

God's Greater Story - Living in Christ's Eternal Rule

15th Sun. after Pent. – 9/13/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 14:1-12 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 8, [Paul says,] **“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”.**

Introduction

✘ This morning we wrap up our sermon series under the theme, *God's Greater Story*, with Paul taking us through the last days of the story and bringing us to the its glorious end.

→ Today Paul joins two very different things together. In just a few verses, he moves from talking about food to talking about the final return of Christ.

✘ He starts out talking about how some Christians in Rome are eating only vegetables and others are eating all foods without any discrimination. Though it is causing a great conflict among them, Paul sets the matter straight; saying that it's really a matter that should be of no significance at all for our relationship with each other.

→ They were arguing about whether or not Roman Christians must keep the Jewish food laws. Could they eat meat that was not kosher; or any meat at all? Paul quickly clears it up, saying that in Christ, those laws have now become a matter of each believer's personal piety before the Lord. Neither one is right or wrong. And it's not our place to judge the other person's opinion on the matter.

✘ Yet only a few verses later, Paul speaks about matters that are of great and eternal worth. He reminds us that one day we all will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and there we “will give an account of [ourselves] to God” (v.12). It's that final judgement that embraces all of life, both now and forever.

→ So, why is something as insignificant as the food on our plate placed so close in context to that which is as great and eternal as the judgment seat of Christ? What does eating have to do with the judgment seat of Christ?

→ You see, for Paul, the return of Christ is not something distant and far away from us. No, the eternal rule of Christ is woven into the very details of our lives even now today.

I. God weaves our daily lives into His loving rule.

✘ In 1306, an artist named Giotto Di Bondone sought to capture this reality on the back wall of the *Arena Chapel* in Padua, Italy. The entire inside of this church, which stood next to a Roman arena, is covered with Giotto's paintings, telling the story of God – three levels of paintings.

→ The painting we've placed at the front of our bulletin (and Home Worship Materials if you're listening to this online) today is what you would see as you turned around to leave the chapel.

✘ In our church, by each of our exits, there's a small sign that says, “You are now entering the mission field”.

→ But in the Arena Chapel, the entire back wall is covered with a message for believers as they walk out into the world. It's Giotto's picture of *The Return of Christ*.

→ In the center, Christ is seated, surrounded by a halo of light. His left hand grasps at the edge of the halo as if He's about to enter into our world; returning in judgment to divide the sheep and the goats. So, as you walk out of this chapel, you're reminded that the world in which you live is not your own.

- You are part of God's kingdom. And the artist wants you to see all of your plans for the day through the eyes of Jesus and His glorious return to judge the living and the dead. Yes, whether you are eating or sleeping; working or playing, it is all woven into God's kingdom of His eternal rule.
- ✘ Paul is clear about this in verses 7-8, "For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. 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".
 - This way of life began at your baptism where God claimed you as His own; joining you to Christ. He's the One who has risen and ascended and promises to come again. So yesterday, today and on the day when Jesus returns, you are His! That means that His loving rule permeates the details of each and every day of your life. Paul, like this artist, wants us Christians to know this fact well.

II. We often forget about God's loving rule.

- ✘ Unfortunately though, we too often forget that truth. Look at the painting again. In the bottom right corner there's a terrifying vision of hell. Demons are torturing humans while the figure of death is seated, devouring everyone he can get his hands on.
 - It's hard to see without going online to see a larger version but even more terrifying, is one small figure of a lone man, journeying, with a bag on his back. He has no terror at all. He's just walking ... toward death; taking his time as he is led by demons to the pits of hell. That shows the ever-present danger that we can forget that we are living here in God's kingdom and end up instead on the road that leads to destruction.
- ✘ In our Gospel Reading this morning, Jesus, in His parable, paints a picture of this problem. He contrasts two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. In the kingdom of God, all debts are forgiven. In the kingdom of this world, all debts must be paid by the one who owes them. A servant is brought before his master with fear and trembling because he lives in the kingdom of this world. He owes a debt of 10,000 talents to his master. When you consider that a talent was worth about 20 years of labor, this man's debt was 200,000 years of daily labor. He could never repay it. His wife and children could be sold as slaves; his property dissolved; his life ruined and he would still be in debt to his master. This is life in the world's kingdom.
 - The master however, lives in a different kingdom; a kingdom where debts are forgiven. And so, out of great mercy, he forgives the man his debt. But that moment of forgiveness is not just a transaction; it is an invitation; an invitation by the master to live in a new kingdom where debts are forgiven. The master intends for this reality to impact and permeate everything this man does each day moving forward.
- ✘ But when the servant leaves he forgets that he lives in this new kingdom. Coming across someone who owes him a pittance; the equivalent of only 100 days of labor, he demands it all. Doing that; living outside of forgiveness and back in the world where every little debt must be paid or punished, this servant walked himself out of God's kingdom and right into prison.
 - With this parable, Jesus invites His disciples, which includes all of us here today, to live in God's kingdom where our debts are forgiven; our sins are paid for, not by our own hard work but by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus has opened the door for all of us to live with Him in His kingdom. Yet, like the foolish servant, what do we do? Too often, we actually choose to live in the kingdom where people must pay their own debts.

✘ That's the problem that Paul sees among God's people in Rome who have been forgiven in Christ. God brought them to new life in Christ's eternal kingdom. But that reality has not changed how they live with one another. They're fighting over food. Those who are "strong in faith" are despising those who are "weak". And those who are "weak" are passing judgment on those who are "strong". Now there is division in God's church; where He wants them to live in forgiveness and love. They have forgotten Christ's death and resurrection for them over something as small as a bit of food.

