

Principles on Disagreeing¹
Selected Scriptures
ABC 7/23/17

Before we start the last section of Romans, I thought it appropriate to take this Sunday to look at some principles drawn from Rom 14-15 on how we're to disagree with each other in grey or debatable or non-moral matters & then end with some questions drawn from Scripture to help us make decisions in these areas where the Bible doesn't speak directly. With that being said, our consciences as Christians are usually pretty similar, after all, we have the same Word to guide us & the same Spirit indwelling us. But God allows us a surprising degree of latitude in personal scruples. Paul never commanded the stricter Christians of Rom 14 to get with the program & start eating meat as Jesus allowed. Neither did he command the meat-eaters to end their carnivorous ways because they might upset the vegetarians. He expected them all to get along in spite of their differences. But human nature being what it is, the stricter group is always tempted to judge those they see as too free (*they call themselves Christians!*), while the free group tends to look down on those with unnecessary restrictions (*those poor legalists!*). As we've seen, Paul condemns both these attitudes. Arrogance & overconfidence among the strong made them ripe for a kind of sin-all-you-want heresy that says there are no moral laws God expects us to obey. *We're saved by grace not law-keeping. Therefore do what you want!* Meanwhile, the judgmentalism of the weaker believers tended to push them into the legalistic heresy of the Judaizers. What would be Paul's glue to go into this gap between believers & bind them together in the midst of disputes? The glue of Christian love (Rom 14 & 1 Cor 8-10). In Rom 14-15 Paul gives 12 principles to ensure the strict consciences of the weak would be respected, while still allowing for the legitimate freedoms of the strong. PRAY

1. Accept those who disagree with you. 14:1-2

Not wrong, just different, remember? By now you've probably classified yourself as either having a strong conscience or weak conscience. But the fact is, in most issues, you're probably both weak & strong at the same time in comparison to others. There are almost always people to your

¹ Portions adapted from *Conscience*, Andrew David Naselli & JD Crowley, pp 84-117

left & right on any of these disputable matters. This means that, depending on the situation, God will call you to obey Paul's exhortations *both* to the weak & to the strong. Accept & welcome one another.

2. If you have freedom of conscience don't look down on those who don't. 14:3-4

Isn't this always the temptation of the strong, to look down on & despise those not as free? Paul condemns this attitude of superiority. But he doesn't stop there. He also says ...

3. If your conscience restricts you, don't be judgmental toward those who have freedom (14:3-4).

Isn't this always the temptation of those with a weaker conscience on some issue, to pass judgment on those who have freedom in that area? Why are both these attitudes so wrong? Paul gives 2 reasons:

A. God has accepted them (14:3c). They are saved by God's grace & accepted by Him whether strong or weak. Are you holier than God so you can't accept what God accepts? I don't think so!

B. Who are you to judge the servant of another? (14:4a). You aren't the master of other believers, God is. Therefore, leave it to Him. I'm not saying these debatable areas are unimportant. Not at all. We should talk about them, study them, & come to conclusions regarding them. But as we do so, always have the right spirit & be open to changing your own mind.

4. Be fully convinced of your position in your own conscience. 14:5

God didn't give you a conscience so you'd ignore & disobey what it tells you. Of course, this doesn't mean your conscience is always right. It's wise to continually calibrate your conscience to better fit God's will & His Word. You can't keep sinning against your conscience & be a healthy Christian. You must be fully convinced of your present position on food or drink or special days, or whatever the issue, & then live consistently by that decision until God leads you by His Word & Spirit to adjust your conscience. As I hope you know, no 2 believers have exactly the same conscience. That's why we need Rom 14! But the truth that needs to burn into all of our hearts & minds is that no Christian has a conscience that matches God's standards completely. No one. That's the goal, but none of us have yet arrived. Therefore, we must respect the consciences of others & not make fun of others' rules or freedoms. If you have an opportunity, you can lovingly

& gently explain your position, but you must never compel someone to sin against their conscience.

