone thoughtlessly had placed a slab of ham in the Rabbi's plate. The Rabbi did not protest but simply proceeded to eat other things his faith permitted. The Roman Catholic Priest leaned over in the direction of the Rabbi and said, "Rabbi, you and I know that the dietary laws from the Old Testament were developed at a time when pork meat was indeed dangerous due to lack of refrigeration and low heat in cooking. Those days are gone, pork is safe and there is no reason to cling to outmoded ancient practices. When will you eat your first mouthful of ham?" The Rabbi paused briefly and then responded, "at your wedding, Father Maguire, at your wedding"

Our relationship to God and to one another is never meant to be quantified which is the point of the Gospel text in Matthew 18 where Peter asks Jesus about the number of times that we are supposed to forgive one another. Peter asks if it is 7 times as the number 7 was excellent from the perspective of being legal.

After all, seven was considered a mystical number, the days God spent creating the world then resting on the 7th day, 7 refers to something being complete (Naaman had to bathe in the Jordan 7 times to be healed), 7 signs in John's gospel, 7 things God hates in Proverbs 6:16, the 7 woes in Matthew.

Seven, however, was still trying to quantify the grace and love of God. Jesus gave an answer that was not legalistic. Jesus used a number to stretch the mind and the spirit of those who heard his answer. It was meant to be a call to **community and commitment beyond commandments**. Matthew goes on to solidify the point he is making by adding the parable in which a greatly indebted servant is dealt with compassionately by his master while he, in turn, deals legalistically and tyrannically with a fellow servant who owes him very little. We can hear in the background of this story the echo of the section of the Lord's prayer "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". Community and commitments, not commandments.

Phillip Gulley, author of "If Grace Is True" as he began to study and write books, his more evangelical Quaker friends didn't appreciate his movement from the priority on what you believe to how you live your faith. He says that the more Evangelical Christians tend to act as if they are the appointed spokespersons for Christianity. Rev. Rob Bell received criticism from his book, "Love Wins" when he suggests that non-Christians may be saved.

What commandments or rules still bother you? How worthy do you feel to be at this table? When you close your eyes how big is God's table and whose knees are under it? As for me, I am so grateful that great pastors like Phillip and Rob are open to listening and following a commitment to love and honor God rather than a commandment to stay aligned with a movement that excludes rather than to be open to expansive love of God.

While we would be mistaken to think that somehow Paul's writings means that everything we want to do is ok – this is not what Paul is saying. Paul is saying that we belong to God -so live in ways that honor God that bring glory to God committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ – loving God, loving neighbor.

Let us move, as God intended, from commandments to our own commitment to honor God.

Let us pray: *Holy One whose love, grace and mercy are without measure, help us to remember even as there are those in our own Christian community who put restrictions and rules around how You accept us, that we are welcome to Your table, welcome to Your heaven, that we are loved and appreciated just as we are. Help us to honor You in the way that we use our words, the way that we treat our neighbors and to be a reflection even to those who would condemn in Your name of how Your love wins and Your grace is true. Feed us as we come to Your table this day. Amen*