

Disputable Matters
Romans 14:1-12
8-23-2026

One of the most influential missionaries of the 20th century was a man named E Stanley Jones. During his more than 50 years serving in India he influenced thousands of missionaries. During that time he became increasingly concerned about how much time and energy were wasted on divisions and arguments among his fellow believers, usually over disputable matters, things that weren't central to the faith but rather cultural expressions of it.

Personal opinions and preferences rather than the gospel itself.

He saw the tremendous damage this did not just to their relationships with each other but with their work in India where many were not so much rejecting Jesus and Christianity but the western culture it was wrapped in, things like dress and language, worship and music styles and instruments, art and architecture.

There are a multitude of examples we could point to like why do men in some hot, humid Polynesian islands insist on the need to wear a coat and tie to church each Sunday?

The blue laws, also called Sunday or Sabbath laws, were based on ideas of what it means to keep the Sabbath and enforce good moral behavior.

Many places still have them on the books like Bergen County New Jersey where you cannot buy clothing, electronics, and furniture on Sundays.

In at least 9 states you cannot buy a car on Sunday.

And in 5 you cannot go hunting.

All based on particular cultural values applied to how people understood God's word

In India he said the gospel was getting lost because it became so enmeshed with the missionaries' western customs, what they were comfortable with from back home, and over time they could no longer tell the difference between the two

The message of the cross was being lost in all the noise.

Jones often talked and wrote about the essential need for Christ to transcend culture and for the gospel to be contextualized or presented in a way which respects and takes into account local customs. It was this which enabled him not just to influence thousands of missionaries, but hundreds of thousands of Indians, leading many to refer to him as the Billy Graham of India.

At one point he said he wished that every pastor would spend some time on the mission field because, as he put it, when all we do is talk about what we believe, we end up arguing with each other and highlighting our differences. But when we talk about who we believe in, we stand united.

We need to be careful not to conflate gospel with opinions and disputable matters, to so enmesh our personal and cultural views with God's, that we can no longer tell the difference.

Because when we do, we become much more inclined to argue and fight and divide over minor issues, judging and criticizing and condemning others over things we think are important, yet are really lesser matters

It comes out in lists of do's and don'ts people will sometimes try to impose on others, trying to make them conform to a particular image rather than Gods

Elizabeth Elliot wrote about this in her book, the Liberty of Obedience. She said there was a young man who was eager to forsake the world and follow Christ closely so he asked himself, what do I need to forsake. And what he came up with was;

colored clothing, for one thing. He wrote, Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against God who created us because it is an attempt to improve on his work.

It may sound absurd, but then Elliot said, this was actually taught in the most celebrated Christian schools of the second century.

There are many things, often argued about and used to judge others that are not issues of faith at all, merely opinions, reflecting the particular expressions of our beliefs which we are comfortable with because they are what we were raised with

Faith can never thrive while trying to live up to other people's demands and expectations!

When Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, people were coming into the church from different places and backgrounds, life experiences and attitudes and taboos.

There were Jews and Gentiles, Romans and Greeks, people from all over an empire which covered most of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East

There were slaves and free, rich and poor.

And they all brought their particular set of cultural norms and practices and values and life experiences with them.

As they mixed, their differences naturally began to surface

they began to notice things like those who didn't eat the same things they did, dress the same way they did, talk the way they did, behave the way they did.

instead of focusing on what and who they shared in common, they began to focus on the ways they were different

The practices they didn't like or approve of in each other.

This naturally led to criticizing and judging and condemning those who didn't do or see things the same way they did and division grew

The very diversity which should have been a blessing, strengthening and enhancing their fellowship and their witness to the power of the gospel to break down barriers was instead becoming the cause for division and infighting.

arguing and judging one another on the basis of disputable matters and personal opinions about things like what they could eat and what was the correct time and day to worship rather than issues of their faith itself.

One of the main elements of the gospel Paul said is that it breaks down our barriers and dividing walls of hostility, we become one in Christ

And very few things in life will destroy the love and unity of Christ body as quickly as legalism and the judgmental spirit associated with it

Because as Mother Teresa said, "If you judge people, you won't have any time to love them."

Which is why, after spending chapters 12-13 writing about the importance of love and how we treat each other, culminating in his words that love is the fulfillment of the law, Paul now turns his attention to the problem of judging one another which was dividing fellow believers and threatening to tear the church apart

So he wrote:

"Accept, LITERALLY THE WORD MEANS TO DRAW THEM CLOSE TO YOURSELF, him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters (or as both the NRSV and NASV translate it, as opinions). 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." (Romans 14:1-8)

those who are weak refers to those who were having trouble letting go of their past and were still tied to their old practices and the belief that their faith was bound up with what they did and the rules they followed, do's and don'ts in addition to faith.

They didn't yet understand or fully grasp the freedom we have in Christ from trying to earn our way, prove our worth, work for our salvation

Paul's admonition is to both the weak and the strong who were so busy pointing fingers at each other they couldn't get along.

To both he says, in Christ, you are accepted so now accept one another without passing judgement on disputable matters, matters of opinion

Don't waste your time arguing and judging and looking down your nose on those whose views on certain practices and behaviors may not be in perfect alignment with yours

Of these disputable matters, opinions and personal preferences, Paul mentions 2 in particular, what they ate and when they worshipped

I. What they ate

This is specifically talking about eating meat that was bought in the marketplace
This was an issue because virtually all the meat sold in the public square was taken from the animals offered as sacrifices to one of the Roman gods in one of the multitudes of pagan temples.

