

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this Bible study series two teachers will do Bible study from ROMANS 14:1-23.

Chapter 14:1 to 15:6 teaches the Christian's duty with respect to Christians whose faith is weak or strong.

(S) **STEP 1. READ**

Let us read Romans chapter 14 together. When you are two or more people, take turns to read one verse each until you have completed the reading. Due to shortage of time, please read Romans chapter 14 for yourself.

(T) **STEP 2. DISCOVER**

Let us discover and discuss some important truths in Romans 14:1-23. "Which truth in this passage is important for you?" or "Which truth in this passage touches your mind or heart?" Think and write your answer in your notebook. After a few minutes take turns to share your discoveries with one another.

(S) An important truth for me is in **Romans 14:1. There are disputable matters among Christians.**

First. Different kind of problems. In Paul's letters, he writes to Christians in different situations. In his letter to the Galatians, he deals with the false teaching that Christians could be saved through doing good works of the law. In his letter to the Colossians, he deals with the false teaching that the human spirit had to be liberated from the human body, especially through the exercise of stringent asceticism. In his letter to the Corinthians, he deals with the problem of eating food contaminated by idolatry. However, in his letter to the Romans, he deals with the problem that Christians had different opinions or convictions about certain disputable matters. "Opinions" are provisional convictions, views which are held as probable. "Convictions" are settled beliefs, which are sometimes regarded as absolute beliefs. "Disputable matters" are matters about which there are no or little clear teaching in the Bible. However, the clear commands and teachings in the Bible are never disputable matters!

Second. Disputable matters in the church of Rome. The church consisted of a minority of former Jews and a majority of former Gentiles. These two groups had different opinions or convictions about certain matters and this difference caused tensions in the church. In Paul's time one disputable matter was 'eating only vegetables' versus 'eating everything' (2). Another disputable matter was 'considering one day more sacred than another day' versus 'considering every day alike' (5).

Christians with "a weak faith" regarded the festival days of the Old Testament as having abiding sanctity. They had not yet understood the implications of the transition from the Old Testament system to the New Testament system. Christians with "a strong faith" had no scruples about what they ate or which days they celebrated as festivals.

The matter of differences was complicated when Christians began to regard their *personal opinions as absolute convictions!* The Christians from Jewish background forbade the eating of certain meat, while the Christians from Gentile background ate every kind of meat. These disputable matters were in themselves not wrong, but became wrong when the conduct of the strong Christians caused the weak Christians to stumble in their faith or when the weak Christians engaged in loveless condemnation of the strong Christians.

Third. In our day, one disputable matter is celebrating all the Christian festivals throughout the year or only some of them. A second disputable matter is observing the Sunday as a Jewish Sabbath day or as a day commemorating the resurrection of Christ. A third disputable matter is the eating of certain kinds of meat and the drinking of wine. A fourth disputable matter is the method of baptism or the method of celebrating the Lord's Supper. A fifth disputable matter is whether Christians should go to church once a week or more often. A sixth disputable matter is whether Christians should sing only the Psalms of the Bible or also other spiritual songs. A seventh disputable matter is the use of musical instruments during worship. An eighth disputable matter is whether the church leaders should wear official robes or just ordinary clothing. A ninth disputable matter is whether Christians should give tithes or as much as they have decided in their hearts to give. A tenth disputable matter is whether Christians should wear certain prescribed clothing in public or any kind of decent clothes. An eleventh disputable matter is whether Christian women should wear a covering on their heads. Other disputable matters are the following: having long or short hair, wearing jewellery, playing games of chance that resemble gambling and watching movies or television. Christians need to have *personal opinions* or, even better, *personal convictions* about these things. But Christians also need to know *how to relate to other Christians, who have different opinions or convictions about these things.*

(T) An important truth for me is from **Romans 14:3-4. The attitudes Christians should have with respect to the disputable matters.** Verse 1 describes the faith of some Christians as “weak”. In this context, it is not their faith in Jesus Christ unto salvation which is meant, but their *faith concerning what they may or may not do as Christians*. Their subjective faith determines their personal opinions or convictions concerning the disputable matters.

There are Christians whose *personal faith allows* them to eat everything and there are Christians whose *personal faith forbids* them to eat certain foods. By the descriptions “weak” and “strong”, no contempt is intended, but only distinction. A “weak” faith is more susceptible to stumbling and destruction by the conduct of Christians with a strong faith.

