

ON TRYING TO CHANGE OTHERS

by Ray C. Stedman

We are back in the fourteenth chapter of Romans this morning, and we are going to be discussing the favorite indoor sport of Christians, that is, trying to change each other. As this passage indicates, this has been a major problem in the church for centuries. All through the history of the church, the problem arises from the attitude that most of us share, I am sure, that God is clearly pleased with the way we live -- but there are those others around. They drink beer and play cards; they go to movies; they smoke cigars; they work on Sundays; they wear lipstick; they dance; they play musical instruments; they use zippers instead of buttons. There is an endless list of things that can be included, debatable matters that the church has never been able to settle because of a misunderstanding of the principles that are set forth here in this very passage.

We are dealing, of course, with the problem of Christian taboos, all the no-no's of the Christian life that we encounter from place to place, and from time to time. We are facing the question of how much fellowship you can have with somebody who lives in a different way than you do, who does things that you do not approve of as a Christian.

This is the problem of Christian ethics, the problem of so-called legalistic behavior, and this passage is a rather extensive one, which indicates the extent of the problem. The passage runs all the way through Chapter 14, and through the first fourteen verses of Chapter 15.

But we are not going to try to cover all that this morning. I want to look at just the introduction to it and to see the principle that will lead us to a solution of this problem. I think it is very important to note that this whole section dealing with this problem is part of an extended commentary of the Apostle Paul on the command of Jesus to love one another. This is part of how you love one another, and this has been the subject ever since the apostle turned to the practical part of this letter, from Chapter 12 on.

In fact, in Chapter 12 he tells us two things about love:

1. First, love must be serving. That is its nature; love serves. That is why we are given spiritual gifts, so that we might serve one another. Paul emphasizes that in Chapter 12.
2. Second, he tells us that love must be genuine. It cannot be phony or sham; it cannot be "put-on" love. It has to be real.

Then, in Chapter 13, we learn that love must be submissive, especially to the authorities, to the state, and the powers that be, because they are put there by God. And in the latter part of Chapter 13, Paul tells us that love must be universal; we owe love to everyone without exception. "Owe no man anything, but to love one another," {Rom 13:8a KJV}. That is a universal debt which we must continually be paying to everyone we meet.

Now, in Chapter 14, we learn that love must be patient and tolerant of other people's views. It begins with our actions towards someone whom we regard as less enlightened than ourselves. Think about who that is for a moment and then listen to what Paul says to do about it (Verse 1):

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. {Rom 14:1 NIV}

That is very plain, isn't it? Do not reject him; do not ignore him; do not treat him in a second-class way. Accept him, but not for the purpose of arguing with him. Do not accept him in order to debate with him, but "without passing judgment on disputable matters."

To "accept him," of course, means that regardless of where you may struggle with someone and about what you may struggle, you must realize that they are brothers and sisters in the family of God, if they are Christians at all. You did not make them part of the family -- the Lord did. Therefore, you are to accept them because they are your brothers and sisters. And you are not to accept them with the idea of immediately straightening them out in the areas in which they are weak. I think that is a very necessary, practical admonition because many of us love to argue and sometimes the first thing we want to do is straighten somebody out.

I remember years ago when, after preaching from this platform on a Sunday night, a man came up to me and started talking in a rather roundabout way. He said, "Let me ask you something. Do you believe that two Christians who love the Lord and are led by the Holy Spirit will read a passage of Scripture and both come out believing the same thing?" I said, "Yes I think that sounds logical." "Well," he said, "can you explain why, when I read the passage you preached on tonight, I believe it teaches there will be no millennium, but when you read it, you believe there is going to be one. What do you think of that?"

Being young and aggressive I said, "Well, I think it means that I believe the Bible and you do not." That immediately precipitated an argument and, with several other people gathered around, we went at it hammer and tongs for an hour or so.

Afterwards, thinking it through, I realized how wrong I was. I had immediately started arguing. I had to write to that brother and tell him that I was sorry I had jumped on him like that. Of course, he had jumped on me, too, but that was his problem, not mine. I had to straighten out my problem, so I apologized to him and said, "I am sorry that I did not recognize the parts where we agree before we got on to those things over which we differ."

