

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 9, 2017**

DISPUTABLE MATTERS (2)

Romans 14:13-23

Last Sunday we began talking about what Paul refers to in Romans 14:1 as “disputable matters” – meaning, questions of individual conscience in which we may have differing opinions or practices from one another. The Reformers in the 16th century called them *adiaphora*, or “matters of indifference.” In the EPC we speak of them as “non-essentials” in which we have liberty to disagree with one another, because the Bible does not speak definitively about them.

As we saw last week, the two “disputable matters” on which Paul shines the spotlight in Romans 14 are about whether or not to eat meat and the observance of holy days. These may not be particularly hot button issues for us, but they provide us with the opportunity to learn and apply biblical principles in areas of life today in which other “disputable matters” or non-essentials of the Christian life may be potential or actual sources of tension or conflict in the fellowship of Christ’s followers.

We will pick up in our Scripture reading where we left off last Sunday in Romans 14, beginning with verse 13. I encourage you to follow along in your Bible or in the pew Bible. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

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To eat meat or not to eat meat – that was the burning question for many, both Jewish and Gentile believers, in the church at Rome. We know from what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians that it was a big deal in Corinth as well (see 1 Corinthians 8:1-13). And no doubt in other places as the gospel message spread and took root. (See the action of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:19-20, 23-29 regarding food sacrificed to idols.)

The other “disputable matter” addressed by Paul was about the observance of special “holy” days for feasting or fasting, and maybe even how to observe the Lord’s Day as well.

Differences of opinion, conviction, and practice led to criticism and judgment, conflict and division between believers on both sides of the issues. That was then.

Among the “disputable matters” that we – or other believers – might get exercised about today include:

- How we should dress or not dress when we come to church;
- What kind of music and what musical instruments we should use in worship (or, more to the point, I suppose, what kind of music and what instruments some people think we should *not* use in worship);

- What translation(s) of the Bible we should use or not use;
- What role women should or should not play in the leadership and life of the church;
- The expression of “charismatic” gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as speaking in tongues (meaning, languages not known by the one speaking);
- Smoking;
- The use of alcohol by Christians;
- And, last but certainly not least, politics, which is among the most divisive issues, not only in our culture at large, but among different groups or “flavors” of Christians in America.

POLITICS: A DISPUTABLE MATTER

I don't want to dwell on politics, but I do want to make one point. Some of you know that I consider Vice President Mike Pence to be a friend, and I hold him in high regard both as a leader and as a brother in Christ. He has said publicly on many occasions that he is a Christian first; a conservative second; and a Republican third. You may or may not like his party affiliation – that is a “disputable matter” in which it is okay to disagree. Republican, Democrat, Libertarian, Independent, or any other party affiliation is not an essential of the faith. You may or may not like his conservative political philosophy – that, too, is a “disputable matter” where you are free to disagree. Conservative, moderate, liberal or progressive, or whatever label you may prefer is non-essential. You may or may not come to different conclusions than the Trump administration and Vice President Pence about policies that are good for America – that is another “disputable matter.” I hope, though, that you will appreciate and applaud the fact that the second most powerful elected leader in our country today is a man who sincerely seeks to put Christ first, who desires to live out his Christian faith in both his private and public life, and who is committed to living his life by Christian principles. I hope we can agree about this.

CHRISTIANS AND ALCOHOL: A DISPUTABLE MATTER

I want to talk for a few minutes about the use of alcohol, because it has been and continues to be a bone of contention between many Christians and a divisive issue in some parts of the Christian community. Some Christians believe any consumption of alcoholic beverages is a sin. Other Christians have a different view and may enjoy a beer or a glass of wine on a regular basis.

The first thing to say about it is that the Bible does not prohibit the use of alcohol. You don't have to abstain from alcohol to be a follower of Jesus. Jesus didn't turn water into Welch's grape juice at the wedding in Cana! Nor did Jesus and the disciples drink unfermented grape juice in the upper room when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. This does not mean it is wrong to serve grape juice in the sacrament of communion, out of respect and concern for any brothers or sisters for whom the use of wine may be problematic. Different churches have different traditions when it comes to juice or wine, which is fine, since it is a “disputable matter” in which we don't all have to agree.

