

Disputable Matters – Part 3

Romans 14:13-23

August 25, 2019

Introduction:

A person can be right and at the same time oh-so-very wrong. I recall back when I was serving at a church in the Chicago area there was an elder on our board who was highly intelligent as well as highly opinionated. When he thought you were wrong, he wasn't hesitant to tell you, often times in very harsh and pointed ways. Myself and others who served alongside me on staff all at one time or another found ourselves under the verbal lashing of this elder. While he was often correct in what he was calling us out for, the manner in which he addressed it was less than kind and gracious, to say the least. He may have been right about the particular issue, but the way he communicated that rubbed us the wrong way and often did more harm than good.

This morning the apostle Paul is going to address a similar problem with those who are on the one hand correct in their freedom to engage in disputable matters but can get it oh-so-very wrong when it comes to how they apply that with other believers who don't share with them the same convictions. The past couple of weeks we've been studying Romans 14, a chapter that instructs Christians about how to deal with disputable matters, that is, those things which Scripture neither forbids nor commands, that Christians are free to engage in or avoid, depending on their personal convictions. Two weeks ago, by way of introduction, we discussed the differing levels of importance in Christian beliefs, gave a list of modern issues that are third-level matters Christians can charitably disagree on, and a chart that lays out for us the particular approaches that one could take towards these disputable matters (which you can find once again as an insert in your bulletin).

Last week we covered the first half of Romans 14, which warned us against despising those didn't engage in the things we felt free to do and warned against judging those who engaged in things we felt convicted to avoid. Now in the second half of the chapter, Paul turns his focus on those who were right in their freedom to eat meat but nevertheless were oh-so-very wrong when it came to how they practiced that freedom around believers who didn't share their same sense of liberty regarding food.

So then, this is a continuation of the sermon from last week and so we're going to pick up from where we left off. We had six points in the message last Sunday and so today we're going to dive right in by starting with point number 7. If you missed last week, I would strongly encourage you to read or listen to that message on our web site in order to get the full picture of what the apostle Paul is teaching us here. But getting into it right now, our first point today, which is actually point number 7 in continuing from last week, is this...

7. Freedom of conscience in disputable matters is correct, but don't let your freedom destroy the faith of a weaker brother (v. 13-15)

Let's take a look at what Paul says about this by opening your Bibles, if you haven't already, to Romans 14, which can be found on pg. 949 of the pew Bibles should you

need to follow along in one of those. We'll start in the middle of the chapter by reading v. 13-15. Paul writes this, **"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.**

The first thing Paul does is reiterate what he said at the very beginning of the chapter, which is to **"not pass judgment on one another."** Those who are "weak" - in that their conscience doesn't allow them to engage in disputable matters - shouldn't judge those who do and those who are "strong" - in that their faith allows them to freely engage in disputable matters - shouldn't look down on those who don't. But there's an additional responsibility the strong have towards the weak. He goes on to say in v. 13, **"Rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother."** He describes the harm the strong Christian can do to the weak a few other ways in v. 15. Not only can it be a **"stumbling block"** or a **"hinderance"** but it can also **"grieve"** your brother in Christ and even, at the end of v. 15, **"destroy the one for whom Christ died."** So what does this mean?

The idea is that the use of one's freedom by the strong has the potential to cause the weaker brother to stumble into sin. So this isn't about mere irritation or annoyance. So using the example of eating meat sacrificed to idols, just because a weaker brother doesn't like the fact that others felt free to eat meat isn't a sufficient ground for them to stop eating meat. The rub comes in when doing so would potentially cause the weaker brother to violate his conscience and engage in a practice he was convicted was sinful. When the strong are behaving in such a way that they're putting pressure on the weak to do what they feel is sinful, either by belittling them or attempting to persuade them, then the use of their freedom is wrong because it's endangering a fellow Christian.

And why is this such a danger? Because first of all, it pressures a person to engage in something they believe is sin, in violation of their conscience. And once someone grows accustomed to violating their conscience in a disputable matter, it can become easier to violate their conscience with a non-disputable matter. There can be a snowball effect that begins to sear the conscience so that a person eventually ignores it, and not just in disputable matters but even in areas that God clearly defines as sinful. So for example, if you make a habit of violating your conscience against drinking alcohol, then it can become much easier to ignore it when you're drinking too much and begin to get drunk.

The second danger is that in flaunting one's freedom before the weak may eventually lead a person to abandon the faith altogether. They may think, "Well, if this is what Christianity is all about, then I don't want anything to do with it." So then, there's a real danger posed by the strong towards the weak. Should they misuse their freedom, they could do serious spiritual harm to their weaker brothers in Christ. It's far more important that believers walk in love toward each other than potentially cause a fellow believer to stumble into sin by causing him to violate his or her conscience.

