

Challenges Christians Face

Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 2

1 Corinthians 6:12

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Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 2

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is the issue of debatable matters. Let's continue to learn about this in a message I am calling, "Dealing with Debatable Matters – Part 2."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 6:12:

¹² **"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything.** (1 Corinthians 6:12)

Introduction

When the apostle Paul said that **"All things are lawful for me,"** what was **"all things"** referring to? **"All things"** refers to such things as *adiaphora*. The *adiaphora* refers to those "things or actions that in themselves are neither immoral nor moral, or neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture, and thus may be permitted for Christians."¹ So, Paul was saying that with regard to the *adiaphora* a Christian is free to do whatever he or she wants to do. In this regard, **"All things are lawful for me."**

This issue of *adiaphora* (or, debatable matters) comes up several times in the rest of *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*. And so last week I thought that it would be helpful for us to get a clear understanding of exactly what things are *adiaphora* and how to deal with debatable matters.

The apostle Paul dealt most clearly with the issue of debatable matters in his letter to the Romans, in Romans 14:1-15:13.

¹ George Thomas Kurian, *Nelson's New Christian Dictionary: The Authoritative Resource on the Christian World* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001).

Some “debatable matters” in our day are the following:

- Giving and receiving of wedding rings (which was hotly contested by the Puritans in the 17th century)
- Wearing jewelry
- Use of make-up
- Consumption of alcohol
- Smoking
- Mode of baptism (immersion or sprinkling)
- Some aspects of Old Testament fulfillment of prophecy
- View of eschatology (especially the millennium)
- Attending movies
- Watching television
- Aspects of Sabbath observance (such as work, play, and worship)
- Eating food in the church building
- Letting children participate in Halloween
- School choices (public, private, or home)
- Mixed swimming
- Playing cards
- “Gambling” for recreation
- Buying insurance
- Dancing
- Wearing pants (for women)
- Using a Bible other than the *King James Version*
- Playing guitars in church
- Men wearing their hair over their ears
- Etc.

Review

Well, with that as an introduction, let’s review Paul’s method in Romans 14:1-15:13 of dealing with debatable matters.

I. The Fundamental Principle (14:1)

Paul lays down the fundamental principle of welcome (especially the welcome of the weak), which undergirds the whole discussion, in verse 1: “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.”

This fundamental principle is in two parts.

A. It Is Positive

It is positive: “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him. . .” (14:1a).

The “weak in faith” are those who are immature, untaught, and (as Paul’s unfolding argument makes clear) actually mistaken. Nevertheless, they are to be welcomed into the fellowship.

B. It Is Qualified

Having reflected on the principle of welcome, we need to note that it is qualified: “. . . but not to quarrel over opinions” (14:1b).

Paul is saying that we must receive the weak person with a warm and genuine welcome, “without debate over his misgivings or scruples,” or “not for the purpose of getting into quarrels about opinions.”

II. Three Negative Deductions (14:2-15:13)

Having laid down the fundamental principle of welcome (especially welcome of the weak in faith), which undergirds the whole discussion, Paul now develops three negative deductions or consequences that follow from the fundamental principle.

A. Do Not Despise or Condemn the Weak Person (14:2-13a)

The first negative deduction is this: Do not despise or con-

demn the weak person. This is fleshed out in Romans 14:2-13a. There are four reasons why the strong in faith should not despise or condemn the weak in faith.

1. Because God has welcomed him (14:2-3)

First, because God has welcomed him.

2. Because Christ died and rose to be his Lord (14:4-9)

Second, because Christ died and rose to be his Lord.

3. Because he is your brother (14:10a)

Third, because he is your brother.

4. Because we will all stand before God's judgment seat (14:10b-13a)

And fourth, because we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Lesson

Well, let's continue to look at the next negative deduction in Paul's method of dealing with debatable matters.

B. Do Not Offend or Destroy the Weak Person (14:13b-23)

The second negative deduction is this: Do not offend or destroy the weak person. This is fleshed out in Romans 14:13b-23.

In this section, as in the previous one, it is our relationship to the weak which is mainly in mind.

The argument moves on, however, from how the strong should *regard* the weak to how they should *treat* them, that is,

from *attitudes* (not despising or condemning them) to *actions* (not offending or destroying them).

But instead of passing judgment on one another, Paul writes, **rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother** (14:13b).

Paul goes on to lay two theological foundations for his exhortation, in addition to the four developed in Romans 14:2-13a.

