

Romans Part 2

How to be a Christian without Being Religious!

Lesson 9: A Stepping Stone or a Stumbling Block? Romans 14:1-23

In chapter 10 of Keller's commentary on Romans, he begins with this introduction,

In chapters 1-11, Paul has explained the gospel: that we are justified in God's sight by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone. Therefore we are simultaneously sinful yet completely righteous and perfect in his sight. If we fully understand the gospel (chapters 1-5) and experience the gospel (chapters 6-8), the result will be a life of grateful, joyous love.

Starting in chapter 12, Paul begins to describe this life of love, which transforms our relationships with ourselves, other Christians, and the world, both with friends and enemies. Now, in chapter 14, he has an opportunity to apply all he has been saying to a very specific case, a problem within the Roman congregation. He is saying: OK, now let me show you how all this applies to this problem you are having.²⁶

What problem troubled the Roman church? Conflicts and disputes over trivial matters. The Roman church consisted of both Jewish and Gentile believers. The Jewish believers added religious traditions (e.g. abstaining from certain foods and worshipping God on certain days) to their new relationship with Christ. On the other hand, Gentile believers brought a mix of pagan beliefs and customs. Naturally, some conflicts arose over matters Paul considered non-essentials, or disputable issues. John MacArthur writes,

In the early church, many Jews who came to faith in Christ could not bring themselves to discard the ceremonial laws and practices in which they had been steeped since early childhood, especially the rites and prohibitions the Lord Himself had instituted under the Old Covenant. They still felt compelled, for example, to comply with Mosaic dietary laws, to strictly observe the Sabbath, and even to offer sacrifices in the Temple because they were given by the true God.

On the other hand, many converted Gentiles had been just as strongly steeped in pagan rituals and customs from false gods, and they felt repulsed by anything remotely connected with such evils. Many Gentiles, for example, could not bring themselves to eat meat that had been offered to a pagan deity and then sold in the marketplace.

Other believers, both Jewish and Gentile, understood and exercised their freedom in Christ. Mature Jewish believers realized that, under the New Covenant in

²⁶ Keller, 145.

Christ, the ceremonial requirements of the Mosaic Law were no longer valid. Mature believing Gentiles understood that idolatry was a spiritual evil and had no effect on anything physical, such as meat that may have been used in idolatrous worship.

*Those who were still strongly influenced, favorably or unfavorably, by their former religious beliefs and practices were weak in the faith **because they did not understand their freedom in Christ.**²⁷*

This was the situation in the early church. And, as a result, some believers were passing judgment on the beliefs and actions of other believers in the church. Sound familiar? Thus, Paul had to address this problem before further damage was done in and to the church. Paul writes in verses 1-12,

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

*One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, **we belong to the Lord.***

For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:

“‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’”

So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

²⁷ MacArthur, 273-274.

DISPUTABLE MATTERS

What is the big problem today? Just as in Paul's day, Christians continue to pass judgment on other believers over "disputable matters!" The Greek word used in verse 1 for "disputable matters" is *dialogismoi*, which, according to Keller, has traditionally meant, "matters of conscience."²⁸ These matters have to do with practices or actions not specifically mentioned in Scripture. The church needs discernment. There are many theological beliefs and moral practices which are extremely important and clearly spelled out in the Bible. But, there are also customs and ceremonies, and even some practices and activities not clearly addressed by Scripture. The issues to which Paul refers in this chapter are "disputable matters" (NIV), "opinions" (NASB) or "differences of opinion" (ISV). What are some disputable matters today? Stott contends,

The sixteenth-century Reformers called such things 'adiaphora,' 'matters of indifference,' whether (as here) they were customs and ceremonies, or secondary beliefs which are not part of the gospel or the creed. In either case they are matters on which Scripture does not clearly pronounce. In our day we might mention such practices as the mode of baptism [immersion vs. sprinkling], episcopal confirmation (whether it is a legitimate part of Christian initiation)...the use of cosmetics, jewelry and alcohol, together with such beliefs as which charismata [special spiritual gifts] are available and/or important, whether miraculous 'signs and wonders' are intended to be frequent or infrequent, how Old Testament prophecy has been or will be fulfilled, when and how the millennium will be established, the relation of history to eschatology, and the precise nature of both heaven and hell. In these and other issues, today as in first-century Rome, the problem is how to handle conscientious differences in matters on which Scripture is either silent or seemingly equivocal, in such a way as to prevent them from disrupting the Christian fellowship.²⁹