Now we need to recognize in this that Paul isn't saying all these disputable matters are wrong to do. Look at v. 14 once again. He says, **"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."** In other words, those who are strong are right in their being able to eat meat or engage in those things which Scripture doesn't forbid. He's likely referring to what Jesus himself said in Mark 7 where Jesus said what goes into a person cannot defile him but rather what comes out of a person is what defiles him. In other words, all foods are clean. You can eat or drink whatever you want: food and beverage won't make you unclean or are sinful to consume.

But if someone considers it unclean, because they cannot in good conscience eat or drink it, then for them it's sinful. So then, there are some things that are always sinful and then there are disputable matters that aren't sinful in themselves but may become sinful if done in violation of one's conscience. And when those disputable matters come into conflict with each other, such that the strong in conscience may potentially cause the weak to sin by violating their conscience, then the strong should voluntarily surrender their freedom out of love for their weaker brother. After all, they have the option to choose to either partake or refrain; the weaker brother has only one option: to abstain. So it's imperative in such cases for the strong to temporarily surrender his freedom for the sake of his weaker brother in Christ.

So what does this mean in practice? Let me try to give a few concrete examples of how we would apply this in our lives. Since this passage primarily touches on food and drink, let me start there. Imagine two believers. One is strong in that his conscience has no scruples about eating meat or drinking alcohol. The other is weak in that he believes it would be wrong for him to eat meat or drink alcohol. How should they respond to each other? If the strong believer invites the weaker believer over for supper, it would be wrong for him to serve him pork chops and a glass of wine. Nor should he have a beer while they're sitting out on the patio watching the sun set. And furthermore he shouldn't in any way insult his weak brother for refraining from meat and alcohol nor pressure him to just try a sip or take a bite. He shouldn't knowingly do anything that would make the weaker brother feel awkward or under pressure to violate his conscience.

But let's say the strong Christian was out at Applebee's and ordered a steak and a beer for his dinner while out on a date with his wife. Then the weaker brother entered the restaurant, saw him, but then noticed what he was eating and drinking. Should the stronger brother then not eat his food or should he never have ordered a beer because there was an off-chance his weaker brother would come to the same restaurant? In this case it would be the responsibility of the weaker brother to not judge the stronger brother. The stronger brother had no intent to cause offense or pressure his weaker brother by ordering a steak and a beer. He was using his freedom in an appropriate matter and therefore the weaker brother should not feel any offense.

Now other than going out to eat, eating and drinking can be a mostly private matter, but some disputable issues can't be kept under the rug quite as easily, so let me make another run at this regarding more public issues: tattoos and body piercing. If you have a tattoo or your nose is pierced, chances are they'll be readily noticed by others. So

again, let's imagine two Christians: one who has both a tattoo and her nose pierced and then another Christian who believes it's wrong to do such things. Both these ladies go to church together. They see each other every Sunday and perhaps even serve in the same ministries together. What ought they do or not do?

On the one hand, the strong Christian should be sensitive towards her weaker sister by not going up to her and saying, "Do you want to see the cool tattoo I got this weekend?" Or if she was invited over to the weak Christian's home, she might consider not wearing the nose ring for that evening or possibly wearing an outfit that would cover up the tattoo. And under no circumstances should the strong Christian try to persuade her weak sister to go to Claire's at the mall to get her nose pierced or accompany her to the tattoo parlor.

But on the other hand, it would be okay to wear the nose ring or to allow the tattoo to be seen at church because there's nothing sinful about either of those two things. Provided the woman with the tattoo wasn't making a big deal about it or putting others down who didn't share her freedom, the weaker believer should politely respect her sister's decision and not demand that her convictions be held by everyone else in the church. Not liking it or being irritated about it isn't reason enough for the strong to forego her freedom. If it isn't going to cause you to sin, then you need to simply leave it in God's hands and allow them to have different convictions than you.

Now those are just two of many examples I could give, and the parameters for how best to respond might look a little different depending on what exactly the disputable matter is, but the general application is still the same: the strong should be willing to surrender their freedoms when it might cause the weak to sin by violating their conscience and the weak should learn to be accepting of the strong, not judging them nor demanding everyone else follow their scruples.

This then brings us to the next point, which is a necessary reminder of what is truly important when it comes to the kingdom of God. So moving on, our eighth point is...

8. Disagreements about eating and drinking are not important in the kingdom of God; what is important is building each other up in peace, joy, and righteousness (v. 16-21)

Please follow along in your Bibles once again as we read through v. 16-21. **"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."**

These verses reiterate some of what Paul has already stated: that everything is indeed clean and that we can therefore eat meat or drink wine because those things in and of themselves aren't sinful. Nevertheless, those morally neutral things can become wrong

things when they cause a brother to stumble into sin by you doing them. That's ground we have covered thus far.

