

# Disputable Matters – Part 2

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Romans 14:1-12

August 18, 2019

## Introduction:

I became a Christian during my first year of college and before that, while I attended a Lutheran church and school, I didn't have a whole lot of interaction with the evangelical subculture. As a result, I was rather surprised to discover the kind of things Christians got bent out of shape over. In high school I had received my fair share of warnings about how Dungeons & Dragons was a gateway to the occult and was told that if I listened to *Stairway to Heaven* backwards I would clearly hear it beckoning me to worship Satan, but like most of my friends I just blew it off as needlessly cautious adults being completely clueless about youth culture.

After I became a Christian, I discovered the rabbit hole went much deeper in terms of the things that were forbidden by certain groups of believers. I met Christians who believed all secular music was bad (whether it was rock and roll or not), those who absolutely forbid any kind of dancing or going to movies, who believed women should never wear pants, and who thought the only kind of Bible translation that was appropriate to use was the KJV, just to name a few. It was a bit disconcerting to meet these people who had all these rules to follow whereas I had no problems engaging in the things they fastidiously avoided.

I imagine that's how it was for the Gentile believers in Rome as they began to interact with Jewish believers. They were numerous things they had no qualms about whereas those from a Jewish background were horrified to see these Gentiles engage in activities they believed were strictly prohibited. Needless to say, this clash of cultures caused conflict and so the apostle Paul addresses this problem and gives instructions on how believers who have very different sets of convictions on disputable matters should treat each other.

A couple of weeks ago I attempted to lay the groundwork for preaching through this chapter by explaining how there are differing levels of importance in matters of Christian conviction, and what's being addressed by Paul here are third-level issues: disputable matters which are to be left to individual conscience. Then I provided a list specifically identifying what some of those issues are in our American, evangelical culture today, as well as a chart that summarized the positions one could take (which are included as an insert in your bulletin for reference). I'm not going to go over that again, but if you missed the message from a couple of weeks ago I'd encourage you to listen to it or read it on our website because I think it's lays out important groundwork for better understanding Romans 14.

So having been on the on-ramp in terms of introduction, today we're getting on the highway by actually digging into the details of the text itself. So over the next two weeks we're going to walk through the entire chapter together. I have ten points I'm going to draw from Romans 14, six of which I'll cover today and the last four next week, points which I should say at the outset I'm indebted to Andrew David Naselli and J. B. Crowley for this outline, as they articulated it originally in their book entitled *Conscience*. So then, let's begin by considering our first point this morning, which is we're to...

## 1. Welcome those who disagree with you on disputable matters (v. 1-2)

Turn your Bibles open to Romans 14 if you haven't done so already. It can be found on pg. 948 of the pew Bibles, which I would strongly encourage you to follow along in if you don't have your own personal Bible with you. I want to start by just reading the first two verses of Romans 14. Paul says this, **“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.”**

In this section of Scripture, Paul identifies Christians as either being “weak” in the faith or “strong.” Now it needs to be said right off the bat that this isn't referring to a person's saving faith in Christ, but rather to “the confidence a person has in their... conscience to do a particular activity, such as eat meat.”<sup>1</sup> For example, in Acts 10 God commanded Peter to eat food that his conscience wouldn't allow him to eat because all his life he had considered it unclean. No one would say his saving faith in Christ was weak: quite the opposite, he was likely one of the most faith-filled Christians at the time. But yet he was weak in faith in that his conscience wasn't strong enough to allow him to partake in eating particular foods without feeling guilty about it. So as we go through Romans 14, you need to understand that those Paul refers to as “weak” in the faith are those who don't believe they can in good conscience engage in what is of itself a non-sinful activity while the “strong” in the faith are those who have no scruples about engaging in such things; their conscience doesn't bother them and so they are free to participate in them.

Now given the pejorative nature of the term “weak,” it's tempting to want to place yourself in the box labeled “strong” rather than “weak.” After all, who wants to be considered weak in the faith? But we need to be careful not to treat these as if they're absolute categories. Someone can be both weak and strong at the same time regarding different issues. For example, a person can have no objection to drinking alcohol but can be strongly opposed tattoos. Or can be against drinking but yet have no problem going to a movie theatre or watching a rated-R movie. A Christian woman can believe allowing her kids to go out trick-or-treating is wrong but have no guilt about wearing pants or buying a bikini. We need to recognize we can be both weak and strong when it comes to disputable issues, and so we need to apply what Paul says to both the weak and the strong because we can be both, depending on what the issue is.

