

Week III

Romans 13:1-7

13:1 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. 2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. 4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. 7 Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

This passage is one of the key points in the Bible in which Christians are given instructions about how we are to relate to a secular government. The clear most basic idea of this passage and other similar passages is that as Christians we must obey the government. In addition to our Romans passage the other part of the Bible that most extensively discusses this idea is from the epistle of first Peter.

1 Peter 2:11-17

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

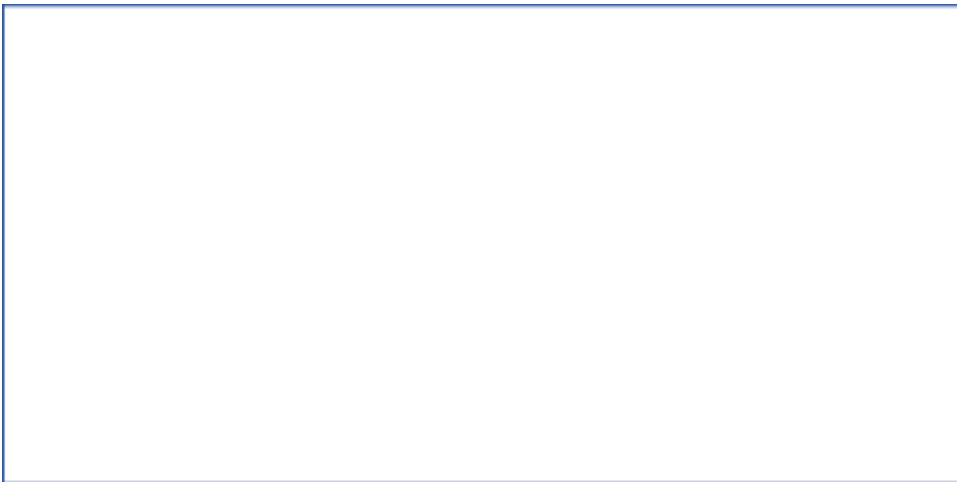
13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

Another passage from Paul's letter to Titus briefly repeats similar instructions.

Titus 3:1-2

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, 2 to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.

What do you see as the top two lessons from these passages?



What is the reason given in the Romans passage that we should obey governing authorities?



The idea that it is God who puts rulers and authorities in their positions of power is taught frequently throughout the Bible. For instance in the book of Daniel, king Nebuchadnezzar, a pagan ruler of a pagan nation, is taught by God that he is in his position because God put him there.

Daniel 4:28-32

28 All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”

31 Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes.”

Nebuchadnezzar was then driven insane for seven years until he gave up his arrogant claims that he was responsible for his accomplishments and then God restored him to his throne.

God also tells the Egyptian Pharaoh of the Exodus, "I have raised you up." (Exodus 9:16)

When Jesus is on trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, this exchange took place:

John 19:9b-11

"Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer.
10 "Do you refuse to speak to me?" Pilate said. "Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?"

11 Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

Even this evil ruler who would shortly order Jesus torture and death, despite believing in his innocence, was put in power by God. All of these rulers that we have just looked at, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate, and the Caesars of Peter and Paul's day were all bad, evil rulers. And yet the Bible says that they were put in their positions by God. And that therefore we must obey their authority.

The core principle of obedience to human governmental authorities is strongly taught in the Bible. Even when those rulers are pagan kings who are far from promoting the proper worship of God.

However, we do have several occasions in the Bible when exceptions are made to this core principle.

One is in the days of Israel's slavery in Egypt. The Israelite population was growing to an extent that the Egyptians began to worry about this large foreign population living within their borders. So they demanded population control. All male children who were born were to be thrown into the Nile river to drown. Here was the plan:

Exodus 1:15-17

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, 16 “When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” 17 The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.

Because the midwives feared God they disobeyed the king. Why was it ok for them to do this in this case?



One book of the Bible stands out as a time when there was significant conflict between the orders of the government and the convictions of the people of God. That is the book of Daniel. Many of God’s people had been taken away from Israel into exile in Babylon where they were ruled by pagan rulers. Among the first of these exiles to be taken away were many highly educated and skilled people. These were put to work in Babylon and advisors and officials in the imperial government. Among them were Shadrack, Meshack, Abednego, and Daniel. There are several stories of how these young men faced crucial choices of whether to obey God or obey their new rulers. Clearly one of the purposes of the book of Daniel was to give examples to the rest of God’s people on how to live in this new situation of living under pagan rulers.

