

ABOUT DOUBTFUL THINGS

by: Ray C. Stedman

INTRODUCTION:

In this chapter of Romans, we come to grips with the problem of religious scruples. This is a very practical section, as you have noted in our previous studies.

In our Bible classes in the homes, we have found that the most frequently asked question by non-Christians is, "What about the heathen who have not heard the gospel?" And the most frequently asked question by Christians is, "What is wrong with such-and-such activity?" Both of these questions, I think, are in the nature of a defense mechanism which reveals a sense of guilt, in some degree.

This is what this section deals with: The question of doubtful things, religious scruples, that area of life where the Scripture does not directly specify an answer, and about which we have many questions.

ABOUT DOUBTFUL THINGS:

This whole chapter is summed up with three words, and I hope these words will remain fixed in our minds as the key of the teaching of this great section:

Welcome Them:

The first word is a word to all Christians:

As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him. {Rom 14:1-3 RSV}

The important word here is the word "welcome," or "receive" as you have it in the Authorized Version: "As for the man who is weak in faith *welcome* him." Receive him. Make him welcome. Whatever else may be done, this must be done. This is the one word that governs our relationship to the man weak in faith.

I think you can see already, from these verses, that the subject of this chapter is one of scruples.

Here is a man who is called "weak in faith." Notice that he is not called "weak in the faith," as you have it in the Authorized Version. It is not a question of weak doctrine, it is a question of weak practice. It is not that he is "weak in the faith," but that he is "weak in faith." He doesn't have much faith. He is facing the problem of taboos or doubtful things.

Here is the section that deals with how to handle someone who is a legalist in the matter of eating meat, drinking wine, or observing days.

It is interesting that, in the early church, in the first century, these were the only areas of doubtful activity that are mentioned in the Scriptures. You find these doubtful things mentioned in several of the letters of Paul, in Corinthians, in Galatians, in Colossians, and here in Romans, but it is always about these three areas -- observing days, drinking wine, and eating meat.

You can see the progress that we have made in twenty centuries. Now we have a much longer list -- smoking, wearing lipstick, improper clothing, doubtful recreation, going to movies, playing cards, watching television --

we have a long list, all the way from eating onions to wearing buttons!

Paul says that the one thing that we must not do with such a person is argue with him. You notice that Paul says, "welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions." That is, don't have doubtful disputes to try to settle his mind or make up his mind for him. You are not to have disputes over opinions, and opinions are all that you can have in this area because, in these matters, Scripture is silent. The rule is that, where Scripture is silent, conscience rules.

There are areas where Scripture does not speak. On the other hand, there are some things that are always wrong, no matter when you do them or where they occur. They are always wrong, and Scripture speaks very plainly and precisely about these areas:

- It is always wrong to steal.
- It is always wrong to lie.
- Drunkenness is always wrong.
- Gossip is always wrong.
- Jealousy and slander and bitterness and all these many things that we find in Scripture are always wrong.

There need be no question about those things. When we are guilty of them, we are wrong because Scripture says so. This is apparent even in our own conscience, as well as in the Word of God. But there is another vast area where things are not wrong in themselves, but the consequences following their practice frequently make them wrong, and this is the area that we are considering -- the area of doubtful things.

I think that it is important to notice that Scripture is deliberately silent in these areas. It is not that it couldn't have spoken about many of these things, but it is that the writers, inspired by the Spirit of God, are led to be deliberately silent about them.

When Paul received the letter from the Corinthians, they wrote to him about some of these things and asked him to give them direction upon how to act in regard to some of these things. It would have been very simple for the apostle to have written back, and said, "As an inspired apostle, my judgment is that you must not eat meat offered to idols," or "you should observe days," or "you should not observe days and holidays, Sundays and Saturdays, and so on," but he didn't. Instead, he spent several chapters explaining the principles upon which these matters must be decided. Here in Romans he does not settle these matters with direct authoritative words -- as he has in other places about other matters -- rather, he leaves it deliberately inconclusive, but clearly gives us the principles.

This is very important because it means that we must follow the same rule. We must not be presumptuous in judging someone else in these areas. This is not for others to settle but for each man to settle himself, as we will see. The one thing that we must do is to welcome them and receive them as a brother or sister in Jesus Christ, as one who shares, with us, life in the body of Christ. The reason is, as Paul says, because "God has welcomed him."

That puts things in the right perspective, doesn't it? And what a blow this is to all forms of exclusions in the church of Jesus Christ --

- To closed communion and all such attempts to separate among the people of God, and
- To shut out those who don't act in exactly the way we think -- who don't subscribe to the same minor variations of doctrine, or who carry out an ordinance in a different way than we do!

