

# Disputable Matters – Part 1

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Romans 14:1-12

August 4, 2019

## Introduction:

Imagine that due to an accident you broke your arm and had to go to the emergency room. You get checked in and then take a seat in the waiting room with a dozen other people who had arrived before you did. After about thirty minutes of impatiently waiting, an ambulance suddenly pulls up to the curb and they hurriedly wheel in a stretcher with a bloodied man on it, howling in pain. You overhear the paramedics tell the receptionist this man has been a horrible automobile accident, and the receptionist immediately allows them to enter hospital for treatment.

One might think to yourself, “Hey, that’s not fair! I was here first! Why does he get to skip the waiting room and get treated immediately?” The reason for this is known as medical triage, which is the process of determining the priority of medical care depending on the seriousness of the patient’s condition when resources, such as medical personnel, are limited. While a broken arm is no fun, it’s not a life-threatening injury, and so someone who’s potentially bleeding to death is going to be given medical attention before you, even if you’ve been waiting for a while.

Hopefully we all can recognize the importance of medial triage. In an emergency room, it’s sometimes necessary to prioritize needs. Not every injury is equally urgent. Some injuries are pressing needs that demand immediate attention and others are less urgent and can wait if need be. Medial needs can be prioritized according to levels of importance.

This morning we’re going to talk about theological triage in that we need to recognize that not everything the Bible teaches is equally important. Christian doctrines and beliefs can also be prioritized. Some truths of Scripture are vitally important, such that to deny them would be to deny the faith. Other doctrines are important because they impact the practice of the church, but aren’t essential to Christianity and thus Christians have disagreed on them throughout history. And then there are things the Bible doesn’t implicitly address, often in terms of how the Scriptural principles apply to contemporary issues and practices.

Throughout the month of August, we’re going to consider what God’s Word has to say to us about what are ultimately less important issues: not unimportant mind you, but nevertheless issues where Scripture doesn’t clearly state, “Thou shalt not...” regarding it. These are often referred to as “disputable matters” for the very reason that Christians dispute whether these are practices Christians should or shouldn’t engage it. All of Romans 14, and part of Romans 15, addresses how we should act towards fellow believers who disagree with us on these disputable matters.

So this morning, I want to begin introducing this topic by giving a short overview regarding disputable matters. We need to first understand how Christian beliefs are to be prioritized, followed by identifying specifically those things which fall under the category of “disputable matters,” and then we need to get a big picture view of the differences and dangers of

those who are strong in matters of conscience and those who are weak. Once that's done, I think we'll be more prepared to dive into the specific instructions the apostle Paul gives to us in Romans 14.

So as we begin today, before we get into the text of Romans 14, we need to first get a lay of the land in terms of understanding the various levels of importance we find in Christian doctrine. So our first point by way of introduction concerns laying out the...

### **Three levels of theological triage**

Theologians have generally recognized that there are three levels of priority when it comes to various theological beliefs and practices. So let's start at the top...

*First level issues: Core* – The most important are those that are core beliefs. They're first level issues that are considered to be central to our faith; these are doctrines that lie at the core of Christianity. They would include things like the belief in Trinitarianism (that there's one God who exists in three Persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the belief that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, that Christ died, was raised from the dead after three days, ascended into heaven, and will return again, as well as the belief that we're justified by faith in Christ, apart from works. These are doctrines that lie at the very core of our faith: Christianity is defined by these beliefs. To deny any of them would be to fall outside of biblical orthodoxy. These are doctrines that must be affirmed if you're to be considered a Christian.

*Second level issues: Conviction* – Then we have second level issues which are matters that churches have to reach a conclusion on because it affects how they practice their faith, but which individual Christians disagree on. For example, baptism would be in this category. Some churches believe baptizing infants is acceptable; other churches, like our own, reserve baptism only for those old enough to profess faith in Christ for themselves. A church needs to conduct baptisms, and so they can't sit on the fence about it: they either need to baptize infants or not. A decision has to be made because it impacts the practice of the church. But regardless of where they land in their convictions about baptism, either view is within the realm of Christian orthodoxy. For example, I happen to disagree with my Presbyterian brothers and sisters in Christ about this issue; they baptize infants because they view them as part of the covenant community. I differ with them in that regard so I wouldn't be able to serve as a pastor in a Presbyterian church. But I can respectfully disagree with them and recognize they're still orthodox Christians because baptism, while important, is not a core theological issue.