First. Christians with a strong faith may not pass judgement on those with a weak faith. Romans 14:1 says, “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgement on disputable matters.” This part of the exhortation is for the strong. They may not “make judgements” concerning the “thoughts” of the weak. The strong may not “make distinguishing statements” concerning the “scruples or different convictions” of the weak (Heb 5:14), like for example make negative statements about their beliefs concerning matters such as eating and drinking, and the observance or non-observance of special days. *Christians may not “subject the convictions and beliefs of one another about these matters to censorious scrutiny”.* *Christians with a strong faith may not provoke Christians with a weak faith by subjecting their scruples to analysis and dispute.* Verse 3 says, “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not.” Christians with a strong faith may *not despise or treat with contempt* other Christians who believe that certain foods may not be eaten, or certain clothes may not be worn, or certain subjects may not be discussed.

Second. Christians with a weak faith may not condemn those with a strong faith. Verse 3 also says, “The man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does.” This part of the exhortation is for the weak. They should watch their attitudes towards Christians with a strong faith. Christians with a weak faith *may not judge or condemn* Christians with a strong faith for eating differently than they, or dressing differently than they. God has accepted Christians with a strong faith and therefore Christians with a weak faith *may not reject them as not being Christians or condemn them as being second class or less obedient Christians.* God has accepted the strong that eat every kind of food. *Christians may not condemn what God approves and they may not reject whom God has accepted.* To do otherwise is to twist God’s Word and make God a liar. Verse 4 says, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand”: The weak Christians are exhorted not to meddle in the domestic affairs of strong Christians, because God has accepted them and their lifestyle of greater freedom. The weak Christians tended to regard the exercise of freedom on the part of Christians with a strong faith as *worldliness* or as *back-sliding*, as *a falling down in their devotion to Christ*. The weak Christian thought that the life-style of the strong Christian was subject to Christ’s disapproval. But Paul says that *the servant of another is not to be judged by our norms, but by those of his own master*. The censorious judgement of Christians with a weak faith is rebuked. And the conduct of the strong Christians, which meets with Christ’s approval, cannot imperil their steadfastness as Christians.

(S) **STEP 3. QUESTION**

Let us try to understand all the truths in Romans 14:1-23 and ask our questions about the things we still do not understand. “**Which question about anything in this passage would you like to ask to the group?**” Think and write your question in your notebook. Then discuss the questions and try to find answers.

1st Question. (14:5-9). **How should Christians view their own personal opinions or convictions concerning the disputable matters?**

(T) **First. Christians should be fully convinced in their minds about the disputable matters.** Romans 14:5 says, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” Each Christian not only has the right to have a personal opinion or conviction in these matters, but God demands that each Christian should be clear about his convictions. Christians should live according to their personal convictions. Only from a personal conviction can anyone do something or not do something *consciously for the Lord*. Paul pleads for acceptance of one another despite the diversity of opinions or convictions regarding disputable matters. Conformity, which is often enforced on Christians, defeats the aim of God as well as the demand of love!

Second. Christians should let their whole conduct be determined by doing everything “as to the Lord”. Romans 14:6 says that the motivation of Christians should be to do things or refrain from doing things “as to the Lord”. A Christian is always conscious that he is serving the Lord. He always gives thanks to God for what he does or refrains from doing. This proves his dependence on God and devotion for Christ (1 Cor 10:30-31). The conduct resulting from the personal convictions of weak and strong Christians is acceptable to God.

Third. Christians may defend their personal convictions constructively. Romans 14:16 says, “Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil”: The “good” is the freedom of the strong Christian with regard to his personal

convictions about the disputable matters. It is his freedom to enjoy what God has created to be received with thanksgiving. The strong Christian should not feel guilty or rejected by the weak Christian because he holds certain convictions. When his convictions are attacked or rejected, he may defend his convictions constructively and in a loving way.

Fourth. Christians should keep their personal convictions between themselves and God. Romans 14:22 says, “Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.” Thus the strong Christian may *not parade* his right and freedom to the detriment of a weak Christian! And the weak Christian may not protest against the right and freedom of the strong Christian. Both have the right to hold personal convictions. They may not surrender their convictions, because they would do so without faith, and that would be sin against God.

2nd Question. (14:10-14). How should Christians view the personal opinions or convictions of others concerning the disputable matters?

(S) First. Christians should not judge the personal opinions or convictions of others with respect to the disputable matters. Romans 14:10-12 says, “We will all stand before God’s judgement seat. ...Each of us will give an account of himself to God.” Christians will not give an account how other Christians lived, but will have to give an account of their own conduct! The Bible *commands* Christians to judge other Christians when there is obvious sin (1 Cor 5:1-13). The Bible *forbids* Christians to judge non-Christians, because God will judge them (Mt 7:1-2; 1 Cor 5:12). And the Bible also *forbids* Christians to judge the personal convictions of Christians about disputable matters (Rom 14:1). Christians should rather judge their own critical attitudes and loveless conduct, judge whether they have lived in accordance with their own convictions, and judge whether they have refrained from judging others for their convictions about disputable matters.

