

**AN EXHORTATION TO THE WEAK BROTHER
ON DOUBTFUL THINGS
Romans 14:4-12**

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When I was pastor of a church in California, there was an elderly man in the congregation who had been raised in a strict, legalistic home, and he had a list of do's and don'ts that would make your head swim. One day he came to me and in a critical and hard tone said, "Pastor, your wife wears her dresses too tight, too short and too loud!" This dear saint was implying that my wife and I were too worldly, that we were not spiritual Christians. What would you have done in this situation? Get mad? Try to argue with him about his misunderstanding of the Bible? Or would you realize this man's background and love him in spite of his weird ideas? This dear brother was to be loved because he was a true believer in Christ, but he was a very weak brother in practicing faith for he did not understand Christian liberty.

In our last lesson we began the study on doubtful things or questionable practices. A doubtful thing is an act, not sinful in itself nor specifically prohibited in Scripture, but one that may become sinful if practiced. Doubtful practices today might include things like movies, television, drinking alcoholic beverages, cosmetics, dancing, recreational activities, and a host of other things. These questionable practices, sometimes called Christian taboos, deal in the area of manmade rules and result in Christian legalism.

Sadly, Christian legalism has driven more people from Christ than it has ever brought to him. What the Bible calls sin, we must call sin, but the Bible nowhere says that any of the doubtful things are sin in and of themselves.

We have already concluded that doubtful things must be settled on the basis of biblical principles and Christian conscience. It is not for others to settle these matters for the Christian, but for the Christian to settle for himself before his God.

Every society has its taboos. Steve Hunter related to me this story: In Equador, a woman is really not well dressed without earrings. One time he and his wife went a few hundred miles into another country, and his wife dressed in style for the occasion, earrings and all. When they came into the church they were visiting, the people began to look at them and talk. The pastor came over and asked them if Mrs. Hunter would take off the earrings because this was a mark of a worldly woman in this particular culture. She did and the problem was solved.

The area of questionable practices as acute in American Christianity as anywhere else in the world. Many Christians are miserable in their Christianity because they misunderstand doubtful things. Christ came to give us an abundant life, not to bog us down with taboos.

Many a young person raised in a so-called Christian home has rebelled at the manmade rules forced upon him by his parents, and when old enough to leave home has cast over the taboos and also cast over Christ, thinking that Christ and Christian legalism were the same.

BACKGROUND OF ROMANS 14

In the church of Rome there were some Christians who felt they could not eat meat, drink wine, or miss any Jewish religious holidays. They were weak brothers in the practice of the Christian faith. These folks were judging all the other Christians in the assembly because they were not conforming to the set of rules they had laid down for themselves. They were not weak because they did not practice these doubtful things, but because they judged others who did. So, Paul told them not to judge or condemn others who did not feel the same way they did about doubtful practices.

There were also many in the church at Rome who understood Christian liberty and had no scruples in doubtful things. They had a grasp of God's grace in Christian living, and felt they could participate in some of these questionable practices of their day. These mature or strong brothers were not to despise or show contempt for the weaker brothers. The two groups were to accept one another, and to live together in love and harmony.

Now, in Romans 14:4-12, Paul gives an exhortation to the weak brothers in the assembly, and it all centers on the words "Do not judge!" (Strong brothers, be patient, your exhortation is coming in the next lesson.)

WEAK BROTHERS ARE NOT TO JUDGE — Romans 14:4

"Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth." The weak brother is not to judge, because every Christian is Christ's servant and Christ alone is to judge him. It is presumption as well as spiritual pride for one believer to sit in judgment upon the conduct of another in the area of doubtful things. The Christian is not answerable to the church in these areas but to the Lord. The church does not have authority to set up any rules or regulations in these areas.

Notice that the command is not to judge. Legalistic Christians are usually tyrannical, critical, and hard. They have an air of “holier than thou,” and make everyone around them uncomfortable. In their pride and judgment of others they are actually guilty of sin. Judging is prohibited, but doubtful things are not.

This same legalistic spirit is often carried over into a Christian's relationship to the unsaved. He looks down on those who are not Christians, because they smoke or drink or whatever. One Christian told me, “I really witnessed for the Lord last night. A man came into my house and lighted a cigar, and I told him that he should not smoke in the house because we are Christians.” That wasn't witnessing, it was stupidity.

Our Lord Jesus had the most difficult time with the religious folks of his day: the Pharisees. They were hyper-separationists who lived by the letter of their manmade laws. Christ never opposed any teaching of the Old Testament, but he viciously attacked the Pharisees for their hyper-piousness and critical attitudes. They could not get over the fact that Jesus ate with publicans and sinners. You see, Christ met the spiritual needs of men, and he went where the sinners were. He didn't commit the sins they committed, but he moved among them in love. For this the Pharisees called him worldly. In some ways, this Pharisaism may be equated to some of the taboos found in modern-day fundamentalism.

Christians, we have the answer for the world's great spiritual needs: Jesus Christ. Many are looking for this One that we possess. He is the bread of life that always satisfies; he is the water of life that quenches the spiritual thirst of men. We will never reach the non-Christians around us if we respond to their actions with legalistic, cold and critical spirits. We need to tell them about Jesus Christ. When they see him in all his beauty, holiness and grandeur, then and only then will he begin to work in their hearts to make them more Christlike in their experience.

“Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.” The Lord Jesus Christ is able to “shape up” his own servants in the area of doubtful things. Phillips renders this, “God is well able to transform men into servants who are satisfactory.”