So what are we do with believers who don't share our convictions on disputable matters? Paul says in v. 1 that we're to **“welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”** These aren't things that should divide us. In Rome, there were some Christians who freely ate meat, while others had a conscience that only allowed them to eat vegetables. These are matters of conscience that shouldn't become points of contention that keep us from fellowshiping with one another. In fact, Paul says we're not to **“quarrel over opinions.”** Don't fight about it. If someone engages in an activity you aren't comfortable doing, and it isn't forbidden by Scripture, don't start an argument about it. Leave it be. We're to live at peace with one another and one way we do that is by not making a stink over differences of opinion on disputable matters.

Now that's not to say we can't have discussion about the wisdom and appropriateness of any given disputable issue. If you think getting a tattoo and body piercing is wrong, for example, then I don't think there's a problem with politely discussing it with another believer who doesn't share your conviction. You might be able to learn from each other if you're willing to charitably listen. But it's another thing to start picking a fight about it, to start an argument over it. Paul says we're not to do that. Don't make these issues a bone of contention. We're to be welcoming of those who are of a different mind than us on disputable matters.

But moving on, we're told in particular the kinds of attitudes we need to avoid when it comes to those who differ with us. So addressing those with a strong conscience, the next point we come to is this...

## **2. Those who have freedom of conscience (those who are "strong") must not look down on those who don't (v. 3a)**

Look at the first half of Romans 14:3 as Paul address those who are strong. **"Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains..."** Those who felt free to eat meat purchased in the marketplace that may have been used for idol worship – referring to Gentile Christians in Rome who had done this all of their lives – were not to despise those who abstained from such meat. Jewish believers would have had issues not only with eating certain kinds of meat that had been forbidden in the Mosaic Law, but also eating meat that had been previously sacrificed to a pagan idol. So you can imagine how Gentiles Christians might have easily looked down upon the Jewish Christians for making a big deal over nothing, in their opinion. Meat is meat. Just because some pagan priest had killed it for a ritual sacrifice doesn't mean they were worshipping the false idol by eating it. Why are these Jewish folks getting so bent out of shape about it?

We can see the same thing happening today. Let's use Halloween as an example. If you have no issues with your kids going trick-or-treating, you can easily look down on those believers who don't let their kids participate. It may not matter to you what long-ago pagan rituals Halloween activities might possibly have their roots in: it doesn't mean that anymore. Your kids aren't getting dressed up in order to scare demons away or participate in witchcraft; they just want the fun of dressing up in a costume and getting free candy from their neighbors. So as a result, you might despise those who believe that Halloween has too many associations with the occult and so they abstain from it, including refusing to let their kids go trick-or-treating.

So when we are strong in an area such that we're free to participate in activity, we need to guard our hearts against looking down our nose at those who abstain. We shouldn't jump to the conclusion, "Oh those people are such legalists!" People may have reasons for not participating in what you're free to do and those reasons may have nothing to do with being legalistic. So for example, there are some Christians who drink alcohol and some who don't. Now If you've grown up in a home where you witnessed firsthand the destruction that an alcoholic parent had on a family, then there's a very good reason why such an individual cannot in good conscience drink. They're not being legalistic: rather they're coming from a place where they were deeply wounded by the effects of

alcoholism and understandably don't want to come anywhere close to allowing that to be repeated in their home. By God's grace, you may not have had their experience and so you don't share their sensitivities, but their reason for avoiding alcohol isn't anything to look down upon. Their conscience is weak with regard to alcohol for good reason and therefore no one should despise them because of it.

But then there's the flip side of the coin because those who are weak can also have the wrong attitude towards the strong. So our next point is this...

### 3. **Those whose conscience restricts them (those who are "weak") must not be judgmental towards those who have freedom (v. 3b-4)**

To those who are weak in matters of conscience, Paul says this in v. 3-4. Look back in your Bible with me once again. **"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."**

There is a different, but equally wrong, attitude that can crop up in those who are weak in conscience and that is the sin of judgmentalism. It's tempting to view other believers who have a strong conscience on disputable matters and think, "Well, how can they call themselves Christians and do that? Don't they know their behavior hurts their testimony? Shouldn't they be giving that up as followers of Christ? They surely can't be as devoted to Christ as I am if they're willing to do such things!"

