

Getting Along through Disputable Matters

Romans 14:1-12 on March 3, 2024

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Please read Romans 14:1-12 before going further in this transcript. Romans 14:1 begins, “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.” As we move into Romans 14 this morning, the Apostle Paul shifts his focus from the obvious sins in chapter 13, like drunkenness and sexual immorality, to what Scripture calls, “disputable matters.” We’re going to focus in on these, over the next couple of sermons, so let’s begin by defining what we mean by them, and what we don’t mean.

Disputable Matters are areas of Christian belief and behavior that Scripture leaves to personal conscience.

New Testament scholar D.A. Carson has written a helpful article on this topic. The link for it is in the footnotes of this transcript. You can also contact the church office and we’d be glad to send you a paper copy of it. I highly recommend that everyone in our church reads this article.¹ Carson says it so well: “What places something in the disputable column...is not whether or not it is disputed...but what Scripture consistently says about the topic, and how the Scripture ties it, to other matters. ...the most fundamental tool for establishing what is or is not [a disputable matter] is careful, faithful exegesis.”² (By “exegesis” Carson simply means the correct approach to understanding and interpreting the Bible. And that’s exactly what we try to do in each and every one of our ministries here at E-Free Bemidji: faithful exegesis.)

We find an example of some matters which are NOT disputable in Galatians 5:19-21, “The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”³ God’s Word makes it clear that the beliefs and behaviors listed in verses 19-21 are NOT disputable; they are matters of sin. So none of these are matters of personal conscience, no matter how much we might try to rationalize them as such. By way of contrast, some good examples of the kinds of things that are disputable matters are found in today’s text. Romans 14:2, 5 says that, “One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ...5 One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully

¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/on-disputable-matters/>

² D. A. Carson, “On Disputable Matters,” Themelios editorial 40.3 (2015), p. 383 and 385.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/on-disputable-matters/>

³ See also 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

convinced in their own mind.”⁴ ⁵ Romans 14:14 later declares, “...if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.” So this morning, Scripture is teaching us that certain matters of Christian belief and behavior are a matter of personal conviction, or we could say, a matter of personal conscience. This means that certain things can be wrong for one Christian, and not wrong for another Christian, which can be incredibly difficult to accept, if we’re someone who likes everything to be black and white.⁶

That said, all of us need to understand that these disputable matters aren’t central to the faith; they aren’t salvific, nor are they distinguishing marks of a Christ-follower, even though some of us might want them to be.⁷ To be clear, there are *indisputable* matters of sin, which are listed in Scripture. Christ-followers are given clear guidance in texts like Matthew 18 for how to confront these sins, and for how to love one another through appropriate church discipline.⁸ ⁹ Dear friend, with all of this in mind, we’re headed for some challenging waters. Romans 14-15 will help us navigate some vital areas of Christian belief and behavior. They’ll challenge us in how we should be loving one another, how we should be “Getting Along through Disputable Matters.” With this in mind, please take a moment to bow your head and ask for God’s help and guidance before reading any further.

Getting along through disputable matters means that...

1) I need to avoid quarreling and dissension with my fellow believers who hold different convictions about disputable matters.

Romans 14:1 says, “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.” This word “accept” means getting along with each other by welcoming each other in. The word that Paul uses here is about embracing each other with sincere Christian fellowship. It’s a picture of

⁴ Check out Galatians 4:8-11, turning back to weak and miserable forces, and Colossians 2:16-19, those who’ve lost connection with Christ.

⁵ To clarify: There are a number of issues that are NOT disputable. Scripture is our final authority. So things like drunkenness, sexual immorality, and dissension are NOT disputable issues. But things like what we can eat or drink, or which days may be more sacred than others, are disputable.

⁶ The *ESV* translates Romans 14:14, “...it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.” This may be VERY difficult to accept for those of us who insist that there’s no room for gray. God has not made life that simple for us.

⁷ This is why disputable matters are best left out of official Statements of Faith or requirements for Church Membership. Nonetheless, they sometimes find their way in, and they remain there until a congregation decides to make an adjustment that’s more in keeping with Scripture.

