



THE REVOLUTIONARY DISCIPLE

The Three Buckets Approach

A Study of Romans 14 to Help You Navigate Disputable Matters with Humility



THE THREE BUCKETS APPROACH

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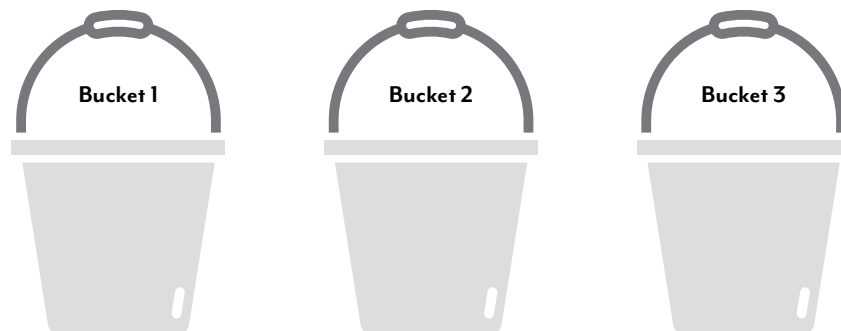
Complete this study with a group, one-on-one, or on your own.

Having waded through disputable matters in the Christian life in our ministry experiences, we have found it helpful to use the “three buckets” approach. It’s difficult as Christians to discern what steps to take when we might disagree with other believers over issues that are not clearly spelled out in the Bible. For example, as we allude to in *The Revolutionary Disciple*, respectable Christians on both sides disagree about issues like mask-wearing and vaccines. Even if you have a strong opinion on these and other issues, Scripture doesn’t address them directly. Scripture might give us principles, but it doesn’t spell out directions on every issue for us.

God leaves us room for disagreement on some issues, because many issues in life are not essential to our salvation. They might be important, but how many are truly *essential*? Most issues are not. In Scripture, God addresses all core issues of our faith with clarity. But what about the other issues that are not considered *gospel*? Aren’t they still important? And what about matters of opinion? How can we tell the difference between these types of issues? Don’t they deserve our careful attention and thought?

With non-essential issues, we as disciples need a way to talk about them with each other. Without this, we get into endless debates about non-essential matters of the faith, which causes unnecessary division. That’s why we use the three buckets approach.*

The three buckets we describe in this study represent the three major types of issues. We can put every issue we face as Christians into one of these buckets. Read through our description of the three buckets below. Then, study Romans 14 and begin placing current issues you face into the three buckets as you do. This exercise will help you know how to talk about your views and how to determine what level of importance to give them in your conversations with other followers of Jesus.



* We’ve adapted some of the following material from Bobby Harrington’s book, *Trust and Follow Jesus* (Renew, 2019), 15–19.

BUCKET 1: ESSENTIAL MATTERS

The first bucket is for salvation issues, which are essential to the integrity of our faith in Christ. Essential matters are non-disputable for those who hold to the authority and inspiration of Scripture based on a proper reading of the Bible. They include:

- God exists as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- God created the universe.
- Jesus was born of a virgin, physically died, resurrected, ascended, and sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father.
- Salvation is found only through Christ.
- Christ will come again at the resurrection of the dead.

These are issues Christians have believed from the beginning, and they are included in the Nicene Creed, for example. We must go to the mat on these issues with other Christians because these issues are worth fighting for. You cannot be a Christian and deny these truths. Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox Christians alike affirm essential matters of the faith.

BUCKET 2: IMPORTANT MATTERS

The second bucket contains issues that don't determine salvation but often affect our choices with regard to fellowship. So, for example, you might not go to a church that holds a different view of the mode of baptism. This is an important rite for Christians, but churches and traditions hold vastly different views on the how and when of baptism. What we believe on this issue is important, but it is not essential to one's salvation. So we must withhold our ultimate judgment on others for matters like these, which are second-bucket issues. These matters include:

- Should a church have a pastor, multiple elders, or a board of directors as their primary leadership?
- What are the roles of men and women in the church?
- What does church discipline look like in practice?
- How do we make disciples in practical terms?
- How do we take communion?

These issues are important because our view on them holds great influence over which church we choose to join. And we should be able to make a clear argument from Scripture on why we believe what we believe on these issues. But faithful Christians still disagree about these second-bucket issues. When we disagree with other Christians on these, we might not fellowship regularly with them, but we still enjoy a common faith and salvation in Jesus.