Other issues fall into this second-level category, such as how a church understands how communion should be done or how a church should be governed or the use of spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues. Those are convictions a church needs to come to some definite conclusion on because it affects the practice of the church on a regular basis. But like baptism, these aren't core areas of doctrine and thus believers can come to differing conviction on them and still be considered Christians. You're an orthodox Christian if you have an elder-led or a congregational church government, whether you believe Christ is

present spiritually in communion or if you regard it just as a memorial meal, or if speaking in tongues is part of your Sunday worship or if it isn't.

*Third level issues: Conscience* – The last group we need to think about, and is what Paul's going to be addressing in Romans 14, are third-level issues Christians can disagree on as a matter of conscience but aren't essential to the functioning of the church. In other words, it's neither a central doctrine of the church nor is it something that directly affects the practice of the church. Now this comes in two forms: beliefs and behaviors. So in regard to beliefs, this would include a number of doctrines where Christians have differing views, such as how one understands the creation days in Genesis 1 or when Jesus will return in relationship to the rapture, or even things as particular as who are the "sons of God" being referred to in Genesis 6 or what you think was Paul's "thorn in the flesh" that the apostle spoke of in 2 Corinthians. Christians have come to many differing conclusions on these questions over the centuries and it's okay for believers to disagree. These aren't core doctrines of the faith and it doesn't affect the weekly practice of the church so Christians are free to come to their own conclusions and should in turn be charitable towards those who differ with them.

The other area this affects is our behaviors and that's where Paul's focus in Romans 14 primarily lies. These are questions relating to how we ought to live in the world, what honoring God looks like in regards to cultural norms and practices. For example, what's permissible to do on the Sabbath? Can we work at a job? Can we go out to eat whereby we cause others to work? Can we cut the grass on Sunday? These are questions that are matters of conscience. Christians don't always agree on what is permissible or not, especially as it relates to contemporary concerns that the Bible never directly addresses.

While these are disputable matters that Christians can and often do disagree on, the danger comes when these issues become so deeply ingrained in a believer's conscience that they insist that everyone else ought to have the same belief they do and thus should do (or avoid) whatever it is they regard as honoring to God. This was a danger in Paul's day and it still is an issue in the church today. Disputable issues aren't always viewed as disputable for those who have deeply held convictions on them.

So laying out these three levels of theological triage is important in laying the groundwork for what we're going to be talking about over the next few weeks. What Paul is saying in Romans 14 concerns third-level issues: not core doctrines or conviction-level matters like baptism, but rather disputable issues that are matters of conscience which Christians can and do disagree on, related to how we live in the world. These are less-important matters that aren't unimportant, but are certainly not core, central tenants of our faith.

### **Defining disputable matters**

Now the next thing I need to do is attempt to be clear on what exactly these disputable matters are. This is the tricky part of my message because this is where I run the risk of making some of you less-than-happy with me. The danger here is that what I consider to be a disputable matter may not be exactly the same as what you do. I may say something is a disputable issue to which you'll respond, "No way Pastor Rob! Doing that is totally sinful! There's no way a Christian should even engage in such or such a thing!"

I recognize this is a risk, but it's a risk I need to take because I don't want to be vague about the application of this passage. As I made up this list, I asked others to help me in terms of things I should include in order to check my own bias, in case the list was missing something I should have included. I don't claim this to be an exhaustive list, but I've been in the Christian evangelical world for some time now and I think I have a fairly decent handle on the kinds of practices American Christians have had disagreements about.

So without any further ado, let me put up on screen what I would consider to be the kinds of modern American disputable matters that would be applicable to the instructions Paul gives in Romans 14. Here they are and let me just read through them...

