



Text: Romans 14:1-23¹

Series: Right Living – The Letter to the Romans (Part 23)

Title: How to Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

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Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

As I read this chapter from Paul's Letter to the Romans, I want you to be on the lookout for two phrases. Paul is addressing two groups of believers in the church of Rome. One group he calls "**the weak**" and the other group he calls "**the strong**." Notice **how Paul distinguishes between the two groups** and ask yourself **in which might you fit?** Depending on the issue Paul raises, it might be one group at one point, and the other group at different point. So, be on the lookout for "the weak" and "the strong."

[**READ** Romans 14:1-23]

The church in Rome was at a crossroads. Issues had arisen that were threatening to blow the church apart. Similar issues had already damaged the witness of the church in Galatia and had even drawn one of the apostles, Peter, into the confusion. (cf. Gal 2:11ff)

What Paul is laying down here are principles of Christian living that will enable believers **to agree to disagree** and remain in fellowship together. What Paul is dealing with here are ways in which sincere followers of Christ choose to live out their faith in Jesus.

The Issues

The issues at stake here are matters of "**opinion**" as the ESV translates the word or "**disputable matters**" as the NIV translates it. It's important to understand that Paul is not dealing with doctrinal matters that are central to the faith.

The issue that is most prominent is the issue of eating meat.

"One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables." Romans 14:2

The "weak" group had chosen to abstain from eating meat, while the "strong" group saw nothing wrong with eating meat or with anything else for that matter. Paul doesn't tell us exactly what the problem was but we can draw on what is

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said elsewhere in the New Testament to narrow down the probable issue to one of two possibilities.

First, the problem in Rome could have been that the meat purchased in the Roman market had come into contact with foods on the “unclean” list found in the Old Testament Law. Notice the word “unclean” in verse 14. Paul wrote...

“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.” Romans 14:14

It’s a word that connects us with the Old Testament laws about food in Leviticus chapter 11 and Deuteronomy chapter 14. The “clean” meats were from animals like cattle, goats, sheep and chickens. Jews were allowed to eat meat from these animals. “Unclean” meat came from pigs and other animals that God forbade. Whenever “unclean” meat came into contact with “clean” meat, the clean was made unclean by contact. Roman meat markets might simply have been places where clean and unclean meat was in such close contact that Jews chose to abstain from all meat rather run the risk of spiritual contamination by what God had declared to be “unclean.”

Notice that Paul says, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself...” Jesus had announced the end of the Old Testament food laws with these words...

“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” Mark 7:19

And Mark, recording Jesus’ words, adds this comment to make sure we get the point...

“(Thus he declared all foods clean.)” Mark 7:19

But here’s the problem: these Roman Jews who were now believers in Jesus had grown up with the habit of abstaining from meat as a part of their devotion to God and they just couldn’t shake the habit! In their minds and hearts, it was still “unclean.” (v.14)

There’s a **second** possible explanation for why these believers in Rome had abstained from meat. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul deals with the problem of “eating of food offered to idols.” (1 Corinthians 8:4) In the markets of Corinth, the meat that was sold in the stalls was first ritually offered to the gods of the city before being put on sale to the public. There were some converts to Christ who simply couldn’t bring themselves to eat meat from the market because of its association with the idols they had once worshipped.

Paul wrote...



“Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ [Isaiah 41:24] and that ‘there is no God but one.’ [Deuteronomy 4:35] ... However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.” 1 Corinthians 8:4, 7-8

The problem might have been that these “weak” Romans believers had abstained from meat because of their previous involvement in idol worship and they were unable to grasp the truth that idols were nothing. Strong believers understood the truth and their consciences were clear – they were able to eat the meat without being troubled in their spirit but the weak were not free in their spirit.

The second issue Paul identifies is that of **“holy days.”**

“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.” Romans 14:5

Almost without question, his reference is to the keeping of **the Sabbath law and quite possibly also the other Old Testament feast days.** The Law of Moses called on the Jewish people to...

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” Exodus 20:8

Work was forbidden on the Sabbath, travel was restricted, even cooking in the kitchen was stopped as a testimony to God’s act of resting on the seventh day from his work of creation (Ex 20:8-11). In addition to the Laws requirements, a whole vast array of limitations were created to avoid doing anything that might appear like work on the Sabbath.

