

For Heaven's Sake, Make Up Your Mind!

Grey Matters – Part II

Romans 14:5-9

Introduction

Last Christmas, one of the gifts my wife bought for me was a little book entitled, *Ludicrous Laws and Mindless Misdemeanors*. It contains a number of interesting events that have occurred inside the courtroom, as well as a number of strange laws. Let me mention a few:

- There is a revised statute in Maine which states that it is against the law to catch lobsters with your bare hands.
- In Washington State, according to section 75, it is illegal to catch fish by throwing rocks at them, but explosives are not prohibited. (I've never liked to fish because of the monotony, but dynamite could change my mind!)
- In Vermont, it is legal to have a dance hall and a pool hall next door to a school, but not a bowling alley. A bowling alley will face a daily fine. (Vermont is going to stamp out corruption.)
- In Larkspur, California, it is unlawful, unless designated, for children to climb a tree. (Don't even get me started.)
- A wonderful statute in the Kansas law books protects the rights of those impacted by trains. Statute 66-701 states that if you are run over by a train, the railroad company must give you free tickets from then on.
- In South Carolina, it is illegal for you to crawl around in the public sewer system without a permit. (Remember that the next time you are tempted.)

- According to the Nevada Revised Statutes, section 642, funeral directors will be arrested for using profanity in the presence of the deceased. (Isn't that comforting!)

I thought the following incident in a courtroom was a classic case of a bright lawyer outwitting a plaintiff:

A man was claiming damages for an arm injury caused by a bus driver's negligence. He was being cross-examined by the attorney representing the bus driver.

The attorney asked the man, "Please show the court how high you can lift your arm now that you've been injured."

The plaintiff, his face distorted in pain, slowly raised his arm to shoulder level.

"Thank you," the attorney said, "Now, please show the court how high you could lift your arm before the accident."

The man quickly shot his arm straight up into the air.

Here are some interesting laws related to the church:

- It is against the law to eat roasted peanuts while attending church services in Idana, Oregon.
- In Honey Creek, Iowa, no one is allowed to carry a slingshot to church.
- It is still on the books in Blackwater, Kentucky, that tickling a woman under her chin with a feather duster during a church

service carries a penalty of \$10 and one day in jail.

- In the state of Kentucky, it is unlawful to use snakes during religious services. (Fortunately, we can still do it in North Carolina – amen?!)
- There is one more that I could not believe – it is against the law to have a cell phone on during church services in Cary, North Carolina! The penalty is one day in jail. I am glad you are taking the news so well!ⁱⁱⁱ

The problem with silly ordinances is not that they creep up, probably for good reason, in the law books of our cities, but that they creep up in the law books of our churches – also with good intentions! It concerns what is right and what is wrong when the Bible does not specifically spell it out!

The subject of grey matters, is no easy matter. It is not a new problem, either.

Go back to the 5th century when spirituality was being defined by how much discomfort you endured. A man named Simeon Stylites, who left his cattle farm and became a monk, became world renowned for committing what he believed was spiritual. He chained himself to the top of a column sixty feet high and six feet across. Food was raised by pulleys to his perch. He spent his days reading, praying, and doing sit-ups to try to stay fit. There he remained for the rest of his life. Imagine thirty summers and thirty winters on top of a glorified flagpole – hoping to impress God with his suffering.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bring the issue of true spirituality forward a few centuries and the problem continues to exist – what impresses God? What does God require from us when His word is silent?

What can we do and what can we not do in the grey areas where there is a principle or an implication from scripture, but no clear command? How do we treat others who see these areas differently?

Two of the most famous Christians in the Victorian era in England were Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker. I happen to have several books by both pastors in my library. A biographer once said of Spurgeon, a man who preached to 10,000 every Sunday morning, “while other men’s sermons are covered in dust, his will still be read and preached.”

Parker’s congregation was second in size only to Spurgeon’s. Early in their ministries, they fellowshiped and even exchanged pulpits. But unfortunately, they had a disagreement. Spurgeon

accused Joseph Parker of being an unspiritual pastor because he often attended the theater where plays and operas were performed. Parker fired back, criticizing the fact that Spurgeon was a poor example because he smoked cigars, both in private and in public. Both considered one another to be misled and misleading in their example.