5. Assume that others are partaking or refraining for the glory of God. 14:6–9

Did you notice how generous Paul is to both sides. He assumes both sides are exercising their freedoms or restrictions for the glory of God. Wouldn't it be amazing to be in a church where everyone gave each other the benefit of the doubt on these differences, instead of putting the worst possible spin on everything? Isn't that what we want in our church? What will you do to help us get there? Do you accept others different than you? Are you proud or judgmental? Do you assume others are doing what they're doing for God's glory? God, through Paul, tells us to be doing all these things. But that's not all.

6. Don't judge others in these things because we'll be judged. 14:10–12

If we thought more about our own situation before the judgment seat of God, we'd be less likely to pass judgment on other Christians. It's our human nature to judge others & rationalize our own actions. Paul says we're not to do this. We're to be concerned about our own judgment, not the judgment of others.

7. Don't let your freedom destroy the faith of a weak brother or sister. 14:13–15

Free & strict Christians in a church both have responsibilities toward each other. But the 2nd ½ of Rom 14 places the bulk of responsibility on Christians with a strong conscience. One obvious reason is because they claim to be strong, so God calls on them to **bear the weaknesses of those without strength** (the weak; 15:1). Not only that, of the 2 groups, only the strong have a choice in these debatable matters like meat, holy days, & wine. They can either partake or abstain, whereas the conscience of the strict allows them only one choice. It's a great privilege for the strong to have double the choices of the weak. But they must use this gift wisely by considering how their choices affect the consciences of their brothers & sisters in Christ. This truth leads Paul to spend ½ of Rom 14 & ½ of 1 Cor 8 on the stumbling-block principle: Christians with a strong conscience must not allow their freedom to embolden a weaker Christian to sin against their own conscience. The concern here isn't just that your freedom may irritate, annoy, or offend your

weaker brother or sister. If they simply don't like your freedoms, that's their problem. But if your practice of freedom leads them to sin against their conscience, then it becomes your problem. We should never bring spiritual harm to others (20–21). How might your use of freedom bring spiritual harm to other professing believers? Paul doesn't specify, but Douglas Moo suggests *two possibilities*.²

1) *Our engaging in an activity that another believer thinks to be wrong may encourage that other believer to do it as well. They would then be sinning because they're not acting "from faith (v. 23). . . .*

2) *An ostentatious flaunting of liberty on a particular matter may so deeply offend someone that he or she may turn from the faith altogether.*

While we must never allow the conscience of others to determine our own conscience, we must always consider the conscience of others when we determine our own actions.

8. Disagreements about eating & drinking aren't important in the kingdom of God; building each other up in righteousness, peace, & joy is. 14:16–21

There's something striking & counterintuitive about Paul's reasoning here & in 1 Cor 8:8. Paul appropriates an argument that the strong want to use for their side, that what we eat or drink doesn't matter to God so quit making a big deal about it, to instead chasten the strong. Since food & drink don't commend us to God, & aren't matters of importance in His kingdom, then why not voluntarily abstain if your freedom could harm a weaker, wavering Christian? Paul mentions just **eating & drinking** in vs 17, but this principle extends to all other disputable matters. The kingdom of God isn't a matter of education choices, political parties, worship styles, or holidays. Once again, we're not suggesting that these are unimportant. We have some strong opinions on them. But they're not what the kingdom of God is about. Breaking our unity & dividing over these less important matters doesn't **make for peace & the building up of one another** (14:19). At the same time, we must note that allowable conscience disagreements do not extend to doctrinal matters that are central & essential to Christianity or matters of behavior that are clearly taught in Scripture. For example, to say that Jesus wasn't God or that He wasn't human isn't up for debate. The Bible is clear: He is fully God & fully human, the God-Man who came to earth to die

² NIV Application Commentary on Romans, p 468

in our place, atone for our sins, & give us His righteousness. When the Bible speaks to behavior, it's not up to our consciences to guide us. His Word guides us. Know what God says & obey it. Be intentional about building others up in righteousness, peace, & joy.

