

Are You Strong Enough to Keep the Peace?

Text: Romans 14:13-18

Date: November 12, 2017

CIT: God values unity so much that He charges strong Christians with the responsibility of deferring to weaker Christians in matters of conscience to keep the peace within a church family.

PURPOSE: To help each Christian see that a Christian doesn't prove how strong he is by what he can "handle" in his Christian life, but what he is willing to give up for the sake of a weaker Christian.

PRETEXT

One of the best books I have read this year is "The Boys in the Boat," the story of the 1936 Olympic Rowing team from the University of Washington. They were an unlikely group of contenders. Their team was made up of working-class boys whose fathers were farmers, loggers, and steel workers. Some were considered outcasts and misfits, but they managed to work together with a spirit of unity and sacrifice that ultimately propelled them to an olympic gold.

That dream was almost shattered in the second year of training. The 8 young men came back from summer vacation, and to the dismay of their coach, they had lost their stroke. To be a champion rowing crew, a team has to master the art of pulling the oars in near perfect unison. The blades of the oars must slice into the water at the exact same time. The oars must be pulled forward as though they are one. A team that cannot master that stroke will never be competitive.

That year, the rowing of the team was sloppy. The oars hit the water at odd times. To compound the problem, squabbles broke out between some of the boys. The performance of the team was so bad that the coach considered breaking up the team.

Eventually the team corrected their stroke. They put away their differences. They recovered a spirit of unity, and the result was one of the most dramatic wins in Olympic history.

TRANSITION

An important component of a church is a spirit of unity. The Apostle Paul described that unity in these terms: *striving together for the faith of the Gospel*. God has designed the church to be a body of members who come together with a sense of mission. They are to unify around the Gospel.

God wants our hearts to **beat as one** with a passion for reaching others for Christ. That's our purpose, and the Devil hates it. He will spare no effort to break up the unity of a church and detract it from its mission.

Our bible text this morning addresses the matter of unity. It is targeted to believers who are "strong in the faith." It gives us three guidelines for avoiding conflict and strife over one of the most common sources of division in the church: **a difference of opinion over matters of conscience - issues** for which there is no direct command or prohibition in the Word of God.

INTRODUCTION

Few things hurt the work of Christ more than division over matters of conscience - issues for which there is no direct command or prohibition in the Word of God.

Most of these issues revolve around the **practical application of God's Word to our lives**.

- We live in a fallen world. In this world, our culture is dominated by people who give little, if any, regard to pleasing God.
- Many are clearly NOT interested in things like modesty, virtue, holiness, and such like.
- It would be unreasonable to think that we could conform to this world in all its practices, and still please God with our lives.

- It is unlikely that we should adopt every **fad** and **fashion** that this world promotes, but where do we draw the line?
- It is unlikely that we should accept every form of **entertainment** this world produces, but where do we draw the line?
- Should a Christian celebrate Halloween, or Christmas?
- Is it okay for a Christian to get a tattoo?

In all kinds of matters like this, every Christian must decide what the Bible and his conscience will allow, and we do not all reach the same answers.

Transition

In the first portion of this chapter, Paul gave us three guidelines for handling these differences.

- You must receive those who do not think like you do.
- YOU are ultimately responsible for determining how God wants YOU to honor Him with your life. (Not about you, but Him)
- YOU do not have the last word on these issues; your Savior does, and He will either approve or reject the decision you made when you stand before Him at the judgment seat of Christ.

As Paul continues his teaching on how to keep our differences from becoming divisive, he gives us three more guidelines to apply. As you make up your mind concerning how you will practice your faith in Christ in this fallen world:

- I. You first concern is not your conscience, but your brother's conscience (v. 13-14)
 - A. Strife arises when we judge a brother by the standard of our *own* conscience.
 1. When two Christians disagree, the tendency is for us to judge one another: to justify our practice and to condemn that of our brother.

2. This frequently leads to bitter disputes and divisive behavior that hurts the cause of Christ.

Paul plainly states that we **must** stop doing that. However, that doesn't mean we are free to do whatever we want, or whatever we believe is right. We are to do what is best for the weaker brother.

- B. It is wrong to cause a **brother or sister to sin against his own conscience** because of something we allow in our own lives.
- In verse 14, Paul again turns to the matter of food.
 - 1. Paul was fully persuaded in his own conscience that if God created it to be eaten, he could eat it, however it got from the fields to his plate.
 - 2. Not every Christian shared his conviction. As a **matter of conscience**, they sincerely believed it was wrong for them to eat foods that had first been offered to or blessed by an idol (a very common practice in a pagan culture)
 - 3. Verse 14 - if that was the conviction a Christian reached, then to them such food was unclean.
 - a) They could not eat it without violating their conscience, and Paul tells the stronger Christians *to respect that*.
 - b) The strong Christian is not to insist on following his conscience if it will cause his brother to violate his own conscience.
 - c) Take the high ground, and yield to your brothers conscience.