All of this is regarded as unscriptural in the light of this passage. The one thing that we must do is to *receive*

them , because God has received them.

If we reject them, we are in danger of becoming holier than God. I am afraid this is a great danger today. So frequently we meet this attitude. Somebody says,

"We don't want them here in our church. They are not our kind of people. Yes, we recognize that they are Christians, but they are just not our kind of people."

But, you see, we have no right to think that way, or to talk that way, because it is the Lord who determines the make-up of his church -- not the people of the church. And Paul insists upon this here. The one thing that must be extended to all who come in the name of Christ is a free and glad welcome, simply

- Because they are believers,
- Because they are Christians,
- Because they know him.

We are not to get them in just with the hope that we might be able to back them into a corner and argue them out of some of their "quaint" beliefs. Rather it is to receive them, love them, welcome them, make them feel at home, despite their quaint beliefs.

This is the clear-cut teaching of these opening verses. This is the word for all Christians in this area: Welcome them!

The Weak Christian:

In the next section Paul gives a word to the weak Christian, in Verses 4-12:

Judge Not:

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand.

One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. {Rom 14:4-7 RSV}

The word here is judge not!

This is for the weak Christian, the one who is bothered by what other people do in the realm of doubtful things.

Now, remember, it is right for the Christians to judge one another in the areas where Scripture speaks. Where someone is engaged in an activity that, in the light of the Word, is clearly wrong (some of these things we have mentioned), it is the responsibility of other Christians to:

- Go to that one and point out his fault, between you and him alone,
- Then if he will not hear you, take another with you, and
- If he will not hear them, tell it to the church.

But, in these doubtful areas, we are not to judge one another. I want to make that clear because so many are confused about this. Many think that when Scripture says "Judge not," it applies to everything. No, it applies only to these doubtful areas where Scripture does not speak precisely on these lines.

The word "judge" means to condemn -- to say about that person that, perhaps, he is not a Christian, or that he is a worldly or a carnal Christian. That is what it means to condemn or judge in this sense -- to regard him as not being all that he should be as a believer, or being unspiritual, because of these doubtful things in which he engages. Paul's word is: Judge not! Of course, if these things lead to outright evil, they need to be judged; but, until they do, you are not to judge.

Reasons for Not Judging:

There are two reasons given for not judging one another:

First of all, judge not in view of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. That is, you have no right to judge. "Who are you," Paul says, "to judge another's servant?" Now, this is an interesting relationship, isn't it? A believer in Jesus Christ is not regarded as answerable to the church in these areas, but answerable to the Lord. The church hasn't a shred of authority to set up any rules or regulations in these areas. This is an area which the Lord reserves to himself, and the man stands or falls *before him*, and not before anyone else. Paul's question is, "Who are you to sit in judgment over somebody else's servant?" After all, they are not your servant, nor are they the church's, they are the Lord's servant. You have no right to judge them, and you have no authority to do so.

Furthermore, it is no help for you to judge in this area. Look at the latter part of Verse 4: "he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand."

I like Phillips rendering of that clause. He says:

... God is well able to transform men into servants who are satisfactory. {Rom 14:4b
J. B. Phillips}

Now, you leave it to him. He is well able to do it.

This is an area where God assumes the right to correct, and he alone. If correction needs to be done, it is up to him to do it; and he is well able to do it!

It is interesting to watch people in this respect. We always seem to want to judge other people, but we forget that we have taken sometimes ten, or fifteen, or twenty years to learn the same things. What it took the Lord thirty years to teach us, we want somebody else to learn in thirty minutes! As soon as we learn it, we expect everybody else to conform to our standard; but it sometimes has taken the Lord a long, long time to teach us these things. Paul says that you can't help somebody else in this area. This is an area where only the Lord can help, and he is able to do it. Leave it to him.

The Observance of Days:

Moreover, there is no merit in abstaining from these things -- any more than there is merit in doing them. This is a very important note in Verses 5-6: "One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike."

Does this mean that a man who observes a special day for the Lord is any holier than the man who doesn't? No, it doesn't. Nor is the man who doesn't observe it any holier than the man who does. They are all alike.

I think that, in this area, we have to put the question of the way we observe the Lord's Day, and the way we observe special days through the year, e.g., Christmas, Easter, and other days.

There are some Christians who object very strongly to an observation of Christmas; they think it is wrong. All right, they don't need to do it. They object to it, and they feel it is wrong because they feel that God is not pleased -- they do it unto the Lord. They fail to observe Christmas because of their regard as to what the Lord would have, but there are other Christians, perhaps a majority, who feel that the observation of Christmas is a wonderful thing. They also do it unto the Lord.