It seems that Christians who have become convicted of a doubtful thing cannot understand why others are not also convicted about the same thing. It may have taken months or even years for them to see the folly of something, but they want somebody else to learn it in thirty minutes. They want everybody to conform to their standard. Paul says one Christian cannot help another in this area; only the Lord can, and He is able to do it. If you feel a Christian has sin in his life because of some doubtful thing, pray for him, but don't complain to others about it or critically judge him.

Legalistic Christians seem to feel that if rules are not made for people to follow regarding doubtful things, then they will go astray spiritually. Not so! The grace way is

the best way. Actually, rules and regulations in doubtful things drive most people from the Lord instead of to him. A proper understanding of grace will make mature Christians.

Sometimes when a Christian learns about his freedom in doubtful things, he goes hog wild and does something that is rank sin. Then conviction comes from God, which is a far greater deterrent to sin than all the rules in the world. There is nothing worse than conviction from God, and soon the believer learns the grace principle and really begins to grow in the Lord.

When I was first in seminary, I knew two women who were from opposite backgrounds. Mildred was from a Christian home which apparently was somewhat legalistic, and she looked drab and almost ghostly, but she refused to wear makeup. Another wife was Cynthia who was from a very worldly home, and she looked like a paper doll with cosmetics so thick she might have passed for a woman of the street. After these girls learned something about doubtful things, Mildred put on a little lipstick and Cynthia took a great deal off, and both honored the Lord. In this case a proper understanding of doubtful things brought a balance to each one's life.

WEAK BROTHERS ARE TO RESPECT ONE'S CONSCIENCE — Romans 14:5,6

"One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike." Some felt that they had to observe Jewish religious days, but others felt that they did not since they were no longer under the Mosaic Law as a rule of life.

Religious days are still a problem today. Some Christians feel it is wrong to celebrate Christmas because of its pagan associations. Others, who are in the majority, think it is a good day to observe because of its religious significance. Let each be convinced in his own mind. Neither should judge or look down on the other.

"Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind." Paul does not set forth a command to solve the problem, but uses the principle of an enlightened understanding on the matter of personal conscience. If God has convicted you that something is wrong, then you must not do it, but this does not mean that this same act is wrong for another Christian in the area of doubtful things. The believer should do only those things to which he can give himself fully and without reserve. He must operate on the basis of conviction.

Over the years that I have been a pastor, I have watched God deal with Christians in the area of doubtful things. When one comes to Christ as his Lord and Saviour, his value system begins to change as the Holy Spirit starts to work in his life. Many of these questionable practices just leave one's life in the same way leaves fall

off the trees in autumn. A person may have loved the party life before his conversion, but afterward attending a party may feel very uncomfortable in the midst of all the drinking and dancing. He begins to feel convicted about this lifestyle. No one has said this was right or wrong, but the Holy Spirit has brought the conviction that this kind of life is not consistent with a walk of holiness. Another might be convicted about smoking because it is bad for his health and because the body is God's temple. He may realize that smoking hinders his testimony for Christ. God quietly and silently works in his life to bring more and more conformity to Christ. This was the case with Charles H. Spurgeon.

“He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.” Whether a person observes Jewish religious days, eats meat, or drinks wine, he is to thank the Lord and live by his conscience. Either course of conduct in these doubtful things can please the Lord, but each person is to decide which course of conduct would best glorify the Lord in his own experience. God is not so concerned with the act itself as with the motive behind it. If a person's motives are wrong, then what he is doing is no longer a doubtful thing but a sin. Only God knows the motives of the heart.

WEAK BROTHERS ARE TO HAVE CONFIDENCE IN THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST — Romans 14:7-9

“For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord: and whether we die, we die unto the Lord; whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.” No Christian is an island; each is directly accountable to God for his actions. We do not live to ourselves and for our own desires as Christians, but everything is related to Christ. Christ alone has the right to rule in our lives, and we must give him that right. He will show each believer his particular path in this area of doubtful things. Live, therefore, unto the Lord.

“For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living.” The Lordship of Jesus Christ doesn't start when we die; it begins now. If the Lord, through conscience or a sense of conviction, tells you to stop a thing, then you had better stop. If he says you should eliminate some practice, or begin some practice, or change your attitude, it is his prerogative to do so. He can handle his own in the area of doubtful things far more efficiently than we might think. If the Christian desires to magnify Christ, then he will have the right attitude towards doubtful things.

ALL CHRISTIANS WILL GIVE AN ACCOUNT TO CHRIST — Romans 14:10-12

“But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.” There is no need for the weak Christian to judge or for the strong Christian to despise, for each will have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account. Each will be judged according to motives. Men who did things on this earth, even doubtful things, to please the Lord shall be rewarded because their motives were right. If their motives were wrong, they shall receive no reward.

“For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.” Each Christian will give his own account. Thus, we see that Christianity is individual and personal. My friend, you will give an account to Christ about your attitude and motives concerning doubtful things.

CONCLUSION

Do you want the forgiveness of sins, to have your deepest spiritual needs met? Then you must receive Jesus Christ as Lord of your life and Saviour for your personal sins. The Lord did not say you have to give up something or clean yourself up before you come to him. He invites you to come in faith just as you are, and he will begin to clean you. He promises to give all who come to him the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and an assurance of heaven. Today is the day for you to acknowledge your sinfulness and cast yourself totally upon Christ to save you. He is your only hope!