Their words became sharp. Their disagreement was such news that reports of it were carried in the London newspapers. Two great men of the faith broke fellowship with one another, and their fellowship would never be the same.^{iv}

Around the same time, in the United States, there was debate and disagreement over the manufacturing of a left shoe and a right shoe. It was maintained by some that because God was a God of order and symmetry, shoes should be symmetrical as well. So cobblers obediently ignored the obvious difference in the shape of the feet and fashioned both shoes the same way.^v

I know a pastor who uses the same argument of God being a God of order, to condemn any singer who slides from one note to the next, saying, “You should go from one note directly to the next note – or you violate the order of God.” He also believes that a guitar must never be strummed, but picked. Strumming is against the order of God.

There is little doubt in my mind that the church has failed to advance, not as much because of disunity over great doctrinal matters, as disunity over grey matters.

I have a plaque that used to hang on top of my door frame – when we moved to this campus, it got lost in the shuffle – that contained a truism that often served as a reminder to me as I left my study and walked to the auditorium. These words were carved into the face of that wooden plaque, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in My name, there will be disagreement as to what the Bible teaches.”

In a way, that is not the biggest problem. If we disagree over what the Bible clearly teaches, then one of us could be wrong. In fact, both of us could be wrong, but both of us could not be right. One of us has misinterpreted the meaning of the text.

Now follow me in this. The tougher issue is when we disagree over what the Bible does not clearly teach! We could both be right. It is much tougher to handle the fact that both Christians who disagree could be right than that both Christians who disagree could be wrong.

This is exactly the issue that Paul is tackling in Romans 14. We can at least take comfort in the fact that the church in Rome, in the very first century of its existence, was filled with division over grey matters as well.

It came down to diets – was God for salad . . . or steak . . . or both?

We learned in the opening lines of Romans 14, basically, four insights. These included:

- First, both sides of the argument were right, although for different reasons;
- Secondly, both sides were composed of genuine believers (the weak vegetable eaters were basically the new believers who had not learned the full truth of the gospel of grace; the meat eaters were those who better understood the new dispensation of grace that acceptance with God is independent of the old covenant commands);
- Thirdly, both sides were critical and uncaring of one another;
- Finally, everyone was going to stand before the Lord and give an account of their attitude and their actions.^{vi}

Now, having dealt with the controversy over special diets, Paul will now raise the next major controversy over special days.

Day Arguments

Let us go back to verse 1 of Romans 14 and get a running start into verse 5.

Now accept the one who is weak in the faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions [his scruples].

One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.

The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike....

What does Paul mean when he writes that one person regards one day above another, or thinks more

highly of one day, while another thinks highly of every day alike?

We gain added insight by reading Paul's writings to the Galatian believers when he asked them,

. . . how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain. (Galatians 4:9b-11)

In other words, Paul is saying, "I have delivered to you the gospel of grace – why are you returning to the minutia of the law?"

Earlier, in chapter 1 of Galatians, he warned them of false teachers who were trying to pull them back into the Old Testament covenant of ritual and symbol and shadow – away from the reality of the cross work of Christ which fulfilled the sacrificial system, among other things.

These false teachers were distorting the gospel of grace for another gospel – basically, of works in order to gain acceptance from God. This is the gospel of, "God is impressed when you sit on a pole, or wear symmetrical shoes, or do not slide your notes when you sing, or more significantly, when you worship on the Sabbath."

In Galatians 2, Paul writes to this Jewish and Gentile mixed congregation,

. . . knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law, but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law . . . (Galatians 2:16)

In Galatians 3, Paul delivers this incredible news to these believers when he writes,

For you are all [Jew and Gentile] sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . you [now] belong to Christ . . . (Galatians 3:26, 29)

Then, in Galatians 4, Paul says, in effect, "Now that you are sons of God by faith in Christ alone, why do you want to go back to the keeping of all the ritual and minutia of the Mosaic covenant? You're free, so why do you want to go back?"

Paul addressed the same issue with the Colossian believers when he wrote in chapter 2,

Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a

festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Colossians 2:16-17)

We can imagine how difficult this issue would be for the early church.

We know that the believers continued to worship on Saturday until the time of Acts 20 when they seemed to officially switch to what they called “the Lord’s day”.

John had his vision in Revelation, on Sunday, which he called, “the Lord’s day”. (Revelation 1:10)

Paul encouraged financial gifts be set aside on Sunday and then, collected when he came into town.

