

Resolving Non-Moral Christian Issues -2

We're looking at dealing with the non-moral Christian issues that our modern-day church struggles with. Going to the movies, television, how to spend Sunday, make-up, jewellery, woman wearing pants, clothing, hair, sport and related issues. We saw last week that the foundation is to admit that such issues exist. The issue in Paul's day was eating meat sacrificed to idols. He showed them the issue was non-moral. The idol was nothing. The meat was nothing. However, he showed that there are two cornerstones to resolving these issues. 1) Determine your own convictions, and 2) graciously live with the convictions of others.

We saw how the Bible shows us how to determine our own convictions on these issues from Romans 14 and I Corinthians 6, 8 and 10. We are to 1) make our convictions under His Lordship. We do it for Him, not for self. 2) We determine if the issue will edify, build and help us as servants of Christ. If not, we reject it. 3) We decide if it will begin to control or enslave us. If so – we reject it. 4) We hold our conviction without doubting or wavering.

However, that is only half of the solution. The problem is, you will follow those steps and come to a conclusion regarding say, going to the beach, that is completely the opposite of another Christian's. And the amazing thing is, neither of you is wrong! These are not moral issues, but your response to them is. So how do we sort it out? The answer lies in graciously living with the convictions of others.

Now this is not tolerating sin. It has nothing to do with sin. Sin is to be rebuked and disciplined in the local church. It has nothing to do with essential doctrine. We expose and separate from false teaching. It has to do with the grace and deference we are to show to each other in the church with regard these non-moral issues. Our problem, as we said last week, is that we like to have a list of right and wrong. We like it spelt out for us, without any prayer, Bible study or soul-searching. So, the mistake we make is that once we have determined our conviction on a particular issue, we now believe that everyone else must have the same viewpoint. We cannot tolerate the idea that what is wrong for me may not be wrong for you. This is not moral relativism: it is the reality of non-moral issues. One man has no problem going into a certain restaurant. It is OK for him. Another comes out of a life of alcoholism, and to go in to a licensed restaurant would return all sorts of things to him. It is wrong for him. And so, we have to understand that the next crucial area to understand is how to live graciously with the convictions of others.

The first principle is to

1) Understand there are weak and strong in the same body

Romans 14:1-3: ¹Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, *but* not to doubtful disputations. ²For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs. ³Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him." Paul begins this chapter by pointing out that there are two groups – the weak and the strong. This has nothing really to do with the time period they have been saved, or even their spiritual knowledge. A weak brother is one whose conscience is easily offended. He is wary of Christian liberty;

it is not clearly defined enough for him. A strong one has learnt to use their liberty with responsibility, conviction, purpose and under authority. Paul gives an example. In his day, the weak brother felt offended by eating meat offered to idols. It seemed like serving them again, and he could even go back into idolatry. The strong understood that meat was meat and it made no difference.

Now here you have a problem: what are these Christians to do in each other's company? Moreover, what are they to make of the other groups' convictions?

Well, Paul gives two different instructions to the two different groups. To the weak, he says, don't judge. To the strong he says, don't despise, and don't cause them to stumble.

2) The weak must not judge

Let's look at the first one. The weaker brother has a 'stricter' conviction so to speak. He doesn't eat meat sacrificed to idols. In our context, he may be a man who abstains from certain things. He takes a very conservative view on some of the issues. The problem that he will struggle with is in his mind he is thinking, "I am strict on these things. That Christian is doing the opposite. He must not care about his spiritual life. He must be a libertarian. He is abusing God's grace." Paul says this is wrong. Notice his rebuke of the weaker brother's thinking "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. (v4) But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. ¹¹For it is written, *As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.* ¹²So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. ¹³Let us not therefore judge one another any more (v10-13a)" Paul says – Don't judge. Now judging does not mean we never discriminate and never evaluate another person's behaviour. Of course we do that. Paul tells us to do that in Philippians 1:9. Paul means the same kind of judging that our Lord spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount: judging another's motives, their inner heart. Unless Scripture gives you a person's motive, which it often does in regard to false teachers, you have no right to guess that another man swimming on Sunday has to do with a disrespect for the Lord's Day. You have no right to see a Christian in front of a television set and consider him worldly and given to sensuality. If you see him watching a filthy program, yes, then it's clear, but not merely because he has one in his lounge. Paul says to the weaker brother that each person will give an account to Christ. He is our Master, He will judge both our motives and our methods. Christians must be accountable to each other in the sense of making sure we are Christlike. But we can never pass sentence on another's motives and inner thoughts. Then we are usurping the place of Christ in another's life. We have one Master, with fellow servants to help us serve that one Master. So while the weaker brother sees the one with a different conviction, he is inclined to think, "I am stronger, their conviction is weak". It is, in fact, very often the opposite. That brother must have the grace to understand that that other believer formed his conviction in the same way but came to a different conclusion.