One day, Jesus’ disciples collided with some of these extra Sabbath laws. They were criticized by the religious leaders of Judaism for breaking the laws of Sabbath by casually collecting a few heads of wheat to ease their hunger as they walked through a grain field on the Sabbath. In their defense, Jesus did what he had done with the food laws – he superseded them. Jesus said...

“...have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath [by working] and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” Matthew 12:5-8



Jesus was declaring a new priority to keeping the Sabbath day – mercy, rather than sacrifice. In Mark’s account of this incident, he records an additional word from Jesus...

“The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27

Jesus was declaring that the priority of the Sabbath was for man’s rest, not for man’s restriction. Mercy and rest were to be the new priorities, not the keeping of “one day” as better than others.

In the early church, this change in Sabbath focus was reflected in the fact that worship shifted from the Sabbath, or Saturday, to the “first day of the week,” the day we call “Sunday” or “the Lord’s day.” (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10) This celebrated the fact that the first day of the week was the day on which Jesus had risen from the dead. (John 20:1) In the church, obeying Sabbath laws was not important. What was important was the regular gathering of believers for worship and mutual encouragement in the name of the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 10:25).

But the problem was that some believers in Rome had lived with the laws of Sabbath for so long that they couldn’t envision a spiritual life without them. Others in Rome, understood that in Christ they were not required to keep the Sabbath law and their worship rhythms changed to reflect the new spiritual realities brought by Jesus.

The third issue, which is only briefly mentioned, is **the drinking of wine**. Paul connects it with the issue of “clean” and unclean food and he wrote...

“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.” Romans 14:20-21

Connecting the drinking of wine as he does with the eating of meat, it is clear that the same issues that applied to meat also applied to wine. Either it was viewed as “unclean” by some because of contamination by contact with “unclean” foods or because it was offered to idols before being sold in the market. Some chose to abstain because of those associations, others in the church did not.

Fear of drunkenness is not the issue with wine in this chapter. Drunkenness is roundly condemned by Paul in chapter 13, verse 13 where he says that we are to...

**“walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness...”
Romans 13:13**



Remember that the things that were dividing the “weak” and the “strong” were “opinions” (v.1), not sins. Drunkenness is clearly defined in the Bible as sin and if that was what was on his mind, he would never have mentioned it here in a discussion about “opinions.” The three **“opinions”** that Paul identifies here **are...**

Things that are neither prohibited nor commanded – they are “opinions” (v.1) about how we live our Christian lives “to the Lord.”

They are similar to contemporary questions that we face like...

- The kind of music we prefer in our worship
- The ways in which we choose to keep our Sundays as a day of worship, rest and mercy.
- The Bible translation we choose to use in our worship and study
- The choices we make about our ownership of property and possessions
- The decision of whether or not we celebrate Advent & Christmas, Lent & Easter

Paul is very clear that these choices were not to destroy their fellowship together. He wrote...

“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.” Romans 14:3

Paul challenges them both to live together for the Lord’s sake.

In which category did Paul see himself? Let me read you what he wrote to the Colossians:

“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” Colossians 2:16-17

And definitively, in the first verse of the next chapter in Romans Paul wrote...

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” Romans 15:1

Paul’s convictions clearly lined up with the strong group. He could have just slammed down the truth and told the weak believers to get with the program but he didn’t do that. He didn’t because some very precious things were at stake here.

- **Christian fellowship** was at stake here – it needed to be nurtured by the grace of forbearance.



- **Christian conscience** was at stake here. A Bible issue might be very clear to you, but there are some things about which we need to learn the grace of agreeing to disagree.
- **Christian love** was at stake here. As one Bible scholar put it, “Liberty is wonderful, but love is even greater.” (Douglas Moo, p. 468)

Notice that Paul doesn't tell the strong to teach the weak, he tells them to “bear with” the weak. Although he disagrees with the position the weak have taken – he calls it “failings” or literally the “weakness of the weak” – he does not challenge them to grow in their knowledge. The choices they've made are not sinful, even though they reflect a lack of knowledge about the fullness of the freedom that Christ has made available to them.

I want you to notice that Paul declares that both the weak and the strong, although they are opposed in opinion on these matters, are united in the fact that they both bring glory to Christ in their lives. Paul wrote...

“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.”
Romans 14:6

Fixing the weak was not the way to bring unity in the body of the church in Rome. Paul begins this whole discussion of “weak” and “strong” believers by beginning where he hopes they will end. He wrote to those who were strong...