Paul refers to the man who continues to cling to some legalistic tradition or belief as the *weaker one* in terms of faith. Keller states, "They have not worked out the implications of the gospel. If you are saved by grace alone, there is no need to feel you can or must somehow keep God's favor through rules and regulations. On the other hand, a strong Christian is someone who knows they are saved by the gospel, and therefore understands that there are areas in which they are free—for instance, in eating meat."³⁰ So, the question becomes: How should the strong believer treat the weak believer? With love. It all goes back to the one law we are always to keep—the law of love. Romans 13:8 states, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law." We are to love our fellowman; how much more should we love our own brothers in Christ whether they are strong or weak?

²⁸ Keller, 146.

²⁹ Stott, 358-359.

³⁰ Keller, 147.

And Paul goes on to give several additional reasons why the strong should welcome the weak:

1. The weak believer has also been **accepted** by God (v. 3).
2. Both the weak believer and the strong **will be judged** by God (v. 4).
3. The weak believer **belongs** to the Lord equally as much as the strong believer (v. 8).

When it comes to these “gray areas,” this is what typically happens among believers: Strong believers tend to look down on weak believers, while weak believers tend to condemn strong believers. The bottom line? Believers, whether weak or strong, all belong to the Lord. God is the Father of us all. All believers are brothers and sisters in Christ. As God’s children, we will all have to stand before the Lord one day and give an account of our lives. Therefore, when it comes to disputable matters, believers should not judge one another. God is the Judge!

Paul continues in verses 13-22,

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. 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. 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. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 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.

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. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Let’s set the record straight on judging. The Christian is to judge everything. Without judgment, no decisions could be made. Thus, the follower of Christ must judge between right and wrong, good and evil and truth and error. Paul makes this abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 2:15, “The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man’s judgment: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.” Believers possess the Spirit of God. As they spend time in God’s Word, they begin to take on “the mind of Christ.” Thus, armed with God’s wisdom they are

prepared to make wise judgments about all things. However, this does not mean that they are to judge hypocritically. Believers are to remove the “plank” from their own eyes in order to “see clearly to remove the speck from [their] brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:1-5). Without wise judgment, believers would not be able to distinguish between actions that are sinful and those that are not. Without wise discernment (judgment), believers would be ill equipped to help restore fallen brothers. Paul addresses this in Galatians 6:1-2, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” A believer must be able to discern (judge) when another believer is sinning, and his judgment must flow from love, based on God’s Word.

Believers are to make judgments about all things, including decisions about “disputable” versus “non-disputable matters.” So, how can believers discern if a practice or belief is disputable? Study God’s Word. Seek counsel from other believers. Pray. Take Paul’s words to heart: “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” (Romans 12:2).

Once a practice or belief is determined to be disputable, believers are directed to “stop passing judgment on one another” (verse 13). Instead, the strong believer should be sure not to cause a weak believer to stumble. How could this happen? A question that always seems to surface in Christian circles surrounds the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Is it okay or not for a believer to drink alcohol? Let’s see what the Bible says. A good website for biblical answers to life’s questions is www.gotquestions.org. For example,

Question: "What does the Bible say about drinking alcohol / wine? Is it a sin for a Christian to drink alcohol / wine?"

