

Living On Three Levels

Grey Matters – Part VII

Romans 14:22-23

Introduction

A staff member emailed this joke to me a couple of days ago:

It seems that there was a major problem in a small Texas town where there were three country churches – the Baptists had a church, the Presbyterians had one, and the Methodists had one too. Each church had the same problem – they were overrun with pesky squirrels.

One day, the Presbyterian church called a meeting to decide what to do about the squirrels. After much prayer and consideration, they determined that the squirrels were evidently predestined by God to be there; chosen to be there, so they refused to interfere with God's electing decree.

In the Baptist church, the squirrels had built their nest in the baptistery. The deacons met and decided to put a cover on the baptistery and drown the squirrels. Can you believe that? I would never have decided that, given my love for animals! I cannot believe someone would do that to God's furry little creatures, but they tried! The squirrels, however, escaped, and there were twice as many in church the following week.

The Methodists also came up with a solution – the only effective solution that really worked wonders. They voted unanimously to welcome all the squirrels into the membership of the church – and that did it!

Unfortunately, this is not just a Methodist issue. It is pervasive in this country. This Easter, our church will add a fourth service in the morning to

accommodate the crowds – which, by the way, we will gladly welcome and preach the truth to.

Have you ever asked yourself the question, “Just why *do* I go to church – beyond Christmas and Easter?”

In fact, have you ever asked yourself, “Why do I do many of the things I do – and do not do the things I do not do?”

Do you do what you do or do not do, not because of reasoned thought, but in order to stay in line with the status quo?

Now, I am not suggesting that you tear down all the fences that have been built around your life. A quote attributed to G. K. Chesterton is, “Don't ever take a fence down until you know the reason it was put up.”

Why do you believe what you believe? Why do you live the way you live? Why are the fences laid out the way they are around the pastureland of your life?

One author told of attending a wedding and hearing the vows. The couple had evidently rewritten the traditional vows, so that, instead of saying, “I will cherish you as long as life shall last,” they said, “I will cherish you as long as love shall last.”

Is it any wonder then, that wedding rings can now be leased for one year at a time?

What is it that you have promised – and believe? Why have you chosen to live and work and dress and entertain and read and play the way you do? Is any of it a matter of principle or is it simply a result of your past?

Why is it that a large number of college students abandon the faith of their fathers during their freshmen year – as soon as they get out of the family corral? The answer is simply that their faith was the faith of their fathers.

Is your life based on conviction – or conditioning? Is your faith the faith of your parents; your past – or has it become personal?!

In Romans 14:5, Paul challenged each believer to be,

... fully convinced in his own mind.

In other words, “Make it personal!”

I want to add another principle to the growing list, as we make our way through Romans 14. It is:

- The Principle of Conviction.

So far, we have uncovered:

- The Principle of Protection – accepting and encouraging weaker and younger believers in the faith. I find it fascinating and somewhat surprising that the way to find our way through the fog of grey issues – issues on which the Bible is neither clear nor conclusive – is not to look out for own life, but to look out for the safety and well-being of someone else’s life.
- The Principle of Reputation – living so that others should see in us nothing less than the stamp of Christ’s holy character.
- The Principle of Consideration – forming, as we learned in our last study, not a Christian demolition team to tear down the lives of people around us, but a spiritual construction crew to build up the lives of our brothers and sisters in the household of faith.

The Principle of Conviction

Now Paul bores in a little deeper as he provides some serious challenges to both the weak or young believer, as well as the strong or mature believer.

To the strong, Paul writes in Romans 14:22a,

The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. . . .

This is a plea for humility and deference. The strong are not to go around setting every other Christian straight.

By the time of Paul, whatever a person stood for was paraded around town. Public shows of piety were the name of the religion game. Whether is was

giving, fasting, or even praying – it was all a matter of public performance by the religious crowd.

In our Lord’s sermon on the mount, He very clearly warned the believer,

Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them . . . when you give money, don’t do it to be seen by men; when you pray, don’t pray like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners in order to be seen by men . . . when you fast, don’t put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. (Matthew 6:1-16 paraphrased)

In other words, some things which can be seen by men, are not to be done for that purpose.