Paul wants us to understand that this is what we are to do. First of all, accept people, let them know that you see them as a brother or a sister. Establish the boundaries of your relationship by some gesture or word of acceptance so they do not feel that you are attacking them immediately.

The Greek here says not to accept them in order to argue about your differences, or, as the New English Bible puts it, "without attempting to settle doubtful points." First, let there be a basic recognition that you belong to one another.

Paul goes on to define more precisely the areas of debate that he has in view here in Verse 2:

One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. {Rom 14:2 NIV}

Did you hear that, you vegetarians? This is not dealing with nutrition, of course. This arises out of the background of the early church in which there was a real moral question about eating meat. Not only were there the Jewish restrictions against certain forms of meat -- Jews did not eat pork, and even beef and lamb had to be kosher -- but it had to be slain in a certain way. So a Jew, or even one raised as a Jew, after he became a Christian, always had great emotional difficulty in eating meat. I still wonder what the Apostle Paul's reaction was when, as a Christian, he was first handed a ham sandwich. I think he ate it, but I do not know what his feeling about it was. He may have struggled at that point.

Then there was the problem in Rome and in other pagan Greek and Roman cities about the matter of eating meat that had been offered to idols. Some Christians said that if you did that it was tantamount to worshipping that idol. You were no different than the people who worshipped and believed in the idol, and therefore, it placed a stigma on your faith to eat meat that had been offered to idols.

Other Christians said, "Oh, no. How can that be? Meat is meat. The fact that someone else thinks of it as offered to idols does not mean that I have to." In these pagan cities the best meat was sold in the butcher shop next to the temple because that is where the sacrifices were sold to the populace, who bought it without any question. So there was a real problem in the church.

As in every area of this type, there were two viewpoints. There was a liberal, broad viewpoint that said it was perfectly all right to do this, and a stricter, narrower viewpoint that said it was wrong to do this. It really does not make any difference what you are arguing about if it is in this area that is debatable -- something about which the Scriptures themselves do not speak -- then you always get this two-fold division. You can put many of the modern problems that we have into this category. Should you drink wine and beer; should you go to the movies; should you dance; what about card-playing; what about work on Sunday? Some of the things I have already mentioned fall into this category.

Let us be very clear that there are areas that Scripture speaks about that are not debatable at all. It is always wrong to be drunk. It is always wrong to commit adultery or fornicate. These things are clearly wrong. In both the Old and New Testaments, God has spoken, he has judged, in these areas.

Christians are exhorted to rebuke and exhort and reprove one another, and, if necessary, even discipline one another according to patterns set out in the Scriptures. This is not judging each other in those areas. The Word of God has judged; it has already pronounced what is wrong.

But there are all those other areas that are left open, and the amazing thing to me, and the significant thing here, is that Scripture *always* leaves those open. Paul will not give a "yes" or "no" answer about some of these things because God does not do so. There is an area, in other words, where God wants to leave it up to the individual as to what he or she does. And, as we see later on, he expects it to be based upon a deep conviction of that individual. But it is up to them. This is the area Paul is talking about here.

It is also clear that he calls the "liberal party" strong in the faith, while the "narrow party" is regarded as being weak in the faith.

I point out that the translation that I am reading from, the New International Version of the New Testament, is wrong in Verse 1 where it translates: "Accept him whose faith is weak, ..." It has nothing to do with the strength or weakness of the individual's faith. It is not talking about someone whose faith is weak. It is talking about someone who is weak in *the* faith. The problem is doctrinal here. The problem is that he does not understand truth. Remember, Jesus himself said, "If anyone continue in my word, he shall be my disciple indeed and he shall know the truth and the truth will set him free," {cf, John 8:31-32 KJV}.

Therefore, the mark of understanding truth is freedom; it is liberty. That is why Paul calls the person who understands truth clearly one who is strong in the faith, while those who do not understand it clearly are weak in the faith. They do not understand the delivering character of truth.

