

## Sermon on Romans 13, 1-14

*Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. <sup>2</sup> One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup> The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. <sup>4</sup> Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. <sup>5</sup> One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. <sup>6</sup> Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup> For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. <sup>8</sup> If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. <sup>9</sup> For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. <sup>10</sup> You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister<sup>[a]</sup>? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. <sup>11</sup> It is written: "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God." <sup>[b]</sup> <sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God. <sup>13</sup> Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.*

A rich man once went hiking in Spain. He came to an abandoned monastery where he wanted to lay his weary head. The rich man was surprised when he found almost no furniture in the monastery (as you would expect in an abandoned monastery in Spain). The rich man found this so unusual that he just blurted out: "Where is your furniture?" he wanted to know. The monk's clever counter-question was unbelievable. "Well, where is your furniture?" The rich businessman replied, slightly irritated: "I don't need any furniture. I'm just passing through." That was exactly what the monk wanted to hear. "Well, we do too..." he summed up what he wanted to say and what Paul wants to say to us today: "...no one lives for himself, and no one dies for himself. If we live, we live for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this is why Christ died and came to life again, that he might be Lord of the dead and the living. We humans are on a journey from this world to the next. From this time to eternity. The problem is not that we don't know it or that we have to explain it first. Everyone knows it very well. There is absolutely nothing in the world that is as certain as this. But we act as if things in this world are eternal and nothing else. In his letter to the Romans it becomes clear that the church was pretty confused. And the church was confused precisely because it had mixed earthly things with eternal things. People had lost their center in Christ and suddenly completely different things took center stage. There were also fierce arguments. Arguments about things that are actually irrelevant: It was about whether or not you could buy meat from the market that had previously been sacrificed to an idol. It was also about observing special rites and days. From a distance, these arguments seem irrelevant and unimportant. But at that time these topics were at the center of the church. It even got to the point where Christians judged other Christians because they had a different opinion on one point or another. Viewed from a distance, all of this seems petty and insignificant. But if we look more closely, we see that we also have disputes and different opinions. Even in the very recent history of the church, we see that there are pastors and members of the congregation who have very different approaches or opinions. All of this, it seems to me, was and is nothing new. And Paul advises a very big heart. Those who have no problem eating meat should abstain out of consideration for others. And thus not burden their

consciences. I sense a great calmness in Paul's lines and also an acceptance of the differences that exist. This calmness does not come from the fact that Paul does not care what people believe or do not believe. On the contrary, because they are firmly grounded in faith, there is a great calmness about things that are not at the center of faith. Paul quickly comes to this center. It is Christ. It is his act of saving us humans. Without this Christ, the ground is torn from under our feet. This applies to personal life as well as to life in the church. Without the firm foundation in Christ, we are on shaky ground. And then there is nothing left to do but desperately search for things that will last a while. Or that might justify us to others. That is despair. Christ does not want us to despair. And he does not want the church to separate into factions. For this he does not expect us to just put aside all earthly things as if they were not important at all. Nor does Christ want us to classify the service, the songs, or other things that we do in church as irrelevant or unimportant. But what matters is that everything is set on the correct route. We need this orientation both in our private life and in our church. We need a fixed point that can accompany us throughout our lives and in church. That can give us a guide in the midst of transience or conflict and despite the many differences may show us what the main theme of our Christian life is. This fixed point can remain a firm anchor for us, something we can hold on to and trust, even when death is imminent or when we have lost everything. In order for all of this to happen, we humans have to be aligned just like one of those old compasses. If an old compass is aligned correctly, the needle always swings straight towards the north. And that is the case no matter which direction you turn the compass. However, this compass must be aligned correctly. If it is not, it may point in the completely wrong direction. The alignment we need is Christ. Christ takes away the confusion by showing us where we should go in this life and in our church. Christ shows the direction of travel! No matter what happens to us, our needle always swings towards Christ and in the direction where we receive Christ through baptism and Holy Communion. In this way, Jesus literally connects our life in this world with the next. Through baptism, this Christ always stands over our lives, just like a compass that always points north. We can entrust our whole life to this Christ. Through Christ we lose nothing at all. But through him we gain everything. Namely: life. Some people are terribly afraid that if they become Christians they will have to give up everything. Family, job. Property and possessions. Of course there are always sects that demand this. But Christ does not do that. He wants to be Lord over us and our lives. He does not take away family or property. No, he fulfills these things by aligning them on an eternal path. Everything we have and everything we are is aligned with Christ so that we know where we are going. If we are not aligned with Christ, we are lost. Sometimes here, sometimes there, sometimes somewhere else. When Paul says here that whether we live or die we belong to the Lord, he sees both life and death from the perspective of the resurrection. Everything is viewed from the perspective of the resurrection. It is almost as if death were completely irrelevant and relativized. Of course Paul also knows about a "not yet". And we know that Christians also mourn and are afraid of death. We also know that Christians are disappointed with other Christians. Or even argue violently. But the finality of this conflict must give way to Christ. The "being lost" and the "being confused" are gone. Gone because we belong to the Lord. That is the center. That is the being aligned, that gives our life a very specific goal. Belonging to the Lord is the great joy of life. That is why Paul proudly calls himself a slave of Jesus Christ - being a slave of earthly things, of people and of anything in heaven or on earth is slavery. Because then we have to live in constant fear of losing something. Belonging to Christ is the great freedom because his love and his faithfulness will never end. He is always there for us. Amen.