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him....” Romans 14:1

The word “welcome” is much more than “smile nicely and shake his hand.” It means literally to include the person in your circle. It means to enfold them and have real fellowship with them.

***How can believers live together and bring honor to the Lord even if they have different convictions on how they are to live for Christ?
Can we disagree without being disagreeable?***

Let me share some principles with you that I've gleaned from Paul's teaching here that I believe make it possible – if we will live them! And honestly, it won't be easy, but God's Word is clear: this is how he wants us to live.

First of all...

Learn to distinguish between essentials and opinions

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.” Romans 14:1



The former executive minister of our denomination once reminded us that although we Baptists love to vote on everything...

“There are some things we don’t get to vote about!”

The Bible is full of teaching that is not open for dispute. Last week we looked at one of those great truths...

“Jesus is Lord” Romans 10:9

God’s Word tells us that he is the one and only Saviour of the world, the master of the universe, the creator of all things, he is God come in the flesh. He is the only way to God. His death and resurrection are the only means by which we are saved from God’s wrath against our sin. Salvation is found only in Jesus – there is no confusion or opinion about it.

Another great truth to hold firmly is that the Bible is God’s Word and is our only source of authoritative teaching about everything God wants us to know. Paul tells us that...

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” 2 Timothy 3:16-17

There is no confusion or opinion about the Bible being God’s Word.

The Bible is very clear about a whole range of moral issues upon which there is great confusion today. Paul wrote with great specificity about the nature of sin to the church in Galatia. He wrote...

“the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.” Galatians 5:19-21

Among other things...

- God’s Word declares unambiguously that homosexual practice is sin.
- The Bible plainly declares that all sexual practice outside of the bonds of marriage is sin
- The Bible straightforwardly declares that slander and malicious gossip are always wrong.
- The Bible leaves us with no doubt that cruelty towards our spouses and our children has always been and will always be sin in God’s sight.



No confusion, no opinion – it’s a fact. When God’s Word commands it, we comply. When God’s Word prohibits it, we obey. What God’s Word teaches, we accept.

But there are things we encounter and about which we must make choices that lie outside the clear, unambiguous teaching of the God’s Word. Let me suggest **some useful questions in determining the essentials:**

- **Does the teaching touch on the person of God?**
- **Does it have to do with the doctrine of salvation?**
- **Is it a moral issue which Scripture identifies as sin?**

We need to understand the difference between matters on which we must be firm and matters where opinions can differ. During a time of intense dispute within his church, a pastor wrote these very wise words...

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

Secondly...

Remember that you are a fellow servant, not the Master

Paul wrote...

“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master [literally “lord”] that he stands or falls.” Romans 14:4

Our tendency is to forget our place and to shift from servant to master. We like to tell people how they can glorify God. We like to tell other people what they should do or how they should live, and usually it ends up being – surprise, surprise! -- exactly what we do and how we live. We’re very uncomfortable with the idea that other people can bring glory to God by making choices that are different from the ones we make. Jesus dealt with Peter about this tendency to play “master” for other people.

Jesus had just commissioned Peter to feed Jesus’ sheep, a wonderful directive. What he meant was that Peter was to have a teaching ministry to the followers of Jesus, but then Jesus said something that disturbed Peter.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.’ (This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, ‘Follow me.’” John 21:18-19



The disciple John was also there and Peter, perhaps stunned by the word that Jesus had given him, asked Jesus...

“Lord, what about this man?” John 21:21

This is a key question and it marks Peter’s shift from “labour to management.” When we start criticizing the discipleship of others we have moved from being fellow servants to the role of master and judge. Notice Jesus’ answer to Peter’s question...

“Jesus said to him, ‘If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!’” John 21:22

There is an edge in Jesus’ response to Peter that we all need to feel. We need to resist the temptation to play “master” in the lives of other believers and we need to just get on with what the Lord has given us to do.

Thirdly...

Establish your own “opinions,” and keep them between you and Jesus

Paul identifies a very personal side of following Jesus here in Romans chapter 14. There are three aspects to this personal life with the Lord.

First, fully establish your convictions about matters of opinion.

Paul wrote...

“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.” Romans 14:5

You and I have a responsibility before the Lord ***to think*** about how we live the Christian life. Think through the issues, study the Scriptures, pray and ask for the Lord’s direction and make up your “own mind.” Don’t let someone else do your thinking for you!