The problem with public piety is that it needs new rules – it needs more complex rules to try to keep everyone convinced of our personal holiness.

So the scribes and Pharisees who studied the Law of Moses, ended up taking on several hundred additions to the regulation of the Old Testament.

The rabbis allowed a man to ride a donkey on the Sabbath, but if he carried a switch to speed up the donkey, he would be guilty of laying a burden on it and that would be sin.

A woman was not allowed to look in the mirror on the Sabbath lest she see a gray hair and be tempted to pluck it out and that would be tantamount to work.

These religious leaders took the simple commandment to avoid adultery and added the specifications that you should never talk to a woman who was not your wife or ever even look around, lest you see a woman. So when the Pharisees went out in public, they were probably almost comical to watch. Some of them came to be known as “bleeding Pharisees,” because they kept their heads so lowered for fear of seeing a woman that they constantly bumped their heads into walls and posts and wagons. But they wore their bruises as badges of holiness.ⁱ

This is like the monks of the fourth century who wore fabric that purposefully included thorns and slept in compartments so small they had to double up to get in bed.

This is also like leaders from the more recent past like Charles Finney, the mystical evangelist who refrained from coffee and tea and insisted that Oberlin College, the school he founded, bar any stimulant, such as pepper, mustard, oil and vinegar.ⁱⁱ

During my college days, it was considered a mark of spirituality to get up very early to pray. The earlier you rose, the more spiritual you were. This Bible college had a bell tower in the center of the campus. At the top of the tower was a small prayer room that was filled only with kneeling benches. The truly spiritual among the young men, would be found in that tower in the morning. I made several 5 a.m. appearances myself – and dozed off with the other men.

On another campus nearby, the same practice was occurring. It finally came to the attention of one of the revered Bible teachers, who made an announcement in chapel to try to stem what was becoming a public show of piety. He said to the students, “I happen to get up every morning around 3 a.m.”

The students could not believe it and thought, “Man, what an example of holy discipline!”

However, this wise leader then added, “And after I’m finished in the bathroom, I go back to bed.”

The students got the message!

Paul is saying to these Roman believers, “There are some things you will be convinced of, but they should remain between you and God.”

For these first century believers, it would have been natural to follow the leadership of the Pharisees – to have a personal belief or conviction about something the Bible does not address and then, try to get everyone else on board.

Paul is saying, “Don’t flaunt your freedom; don’t legislate your personal liberty; in fact, some things should be a matter of private discipline and personal holiness.”

This phrase, in Romans 14:22a, could literally be rendered,

The faith that you have, keep to yourself before God.

Now obviously, Paul is not saying that we should never share our faith with others. He has already made that clear when he wrote,

. . . “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher [a messenger]? . . . faith comes from hearing and hearing by the word of Christ. (Romans 10:13-17)

Understand then, Paul’s statement in Romans 14, to keep your faith to yourself, within the context of chapter 14. Things that you believe, as they relate to matters of grey; to matters which the Bible is not conclusive or clear, be careful – do not brag about them; do not impose them on others; do not hold them up to be everyone else’s standard; do not require them of younger believers; in fact, unless you are asked about some of your personal beliefs, you might even keep some of them to yourself.

Three levels of personal conviction

Let me break down this idea of personal convictions regarding grey matters into three sections. I believe it will make this clearer. Let me give three levels of personal beliefs – with each level becoming more clearly defined in Scripture.

1. Level one is a personal preference.

I would define a personal preference as a decision based on an assessment of personal feelings, sensitivities, background, and taste.

Even though Scripture is silent, you are personally confident as you talk with the Lord and read His word that what you are doing is the right thing. You do not know of any scripture that forbids the things you are doing; there is no verse that clearly tells you one way or another. You might change your mind, but at this point, with what you know and what you sense and how you feel, this is the way to go.

The word “preference” is used for level one – this first level of conviction is the level of personal preference. It is an application of your personal feelings, tastes, and background to your present walk with Christ.

2. Level two is a personal certainty.

This could be defined as an application of scripture to your present walk with Christ. While the Bible does not explicitly address the issue, you feel that the weight of biblical instruction weighs in favor of a decision you are making.

