

### *Are You Going to Eat That?*

I was reminded this week of the story of a children's sermon wherein the pastor was holding a stuffed squirrel and began quizzing the children as to what he had in his hands. None of the children were having any of it; they sat mutely. Finally, after he had quizzed the children on what he was holding just a little too solicitously, one intrepid child responded, "We know the answer is Jesus, but that looks like a squirrel to me."

As we start pondering Paul's reflections on dietary practices, remember that *Jesus is the answer*, because I will readily grant you these tend to be the scriptures that struggle to have a modern application. So just remember, *Jesus is the answer*.

The Apostle Paul does not appear anywhere to consider himself a carnivore. An omnivore, maybe, but really, aside from this handful of passages in 1 Corinthians, here in chapter 8 where he appears to embrace vegetarianism for Jesus, and again in Chapter 10, where he takes it up a notch, we very rarely hear about the dietary preferences of Paul. He instructs his pupil Timothy to take a bit of wine for his stomach on one occasion, but otherwise frankly spends more time debunking dietary restrictions than adding to them.

Aside from the occasional malapropism confusing Presbyterianism and Pescatarianism, we also do not tend to spend a lot of time in the reformed tradition talking about dietary restrictions or even preferences.

But since we have started off talking about vegetarianism, let me share that my grandfather became a vegetarian before it became a popular thing to do.

His reason for doing so was simple: My grandfather grew up on a farm in Mint Hill, North Carolina, and like many farm children, he had no illusions about the origin of meat.

As a soldier in the second World War, his interest in meat plummeted even further.

As an adult, he just wasn't very interested in it, it held no appeal to him, and my grandmother was a marvelous cook who could make a vegetarian meal into a feast. To be fair, were I to use the quantity of butter, salt, and bacon grease that my grandmother used, I could probably become a very happy vegetarian indeed.

But in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, being a vegetarian in the American South made one something of an oddity, and so my grandfather developed an affectation that, to this day, makes my stomach turn.

In the summertime, cookouts are almost a way of life, and so as not to cause his host to worry about what to serve the odd vegetarian, my grandfather resolved he would occasionally eat meat.

But not just *any* meat... where most people might compromise by bringing a nice piece of fish, or perhaps even chicken to the person at the grill, my grandfather would present the frequently bemused chef with a can of Vienna Sausages to grill. You heard me right, for the uninitiated, that is, in fact, the correct pronunciation of said sausage if you are from a certain part of the world. Vy-Eena has nothing to do with the city in Austria, it is an abomination produced by a shocking number of meat-packing plants, for which they have much answering to do.

Naturally, I wanted the details about this peculiar practice, so I followed up with my pescatarian mother, as to why in the world a vegetarian, of all people, would eat something so utterly revolting.

Here is what I learned: *It was more important to my grandfather to be a gracious guest than it was to be a purist vegetarian.*

Which brings us back to the Apostle Paul and his erstwhile vegetarianism. In this eighth chapter of the letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses the thorny problem of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

He immediately settles on a elegant solution: The idols to which the meat was sacrificed do not represent real gods, and so the meat is just meat.

There is nothing special about it. It is not tainted as a result of proximity to pagan practice, it is not dishonoring God because the Christians know full well that the idols are not real gods, it is just meat.

Paul knows this.

Some of the Corinthians know this.

It does not appear to be a hard thing to grasp.

But then Paul adds something interesting: Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

He knows there is no harm to his eating meat that was sacrificed to an idol representing a non-existent god, but if his dietary practices were going to cause consternation to someone struggling in faith, if his insistence on being *right* would cause someone else to struggle in faith or turn away from the church, he would rather risk being wrong than be the reason that someone turned away from Jesus Christ.

He concludes, if that is the case, he would rather never eat meat again than be the reason that someone weak in faith stumbled and fell.

The question to the Corinthians follows, "Are you going to eat that?"

It is as utterly grace-filled a moment as we see from Paul.

Paul is setting boundaries on Christian behavior, for the sake of the grace of Jesus Christ. He is saying here, as he has said elsewhere, that while Christian discipleship frees us from so much, it also binds us to one another, and gives us the privilege of responsibility for our actions so that we do not harm another.