BUCKET 3: PERSONAL MATTERS

Scripture offers us less clarity on third-bucket issues (if it mentions them at all), and they fall into the realm of personal opinion. That is, our belief on these matters neither affects our salvation nor does it affect our fellowship choices. Yet we still hold individual convictions about them. Issues in the third bucket are typically not found in Scripture, so we can conclude that God leaves room for us to make up our minds based on wisdom, biblical principles, and sometimes even prayer.

Personal matters include:

- Can a Christian drink alcohol in moderation?
- Is it okay to get a tattoo?
- What does Sabbath rest look like for me and my family?
- How do I steward my resources for the kingdom?
- How should I interpret and apply end-times passages in the Bible?

Take the last of these matters about end-times interpretations as an example. We must make sure to withhold judgment on others because there is no uniform way all Christians throughout the millennia have interpreted end-times passages. The reality of Jesus' Second Coming is a first-bucket issue, but our interpretation about the when and how of the Second Coming is a third-bucket issue. Diligent study, wise counsel, and a humble heart guide us to make up our minds about these personal matters of perspective. And while we can talk with others when it's beneficial and not divisive, we must not impose our views on others. In fact, as we'll see, sometimes it's prudent to be completely silent about them.

Let's look more closely at these third-bucket issues by studying what Paul writes in Romans 14. The rest of this study will help you engage this important text and apply what you learn to current issues today. At the end of this study, you'll be able to work out this framework by placing issues in each bucket.

A DEEPER LOOK INTO ROMANS 14

We asked in Chapter 16 of *The Revolutionary Disciple*, "What happens if Christians don't agree on disputable matters?" Romans 14 helps us know what to do when we disagree on these third-bucket issues. Before we jump into the text of Romans 14, let us offer some background for context.

Christians in Rome at the time struggled with the clashing of two cultures: Jewish religious culture and Greco-Roman religious culture. They disputed what was right to eat and drink and other everyday issues like those. Some Jews did not eat certain foods because it disturbed their conscience, while the Gentiles (the non-Jews) generally believed all foods were okay to eat without feeling any guilt.

Both groups were influenced by their previous religious background before having converted to Christ. They faced disagreements that were largely cultural but often overlapped with religious conviction and the heart of God. So Paul instructs believers on how to interact with one another when they disagree about these non-essential, third-bucket issues.

Read Romans 14:1–8, and then answer the questions below to understand better this principle about handling disputable matters.

1. In the context of Romans 14:1–4, who is the person whose faith is weak? Is it the person whose conscience is free to eat any food, or the person to whom some foods are “unclean”?
2. For those with more restrictions—in this case of food in their culture—how exactly does their perspective make their faith *weak*?
3. According to this passage, why are we not allowed to judge Christians over disputable matters like these?
4. Read Romans 14:5. Why is it important we are convinced in our own minds about what we believe about disputable matters?

Now read Romans 14:9–23, and then answer the following questions.

1. Read Romans 14:13–14. In this context, “judgment” has to do with ultimate judgment before God. With that understanding of judgment according to this passage, what issues are we *not to judge* Christians about?
2. If Paul is fully convinced all foods are “clean” (that is, okay to eat), then why doesn’t he just tell everyone to agree with him on this matter and go along with his perspective?
3. Read Romans 14:15. How can our judgment about matters like these “destroy” our brothers and sisters?
4. In Romans 14:21, Paul says it’s better to refrain from eating or drinking when it will cause our brothers and sisters in Christ to fall. Why does he say this?
5. Read Romans 14:22–23. According to this passage, what does a holy silence—a willingness to keep our opinions to ourselves—do for the body of Christ?

Answer the following questions about Romans 14 as a whole.

1. How do these principles about disputable matters apply to current issues today?
2. What matters does it clarify for you?
3. What is one issue to which Romans 14 *does not apply*? That is, what is at least one non-disputable matter?
4. Take a disputable matter today. According to Romans 14:1 and the surrounding context, does your stance make your faith strong or weak?
5. What is your takeaway from Romans 14 about interacting with those with whom you disagree?

THINKING IN TERMS OF FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD-BUCKET ISSUES

We've added the chart below for you to use as you apply the framework of this study to issues you're currently facing.

- In addition to what we outlined above as first-bucket matters, what are a few “issues” you would put into the first bucket? Why?
- What would you add to the list of second-bucket issues? Why?
- What about third-bucket issues? Why?

Feel free to use the chart below to fill in the issues you'd place in the buckets.

