

Sermon Title: The Guidelines for the Principle of Christian Liberty, Part 1

Sermon Text: Romans 14:1-3

Sermon Purpose: To call the hearer to practice the guidelines of Christian Liberty, in order to achieve the goal of mutual acceptance.

Sermon Proposition: There are 3 guidelines for the strong to follow when dealing with the weak.

Introduction:

“One of the most serious problems facing the orthodox Christian church today is the problem of legalism. One of the most serious problems facing the church in Paul’s day was the problem of legalism. In every day it is the same. Legalism wrenches the joy of the Lord from the Christian believer, and with the joy of the Lord goes his power for vital worship and vibrant service. Nothing is left but cramped, somber, dull, and listless profession. The truth is betrayed, and the glorious name of the Lord becomes a synonym for a gloomy kill-joy. The Christian under law is a miserable parody of the real thing.” – [S. Lewis Johnson “The Paralysis of Legalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 1963]

“Several months ago I was conversing with a man I greatly admire. He is a Christian leader in a position that carries with it heavy and extensive responsibility. He said he was grieved on behalf of a missionary family he and his wife had known for years. The legalism they had encountered again and again on the mission field from fellow missionaries was so petty, so unbelievably small-minded, they had returned to the States and no longer planned to remain career missionaries. He said it was over a jar of peanut butter. I thought he was joking, to which he responded, “No, it’s no joke at all.” I could hardly believe the story.

The particular place they were sent to serve the Lord did not have access to peanut butter. This particular family happened to enjoy peanut butter a great deal. Rather creatively, they made arrangements with some of their friends in the States to send them peanut butter every now and then so they could enjoy it with their meals. The problem is they didn’t know until they started receiving their supply of peanut butter that the other missionaries considered it a mark of spirituality that you not have peanut butter with your meals. I suppose the line went something like this: “We believe since we can’t get peanut butter here, we should give it up for the cause of Christ,” or some such nonsense. A basis of spirituality was “bearing the cross” of living without peanut butter.

The young family didn’t buy into that line of thinking. Their family kept getting regular shipments of peanut butter. They didn’t flaunt it, they just enjoyed it in the privacy of their own home. Pressure began to intensify. You would expect adult missionaries to be big enough to let others eat what they pleased, right? Wrong. The legalism was so petty, the pressure got so intense and the exclusive treatment so unfair, it finished them off spiritually. They finally had enough. Unable to continue against the mounting pressure, they packed it in and were soon homeward bound, disillusioned and probably a bit cynical. What we have here is a classic modern-day example of a group of squint-eyed legalists spying out and attacking another’s liberty. Not even missionaries are exempted.” – [Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*]

“I heard about a fellow who attended a legalistic college where students were to live according to very strict rules. They weren’t supposed to do any work on Sundays. None! Guess what? He spied on his wife and caught her hanging out a few articles of clothing she washed on Sunday afternoon. Are you ready? The guy turned in his wife to the authorities! I’ll bet she was fun to live with the next day or two.” – [Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening*]

“Legalism has no pity on people. Legalism makes my opinion your burden, makes my opinion your boundary, makes my opinion your obligation.” – [Max Lucado, *Up Words*, May 1993]

“In a church a woman was knitting, waiting for the service to start. She had been there forty-five minutes. Some other dear woman said, “Oh, honey, we don’t do that in the house of God.” Well, what in the world do you do for an hour if you come waiting for a church service to start? Another was boning up for a test in college, and somebody said, “You know, here we read the Bible.””

“I know a man approaching sixty years of age today who is still haunted by the memory of being raised by hypocritical parents. It has taken him most of his adult life to face the full truth that he was emotionally and spiritually abused by their deception. Throughout his childhood his family attended a church where they were taught you shouldn’t go to the movies. This was so firmly enforced that in Sunday church services people would be called to come forward to an altar and confess that they had done that or some other “sins.” The problem is his family went to movies on Friday or Saturday night, always in secret. But they made it very clear that he shouldn’t say anything about it. They drilled it into him, “Keep your mouth shut.” Here he is, a little boy, being lectured on the way home from the theater, “Don’t tell anybody on Sunday that we did this.” Of course, they went to see the film miles away from the church so church folks wouldn’t know. Not until recently has the man come to realize how damaging that hypocrisy was to his walk with Christ.”