⁸ Matthew 18:15-17 lays out the appropriate steps of church discipline, first going to someone 1 to 1, then 1 with 2-3, and then 1 before the entire church if necessary. 1 Corinthians 5:1-11 urges us to confront blatant sins inside the church. Matthew 7:1-5 reminds us to take the log out of our own eye first, before trying to remove someone else’s speck.

⁹ I’ve had multiple conversations with people who’ve convinced themselves that an obvious sin is somehow a disputable matter. In these cases, we don’t accept their behavior, we confront it, by speaking the truth in love and taking sin seriously. See Ephesians 4:14-15 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-11.

receiving someone into your home and into your circle of friends.¹⁰ Accept them fully, embrace them in fellowship! This is in stark contrast to quarreling with them, about who is right or wrong about a particular issue. Romans 14:3 adds that, “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.” Paul is warning the believers in the Roman Church not to allow these disputable matters to tear them apart, he’s warning them to get along, before it leads to dissension. Just how big of a deal is dissension in the church? Well, I can tell you this, dissension is most certainly not a disputable matter; it’s clearly an outright sin.

Paul just talked about dissension last week, in Romans 13:13, “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.” So Romans 13:13 describes dissension as indecent behavior. James 5:8-9 warns us against grumbling against one another, “You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” Brother or Sister in Christ, we have to beware of dissension in our church! Dissension is also sometimes translated as “strife” or “discord,”¹¹ and if someone were to dig into the various cross references, they’d discover that, time and again, dissension is listed right alongside a whole host of other sins. In Romans 13:13, it’s listed along with carousing and drunkenness, and sexual immorality and debauchery. In 2 Corinthians 12:20-21, dissension is listed with jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance, disorder, impurity, sexual sin and debauchery. We also saw dissension listed earlier in Galatians 5:19-21 along with sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, factions and envy. If we don’t guard our hearts against dissension, then it will run its course right alongside a myriad of other despicable and regrettable behaviors. These behaviors are not only immoral, but they’re also destructive to Christian community. So rather than dissension, rather than quarreling and bickering, deeply devoted followers of Jesus are called to love one another. Ephesians 4:2-3 urges us to live lives worthy of our calling, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

¹⁰ Accept = προσλαμβάνω “④ to extend a welcome, receive in(to) one’s home or circle of acquaintances, ...of one Christian receiving another Romans 14:1; 15:7a.” (William Arndt et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 883.)

¹¹ ἔρις, ἰδος, ἡ “Engagement in rivalry, especially with reference to positions taken in a matter, strife, discord, contention... In a list of vices Romans 1:29; 13:13; ...2 Corinthians 12:20; Galatians 5:20.” (William Arndt et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 392.)

So we need to be careful that disputable matters don't lead us into quarreling and dissension, which will tear our church apart.¹² I appreciate how my Study Bible says it: "Fellowship among Christians is not to be based on everyone's agreement on disputable questions. Christians do not agree on all matters pertaining to the Christian life, nor do they need to."¹³ So it's not about strict uniformity, it's about harmony in the midst of our differing convictions; we need to bear with one another! We need to embrace God-honoring Christian fellowship, despite our differing convictions over disputable matters.

Getting along through disputable matters also means that...

2) I need to lovingly empathize with my fellow believers' perspectives on matters of personal conscience.

Romans 14:2 says, "One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables." Now the reason that some of the Roman Christians were troubled about eating meat, is that so much of the meat that was sold in the market, was meat that had been sacrificed to idols.¹⁴ Many Christians felt that eating the meat was a way of participating in the worship of false gods. So it's not like they were just trying to be "holier than thou," they had legitimate reasons for feeling these convictions about this meat. Those Christfollowers who'd come from a Jewish background would've had a particularly hard time with this. They would have been mindful of their Old Testament heroes like Daniel, who abstained from eating King Nebuchadnezzar's royal food, as a way of honoring God. So no matter how much their Gentile brethren may have quarreled with them about their freedom to eat whatever they wanted, the way that these Jewish people had learned to think about food, had been ingrained in them for hundreds of years.¹⁵ *(So you Gentiles, have a little empathy for your Jewish brethren!)*

It's worth noting that Paul doesn't take sides here, despite his own Jewish heritage, and despite the discovery of his own freedom in Christ. He doesn't call for a change in the beliefs and behaviors of the believers with weaker faith, nor the believers with stronger faith.¹⁶ He simply says, "If you feel comfortable eating everything, fine; then eat it. If you don't feel

¹² Thomas Schreiner refers to the sins of "dissension and jealousy" in Romans 13:13 as "sins that tear apart the community." Romans, 2nd Ed., Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 679.