Paul says that, in either case, there is no merit for one or the other. The observation of a special day doesn't add anything to you, or make you any holier, it is what the heart says with regard to the Lord that is important.

Eating:

Again, he says, with regard to the question of eating, one doesn't eat meat because he thinks it is only right to eat vegetables and that he would be defiled, or in some way injured in spiritual development by eating meat. All right, he gives thanks over the vegetables and he thanks God for the supply of it. But the other man, who eats meat, gives thanks for his meat and therefore his heart if as perfectly right before God as the first man. There is no merit, therefore, in abstaining from one or the other.

It is interesting to see that Paul doesn't try to legislate here. He doesn't put down a rule and say, "It is wrong to eat meat," or "it is wrong to drink wine," or "it is right to drink wine," or "it is right to eat meat."

He doesn't say this at all. He says, "Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind." And leave the other person's mind alone. It is up to them in these areas.

No Proper Ability to Judge:

Then the fourth point under this is that there is no proper ability to judge.

None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. {Rom 14:7-9 RSV}

There is only one Lord, you see. None of us live to ourselves. No man is an island -- no Christian, especially. We all have a relationship to the Lord, and whatever we do touches that relationship, whether we live or whether we die, it makes no difference. We do not live all to ourselves and according to our own desires; everything we do is related somehow to him. Then he alone has the right to be Lord and to rule in these areas of our life; he won that right by his death and resurrection.

This is a helpful passage to remind us that the Lordship of Jesus doesn't start when we die. I think that a lot of Christians act as though it does -- that we only really become subject to him after we die and go to heaven. No, his Lordship begins now! He won the right to be Lord both of the dead and of the living. His Lordship is true of us now, and, in these areas, he alone has the right to be Lord. If he says to you, through conscience or through some sense of conviction, "Stop this thing," then you'd better stop it because he is Lord. If he says that you should eliminate some practice, or begin some other practice, or change your attitude, this is his prerogative.

But Paul's word to all others is:

Don't judge in this matter. If you are troubled by what someone else does in these doubtful areas, remember that the Lord is able to make him stand. He is the one who taught you, and he can teach him. Pray for him. If you feel this is a weakness in his life, pray for him, but don't talk to him about it because we are not to judge one another in these matters.

The Judgment Seat of Christ:

Now we come to the second reason for not judging one another: Judge not in view of the judgment seat of Christ:

Why do you [the weak one] pass judgment on your brother? Or you [the strong one], why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; as it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,

**and every tongue shall give praise to God."
So each of us shall give account of himself to God. {Rom 14:10-12 RSV}**

Now, we have many references to this in Scripture. You know we are told that the day is coming when the Lord shall come and judge the secrets of men's hearts, the hidden motives which will then be revealed.

This is the problem now. This is why we can't judge each other: We don't know the motive for our participation, or non-participation, in some of these things, but God does.

The only one, therefore, that we are free to judge is ourselves, because we must stand someday, each of us, before the searching eyes of the Lord himself, and all the secret things of our hearts will be exposed to him and to all those present. Then we must give an account of what we have been, how we have acted, and what our thoughts have been. But we won't judge anyone else in that day. Therefore, "don't judge anyone now," Paul says, "because we do not know the facts, and we have no ability to judge in this respect."

The Strong Christian:

Now comes a word to the strong Christian, in Versus 13-23:

Then let us no more pass judgment on one another, but rather decide never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for any one who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. {Rom 14:13-15 RSV}

Hinder Not in View of the Nature of Love:

This word is *hinder not*, -- don't cause another to stumble.

This is addressed to the one who thinks he has liberty to do these things. It is true that you do have this liberty, and the weak one is not to judge you, but, remember also, that your liberty is to be exercised within the bounds of love. If you make it difficult for someone else by your liberty, then you are not walking in love.

Therefore, hinder not in view of the nature of love -- that is his first argument here.

I remember Dr. Ironside used to say to me on many occasions, "Remember, Ray, don't ever insist that other people walk in the light of your conscience." That is a good rule.

Don't try to get somebody else to walk in the light of what you feel free to do, or feel restrained from doing. In these areas we stand as individuals, alone, before the Lord. Every man stands or falls before his own master, and the Christian who insists on exercising his liberty at the expense of somebody else is turning liberty into license. The action of love, you see, is to restrain yourself, deliberately.

Love Limits:

Did you ever see a father walking down the street with his little boy? --

- How he walks slowly?
- And takes small steps?
- And goes along adjusting himself to the little one at his side?