I have heard parents use scripture to defend sending their kids to public school, to defend sending them to Christian school, and to defend homeschooling them. There are three different camps within the church – all armed and ready to debate, if not battle the others.

I like the fact that people are digging into the application of scripture to settle their minds and hearts on the issue. I believe it unfortunate when sides are taken and those who disagree with another’s

application of scripture are considered wrong – and bullets begin to fly.

There are plenty of verses that challenge us to evangelize our world. One set of parents will argue, using the question, “How can you do that if you are separated from the world?”

The problem is that there are no verses that specify that your children are to be doing that in middle school.

There are plenty of verses in the Bible that place the responsibility of teaching children the truth of scripture upon the parents. However, these verses do not say it is the responsibility of parents alone, for why would God’s Spirit give believers the gifts of teaching and exhortation for the sake of the church?

There are those in the third camp who believe strongly that formal education should have a Christian world-view and be taught from that perspective. However, there is not one verse for either side of the argument that specifically addresses formal education.

So, now that I have caused everyone to be upset with me, which way do you turn?

My wife and I have had the privilege of seeing our children in a public school setting, leading kids to Christ as early as first grade. We have also homeschooled them for several years. We have had them in Christian school as well. I can say with great authority that none of them work – let me add the word, perfectly.

So talk it out; pray it through; discuss it as husbands and wives; ask others their opinion and experience; consider your own children and their particular needs and bent. This is an area of Christian liberty – an issue colored over in grey.

I am deeply concerned as I watch differing opinions stockpile ammunition for future battles. And all the while, the world is more than willing to take a ringside seat!

One author told a story of two congregations that were located only a few blocks from each other in a small community. They agreed on all the major doctrines of the Bible, so they thought it might be better if they merged and became one larger, more effective body, rather than two struggling congregations. It was a good idea, but they were not able to pull it off. What was the problem? They could not agree on how they would recite “The Lord’s Prayer”. One group preferred “forgive us our trespasses,” while the other group demanded “forgive us our debts”. So, as the local newspaper reported,

“One church went back to its trespasses, while the other returned to its debts.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul goes on to say, in the latter part of Romans 14:22,

. . . Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

This could be translated, “Happy is the believer who does not feel guilty when he does something that he has thought through and judged to be right.”

These are not doctrinal issues; these are not matters of heaven or hell. However, that is not an excuse for apathy; for sloppy thinking; for never praying. Think!

Paul was convinced that he was supposed to go to Spain. He writes in the next chapter of Romans, “I’m coming to see you in Rome, as I travel on to Spain.”

Paul was certain the will of God would take him to Spain! He never went.

Why would God put Paul through the exercise? Perhaps:

- it kept him fresh and visionary;
- it developed his growing excitement about the expansion of the gospel;
- it encouraged a global vision for the Roman believers;
- it challenged the believers in Spain to prepare for Paul’s arrival.

More than likely it did what God wants to do in our own lives as we seek His Spirit and His word for direction. It keeps us seeing His Spirit and His word. It drives us to our knees!

Is there a better place to be than searching after the heart and mind of God?!

What you choose to do might be different than the choice of anyone else, but your sense of certainty and confidence in the Lord gives you the freedom, in that particular area of grey matters, to decide.

Hudson Taylor was the pioneer missionary to China during the late 1800s. After being there for some time, he realized that his respect among the people and his ability to be revered as a religious teacher were being hindered by his Western apparel.

He decided to do something no other missionary had dared. He decided to wear the customary robe of a teacher and, more dramatically, he chose to wear the pigtail or the Chinese queue, as it was called.

He wrote to his sister the shocking details, “I had better tell you at once that on Thursday last at 11 p.m. I resigned my locks to the barber, dyed my hair a good black, and in the morning had a proper queue woven into my own hair . . . then, in Chinese dress, I set out.”^{iv}

The reaction to Hudson’s news in England was to be expected. He lost support without ever being notified or asked. He eventually began his own mission board, calling it the China Inland Mission.

By the time J. Hudson Taylor passed away in 1905, there were eight hundred missionaries under his leadership and more than 125,000 Chinese Christians.

Taylor had become convinced that an application of Paul’s own personal testimony would be fitting for him to change his dress.

He would become,

. . . all things to all men . . .

