

OUR GREAT EXAMPLE

by Ray C. Stedman

We are in the fifteenth chapter of this epistle of Romans, and Paul is concluding his discussion of the different views on what is wrong and what is right for Christians.

- Is it morally right for a Christian to drink wine, beer, or cocktails, or is that wrong?
- Is it morally wrong for a Christian to keep special days, such as Lent, or is that right?
- Is it morally wrong for a believer to smoke, or is that right?
- Is it morally right to eat pork, or is that wrong?

These are but some of the questions that Christians have asked through the years. You could go on and on, for there is an extensive list along these lines.

I was just reading this morning that Dr. Carl McIntire, the flamboyant fundamentalist Presbyterian preacher, is now attacking Christians for going along with the change from Fahrenheit to Celsius, or centigrade. He says it is nothing but a sneaky Communist plot to take over the world by degrees!

So there are a lot of things you could get upset about and divide over. The apostle has been giving us some very helpful guidelines and I am not going to retrace these arguments for you as our messages are in print. There is really no need to retrace them, anyway, for in the opening two verses of Chapter 15, Paul summarizes them for us.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. {Rom 15:1-2 NIV}

There are two thumbnail rules to follow when you have to make a quick decision as to whether you ought to insist on liberty in a certain area, or give way to someone else's qualms, or prejudices, or differences of viewpoint.

The first rule is: Choose to please your neighbor rather than yourself. Do not insist on your way of doing things; be quick to give in. After all, this is what love does. Love does not insist on its own rights, Paul tells us in First Corinthians 13. Therefore, if you are loving in your approach, love will adjust and adapt to others. I like J. B. Phillips' translation of this verse.

We who have strong faith ought to shoulder the burden of the doubts and qualms of others, and not just to go our own sweet way. {Rom 15:1 J. B. Phillips}

The second rule, however, says to be careful that your giving in does not allow your neighbor to be confirmed in his weakness, that you do not leave him without encouragement to grow, or to re-think his position. I think this is very important, and it reflects some of the things that Paul has said earlier in this account. We are to seek to build one another up. As I have pointed out before, in all these kinds of questions, if we do nothing but give way to people, and give in to their weaknesses, the church eventually ends up living at the level of the weakest conscience in its midst. This presents a twisted and distorted view of Christian liberty, and the world gets false ideas about what is important, and what Christianity is concerned about. So this helps to balance the situation. Please your neighbor, but for his own good, always leaving something there to challenge his thinking, or make him reach out a bit, and possibly change his viewpoint.

In Sacramento this past week, a man made an appointment to see me. He told me he was a teacher in a Christian school there and he had been asked by the board of the school to enforce a rule prohibiting students from wearing their hair long. It was a rule that he did not agree with, so he found himself in a serious

dilemma. If he did not enforce the rule, the board had given him clear indication that he would lose his job. If he did enforce it, he would be upsetting the students and their parents, who felt that this was a matter that did not merit that kind of attention. Our culture has long since changed from regarding long hair as a symbol of rebellion, so this man found himself in between a rock and a hard place. His plea to me was, "What shall I do?"

My counsel, whether right or wrong, in line with what we had learned here earlier in Romans 14, was that we should not push our ideas of liberty to the degree that they would upset the peace. So I said to him, "For the sake of peace, go along with the school board and enforce the rule for this year. But make a strong plea to the board to re-think their position and to change their viewpoint. At the end of the year if they are unwilling to do that, perhaps you might well consider moving to a different place, or getting another position. That way you would not be upsetting things, and creating a division or a faction within the school."

Now, I think that illustrates what Paul is bringing before us here. These kinds of decisions are not easy to make. Oftentimes people can lose sight of the main objectives of being together as Christians, and they get so focused in on these issues that a church can split right down the center. Or else these issues will create such arguing, bickering, fighting and dissension within the group that everyone is made unhappy, and the whole atmosphere of the church is changed. Paul is saying to us that this is really not necessary as there are things that can be done to work these problems out. To encourage us in this, he gives us three factors that we can count on for help with these problems.

