

Romans 14

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over.

(Emo Philips, The Best God Joke Ever – And It's Mine, theguardian.co.uk)

A few years back, a British website *Ship of Fools*, voted that the best religious joke of all time. What makes it funny is how well it shows the way Christians can truly appear – arguing and dividing over topics that seem irrelevant to anyone on the outside. Certainly, much division has been caused by people who depart from essential doctrines of beliefs. Often, however, these divisions are over petty things that need not matter at all – mere opinions, with no solid biblical basis. How are we to relate to others who live out their faith in ways that look a lot different from our own? Paul answers that question in Romans 14.

Not everything is a question of right and wrong. We should be very accepting of others and very willing to deny ourselves.

- I. We need to be flexible enough to allow variety in the non-essentials. 14:1-12
- II. Concern for others is more important than our own freedom. 14:13-23

- I. We need to be flexible enough to allow variety in the non-essentials. 14:1-12

A. 14:1 The word “receive” is suggestive of “genuine cordiality.” Welcome this person, but not in such a way as to try to change his or her mind.

B. 14:2-6 Two main issues came up often in the early church:

- 1. 14:2-4 Eating certain foods
- 2. 14:5-6 Keeping certain days

1. 14:2-4 Eating certain foods: Most cultures, and even some philosophical schools in the ancient world had customs or rules regarding food. The Jews, however, probably took their food laws more seriously than anybody. After all, they came from God. Most Jews in the Roman Empire kept these laws wherever they went. Even when some became Christians, they still ate kosher food.

Out in the Gentile world, much of the meat that was butchered was sacrificed to idols before it was sold. This became an issue for both Jewish and Gentile converts. Many believers, both Jew and Gentile, could not disassociate the eating of the meat with the sacrifice offered to the pagan god. They might know perfectly well that they were saved by the blood of Christ, but they would simply feel weird eating meat that they knew had just been offered to Zeus, Apollo, Mercury or Venus.

2. 14:5-6 Keeping certain days: Some of the early Christians, given their Jewish background, still observed the Sabbath or other OT holidays. When those days came along they felt empty if they didn't. Paul's point here is that the observing of days, or failure to observe days is not the common denominator dictating Christian fellowship. (See *New Commentary on the Whole Bible*)

Col 2:16 - 17 (NKJV) ¹⁶So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, ¹⁷which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

C. 14:10 Ultimately Christ will judge us all. The issue of the believer's eternal destiny will not be at stake; that was settled by his faith in Christ. Still, each believer's life of service will be under review, so it's worth taking our future judgment seriously. God has given us freedom, but that freedom comes with the price tag of responsibility and accountability. (See also *Bible Knowledge Commentary*)

2 Cor 5:9 - 10 (NKJV) ⁹Therefore we make it our aim, whether present or absent, to be well pleasing to Him. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.

D. 14:11 Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23. In Philippians he paraphrases the same OT verse and relates it to the Lordship of Jesus Christ:

Phil 2:9 - 11 (NKJV) ⁹Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, ¹¹and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Not everything is a question of right and wrong. We should be very accepting of others and very willing to deny ourselves.

Applications: The church must be uncompromising in its stand against activities expressly forbidden by Scripture (murder, lying, theft, sexual sins). At the same time, it should not create additional rules and regulations and give them equal standing with God's law. Many times Christians base their moral judgments on opinion, personal dislikes, or cultural bias rather than on the Word of God. When they do this, they show that their own faith is weak.

So how do we treat the weaker Christian? We try to respond to that weaker brother or sister in love. When a believer is acting according to his or her conscience, that person is entitled to our respect. Some issues are central to the faith, but many others are not. These non-central issues are simply not worth fighting about. (See also *The Handbook of Bible Application*)

Not everything is a question of right and wrong. We should be very accepting of others and very willing to deny ourselves.

II. Concern for others is more important than our freedom. 14:13-23

A. 14:13-21 **Christian Ethics, Moral Limits:** Paul's teaching here is of supreme importance. This is really one of the building blocks for a dependable approach to Christian decision-making. Paul claimed his freedom in Christ, but he still highlighted the need to be sensitive to the other person's conscience. Our own conscience may not be violated by a particular action, and so we do it. But such an action may be perceived as immoral by other individuals who are living at another level of ethical maturity. They may end up morally confused. (See the *Disciple's Study Bible*) The kind of issues that normally fall into this category might be:

1. Entertainment: Movies, TV, Sports
2. Styles which regularly change over time: Music, clothing, appearance
3. Alcohol and tobacco, or whether a Christian can even go to certain places that serve alcohol, etc.

B. 14:22-23 **Sometimes, our conscience is our best guide.** We try to steer clear of actions forbidden by Scripture, of course; but sometimes Scripture is silent. Then what do we do? We should follow our conscience. "Whatever is not from faith is sin" means that to go against a conviction will leave a person with a guilty or uneasy conscience. When God shows us that something is wrong for us, we should avoid it. But we should not look down on other Christians who exercise their freedom in those areas. (See *The Handbook of Bible Application*.)

I don't smoke, and would not recommend it for health reasons, but here's a great example from the late 1800s that perfectly illustrates our point:

Last Sunday evening, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, the deservedly popular, unquestionably benevolent, and eminently shrewd Mr. Spurgeon was preaching a sermon on the sinfulness of little sins—a somewhat favourite topic among Nonconformist clergymen ...

"The gist of Mr. Spurgeon's discourse was that habitual indulgence in little sins leads to the commission of great ones ...

"At the close of his useful sermon the minister introduced an American clergyman who, he said, was anxious to address a few words to the congregation. This reverend gentleman 'improved the opportunity' by inveighing fiercely against the sin of smoking tobacco, especially in the form of cigars, and told his hearers how he had struggled and fought against the pernicious habit, and how at last, by the blessing and with the assistance of Providence, he had conquered his addiction to the weed.

"Then uprose Mr. Spurgeon and, with quiet humour, remarked that he would not allow the congregation to separate without telling them that he did not consider smoking to be a sin, and that, by the grace of God, he hoped to enjoy a good cigar before going to bed that night.

(The Daily Telegraph, September 23, 1874. See this page at spurgeon.org)

Conclusions:

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity. (Reformation Slogan)

A Christian ... is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian ... is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all. (Martin Luther)

This chapter has addressed how, under the lordship of Christ, we are to balance Christian freedom and Christian responsibility. We've seen several principles that can help us to strike the delicate balance. In closing, let's review them:

1. We should never be judgmental in non-essential or gray areas (14:1-5).
2. Each individual should be convinced in his or her own mind as to the rightness or wrongness of an action (14:5).
3. Remember that we must ultimately all stand in judgment before God in (14:10).
4. We should never put a stumbling block in the way of other Christians (14:13).
5. We must always do our best to act in love (14:15).
6. We should pursue actions which promote peace rather than division (14:19).
7. We should seek to edify others (build others up) by our actions (14:19).
8. We must only do that which we can truly do in faith (14:22, 23). (See the *Believer's Study Bible*)

Not everything is a question of right and wrong. We should be very accepting of others and very willing to deny ourselves.