

You Get to Decide
Romans 14:1-23
Part 4 of the Series, "Why Are We Here?"
Pastor Dan Erickson
October 1, 2017

- A woman cannot wear lipstick to church
- Men must have their hair cut so it is at least one-half inch above the collar
- There must be an 8" gap between a guy and a gal sitting next to each other in church if they are not married.
- One must never play pool (billiards) or enter a bowling alley
- No TV's are allowed in anyone's home
- You must not drink any beverage which has caffeine in it
- You are not allowed to work at a grocery store that sells cigarettes or beer
- You may not eat at a restaurant on Sundays
- Males and females should never be swimming on the beach at the same time

Folks, those are rules that some churches have required their members to follow. None of them have ever been rules at Chisholm Baptist Church. At least that I am aware of. Some of you just breathed a sigh of relief. Or maybe you're moving back to just 2" from the person sitting next to you.

As we continue our series on the purpose of this church, we come to what is an important topic. Though much has changed in the past twenty years, this is still one of the most common misunderstandings that people have about CBC.

Maybe you have heard comments like this: "Oh, you go to the Baptist Church. Aren't there a lot of rules that you have to follow?" Or "I suppose you don't do that because you are a Baptist." Sometimes folks who start attending our church will say, "Boy, this church is a lot different from what we thought it would be. We were afraid it would be very legalistic, with all sorts of man-made rules. But it isn't that way at all."

Now the reason that is the case is because here at CBC we believe each individual is accountable to God for the decisions he/she makes. If the Bible doesn't speak clearly on a subject, it is not the church, not the pastor, but you who gets to decide what you should do or not do. Friends, today we will

look at the biblical basis for why we believe you should get to decide and explore how to put this into practice. Let's pause and pray the Lord would help us hear, understand, believe and obey as He speaks to us through His Word today.

When I say our church is not "legalistic," I want to make sure no one gets confused. We do believe everyone should follow the commands God gives us in the Bible. Through this book, God reveals to us what is right and what is wrong in many situations. As **2 Timothy** says, **All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness.** As Creator and Sovereign of the universe, God has absolute authority. When He speaks, we had better listen and obey.

Thus, even though on many issues we have to make our own choices about what we should do or not do, we don't get to decide what God has already decided. Yes, we can choose to ignore what God has said, but when we do that, we are wrong.

Is it OK if I have a sexual affair with someone other than my wife? No. I don't get to decide whether that is right or wrong. God has already decided and commanded: "Do not commit adultery."

Is it OK to rip off some new shoes from the store because I don't have enough money to buy them? No. I don't get to decide because God already has said, "Do not steal."

Is it OK if someone decides to quit going to church and just worships the Lord at home? No, Christians don't get to decide whether or not they should participate in a church. Hebrews commands us to meet with other believers in Jesus.

Friends, whenever we disobey a clear teaching of Scripture, we are wrong. In fact, it may be appropriate for the church to confront us about that choice. When God has spoken in the Bible, we don't get to decide what we should do or should not do.

However, the church should not require its members to follow questionable or speculative interpretations of what the Bible says. The focus has to be only on what it clearly teaches. This includes what the Bible explicitly says, such as honoring one's parents. It includes clear implications of what is taught. For example, nowhere in the Bible does it say, "Thou shall not use heroin." However, it does say (Romans 13:1) that we are to obey the government's laws, and it says (1 Corinthians 6:19) that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Thus, "Thou shall not use heroin" is a pretty clear implication of what the Bible explicitly says.

Now, there are some folks, usually Baptists, who argue that every Christian has the right to interpret Scripture according to his/her own conscience. They claim this means any sincere interpretation of Scripture, no matter how bizarre, needs to be honored. Thus, for example, if someone really believes the Bible doesn't condemn abortion, then it is OK for that person to have an abortion. I don't think so. As individual Christians we don't have the right to re-interpret or try to explain away clear teachings of the Bible. When God speaks on an issue, we all need to listen and obey.

But, how do we decide what is right or wrong when the Bible doesn't speak clearly. To help us get a better handle on what we are talking about today, I want to illustrate with a significant moral dilemma.

Is it right for a Christian to wear a striped shirt or striped blouse to church on Sunday? Now, I suspect there are very few, if any, folks in this room who have a problem with striped shirts. Though there are some churches which insist that men wear plain white shirts when they come to church. They claim that Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 2:9 concerning modesty in dress means that striped shirts are inappropriate. However, that is stretching things quite a bit. I don't think anyone can honestly say, "I believe the Bible clearly forbids striped shirts." It is not a subject on which God has clearly spoken. Remember, this is just an example to help us understand how we make these types of moral decisions.