Secondly, keep your convictions between yourself and the Lord.

Paul wrote...

“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.” Romans 14:22

Once you’ve decided what your convictions are on matters of opinion, don’t go around button-holing people, trying to convert them to your way of thinking. Be appropriate in discussing these ideas with others – don’t be manipulative or condescending in your conversations with others.



Thirdly, listen to your conscience as you live out your convictions.

Paul wrote...

“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.” Romans 14:23

Don't ignore your conscience! It's like the warning sounds our car makes to tell us something is wrong. If we regularly ignore the warning sounds pretty soon we find ourselves at the side of the road out of gas or trying to break into the car because we locked our keys inside.

Cf. my “golf guilt” experience

- In early 1990s I took up golf – spent way too much time and money on the game as I tried to learn it.
- Determined to set a boundary to “limit” its influence in my life: “No golf on Sunday.”
- In 1992 camping near Fernie, B.C., with Ruth and the kids. Sunday afternoon, took my clubs and drove into Fernie to play golf
- Fighting with myself all the way – course closed, couldn't play.
- Returned “rejoicing” and singing hymns all the way back to campground
- Although there was nothing wrong with playing golf on Sunday, I had come to a conviction and my conscience would not let me violate it.
- Fast-forward to summer, 2008 – during my sabbatical. I played golf on several Sunday afternoons and evenings with friends from the church.
- Had great times of companionship AND no pangs of conscience – why?
- My convictions had changed and I had given myself time to allow my conscience to catch up with my convictions.
- Now, it would be completely wrong of me to try to pressure one of you to play golf on Sunday because my convictions have changed.
- If you don't play golf on Sunday, I will understand and respect your conviction and practice!

Fourthly...

Remember that love is more precious than knowledge

Paul is clearly on the side of the strong. He knows that there is no Biblical barrier to eating meat but notice what he says to his fellow strong believers...

“For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.” Romans 14:15



Paul does not tell the strong to educate the weak, he tells them to love them! And it's a costly love! Paul asks the strong to be willing to limit their liberty in Christ for the sake of their weak brother or sisters whose relationship with Jesus is still intertwined with unnecessary limitations.

Love, not knowledge, is what makes a church a living testimony to the presence of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth...

“Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.” 1 Corinthians 13:8

It's Super Bowl Sunday so please forgive one football illustration. Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, was asked what it took to make a winning team. He said...

“There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don't win the game. Then you come to the third ingredient: if you're going to play as a team, you've got to care for each other – you've got to love each other.”

Finally...

Keep your focus on the eternals not the externals

Paul wrote...

“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.” Romans 14:17-18

A wise person once said...

“The eternals, not the externals, are the essentials.”

Often quarrels erupt over “opinions” and “disputable matters” because we've lost touch with the “eternals” in our own lives. Our spiritual lives have become cold and rigid and external. We “do church” and we “keep the rules” that keep us feeling safe. Inside, we're unhappy and far from the love and Spirit of Christ. We live our lives in fear of what others think of us, looking for their approval.

If we find ourselves thinking about externals, we need to renew our connection with the eternals. We need to ask ourselves:

- Am I resting in the gift of **righteousness** that comes to me through faith in Jesus Christ?
- Am I experiencing the **peace** that comes to me because Christ has satisfied God's justice for me and I am free forever from the fear of punishment?



- Am I experiencing the **joy** of the Holy Spirit springing up inside me because I'm living my life to the glory of the Lord?

Brothers and sisters, our first line of defense in the fight to keep ourselves from becoming mired in quarrels over opinions is our own hearts.

As we prepare to meet the Lord this morning at the Lord's Table, let's sing this song as **a prayer of preparation...**

Lord, Be Glorified

Bob Kilpatrick

**In my life, Lord, be glorified, be glorified.
In my life, Lord, be glorified today.**

**In my work, Lord, be glorified, be glorified.
In my work, Lord, be glorified today.**

**In my home, Lord, be glorified, be glorified.
In my home, Lord, be glorified today.**

**In my life, Lord, be glorified, be glorified.
In my life, Lord, be glorified today.**

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- **Invitation to the Lord's Table**
- **Songs of Communion**
 - Alas! And Did My Saviour Bleed (#306 with an additional verse)
 - As the Deer (#548)
- **Invitation to Prayer** – after the Communion service our Prayer Team will be hear to pray with you
- **Benediction**