

# Respecting Matters of Conscience

Text: Romans 14:1-12

Date: November 5, 2017

**CIT:** We must refrain from judging others in matters of conscience because that is not our job; it's God's!

**FCF:** In our fallenness, we not only believe we know what is good for our own lives, but we are convinced we know what is good for everyone else also.

**Purpose:** To encourage every Christian to refrain from judging others in matters of conscience; to focus instead on honoring God with his/her life.

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## Pretext

America today is often described as a Post-Christian culture. When you hear that, it tells you two things. First, it **recognizes the influence that biblical truth and biblical virtues had over our culture in the past.**

- Christian values and Christian thought were accepted by a large segment of our society.
- Many biblical principles were observed in our homes and in our communities, even by those who did not attend church or necessarily consider themselves Christian.
- What was considered acceptable and what was considered “out of bounds” in the larger public sphere was largely determined by Christian beliefs.
- That was reflected in how people talked, how they lived, how they dressed, what was allowed on television, etc.

That is not the case any more. A lot of the biblical truths that shaped the way the average American once thought and lived have been replaced by secular philosophy. That's why things that were once rarely questioned, such as the definition of marriage, are so hotly debated today. That is

why practices that most Americans agreed were wrong in the past have found widespread acceptance in our culture today.

So, when you hear America described as a Post Christian culture, it means that a **secular worldview now dominates where a Christian worldview once so greatly influenced our society.**

One results of this change is that **there is much more diversity among Christians about what it means to live as a Christian in our world than there was in the past.** For example, if we ask questions like this:

- Is it okay for a Christian to use profanity?
- Does God care what a person wears, or does it even matter?
- Does God care what kind of music you listen to, or what kind of movies you watch?
- Is it okay for a Christian to get a tattoo?
- Does God have a preference on how He is worshipped, or is He good with whatever?

I could keep going, but you get the point. Those questions are being asked today, and how believers answer those questions can be very, very different than they were in the past. **There is no longer a widespread, uniform agreement among believers about how a Christian is to practice his faith.** And, that has created a lot of tension among Christians today.

So, how do we settle those differences? And how are we to respond to brothers and sisters in Christ, often within the same congregation, who think differently about such matters than we do?

That is the subject of our Bible text this morning. The Christians in the first century were confronted with the same situation. Not everyone agreed on how the Christian faith was to be practiced in a pagan culture, and Paul wrote this section to help them deal with these differences in a godly manner. It would help us, too, to hear what Paul has to say and do what He instructs us to do.

## Introduction

At issue in this text is the reality that Christians can differ on the **practical application of God's Word** to their lives. And in our text, Paul raises two questions that were being apparently being asked by the Christians of that day.

First, **does God care what we eat, and if so, where do we draw the line?** Some (and Paul indicates that they were right) decided that they could eat all things. Others decided that to really please God, they should only eat herbs.

Second, **do we have live for God every day, or does God only expect us to be religious on special days**, holy days - like Easter and Christmas? So long as we do what we are supposed to do on those days, God will be pleased with our lives.

Because Paul does not tell us what prompted these questions, it is impossible to speak dogmatically about why these questions were raised. However, it probably had to do with the pagan background of many of the Roman believers. For example, in the matter of food, they knew that much of what they could buy in a public market had been dedicated to an idol. A false God had been asked to bless it. And so, the question was raised, should we eat food that has been dedicated to a false God.

It would kind of be like this. It is not uncommon to go into a Chinese restaurant today and see an altar to Buddha prominently on display. And it's not for show. The owners place offerings of money or food on the altar, asking Buddha to "bless" their business. So, should a Christian eat there? Is it okay to eat that food? Or how about restaurants that serve alcohol?

Some Christians would say, "It doesn't matter. It's just food." However, a person who was saved out of buddhism, or who was once addicted to alcohol, might say, "I won't eat there. I don't believe I can honor God and it at that restaurant."

That's the kind of tension that was being experienced in Rome. And we can create the same kind of tension here today by asking a question like,

Should a Christian parent send his children to a public school? Some would say, "Sure, no big deal." Others would say, "No way! A Christian child has no business being taught in an environment that undermines so many Christian truths."

Now, it is very important for us to understand that Paul addresses these kinds of issues as a matter of faith. That's what it was for the Roman Christians.

- They did not consider their views on what to eat as **preferences**. To them, this is what it meant to live out **THE FAITH**.
- Each faction **believed that he was accurately applying the Bible to his life**.

Additionally, Paul describes one group as **strong** in THE FAITH, and the other (in this case, the one who only ate herbs) as **weak** in THE FAITH. What does that mean?

- One had a more complete understanding of the Bible on this particular issue than the other.
- The person described as weak in the faith had an **incomplete or inadequate understanding of what the Bible taught on this issue**.
- He thought he was applying the Bible correctly, but he was not. If he had known his bible better, he would have understood that it was okay to eat food that had first been blessed by an idol. That doesn't mean he would HAVE to, but he could.