The first one is the encouragement of example that comes to us from the past (Verses 3-4):

For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scripture, we might have hope. {Rom 15:3-4 NIV}

Paul's first example for us is Jesus himself. He ran into this kind of problem though he was perfect, though he never did anything that was wrong or out of line. Even though he never on any occasion conducted himself in a way that was in the slightest degree displeasing to God the Father, nevertheless, he ran into these kinds of antagonisms. As Paul says, Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures that predicted that those who did not like God's methods would take it out on him. "The insults of those who insult you," he says, "have fallen on me," {cf, Psa 69:9 NIV}. And so our Lord had to bear with all the unhappiness and sometimes the insults of those who could not be pleased even with what God himself was doing.

Remember in Luke, Chapter 14, the Pharisees felt that Jesus was not keeping the Sabbath properly? They were very upset because he did things they felt were wrong to do on the Sabbath. Now what did our Lord do? Did he give in to their desire? No, he did not. He ignored their protest and went ahead and did things that upset them even more, because if he had gone along with their desires, they would never have learned what God intended the Sabbath to be. So the Lord did not adjust to their antagonism.

But on another occasion the Lord was accused of not paying his taxes. When the disciples told him about this, he sent Peter down to the lake to catch a fish, and in the fish's mouth he would find a coin sufficient to pay the tax for both Peter and himself. Jesus said he did this in order not to offend them. That is, he adjusted to their complaint at that point.

If we think we have difficulty in applying these rules we must remember that the Lord himself had difficulty in this, and there is still a third occasion when he publicly acknowledged that there was no way to please everybody. Jesus said, "When John the Baptist came to you, he came neither eating nor drinking." That does not mean that John did not eat food; it means that he carefully observed certain dietary restrictions. He was probably a Nazirite and had taken a vow never to touch any kind of alcoholic beverage. So Jesus said, "When John came neither eating nor drinking, you said of him, 'He has a demon.' But when I came both eating and drinking, you called me a glutton and a drunkard. So how can I please you?" {cf, Matt 11:18-19, Luke 7:33-34}. Jesus simply recognized the impossibility, at times, of adjusting to everybody. Thus he went ahead and did what God had sent him to do and he let God take care of the difficulties.

I think this is what Paul has in mind here. He tells us that our Lord is the example, and there will be times when you cannot please anybody. There will be other times when you can, and, if you can, you should. But there will be still other times when if you did, you would hinder people in their spiritual growth, and then you should not seek to please them.

Not only do we have our Lord's life as our example, but the Old Testament also helps us here, especially in the matter of yielding up our rights. Remember when Abraham and Lot, his nephew, stood looking over the valley of the Jordan River? It was evident that they would have to divide the land among them, and Abraham, who was the older of the two, and the one who, by rights, ought to have had the first choice, gave that choice to Lot. Lot chose first, and he chose the lush, beautiful, green areas of the Jordan valley, leaving Abraham the barren hills. Now Abraham is an example of graciousness; he gave up his rights.

Remember when Moses, according to the record, gave up his place as a prince in the household of Pharaoh? As Hebrews tells us, he gave it up in order that he might "suffer reproach with the people of God for a season," {cf, Heb 11:25-26}. This is a beautiful example.

Remember David and Jonathan who were such close friends? We see Jonathan so gracefully yielding his right to the throne to David, his friend, because he knew God had chosen him. And Jonathan also supported him against the wrath of his own father. What a beautiful picture this is. Jonathan is willing to give up in order that David might gain.

When you come to the New Testament there is that scene when John the Baptist says of Jesus, "He must increase; I must decrease," {cf, John 3:30}. And yet none of these men who gave up ever lost anything. Now that is the point the apostle is making. These men gained by this. God was glorified, and they themselves ultimately gained, because, in giving up, they achieved the objective that God was after. So Paul gives us this picture of willingness to give up, refusing to do so only when it is going to be hurtful to somebody, leaving them ignorant of the principles of Scripture, bound to some narrow, rigid point of view.

So we get help from the past. Not only that, Paul goes on to show us there is encouragement right in the present. Verses 5-6:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. {Rom 15:5-6 NIV}

There is no need to panic or to be afraid that we cannot work these problems out, Paul says. God can drastically change the situation. He is that kind of a God. The apostle suggests two things we can do when we get involved in a disagreement like this.