Second. Christians should distinguish between the clear objective commands and teachings of the Bible and the subjective personal convictions of some Christians about disputable matters. For example, in Mark 7:15,19 Jesus clearly teaches that all kinds of food is “clean”. In Romans 14:14 the apostle Paul says that no food is unclean in itself. In 1 Timothy 4:3-5 Paul teaches that everything God created is good and nothing should be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving. The objective teaching of the Bible is that all foods are clean.

However, the subjective conviction of some Christians is that certain kinds of food are “unclean”. The apostle Paul commands other Christians to accept this subjective conviction of weak Christians.

The situation is similar with respect to idols in 1 Corinthians 8:4,7. Many Christians know that “an idol is nothing at all in the world” and “there is no God but one”. However, not everyone knows this! Some people are still so accustomed to idols that they subjectively regard food offered to idols as unclean! The distinction is thus between *the objective biblical teaching* and *the subjective personal conviction*. The difference is between “*what is true objectively*” and “*what is recognised as true subjectively*”! Christians should know the biblical teaching, but nevertheless should reckon with other Christians’ subjective feelings and opinions about these matters. In an atmosphere of love, Christians may build one another up in the area of their subjective opinions or convictions.

3rd Question. (14:15-20a). How should Christians conduct themselves with respect to disputable matters?

(T) First. Christians should let their conduct be determined, not by their rights or their freedom, but by love. By their conduct strong Christians may not cause weak Christians to stumble in their subjective personal conviction. For example, if a strong Christian deliberately eats food that a weak Christian regards as unclean in the presence of the weak Christian, he destroys his brother. The strong Christian must love the weak Christian by not exercising his right in the presence of the weak Christian. The weak Christian may not judge the strong Christian for having a different life-style. Thus, Christian conduct should be determined by love.

Second. Christians should let their conduct be determined by building others up. Romans 14:15,20 teach that Christians may not destroy other Christians nor destroy the work of God in other Christians. The word “destroy” (G: *apollumi*) here does not refer the weak Christian *falling from the Christian faith* or to his *eternal perdition*, but to the tearing down of his personal convictions. The sin of the strong Christian is that he breaks down the weak Christian’s convictions concerning disputable matters.

When the weak Christian allows his personal conviction with regard to disputable matters to be overturned by the conduct of the strong Christian, he acts destructively towards himself, that is, he also sins. The sin of the weak Christian is that he violates his personal convictions about disputable matters and his conscience about what is right and wrong. If he continues to violate his personal convictions and conscience, he would damage himself. But Romans 14:4 promises that he will stand, because God is able to make him stand.

Third. Christians have the responsibility, not to promote their own rights and freedom, but to **promote God's kingdom.** When the strong Christian's rights and freedom become the cause of damage to the weak Christian, then his rights and freedom come into disrepute. Romans 14:17 teaches that what is essential in God's kingdom, is not holding strong opinions or convictions on disputable matters, but to promote righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. *The kingdom of God* is the realm to which all Christians belong, the sphere in which God's sovereign rule is recognised and his will is supreme! Inconsiderate conduct of the strong Christians and loveless judgements of the weak Christians break down the kingdom of God.

4th Question. (14:20b-23). What is the **relationship between one's faith and one's convictions** concerning the disputable matters?

(S) Both strong and weak Christians have opinions or convictions about the disputable matters. However, their personal opinions or convictions differ from one another.

First. Christians may **not do anything against their personal convictions.** Verse 20 literally says that "It is wrong for a man, who eats through stumbling" and refers to the weak Christian who eats against his personal conviction and thus eats without a clear conscience and without faith (14:23). Verse 21 exhorts the strong Christian not to do anything that would ultimately cause the weak Christian to stumble.

Second. Christians must **do all things according to their personal faith,** that is, according to their personal convictions. Verse 22 teaches that strong Christians have the right to hold strong opinions or convictions about their freedoms and to exercise their freedoms. They may not surrender their personal convictions, because that would be an act against their conscience and faith. Verse 23 teaches that weak Christians have the right to hold different convictions and refrain from doing what other Christians do. They too may not surrender their personal convictions, because that would also be an act against their conscience and faith. Both strong and weak Christians remain responsible for what they subjectively believe about disputable matters, whether something is right or wrong. Christians can only stand firm by a sincere objective faith in the teachings of the Bible and by a sincere subjective faith about disputable matters.

(T) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK.** Due to shortage of time, we will skip the application and prayer.

First. Join a house fellowship that does Bible study. Use "the five steps" Bible study method to prepare Romans chapter 15.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".