It's easy to judge people who engage in disputable matters when your conscience tells you that doing it is sinful. In my early days as a believer, there were certain things I thought were wrong to do that it was very easy for me to judge others for doing. If you take the list of disputable matters in our bulletin, I imagine there may be at least a couple of things, if not more, you may think to yourself, "There's no way a Christian should do that!" So let's be honest here: what's been your attitude towards Christians who do those things? If you homeschooled your kids, for example, have you judged those who sent their kids to a public school? Or conversely, what do you think of parents who've pulled their kids out of public school in order to home school them? Has there not been the temptation to judge them, sometimes harshly, for the choices they've made?

Paul warns us against judging people who have a strong conscience that allows them to engage in what you believe you should avoid. First, he says we shouldn't pass judgment because **"God has welcomed him."** If God has accepted him, then who are you to differ with God? If the Lord doesn't have an issue with someone engaging in one of these disputable issues, then who are you to not welcome them or demand they behave exactly as you do?

Second, Paul asks this in v. 4, **"Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls."** God hasn't appointed you as master over other believers. You're a fellow servant. Every believer

is accountable to God, not you, and so it's up to God to judge whether they should or shouldn't engage in any particular disputable issue. When you judge another believer over matters of conscience, you are setting yourself up as God. Therefore, it's inappropriate to judge others who have a stronger conscience than you. If God has welcomed them, then so should you, without crossing your arms and furrowing your brow in judgment of them.

So then, there are dangerous attitudes on both sides: if you're strong, it's a temptation to look down on and despise the weak for their unwillingness to engage in the activities you do. If you have a weak conscience, then it's easy to sit in judgment over those who do those things that seem wrong for you to do. But now we need to move on from the kinds of attitudes we need to avoid to what we need to do when it comes to our own convictions on these matters. So the fourth point Paul makes here in Romans 14 is...

#### **4. Each believer should be fully convinced of their position on disputable matters in their own conscience (v. 5)**

In v. 5 Paul says this, **“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.”** There's a switch here in the disputable matter Paul uses to illustrate his point. Whereas before he was talking about eating meat, now he touches on holy days, which also would have been a matter of dispute between Jewish and Gentile believers. The Jews would have held certain feast days in high regard while those without any Jewish background would have treated such days as any other. It would be similar to Protestants celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25 whereas Christians in the Eastern orthodox church celebrate it on January 7. For us, January 7 is just another day but for them, January 7 is as important as December 25 is for us.

Regardless of what days you believe are more significant than another, Paul instructs us to each be **“fully convinced in his own mind.”** Now this doesn't mean one can't be wrong on certain things, but when it comes to disputable matters that Scripture never directly addresses, we have the freedom to come to our own convictions. So if you think you should celebrate Christ's birth on December 25, have at it! Be convinced in your own mind that this is the proper time of year to do so. But if you're an Eastern Orthodox Christian, then celebrate it on January 7. And even beyond that, if you think Christmas shouldn't be celebrated at all, or at least not during a date that was likely once associated with a pagan Roman festival, that's fine too. Just come to a conclusion in your own mind as to what is the right thing for you to do and do it. Not everyone has to agree with you. There's no law saying the birth of Christ must be celebrated on such and such a date. Come to your own convictions and then act in accordance with them.

So it is with all disputable issues. Regardless of where you come down on any of these disputable matters, be fully convinced in your own mind about it. Now that of course doesn't mean be pig-headed about it: there should always be room for any of us to learn and change with a fair degree of open-mindedness. But if your conscience tells you it's wrong to engage in such and such a thing, then don't. Let your convictions guide you. But if your conscience has no quibble about engaging in a particular disputable matter,

then do so without guilt. Be fully convinced that what you're doing or avoiding is what God's would have you do.

But let it be said that it's not wise to violate your conscience. If you think something is wrong to do, then don't do it, even if others have the freedom to do so. Conversely, it's not wrong to engage in a disputable matter even if others around you all think it's wrong. So if you don't think a Christian should smoke tobacco products, then by all means don't buy a pack of cigarettes, even if others around you smoke. But if you have no scruples with having an occasional cigar, then you're free to do so, even if most other believers you know don't agree. Provided you're fully convinced in your mind that you can do so without sinning, you're free to do so.