The Bible is not against the proper use and enjoyment of wine and other alcoholic beverages. What the Bible *is* emphatically against is drunkenness. Getting drunk is never approved in the Bible. It is never okay to drink to the point of compromising or losing control of your mental or physical faculties. Drinking is not inherently sinful. Drunkenness is. We have the freedom in Christ to drink or not to drink. We are *not* free in Christ to get drunk or to encourage others to drink too much.

This is not to say that it is always okay, or always good, to exercise your Christian freedom to drink alcohol. You may come from a home where the occasional and moderate use of alcohol is or was a normal part of your family life. Or, you may come from a home where abstinence from alcohol was or is the accepted rule. Or, you may possibly come from a home where alcoholic beverages were (or are) abused.

While alcohol is not evil, we know it can lead to evil, if abused or misused. We know it is not safe for anyone who is addicted to it. It is not safe for anyone who is a recovering alcoholic – which includes some of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In Paul’s vocabulary of “the strong” and “the weak,” those who know and affirm their freedom in Christ to drink wine or other alcoholic beverages responsibly are “the strong,” while those whose consciences will not permit them to drink alcohol are “the weak.” The weakness of “the weak” is not in their exercise of self-discipline or self-control in refraining from the use of alcohol. That is actually a sign of strength. If they voluntarily choose to abstain out of personal conviction for the sake of their witness or for the benefit of some “other(s)” in their life, not because they believe it is inherently wrong for a Christian to drink, there is nothing weak at all about their decision or conviction. Paul would affirm their strength and their loving concern for the well-being of others who may be influenced in one way or another by their example.

“WHY I GAVE UP ALCOHOL”

A young woman named D. L. Mayfield wrote an article in *Christianity Today* about how she and her husband made the decision to give up alcohol. I want you to hear her testimony:

“Our first shock when we moved into [a low-income neighborhood] was the amount of substance abuse that surrounded us. I would go to get my mail and find a man blocking the stairs, passed out and unresponsive at 11 in the morning. We have neighbors who eat raw chicken when they are drunk and get terribly sick; others who suffer from alcohol-related psychosis and bang symphonies on the trees outside our window at all hours of the night. Empty vodka growlers line the living room of one. There are people in our building who die because of alcohol – cirrhosis of the liver, asphyxiation from their vomit, slow-sinking suicides everywhere we turn.”

It is not a pretty picture.

“And suddenly, alcohol is no longer fun. Instead it is a substance that changes my friends and neighbors, making them unpredictable and unsafe. There are other neighbors here, too,

people who are in various stages of recovery. They shake their heads and tell me they don't touch the stuff anymore. They find that every sober day is a gift.

“After a year of living among them, I gradually just ... stopped. I dreaded going to the liquor store, imagining the faces I would see there. I saw my neighbors get off the bus with a 12-pack in each hand, and I was less likely to get a beer the next time I was out. Eventually, I realized I could abstain from alcohol entirely, that it could even be a spiritual discipline for me – a way to pray and identify with my neighbors, who could not stop. Since so many were caught in a cycle of stumbling and picking themselves up again, it became good for me to not drink, as a way to stand with the brothers and sisters I was learning to love.” (D. L. Mayfield, “Why I Gave Up Alcohol,” *Christianity Today*, June 2014).

You misunderstand if you think I'm suggesting that abstaining from alcohol is the right and necessary course of action for every Christian. I'm not saying that at all. You are free in Christ to drink. And you are free in Christ to not drink. There may be circumstances, though, when it is better to set aside your freedom to drink, for the sake of another or others who may be harmed by your free choice to drink, either because of their “weak”, sensitive consciences or by the addictive power of alcohol in their lives. Your liberty in “disputable matters” such as this is a great gift from God. But it is not the highest value in the kingdom of God.