The two theological foundations as to why the strong in faith should not offend or destroy the weak in faith are as follows:

1. Because he is your brother for whom Christ died (14:14-16)

First, do not offend or destroy him because he is your brother for whom Christ died.

Before deploying this argument for not harming the weaker brother, however, Paul explains in very personal terms the dilemma which faces the strong. It is created by two truths in conflict with each other.

First, Paul says, **“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself”** (14:14a).

Paul’s reference to the Lord Jesus probably does not mean that he is actually quoting him, although he is sure to have been familiar with Jesus’ controversy with the Pharisees over the clean and the unclean, and with the risen Lord’s word to Peter not to call unclean what God has made clean.

The reference seems to be more general (“All that I know of the Lord Jesus convinces me that. . .,” seems to be what he is saying), and is also a claim to be in close personal union with Christ as his disciple and especially as his apostle. However he came to his conviction, it was that **nothing is unclean in itself**.

But, and this is the second part of the dilemma, **it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean** (14:14b), and he should not partake of it.

Verse 14 refers, of course, to ceremonial or cultural (not moral) issues, for Paul is quite explicit that some of our thoughts,

words, and deeds are intrinsically evil.

The paradox, then, which faces the strong, is that some foods are both clean *and* unclean simultaneously.

On the one hand, the strong are convinced that all foods are clean.

On the other, the weak are convinced that they are not. How should the strong behave when two consciences are in collision?

Paul's response is unambiguous. Although the strong are correct, and he shares their conviction because the Lord Jesus has endorsed it, the strong must not ride roughshod over the scruples of the weak by imposing their view on them.

On the contrary, they must defer to the weaker brother's conscience (even though it is mistaken) and not violate it or cause him to violate it.

And here is the reason: **If your brother is grieved by what you eat**, not only because he sees you doing something of which he disapproves, but because he may be induced to follow your example against his conscience, **you are no longer walking in love** (14:15a).

Love never disregards weak consciences. Love limits its own liberty out of respect for them. To wound a weaker brother's conscience is not only to distress him but to "**destroy**" him, and that is totally incompatible with love. **By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died** (14:15b).

Paul has already twice referred to the weaker Christian as a "brother" (14:10); now he repeats the term three more times (14:13, 14:15, 14:21), and adds the poignant description **for whom Christ died**.

Did Christ love him enough to die for him, and shall we not love him enough to refrain from wounding his conscience?

Did Christ sacrifice himself for his well-being, and shall we assert ourselves to his harm?

Did Christ die to save him, and shall we not care if we destroy him?

But what kind of "destruction" does Paul have in mind? It

seems that Paul's warning is that the strong who mislead the weak to go against their consciences will seriously damage their Christian discipleship.

He urges the strong against causing such injury to the weak. **So do not let what you regard as good** (i.e. the liberty you have found in Christ) **to be spoken of as evil** (14:16), because you flaunt it to the detriment of the weak.

So, do not offend or destroy the weak in faith because he is your brother for whom Christ died.

2. Because the kingdom of God is more important than food (14:17-21)

And second, do not offend or destroy the weak in faith because the kingdom of God is more important than food.

If the first theological truth which undergirds Paul's appeal to the strong for restraint is the cross of Christ, the second appeal is to the kingdom of God, that is, the gracious rule of God through Christ and by the Spirit in the lives of his people, bringing a free salvation and demanding a radical obedience.

Although the kingdom of God is not as central a doctrine in the teaching of Paul as it was in the teaching of Jesus, it nevertheless occupies a prominent place.

The apostle's argument now is that, whenever the strong insist on using their liberty to eat whatever they like, even at the expense of the welfare of the weak, they are guilty of a grave lack of proportion.

They are overestimating the importance of diet (which is trivial) and underestimating the importance of the kingdom (which is central). **For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit** (14:17).

Righteousness and peace and joy inspired by the **Holy Spirit** are sometimes understood as the subjective conditions of being righteous, peaceful, and joyful.

But in the wider context of Romans it is more natural to take them as objective states, namely justification through Christ, peace with God, and rejoicing in hope of God's glory (5:1ff), of which the Holy Spirit himself is the pledge and foretaste (8:23).

And the reason for the greater significance of the kingdom is that **whoever thus serves Christ**, who seeks first God's kingdom and acknowledges "that food and drink are secondary matters," **is acceptable to God and approved by men** (14:18).