I think William Barclay in his commentary on Romans has handled this well. He says:

Such a man is weak in the faith for two reasons. (i) He has not yet discovered the meaning of Christian freedom; he is at heart still a legalist; he sees Christianity as a thing of rules and regulations. His whole aim is to govern his life by a series of laws and observances; he is indeed frightened of Christian freedom and Christian liberty. (ii) He has not yet liberated himself from a belief in the efficacy of works. In his heart he believes that he can gain God's favor by doing certain things and abstaining from doing others. Basically he is still trying to earn a right relationship with God, and has not yet accepted the way of grace. He is still thinking of what he can do for God more than of what God has done for him.

That is the problem here. It is the problem of a Christian who is not yet understanding fully the freedom that Christ has brought him, who struggles with these kinds of things, and who feels limited in his ability to indulge or to use some of these things -- while others feel free to do so. One is strong in the faith; the other is called weak in the faith. Every church has these groups. We have them right here. Paul puts his finger precisely on the natural attitudes which each group would have toward each other that must be avoided if we are going to accept one another as he says.

In Verse 3 you have that:

The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, ... {Rom 14:3a

NIV}

That is the first thing. In other words, the strong must not reject the one who is still struggling, who is still weak. The word "look down" here is really a word that means "push him out." The strong must not push him out; they must not exclude him. That involves several things:

First, it means that he must not think about him in a disdainful or contemptuous way. He must not let himself look down on these people.

I think this is a tendency that some of us have who feel that we are free in certain of these areas. We tend to regard those who are not yet free as weaklings, which in some sense they are. But we are not to regard them as deliberately so, as if it is their own fault that they are that way. Thus we get offended when they do not behave as freely as we think they should. This is wrong. Paul says, "The strong must not reject the weak." You must not think wrongly about him. You must not say wrong things about him. You must not ridicule him.

Someone has defined a legalist as someone who lives in mortal terror that someone, somewhere, is enjoying himself. But we must not think of legalists that way, because that is not the motivation that governs them and creates legalism in their attitude. There is another reason and, therefore, we must limit ourselves to that, and not think of them as motivated simply because they want to spoil it for everyone else.

We are not to exclude these people from our contacts with one another. We must not form little cliques within the church that shut out people from social fellowship with people who have different viewpoints. We must not think of our group as being set free while this group over here is very narrow and we have nothing to do with them.

This is wrong, and Paul clearly says so. In fact, he implies that if any of the so-called strong exclude weaker brothers, look down on them, treat them as though they are second-class Christians, they have simply proved that they are just as weak in the faith as the ones they have denied. Strength in the faith means more than understanding truth. It means living in a loving way with those who are weak: The truly strong in the faith will never put down those who are still struggling.

On the other hand, the apostle goes on:

... the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. {Rom 14:3b NIV}

Here is the other side of it. Those who struggle must not look down on those who have freedom in these areas. Those who think it is morally wrong for a Christian to drink wine or beer must not look down on those who feel free to do so. They must not judge them. The word "condemn" means to sit in judgment on them and it involves several things.

It involves, first, no criticizing of such people or censoring of them. We are not to go up to them and tell them, "I do not see how you can be a Christian and do things like that." That has nothing to do with being a Christian. Their Christianity is established on grounds other than those.

It means no categorizing of such people, no classifying them as carnal Christians or reproving or rebuking them. In these areas we have no rights to reprove or rebuke. The church has no authority in these areas. It means no legislating against them; no imposing of behavioral standards or codes without the agreement of all those who are affected by them. These are areas in which the Scriptures say we are to make up our own minds and we are to go along only with that with which we agree.

Now, there are sometimes good reasons for limitations. We will go into some of them as we get further into this section next week. But they must be reasons which the individual accepts and makes. They are not to be imposed upon him by others, that is the point. What has happened often in the church is that those who are weak in the faith, i.e., those who do not fully understand the freedom in Christ, are the majority party and they often make artificial standards for Christians and impose them on everybody who comes into the church, with

the implication that you really cannot be a Christian unless you do these things or do not do these things.

That has given rise to a tremendous distortion of Christianity in the eyes of the world. It has given rise to the idea that Christianity is a "do not do something" idea, a "don't" religion. This distorts the freedom that is the message of the gospel. It propagates the feeling that Christianity is a set of rules to be obeyed, and the freedom of the sons of God is denied. The world therefore, gets a totally false idea of what the church is all about.