So, is it OK to wear a striped shirt to church? Please take your Bible, and let's turn to Romans 14 (page

948 in the pew Bible). Here the Apostle Paul deals with what he calls in verse 1, "disputed matters." Though he doesn't mention striped shirts, he does give us three principles for making the right decision about any gray matter, on any issue the Bible doesn't clearly address.

- 1) If the Bible doesn't speak clearly, each Christian needs to follow his/her own conscience in making a decision.

Now, to say Christians should follow their consciences may not seem like a very controversial statement, but it can be. Some folks believe it is the job of the church to give directions on topics where the Bible is silent. For example, since there are no instructions on striped shirts in Scripture, then the church or someone in church needs to decide what is right and what is wrong.

Here at CBC we don't believe that. We affirm what is sometimes called "soul liberty." This is the idea that on a matter the Bible doesn't address, each individual is accountable, not to the church, but to God for the decisions he/she makes.

Let's look at **Romans 14:2-4a – One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat meat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him. Who are you to judge another's household servant? One person believes he may eat anything, while one who is weak eats only vegetables. One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat, and one who does not eat must not judge one who does, because God has accepted him. Who are you to judge another's servant?"**

In other words, the decision about what type of food someone is going to eat is between that person and God. No one else has the right to determine what is right or wrong for that person.

Romans 14:5 – One person judges (or considers) one day to be more important than another day. Someone else judges every day to be the same. Let each one be fully convinced in his own mind.

That means each person needs to follow his/her conscience.

Romans 14:6 – Whoever observes the day, observes it for the honor of the Lord. Whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, and whoever does not eat, it is for the Lord that he does not eat it, and he gives thanks to God.

Let me read that from the NLT. **Romans 14:6 – Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God.**

Now, we might think in order to put an end to the disputes, Paul would just say, “Here’s the list of foods you can eat, and here are the holy days you need to observe.” But he doesn’t. Each individual Christian needs to make a decision on these disputed matters. We all need to seek the Lord’s guidance, follow our conscience, and make a decision we believe is honoring to the Lord. That is our responsibility.

Because, as **Romans 14:12** says, **So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.** Thus, if you think wearing a striped shirt honors the Lord, great. Wear it! If you think it dishonors the Lord, don’t ever put one on. You have to decide. Now, the fact I am responsible for my own choice doesn’t mean I should not consult with other people. It is good to seek counsel from pastors, other church leaders, and mature Christian friends as we make a decision. Yet, we need to remember that no matter from whom we receive counsel, we are still responsible and accountable to God for whatever decision we make.

2) We need to consider how our decision will impact other people.

The Bible says nothing about striped shirts. Wearing a striped shirt, as I did the last two Sundays, doesn’t bother my conscience at all. Yet, before I put one on, I do need to think about how my decision may affect others, especially other Christians.

Because **Romans 14:7** says – **For none of us lives for himself, and no one dies for himself.** Yes, Paul Simon sang, “I am a rock, I am an island,” but that is not true. Our choices always impact someone else.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in **Romans 14:13-15** – **Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead, decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean. For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died.**

In other words, Paul says, “I have no problem eating a ham sandwich for lunch, but if eating that ham is going to cause great distress for one of my Christian brothers, I will have a peanut butter bagel instead.” What food I eat or don’t eat is not nearly as important as the relationships I have within the body of Christ.

As he says in **Romans 14:17** - **.....for the kingdom of God is not (about) eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and love in the Holy Spirit.** Yes, as Christians we have been given wonderful freedom in Jesus Christ. Yet, as Martin Luther said, it is “freedom not to do what we want, but a freedom to do what we ought.”

No, we don’t need to follow man-made rules which say, “You can eat this, but can’t eat that.” However, we do need to follow God’s rule which says, “Do not cause a brother or sister to stumble.”

Note that Paul sees loves as the key. When you love someone, you don’t want to do something which will hurt that person, even if it is something you have the right to do. If I know someone in this church has a sincere objection to people wearing striped shirts, I should probably stop wearing them. I cannot think of any reason why I have to wear one or why anyone would be offended by a solid shirt. Thus, the loving thing to do would be to go along with the wishes of

those who don't like striped shirts.

Now, not being that stumbling block for other Christians can get a little complicated. If you choose to do something, you may upset one person; but if you choose not to do it, you may upset someone else. In that case, you really need to ask the Lord to help you make the best decision.

Yet, even in those cases, our own comfort and convenience should not be the goal. What honors God and what is good for others is what needs to guide our choice. "But, Pastor Dan, life gets real complicated when you are trying to make sure you don't offend anyone. Some people seem to get upset when I breathe. I cannot always be thinking about how someone else feels about decisions I make." Well, through the Apostle Paul, the Lord says, "Yes, you can." But he adds a very important balance.

3) Do not judge those who make different choices than you do.

Judging is such an easy thing to do. As Leo Aikman said, "Most of you are umpires at heart. We like to call balls and strikes on someone else."