He has perfect liberty to walk out in full, free stride if he wants to, but, if he did, he would walk away from his little boy and leave him alone. So love limits.

And love limits in these matters. You may have perfect liberty to go into some these places of amusement and

to participate in things that you would feel perfectly conscience-free to do, but you won't do them if you feel that they are becoming a stumbling-block to someone else -- not if you love them, because love limits in this respect.

The greatest right we have as Christians is the right to give up our rights. This is what our Lord manifested, wasn't it? The right to give up his rights -- this is the mark of love.

Paul says, "Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died."

I might point out that the word "ruin" here doesn't mean "perish." It doesn't mean ruin in the sense of eternal perishing (that he will be lost), but, rather, it refers to the wasting of his life. It is quite possible for Christians to feel free to do something themselves which, if other younger believers see them do it, will lead them into an area beyond their control -- where they are beyond their depth. They are not strong enough to handle it, so they get involved in an activity that sweeps them along and sometimes wastes years of their life -- this is what Paul is talking about. Don't let it ever have to be said of you that someone else spent years in a wasted relationship, wasting his life, because of something he saw you do or heard you say. This would not be the activity of love.

I think the most searching words that ever came from Jesus' lips, perhaps, were those words when he spoke to his disciples and said about little ones, "If any man offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it were better for him if a millstone be hanged about his neck and he be cast into the depth of the sea," {cf, Matt 18:6 KJV}, not because he has brought about the eternal damnation of that one, but because he has caused that little one to waste much of his life by something he has seen in another.

Hinder not, therefore, in view of the nature of love.

Hinder Not in View of the Nature of Truth:

Then Paul goes on to another point, Verses 16-21:

So do not let what is good to you be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything indeed is clean, but it is wrong for any one to make others fall by what he eats; it is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble. {Rom 14:16-21 RSV}

That is, hinder not in view of the nature of truth, for, after all, what are the important things of life? Are these things that are of a doubtful nature the great issues? Is it so important to you that you eat meat, that you drink wine, that you go to movies, that you dance, that you smoke, or whatever it may be? Is that the important thing? Is that the thing for which Christ has indwelt your life?

Oh, no! The kingdom of God doesn't consist of these things -- pro or con.

Rather, the kingdom of God consists of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are the important things of life!

Example from a Bible Class:

We were having a Bible class some time ago and were discussing, in a question-and-answer session, some of the principles concerning the Christian life when somebody raised the question of the Christian smoking and drinking in society -- at parties, etc. This became the subject of discussion; others contributed to it, and soon it became apparent that the impression was being given that to be a Christian is not to drink or smoke.

I felt disturbed enough about it that I interrupted the class and tried to bring it back to the point, because these are not the issues. Whether you drink or smoke has nothing to do with whether you are a Christian or not. I

think that we need to make that crystal clear in these days.

The important things are righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, because of these important things, don't demand that you have the right to exercise your liberty at the expense of somebody else. It is not that important to you, really. If you have righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, that ought to be enough. These other things you can let come or go, as they will.

Consequential Evil:

I think this is a clear-cut example of what we call consequential evil. Is it wrong to eat meat? Is it wrong to drink wine? No, of course not.

But, in Verse 21, Paul says,

**It is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble.
{Rom 14:21 RSV}**

We just said that it is ***not wrong*** to eat meat or drink wine, but Paul says that it ***is wrong*** to eat meat or drink wine. Why?

If it makes your brother stumble, then it is wrong. There is nothing wrong in the thing itself -- this a consequential evil. If it is a hindrance, a drawback, or a stumbling block to somebody else, then it is wrong.

This is beautifully brought out in First Corinthians where Paul says, "If eating meat makes my brother stumble, then I will never eat meat again as long as I live," {cf, 1 Cor 8:13}. It is not that important to me; I can live very well on vegetables. If it is going to bother somebody, then I will not eat meat.

That is love in action, isn't it?

That is awareness of the nature of truth.

Hinder Not in View of the Nature of Sin:

Then Paul makes a third point:

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God; happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves. But he who has doubts is condemned, if he eats, because he does not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. {Rom 14:22-23 RSV}

That is, hinder not in view of the nature of sin. Sin is lack of faith, but faith is the attitude of dependence upon someone or something.

Little Laurie's Leap:

We have a wonderful example of this in our home. We have a new baby -- and what a baby -- little Laurie!

She is ten months old and has developed a marvelous feat: She leaps from the refrigerator. We put her up on the refrigerator, which is a tall one, higher than my head, and she sits up there and looks all around and beams at everybody. But she also notices the tremendous chasm around her and is a little bit frightened.