¹³ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1913 footnote on Romans 14:1.

¹⁴ "While the Mosaic law does not forbid meat, many Jews living in pagan environments would refrain from eating meat because of fears that it might have some association with pagan religion." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2317 footnote on Romans 14:2.

¹⁵ Given Paul's own Jewish heritage, it's impressive to see how far his faith has come in places like Romans 14:14, where he says, "I am convinced...that nothing is unclean in itself." Also consider the Jewish apostle Peter's encounter with a Gentile named Cornelius in Acts 10, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15).

¹⁶ See note in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2317 footnote on Romans 14:3.

comfortable eating certain things, fine; then don't eat it. God accepts Christians who have differing convictions about food; it's a disputable matter." So rather than pressuring our Brother or Sister in Christ to eat something that they don't feel comfortable eating, we should lovingly empathize with their perspective. And instead of quarreling with our fellow believers about their decision to eat something that our own conscience won't allow, we should lovingly accept their perspective of freedom in Christ. We should agree to disagree and practice Romans 12:10, "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves."¹⁷ Now THIS is a distinctive mark of a Christ-follower, not which foods we eat, but how we love one another by learning to get along through disputable matters.

At this point, some of you may be thinking, "ok Pastor Jerry, this is all well and good for the Christians living in the 1st century, but how does this apply to me? It's not like the meat that I'm buying at Walmart or Lueken's has been sacrificed to an idol!" Fair enough, but the principles in today's text can be carefully and prayerfully applied to our modern situations. Let me share three examples:

One example could be social drinking. A church that I attended back in the 1990s made a rule that members couldn't drink alcohol; in fact, members weren't even allowed to work somewhere that served alcohol. It was a well-intentioned effort to distinguish ourselves as holy people, and it was probably a remnant from the prohibition days back in the 1920s. The problem with a requirement like this, is that it doesn't really line up with Scripture. While drunkenness is clearly a sin, and while it may indeed be wise for some of us to abstain from drinking alcohol, social drinking for Christians is a disputable matter. So rather than quarreling over this issue, or letting it cause dissension in the church, it would be better for us to leave it as a matter of personal conscience, and not to make it a requirement for membership.

Another example could be politics. Romans 13 taught us to be subject to our governing authorities, so let's not rebel against what God has instituted. Let's pay our taxes as we recognize that these are God's servants whom He has put in place for our good. And let's be faithful to pray for our leaders, whether we voted for them or not. These things are not disputable. However, that being said, there are some Christians whose personal convictions might insist that there is only one possible candidate for whom any Christian should vote, or only one possible political party to which we must belong. But there are other Christians whose consciences are

¹⁷ Romans 12:20 should also be considered in light of 1 Corinthians 8:9-13. Pastor Eric will touch on this more next week.

convinced otherwise. And there are still others who may prefer to use their freedom to not vote at all. Rather than quarreling over this, let's empathize with our fellow believers' perspectives, and let's not make this a distinctive mark of our Christianity. Politics are a matter of personal conscience.

Another example could be Native American traditions and practices. For some of us from a Native background, certain traditions and practices are vital to our personhood, but some traditions and practices may stir up negative religious connotations for us as followers of Jesus. For those of us who are Anglos, it's unlikely that we even understand those religious connotations, but we should at least try to empathize with the perspective of our Native American brethren. So, should Christians partake in Native traditions and practices? And if so, all of them, or only some of them? Well, I must admit, that being an Anglo American myself, I'm hesitant to weigh in on this one. I feel a little bit like I imagine the 1st century Gentiles felt, when they were trying to empathize with the 1st century Jews. The Jewish traditional practices were foreign to many of the Gentiles, and it must've been quite challenging to navigate how to get along together. Even as the early church prayerfully navigated the issues of their day, you and I must navigate the issues of our day. Rather than judging each other, or treating each other with contempt, we should seek to lovingly empathize with each other's perspective. We need to work through these kinds of disputable matters together, in Christian love.