The first story from Daniel relates to the food that they were given to eat. They did not want to eat the king’s meat and wine that was provided for them during their time of training in the customs of the Babylonians. In Daniel 1:8 it says, “But Daniel

resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.” The reason that Daniel believed that it would defile him to eat and drink this food is not given. Most likely it was the same reason that is discussed in Romans a few chapters later and we will look at next, the animals that the meat came from were probably sacrificed in idol temples.

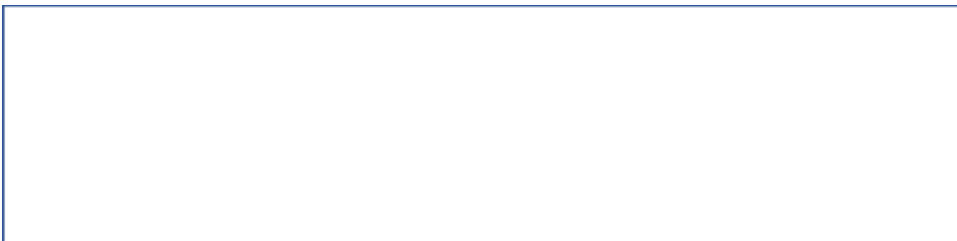
We see here that Daniel and the others decided that the solution to this problem was to ask for special permission from the government official in charge of the food to eat something different. And permission was granted. This is an example of God’s people working within the legal system to avoid violating their conscience. They did not need to defy the authorities. They negotiated a solution without having to have a dramatic confrontation.

The next story from Daniel is not resolved so easily. In this story the king has built a giant golden idol and orders all of his government officials to bow down and worship it. Daniel himself is somehow absent in this story, but the other three are left with a choice. Either sin against God, or defy the king. Even when they are threatened with the death penalty they refuse to obey the king. Here is their bold response:

Daniel 3:16-18

16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

Why was it right for these men to defy the king like this?



In the next story from Daniel we have a new king who is trying to consolidate his hold on power. He is persuaded to issue a law that says that it is illegal to pray to anyone but himself. It is well known that Daniel had a habit of praying to God in a publicly visible place three times per day. Would Daniel obey this new law or would he obey God?

Daniel 6:10

10 Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.

This resulted in the most famous scene from the book of Daniel in which he is fed to lions who don't eat him because he is protected by God.

There is a great Christian rock song from the mid-90's by one of my favorite bands, Guardian. You can find it on youtube or apple music by searching for "Guardian Lions Den". Here's my favorite part of the song:

Late one night in a fever dream
The Prophet Daniel appeared to me
"Sir, " I said, "I've lost my nerve
I lip serve God and put my faith in Godless men
Oh, I fear the lions' den"
Then he said, "Who says I'm not a feline-phobe?
Who says I wasn't ready to wet my robe?
Faith is tough, boy, but God gives grace
And take a deep breath, head up, set your face like flint
Oh, stop bein' a wimp"

How is the story of Daniel and his acceptance of the lion's den rather than stopping his habit of prayer different from the "blazing furnace" story? Why is it still right for him to defy the king?



Our last example of defying the authorities is from the book of Acts. In this case the apostles have been preaching about Jesus in Jerusalem and many people are beginning to believe in him. This upsets the authorities because just a few months earlier they had had Jesus executed and now they are being made to look pretty bad.

Acts 4:17-21

17 But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn them to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

18 Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John replied, “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! 20 As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

21 After further threats they let them go.

Just as they said, the apostles chose to obey God rather than the authorities. A short time later they were arrested and brought before them again.

Acts 5:27-33

27 The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 28 “We gave you strict orders not to

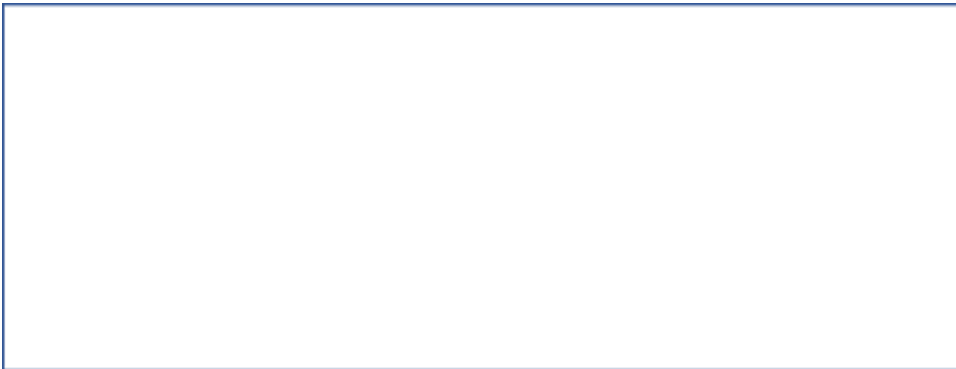
teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

29 Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings! 30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

33 When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. [They are talked down from the death penalty by one of their own number.] . . . 40 His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

Why was it right for the apostles to defy the orders of the governmental authorities in this case?



