

Sermon Text – Sunday, September 13, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Exodus 15:1-11, 20&21; 2nd Reading: Matthew 18:21-35
Scripture for Message: Romans 14:1-12 “Accountable”

Paul can be perceived as judgmental when he writes to various churches to address their issues, and today's scripture reading is no exception. He talks about those who “eat only vegetables” as weak in faith, assuming he means that those who believe in eating anything are strong in faith. That, in my opinion, sounds judgmental and sometimes it's hard to look beyond that. Let us not be judgmental about Paul as we read from his letter to the Roman churches, let us look beyond the weak and the strong as we try to get to the heart of the matter. The fact of the matter is that Paul's personal opinion matters no more than anyone else's in relation to God's acceptance of believers from all cultures.¹

When I read these words, I hear them as a warning to not think yourself better than another, because in the end we are all accountable to God who is the only being qualified to judge humanity. I hear Paul counseling the church that whatever you do – whether this or that – it should be out of reverence for the divine. That is advice for all humanity, all believers.

Do what you do to honor God and not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Do what you do and give thanks to God. Christian freedom extends to whatever may be done to honor God.² Paul gives us his reasoning that we do not live or die to ourselves, but our lives belong to the Lord, bought with his blood through his death and resurrection. The fact that there is one Lord, and we are all servants of the same Lord, overrides any disagreement on peripheral matters. We are all accountable to God – the weak and the strong.

We can tie the words Paul used to address the Romans to Jesus' words about forgiveness. Peter asks how often he should forgive and Jesus responds by telling a parable about forgiveness. Jesus finishes with these words – “if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart” my heavenly Father will also hand you over to be tortured. Jesus, as he teaches his followers to pray, gives them these words “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Forgive us as we forgive others – that

¹ Karen Baker-Fletcher. “Romans 14:1-12 – Connecting the Reading with the World.” *Connections, Year A, Vol.3* eds. Green, et.al. WJK. Print. 2020. pp 309-310.

² Paul J. Achtemeier. *Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Romans*. WJK. 2010. Print. 216

Sermon Text – Sunday, September 13, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

statement can be expanded in meaning – what you do not give to others God will not give to you. Can we not consider our tendencies to pass judgment on others in the same context as refusing to forgive? If you refuse to forgive, that, to me, is the same as continuing to judge.

Underlying Jesus' words on forgiveness and Paul's words about judgment is Christian freedom and the unity of believers in the body of Christ. Paul writes out of concern that self-righteousness and judgment are threats to the unity of the body. Why do we judge those who are different from us when in the end, on God's Holy Mountain, our differences will have no consequence? How can we reject those whom God welcomes or decide who we think God should welcome? "For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." I consider these words a dire warning – how we treat one another affects our future.

When believers judge others according to their own convictions, there exists the danger that they are setting up something other than God as god. Those who do the judging are supposing that their practices and beliefs are "better than" another or that they know precisely what will honor God. That attitude dishonors God and discounts the truth that God can turn any action or practice, however intended, to God's own redemptive purposes. My mother used to tell me, "You have enough of your own worries without worrying about someone else." Leave people to their convictions – as long as they set aside time to honor God. The act of honoring God and giving thanks to God is more important than how we perform the act.

Eventually every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall give praise and each of us will be accountable to God. Paul writes "For to this end Christ died and lived again" and we should point out that Jesus Christ did not die to give human beings the power to condemn one another. Paul is concerned that how we treat others affects our future – Paul is concerned enough to remind us that we are accountable to God alone. God's judgment is not about whether we are worthy of salvation – Christ has made us worthy. It is, however, about the quality and responsibility of living as one who knows they are worthy. When we stand before the judgment seat of God it will be to account for our own actions – not the actions of others. What you did not do for the least of these you did not do for Christ!

Sermon Text – Sunday, September 13, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

So, what does this all mean for the church? It is a lesson that the condemnation of fellow believers whose practices differ from our own is wrong because, although the practices may differ, they grow from a common root: All are done to honor God. We cannot judge those attempts to honor God when they come honestly and from the heart. You have heard it said before, what is done honestly and with compassion, mercy, and love is blessed by God in heaven.

Last week the message to the church was that when we deal with sin, individual sin as well as corporate sin in Jesus' name we must treat people with compassion, mercy, and love. The way Jesus would deal with people, the way Jesus dealt with tax-collectors and pagans or outcasts. Paul, as he warns the Romans about judgment, is concerned with the effect a believer's actions would have on others. Paul is concerned with the unity of the body of Christ. Jesus' parable about forgiveness focuses on how we treat others as well – what we do does not stay in a vacuum – our actions, as Christians, affect the world.

Because the church is the image of what living in the kingdom of God would look like, we as individuals within the church must live accordingly. We cannot stand in judgment of others who do not act the way we think they ought to act – judgment is God's right and not ours. We cannot refuse forgiveness or we will be paid accordingly by our heavenly Father. We, as Christians, model before others not only how to treat others, but how we handle the mistreatment of others.³ Refraining from judgment and offering forgiveness may be two ways we model our treatment of others.

So then, each of us will be accountable to God. Accountable for how we treat others, how we treat all of God's creation. Accountable for how we live according to God's will. Accountable for how we judge those who bear God's own image, that same image is on us. Accountable for forgiving as we are forgiven, loving as we are loved. We are accountable as well for not acting when we see one of our brothers or sisters in Christ living lives that are not bringing glory to God.

We, the church, are here to show people how to live according to God's will. Yes, sometimes we get that wrong and how we manage our own failures and shortcomings are examples for others. The church is the

³ Raquel St. Clair Lettsome. "Matthew 18:21-35: Connecting the Reading with the World." *Connections, Year A, Vol. 3* eds. Green, et.al. WJK. Print. 2020. pp 313-315.

Sermon Text – Sunday, September 13, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

model of God's kin-dom and family – we are brothers and sisters in Christ; we must love each other like family. We must accept that sometimes members of the family will slip and fall but we don't condemn – we forgive, we don't judge, we help them up and bring them back – just like the good shepherd does for his lost sheep.

I am sure that each of you have had an experience where someone has shared something they are fully convinced of in their own minds; something that is completely out of alignment with what you are fully convinced of in your own mind. Do you quarrel about who is right or who is wrong? Do you walk away from the relationship thinking the other person is out of their mind? Do you let those differences break your relationships? Consider what would honor God, if there is an honest attempt to honor and give glory to God, who are you to judge? These are things that throughout the history of the church have created rifts and divisions. Those disagreements are why there are so many Christian denominations because we quarrel over matters that are inconsequential to our salvation.

Do we think we are better than the God of all creation, do we look at what God made, what in the beginning God called very good and pass judgment? We will all stand before the judgment seat of God – are you ready? Again, the warning that Paul gives is to do what you do for the glory of God, honestly with compassion, justice, and mercy – then don't worry if you believe that what others are doing to honor God does not look the same. All creation will eventually be accountable to God.