Transition: Your first concern is not your conscience, but your brother's. Why? Because...

- II. Love for your brother is to have priority over exercising what you perceive to be your liberty (v. 15)

- A. If you insist on following your conscience, and it brings your brother to grief, that's not loving towards him; it's selfish.
- B. Jesus DIED to save your weaker brother; don't become the tool the devil uses to destroy him.
 - 1. Have you ever considered that your brother may *need* the extra layer of protection in his life to safeguard him from falling back into an old habit or yielding to sin?
 - 2. Do you want to be the one responsible for causing him to remove that layer of protection, and thus be devoured by the enemy?
 - a) The Christian who sins against his conscience often falls to *real sin*.
 - b) Love demands that we never allow the convictions of our own conscience to be responsible for a brother's fall.
 - c) What you may consider as "bondage" might in fact be a valid form of protection in his life!

Transition: Your first concern is not your conscience, but your brother's. If you love your brother, don't allow your conscience to be the cause of his fall. Instead...

III. Govern your actions by the principles of God's Kingdom, not your preferences or convictions (17-18)

In verses 17-18, Paul turns the table on the stronger Christian. In so many words, Paul says that the strong Christian should give far less attention to what the Word of God might allow, and focus instead on forging a life that reflects the Kingdom of God, the rulership of Jesus Christ over his or her life.

For example, Paul would certainly have the right to eat all the meat he wanted to, whenever he wanted to, and he would not be violating a command of God. However, he is not to insist on his right to do this, as if eating meat was of grave importance to God. That is NOT of

grave importance to God. What IS of grave importance to God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. Where Jesus is Lord, these WILL be evident in our fellowship.

- A. The principle of righteousness: conforming to God's standard of right and wrong.
1. God does have a mind on all of these matters that we have questions about, and we should seek to know His mind: what *He* thinks is right.
 2. Instead of asking "What's wrong with it," we need to ask "is it right in the eyes of God."
 - a) **Just because God doesn't have a rule against something doesn't make it right.**
 - b) In many discussion on matters of conscience, it seems to me that God's call to holiness is omitted. The first concern does not appear to be a life dedicated to God, but just doing what we want - as if God has no mind on the matter.
 - c) Ray Pritchard: In our zeal to be free from "legalism" we fall into the ditch of worldliness.

Just because God doesn't have a rule against it doesn't make it right in the eyes of God.

- B. The principle of peace: maintaining unity between your brothers and sisters in Christ
1. Jesus DIED to bring us together; why should a Christian who considers himself a strong Christian risk breaking up a fellowship by insisting on his "liberty"?
 2. A Christian doesn't prove how strong he is by what he can "handle" in his Christian life, but what he is willing to give up for the sake of a weaker brother.
 - a) What should you be willing to give up to help your brothers and sisters walk closer to God?

- b) What should you be willing to give up to promote peace within your church fellowship?
- c) What should you be willing to forgo to advance the cause of Christ?

Keeping the peace is more important to God than our preferences.

C. The principle of joy in the Holy Ghost: division quenches the Spirit; it does not produce the fruit of joy.

1. When we become carnal over matters of conscience, insisting on our “rights,” our “liberties,” it stifles the work of the Holy Spirit.

If I can give up my “right” to do something in the interest of peace and a spirit of joy, why wouldn’t I want to do that?

2. The stronger Christian is the one who is willing to yield his preferences in the interest of authentic, spiritual joy.

Verse 18 - if we observe these principles as we serve our Savior, we experience two positive outcomes.

- **We maintain a good conscience before God.** He *approves* of our walk in this world.
- **We preserve the unity of our fellowship.** We receive the approval of the men and women with whom we serve to advance the Cause of Christ.

Conclusion

Have you ever heard someone say, “How I live my Christian life is between me and God. It’s nobody else’s business!”

Those are not the words of a strong Christian. Those are the words of a selfish Christian. They are not even close to being right.

God values unity so much that He charges strong Christians with the responsibility of deferring to weaker Christians in matters of conscience. Are you a strong enough Christian to keep the peace?

- **Have you created strife by judging others by the standards of your own conscience?** Get it right with God, and get that practice out of your life.
- **Have you ever considered that having a “right” to do something still doesn’t make it right?**
 - It isn’t right if it causes a weaker Christian to sin against his own conscience or, worse, to fall into actual sin.
 - Before you begin tearing down the fences in a brother’s life, maybe you should consider that they might actually be helpful to his walk with Christ.
- **Is the practice of your faith uphold the principles of Kingdom of God?** Does it promote holy living? Does it strengthen the fellowship of the church? Could it be hindering the work of the Holy Spirit and the joy He can produce in our lives?

If you need help in understanding the degree of “sacrifice” you should be willing to make, consider Jesus Christ. He died to bring sinners together. He put our need of salvation above His own “right to life.” He gave His life for our sins so we could have God’s forgiveness.

Shouldn’t we follow His example? What liberty shouldn’t we be willing to forego to advance the cause of our Savior?