

EXHORTATION TO THE STRONG BROTHER ON DOUBTFUL THINGS Romans 14:13-21

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Christians, especially young people or new Christians, often ask my advice on amusements and other practices. I note that they are torn by the desire to do something which they think might give them great enjoyment but about which their consciences are not clear. They think they must give up something that they want very much to do. I always point out what the Bible says is sin: lying, cheating, envy, jealousy, hatred, pride, selfishness, drunkenness, lust, premarital and extra-marital sex, divorce, etc. Then in the area of doubtful things or questionable practices, I tell them that they must not follow my standards but must set up their own in light of their accountability to Christ, although I do give my opinions on the things under discussion. I have found that one way to bring these people to a mature decision is to point out that their conduct is not to be based on what pleases them or on what may be best for them or others, but rather upon what will please the Lord Jesus Christ.

Maturity comes in the area of doubtful things when people make their own decisions before the Lord. Doubtful practices such as movies, dancing, smoking, television, drinking alcoholic beverages, amusements, etc. are solved on the basis of biblical principles, not by a direct command of Scripture. A doubtful thing is not inherently sinful, but it may become sinful for a person if the Lord has convicted one's conscience that it is wrong or if it becomes a stumbling block to another Christian.

Doubtful things are primarily issues between strong Christians and weak Christians, and have very little relationship to our testimony to the world. Most people in the unsaved world couldn't care less whether a believer in Christ goes to a movie or a dance, but these things may become issues with other Christians who have been saved out of the world system.

In Romans 14:4-12, the Apostle Paul tells the weak brother not to judge the strong brother who exercises Christian liberty in some areas, for every man someday must give an account to God for all his actions. We are definitely commanded to keep our noses out of other Christian's lives in doubtful areas, and are ordered not to criticize them.

Now in Romans 14:13-21, Paul tells the strong brother not to misuse his Christian liberty. He is to operate on the principle of love towards the weaker brother. The strong brother who understands Christian liberty is under great responsibility to use his liberty wisely and, if necessary, to forsake it for the cause of Christ.

THE STRONG ARE NOT TO BE A STUMBLING BLOCK TO THE WEAK — Romans 14:13-14

"Let us not therefore judge one another any more." All Christians are to put away judging one another in these areas of doubtful things. If one feels another is misusing his Christian liberty, he must pray for him but never judge. In addition, he may advise, cite his own experiences, point to the Word of God, and seek to enlighten, but he may never command the conscience of another believer.

"But judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way." The strong brother who understands the grace of God and Christian liberty, and whose conscience is free in these questionable practices, is to exercise his liberty in the bounds of love. He should never use his liberty in any way that would shock a weak brother or lead him to fall into sin. The Christian who insists on exercising his liberty at the expense of somebody else is turning liberty into license. Love limits the exercise of Christian liberty deliberately and willingly.

You may have freedom to do some doubtful things but you won't do them because they might become a stumbling block to a weak Christian. A mature believer may have liberty, but he is not always free to exercise it. Because we love the brethren, the greatest right we have is the right to give up our rights.

I remember Rev. Austin, who pastored the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Roanoke, Virginia, so faithfully for years. Some brethren in that group felt it was wrong to go to movies, and they tended to judge others who felt they had the freedom to go. Rev. Austin had perfect liberty to go to a respectable movie, but he never went while in Roanoke because he did not want to offend others. When out of town, he and his wife would attend movies, but they never made an issue of this. Why? Because they loved the brethren, and their personal wants and desires were made second to the unity of the body of Christ.

"I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Though nothing is unclean of itself, some doubtful things become moral issues for weak brothers, and strong Christians are held responsible for the weaker brothers' consciences. Because of this, strong brothers may not always exercise their liberty. Most weak brothers and Christians, such as legalists, are very set in their ways and cannot be convinced of the grace of God by strong Christians flaunting their liberty. They need a great deal of love and patience to enter into the fullness of the Christian life. One good way to reach these brethren is temporarily to conform to their standards for the sake of gaining their ear, and then to instruct them in the Word.

There was a young man in my church in California whose conscience would not permit him to go to any movie. My personal conscience is not offended at movies, although I will not attend most movies today because they are filled with sex, hate, and violence, and I do not want to fill my mind with these things. While I was his pastor, I did not attend any movie for two years because I honored my weaker brother's conscience. During that time I taught scriptural principles about doubtful things and had many private discussions with this young man. Then one day he saw the true issues in this area. Before we left the church, he and his wife attended a movie (*Mary Poppins*) with my wife Carol and me. He had come to some degree of maturity in this area.

THE STRONG ARE NOT TO DESTROY THE WEAK BROTHER — Romans 14:15-19

“But if thy brother be grieved [injured] with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably [lovingly].” One of the big doubtful things in the first century church was eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Paul says that if the strong brother’s eating of such meat causes his weaker brother to stumble, then the strong Christian is misusing his liberty and not walking in love.

“Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.” The word “destroy” here does not mean “eternal perishing,” but “ruin” in the sense of “wasting a life.” A strong Christian can actually misuse his liberty in a way that will ruin a weak brother’s life.

It is quite possible for more mature Christians to feel free to do things that would lead less mature believers into an area beyond their control. Suppose a strong brother who has liberty to drink a glass of wine is seen doing so by a young Christian or one who has been saved out of a bad experience with alcohol. This young Christian or believer with a former alcohol problem may think this is all right for him as well, only to discover too late that he cannot handle it. Much of his life may be wasted because the stronger brother did not exercise restraint in his Christian liberty. Don’t let it be said of you that someone else wasted years of his life because of something he saw you do or heard you say. This would not be love.

“Let not then your good be evil spoken of.” A misuse of liberty could bring a loss of testimony. The Christian’s life is the thing that speaks loudest to those about him. If a strong brother loses rapport with the weaker brother, he may never get him to grow and understand the grace of God in the Christian life.

Often brethren who are strong in the faith tend to overreact to any form of Christian legalism. Instead of being gracious, they tend to flaunt their freedom so as to make the weaker brother furious. Some of my good Christian minister friends are in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a denomination that is quite free on Christian liberty. With some of them it is a campaign to straighten out true believers on questionable

practices. A few years ago many of these dear brothers seemed stereotyped. They grew beards, smoked pipes and imbibed good brews. These Christian brothers have taught me much theology and graciousness in Christian liberty, but I do not feel free to participate in many of their practices. The issue with me is not the thing but the motivation for doing it. We should always ask ourselves four basic questions about doubtful things:

1. Will it please Christ?
2. Will it affect my testimony before the lost, or be a stumbling block to the saved?
3. Will it be harmful to my own body?
4. Will this act solidify or divide the body of Christ?

“For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.” The Christian life is not material things and external acts, not eating or drinking or any such thing. God simply does not care what, when, or how we eat and drink, so long as it does no damage to ourselves or to someone else. These things are unimportant to him — but are they the great issues of our own lives? Are they so important that we cannot do without them? Are these the things for which Christ indwells our lives? The important things are righteousness, peace, and joy produced by the Spirit of God in our lives. Righteousness and inward peace and joy are to be the goals of all men who believe in Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Saviour. The real Christian life is spiritual and is related to being occupied with Christ and controlled by the Spirit of God. Be honest — are doubtful things conducive to a walk of holiness? Can we best produce joy, peace, and righteousness with or without them? Are most doubtful things compatible with Christlikeness?

“For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God and approved of men.” The mature brother who sets aside his liberty for the weak brother because he is motivated by love will be approved by God and men.

“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify [build up] another.” The burning desire of every Christian should be to have a spiritual life that builds up his Christian brethren, not tears them down.

THE STRONG ARE NOT TO DESTROY GOD’S WORK — Romans 14:20-21

“For meat destroy not the work of God.” If the mature believer insists upon his liberty, this could destroy the work of God — that which is normally carried on

through a local assembly that is working harmoniously. This work is primarily the task of reaching the unsaved for Christ. When the peace of the assembly is disrupted because the strong brother insists upon using his liberty, the assembly is divided so that the work of evangelization is not carried on.

"All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence." Paul reiterates: a doubtful thing is not inherently sinful, but it becomes sinful for the weaker brother when his conscience is offended by it.

"It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak." Although something might not be inherently wrong, it is wrong if it becomes a hindrance, a drawback, or a stumbling block to somebody else. Because the strong brother loves the weaker brother, he will not exercise his liberty if his action will cause the weaker brother to stumble. Love foregoes one's own liberty for another's good. The Christian is bound by love, not by legalism, when he gives up something for another's good. He willingly gives up something that is good for something better: the building of the weaker brother, the unity of the body, the furtherance of the work of Christ.

Paul expressed his feeling on doubtful things in 1 Corinthians 8:12-13:

"But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend."

With much light comes much responsibility. The strong brother has been given special light on the subject of questionable practices, but he must use this light in a responsible way, even restricting his freedom if necessary. It is like light that comes into the eye. The more light that is admitted, the more the pupil restricts. So it is with Christian maturity. The more light we have, the more we willingly restrict our lives for the cause of Christ and love of the brethren.

CONCLUSION

Doubtful things are not an issue in becoming a Christian. A person is not necessarily a Christian because he abstains from certain things. I am often asked if a person can drink or smoke and be a Christian; the answer is yes. (It has been my observation that when one does trust Christ, the excesses in doubtful things pass immediately and some things drop off completely.)

The issue in salvation is Jesus Christ. The Bible states that all men are separated from God because of sin in their lives, and that only Christ can forgive that sin. Moral people are just as sinful as immoral people. All need Christ. In heaven, there will be people who practiced doubtful things and also those who didn't. In hell, there will be those who practiced doubtful things and also those who didn't. They will be in hell because they refused to receive Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour, and they will perish in their sins.

Where you spend eternity will depend on what you have done with Jesus Christ in this life. Will you accept him now? The decision is yours!