

Sermon: Judge Not

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, September 13, 2026)

If anyone has a case against his brother, Joseph among all the biblical characters had probably the strongest claim. He was betrayed and sold into slavery by his ten older brothers. For what? For the youthful indiscretion of showing off his new shinning robe. For the careless sharing of a puzzling dream, which one could potentially be interpreted as his family bowing down to him. And for being the favourite son of his parents. None was really his fault, yet this naive young man was taught a brutal life lesson by his jealous brothers that irrevocably damaged his body, mind and soul.

Nevertheless, God was with Joseph. God watched over him, blessed his work, raised him from the slaver's pit and exalted him in time to become the Viceroy of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh. It was a story of rags-to-riches of unfathomable proportion, a story of divine providence par-excellence.

If anyone was ever in the position to judge his brothers, Joseph would be it. In his highly exalted position, Joseph found himself towering over his once conniving now quivering brothers—them on bended knees, begging for food, begging for their lives. In their sinful and fearful nature, they thought, the only reason Joseph did not immediately behead them, or impale them, or bury them alive, or any other dozen of brutal ways one gets executed in the Ancient Near East, was on the account of their father.

Joseph's father, who said to Joseph: "I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you." On that account, Joseph forgave his brothers, and they lived in peace in Egypt, fed well and all but escaped the seven-year famine that ravaged the regions all around.

But now their father has passed, and the brothers, in their narrow-minded smallness, could not believe the forgiveness of Joseph was ever genuine, could not believe their reconciliation could last. So they found themselves on bended knees the second time before Joseph, begging, once again for their lives.

If anyone was ever going to play the judge, the juries, and the executioner, Joseph was prime for it, with noting and no one to hold him back, to give the all-deserving two thumbs down. If this was taking place in

a gladiator pit, the audience would most likely be cheering Joseph on, with thousands shouting across with thunderous roar: Kill! Kill! Kill!

But Joseph did not, he begged to differ. In his own words, which echo his previous words when he first forgave them: “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...” (Genesis 50:19-20) In such a way, Joseph reassured them, spoke kindly to them, and reconciled with them.

If Joseph, in his exalted position, with a fully justified case, with ample opportunities to exact his sweet revenge, did not judge, why could we not do the same? Why do we find ourselves constantly judging one another, bearing grudges that would not yield, and plotting vengeance over any small perceived wrong? Are we in the place of God?

Sisters and brothers in Christ, as we continue to reflect on the practical theology of Paul, we come to this passage in Romans 14, where once again we find the Apostle trying his best to address a certain not-so-insignificant debate in the community of faith. The issue of the day seems to be whether one could eat meat, or one should eat only vegetables. Now this was not our modern equivalent of choosing to be a vegetarian or a vegan. Meat in the time of the Roman Empire, were mostly prepared as sacrificial food to the gods. These gods, on account of them being carved idols by human hands, did not actually get up to consume the said meat, so they were in turn sold in the market.

Nevertheless, in the early church, particularly among those who were of Jewish background, who were accustomed to observe various dietary restrictions as prescribed by the Torah, had equated eating meat sacrificed to idols as blasphemy. They would not do it, and they view those doing it with an utmost disdain.

On the other hand, those Gentile Christians, who were used to eating meat sacrificed to idols or not, really did not see what the fuss was all about. They would not abstain, did not see the need to, something they had been doing all their lives, and despise any who were trying to force them to.

This was the context where Paul entered into the fray. He calls this debate ‘quarrelling over opinions’. To those who abstain from eating meat, he describes them as ‘weak in faith’, as “*some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables*” (v.2), for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is still constrained by the dietary restrictions.

Yet, the more important point Paul wants to stress is not to pass judgement against one another, as in “*Those who eat must not despise*

those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat, for God has welcomed them.” (v.3)

He then asks rhetorically in the following verse, “Who are you to pass judgement on slaves of another?” It is true that in the time of Rome, a slave owner does not regularly judge slaves belonging to another owner. It is before their own lord that a slave stand or fall. The power to judge resides solely in the hand of the owner of a slave. By that logic, the power to judge believers, those who proclaim faith in Jesus Christ, as Lord and Saviour, resides only in the hand of Christ.

The same principle applies to observing the Sabbath and other religious holidays, as *“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 mind.” (v.5)*

The point that Paul is advocating is not a free-for-all, do-whatever-one-feels like. The point Paul is making is that we all are, and we all stand before the judgement seat of God in Christ, as he quotes Isaiah 45:23, and as he has advocated elsewhere, that before the All-Mighty God, “every knee shall bend...and every tongues shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10-11)

So then, let each one of us be held accountable, to the Lord God who created us, who redeems us in Christ, who sustains us in the Spirit, who continues to re-create us in the *Imago Dei*, the image of God, and it is glorious! So in light of the great Light, how can we judge one another? How can you even attempt to play the judge when we are all under the same Supreme Judge?

I know it is easier said than done. I for one have to constantly check my self, my judgemental old-self that seems to not want to die. I constantly remind myself the words of Jesus: *“Judge not, lest ye be judged”*, a famous saying from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:1. I check myself regularly, to see whether I am paying way too much attention to the speck in my neighbour’s eye but have neglected to notice the log in my own. I do this not out of fear or out of any innate sense of superiority or inferiority, I check myself because I know where that judgemental nature will inevitably lead to, and where a forgiving nature, on the other hand, can create a space for both myself and others to breath, to breathe in air and to breathe in spirit, the Spirit of God. I so want that space, as the psalmist sings, *“He brought me out into a spacious place, he rescued me because he delighted*

in me.” (Psalm 18:19) And that spacious place is not just for me, is for you, for all of us.

Yet, sometimes I must judge. Due to my position as a minister and the moderator of the Session, I have no choice but to play the judge from time to time. I do not like it, I try to avoid it as much as I can. Some of you may know that I am now the interim-moderator of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in downtown Ottawa. I took on that Presbytery appointed assignment thinking I can help the congregation with their search for a new minister.

What came unexpectedly were not one but two complaints filed under the Harassment Policy of the PCC. I won’t go into details because I can’t, but just to note that had I known ahead, I might not have taken on that assignment. But there it is, as much of a headache it is, I have no choice but to engage in the judicial process of the court of the church.

Just a few days ago, I shared with the St. Andrew’s Session of the passage of Matthew 18, the theological foundation of the judicial process of our denomination, that is to seek, to work towards reconciliation—for people to be reconciled with one another, and for people to be reconciled with God.

The story of Joseph still rings true to me. I can almost see the sigh of relief let out by his brothers, as they realized on their bended knees that not only their lives were spared, they had finally, irrevocably be reconciled with Joseph, not due to their guilt, shame or repentance, but for truly God had intended it, for the praise and glory of God. I’ll leave with you these words from Psalm 133

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell together in unity!
It is like the precious oil upon the head,
Running down on the beard,
The beard of Aaron,
Running down on the edge of his garments.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
Descending upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the Lord commanded the blessing—
Life forevermore.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**