But Paul adds that the kingdom of God isn't about rules concerning eating and drinking. If you think Christianity is primarily concerned with whether you have beer or what kind of swimsuit you wear or whether you use playing cards or smoke a cigar or watch R-rated movies, then you have a serious misunderstanding of our faith. God's Word is totally silent about those things and many others. You can do them or not do them: although whatever you do chose to do or abstain from should be done for the glory of God, but Christianity isn't about giving us a set of rules regarding the things we can or cannot do.

Instead, Paul says here's what matters at the end of v. 17: **“righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** The kingdom of God is concerned about people pursuing peace and mutual upbuilding of one another in love. So if refraining from eating meat helps to keep the peace and prevents your brother in Christ from stumbling, then set aside the meat for a time and keep the main thing the main thing. Don't harm your brother for whom Christ died just so you can press your point that you're free to eat this or drink that. And conversely, don't cause division in the church just because not everyone shares the same scruples as you do on disputable matters. The kingdom of God isn't about getting everyone to adopt the same list of dos and don'ts you have. As Paul said at the start of the chapter, we're to welcome everyone, regardless of whether they're strong in the faith or weak, without despising or judging them.

So what's important to God and central to the kingdom is how we treat one another, not whether we have the freedom to eat or drink whatever we want or how many things we put on our list of no-nos. Moving on, Paul makes a short statement in v. 22 that helps us practically to keep the peace between believers who inevitably will have differing convictions on disputable matters. So our next point is this...

9. If you have freedom, don't flaunt it; if you are strict, don't demand others be like you (v. 22a)

Paul addresses both the strong and weak when it says this at the start of v. 22. Look there in your Bibles with me. He says, **“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.”**

The best way you can keep the peace in the church is keep your views on disputable matters to yourself, as far as you are able. So if you have a strong conscience, don't flaunt it or brag about it. Don't demand everyone engage in the same things you do. Keep it to yourself. Now obviously you can't keep a tight lid on everything: if you have a nose piercing for example, it's going to be seen, or if you go to a restaurant, you will occasionally be eating or drinking something a weaker believer might witness. But as far as you're reasonably able, don't draw attention to your freedom.

And if you have a weak conscience in a particular area, it's not your job to “police” others and confront them for their violation of your standard. Keep your convictions to yourself and allow others to enjoy their freedoms.

There's a danger here that can possibly lead a church into legalism, which is on the far right-hand column on the handout I gave you. The weak can insist that everyone must hold their view in order to be a Christian. As soon as you make a disputable matter an indisputable mark of what it is to follow Christ, you've crossed into legalism. Sam Storm describes legalism as this, "Legalism is the tendency to regard as divine law things that God has neither required nor forbidden in Scripture, and the corresponding inclination to look with suspicion on others for their failure to conform." ¹

So for example, let's say tomorrow I become convicted about watching television. I come to the conclusion that the vast majority of television shows are a rot on the mind, a complete waste of my time, and that it would be sinful to continue to watch it. So I throw out my TV and determine never to watch it ever again. Well, that's fine for me to make that choice. The Bible doesn't address owning a TV and so if my conscience is telling me to throw the idiot box out, then I should obey my conscience. But I should keep that decision to myself and not broadcast to everyone what I've done.

But what if the following week after making that decision I come to church and my sermon is entitled, "The Grave Moral Evil and Insidious Sin of Watching TV" and I then spend the next 45 minutes laying out the evils of television and demand that all of you need to throw out your TV in order to truly follow Christ? If I do that, then I've crossed a line into legalism. I'm demanding that my scruples about TV becomes your scruples, and even more than that, I demanding you avoid what I avoid otherwise I'm going to question your devotion to Christ.

If a church falls into this mindset, then we can come into lowest-common denominator Christianity, where everyone in a church must go along with the scruples of whoever has the least amount of freedom lest they be judged. So the result is this: if I decide TV is wrong to watch, then all of you have to get rid of your televisions. Of if I think eating meat is wrong, then none of you can ever eat a steak or a bacon double cheeseburger ever again. That's why Romans 14 is so important. Paul doesn't expect us to live under lowest-common denominator Christianity. The strong can enjoy their freedoms and the weak can have their convictions, but we need to keep those to ourselves and not insist everyone engage in or avoid the same things we do. So whether you're free or strict on a disputable matter, keep it to yourself and don't demand that everyone else in the church share your convictions.

But there's one more point we need to draw out of this chapter that's actually a very important principle for how we understand what makes something sinful or not. So our final point this morning is this...

