

How to Handle Disputable Matters with Grace

I can remember the first time I heard the “Imperials” gospel quartet from the 1970's. I was at my friend Darrell’s house. He had just purchased a new record player that could record music on something called a cassette. I had seen cassette recorders before, but this was the first time any of my friends had a phonograph where you could actually record your LP’s onto a cassette.

It sounded a lot like Rock and Roll, and I knew I wasn’t supposed to like Rock and Roll. Christians in my church were arguing over what constituted Christian music, and for the first time, I was a part of the debate. I had just entered my first exposure to “disputable matters.”

On Sunday nights, we’ve been studying the “Truth Project.” One of the things we learned is that Satan always counterfeits God’s perfect plan and replaces it with a lie. Jesus said that the Church should be one. Satan seeks to divide. Jesus said to love one another. Satan deceives us into arguing with one another. It’s nothing new. It goes all the way back to the church at Rome.

We argue about so many things. And when we argue, we do so in the most forceful and spiritual of tones. How many churches have been divided because of opinions about things that are not commanded or spoken of in the Bible?

Ray Stedman wrote... “All through the history of the church, the problem arises from the attitude that most of us share, I am sure, that God is clearly pleased with the way we live -- but there are those others around. They drink beer and play cards; they go to movies; they smoke cigars; they work on Sundays; they wear lipstick; they dance; they play musical instruments; they use zippers instead of buttons. There is an endless list of things that can be included, debatable matters that the church has never been able to settle because of a misunderstanding of the principles that are set forth here in this very passage.”

The passage that Stedman write about is the passage of we are currently studying. Romans 14!

Disputed Matters in the Church at Rome. A REVIEW

We’ve learned that the issue in Romans 14 is that of weak and strong Christians.

Some ate meat, others did not.

Some honored special days, others did not

Now while these are not the issues we face in the church today, there are vital principles

in Romans 14 that apply to how we handle disputable matters. Let's begin by stating that these matters are not matters that the Bible commands. There should be no dispute about obeying the clear teaching of Scripture. Some of today's key issues relate to the areas of entertainment, spending, social drinking, associations, music, etc.

Some Christians accuse other Christians of being legalistic. I don't think that legalism is the proper word to describe the warning of Romans 14. Legalism is a teaching that people must follow certain rules (Laws) in order to be saved. That problem existed in the church in Paul's day but it is not the problem he is addressing in Rome.

More accurately, the warning of Romans 14 is over **judgmentalism**. Legalism gives rules necessary for one's *justification*. Judgmentalism gives rules necessary for one's *sanctification*. I have found that in most churches, judgmentalism is the real culprit. We always seem to know what other Christians should or shouldn't do in order to be *spiritual*.

This debate is not new, now was it something confined to Paul's letter. In the second century, the big question facing Christians was "Should Christians go to the Circus?" Not Ringling Brothers and Barnum Bailey circus. The Circus as in the Roman The ROMANS Circus, where the gladiators would fight. Christians were troubled whether it was permissible for a believer to participate in the opulent, violent and sensuous affairs that the pagan's thrived on.

The great Christian leader Tertullian wrote a book called "Spectacles," which contained an indictment of the performances given in the circus, theater, stadium and amphitheater. Such forms of entertainment were considered absolutely incompatible with the faith and moral discipline of Christianity." (Rene Showers, "Faith, and Love in Life with Christ, 7). Tertullian addressed an activity that was not specifically forbidden in the Bible, and gave a strong verdict against it.

Christians in the second century would not have understood a prophetic warning against video games or television. These are the issues we debate today and ask the question, "is this activity permissible for a Christian?"

Let's begin by establishing some Guidelines to Live By

1. The first guideline: **Do not offend the holy nature of God.** We must obey Scriptures. Jesus told us "*Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.*

These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me." (John 14:23-24) A Christian cannot openly disobey the teaching of God's Word, His commands and ordinances without consequence. Obedience is the mark of one's faith.

We must honor the Lord as holy.

- a. Certain THINGS are sacred.
- b. As God's chosen people, WE are sacred. That means that our testimony is vitally important. (1 Peter 2:9-10) *"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."*
- c. WORSHIPING God is sacred. When Nadab and Abihu offered unauthorized sacrifice, God judged them because they did not honor the Lord as holy. (Leviticus 10:3) *"Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke of when he said: "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.'" This by the way, is the same indictment against Moses and Aaron that forbid their entry into the promised land. Although their sin was seemingly smaller than Nadab and Elihu, their position was more prominent, and their judgment more severe. (Numbers 20:12) *"But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."**

2. The Second principle is that **Christians are at Liberty to Practice Whatever God's Absolutes do not Forbid.** This is the principle of Christian freedom described in the following passages.