9. If you have freedom, don't flaunt it; if you are strict, don't expect others to be strict like you.

14:22a

This verse makes it clear that the **faith** in Rom 14 refers to our confidence of conscience. We're not supposed to keep our **faith** in the gospel to ourselves! Just the opposite, we're to share it (1 Pt 3:15). But our decisions in grey areas don't have to be publically proclaimed. Not flaunting our opinions applies equally to the strong & to the weak. To those with a strong conscience you have freedom in Christ, but don't show it off in a way that may cause others to sin. Be especially careful to nurture the faith of young people & new Christians. Those with a weak conscience in a particular area also have a responsibility not to police others by pressuring them to adopt your strict standards. You should keep these matters between yourself & God.

10. Live according to your conscience & be blessed. 14:22b-23

God gave us the gift of conscience to increase our joy as we obey its guiding. Listen to your conscience & follow it. D.A. Carson puts it this way:

Paul judges it dangerous for Christians to defy their consciences, because if they get in the habit of ignoring the voice of conscience, they may ignore that voice even when the conscience is well informed & properly warning them of something that is positively evil.³

Want to be blessed? Obey your conscience & align it with Scripture.

11. Follow Christ's example & put others first. 15:1-3

This principle doesn't mean the strong have to agree with the position of the weak. It doesn't even mean the strong can never again exercise their freedoms. Neither does it mean the strong only *put up with* or *endure* or *tolerate* the weak. For a Christian, to bear with the weaknesses of the weak means you gladly help them by refraining from doing anything that would hurt their faith. Rom 15:3 emphasizes the example of Christ. We cannot even begin to imagine the freedoms & privileges that belong to the Son of God. To be God is to be completely free. Yet

³ *The Cross & Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians*, p 123

Christ did not please Himself but gave up His rights & freedoms to become a Servant to the Jewish culture so we could be saved from wrath. Compared to what Christ suffered on the cross, to give up a petty freedom is nothing.

12. We bring glory to God when we accept one another as Christ has accepted us. 15:5-7

With this sentence, Paul bookends this section that began with similar words in 14:1. But here in 15:7 Paul adds a comparison, **as Christ also accepted** you, & a purpose, **to the glory of God**. It matters how you treat those who disagree with you on disputable matters. When you welcome & accept them as Christ has welcomed you, you glorify God. That's our goal.

As I said, part 2 of today's sermon is how to make decisions in debatable areas. As we know from the NT, we've been freed not to sin but from sin (Jn 8:32-36; Rom 6:18, 22; 8:2). The Pharisees wrongly tried to impose religious traditions on Jesus (Mk 7:1-23) & the Judaizers wanted to put Paul back under the law (Gal 2:4; 1 Cor 10:29). But the liberty of Jesus & Paul allowed them to reject man's traditions & embrace God's truth. We are saved by God's grace alone to be obedient to God's Word alone. Our liberty in Christ doesn't give us a license to sin (Rom 6:15; Gal 5:13; 1 Pt 2:16). We have been freed from sin & are instead enslaved to righteousness (Rom 6:17-18) so we should no longer want to practice sin, but live in righteousness (Rom 6:22). We are called to a lifestyle of holiness (1 Pt 1:16-17). Is this accomplished by legalistically basing our salvation on human works? Of course not (Eph 2:8-10). Is it reached by basing our sanctification on man-made rules? Again, of course not (Col 2:16-23). How is it accomplished (Rom 4:20; 2 Pt 3:18)? By desiring God's Word (1 Pt 2:1-2) & speaking the truth in love (Eph 4:15). Obviously, where there are clear commands in Scripture, they're to be obeyed. But when the Bible doesn't speak to an issue, there is liberty, even the liberty to not exercise that liberty. So, what about the grey areas where both legalism & license can at times rear their ugly heads? Legalism can take an infinite number of directions. But the common element in them all is a human standard of righteousness that's imposed on others as if it had the authority of God's Word. Some of the more common ones include:

- Imposing extra rules of conduct

- Mandating only 1 version of the English Bibles
- Forbidding certain kinds of entertainment
- Keeping the Sabbath commands
- Banning certain musical instruments
- Commanding clothing or grooming requirements
- Embracing certain political parties or views
- Demanding one method of schooling over all others

We must be careful to not add to what God has already given us as standards for righteousness. But how do we come to a conviction, being fully convinced that what we're doing in these non-moral matters is truly what God has for us. After all, life is full of decisions. Every day, we make a multitude of decisions that affect our lives. Many are inconsequential while others can have more meaning. 35 years ago I was interning at a church in AZ & working in the Jr High youth group with Muriel's brother & my sister, Rhoda. I don't remember all the details, but Rhoda & I put together a worksheet titled, *Right or Wrong? 8 Guidelines to Help You Decide*. Since then I've used & adapted it a number of times & brought it up to 12 principles or guidelines. A few years ago I ran across a website that has 67 tests that can be used to help you decide on what's OK for you to do. While that might be beneficial, it seemed a little overboard. These guidelines can be used to determine the answer about a grey or questionable activity. Obviously, as Christians, God's Word should govern our decision making. Many things are black & white. There's no question about it because the Bible is clear. Lying, murder, adultery, & similar things are clearly sin & we're to avoid them. We don't have to wonder if we're to be loving to one another because we're commanded to be. So the 1st question to ask yourself when making a decision in some area of behavior is ...

1. Does it violate Scripture? (Jn 14:15; 1 Jn 2:3) If so, it's wrong & we'd better not come to a conviction of conscience that is different than what God has said in His Word. Question #2 goes along with this one.

2. Does it violate the laws or rules of those in authority over me? (Rom 13:1; Eph 6:1) When a governing authority makes laws, as Christians we're to obey them (unless they go against what God says). These 1st two are no-brainers. Obey God, obey authority over you. But what about the grey areas? What about what we should wear? What about what we should watch? What about

places we should avoid? What about music we listen to? What about dancing or card playing? What's the right choice in educating our children? How do we celebrate holidays? Do we celebrate Halloween? Define modesty. Can I buy my groceries from an atheist? Can I have a glass of wine with my dinner? Can I go to a doctor who's a Hindu & believes in reincarnation & karma? Here are a few questions to ask yourself as you pray & seek God's direction in these grey areas of life.

3. Does it do harm to my mind or body? 1 Cor 6:19-20 tells us,

do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, & that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

That's pretty clear. If it's harmful, don't do it.

4. Does it control me &/or my actions? 1 Cor 6:12 says, **All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.** Our mindset should be that we won't allow anything to master us other than Jesus Himself. Ask yourself, *Will it become something that I can't let go of?* For example, it's not wrong to have a nice car or a nice home, but if God were to ask you to give them up & serve Him on a mission field or in full time service, those things shouldn't have such a grip on us that they'd keep us from doing what God wants us to do. When we go into debt for these things to such a degree that we no longer give to God or become so financially enslaved that we can no longer serve Him, it's controlling us. If you think that something will divert your attention from God & His glory, avoid it. Don't allow anything other than Jesus Christ to become your master!

5. Is it motivated by something other than God's love for others? Paul tells us in 1 Cor 10:24, **Let no one seek his own *good*, but that of his neighbor.** Even if something will build us up we should not do it if it is not also for the good of others. Our primary concern should be for the **good** of our **neighbor**, a principle contrary to basic human nature.