Tobacco smoking	Dressing up for church
Drinking alcohol	Bikinis vs. one-piece swimsuits
Body piercing	Women wearing dresses vs. wearing pants
Tattoos	Women wearing make-up
Dancing	Women working outside the home
Gambling	Men with long hair
Using playing cards	Men wearing hats in church or when praying
Working on Sunday	Dating vs. courtship
Watching TV	Bible versions (KJV only)
Watching R-rated movies	Eating meat
Going to the theater	Taking on debt
Listening to secular music	Vaccinations
Violent video games	Celebrating Halloween / trick-or-treating
Playing Dungeons & Dragons	Santa Claus or the Easter bunny
Harry Potter	Voting / political views
Using certain curse words	Schooling – public vs. private vs. home school

Once again, I don't claim this is an exhaustive list but I think it's a pretty solid one for our American evangelical culture in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, even if not everyone will agree with me on it. Since cultural norms are always changing and vary with culture, this list would look different if it were made a hundred years ago or if it was composed for Christians living in India or China. But for us, living in America in 2019, I believe this list provides adequate examples of very specific disputable matters that would be applicable to what Paul's discusses in Romans 14.

Now with these examples in mind, I want you to turn open your Bibles to Romans 14, which can be found on pg. 948 of the pew Bibles. In this chapter, Paul mentions three disputable matters that were a concern during his time: eating meat sacrificed to idols, the observance of special days, and drinking wine. Those were particular concerns for the believers living in Rome, especially with the mix of Jewish and Gentiles believers in the church with differing sensibilities regard matters of conscience. While these aren't all a concern for us today, the principles Paul lays out for us apply to any of those issues I just listed before. So then, recognizing that what Paul says in this passage applies to any and all of the contemporary issues I just listed, please follow along in your Bibles as I read the whole of Romans 14.

**“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.**

**One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. 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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written,**

**“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall confess to God.”**

**So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.**

**Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.**

**Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”**

Reading through the entire chapter is just a way for us to begin to get a bird's eye view of the passage; I'll start getting into the details later this month. But before we go, I want to help you get a big picture view of the differences and dangers of those who are strong in matters of conscience and those who are weak. So I have a chart that I want to call your attention to in your bulletin that I think is a helpful summary of what Paul is teaching here.

## Big Picture View of Romans 14

The chart in the insert in your bulletin is a summary of what is being talked about regarding disputable matters, in particular eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, the main issue Paul speaks of in Romans 14. There are three columns to describe the person who has a strong conscience (referring to the person who has no scruples about eating meat) while the second set of three columns describes an individual who has a weak conscience (referring to someone who doesn't have a clear conscience that eating meat is acceptable).

Each position has its dangers that, if taken to an extreme, can lead to a heretical position, as seen in the outside columns. So for someone who has a strong conscience, they might allow their freedom to lead them to a place that is too liberal in what they do, which can lead to a license for immorality. But on the other end of the spectrum, someone with a weak conscience can go to an extreme that insists their particular scruples are essential to what it means to follow Christ, which then turns into a form of legalism. Both views – both legalism and licentiousness – are false and dangerous views.

The more moderate, but still incorrect position, which is what Paul primary addresses in Romans 14, are found in the lightly shaded middle columns of both the strong and weak conscience. In this case, while the strong may not slide into immorality, he can become arrogant and look down on those with a weak conscience who are unable to participate in the activities he does. On the other hand, those with a weak conscience, while not becoming legalistic, can easily become judgmental towards those who engage in things they believe are immoral. This was the problem being faced in Rome and what is the main focus of Romans 14.

The view that Paul hopes to encourage us to adopt is found in the more darkly-shaded columns in the middle of the chart, the approach of love. Whether you have a strong conscience or a weak one, Paul wants us to show love towards our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ by neither looking down on those who have a weak conscience nor judging those who have a strong conscience. Instead, we should welcome each other and not put any unnecessary barriers between us over our views on disputable matters.

### Conclusion

So then, this chart is meant to be a snapshot summary of what Paul has to teach us in Romans 14. It's an overview to help us get the lay of the land a bit before we get into the details of the passage, which we'll do in a couple of weeks. But this morning I wanted to help us think through important introductory concerns in order to be better equipped to begin walking in detail through the chapter. So we will stop there for now and get right into it, starting at v. 1, in a couple of weeks. With that, let's close our time together now with a word of prayer. Please bow your heads with me.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2019.**