PRINCIPLES AND EXHORTATIONS

If you look closely at verses 13-23, you will see that Paul makes no less than 11 declarative statements and gives seven exhortations to the followers of Jesus in Rome about how to deal with “disputable matters” like eating meat or drinking wine. I want to call just a few of them to your attention.

First, the exhortation with which Paul begins verse 13 is really a restatement of what he says in verse 1, where he urges us to “welcome” (ESV) or “accept” (NIV) “the one whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.” He reiterates the point in verse 13: “Therefore,” he says, since each of us is accountable to God for our actions (14:12), “let us stop passing judgment on one another.” Keep in mind that he is talking about these “disputable matters,” the non-essentials of Christian faith and life in which God has given us liberty. He does not mean that we are to suspend judgment on matters about which God has spoken clearly and definitively in His Word. But, when it comes to the non-essentials, we are first of all to refrain from criticizing or condemning or arguing with Christian brothers and sisters who have a view that is different from ours. Neither “the strong” nor “the weak” should criticize or look down upon the other with regard to these matters. There is no place for it in the family of God's people. Mutual respect and courtesy are relationship rules always to be observed.

In his next breath, in the second part of verse 13, Paul counsels us to resolve “not to put any stumbling block (*proskomma*) or obstacle (*skandalon*)” in the way of a brother or sister. He is personally convinced that “no food is unclean in itself” (14:14). We know he is on solid biblical ground, because we have the words of Jesus Himself in Mark 7 in which, as Mark says, “Jesus declared all foods ‘clean’” (7:19). In addition, we have the roof-top vision of

Peter in Caesarea, in which the Lord told him that all foods are clean in God’s sight (Acts 10:9-16).

Convinced as he is, though, Paul does not assert his freedom to eat (or drink) in all circumstances. He is more concerned about the well-being of brothers or sisters with “weak” consciences who will be adversely affected by the assertion of his freedom.

My liberty in non-essentials means that I am free to do as my conscience permits in “disputable matters.” But, when the well-being of my brother or sister is at stake, love trumps liberty. It has to. Love for my brother or sister requires that I willingly set aside my freedom so that I will not cause my sister or brother to stumble or fall into sin.

Look at verse 15: “If your brother (or sister) is distressed because of what you eat” – because of what you drink, because of what you do – “you are no longer acting in love.” Acting in love is a much higher kingdom value than having the liberty to do what I want.

Paul follows this with back-to-back exhortations in the second part of verse 15 and verse 16: “Do not by your eating (or drinking) destroy” – do spiritual harm to – “your brother (or sister) for whom Christ died.” And then: “Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.” Your freedom in “disputable matters” is not evil. But it can have an evil effect if used callously or cavalierly. As if twice is not enough, Paul follows up with another exhortation in verse 20: “Do not destroy” – do not damage or tear down – “the work of God” in the life of a sister or brother “for the sake of food.” It is not worth it.

The kingdom of God – which is the gracious rule of God in the lives and relationships of His people – is not defined by our freedoms to eat and drink, or not to. There is way more to it than what you eat or drink. Of much greater value – in fact, of eternal value – are qualities like “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (14:17). Joy is a sense of delight in God that comes from a relationship with God, not from the circumstances in your life. The peace Paul probably has in mind here is that peace of God that comes from peace with God that is ours through faith in the Lord Jesus. Righteousness in this context may refer to the status of righteousness imputed to us through our being justified in God’s sight by faith. Or it may be a reference to the practical righteousness (or right conduct) to which we are called as followers of Christ. E. F. Harrison suggests that this practical righteousness is really another fruit of the Spirit, like peace and joy and the others included in Paul’s list in Galatians 5:22-23 (Harrison, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 10 [Romans – Galatians], 149*).

TWO BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

We’re not finished with this yet, because Paul isn’t finished yet. We’ll continue our examination of these “disputable matters” and what they mean for our relationships in the fellowship of Christ’s followers next Sunday. For now, here are two biblical principles to guide our thinking and doing when it comes to “disputable matters:”

- When liberty and love come into conflict, love trumps liberty.
- Relationships with one another are more important than demanding your rights.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always, to the glory of Your name. Amen.