

## Judge Not and Pass the Ketchup, Please

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8 October 2023

I want to begin this part of the service with a short meditation. Sit in a comfortable position, maybe resting your hands on your lap, sitting up a little straighter so your lungs can expand and your belly is relaxed. Now take a slow breath in, expanding your belly as you pull air in as deeply as possible. Slowly release your breath, breathing out as much air as you can. Take another slow deep breath and again slowly let it go. As you breathe, be aware of any tension you are holding in your body and imagine it being blown out with your exhaled breath.

Now imagine your favorite food. See it in your mind's eye. Imagine what it looks and smells like. Think about how it tastes as you put it in your mouth, chew it, and swallow each delicious bite.

Take another deep cleansing breath. Now we are going to imagine that someone else is eating, but they're eating something you don't like. Some food or beverage that makes your mouth pucker, your taste buds recoil, or your body react in some other way. They're clearly enjoying every bite, but you can't imagine how they're eating or drinking *that* food! Imagine sitting at a table with this person as they take each bite, chew, and swallow. What sensations, thoughts, or emotions are you experiencing? What are you aware of in your body? What words might you say to that person about how you feel about what they're eating?

When you're ready, come back to this space. Open your eyes and bring your awareness back to the present moment. We'll come back to these meditations later, so for now just tuck them away.

When I was a kid, we ate whatever our mother put in front of us. Sometimes there was more variety than at other times, especially in the summer when we grew our own vegetables and went fishing or clamming, or when my brothers decided to appropriate some lobster from "the ocean." At other times our mother would scrape the last few scoops of flour out of the flour can and make us biscuits. She'd serve them with government rationed molasses or corn syrup, or sometimes butter if we had any. It wasn't uncommon for us to get a call in the middle of the night about some bear, deer, or moose that had been shot out of season. Some of us kiddos regularly entertained the game wardens while our parents took care of said animals, in months when hunting was not allowed.

Those are stories for another conversation, because right now I want to talk to you about ketchup. Did you know that 40 percent of Americans like ketchup on their scrambled eggs? How many people here like ketchup? Any ketchup haters? In my family, ketchup was a readily available condiment that could be used to cover a multitude of mystery meats and doctor up vegetables, pasta, or any number of other foods. We almost always had ketchup. Missy and I were talking about this the other day, and she remembered thinking that ketchup on rice was gross. Our brothers would eat it on anything, and they all liked it on rice. One day she tried it and liked it. She was pleasantly surprised to discover one more way she could use ketchup, which she has always liked.

I do not like ketchup! I've tried over the years to eat it with French fries, hotdogs, or other things that you're "supposed" to eat with ketchup. I still don't like ketchup and find gross its smell, taste, texture, and the variety of unorthodox ways people use it. I wrinkled my nose when Missy was talking about rice on ketchup, and we both were disgusted remembering the time one of our brothers ate a ketchup and cornflake sandwich.

Liking ketchup. Not liking ketchup. Liking coffee instead of tea. Soda or water? Vegetables, meat, or both? Salty or sweet? These are all personal preferences as varied as humans themselves. We all have our likes and dislikes and our opinions and judgments about what we and others eat. We also have a myriad of judgements and opinions about other things in life. Did you know that humans make, on average, 35,000 semi-conscious judgements in one day? Think about that for just a minute. We make 35,000 semi-conscious judgements in *one* day! This doesn't include conscious judgements we make on a variety of topics, subjects, and beliefs.

When thinking about this number we need to be aware that many of our judgements are about practicalities of living life. What clothes we wear, driving our cars, work decisions, food choices, relationships, and many other judgements that help us survive and live our lives. But what about other types of judgements? The kinds we make every day about other people's behaviors, attitudes, likes and dislikes, gender identities, jobs, things they read, activities they do, clothing they wear, cars they drive, how much television they watch or don't watch, political affiliations or beliefs, ethnicity, race, ability or disability, sexual orientation, how they care for their children, aging parents, partners, recyclers and non-recyclers. The list of things we judge can go on forever.