This has happened widely in our day and for the most part, I think, the "narrow party" has triumphed in the evangelical churches. This is why many people will not touch the church with a 25-foot pole, even though they are fantastically interested in the gospel. They see the church as having imposed standards and rules of conduct that have nothing to do with the Scriptures. These are artificial regulations that only the church has brought about.

Now, as a fourth main point, we come to the reason that governs this kind of conduct. It is set forth in Verses 4-12, and it is the central part of this section. The apostle sets forth three great facts, all supporting and explaining the great principle involved.

The first reason why you must not look down on the weak or judge or condemn the strong is because it is not your responsibility to change your brother in this area. He is not your servant. This is what Paul says in Verse 4:

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. {Rom 14:4 NIV}

That is very plain, is it not? The reason we are not to judge each other is that we are not responsible for one another's conduct in this area. Such responsibility is not defined in the Scriptures. This is an open area that each one has to decide before God, and, therefore, we have no responsibility to change each other and no authority to do so.

He is not your servant, Paul says; the Lord chose him. The Lord, then, is the one responsible to change him. The Lord chose him without asking you or me. Half of you would not be here if I were choosing you! Oh, I do not know about that. I do not know you that well. But I did not choose you, therefore I do not have to change you, either. Nor do you have to change me. We are not responsible for each other in this area.

The thing Paul brings out (Verse 4) is that the man under consideration is being changed. He is on his way to standing. He will stand, Paul says. "Stand," of course, means that he will be straightened out if he is doing wrong in this area. If it is really wrong, God will straighten him out and it is not up to you to do it. This is why I enjoy so much that little pin that Bill Gothard gives out with the letters P B P G I N F W M Y. That is, "Please be patient, God is not finished with me yet."

We are all in the process of change. The Lord is doing it, and he will do it. He is changing us, and if we will just wait a little while we can see some of the changes. Now, if the problem is one of not understanding truth, the solution is teaching the truth more plainly. As people hear it and understand it, they will be freed from this. To try to force them into some kind of compliance with something they yet do not understand is ridiculous and futile. Therefore, be patient. If they are being exposed to truth, they will change. Let the Lord change them; it is his responsibility. Not only will he do so, but he is perfectly able to do so. God is able to do it. I like Phillips' translation here. He says, "God is well able to transform men into servants who are satisfactory." That is exactly what Paul is relying on here.

Now, if the first point is that it is not your responsibility to change these people, the second one is that God is reading the heart and he sees something that you cannot see about them (Verses 5-8):

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. For none of us

lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. 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. {Rom 14:5-8 NIV}

That is a very impressive point. What Paul is saying is that God can read hearts and you cannot. These distinctions and differences of viewpoint arise out of honest conviction which God sees, even though you cannot. Therefore, the individual is not simply being difficult because he does not agree with you. He is acting on the basis of what he feels is right, so give him the benefit of the doubt on that.

Believe that he is as intent on being real before God and true to him as you are, and if he feels able to indulge in some of these things you think are not right, then at least see him as doing so because he really feels that God is not displeased with him on that basis. Or, if he does feel limited and he feels he should not do certain things, do not get upset with him because he has not moved into freedom yet. Remember that he really feels that God would be displeased if he did those things; it is an honest conviction. The apostle makes clear here that every man should have that kind of a conviction, if he acts this way. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own heart," {cf, Rom 14:4b KJV}.

Do not just act from tradition, because you were brought up that way or because you just feel it is right. Find some reason in the Scripture for it. Seek justification out of the Word of God. You may change your mind as your understanding of truth develops, but at least let it be on the ground of a conviction of the heart and of the mind.

The next thing Paul says is that God sees both of these men and both of these viewpoints as honoring him. The one who thinks Sunday is a special day that ought to be kept different from all other days is doing so as unto the Lord, therefore honor that, respect that viewpoint. The one who says, "No. When we are in Christ, days do not mean anything. They are not set aside for any special purpose. Therefore, I feel every day is alike, and I want to honor the Lord on every day." Okay, do not feel upset at that. He is doing so out of a deep conviction of his heart.