Specifically, he would become more like the Chinese,

. . . so that [he might] . . . save some. (I Corinthians 9:22)

The first level is personal preferences by means of an application of feelings and background; the second level is personal confidence by means of the application of some passage of scripture. Let me give a third lever.

3. Level three is based on personal commands.

This could be defined as the decisions based on clear interpretation of scripture to your walk with Christ.

The Bible speaks to these issues! There is no doubt. It is not a matter of confusion; it is a matter of submission. For example:

- “Flee immorality . . .” (I Corinthians 6:18a) – It is the will of God that you abstain from immorality; that is, sexual relations outside of marriage. You do not have to pray one moment about this – it is clear!
- “. . . Do not commit murder. . . .” (James 2:11) – You never have to ask the Lord during your devotions if you can kill that guy at work – you cannot!
- Have a thankful spirit. (Philippians 4:6 paraphrased)

- Give financially with joy as God prospers you. (I Corinthians 16:2 paraphrased)
- “. . . do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26)
- Do not be greedy (Ephesians 5:3 paraphrased)
- Walk honestly (Romans 13:12 paraphrased)
- Do not murmur or complain (I Corinthians 10:10 paraphrased)
- “Let us not . . . envy one another.” (Galatians 5:26)
- Do not be absent when the assembly meets for worship (Hebrews 10:25 paraphrased)
- “. . . love your enemies . . .” (Matthew 5:44)
- “Do not love the world . . .” (I John 2:15)
- “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.” (Ephesians 4:31)

There is something in these verses for everyone! You never have to pray about God’s will concerning these matters, as well as that of a thousand more commands in the New Testament.

One of our Adult Bible Fellowship teachers did some research using his Bible software. He sent a copy to me of more than one thousand clear commands for us to obey in the New Testament. These included:

- seven things to abstain from;
- seven things to avoid;
- three things to ask for;
- fourteen things to beware of;
- five things to consider;
- three things to continue in;
- two things to endure;
- four things to flee from;
- ten things to follow;
- six things to honor;
- six things to lay aside;
- plus many more.

The implication is obvious – if we spent more time obeying what the Bible says, we would spend less time agonizing over the things the Bible does not say.

Perhaps you are asking, “Does this mean I can do anything the Bible doesn’t specifically address?”

This is Paul’s warning in Romans 14:23.

But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

This is the rule of thumb, “When in doubt – don’t!”

When you are in doubt as to whether an action will uphold your faith in the glory and righteousness of Christ – do not do it! If your conscience is filled with guilt – do not go there!

In other words, as you work through the three levels of decision making – preferences, confidences, commands – if it comes down to the fact that you are at liberty to do something, but at the end of the day, your conscience troubles you about it, which means you cannot do it to the glory of God, then do not do it; stop! Do not use your liberty to drag your conscience through the mud.

Watch out as well, for others around you. Paul charges us to use our influence to promote, not questionable living, but holy living.

Key words concerning grey matters

Let me give three key words as you pursue balance in the area of grey issues.

The first word is *liberty*.

I have defined Christian liberty as, “choosing to make lifestyle choices out of love for Christ and others.”

You have the liberty to make choices in life. For example:

- What are you going to do about your children’s education?
- What are you going to wear?
- What are you going to do for entertainment; for leisure; for sports; for reading material?

Paul would say, in Romans 14, to govern our choices by two things:

- our surrender to the Lord (verse 6);
- our concern for other believers (verse 13 – do not put an obstacle or stumbling block in a brother’s way).

Liberty says, “I now have the freedom to do, not whatever I want to do, but whatever Jesus Christ wants me to do.”

Liberty does not say, “I have the freedom to do anything that makes my life better.”

Instead, liberty says, “I have the liberty to make my brothers’ and sisters’ lives better.”

This is true Christian liberty.

There are two extremes to biblical liberty.

- **One extreme of liberty is known as *legalism*.**

This is when someone chooses to obey external codes in order to earn the favor of God and others. The tragic flaw in legalism is the belief that God’s approval must be won by following a list of rules in areas on which He has never clearly spoken.