→ Sadly this kind of fighting didn't end with the first century, but continues still today. Throughout the history of the church the evil of division and sin has reared its ugly head. Some of the famous examples involve faithful saints being killed by those in the church who would not live in forgiveness and love. St. Peter for example was crucified upside down. According to tradition James the Less, at 96 was pushed off the roof of the Temple in Jerusalem. And when he continued to live, he was clubbed to death and his body was sawn into pieces. There are countless more examples of Christians living in conflict with the world because they ... we have turned away from living in Christ's kingdom of forgiveness and peace.

→ Here's the deal: just because I have a strong opinion that this or that is the way it "should be", doesn't mean the same for everyone else, unless of course it is clearly commanded or denied in Holy Scripture. Often we live in conflict with each other over something as insignificant as which hymnbook should or shouldn't be used; whether or not an addition should be built onto the church; how long is "too long" to spend in a service worshipping our Lord; or even something as small as a recipe that never made it into the congregational cookbook. Yes, the things over which we fight can be small, like eating vegetables or meat, but the damage and division that can come into Christ's body can become so great that God's people can turn away from His rule of love and forgiveness and walk carelessly right into the depths of condemnation and hell itself.

✘ This was Paul's concern for the believers in Rome and for those of us in the Church today. How do we live with one another? Do we receive one another as those for whom Christ died? Do we live in the love and confidence that Christ has brought us into His kingdom for eternal life with Him?

III. In Christ's forgiveness - invited to love one another.

✘ Thankfully God Himself comes among us and forgives us our sins in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in verse nine, "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living".

→ Jesus entered this world and gathered about Him those who had accumulated great debts; tax collectors who were stealing from God's people; women who sold their bodies for pleasure; even corrupt church leaders – those who had wandered far from God's ways and were living in debt and unable to set themselves free.

✘ These are the ones for whom Jesus died. Although he had no debt of His own as the Son of God, Jesus used His priceless life as payment for our sin; for all sin; for our lack of love for one another; for our judging and despising of those for whom Christ died to forgive.

→ Today, in Paul, this wonderful truth is proclaimed to you! Jesus died and lives again for you; that you might be His own and live under Him in His kingdom; that He might be Lord of the living and the dead. Paul told us earlier in chapter six that we who have been baptized into Jesus have been baptized into His death and now our lives are His. Now His kingdom is ours and because His kingdom is eternal, no one here can ever take it away.

✘ This is the kingdom that Joseph in our Old Testament Reading today lives in by faith. When Joseph's brothers came before him, they knew they had sinned against him. They had sold him

into slavery. They lied to their father, acting as if Joseph were dead. And now, after their father is dead, they lie to Joseph, telling him something their father never said, hoping to save their lives by a lie.

→ Yet Joseph knows of their deception and sin. As the second in authority only to Pharaoh, Joseph could have them sold into slavery. He could rule over them in vengeance. Yet by wisdom from God, Joseph chooses to rule over them in love. Joseph invites them to live by God's love instead of hatred. Joseph invites them into a different kingdom; a kingdom greater than Egypt; a kingdom ruled by someone greater than Pharaoh. Joseph invites his brothers to live with him in the kingdom of God where sins are forgiven and God's people live with each other in love. "Do not fear," he says, "I will provide for you and your little ones" (Gen. 50:21).

✘ Jesus foretells this kingdom in our Gospel Reading and Paul proclaims this kingdom in Christ for the believers in Rome and for you and me today. God has brought us into His kingdom. He forgives our sins and He invites us now to live with one another in love.

✘ What's that look like? Well, consider one last time Giotto's painting of the Last Judgment. You see that Jesus is at the center of everything. He hangs there in the air; surrounded by light; about to break through this halo and enter the world. Until that day, we go forth as His people. We cannot stay here forever in this church building or locked up in our home.

→ We must go out into the world. That's why the artist strategically placed a symbol over the door that guides us out of the chapel and into the world. Everyone who leaves God's sanctuary enters the world by walking underneath the cross. This is where we are invited to live by faith; under the cross of Jesus.

✘ Paul says that the day will come when everyone will see and know that Jesus rules over all. Verse 11 says it is on that day that, "every knee shall bow to [Jesus], and every tongue shall confess to God". On that day, He will fulfill His promise and raise us to live with Him in a new creation.

→ But until that time, we live by faith in Him who loves us. Yes, Jesus appears on this earth in small ways through the lives of His people; as we interact with each other in self-sacrificial love; in undeserved forgiveness; in a kind word and a compassionate act toward another. This is how we live in His love.

→ Whether the Christians in Rome are leaving their house churches, a family in Italy is leaving this chapel, or you and I are leaving the church this morning, we all do so only by grace; God's grace; grace that we now share with others.

Conclusion

✘ These last number of weeks Paul has been telling us *God's Greater Story*, the story of God the Father sending His Son Jesus to live, die, and rise again to forgive all sins; the story that He ascended into heaven and now rules at His Father's right hand; the story that He sends His Spirit into our midst, and through baptism, brings us to Jesus. In turn Jesus brings us forgiven to His Father, and the Father makes us part of His eternal kingdom where we live now, no longer for ourselves, but for the purposes of God.

→ This is *God's Greater Story* for you; that you live in Christ's eternal rule where He gathers you to hear His Word in worship; to receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins; and to live by, and share His love in your daily life with others. So whether you live or whether you die, you are the Lord's; whether here in the world or there in His new and eternal creation. To this God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all glory forever and ever. Amen.