Answer: Scripture has much to say regarding the drinking of alcohol (Leviticus 10:9; Numbers 6:3; Deuteronomy 29:6; Judges 13:4, 7, 14; Proverbs 20:1; 31:4; Isaiah 5:11, 22; 24:9; 28:7; 29:9; 56:12). However, Scripture does not necessarily forbid a Christian from drinking beer, wine, or any other drink containing alcohol. In fact, some Scriptures discuss alcohol in positive terms. Ecclesiastes 9:7 instructs, “Drink your wine with a merry heart.” Psalms 104:14-15 states that God gives wine “that makes glad the heart of men.” Amos 9:14 discusses drinking wine from your own vineyard as a sign of God’s blessing. Isaiah 55:1 encourages, “Yes, come buy wine and milk.”

What God commands Christians regarding alcohol is to avoid drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18). The Bible condemns drunkenness and its effects (Proverbs 23:29-35). Christians are also commanded not to allow their bodies to be “mastered” by anything (1 Corinthians 6:12; 2 Peter 2:19). Drinking alcohol in excess is undeniably addictive. Scripture also forbids a Christian from doing anything that might offend other Christians or encourage them to sin against their conscience (1 Corinthians 8:9-13). In light of

these principles, it would be extremely difficult for any Christian to say he is drinking alcohol in excess to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Jesus changed water into wine. It even seems that Jesus drank wine on occasion (John 2:1-11; Matthew 26:29). In New Testament times, the water was not very clean. Without modern sanitation, the water was often filled with bacteria, viruses, and all kinds of contaminants. The same is true in many third-world countries today. As a result, people often drank wine (or grape juice) because it was far less likely to be contaminated. In 1 Timothy 5:23, Paul was instructing Timothy to stop drinking the water (which was probably causing his stomach problems) and instead drink wine. In that day, wine was fermented (containing alcohol), but not necessarily to the degree it is today. It is incorrect to say that it was grape juice, but it is also incorrect to say that it was the same thing as the wine commonly used today. Again, Scripture does not forbid Christians from drinking beer, wine, or any other drink containing alcohol. Alcohol is not, in and of itself, tainted by sin. It is drunkenness and addiction to alcohol that a Christian must absolutely refrain from (Ephesians 5:18; 1 Corinthians 6:12).

*Alcohol, consumed in small quantities, is neither harmful nor addictive. In fact, some doctors advocate drinking small amounts of red wine for its health benefits, especially for the heart. Consumption of small quantities of alcohol is a matter of Christian freedom. Drunkenness and addiction are sin. **However, due to the biblical concerns regarding alcohol and its effects, due to the easy temptation to consume alcohol in excess, and due to the possibility of causing offense and/or stumbling of others, it is often best for a Christian to abstain from drinking alcohol.***³¹

Here is my personal opinion. I do not believe that drinking wine or beer is necessarily sinful, though it can be. Jesus turned water into wine. He was even accused of being a drunkard because He hung out with drunks, and I believe He actually drank wine with them. Matthew 11:19 states, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’” Furthermore, at one point, Jesus said he would drink no more wine. Jesus said in Matthew 26:29, “I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father’s kingdom.” With that said, given our culture and the great problem of alcoholism in our society, consumption of alcohol by believers is probably best avoided in most circumstances. I speak from experience as my father was an alcoholic who died from cirrhosis of the liver. Most families have been touched in some way by alcoholism. Finally, if you have **any doubt** about whether or not you should drink alcoholic beverages, then Paul says, “You should not!” Verse 23 states, “But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”

³¹ From the web site: <http://www.gotquestions.org/sin-alcohol.html>

Here are several guidelines that Paul offers to the strong believer (the believer who does not feel bound by certain practices or legalistic restrictions):

1. Do not cause a weaker brother “to stumble” (fall back into sin) because of something you feel free to do or not do! Example: If a believer feels free to drink a beer or glass of wine, he should refrain if he is in the presence of believers who feel strongly against it. To use one’s freedom in Christ in a way that causes a brother to stumble not only is unloving but also may lead to his/her spiritual and/or physical harm.
2. The believer’s life is not about freedom to eat or drink as he pleases. In other words, being a follower of Jesus is not about pleasing oneself. It is about serving Christ and loving others. Remember the words of Jesus found in Matthew 10:38-39, “Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Thus, as believers, we should be willing to sacrifice our freedom to do certain things in order to strengthen the faith of others and glorify God.
3. Followers of Jesus should be willing to do whatever is necessary according to God’s Word to bring about peace and edification within the body of Christ.
4. Whatever you believe about disputable matters should be kept between you and the Lord. Remember, it is the Lord you serve, and it is the Lord to whom you will give an account of your life.
5. Let all of your actions flow from your faith in Jesus Christ and in accordance to His Word.