First, there ought to be prayer, prayer for unity. Paul prays himself that God may grant "a spirit of unity among yourselves." In Luke 11:13 {NIV}, Jesus said, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those that ask him!" Now Jesus does not mean that is the way to get the Spirit of God to come into your life. He is talking there about problems and difficulties in your life when you need a special ministry of the Holy Spirit. He says, "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, even though basically you have evil in your nature, how much more willing is the heavenly Father to give the Holy Spirit to you in times of problems and difficulties, to preserve the spirit of unity that you desperately need."

This very week I learned of a situation of two brothers in Christ who had a serious difference of viewpoint. Not only did it bring them to a deadlock where they were not able to resolve it (for both felt they were right, and neither was able or willing to give in), but it affected a whole program that God was putting together, one that depended upon their working together. It looked as though the whole thing would come to an ignoble end; nothing could be worked out. But when others heard about this, and the two men involved began to pray, asking God to intervene, then, at the final meeting that was scheduled to try and work this out, one of the men said, "There is no need for us to talk about this, because God has already been talking to me. He showed me

that I had been stubborn and obstinate about this, and I'm sorry. Let's go on to other things now; let's get the program started." The whole difficulty just faded away because God is able to change situations and bring about unity. So prayer for unity is one of the most important things we can do when there is this kind of disagreement among us.

The second thing the apostle says is to praise God for the relationship you already have, "so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." With one heart and mouth. Remember that you are brothers. Give God thanks together for what unites you, and minimize the things that divide you. Remember the important thing is that in the eyes of the watching world you manifest the unity of brotherhood that God has brought about. You did not make yourselves brothers and sisters: God did. Therefore he desires that to be visible to the world around. That is why, in Ephesians 4, we are admonished to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," {cf, Eph 4:3}. One of the present helps we have is to pray, to ask God for the spirit of unity, and then to praise him for the unity that already exists.

We have had encouragement from the past, and encouragement from the present, and now Paul tells us to be encouraged by what the future holds (Verses 7-12):

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, so it is written:

**"For this reason I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing hymns to your name." [cf, Psalm 18:49]**

Again, it says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." [cf, Deut. 32:43]

And again,

**"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and sing praises to him, all you peoples." [cf, Psalm 117:1]**

And again, Isaiah says,

**"The root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
the Gentiles will hope in him." [cf, Isaiah 11:10] {Rom 15:7-12 NIV}**

Now what Paul is saying here is that God is already working out a great program that involves reconciling the Jews and the Gentiles. God has announced that he is going to do that, and he will bring it to pass. It has already started. It started when Christ accepted both Jews and Gentiles, regardless of the great differences between them.

I do not know if you have ever been involved in a church fight over an issue like drinking or smoking or movies or dances or whatever, but if you have, you know that tempers can get very hot. People can get very upset, and factions can form; divisions and feuds break out. And yet I have never heard of a church fight on those grounds that was any worse than the attitudes that Jews and Gentiles had toward one another in Paul's day. The Jews held the Gentiles in contempt; they called them dogs. They would have nothing to do with them. The Jews even regarded it as sinful to go into a Gentile's house and they would never dream of eating with a Gentile. They regarded them with utter contempt. In the book of Acts, Peter got into serious trouble with his Jewish friends because he went into the home of Cornelius the centurion, and ate with him. It was only because Peter was able to show that the Holy Spirit sent him there, and used him there, that he was able to justify his conduct to his friends.

Of course, if the Jews felt that way about the Gentiles, the Gentiles paid it right back in kind. They hated the Jews. They called them all kinds of names; they looked down on them. This is where modern anti-Semitism was born. These were opposing factions who hated one another, and would have nothing to do with one another, Yet, Paul says, that kind of division God is healing by the work of Jesus. And how did Jesus do it? Paul's point is that Jesus began his work by becoming himself a minister of circumcision. The version I have says he "became a servant of the Jews." That is based on the idea that what Paul wrote was, "Christ became a minister of the circumcision," which is another name for the Jews. Actually what the text says is, "he became a minister of circumcision," which does not necessarily refer to the Jews as a people, but refers to their customs

and rituals and ceremonies.