A pastor, after preaching on this passage, had a time of testimony He asked the congregation to share experiences of giving up something for the sake of someone else. Except for one man who said he didn't drink or smoke around other Christians, no one responded. After the service a

number of people told the pastor, *For the first time in my life I realized that I don't really give up anything for the sake of others.*⁴ Apparently some of the believers at Philippi had the same problem, & Paul wrote them,

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (2:3–4).

6. Does it go against my conscience? (Rom 14:5; 1 Cor 8:7; 1 Jn 3:19-21) Don't violate your conscience! When your conscience speaks, listen! Don't criticize someone who doesn't do certain things because it violates their conscience. Don't mock someone with a different standard than you have. We are each to give an account of how we listen or refuse to listen to our own conscience.

7. Does it glorify someone other than God? (1 Cor 6:20; 10:31) Will the Lord be lifted up & glorified in what I do? His glory & exaltation should be the supreme purpose behind everything we do.

8. Will this be a hindrance to non-Christians around me? Does it hurt my witness to them? (Mt 5:16; Col 4:5) 1 Cor 10:32-33 says,

Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the *profit* of the many, so that they may be saved.

Our light is to shine in a dark world surrounding us & draw people to Christ. So we need to ask ourselves if we're doing something that's going to help or harm others spiritually? Is my testimony going to be helped or hindered? Will unbelievers be drawn to Christ or turned away from Him by what I'm doing? Will it help me conduct myself **with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity** (Col 4:5)? One of the greatest testimonies that we have to a lost person is the love & concern we have for our brothers & sisters in Christ & a purity & honesty & integrity they aren't used to seeing. Will this lift up Jesus? Will this point others to Him?

⁴ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p 246

9. Will it offend or cause other Christians to stumble & sin? (Romans 14:21-23; 1 Cor 8:9; 10:23-32) We've talked about this at length together so go back & listen to the earlier sermons on Rom 14.

10. Will this hinder my own spiritual growth? In Heb 12:1 we read,

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance & the sin which so easily entangles us, & let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

When runners run in a race, they rid themselves of any non-useful weight. When backpacking you do the same because extra weight adds up with each step. In a similar way, if something diverts your attention from God, avoid it! Is it an encumbrance that we should willingly give up?

11. Is there a better use of my time and/or resources? (Ps 90:12) Eph 5:15-16 tells us, **Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time...** While evaluating keep in mind that time for rest & relaxation is also needed. If this is a problem for you, there's a wonderful book by Tim Hansel called *When I Relax I Feel Guilty* which I highly recommend. Obviously, balance is needed. But if your time or resources are out of whack in an area, it may be good to give it up.

12. Could this be done in Christ's name? Can I imagine Jesus doing this? Would I want to be found doing this when Jesus returns? (1 Jn 2:6; 2:28) In Col 3:17 Paul tells us, **Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.** Would Jesus listen to this? Would He wear this? Would He do this? Would He drink this? Would He watch this? Would He go there?

I'm sure you can find other biblical guidelines to add to this, but this is at least a starting point. We must stay in the Scriptures & be cautious about pushing our own personal choices on the consciences of others. We should be zealous to quietly live out, exemplify & teach the principles of holiness that are clearly taught in Scripture. We should follow the advice of our Lord & do our praying, fasting & giving in secret, not wanting to be seen by men. In all that we do we should be exalting the Lord Jesus Christ as the source of any & all holiness, holding up the cross before

men so that they might be drawn to Him by faith & seeking to promote the liberty that He has purchased for us.

May God give us the wisdom to navigate a righteous course through life, following the course that Scripture sets & never wreck on the rocks of either legalism or license. But while Rom 14-15 gives us help in deciding what course of action we should take in debatable matters, the main thrust of it is that we need to be united in fellowship in spite of our differences. Rather than focusing on what we can or can't do or what we should or shouldn't do, what we must take away from this is that we must get along with each other. As 1 Thes 5:13 says, **live in peace with one another**. Our focus must be on maintaining & strengthening the unity we have with one another no matter our differences in these grey areas.