

Romans 14, Pt. 1

Occasionally, I am invited to events up on the hill. And occasionally, these events feature an open bar. And occasionally, I look over to the open bar and see a fair amount of Presbyterians in line; maybe not enough for quorum at a congregational meeting, but it is close. It is no surprise to most of you - especially those of you who come from a Baptist background - that Christians disagree about drinking alcohol. Many fundamentalists and evangelical Christians in the US - in contrast to Europeans - find the consumption of alcohol to be at best a foolish and potentially harmful action. Others - including most Presbyterians - count a glass of wine or beer to be one of God's good gifts to be enjoyed. We all know there are many differing opinions within the ranks of faithful, Bible-believing Christians about a range of issues. We have different views of the lottery, or worship practices, or styles of dress. Some people are okay with tattoos. Others would never be caught dead with ink on their body. Can Christians go to a horse race? Are drums okay in a service of worship? Are there limits to how much technology we should permit in our home? The questions go on and on.

And the questions and disputes were there in the first century as well. In the first verse of our passage, Paul makes mention of a word that might be translated as opinions, doubtful things, or debatable subjects. With these differing views came the possibility of disunity, division, and spiritual harm. Remember that God's people are called to be a righteous people in an unrighteous world. Remember that Paul thinks that we must focus on our community and our practices, even as we tighten our doctrinal commitments. We can only discern the "good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (12:2) as we dwell together in the church. If, however, the church is torn apart by fights over opinions, then the church will falter in its mission to display the righteousness and mercy of God to the world. So, things which may be not-so-big deals become very big deals as they lead Christians away from "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (14:17).

Next week, we will consider in-depth Paul's strategy for handling these disputable matters. For today, I thought it would be wise to set up that discussion by considering three things: **the category**, **the context**, and **the community**.

The category. What came we say about this category of disputable things or opinions? For Paul in this chapter, two big issues were included in this category - food choices and the recognition of certain days. The background here is the tension that existed between Judaism and the emerging Gentile church. Paul has one or both of the following situations in mind. First, Paul could be wrestling with the fact that Christians from a Jewish background wanted to continue recognizing Jewish Sabbath practices and holy days and continue following kosher food laws. Obviously, this could lead to tension as these Jewish Christians lived in close contact with Gentile counterparts who knew little of Jewish festivals and food restrictions. Second, Paul might be addressing Gentile Christians who had been pressured into the view that they had to adopt Jewish practices in order to become faithful Christians. In either case, divisions were fomenting about food and special days.

As I have already indicated, there are many other things that we might put into the category of disputable things. Let me take a moment to lay down three parameters for understanding this category.

1. **This is not about essential doctrine.** Don't think for a moment that the content of chapter fourteen offers a pathway for churches to downplay core doctrine in the name of diversity. Paul has already told us in chapter one that he is a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, and set apart for the gospel of God (1:1). The gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes (1:16). In Galatians, Paul boldly proclaims, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8). So, these opinions cannot touch on the content of apostolic teaching.
2. **This is not about basic Christian ethics.** Don't think for a moment that the content of chapter fourteen offers a pathway for churches to downplay consensus surrounding basic Christian ethics. As we have seen in our study of chapter thirteen, Paul still sees the Ten Commandments

as an operational baseline for a faithful life. We were given a litany of sins in the first chapter. We were told in chapter six that we are dead to sin and that we should no longer present ourselves to sin. Christians can disagree about a lot, but there should be wide consensus on subjects like preserving faithful marriages between one man and one woman, loving neighbors, even the difficult ones, engaging in ethical business practices, telling the truth, and avoiding greedy, acquisitive materialism.

3. **These “non-essential” matters can be exaggerated into “essential” problems.** Don’t think for a moment that the content of chapter fourteen prevents non-essential things from becoming essential disputes. Sure, Christians can disagree about alcohol consumption. But watch out if someone’s view on that issue gets blown up into a test of salvation. In that case, something that was disputable, becomes something that must be resisted in the name of the gospel. Salvation through abstinence from alcohol is a false gospel. Christians like different kinds of music. That’s fine. But if those who prefer contemporary songs malign traditionalists as lacking spiritual vitality and accuse them of deadness, then faithful Christians must reject the gospel of contemporary music. In other words, we need to proceed carefully with this category. In Paul’s case, though Paul knew that one side was technically right and the other side was technically wrong, he did not want either position to gain ascendancy so that others could be cast out of the church.

The context. We need to remember that this chapter takes place in the overall flow of Romans. It is true to say that the entirety of the last thirteen chapters bears on what Paul here writes, but for the sake of brevity, let me offer three points which Paul has previously made which help us to understand our present chapter.

1. **Judgment is on the basis of works.** In 14:10-12, Paul writes that everyone will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, make confession to the Lord, and give an account of his or her life. This is nothing new. In 2:2, we were told that God will judge in truth. In 2:16, we were told that God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ. Though I will say more about this next week, it is enough to note at the moment that we

must be careful in judging one another over disputable things because we will each stand before God's judgment.

2. **Law-games cannot save us.** In 14:17, Paul lets us know that this teaching has to do with the kingdom of God. If we are dealing with God's kingdom, then we are dealing with the divine king. And if we are dealing with the divine king, then we are dealing with an absolute standard of righteousness. As we have been traveling through this letter, I have often remarked that people try to negotiate with God or barter with his law. But it doesn't work, because apart from God's grace we are spiritually dead. God in Christ has rescued us from a dead, ineffective law that only can produce condemnation, so that we might have new life in Jesus: "Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another - to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit for God" (7:4). No one can barter with God's law based on the position that we take on a debatable thing. I love singing the Gloria Patri; but I would be a fool if I tried to stand at Christ's judgment seat and offer my singing of this song as a spiritual advantage over those who do not sing it. I do not have any tattoos; but I would be a fool to try to prove to God that I am righteous because I do not have tattoos. Law-games cannot save us.
3. **Justification comes through faith in God's promises.** We are saved when we have the kind of faith that Abraham had. Abraham's faith in God led him to walk with God. Yet he was not justified because he walked with God but because he believed God and God counted that belief to him as righteousness (4:3). This is how it is for all true Christians. Christ died as an atoning sacrifice. We are joined to him in his death and resurrection. He is our righteousness and life.

The community. Finally, it is important to remember what life was like in the first century church. The early Christians were a minority community in a cosmopolitan and pagan context. The church in Rome was a collection of house churches that recognized fellowship with one another and with other Christians throughout the empire. The early Christians depended on one another. They shared life and resources together. Eventually they developed distinct subsections of cities, increasingly drawn to a shared life that set them

apart from the prevailing culture. The Romans came to see the early Christians as secretive and anti-social. Hence, in time, periodic persecution would beset the young church. But Christians loved one another. Losing the community was a terrible price to pay. It hurt to be removed from fellowship. For us, differences in disputable matters will sometimes lead us to simply go to a different church. It doesn't necessarily feel to us like a loss of investment or family separation. You go your way, and I'll go mine. But it wasn't that way for the early Christians. Being a sometimes maligned minority in a city like Rome meant that division over disputable subjects was both personally and missionally damaging.

I think this is a good place to stop today. Now is not the time or place for a discussion of church splits and departures. I do think it is sometimes right to leave one church to find a home in another. We each must listen to God's call, and we will sometimes go in different directions. But there is something that we must keep in mind. It should hurt to lose Christian fellowship, even when it seems like the right thing to do. We should be striving here in this congregation to have a community where the loss of it would be painful. God really does want us to love one another and to share life with one another. As Paul writes in 14:19, "Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another." It is possible to have this kind of edifying community today.