Summary according to Keller,

After a group of Christians agree to put an issue in the disputable area, then we need to follow Paul’s advice. The weaker must be willing to really review the biblical data, rethink their position, and refuse to condemn those who disagree. Instead, they must allow others to follow their own consciences in that area. At the same time, the stronger must also be willing to review the biblical data, rethink their position, and be willing to curb their freedom to avoid discouraging or harming fellow believers, especially if their convictions in the area are very strong. This will then be a Christian community that is able to exhibit the righteousness, peace and joy that the Holy Spirit gives to members of God’s kingdom, and for which the Lord Jesus died to bring all believers—“weak” and “strong”—into.³²

³² Keller, 158.

DAY 1: Read chapter 12, pages 123-132, from *How to Be a Christian without Being Religious*.

1. What were some of the issues that faced the church of Paul's day?

2. Ridenour writes, "Paul is talking about disputable questions, that is, questions where two points of view are equally valid and useful... There are many areas in life where the answer is not cut and dried or black and white. Christians must search their own consciences to see what they really believe (verse 5)... Paul is saying that those who live in freedom and liberty to live above the legalistic taboos of men are not the weak ones. The legalists are weak and need to be accepted and understood."³³

What are the two lessons Ridenour states that believers should learn?

3. What are the three basic rules Ridenour mentions that the Lord taught and practiced and that will enable you to communicate with other people, instead of continuing to play judging games? Explain each.

³³ Ridenour, 127.

7. Verse 3 states, “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him.” Explain the judgmental attitude of both types of believers toward each other and give an example of each.

8. Give 4 or 5 reasons Paul says believers are not to pass judgment on each other when it comes to “disputable matters.”

DAY 4: Read Romans 14:9-12, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, 2 Corinthians 5:10 and Revelation 20:11-15.

It is important for everyone to understand that there will be two very different judgments in the future. Believers and non-believers are headed to two distinctly different places of judgment. One day, all non-believers (those who refused God’s gift of eternal life offered through Jesus Christ) will be forced to stand at the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11-15) to be condemned to the “lake of fire.” On the other hand, all believers will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10) to receive their reward.

9. Paul writes in verse 12, “So, then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.”
 - a. Are you prepared for this day?

 - b. If so, how do you know? What experience/decision can you point to in your life that makes you prepared?

 - c. If not, what do you need to do right now to make sure that you are ready to stand before Jesus, the coming Judge of the world, and give an account of your life? See Romans 10: 9-10, 13.

10. Based on 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, how will believers be judged?

11. Do you think believers will face any condemnation (Romans 8:1)? If not, do you think believers will deal with any momentary regrets? Explain.

12. Read Revelation 20:11-15. The Great White Throne Judgment should be greatly feared by everyone. It will be an experience like no other. Many, many people will stand before Jesus awaiting their sentencing. It will be a place of great judgment and condemnation. Knowing this, what should you be doing with the gospel (Romans 10:13-15)?

DAY 5: Read Romans 14:13-23

13. Verse 13 states, “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.” Give an example of how a Christian who feels freedom in a certain area could cause a weaker brother to stumble.

14. According to verse 14, what determines if a “disputable matter/act” is sinful for a believer?

15. Paul writes in verse 17, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Explain what Paul means.

16. In verse 23, Paul writes, “But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith: and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”

a. Explain what Paul means.

b. Give an example of a “disputable matter” about which a believer could have doubts.

17. Application:

a. What is the greatest lesson you have learned from chapter 14?

b. Are there any changes you are convicted to make in any particular areas of your life?