The Sabbath command is the only commandment of the ten that is never repeated in the New Testament.

However – listen to this – even though we have the precedent of the early church choosing to worship on the day of our Lord’s resurrection – every Sunday was Easter – still, not one command in the New Testament ever said we have to worship on Sunday!

So this is Paul’s opportunity to settle the score. Surely Paul would just nail this issue down; just tell us, “Worship on Sunday – it’s more special than any other day.”

Go back and look at Romans 14:5a again.

One man regards [elevates] one day above another, another regards every day alike....

You might say, “Wait a second! I thought the Bible said somewhere, that you’ve got to be in church on Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday night. And, if you miss any one of these three, you’re in big trouble – maybe one day in jail. You mean to tell me that Paul is saying that you don’t have to come to church on Sunday? Where’s your sense of job security, Stephen, you’re a pastor for crying out loud?! What are you saying? People don’t have to come to church anymore?”

No, not at all, so just relax.

I am saying the same thing that Paul has effectively said; that is, God is not approached only on the Sabbath; acceptance before God is not restricted to special days or seasons. God is available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

This means that confession does not have to wait for the weekend. Worship among believers can occur in a living room on Friday afternoon, or in a board

room on Monday morning. Welcome to the age of grace!

If your church family wants to worship on Sunday morning, as the church has chosen to do for 2,000 years now, so be it. But if your assembly and the leaders of your church decide your worship needs to be on Thursday morning – perhaps that is the only time they can rent a building or maybe that is a time the local communist guards do not seem to notice so many people heading for the woods to worship – if you can believe it, you can actually worship God in the woods, on Thursday, too.

Do not forsake the assembly, by the way, as some do, as Hebrews 10:25 reveals. Evidently, some Christians had already taken their freedom to an extreme position and chosen to ignore the assembly and meet all by themselves. All their business meetings were unanimous – and they never disagreed with the preacher.

Whenever your assembly chooses to meet – be there. Know that God will be the audience of your collective worship, whenever it is.

So let us get back to the question. We have one church meeting on Saturday, another that is meeting on Sunday, and a new church plant that rents the community meeting house on Thursday. Which one is right? Which one is closer to the truth? Which one is the one I should join?

How do we decide? Paul gives us the answer. Notice the last part of Romans 14:5.

. . . Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

That nails it, does it not? Paul nailed it down all right – he nailed it down, firmly in mid-air! Thanks a lot, Paul! He said, “You’re both right!”

However, if you think this is a free pass to thinking it through and studying it and praying it through, think again. Romans 14:5b says,

. . . Each person must be fully convinced ...

The word “convinced”:

- is from “plerophoreo (πληροφορεω),” which means, “to come to full certainty”;
- could be translated, “to be fully persuaded, and means, “to make up your mind; to have your heart set on”;
- is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, or the Septuagint, only once, and in a negative way, to speak of the evil person who is fully set on doing evil.^{vii}

This word is used in the New Testament in II Timothy 4:17, for preaching what must be fully known, and in Luke 1:1, when Luke writes of things “on which there is full conviction,” regarding the eyewitness accounts of Christ’s life.

This is the conviction that Paul is referring to in Romans 14. This is not some take it or leave it exercise. This is not for someone to say, “Oh, whatever!”

Paul is much more passionate than that. He is saying, in effect, “For heaven’s sake, make up your mind!”

Develop some conviction about what you do and what you believe and how you behave. Think!

Do not just parrot some other person’s clichés. Do not pray other people’s prayers. Our lives are not dictated by a ruling class of clergymen.^{viii}

We, individually, are priests and priestesses before God (I Peter 2:9).

We have liberty, not to do whatever we want, but to do what we believe in our heart and have thought through with our renewed mind that God wants us to do.

It is not enough to say, “Well, that’s how I was raised,” or “That’s the way my parents taught me to worship,” or “My parents believe that, so I guess I will too,” or “Nobody believes that at my school, so why should I?”

For heaven’s sake, make up your mind! Moses would have never written that! “Make up your own mind about the Sabbath and special seasons”?

This is stunning; shocking; unsettling. Grace is unsettling.

It was all so clear in the old dispensation. It was Saturday or nothing; it was a turtle dove for this sacrifice and a measure of barley for that one.