The one who drinks beer gives thanks to God for the refreshment of it and the taste of it, and it is perfectly proper that he does so. The one who says, "No. I cannot drink beer. I only drink coffee," gives thanks for the coffee. The coffee may do as much physical harm as the beer, but, in either case, it is not a moral question. It is a question of what the heart is doing in the eyes of God. Sometimes we are too harsh with one another in these areas.

I heard some time ago of a girl who was a converted nightclub singer, a fresh, new Christian, who was asked to sing at a church meeting. She wanted to do her very best for the Lord whom she had come to love, and so she dressed up the best way she knew how and she sang a song that she thought was expressive of her faith. She did it in the "torchy" style of the nightclub singer. Somebody came up to her afterwards and just ripped into her and said, "How can you sing a song like that and claim to be a Christian? God could never be happy with a Christian who dresses the way you do, and to sing in that kind of a nightclub style must be offensive to him." The poor girl was so taken back, she just stood there for a minute, and she broke into tears, and turned and ran.

Now, that was a wrong and hurtful thing to do to her. Granted, later on she might have changed her style, but God has the right to change her, not you. Her heart was right and God saw the heart and honored it. I think that was something he was pleased with, not displeased. We must remember that we are not to make distinctions where God would not.

The last thing Paul says in this area is that our relationship with one another is more important than our life style (Verses 7, 8): "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." Basically, what Paul is saying there is simply that living is liberty and dying is limitation. In the context, this is surely what this means. He is not talking about funerals, and life and death in that sense. He is talking about those who feel free to enjoy liberty to the fullest. They are living, while others, because of deep convictions of their own, limit themselves, and to that degree they are dying, because death is limitation.

"But whether we live," Paul says, "or whether we die, that is not the important thing. The important thing is that we belong to the Lord. He understands." That, therefore, is what we ought to remember in our relationships with one another. We belong to the Lord. We are brothers and sisters. We are not servants of each other. We are servants of the Lord and he has the right to change us.

The third and final fact that supports this governing principle is that Christ alone has won the right to judge (Verse 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. 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 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. {Rom 14:9-12 NIV}

That is clearly stating the fact, again, that the Lord alone has the right to judge us in these areas and he has the ability to do so because he has been involved in both death and life. He died, so he knows what ultimate and utter limitation is. He gave himself up to death and he deliberately restricted himself in many things so that he knows what that is like. And he lives, so he is free to do anything and everything that he desires, and he knows what that is like. Therefore, he alone has won the right to judge us. He understands us both.

So Paul says, "Stop trying to take his place. Stop trying to be Christ to the rest of the church or playing God to each other. You, the weak, why do you judge your brother? And you, the strong, why do you look down on your brother? It is wrong. You are trying to take Christ's place when you do that. But remember that all of us, men and women alike, all brothers and sisters together, must individually stand before God's judgment seat."

This is true in both a present and future sense. There is a sense in which we are before him all the time and we have to give an account to him and to him alone. But there is also coming a day that Paul mentions in First Corinthians 4, where he says, "The Lord returns and brings to light all the hidden things of the heart," {cf, 1 Cor 4:5}. All the things that we thought nobody ever saw will be brought out to the light. We must then give an account to the Lord.

That is where we stand. Again, Paul sums up everything in the first part: We are not servants of each other; we are brothers and sisters; we are all struggling; we are all in the process; we are all subject to change; we are all trying to understand truth more clearly as we go on and we are all being freed by it. But, in the process, the only one who has a right to do anything about it is the Lord. So stop judging each other in these areas. That is what Paul is saying.

There are other things we need to explore in this area, and later in the section which we will take up next week, Paul goes further into them to show us how we are to carry them out.

But here is the great principle: In these areas we are to quit judging one another; quit treating each other with disdain and contempt and ridicule and separating from one another. We are to love one another and show it by accepting one another.

Prayer

Thank you, our Father, for these searching words which make us all feel a bit guilty. We have all been guilty of this, whether strong or weak. We have judged our brother, and condemned him. Forgive us for that, Lord. Help us to see that we have been usurping your place, Lord Jesus, in doing so. Help us to stop that, and to begin to answer only for ourselves before your throne, and upholding and praying for our brother or sister if we feel they need it. Grant to us, Lord, that illuminating understanding of truth that sets us free. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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