10. Your conscience regarding disputable matters should be based on faith, otherwise it's sinful (v. 22b-23)

Look back in your Bibles one last time at the very end of the chapter, starting at the middle of v. 22 through v. 23. Paul concludes saying this, "**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.”

First, I want you to notice Paul’s positive affirmation of those who are strong in the faith and can engage freely in disputable matters. He says that those who have no reason to judge themselves for doing what they approve are **“blessed.”** In other words, it’s a good thing to act without any violation of one’s conscience when it comes to disputable matters. If a Christian eats meat or drinks or celebrates certain days without any sense of guilt, then he’s blessed by God for doing so. Such a person is approved by God and is acceptable to him and therefore those who are weak should treat the strong in the same manner. There’s no room for judgment against those who feel free to engage in those things you’re convicted you ought to avoid.

Conversely, we’re reminded that if someone eats food that he feels he ought not to eat, in violation of his conscience, then he’s condemned in doing so because such behavior is not motivated by faith, for anything we do which is not motivated ultimately by faith is sin. So if you’re weak, don’t disobey your conscience. If you regard something to be sinful to do, even if God hasn’t forbidden it in Scripture, then it’s sin for you to do it. Therefore other Christians shouldn’t look down on those who have scruples about disputable matters and certainly dare not do anything that would insult them, pressure them, or force them to engage in an activity they believe is wrong. That would be enticing them to violate their conscience and therefore sin.

The principle that underlies this whole idea is found at the end of v. 23. **“For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”** That’s the truth that stands behind everything Paul says here in Romans 14. If you engage in some disputable matter in faith, fully believing it is okay for you to do so, then it’s fine. But if you don’t have faith that what you’re doing is acceptable to God, then whatever it is becomes sinful, not because it’s sinful in itself but because of this principle: whatever you do, no matter if the action is morally neutral or even a good thing, should you do it apart from faith, by acting against your conscience and apart from faith in Christ, then it becomes sin.

Now this is a very important concept for us to grasp, and it has implications that go far beyond just how we deal with disputable issues. So next week I’ve going to devote the entire message to unpacking this idea that whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. But for now, it has a pressing application for the topic at hand: when it comes to disputable matters, we need to act according to faith, not doubt, otherwise whatever it is we do, is sin.

Conclusion

So then, let me conclude by encouraging each of you to make what Paul has said he in Romans 14 a living reality here at Grace Fellowship. I created a big old list of disputable issues that I don’t have the slightest doubt that not everyone here agrees on. There are some things on this list you may think are ridiculous for Christians to be troubled by and other things you may strongly disagree with because you believe that it isn’t something disputable; it’s just plain wrong. I’ve tried to be fair in covering all the things I thought

Christians in early 21st century America truly do disagree on and that aren't forbidden anywhere in Scripture. But regardless of how you personally feel about them, what Paul has to say about how we relate to each other when it comes to these things is important for the well-being of our church.

So if your conscience tells you to avoid these things, then obey your conscience, but don't judge those who come to different convictions than you. Charitably disagree without insisting that everyone agree with you. And if you have the freedom of conscience to engage, then do so, without guilt. But be sensitive to those who don't share your freedom. Don't despise them or insist they need to engage in the same things you do. Use your freedom to put those things aside for the sake of your brother if you're in a situation to do so. Because far more important than how we use our freedoms or what we choose to avoid is how we love, honor, and respect one another, especially those who differ with us.

But let add an important caveat here at the end of this that Paul doesn't mention in this passage but he does talk about elsewhere. In 1 Corinthians 6:12, Paul says, *"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be dominated by anything."* In other words, just because you can do something doesn't necessarily mean you should. If you're living at home, you should obey your parents' rules if they say you shouldn't do something, even if it's a disputable issue. Submitting to those in authority trumps your freedom to engage in disputable matters.

Furthermore, just because something is permissible, it doesn't mean it's wise to do it. Just because there isn't any command against smoking in the Bible, it still doesn't change the fact that cigarettes are both terribly unhealthy and addictive and therefore not the wisest of habits to pick up. Or if you come from an alcoholic family, I don't think drinking is a wise choice and certainly isn't a wise path to take as a young person going off to college, when you'll be surrounded by people who won't be encouraging you to drink in moderation but will only encourage you to get drunk, which is something Scripture clearly forbids. So then, there are other factors to consider when it comes to any of these disputable matters; just because you can do something doesn't mean it's necessarily wise to do so.

May we be a church that in all things – be they disputable matters or otherwise – seeks to act in wisdom and strives to obey the greatest commandment: to love God above all else and to love our brother as ourselves. Please join me now as I close in prayer.

Endnotes

1. Sam Storms. [Tough Topics: Biblical Answer to 25 Challenging Questions](#). Crossway; Wheaton, 2013.

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