

Lesson 3

MY BROTHER OR ME?

Romans 14:1-23

BACKGROUND

In the local church at Rome, there was a small group, probably Gentiles, who had come to the conclusion that there was something religiously wrong with eating meat and drinking wine. Apparently they had moved into the area of asceticism; that is, the Christian life for them had been reduced to a series of negatives--*touch not, taste not and handle not*. This group had become legalistic and was judging everyone who did not conform to their man-made standards.

This same group of weak brothers in Rome also struggled with religious holidays. This would include whether to observe Jewish holy days or pagan holidays. There was a mindset against all culture whether good or bad.

The great majority of Christians in this assembly at Rome did believe in the grace of God in Christian living and understood Christian liberty and undoubtedly used their Christian liberty. However, some in the liberty group were misusing their Christian liberty and causing weak brothers in conscience to stumble in their Christian walk. These two extremes in the church at Rome were threatening the peace and harmony of the assembly. Paul writes to correct the situation.

THE PROBLEM AT ROME - 14:1-3

“Accept him whose faith is weak”—These believers were not weak in the Faith (the fundamentals of Christian doctrine), but were weak in the area of Christian living, namely the area of understanding the principles of Christian liberty in relation to meat and wine. They were weak in the sense that they were immature in a particular area of practical Christianity.

The weak brother is not weak because he does not practice certain questionable practices, but he is weak because he cannot stand to see other Christians practicing them and he judges. His conscience is truly offended at the actions of strong Christians. These weak brothers and sisters are to be accepted as Christian brothers and accepted in the local church because they are believers in Christ. *One’s viewpoint on questionable practices is*

never a basis for fellowship with a local church. It could become an issue for leadership but not membership if liberty is abused.

“Without passing judgment on disputable matters.”--The strong in the assembly are to accept the weak brothers, who do not understand fully Christian liberty, but they are to be received without any intention of criticizing the weak over matters of opinion. The strong are not to try and argue the weak brothers out of their positions, for all arguments in the area of questionable practices are simply over opinion and the Bible is silent on these questionable practices.

“One’s man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.”--There were two groups in this church and each had definite convictions about this matter of eating meat and drinking wine (Rom. 14:21). It appears that the reason these weak brothers were pushing for vegetarianism was that all meat was sacrificed to idols; therefore, to be safe, it was better to eat no meat at all. They were definitely ascetic in their approach - no meat and no wine. Christians can have two opposite views on doubtful things and still fellowship together in love and harmony.

“The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not,”--There is a tendency for strong believers in conscience to become disgusted and frustrated with weak brothers, calling them narrow minded, legalistic and bigots. The strong are not to despise, show contempt for or look down their noses at the weak.

“And the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does,”--Those who are weak in conscience are not to judge (condemn) those who have liberty to practice questionable things. Those of a more legalistic persuasion have a great tendency to judge and be critical of anyone who does not match up to their man-made standards of morality and this causes great division among true believers. The weak brothers feel themselves superior because they have given up so much, which is rank pride. With a “holier than thou” attitude, the weak brother judges the strong brother as a libertine.

Judging in this context is in the area, of questionable practices, not in the areas of Christian morality and doctrine as set forth in the Word of God. Judgments are to be made in the areas where Scripture plainly speaks for or against something. Of course, if a questionable practice leads to outright evil, those who are guilty must be judged; but until this happens, no Christian is to judge in the area of questionable things.

“For God has accepted him.”--Based on the finished work of Christ, God has accepted and received both the weak and strong brothers. Therefore, all Christians should be able to get along as brothers in Christ in the area of questionable practices. If they cannot, then there is a failure to exercise love, and a failure to exercise love is sin.

EXHORTATION TO THE WEAKER BROTHERS - 14:4-13a

“Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls.”-- The weak brother is not to judge because Christ will one day judge every Christian. It is presumption as well as spiritual pride for one believer to sit in judgment upon the conduct of another believer in the area of questionable practices.

The legalistic brother can be the biggest bully in the world with his hard and critical attitude. Yet he fails to see the inconsistency of his own position. Judging is commanded against in Scripture and is sin, but questionable practices are not.

The Christian does not answer to the church in these areas, but he is answerable to the Lord. The local church has not a shred of Biblical authority to set up any rules or regulations in these areas.

“And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”-- The Lord Jesus Christ is able to shape up His own servants in the area of questionable practices. The strong brother has the Holy Spirit in him to be a check and balance to the abuse of Christian liberty.

“One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.”--Paul shows that whether observing Jewish religious holidays, or pagan days, how one observes the Christian Sabbath (Lord’s Day) or eating of meat, every man must be persuaded he is doing right. God is looking at the man’s motives. Each group, whether it eats or does not eat, is inspired by the same motive to please the Lord. God is not so much pleased with the act itself but with the motive behind the act.

The weak and the strong brother must decide which course of conduct would best glorify God in his own experience. 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. It is possible, therefore, for two Christians to have different attitudes and actions about questionable practices and, yet, both can give thanks to God.