All quotes taken from: Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 1998, pp. 337-339.

- I. The 1st guideline is to receive those who are weak in the faith. V.1a
- II. The 2nd guideline is to not dispute over doubtful things. V.1b
- III. The 3rd guideline is to allow for liberty in doubtful things. V.2-3

I. The 1st guideline is to receive those who are weak in the faith. V.1a

Paul wraps up his exhortation in 14:1-15:13 with a plea for mutual acceptance, that preserves the unity in the church. There are two groups addressed in his exhortation. The weak did not understand the full truth of the Gospel.

(Temporary Condition) 1) Those who are weak in the faith. 14:1 (Ephesians 1:15ff)

(Long-term Condition) 2) Those who are strong in the faith. 15:1

- a. The “strong” eat all kinds of food while the “weak” eat only vegetables. (14:2)
- b. The “strong” make no distinction among days while the “weak” value some days more than others. (14:5)
- c. The “strong” drink wine while the “weak” abstain from it (14:21 cf 14:17)

Paul challenges both “strong” and “weak” Christians to not condemn each other over doubtful things, because it is the Lord, and He alone, who has the right to assess the believer’s status and conduct over doubtful things.

The “strong” is to receive the “weak” in the faith. The verb “receive” means to accept into one’s society, or social sphere, home, circle of acquaintance (BAGD), it implies that Christians were not just to tolerate “the weak” but to treat them as equal brothers and sisters in Christ. There was to be mutual acceptance demonstrated by intimate fellowship typical of the people of God. The Greek verb (προσλαμβάνω) literally means, “to take alongside oneself.” The present tense of the imperative suggests a continuing attitude of acceptance.

Acts 28:2 And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold.

Romans 15:7 Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.

II. The 2nd guideline is to not dispute over doubtful things. V.1b

The disputed matters in this context related to basically three areas, 1) the eating of meat offered to idols, or meat in general, 2) the observance or non-observance of certain days, 3) and the drinking or non-drinking of wine (Romans 14:2, 5, 21).

Paul wants the believers that are “strong” in these areas, to receive those that are “weak” in these areas, and receive them into full fellowship. Instead of trying to reason, argue, or debate them into agreeing with their views on these issues, therefore, causing quarrels and division that hinders the unity of the church. (**Galatians 6:1**)

Matthew 18:6-7 "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. **7** "Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

Galatians 5:13-15 For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not *use* liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. **14** For all the law is fulfilled in one word, *even* in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **15** But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!

1 Thessalonians 5:14 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.

III. The 3rd guideline is to allow for liberty in doubtful things. V.2-3

A. The "strong" believe they can eat all things. V.2a

B. The "weak" believes they can only eat vegetables. V.2b (Hebrews)

1 Timothy 4:1-3 Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, **2** speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, **3** forbidding to marry, *and commanding* to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

C. The balance that one does not despise the other. V.3a

Paul is aware that both groups can be at fault for hindering the intimate fellowship. He as a result rebukes and challenges each group, involved in the dispute. The one who eats "all things." V.2 (ie "the strong") is not to "despise" the one who does not (the "weak") in turn is not to "judge" (condemn) the one who does eat (the "strong").

The word "despise" communicates the idea of a disdainful, condescending, judgment, an attitude that see's themselves as superior, and the other inferior spiritually. (liberal vs. legalist)

D. The basis for this is God has accepted them both. V.3b

No Christian has the right to reject, condemn, or be an ultimate judge that rejects from the fellowship those whom God Himself has accepted, because of a difference of opinion on doubtful things. Therefore, the church and its members must "receive" whomever God has "received."

Paul limits his plea of mutual acceptance to those who can rightly claim a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ, involving all the doctrinal purity and lifestyle requirements that the writers of the Old Testament and New Testament elsewhere insist must be true as a result of saving faith.