Now I bow my head and pray directly to God. But wait, do I bow my head or raise it toward heaven? Do I close my eyes or keep them open? Do I pray standing, kneeling, lying prostrate, or sitting?

Would you believe the council of Nicaea, in the 4th century, had to settle this dispute? They drew up twenty formal statements that addressed everything from when to celebrate Easter to the amount of interest a clergyman could earn on a personal loan to the posture of someone who prayed in church – should they stand, kneel, or remain seated?^{ix}

Paul would have said, “Just pray!”

In fact, in I Thessalonians 5:17, Paul said,

pray without ceasing;

This evidently means we can pray just before falling asleep. Some of you are almost there!

In a matter of years after Romans was written, the church was deeply involved in thinking their way through issues of grey.

If anything, grey matters are intended by God to make us think! They are to mature us and sharpen us in the word and strengthen our resolve for holy living. At the same time, they are to develop in us, gracious spirits toward those who might disagree over non-doctrinal issues.

That is hard to do. It was for the church in Rome, as well.

The truth is, grace is unsettling. We would prefer someone to come along and settle all the differences of opinion so we can be unified in every opinion and uniform in every appearance.

It is like the poem I came across some time ago that spells out my own past experience, and maybe yours as well. The words are:

Believe as I believe,

No more, no less;

That I am right

And no one else, confess;

Feel as I feel,

Think only as I think;

Eat what I eat and drink what I drink;

Look as I look,

Do always as I do;

Then, and only then,

Will I fellowship with you.^x

The truth is, God does not cut out paper doll saints. He has never used a cookie cutter to make Christians. He even made the left foot differently than the right.

At the same time, differences of opinion are no excuse for sloppy thinking – or shallow living.

Paul says, “Make up your mind – develop well thought through convictions about what you are going to do and not do.”

Without a doubt, Paul is rattling the cage. Both Gentiles and Jews within the church have just had their ammunition taken away. Neither side can demand that the other side acknowledge their superiority. In fact, I believe Paul is suggesting that if

either side wins the argument, both sides lose – the truth of grace is lost.

Boundaries for Grey Matters

So, is there any help in this today, for those of us who are not necessarily struggling over which day to worship or which food to eat? We are struggling nonetheless, with a need to develop convictions about a myriad of other issues. Is there any direction for us as we think our way through the fog? I believe there is.

About six years ago, one of our neighbors informed us that they had a male Bassett hound puppy that needed a home. It had registration papers that proved it was full-blooded Bassett. I'm not sure why that mattered, but it did sound impressive. We already had one dog – a female Bassett and Beagle mix. I figured it would be great to have a litter or two of puppies for the kids to enjoy, and besides, the information about the birds and the bees would come as a natural part of the education of having male and female Bassett hound dogs. Believe me, our kids got quite an education.

We put up one of those invisible fences – wire underneath the surface of our back yard. Then, we put special collars on the dogs that were equipped with a beeper and metal studs which would deliver a shock. I do not know how it worked, but I do know that as the dogs would come close to the line, which we marked with white flags, a beeping sound would begin. The beeping sound would get faster and faster as they neared the line and then, when and if they crossed the line, they would get a shock. The shock level could be set at low, medium, medium high, or high, and it would cause them to yelp and retreat from the line.

For Patches, our female, it worked fairly well. For Murphy, the name we gave the male, it did not work. He just could not get it. Evidently those registration papers were not the same as a diploma.

If Murphy saw a cat or a jogger, he would run toward the line – I watched him do it time and time again – and he would never even slow down. He would just yelp as he crossed the line and keep moving. I would drag him back over the line and he would yelp again.

I set the power to the highest setting. It had the same power as the electric chair – the lights in the neighborhood would dim every time Murphy crossed the line!

I finally figured out that Murphy was not dumb – he just had a high tolerance for pain. He did not care if he got shocked because he knew the pain would not last very long.

What a nuisance – all the time I spent. Murphy basically spent his life running across the line and digging holes all over the backyard. They were deep holes. I had no idea what he was looking for, but he never seemed to find it.

I finally took him to the pound – my kids had had enough of an education. The people at the pound assured us that people were looking for full blooded Bassett hounds and he would probably be taken in by someone very soon – or he would die, and I did not care.

Have you got your thinking cap on? Are you ready to think this thing through?

Let me give two questions that serve as invisible boundaries. They can keep you from wandering too close to the line where the pain of guilt and an offended conscience is waiting.