- a. (Galatians 5:1) *"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."*
- b. (Galatians 5:13) *"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."*
- c. (1 Peter 2:16) *"Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God."*

3. The third principle: **Do Not Offend Your Own Conscience.**
 - a. *Negatively* - if something violates your conscience, then do NOT do it!. (Romans 14:14) *"As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean."*
 - b. *Positively* - there is a BLESSING when you remain sensitive to your conscience. (Romans 14:22) *"So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves."*
 - c. In our Christian freedom, we are to judge ourselves by God's standards. A Christian who does this need not fear being judged by someone else. (1 Corinthians 2:15) *"The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is **not subject to any man's judgment:**"*

4. The fourth principle is **Do Not Offend the Conscience of Another Person.** Notice the emphasis on this throughout Romans 14:
(Romans 14:13) *"Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind **not to put any stumbling block** or obstacle in your brother's way."*
(Romans 14:15-16) *"If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. **Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.** Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil."*
(Romans 14:20-21) *"Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall."*

Perhaps you have wondered like I have, Why Don't All Christians Agree?

There is MORE than just the issue of the "weaker brother." We mentioned two weeks ago that if the only factor under consideration were the issues of the weaker brother, then every discussion concerning permissible things would result in the more restrictive position automatically being wrong. If the weak brother's conscience restricts him from doing things not forbidden, then every debate over Christian activity would favor the less restrictive choice. This is not always true.

There are times that a wiser, more mature Christian has the godly discernment to warn us against something not specifically addressed in Scripture. **Here are some of the reasons that Christians do not agree.**

1. Disobedience to God's Word. There are times that one Christian simply does not want to obey the clear teaching of the bible. We believe in the INSPIRATION of the Bible. We believe in the CLARITY of the Bible. We believe in the AUTHORITY of the Bible. These foundational beliefs establish our confidence in studying and applying Scripture. Through proper exegesis (taking truth OUT OF the text), we can know what God desires.
2. Strong and Weak Christians. Romans 14 addresses this issue for us.
3. Worldliness. We often disagree on applying the warning to avoid worldly behavior.
 - a. (1 John 2:15-16) *"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world."*
 - b. (John 15:19) *"If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you."*
 - c. (Romans 12:2) *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."*

Worldliness is *"the organized system of human civilization that is actively hostile to God and alienated from God."* **C. J. Mahaney**, "Worldliness," (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Ill., 2008), 26.

Think for a moment. In our modern society today, in "everything goes" America, Do you think that we are guilty of TOO STRICT or TOO LOOSE of an understanding of worldliness? I would venture to say without reservation that we are too soft in our evaluation of worldliness.

As a child, I remember "Watch Night" services, where the entire church gathered on New Years Eve and prayed together as the clock

ticked past midnight. For a kid, these were pretty boring services, but they made an impression on my young little mind. Prayer is important and the best thing that we could do as the year approached was to honor the Lord and ask for his blessing.

Compare that perspective with an advertisement from Mars Hill church in Seattle for a New Years Eve Dancing party.

“Come bust a move on the enormous dance floor when the ballard campus transforms into a posh club to celebrate the new year. A smoking band, tasty desserts, a champagne toast at midnight – mars hill has never seen a party like this.

*Ring in 2008 in Red Hot Style. This New Year’s Eve party features internationally known artist, **Bobby Medina** & his **Red Hot Band**. This 12 piece big band does it all, from Swing, to Latin to Motown and beyond and are widely considering one of the top dance bands in the Northwest.*

***Bring your ID’s** if you wish to enjoy the champagne bar, which opens at 11:30pm for toasting.*

*Register the night of at the **dance contest** – everyone is welcome! \$200 first prize!*

Somehow, I think we’ve lost something.

4. **Another reason we disagree is whether something distracts from our Christian testimony.**
 - a. (1 Peter 2:12) *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”* (1 Peter 2:15) *“For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.”*
 - b. (Titus 2:7-8) *“In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.”*

5. **Finally, we sometimes disagree over Biblical Separation.** (2 Thessalonians 3:14) *"If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed."*

In order to be governed by grace, we must apply the following practices.

1. Deference. We must defer to other Christians, giving up our freedoms for the greater cause of unity in the Church. (1 Corinthians 1:9-10) *"God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."* (Ephesians 4:2) *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."*
2. Pleasing to God. We must seek unity in the Church and think of others above ourselves in order to please God. (Romans 14:18) *"because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men."*
3. Governed by Love. Everything we do must be governed in love. (Romans 14:15) *"If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died."*
4. Spirit of Peace. Everything we do must be done in a spirit of peace. (Romans 14:19) *"Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."*