Our scripture reading tackles this topic head on. Paul is writing this letter to the Romans to prepare them for his visit. This is a community that Paul had never visited. He seems to be aware of the behaviors and attitudes with one another and the judgements and conflicts that may be happening. Paul seems to know a bit about the potential conflicts in this community that he has never visited. Probably because he has been in other communities of Christians, seen these conflicts, and knows a bit about human behavior. Paul wrote to explain to the people his understanding of the Christian faith and its practical implications for the lives of Christians. Paul spends a lot of time talking about how Christians should live with each other and teaches about how to live and love in relationship with each other and God.

Paul focuses on food preferences and what days people consider holy or not. Why would Paul spend so much time talking about these two topics? Remember that his letter was being written to prepare the way for his visit and to solicit their financial support for his trip to Spain. Paul is striving to find ways to settle quarrels and judgements without destroying the fabric of the community. He uses these topics to illustrate the ways to settle conflicts and teach about how to be in relationship with other Christians. Paul does not offer any specific directives or decisions on food preferences or holy day choices that individuals are making. He issues no correct conduct by which Christian believers should be assessed or judged. Paul's method is to make a series of observations that are theological in nature that he hopes will lead the believers to live in communion with one another.

By focusing on these opinion-based judgements, Paul paves the way for harder topics of conflict in the early Christian communities that continue to be relevant to us today. Paul is not concerned about whether some Christians ate meat while others ate only vegetables. He is not concerned about whether some people held various days more sacred than others. People are free to believe

and practice these things as they see fit in their own personal relationship with God. Paul exhorts the people of Rome not to despise or reject others because they have differing opinions, beliefs, or practices. He tells them that God is the only one who can judge, and that the relationships we have with the Holy are ours alone. In Romans 14:4, Paul says that each person should be fully convinced in their own mind that they are doing what God would have them do. One person is not above another and may not judge, according to Paul. Only Christ, in relationship with the individual, may judge, and everyone is equal before God.

Paul is not advocating an approach that is all about the individual. Instead, he's talking about the person living in relationship with God and striving to discern how God wants them to live rightly in that relationship. That individual relationship is one in which we are accountable to God and thus our behaviors and actions as we strive to live in relationship with God and love one another. Paul tells us that we are to evaluate the impact of our own behaviors and beliefs on other people. We are to uphold each other as we walk this road of faith, and he warns them not to do anything that causes other Christians to stumble or hinders their spiritual growth. As followers of Christ, we are all at different places in our faith walks. We come from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and life experiences, past and present, that have an impact on what we believe and how we behave and practice our lives. The most crucial lesson we need to learn, to live in harmony with one another, is to stop judging other people.

So, beloveds, whether you like ketchup on your fries or not—and whether you'd ever think of putting ketchup on your rice, eggs, steak, or any other food—we are all equally welcome at God's table and encouraged to love and care for one another, and to exemplify the love and mercy of God as Christ's people. We are all welcomed into a wholly individual, Holy relationship with God. I encourage each of us, as we go out from this place, to look upon each other and those in the wider world with fresh eyes, through the lens of God's love. Whether about clothing, food, spiritual practices, politics, or ketchup, we all make judgements about ourselves and other people. As we grow and mature in our faith, what we do with all the types of judgements is up to us. Paul tells us that we are not to try to correct the small things and that we're to leave all judgements up to God. Do we tell others they're wrong? Do we try to correct behaviors, or do we leave it up to the Holy? How do we talk about our differences and offer each other support in ways that are pleasing to God and help us live in right relationship with one another? We come from a place of love and compassion, caring, and respect. We strive to keep our opinions and judgements in check, be aware of our biases, and lean into and trust the Holy.

I'd like to end this part of the service like we began, with a meditation. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. If you can, go back to the judgement about food that you were thinking about at the beginning of this message. Imagine that judgement—see it, think about it, and feel any emotions that are present with it. Take another deep breath and imagine God in that interaction or moment. Imagine the love and mercy of God, pouring out onto you and the other person. Be aware of what that feels like. In your mind. In your body. In your heart and the deepest parts of yourself. Feel the lightness and maybe the letting go of the opinion or judgement. Acknowledge the love that radiates from those places and know that that love is from the Holy. Amen.