

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 2, 2017

## DISPUTABLE MATTERS

Romans 14:1-12

### ESSENTIALS AND NON-ESSENTIALS

One of the things I love most about the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) is the motto of our denomination: *In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity (love)*. This motto is often attributed mistakenly to St. Augustine, the great church father of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, but cannot be found anywhere in his writings. It seems, instead, to have originated in a tract written by a 17<sup>th</sup>-century German theologian named Peter Meiderlin in 1627, in the midst of the thirty Years' War in Europe.

Regardless of its origin, it expresses a biblical principle that lies at the heart of our family relationships in the EPC: We have a foundational unity in the essential doctrines of the Christian faith (which are laid out in a statement of faith we call the *Essentials of our Faith*). In what we call the non-essentials of the faith, we have the liberty to disagree with one another. In all things, whether essential or non-essential, we are governed by the biblical command to love one another, which, as Paul has said in Romans 13:8-10, is both our Christian duty and the continuing debt we owe not just to the people in our lives who are easy to love, or to people who love us, but to every person without exception, including those who are different from us and, in one way or another, hard to love.

In Romans 14, Paul turns to the outworking of this mandate to love one another in the non-essentials of Christian faith and life, in those things where we may disagree with one another. He calls them “disputable matters” in verse 1. They are disputable or non-essential precisely because we don’t have to agree with one another about them. They are questions of conscience in which we may differ with one another, and in which it is neither appropriate nor biblically mandated to require everyone to believe or act the same way. In the family of the church, there is room for disagreement. There is room for differences of opinion and practice regarding certain things – specifically, things about which the Bible does not speak definitively.

The Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century referred to such matters as *adiaphora*, which means “matters of indifference,” referring to customs or ceremonies, or secondary beliefs that are not part of the gospel or doctrines at the heart of the faith. An example in our day is baptism: Here at Faith, we affirm and practice infant baptism (when one or both of the parents are professing believers), but we don’t insist on it. We are careful to say that baptism does not confer or guarantee salvation, nor is baptism necessary for salvation. We honor the wishes of Christian parents who prefer to have their children dedicated instead of baptized, so their children can be baptized later as professing believers in Christ. We affirm and celebrate the baptism of professing followers of Christ who have not been previously baptized.

In addition, we believe the manner of baptism is part of the *adiaphora*: We are fine with baptism by sprinkling, pouring, or dunking (immersion). Some Christians disagree, but we believe there is more than one acceptable way to administer the sacrament of baptism. It is, we believe, a *non-essential* or *disputable matter*.

In the essential doctrines of the faith – in what we believe about the Bible; about the triune God – about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; about the human condition and God’s provision of salvation by grace; about the church; about the promised coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ; and about the Great Commission God has given to the church – we are united in what we believe. And this unity in the essentials is, well, *essential* to our health and well-being and vitality as a church family. But our unity in the essentials doesn’t mean that we agree on everything. Or that we have to. After all, we have Redskins fans, we have Steelers fans, we even allow Dallas Cowboys fans in our church! (Some of you may think loyalty to the Redskins should be raised to the level of an essential, but fortunately we have not made it a test of one’s orthodoxy!) Paul would call it a “disputable matter.”

In the 1<sup>st</sup>-century, there were matters more serious than football that threatened the health and unity of the church. It is intuitively obvious, I think, that differences of opinion or practice can lead to disunity – to disharmony or division – if left unaddressed. Paul addresses two of these issues in the verses we read from Romans 14 (verses 1-12). These two disputable matters, as he calls them, relate to one’s diet and the observance of “holy” days.

### **TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT**

The first, in verses 2-4, involves one’s diet – specifically, the decision to eat or not to eat meat, a choice that remains before us today. Some of us choose the vegetarian option, making the conscious decision not to eat meat, or the vegan option, which goes a step beyond vegetarianism by not consuming any animal products, such as eggs, cheese, or milk. You may recall that Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the Old Testament opted for a diet of only vegetables and water (Daniel 1:11-16) for purposes of their health. In Paul’s day, some believers may have chosen the vegetarian or vegan option for their health-enhancing benefits. More likely, based on what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 8 about food – in particular, meat – left over from the sacrifices to idols in the pagan temples and then re-sold in the marketplace, the decision to forgo meat was made to avoid any connection with the pagan rituals. Or, on the other hand, some Jewish Christians, seeking to adhere to the kosher laws, probably opted to eat no meat at all in order to insure that they didn’t eat non-kosher meat.

Different Christians came to different conclusions. Some embraced a vegetarian or vegan diet out of principle. Some abstained from eating meat in order to avoid meat offered to idols or any other meat that did not meet kosher standards. Others freely ate meat of all kinds, without worrying one way or another.

Some people felt very strongly about it, but, for Paul, it was a disputable matter, a non-essential of the faith in which every Christian has the liberty to choose the course of action they believe is God's best for them.