That then brings us to another point that needs to be made from this passage, and it's an especially helpful word of instruction to help us avoid despising or judging other believers who disagree with us. So point five is this...

#### **5. Assume that others are partaking or abstaining from disputable matters in order to honor God (v. 6-9)**

I think this is a very important assumption to go with when it comes to what others avoid or engage in when it comes to disputable matters. Look back in your Bibles once again at v. 6-9. Paul says, **"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."**

Do you see how generous Paul is being to both the strong and the weak? He's not picking sides here. He's assuming the motivation for both positions is that they're seeking to honor the Lord. He's not casting doubt on anyone. Paul assumes whether they're eating meat or abstaining from it, they're doing it with thanksgiving to God in order to honor him with their lives.

If you know someone is a Christian any yet they either abstain or engage in something you don't agree with, then you shouldn't be rushing into judgement if its an activity you wouldn't do, nor should you be despising them for avoiding that which you're free to do. What we should be doing is given them the benefit of the doubt, assuming that they love Jesus and are striving to live for him. There's quite a bit of bickering and division between Christians that can be eliminated to if we adopt this attitude towards fellow believers who disagree with us on disputable matters.

I want to encourage you to strive for this assumption with other Christians. Assume the best. If a believer is wearing a bikini at the pool while you believe modesty requires you to only wear a one-piece, then don't jump to the conclusion they're automatically being immodest. Assume they're striving to honor God just like you are. but they happen to

draw the line at a slightly different place than you. Or if a believer isn't comfortable watching a movie you enjoy, don't write them off as being prudish. They're avoiding certain kinds of movies because they're trying to honor God with their eyes and their comfort level happens to be more strict than yours. Regardless of whether one is weak or strong, assume your fellow believer is engaging in an activity or avoiding an activity because they're responding to the convictions of their conscience so they might live their lives to the glory of God.

But there's one more thing we need to remember before we wrap up this first half of Romans 14, and that's this...

**6. Do not judge others in disputable matters because we will all one day stand before the judgment seat of God (v. 10-12)**

Consider finally what Paul reminds us of in v. 10-12 of Romans 14. **“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.”**

The point here is that every one of us will stand before God and have to give an account of our lives to him. We have to answer to him and him alone. So the weak person who refused to engage in things you thought were just fine is going to have to answer to God for his life, and if he was being legalistic, then God will see that justice is done. And the strong person, if he engaged in sinful behaviors under the guise of Christian freedom, then he'll stand before God and will be judged appropriately.

In other words, you don't need to do God's work for him. It's not your place to despise or judge your brother. God will see to it that justice is done. If a fellow believer was sinning by getting that nose piercing or watching that movie or drinking that beer or using that Bible translation, God will see to it that's properly dealt with. God hasn't tasked you with the job of judging others for every little thing you might disagree with. Since you have to give an account to God for your own life, you should best concern yourself with yourself. We need to be more concerned about the plank in our own eye than worry about the possible speck in someone else's.

## **Conclusion**

Now we need to stop there due to time constraints, but there's more to be said and we'll continue with part three next week. There are considerations we need to make in order to avoid needlessly offending others when convictions about disputable matters come up, which we'll get into next Sunday. But in our passage today, we've been given clear and wise instructions about how we're to respond to those who differ with us in matters of conscience. We're to welcome everyone, without looking down on them if we're strong and

without judging them if we're weak. Instead, we are to come to our own firm convictions on these matters while at the same time assuming the best of others, that they're choosing to engage in or avoid such things in order to honor God. But regardless if we're weak or strong, in all things we should remember that we have to answer to God for our lives, and so rather than being overly concerned about what others do or don't do, what they wear or don't wear, what they consume or don't consume, we should keep a careful watch on our own hearts, because the only person we have to give an account for is ourselves.

So with that, would you please bow your heads with me as I conclude our time together with a word of prayer. Let's pray.

### **Endnotes**

1. Naselli, Andrew David & J. D. Crowley. Conscience: What it is, How to Train it, and Loving Those Who Differ. Crossway; Wheaton, 2016.