## TRANSITION

Paul's concern in this section (and he has much more to say on this in the following verses) is **how we will deal with these differences** - both as a **matter of fellowship** with other Christians, and as a **matter of conscience** before the Lord. Notice, the first word Paul gives us is this:

- I. You **MUST** receive those who understand the Bible differently on these types of issues.

- **Don't withhold fellowship** from them. Welcome them. Love them. Give them the opportunity to grow stronger in the faith - to increase their understanding of the Bible.
  - Worship with them and pray with them
  - Build relationships with them.
  - Don't shun or isolate them; but love and make room in your hearts for them.
- A. Don't receive them with a **contentious** spirit - to *doubtful disputations*
1. Paul calls these issues "doubtful disputations" because they are not matters over which we should be contentious.
    - Paul is not addressing false doctrine or false teaching
    - He is not addressing Christians living in open sin
    - He is dealing with matters of conscience - matters that often are not directly dealt with in the Bible.
  2. When it comes to matters of conscience, there is no place for combative or confrontational spirit.

B. Neither receive them with a **condescending** spirit

*(Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not)*

- If you think you have a better understanding of the Bible on a particular issue, don't look down upon those who haven't got there yet.
- Give the same respect to your weaker brother as you do to those who share your understanding.

Paul gives us two reasons for this

1. Receive them because God has received them.

To refuse to receive someone whom God has received is to hold that person to a higher standard than God does.

2. That person doesn't answer to you; he/she is the servant of the Lord.
  - a) We don't know where a person has come from or what they've been through, but God does.
  - b) We don't know their struggles, and we don't know how God has been working in their hearts, but the Lord Jesus does.
  - c) We don't possess the qualifications to fill the role of God in their lives; that spot is reserved for their Savior.
- Paul's concern here is that **people be given the opportunity to grow in grace and in the knowledge of God.**
- To deny someone access to Biblical instruction in a gracious, caring environment is to rob them of the opportunity to grow up in the faith.
- We must allow people to live out their faith at their level of spiritual maturity.

**Transition:** Church ought to be a safe place for people to be nurtured and to grow in the faith.

## II. YOU are ultimately responsible for determining how God wants YOU to honor Him in your life

Does that mean a church cannot establish some **ministry guidelines** - what they expect from people who will serve in their ministries? Absolutely not. In fact, God includes such lists in the Bible for those who serve in leadership positions. The Apostle Paul charge Timothy to be an example to the believers. A little further on in this chapter, Paul is going to teach us that there are times when we should choose to take the high road in some matters out of consideration for others.

Yet, in all these areas, the first thing we need to understand is this:

- A. You have a responsibility to decide what is right in matters of conscience

1. Paul does not issue a call for conformity; He does not demand that the herb eater to start eating meat.
2. Instead he charges each person with the responsibility to be *fully persuaded in his own mind* that the decision he has made is supported by the Word of God.
  - a) Can you articulate from the Bible why you have reached this decision.
  - b) To be fully persuaded is a very high standard to meet.
    - (1) It means you have fully sought the Bible for understanding
    - (2) In the end, what the Bible teaches, and not someone's opinion, is to shape your decision.

B. You must never forget that you do not live for YOU, but for God

NOTE: Paul roots this truth in the Gospel. Jesus died and rose again to save our souls and to secure them for eternity. Because of that, **our lives belong to Him.**

1. The Christian is to do everything “**unto the Lord**”
  - a) Because it pleases Him, or serves Him.
  - b) With the intent to bring HIM glory
2. Whatever decision we make, we should be convinced that our actions will honor the Lord and fulfill His will for our lives
  - a) Your life is to be viewed as a stewardship from God.
  - b) Not even something as basic as what you should eat, or how you organize the days of your life, is to be viewed as outside the Lordship of Christ.

**Transition:** It is our own, individual responsibility to determine from the Word of God how God wants us to practice our faith and honor Him with our lives.

### III. Jesus will have the Last Word on the choices you make (v. 11-12)

- We shall all stand before His judgment seat
  - We will all bow the knee to His Lordship
  - We will all give account of our lives to God
- A. You have the liberty to decide matters of conscience for yourself, but expect to answer to Jesus for how you chose to live out your faith.
- B. In making your decision, did you make that decision because you believed it would honor Jesus, or because you really wanted to please yourself? Jesus knows, and usually, we do to.
1. You will stand before Jesus
  2. You will acknowledge His Lordship
  3. Isn't it better to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ *now* so that you can stand before Him with a clear conscience then?

## Conclusion

Paul's first concern is to tell us that we must refrain from judging how others practice their faith because it isn't our job; it's God's.

His greater concern seems to be to make us seriously think about our own practice of the faith.

- Have you taken the time to be *fully persuaded* of what God expects of your life?
- Do you give others the time and opportunity to do the same? Or do you often find yourself critical, engaging in conflict, trying to convince others that you are right and they are wrong?
- Are you prepared to stand before God and answer to Him for how you lived?
- Most importantly, have you received Jesus as your Savior