What the apostle is arguing is that the Lord healed this breach between the Jews and the Gentiles by his giving in and limiting his own liberty. He who designed the human body, he who made it perfect, exactly as it ought to be, he himself consented to the act of circumcision. His body was mutilated. That part of his body which was the mark of the flesh was to be cut off. Jesus consented to that and limited himself in that way. He became a circumcised Jew. He who declared in his ministry that all foods are clean, and thus gave clear evidence that he understood the liberty that God gives us in the matter of eating, never once ate anything but kosher food. He never had a ham sandwich. He never had bacon and eggs for breakfast. He limited himself to the Jewish diet, even though he declared that all foods were clean.

He who was without sin insisted on a sinner's baptism. He came to John, and John said, "Why are you coming to me? I need to be baptized by you. You do not need to be baptized." Jesus said, "Allow it to be so, for in this way it becomes us. It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness," {cf, Matt 3:15}. So he who had no reason to be baptized consented to be baptized. He who longed to heal the hurts of the world said that when he came, he limited himself to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Now, Paul's argument is that the results of that limitation were that Jesus broke the back of the argument and of the contempt between the Jew and the Gentile. He reached both Jews and Gentiles to the glory of God.

If you trace this through you can see that what Paul is saying is that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God showed his faithfulness to the Jews in fulfilling the promises made to the patriarchs; and he showed his mercy to the Gentiles, saving them who were without any promises at all. Thus the two, Jew and Gentile, shall fully become one, just as the Scriptures predict here.

You have quotations from the Psalms (the Writings); from Deuteronomy (the Law); and from Isaiah (the Prophets). So you have the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings all agreeing that God can work out these kinds of problems. >From the past, from the present, and from the future there is encouragement to work them out. What Paul is really saying is, "You do not need to separate; you do not need to split; you do not need to fight; you do not need to sue one another; you do not need to quit. You can work the problems out, for there is help available from all these sources, and God is honored and glorified when you do so."

Then Paul concludes with this magnificent benediction, Verse 13,

May the God of hope fill you with great joy and peace so you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. {Rom 15:13 NIV}

What a magnificent verse! Whenever I am asked to give an autograph, I almost always include this verse in it. It is such a beautiful expression. Look how much you have got going for you. All the great words of the Christian faith appear here: hope, twice (once it is called "overflowing hope"); and joy, great joy; and peace, calmness and confidence; and trust, belief in a living God; and finally, the power of the Holy Spirit, the invisible force that can open doors and no man shuts them, and can shut and no man opens -- the power of God released among us.

Now I think we Christians need to remember this. I am delighted that here at Peninsula Bible Church we have had very, very little of this kind of strife. I am just so grateful for it. I have been in places where the whole testimony of Christ in a community has been wrecked by the divisions and the attitudes that people have had toward one another in these areas; when we presume to write one another off because one has liberty we do not feel they should have; when we talk down to people and disparage those who do not have the faith and strength to act in liberty such as we do, we destroy the work of God.

What the apostle is urging us to do is to unite on the great positive words of our faith, and that we allow these qualities of hope, and joy, and peace, and trust, and power to be visible when others see us gathered together as Christians. When they hear us talking about each other we are to reflect these qualities, rather than the miniscule divisions and arguments that many of us have.

In some ways the letter to the Romans ends with that verse. Paul goes on, it is true, to give some personal words about his own ministry which we will be looking at together next Sunday, and in the sixteenth chapter there is a long list of his friends, and his greetings to them. But, in a sense, the whole argument of this epistle is drawn to a close with this tremendous benediction:

May the God of hope fill you with great joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. {Rom 15:13 NIV}

How I hope these will be the characteristics that we manifest to the world around.

Prayer

Our Father, we do thank you for the peace and joy and righteousness that are gifts to us from your Spirit at work in our hearts. Thank you for the liberty and freedom that you give us in these areas. We pray that we who regard ourselves as strong, may be willing to bear the burdens of the weak, and not to offend them or to hurt them or to slash at them. May love be evident among us, Lord, but above all else, we pray that we may manifest a spirit of unity to the watching world that knows no way to get divergent factions together. We thank you for this miracle of unity among us, and ask that it be preserved in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

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