### **“WEAK” AND “STRONG”**

The language Paul uses of “weak” and “strong” doesn't mean that eating meat is inherently better than a vegetarian lifestyle, or vice versa. He is not talking about people who adopt a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle for health rather than religious reasons. There is nothing “weak” about that. It certainly does not reflect a weakness in one's faith. Where “weak” and “strong” come into play is when a believer does not feel that he or she is free in Christ to eat meat of any kind (along with anything else) without violating a dietary law and thereby damaging his or her relationship with God. The one who is “strong” in this context is the one who knows and embraces the freedom in Christ to enjoy food of all kinds as gifts from our gracious God.

### **THE LORD'S DAY AND OTHER “HOLY” DAYS**

The second disputable matter involves the observance of holy days, as we see in verses 5 and 6. It is hard to tell if Paul has the weekly Sabbath (or Lord's Day) observance in mind, or the observance of special days for feasting or fasting that were part of the religious life of the Jews, or both. What is clear is that not everyone in the church was in agreement about these things. Some thought it important to continue to observe the special days and weeks of the Jewish calendar. Some, especially Gentile Christians, but some Jewish Christians, too, did not. As applied to the Sabbath (or Lord's Day), the specter of Pharisaic legalism regarding what one could or could not do on the Sabbath was a clear and present danger. And it still is.

Our denomination's historic theological standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), which dates back to the Puritan era of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, has a very restrictive understanding of what is and what is not permissible for Christians to do on the Sabbath or Lord's Day. For example, it forbids recreational activities of any kind, which is difficult for most of us to accept or live by. I have a high view of the Lord's Day. I believe it is different from the other six days of the week and is meant to be a blessing from God to us. I believe worship with God's people and the study of God's Word, fellowship with one another, and acts of hospitality and service to others (what the Confession calls “duties of necessity and mercy,” WCF 21.8) are to be our priority on the Lord's Day. But I don't think this precludes the enjoyment of recreational activities, as long as our recreational activities don't take precedence over our spiritual opportunities or hinder our spiritual life. Not everyone sees it the same way. Some Christians have a more restrictive view of the Lord's Day than I. Some have a more “liberal” view. It is not a matter on which we all have to agree.

### **GRACE IN DISPUTABLE MATTERS**

Well, if we don't have to agree on things like this, what *are* we supposed to do? How *are* we supposed to handle “disputable matters” when we encounter them? Paul gives us the answer in verse 1: “Accept the one whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.” Or, as it says in *The Message*: “Welcome with open arms fellow believers who

don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with – even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.” The reality, of course, is that we all have our own history, our own experiences, our own backgrounds and baggage to deal with.

Paul's point here is *not* that anything goes, or that anything and everything is acceptable in the church. No! Far from it! It is not about welcoming heresy or false teaching of any kind in the church. Nor is it about condoning sin of any kind or affirming sinners in their sin. It is not about approving immorality. It is about welcoming and accepting brothers and sisters in Christ who have different views than you do on matters that are non-essential to the faith, without expecting them to change their views or practices to match up with yours. Things like politics. Or the use of alcohol. Or the environment. Or what translation of the Bible we should use. Or how we dress when we come to church. These are all “disputable matters” on which we don't have to agree.

The problem in the Roman church, apparently, was that “the weak in faith” (who had not yet come to understand or accept the freedom that was theirs in Christ) were prone to criticize and judge “the strong”, while “the strong” had a tendency to look down on “the weak” and even to view them with contempt. Paul says that both are wrong.

### **HAVE CONTEMPT FOR CONTEMPT**

In his book *Sacred Marriage*, which is one of the best books on marriage I have ever read, Gary Thomas quotes the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Roman Catholic bishop and mystic Francis de Sales, who wrote: “Have contempt for contempt.” It is good advice for husbands and wives. There is no place in marriage for contempt toward your husband or wife. It applies to life in the church as well, for there is no place for contempt toward your sisters or brothers in Christ. “Have contempt for contempt.” Don't give it an inch in your marriage or in our relationships with one another.

Dietary habit and the observance of the Lord's Day or special days in the Christian year may not be hot button issues for many of us. But no doubt there are “disputable matters” that we have a tendency to get exercised about, like those I just mentioned. Sometimes we try to elevate our pet non-essentials to the level of essentials, because we believe everyone in the church should believe and/or do exactly like us. We'll have an opportunity to explore some of those things in the next few weeks as we continue to examine Paul's teaching on these matters in Romans 14 and 15.

### **ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD**

With regard to eating meat (or not) and the observance of special days, here is how *The Message* brings Paul's instructions to life: “What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for *God's* sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's *God* we are

answerable to – all the way from life to death and everything in between – not each other” (14:5-8, *MSG*).

Got that? It is to the Lord that you and I are accountable in these things. And, O, by the way, in case you missed it, the whole point of this is to help us better understand how to love one another. That’s really what Paul is talking about. Giving grace to one another in disputable matters is one way we make payments on our continuing debt to love one another (13:8). When we welcome and accept one another without passing judgment on disputable matters (about which the Bible does not speak definitively), without criticizing or looking down on others who see things differently, we incarnate the grace and love of God. Which is a beautiful thing.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.