We have found that, if we hold up our arms to her, and ask her to leap off, she will. But she closes her eyes, and shakes and trembles, and then finally squints her face up, and leaps off, expecting you to catch her.

Now, that is faith:

- She is afraid, very much afraid;
- She shakes and trembles before she throws herself off the precipice;
- She is quite willing to do it, but not willing to look --
- Yet she jumps off into our arms!

She has confidence that we will catch her; she is dependent upon us -- that is what faith is.

Faith is a Leap:

Faith is a leap against the circumstances. It is a trust, despite some of the apparent dangers around, trusting in a force or a person who can sustain.

This is what we have been getting all through Romans: Faith is the attitude of dependence upon the indwelling Lordship of Jesus Christ to meet all our needs for any occasion. Anything that doesn't come from that -- any activity or action of our life that does not proceed from this attitude of dependence upon him -- is sin. "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." And, as the writer to the Hebrews says, "without faith it is impossible to please God," {cf, Heb 11:6}. Not that it is difficult, it is impossible, without faith. We cannot please him without this attitude of our conscious dependence upon his indwelling life.

As you see from this, it is not the *nature* of an action that makes it wrong, it is the *origin* of it. Does it originate from an awareness of Christ within? Well, if not, it may be very sincere, it may be religious, it may be costly to yourself, but *it does not please God*. It cannot please God. Therefore, it is sin, because whatever does not proceed from an attitude of faith is sin.

If we try to get somebody to act beyond his belief, or we force some young Christian into some activity, or we lead them on by our example into something that they feel conscience-stricken about, we have caused them to commit sin. Or, if we ourselves move into an area where we feel very ill-at-ease and conscience-stricken, we are not ready for that. Perhaps sometime later, after we have learned more of the reality and the liberty of the Spirit of God, we can come to that activity, but we can't yet. So, "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."

Hinder Not:

Thus, the word to the strong is: Hinder not, do not cause another to stumble --

- First, because of the nature of love,
- Second, because of the nature of truth, and
- Third, because of the nature of sin.

CONCLUSION:

Ah, but there is another word in Scripture that says, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," (2 Cor 3:17 {KJV}). And the one way that we will be delivered from bondage, from being bound to observation of days, and things, and events, and restrictions, is by our continual role in the awareness of the presence of God in our life. When we learn to accept this relationship, we find that his presence doesn't limit us, it enhances. It doesn't narrow us, it enlarges our life. It doesn't inhibit us, it inspires us. And we can take on far more than we did before.

How beautifully this is seen in the life of our Lord Jesus. He did all those things which pleased the Father, and "without faith it is impossible to please him," {Heb 11:6}. Everything that he did was out of faith, in relationship to the Father. He did everything out of an awareness of the indwelling life of the Father in him. He did always those things which pleased the Father. Yet, there was never a freer man who ever lived than Jesus Christ!

Have you ever noticed that, in reading the Gospels?

He was bound by no one. He was limited by no one. He was in control of every situation into which he came. He had perfect freedom to eat with the publicans and the Pharisees and others, even though his enemies scolded him because of this. He had freedom to go down into the haunts of the lowest, vilest sinners, and sit and eat with them, and talk with them, and mingle with them. He did everything in relationship with the Father, and he had freedom such as men have never had.

The is what Paul is bringing out here. It is the indwelling life of our indwelling Lord who delivers us from all restrictions, but we must walk in realism in this respect and go no further than we have been taught by the Spirit of God. As we walk thus, we discover that we have entered into life at the small end, and the result of it becomes a continual branching out into greater and wider freedom and liberty.

After all, isn't that what Scripture says? "I am come that you might have life and that you might have it more superlatively, abundantly, with peace that passes knowledge, joy unspeakable and full of glory, and love that passes knowledge" {cf, John 10:10, Eph 3:19, 1 Pet 1:8}. All these things {are} to be part of those who walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for your awareness of our life, and for the fact that you are very concerned and aware of these areas that are doubtful areas in our life. Thank you, Father, for the liberty that we have in this. Thank you also for the love that limits us in our relationships one to another so that we are willing to wait for someone else -- willing to help along the man or the woman who doesn't yet see things quite as fully and freely as we do. Lord, teach us to walk in this relationship. What a marvelous manifestation this is! That we, who learn by grace to be set free of all inhibitions and all bondage, and to walk through this world enjoying everything as you have made it, also have the grace to limit ourselves for the sake of another, and to inhibit our actions, restrain ourselves, and control the impulses of our life that we may live in such a way that we may demonstrate the marvelous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you for this in his name. Amen.

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