If we had more time, perhaps we could discuss some other disputable matters, like... Harry Potter, Gandalf, and D&D, or Hats and coffee in the sanctuary, or Playing sports on Sundays, or Facemasks and vaccinations, and the list goes on. Instead of judging each other over disputable matters like these, and rather than treating each other with contempt, let's pursue loving empathy toward one another's perspective. In fact, let's lovingly talk through some of these things. But as we talk, let's make it a robust dialogue, rather than a heated debate. And as we talk, let's speak the truth in love, rather than quarreling, bickering, or slandering one another.^{18 19} There are *gray* areas and there are *gospel* areas, and we need to prayerfully discover which are which. We do this by carefully and consistently studying God's Word together. And, by depending on God's

¹⁸ "Every generation of Christians faces the need to decide just what beliefs and behavior are morally mandated of all believers, and what beliefs and behavior may be left to the individual believer's conscience... we recognize that some things that were thought theologically indisputable in the past have become disputable." D. A. Carson, "On Disputable Matters," Themelios editorial 40.3 (2015), p. 383.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/on-disputable-matters/>

¹⁹ The shifting in modern thought over which theological issues are debatable, and which are not, "shows that the line between what is theologically indisputable and what is theologically disputable may be driven by cultural and historical factors of which we are scarcely aware at the time." D. A. Carson, "On Disputable Matters," Themelios editorial 40.3 (2015), p. 384.

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Spirit to enlighten us to His truth. And then, we do our best to live out obedient, gospel-centered lives.

Instead of spending a lot of time and energy on these various questions, let's spend the bulk of our time and energy on worshipping God. Rather than quarreling over secondary "gray" areas, which can draw us into dissension, let's focus on the primary truths of the gospel which unite us in Christ!

Getting along through disputable matters means that...

3) We all need to honor God together in the midst of our differing practices regarding disputable matters.

Romans 14:6-8 says, "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. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. 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." When it comes down to it, whatever each of us believes about these various disputable matters, we should all be united by one shared priority: honoring God together. Whatever we choose to do, or choose not to do, we do it as unto the Lord. We choose to live for Him and to die for Him, because all of us belong to Him. I appreciate how the *ESV* translates Romans 14:6, "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."

So who are we to judge our fellow believer if they chose to honor the Lord by abstaining from something, or if they chose to honor the Lord by partaking in something, while giving God thanks for it? When it comes to disputable matters, as long as each of us is abstaining or partaking in honor of the Lord, then let's rejoice together. Let's give God thanks together, that our mutual faith is leading us to mutual worship. Even though some of our individual beliefs and practices may differ, our hearts can join together in corporate unison, as each of us does what we sincerely believe is pleasing to the Lord. Romans 15:7 later declares, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God." Within the parameters of these disputable matters, let's accept one another, and let's bring praise to God by honoring one another's differing practices.

Well, there's so much more that could be said about these disputable matters, but that's all the time that we have for today. We'll develop a fuller understanding of these over the next couple of Sundays, so you won't want to miss it. Until then, let me conclude by mentioning an unfortunate reality: sometimes an unintended consequence of talking about disputable matters, is that it can become a way for some of us to seek out how much

we can get away with. So rather than focusing on how we can best honor God, our old sin nature may cause us to look for any potential loopholes. We may find ourselves pursuing as much freedom as we can possibly find, in order to do whatever we want - whatever we can justify, whatever falls just short of getting us into any serious trouble with God. This kind of rationalization is immensely counterproductive to becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus. Not only is this a horrible approach to Christian living, but it also reveals a distinct lack of spiritual maturity.

I appreciate how D. A. Carson summarizes the end of his article. Rather than asking what we can get away with, Carson says, “surely serious Christians will be asking another series of questions:

What will bring God glory?

What will sanctify me?

...What does it mean to take up my cross and follow Jesus?

...What will contribute to fruitful evangelism?

...What beliefs and conduct [will] nudge me back toward the cross, and forward to loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and my neighbors as myself?

Again: What will bring glory to God?”²⁰

Brother or Sister in Christ, when it comes to this topic of disputable matters, let’s make that our all-encompassing question: What will bring glory to God?

²⁰ D. A. Carson, “On Disputable Matters,” Themelios editorial 40.3 (2015), p. 388.
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