1. **First, ask yourself the question: Can I do what I am doing and be in total submission to God?**

Let me say this with fewer words: Am I in submission to Jesus Christ?

Notice the way Paul repeatedly refers to the priority of the Lord. You could circle the names of God as they appear ten times in four verses. Look at Romans 14:6-9.

He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or 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.

By the way, this is a great text for the deity of Christ – the names Lord, God, and Christ all refer to the same Person. He is God – Lord and Messiah.

Are you doing what you are doing for God? Is He Lord and Master over your actions and decisions and convictions?

Paul's point is that we can do whatever we want, as long as we know the Lord would not be embarrassed to be there too. Say whatever you want to say, see whatever you want to see, eat whatever you want to eat, as long as you know the Lord would be perfectly at home saying and seeing and eating those things too. The less comfortable you think the Lord might be, the closer you are to that invisible boundary and sorrow and guilt and disappointment are just a few steps away.

Am I in submission to Jesus Christ my Lord?

2. Secondly, ask yourself the question: Can I experience whatever it is I am experiencing and at the same time have a spirit of appreciation to God?

A shorter version of this question is: Am I giving thanks to God?

Notice the repetition of this phrase in Romans 14:6.

. . . he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

Both are thanking God! They are saying, "Thank You, Lord, for these vegetables."

I could never pray that!

The question remains, can you do what you do and know that you can bow your head and say, "Lord, I thank You for what I'm about to do . . . or experience . . . or watch . . . Thank You for it, Lord."

Eric Liddell's story was told in the movie *Chariot's of Fire*, and was, for the most part, a true story. He was called "The Flying Scotsman" because of his incredible speed. He wanted to compete in the Olympic games, while his family wanted him to begin his missionary career. He decided to put off his missionary work until after the Olympics. His family was very unhappy with his decision.

When he made the British Olympic team, he went to the games in Paris. However, when he arrived, he found out that the qualifying heats were to be held on Sunday. He had made up his mind that he would not race on Sunday – and instead, he preached

in a church in Paris that day. It is interesting that to his family, he was compromising by running, while at the same time, he refused to run on Sunday.

Both of the controversies were grey areas. Running instead of entering the ministry – grey; preaching on Sunday instead of running in a race – grey. Eric, however, had made up his mind how far he would go on the issues.

Eric entered himself in a different race – the 400-yard dash. It was not what he had trained for, but Liddell ended up winning the race and setting a world record at the same time.

After his Olympic victory, Eric traveled to China, where he was ordained and began to serve. Serve he did, for the rest of his life.

In the midst of the debate with his family over whether he should put off the ministry and run in the Olympics, Eric delivered the wonderful statement to which I believe the apostle Paul would say, "Amen!" Eric said, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but He also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure."

That is another way of saying, I am running as unto God and I am giving Him thanks for the privilege.

Ladies and gentlemen, make up your mind. Talk it out; debate it among friends; study the word; look up the verses in commentaries and the words in Lexicons; call respected teachers and pastors and friends, but whatever you do, remember you have been saved to think it through.

In making up your mind, remember these invisible boundaries that will become very visible to everyone around you; make sure that Christ is your priority and thanksgiving is your practice.

Then, for the sake of heaven, make up your mind.

Sing:

He is Lord, He is Lord,

He is risen from the dead and He is Lord,

Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess

That Jesus Christ is Lord.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/12/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Lance Davidson, *Ludicrous Laws and Mindless Misdemeanors* (New Jersey, Castle Books, 2004).

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- ⁱⁱ Robert Pelton, The Door, Christian Reader, vol. 33, no. 5.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Bruce Felton and Mark Fowler, The Best, Worst and Most Unusual (Galahad Books, 1994), p. 148.
- ^{iv} R. Kent Hughes, Romans (Crossway Books, 1991), p. 263.
- ^v Felton and Fowler, p. 537.
- ^{vi} William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary: Romans (Baker, 1980), p. 453.
- ^{vii} Gerhard Friedrich and Gerhard Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, ab. By Geoffrey Bromiley (Eerdmans Publishing, 1985), p. 871.
- ^{viii} Roy L. Laurin, Romans: Where Life Begins (Kregel, 1988), p. 452.
- ^{ix} Christian History and Biography, issue 85, p. 24.
- ^x R. Kent Hughes, p. 259.