The priests made money by selling it
Since it was offered in a pagan temple and sacrificed to a false god, the issue for some became, was it okay or was it a sin to eat
If you did eat, weren't you were supporting and encouraging those false beliefs

It's not just food, examples like this abound

If we wanted to bring this a little closer to home, the next time you have a friends or family member visit from the mainland, would you take them to the Polynesian Cultural Center
It is owned and operated by the Mormon church and a portion of your money would then go to support a church that teaches things that are in opposition to Gods word.
So would it be a sin to go?

Or what about offering the incense at a Buddhist funeral?
In both cases, some would say yes and some no

The issue Paul is making is not who is right or wrong, but regardless of your answer, don't stand in judgement of your brother or sister and let it come between or divide you.

As Paul writes in verse 4, "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." (Romans 14:4)

II. The second disputable matter Paul mentions, is what day should we worship on

Is there a correct day?

The commandment says honor the Sabbath by keeping it holy
The Sabbath is Saturday, so are we not breaking the Sabbath by worshipping on Sunday instead
It used to be that the Seventh Day Adventist church said we were.
There is a small denomination named Seventh Day Baptists that say we are.

The commandment also says we keep it holy by doing no work on it.
So are we sinning if we miss worship because we have to go to work?
What if we go out to eat or shop? Are we not then responsible for making someone else sin who has to go to work instead of worship?

People were arguing and judging each other about such things
They were being divided not by their faith but particular behaviors and actions, disputable matters and personal opinions **and Paul says stop it!**

We are saved by grace through faith not law so why let the law and our lists of do's and don'ts divide us?

Paul told the Colossians, “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” (Colossians 2:16–17)

Yet that type of behavior continues today

Before I went to seminary, our former pastor at Olivet was Cliff Hoff. I remember him talking about his time in the military when he served in Germany and the church he attended had both a German and an English congregation each with their own pastor. The pastor’s tried to bring the 2 groups together by planning a big social event which turned out to be a disaster and left them more divided than ever. The German group remained on one side of the hall for the entire evening standing around condemning and judging their American brothers and sisters who were smoking their cigarettes, something they considered sinful. While on the other side sat the American questioning whether the Germans were even believers because they all had their mugs of beer in hand. Each standing in judgement of the other strictly on the basis of their own cultural norms and values.

It remained a church divided over disputable matters.

There have been so many of these depending on the time and place.
Judging and condemning each other not just on things like drinking alcohol or smoking

Is it wrong to play cards? Go dancing? Many used to think so.

What about women wearing makeup or pants, or work outside of the home which were all at one time strongly condemned as sin.

John Roufs told me about his pastor growing up in Minnesota who would go to a nearby town to go to the movies because some in his church thought it was a sin.

Some used to actually consider it a sin to listen to Christian radio, because as they said, Satan is the prince of the air.

Disputable matters!

Years ago, the small church I was pastoring held an outreach event where we were able to get a local Christian band to perform a concert in the church and I had some approach me telling me I had to stop it because that music and its beat were sinful.

There is a story of Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker, two of the best-known preachers in England during the middle and late 19th century. Early in their ministries, they fellowshipped regularly and often exchanged pulpits. All that ended suddenly when they had a disagreement which became so heated it even made it into the newspapers. Spurgeon accused Parker of being unspiritual because he attended the theater. On the other hand, Spurgeon was condemned for his love of cigars.

Many were offended by his smoking. They considered it as lingering sin in his life and evidence of his moral weakness. But his attitude on smoking could be summarized by an encounter he had with a young man who asked him what he should do with a box of cigars that had been given to him as a present. Spurgeon's answer was, give them to me and I will smoke them to the glory of God

We mustn't let disputable matters, matters of opinion divide and blind us from what is essential, that we share one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all who is over all and in all and through all, as Paul told the Colossians

As Augustine put it so well, in essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity!

For as Paul states here, we don't live for ourselves and our preferences, likes and dislikes, do's and don'ts, but for God and one another.

So don't get tied in knots over disputable matters, it can do great harm.

In his commentary on Romans, Kenneth Boa wrote about a disturbing poster made the rounds in Christian bookstores a number of years ago. In the foreground of the poster were 2 wizened old saints who were down on their hands and knees, in a heated argument about something on the floor between them. They both wore dark clothes, wrinkled and unhappy faces, tense bodies, argumentative expressions and gestures. As you looked closer to see just what it was they were arguing about, you could see a sewing pin stuck upright in the floor between them. On the head of the pin the artist had drawn an innumerable host of tiny angels—and suddenly the men's preoccupation was evident. They represented the church of the ages engaged in a fruitless and endless debate over the unanswerable question, How many angels can fit on the head of a pin?

This question is thought to have originated in the Middle Ages when great energy and speculation was expended on defining such matters as the size and constitution of angelic beings. Since then, the question has served to represent those occasions when the church loses its focus and becomes overly involved in disputable matters to the detriment of the church itself.

If you looked even closer, you would see another image, this one of a cliff in one of the upper corners with red hot tongues licking its sides consuming all that fell into the abyss. And while these two were arguing over the size of angels, there was a long line of people with the look of terror on their face as they marched toward the edge of the cliff where many were already shown in various stages of descent into the flames below.

The message of the painting became obvious: The church, represented by the two crusty old men, was arguing over totally irrelevant and unanswerable issues and disputable matters, while humanity, stripped bare of all hope and righteousness, was falling steadily into the pit of hell.

Kenneth Boa asks: how often do we get sidetracked into debating disputable matters with one another at the expense of a world that is waiting upon us to deliver the good news of the gospel, the power of God unto salvation, to them?

It's not that the issues can't be important, but our shared faith, common task, and the unity which is to bind us together is far more important than our personal preferences and opinions on disputable matters, rules and laws, dos and don'ts, culture values and norms.

Diversity is a strength not a sin, the divisions caused by legalism are

"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." (Romans 14:9–12)