“For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone.”-- Every Christian is held accountable to his own Lord for his actions.

“If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”--The Christian belongs to Christ; his responsibility is

not to himself but to the Lord. The Christian cannot live any part of his life apart from Christ and be happy.

“For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.”--This stresses Lordship, so that the Christian's first responsibility is to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in questionable practices. If the Christian desires to magnify Christ, then he will have the right spirit in questionable practices.

“You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: ‘As surely as I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’ So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.”--Since Christ is Lord of all, then the weak have no right to judge the strong and the strong have no right to despise the weak. Each believer is going to give an account of his actions before the Lord at the Judgment Seat. At this judgment, Christians will be judged on the basis of motives. Christian men and women, who did things on this earth (even questionable practices) to please the Lord, shall be rewarded, for their motives were right. But if their motives were wrong they shall receive no reward.

EXHORTATION TO THE STRONGER BROTHERS - 14:13b-21

“Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.”--The strong brother who has liberty in questionable practices is to exercise his liberty in the bounds of love. The strong Christian should not use his liberty in any way that would cause a weak brother to be shocked or be led to fall into sin. A strong believer has liberty but he is not always free to exercise it. *Because he loves all the brethren, the greatest right the strong believer has is the right to give up his rights.* Only a free man can set aside his freedom for the good of others. The person who is really free can really love. *He gives up the good (liberty) for the best (the unity of Christianity).*

A stumbling block is when we cause our brother to fall into sin. A weak brother is to allow his conscience to be trained and enlightened on the subject of questionable practices. *With an enlightened and trained conscience, he may not be able to practice the questionable thing, but he will be able to tolerate and love Christians who do.*

There is hardly anything in the area of questionable practices that does not offend someone. The strong brother needs to ask himself, “Is this causing my brother to fall into sin?” “Does my brother's conscience need enlightened?” “Does this questionable practice offend many or just one?” Then the strong brother must make up his mind to set this liberty aside for the common good of the Body of Christ.

“As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.”--There is no questionable practice, which is inherently wrong in itself, and the strong brother understands this fact. Yet, there are the weaker brothers who feel questionable practices are wrong and they are definitely wrong for the weaker brother. *The stronger brother is held responsible for the conscience of the weaker brother, for it is the weaker brother’s conscience that is defiled, not the questionable practice.* Therefore, the strong brother should refrain from using his liberty.

“If your brother is distressed (grieved) because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love.”--If the strong brother’s liberty causes the weak brother to fall, then the strong brother is misusing his liberty and not walking in love. Love is the highest law.

“Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.”-- A misuse of liberty could prevent the growth of a weaker brother or cause him to fall into spiritual ruin. He may see a strong brother doing some questionable thing and try it himself, going against his conscience and this will throw him out of fellowship with Christ and cause havoc in his Christian walk.

“Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil”--A misuse of liberty could bring a loss of testimony. The Christian’s life speaks loudest for Christ. 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.

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,”--The real Christian life is not wrapped up in material things and external acts, but it is spiritual and is related to being occupied with Christ and controlled by the Spirit of God.

God is not particularly interested in what we eat or drink so long as our eating and drinking does no damage to us or to anyone else. However, are questionable practices so important that the strong brother cannot do without them? Are they the great issues of his life? Are questionable practices the things for which Christ indwelt them?

“Because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.”--God and men will approve the strong brother, who sets aside his liberty for the weak brother because he is motivated by love.

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace”--The burning desire of every Christian should be to do things, which will make for peace in the local church.

“And to mutual edification.”--The desire of the strong believer should be to have a life, which would build up, not tear up, the weaker brother.

“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble.”--If the strong believer insists upon his liberty, this could destroy the work of God. The work of God is all the work normally carried on through the local church, especially the task of evangelism to the world. However, if the peace of the assembly is disrupted because the strong brother insists upon using his liberty, the church is divided so that the work of evangelism is not carried on effectively.

“It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything also that will cause your brother to fall.”--The issue of questionable practices goes beyond that of whether the Christian should eat meat or drink wine. It includes *anything*, which might cause disruption of the work of God; that is, all questionable practices that might impair the ministry. The strong believer willingly gives up that which is good for that which is better—the building of the weaker brother, the unity of the church and the furtherance of the work of Christ. The Christian is bound by love, not legalism, when he gives up something for another’s good.

CONCLUSION - 14:22-23

“So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God—
This is a personal matter when it comes to questionable things. In things indifferent, things doubtful, things questionable, things in between, the Christian is to have his personal convictions before God but not to push them on other Christians who feel differently.

“Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves”--The strong brother has liberty and his conscience does not condemn him. If he uses the liberty, he is blessed.

“But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”--The weak brother must *never* violate his conscience. If he cannot involve himself in a questionable practice by faith, then he must not do it. Let each man be fully persuaded in his own mind.