There was an article last September in the Washington Post entitled, *Everyone is Setting Boundaries. Do They Even Know What It Means?*<sup>1</sup>

Leaving aside the necessary therapeutic definitions that the article explores, one of the points worth contemplating for those of us considering what it means to live in community is this, “Boundaries are not a means to manage another person’s behavior or choices that are made independent of you. If you tell someone you don’t like it when they wear a certain outfit, or you don’t want them to post certain photos of themselves, “that’s not a violation of a boundary, that’s just a preference.”

What Paul is doing here is setting boundaries for Christian behavior in the right context.

The article further states, “It’s important to remember that setting boundaries is about how you want to be treated or live *your* life — and how you react when someone crosses the line. For instance, if you’re in a romantic relationship with someone who seems to flirt a lot with a particular person, it’s okay to say: “I worry about this relationship you have with this person; it makes me uncomfortable.’

But if you can’t come to an understanding around the issue, you may decide the relationship doesn’t work for you. “That would be a healthy boundary,” [Jonice] Webb says.

In this case, you’re not asking the other person to change their behavior, but you’re changing your *own* behavior.

Paul wants the Corinthians to monitor their *own* behavior, to take responsibility for the outcomes their choices precipitate.

I have a dear friend who is an authority on many topics; she’s a polymath, she’s one of the smartest people I know. One time, her husband was just sure about something. I knew he was wrong, I knew *she* knew he was wrong, but she astonished me by going along with it.

I waited until he was out of the room, and then I pounced, “You know better than that!”

She replied, “Well, we’ve seen a marriage counselor and we’ve learned a few things. He has learned that I need him to be emotionally available to me even if he’s interested in something else, and I have learned that I can be right all the time, or I can be married, but I can’t be both.”

It is better sometimes to be gracious than it is to be a purist, to be *right*.

But here is what I struggle with, perhaps you do too: It *is* important sometimes to be right.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2023/09/08/setting-boundaries-therapy-words/>

It's important for the church to be *right* about a whole host of things – about our witness regarding racism, and gun control, and consumerism, and inclusion, and about the cheapening of covenant commitment with salaciously sexualized advertising targeting adolescents, to say nothing about the toxic effects of social media on the well-being of young people and the cohesiveness of our society.

There are so many things about which we need to be *right* because getting them wrong means irrevocably harming the fabric of who we are.

Make no mistake about it, Paul was not pushover for bad theology (There are some Galatians who are still smarting from the letter he wrote to them, and they've been dead for nearly two thousand years).

But here, *here* Paul is saying that on a matter where changing his own behavior doesn't amount to a hill of beans, it is better to be gracious. It is better to be kind.

It is better just not to eat that meat.

And with that, he is saying something pretty profound to us.

It doesn't matter how right we are on any number of things when it comes to *human cost*.

And that is where discernment that can only come with maturity in faith comes into play.

Because, times don't change that much. There is still plenty about which it is possible to be one hundred percent right and one hundred percent at odds with the kingdom of God.

Just off the top of my head, it is possible to be one hundred percent right about the constitutionality of how we handle gun-control in this country, and be as wrong as one possibly can be about gun-violence.

We can be a hundred percent right about what we think about human sexuality and marriage and the Bible. You know, perhaps that our stance on inclusion and marriage puts us at odds with a great swath of the larger Christian Church. But I hope also know that we arrived where we are, a place of commitment to inclusion, dignity, and equality, not *in spite of what the Bible teaches, but because of it*. It is important to be clear that our teachings, our beliefs, are Biblical because not to do so is to cede the authority of scripture to those whose teachings are part of the problem, the problem being theology that contributes to the greatly higher rates of suicide among LGBTQIA teens than their counterparts.

*But*, if we say it in a way that drives wedge between us and those who need to hear what we are saying, we have missed an opportunity.

We can be as right about economic theory and taxation and the best way to alleviate poverty as every one of the economic theorists of all time combined, but if we're letting people starve or freeze, we are wrong where God is concerned.

And, Paul says, we can be right about our understanding of God and meat sacrificed to idols – but if the meatloaf on the table turns someone seeking Jesus away from the comfort of the church, we’ve blown it.

Sometimes we have to give up being as right as we think we are because knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

Sometimes you can be right, or you can be faithful, but you can’t be both.

It comes down to discernment.

It comes down to growing in faith.

It comes down to living in community.

It comes down to Jesus.

Because in the end it is Jesus who will make all of these things come around right.

And so, I suppose, it turns out Jesus *is* the answer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.