Taking into account the clear teaching that we are to obey the government in the first passages that we looked at, and the clear examples of God's people defying the government in these stories what general principles do you see that tell us when we should obey the government and when it is right to disobey?



Week IV

Romans 14:1-23, 15:1-7

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. 2 One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. 3 The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

5 One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. 6 Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7 For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. 8 If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. 9 For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. 11 It is written:

“As surely as I live,” says the Lord,

“every knee will bow before me;

every tongue will acknowledge God.”

12 So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

13 Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. 14 I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean,

then for that person it is unclean. 15 If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

19 Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. 21 It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

22 So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. 23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

15:1 We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. 2 Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. 3 For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." 4 For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

5 May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

This section is the classic treatment of how to deal with debatable issues in the church. This passage is especially interesting since Paul states clearly that there is nothing wrong with eating the suspect food, and yet recommends staying away from it if someone else incorrectly thinks that there is something wrong with eating it. We

are to sacrifice our own rights to do what is not forbidden for the sake of others who have a problem with it. This sacrificing of our own rights is one of the biggest applications of this passage.

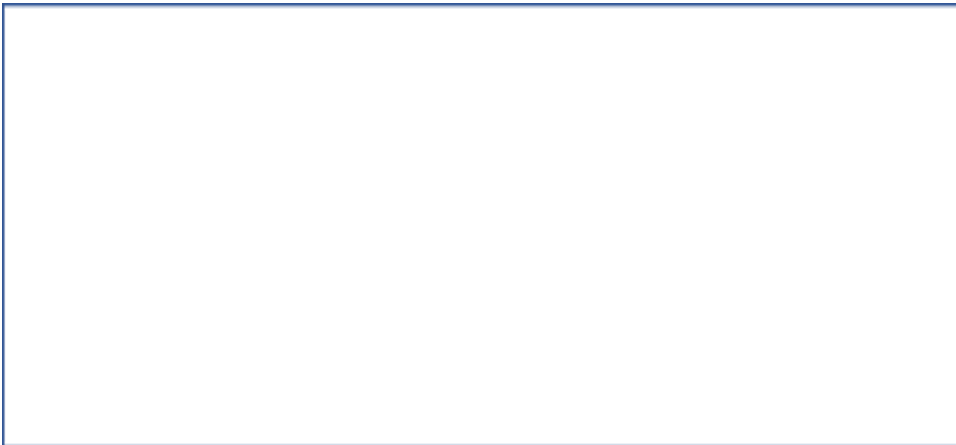
The core idea being discussed throughout this fairly long passage is the idea of “disputable matters”. But what does this term “disputable matters” mean?

The first thing we see in these first verses from Romans 14 is that disputable matters are behaviors that Christians are split about whether they are ok or not. Can we eat meat? Some say yes, some say no. Do we need to observe sacred days? Some say yes, some say no.

But if disagreement about whether something is ok or not is enough to put it in the disputable matters category almost everything can be *disputable matters*. But that is not Christian teaching. The Bible teaches us that some things are definitely wrong and some things are definitely good.

When we take a look at the teaching of Jesus himself, we see many times where he is correcting people on what they think is right or wrong. There are quite a few stories where Jesus tells people, “you think this is ok, it’s not ok.” Or “you think this is sinful, it’s not sinful.”

Read Matthew 5:21-42. What things do you see there that people thought were ok, but Jesus corrects them by teaching that they are actually sinful?



And the rest of the Bible follows the same kind of pattern. The Bible often calls out specific behaviors and says these things are sinful. No disputing allowed. Not that these are universally accepted understandings of right and wrong. There are some who disagree with Jesus in the gospel stories and with Paul in his letters, that is why they have to correct them.