Or maybe we are like Lucy. Linus asks her, "Why are you always so quick to criticize me?" She replies, "I just think I have the knack of seeing other people's faults." "What about your own faults?" Linus cries. Lucy says, "I have the knack of overlooking them!"

Telling others what they are doing wrong can be fun. Yet, listen to what Paul says in **Romans 14:1 – Accept anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about disputed matters.** And **Romans 14:10 – But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.** And **Romans 14:13 – Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister.**

When someone makes a decision which is different than we would make on a disputed issue, we should not condemn them for their choice. You may not think it is good to wear a striped shirt to church on Sunday, but no one says you have to do that. Wear

a solid colored shirt, but don't criticize someone who wears a striped one.

In fact, Paul says in **Romans 14:22 – Whatever you believe about these things, keep between yourself and God.** Whatever you believe about eating meat or wearing striped shirts or any disputed matter is usually best kept to yourself. Proclaiming your position so that everyone knows what you think about a disputed issue doesn't accomplish very many good things.

Remember, on these issues where God does not speak clearly to us through the Bible, each person needs to follow his/her conscience. If your conscience doesn't allow you to do something, fine. Don't do it. But, don't assume that someone making the opposite choice is not following her conscience as well. And if she is doing that, then it is between her and God, and we have no right to stick our nose into her business.

Remember what Paul asked in **Romans 14:4 – "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?"** If someone believes God has commanded him to do something or not do something, we don't have a right to criticize unless he is violating a clear teaching of Scripture.

Friends, if the Bible doesn't give us an answer to a question, it is not surprising that we will not all come up with the same answer. It is only natural that we will make different choices. We must learn to accept that fact and respect the choices others make. If we do that, there will be less conflict with other Christians.

OK, some of you may be thinking, "But, Pastor Dan, this is all kind of silly. You are talking about people being offended by striped shirts. There is no one here like that. Why don't you talk about some issues where people really have some different views?"

Well, there are some issues like that. For example:

- Drinking alcoholic beverages – Everyone should agree that the Bible clearly teaches drunkenness is a sin and that we should avoid abusing alcohol in any way. But is it wrong for a Christian to drink a glass of wine with his/her dinner? There

are different opinions in this room on that question. And sometimes it has been a “disputed matter” in this church.

- Or what TV shows and movies are appropriate to watch – Is it OK for a Christian to watch an R-rated movie?
- What type of attire is appropriate for someone to wear to church on Sunday? Does anything go? Or does showing respect to the Lord in worship require wearing a certain type of clothing? “Well, Pastor Dan, I think people should wear what they want as long as it is modest.” OK, but I suspect we have a few different opinions in this room about what constitutes “modest.”
- Or how much money should someone be giving to the church? Is tithing required in the New Testament? If one gives 10%, is it OK to use that 90% anyway he/she chooses. Or should all Christians be living a simpler lifestyle, spending less money so they have more money to give to missions?
- We also have different opinions on education choices for children – should Christian families choose public, private or home schooling?
- And there are some different political views in this room. Oh, we probably are close to a full consensus when it comes to abortion being wrong, but when it comes to labor issues, things like minimum wage or NAFTA, there are some different opinions here.

When it comes to any of these disputed matters, we need to follow the three steps I have outlined from Romans 14:

#1 – Does the Bible speak clearly on this topic? If it does, then we should be in agreement, but if not, then...

#2 – Each Christian needs to follow his/her own

conscience. And as you do that, you need to think about how your choices impact others, and you need to seek to avoid being a stumbling block. And then...

#3 – As you follow your own consciences on these issues, you need to make sure you don’t judge or look down on other Christians who are making different choices than you are.

And then, something I have not said yet this morning. Don’t make the disputed issue, the issue. One reason I talked about striped shirts this morning instead of whether it was OK for a Christian to drink alcohol, drive a Rolls Royce, go to public school or join a labor union is because when I got done, my fear is that is what you would have been thinking about. I don’t want you getting stuck on the disputed matter, but I want you to hear about how the Lord wants to deal with any disputed matter. And I want you to remember, as Paul said in **Romans 14:17 – The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.** Or as I would say, “This church is not about a view on any disputed matter, but about Jesus and about loving, trusting and following Him.”

Soon after I arrived here 24+ years ago, I remember saying, “I don’t want CBC to be known as the church where people don’t drink alcohol, but as the church where people love Jesus.” Likewise, I don’t want this to be known as the church where people can watch R-rated movies, always dress up for church, send their kids to Christian school, vote Republican or cheer for the Green Bay Packers. Because if you do or don’t do any of those things is really up to you and not the issue. The issue is do you, do we love Jesus? Do we trust in Him to save us from sin, death and hell? Do we seek to follow Him where He leads us? That is the issue. That is what matters. That is where we want our focus to be.

May God help us do that today and in all the days ahead.