Legalism is entirely external. It is, in fact, possible to keep all the rules and be far away from God. Do not misunderstand, though, it is possible to break all the rules and be further away from God! What makes legalism wrong is not a set of rules.

I can guarantee that your job has a set of rules to follow. In fact, you probably have to show up at a certain time and can only take so many days off for vacation. That is not legalism.

After church today, when you go to McDonalds for lunch because that is where your five year old wants to go, the guy standing behind the counter is not wearing that shirt because he likes it. If he had his choice, he would be wearing a UNC hat, or an NC State hat, or if he is strange, a Duke hat. He does not decide what he is to wear to work – it has been decided for him by his company. That is not legalism.

Legalism is the belief that the shirt makes this guy righteous before God; that the hat he wears equals righteousness. Legalism is the belief that never taking vacation days and always clocking in at the right time make you are acceptable to God.

Legalism is the belief that keeping rules is the same thing as developing holy character.

An orthodox Jew in an Israeli hotel on a Saturday, got on one of the special Sabbath elevators. These elevators are programmed to stop at every floor, so the Jew will avoid working on the Sabbath by not having to push any buttons.

The young evangelical believer in South Africa is told it is wrong to pray with hands in his pockets.

A Muslim woman was beaten this past week, for venturing outside her home without her veil.

All of these have one thing in common – legalism; the belief that God’s grace is earned.

The truth is that legalism only makes mankind more creative in getting around the rules.

One author spent time observing the Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. They had all agreed to follow the 212 rules of the Buddha, many of which were now outdated and impractical. For example, their leader specified that the faithful monk would never eat anything after noon, until the next morning's breakfast. He watched them get around the rule by stopping the clocks in their monasteries at noon each day; and after the evening meal, they reset their clocks to the correct time.

Liberty is based on love for God.

Legalism is based on fear of God. It is the fear that we will not be accepted by God unless we keep all the rules.

- **Another extreme of liberty to avoid is *libertinism*.**

Libertinism is when a person chooses to manipulate whatever is necessary in order to please himself, without regard for God or anyone else. It is nothing less than a license to sin.

Paul wrote,

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? (Romans 6:1)

In other words, since we are accepted by God, independently of following a list of rules, can we throw every restraint out the window?

Paul responded,

May it never be! . . . (Romans 6:2a)

Peter wrote,

. . . do not use your freedom [liberty] as a covering for evil . . . (I Peter 2:16)

Paul warned the Galatians,

. . . do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh . . . (Galatians 5:13)

While liberty is interested in influence,

- legalism is interested in impersonation;
- libertinism is interested in indulgence.

Licentiousness or libertinism is defined by Webster as, "a disregard for any rules of conduct".

Libertinism is the opposite extreme of legalism. It does not care what people think; it does not even care what God thinks; it only cares for itself.

Libertinism is the height of arrogance and pride. It destroys lives; it hinders the testimony of Christ; it can just as easily ruin the purity of the church.

So, as you make your way through grey matters, avoid the extremes of legalism and libertinism. Enjoy your liberty in Christ that seeks His glory and the advancement of His cause above all things.

Will your allegiance to Christ be obvious to those around you by the convictions and certainties and preferences that you choose? Oh yes.

I recently read the story of a missionary who served in Laos a number of years ago. Before the national boundaries were set, the kings of Laos and Vietnam reached an agreement on taxation in the border areas where it was hard to tell "who was who". However, the choices the people made actually made identification easy. The Laotians ate short-grain rice, built their houses on stilts, and decorated them with Indian style serpents. The Vietnamese ate long-grain rice, built their houses on the ground, and decorated them with Chinese style dragons. So, for taxation purposes, the location of a person's house was not what determined their nationality. Instead, each person was taxed by the country whose values they had adopted as a way of life.

This is true for us as well. Our choices and convictions just might be reflecting the values we hold dear. Our convictions are revealing the kingdom to which our heart truly belongs.

Sing:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;

Praise Him all creatures here below;

Praise Him above ye heavenly host;

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/19/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace? (Zondervan, 1997), p. 198.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 199.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Romans: Righteousness From Heaven (Crossway, 1991), p. 279.

^{iv} Frederick Taylor, J. Hudson Taylor: God's Man in China (Moody Press, 1965), p. 99.