For instance in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

Clearly there were some who were debating at least some of these behaviors or Paul wouldn't have had to say, "do not be deceived." So, when the bible says don't quarrel over disputable matters it does not mean we are never to take sides on issues of right and wrong. Sometimes we need to take a stand on an issue and let people know, "you think this is ok, it's not ok." Or, "you think this is sinful, it's not sinful."

But there are also times when we need to put things in the disputable matters category and not quarrel over them.

The primary example that is discussed here, and also in a similar passage in 1 Corinthians, is whether it is ok for Christians to eat meat from animals that had been offered as sacrifices to idols.

In Rome and Corinth and other cities of the Roman Empire there were a number of temples dedicated to various gods including Poseidon, Apollo, Venus, Isis, and others. One of the ways that the people of Corinth would try to earn the favor of the gods was to offer animal sacrifices at their temples. When they did that, a small symbolic portion would be burned for the god, the worshiper would eat a portion, and the rest would go to the priests, who would sell much of their portion in the city market. This was so common that a large percentage of all the meat available in the city had been offered to a god. And it often wasn't clear whether meat bought in the market had been offered or not.

So, Christians were divided about whether it was acceptable to eat meat that had been sacrificed to an idol.

This is not really a thing for modern American culture. But it isn't just ancient Greco-Roman history either. When I was teaching bible college in South Africa this was very much a current issue for my Zulu students. Ritual sacrifice of a bull to the ancestors is a way that families would honor the dead. The whole extended family would be invited to a big feast in which this meat would be served. My Christian students had a dilemma very similar to the Roman Christians as to whether they could eat it.

The Bible is clear that it is not forbidden to eat this meat. Here are key verses from 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14:

4 So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." . . . 7 But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. 8 But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

14 I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. . . . 20 All food is clean,

Despite the fact that there is nothing really wrong with this food, surprisingly Paul does not conclude, so everyone should go ahead and eat it. The situation is not that simple. Because some people have convictions about this food, there are two situations where it would actually be sinful to eat the food.

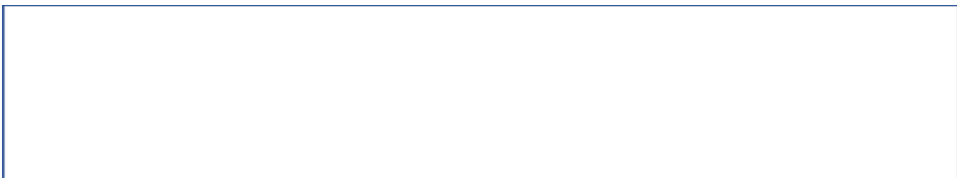
Looking closely at the passage for the answer, what are the two situations in which eating this food would be sinful?



It is ok for us to change our convictions on these matters. We may consider something that in this *disputed matters* category as sinful, but later come to realize that it is ok to do it. Or God may bring conviction to us that something that we always thought was fine is actually sinful. Growth and change in our convictions are a part of the process of sanctification in our lives.

It is also ok for us to disagree about these matters. That is one of the main points that Paul wants to make here in Romans. These are things about which Christians have different opinions, and we are to respect and honor the convictions of others. This is especially emphasized on the part of the “stronger” Christian who sees that a disputed matter is actually ok to engage in. Even though this Christian is free to do this thing, he or she should refrain if doing so would be a problem for other Christians.

Which part of the passage most clearly teaching this idea of considering others’ convictions? How are we to apply that idea?





One of the big problems in dealing with these disputable matters is the issue of how we perceive those on the other side of the issues.

Romans 14:3-4

The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Our normal human tendency is for those who understand that there is nothing really wrong with a particular behavior to look at those who have these unnecessary convictions and think something like, "What is wrong with you guys? Don't you realize that idols are just blocks of stone, a glass of wine is just a beverage, and one day of the week is no more or less holy than the other days? You ignorant legalistic fundamentalists need to get with the program." That's called contempt.

While the other side of the dispute sees these worldly compromising Christians who live no differently than the sinful world around them. That's called judging.

What does the Bible say? Do not treat with contempt and judge people who disagree with you about disputable matters. Accept those who have a different view

of these things. They are also good Christian people who have been accepted by God.

One reason that this is hard is because a lot of people don't really believe in this third category. For many people things are either sinful or acceptable, there is no grey! And if you disagree you either need an education in Christian freedom, or you need to learn to say no to sin.

But the Bible says no, it's not that simple. There are disputable matters that we disagree about. And we need to treat those things differently than we do clear sins.