Verses 19-21 repeat, enforce, and apply the same teaching about proportion or balance. They contain three exhortations.

First, **so then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding** (14:19). This is the positive goal which all should seek, and which the strong were neglecting in their insensitive treatment of the weak.

Second, **do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God** (14:20a). "The work of God" could mean the individual weaker brother, but in the context it seems to refer rather to the Christian community.

"**Destroy**" translates a different verb from the one which Paul used in verse 15. Here in verse 20 *katalyo* means to "tear down" or "throw down," particularly in relation to buildings.

It appears to be deliberately contrasted with the earlier verse. Our responsibility is to seek to build up the fellowship (14:19), not to tear it down (14:20).

And in particular we must not tear it down **for the sake of food**. Surely, for the sake of a plate of meat we are not going to wreck God's work!

Are you strong really prepared, he asks, to distress a brother **by what you eat** (14:15a), to damage him spiritually **by what you eat** (14:15b), to prize your **eating and drinking** above God's kingdom (14:17), and now to demolish God's work **for the sake of food** (14:20)?

There must have been some red faces among the strong as they listened to Paul's letter being read out in the assembly. His gentle sarcasm showed up their skewed perspective. They would

have to re-value their values, give up insisting on their liberties at the expense of the welfare of others, and put the cross and the kingdom first.

And third, Paul expresses a contrast between two kinds of behavior, which he declares to be respectively “wrong” and “right,” *kakos* (14:20b) and *kalos* (14:21). **Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong (*kakos*) for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats (14:20b).** This being so, **it is good (*kalos*) not to eat meat or drink wine** (which is here mentioned for the first time) **or to do anything that causes your brother to stumble (14:21).**

The statement that “**everything is indeed clean**” sounds like the slogan of the strong. And Paul agrees with it. Here is the theological truth which gave them their liberty to eat anything they liked.

But there were other factors to consider, which would require them to limit the exercise of their liberty.

In particular, there was the weaker brother or sister with the oversensitive, over-scrupulous conscience, who was convinced that not all food was clean. So it would be wrong for the strong to use their liberty to harm the weak.

Alternatively, it would be **good** for the strong (Paul drives the argument to its logical conclusion) to eat no meat and drink no wine, that is, to become vegetarians and total abstainers, and to go to any other extreme of renunciation, if that were necessary to serve the welfare of the weak.

Paul concludes (14:22-23) by drawing a distinction between *belief* and *action*, that is, between *private conviction* and *public behavior*.

So, he writes, as regards the *private* sphere, **the faith that you have**, whether you are strong and believe you can eat anything, or weak and believe you cannot, **keep between yourself and God (14:22a)**, keep it a secret. There is no need either to parade your views or to impose them on other people.

As for *public* behavior, there are two options, represented by

two “men” whom we quickly recognize as a strong and a weak Christian respectively.

The strong Christian is blessed because his conscience approves of his eating everything, so that he can follow his conscience without any guilt feelings. **Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves** (14:22b).

But whoever has doubts, that is, the weak Christian who is plagued with misgivings because his conscience gives him vacillating signals, **is condemned** (probably by his conscience, not by God) **if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith** (i.e., which does not arise from conviction) **is sin** (14:23).

This final saying exalts the significance of our conscience. Although our conscience is not infallible, it is nevertheless sacrosanct, so that to go against it (to act **not from faith**) is to sin.

At the same time, alongside this explicit instruction not to violate our conscience, there is an implicit requirement to educate it.

Conclusion

So, regarding debatable matters the fundamental principle is to welcome the weak in faith with a warm and genuine welcome.

Having laid down the fundament principle of welcome, we have seen two negative deductions that flow from the principle. First, we are not to despise or condemn the person who is weak in faith. And second, we are not to offend or destroy the person who is weak in faith.

Next time we shall look at the third and final negative deduction regarding how we are to welcome the weak in faith with a warm and genuine welcome.

Let us now commit ourselves to welcoming all true brothers in Christ with a warm and genuine welcome. And let us not despise or condemn, nor offend or destroy the person who is weak in faith. Amen.

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and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Almighty God, thank you for your Word. Thank you for the Apostle Paul's clarity on this issue of debatable matters. Help us to welcome all true brothers in Christ with a warm and genuine welcome. And let us not despise or condemn, nor offend and destroy the person who is weak in faith.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, welcome one another as God has welcomed us into fellowship with him!