I have a personal conviction about my dress in the house of God. I prefer to wear something that reminds me that He is to be revered. However, when I see other believers in jeans and takkies, it would be ungodly of me to assume they are unspiritual for doing

so. We're both worshipping God. They have thought through the issue and come to a different conclusion, and that's ok for them. So to the weak, he says, don't judge.

3) The strong must not despise or offend

Then Paul has two words for the strong. The strong are those who better understand grace, the entire doctrine of grace. To the strong, Paul firstly says, don't despise. The one who was eating the meat was not to despise the one not eating. This is the other side of the coin. The one who understands that meat is nothing, and an idol is nothing is all too inclined to say, "How legalistic that brother is! How foolish! Doesn't he realize that it's no big deal!" This is wrong, says Paul. Don't despise the weaker. Don't get angry because he doesn't understand your liberty, or even if he misunderstands your liberty. I know someone who is fond of mocking another pastor for his strict convictions. He makes a joke of this man's views on dress, fellowship and Bible versions. He makes a caricature of him as a fool with no insight. In fact, this man has some rather strict convictions himself, but his pride will not even acknowledge those things as non-moral issues. The point is, he has got twisted up, and is in fact heading right back to being weak. To despise another for their conviction shows we haven't worked through these issues at all, and don't understand grace. We must accept some will have stronger or stricter convictions on some issues than ourselves. Often, the reaction of despising comes about because we haven't really thought out the issue between ourselves and God, and somehow feel like we are being shown up by their strong conviction –as if it is some kind of competition.

Paul's second instruction to the strong is, don't cause your brother to stumble. This is perhaps the issue Paul hammered home the hardest. He repeated it frequently. He says to the strong, "yes, you are more at home in the grace of Christ. Do not cause the weaker to stumble by an irresponsible use of your liberty."

"But if thy brother be grieved with *thy* meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. (v15) *It is* good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor *any thing* whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak. (21)

8:9 But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak." Paul says to the strong: don't exercise your liberty in a way that would hurt your brother. For instance, Paul says that if he is with that weak brother, he will not be eating that meat.

V13 Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend.

I know a pastor feels it is wrong for a man to wear shorts. I don't share his conviction, unless the shorts are ridiculously revealing or questionable in some way. However, I will not visit that man wearing shorts, for it will cause him to be grieved. Having grace is to respect his conviction, not despise him for it, and simply not give him any reason to be offended. Some will say, "What a stupid conviction!" But that goes right back to Paul's warning: don't despise! However, the flip side of the coin is that the true meaning of offend means that I will cause the weaker brother to go and violate his own conviction

because of me. Often that is not the case, it is simply a case of people getting annoyed that you don't hold their convictions. It comes back to not judging, and not despising.

Now Paul anticipated the question that would come by the stronger brother 10:29-30 "for why is my liberty judged of another *man's* conscience? ³⁰For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?" Why must I be judged for my conviction? Paul says, give no offence. Yes, you have your conviction, but use your liberty with consideration. You have a car that is capable of doing 100km/h. But you do not always push it to that limit because it is unlawful, and inconsiderate. In the same way, your convictions must consider your brother and sister. I knew a pastor who went with a member of the church to a restaurant. That member had a personal conviction about not going into restaurants that were licensed. This pastor was not going in there to drink, and didn't mind. However, that brother was offended. Later, when the pastor found out about the brother's conviction, he apologized to him, which was gracious. If he had known, he would not have gone in there, which made him confused. The key is, we do put the other ahead of ourselves. Christian liberty is a privilege to be used wisely, not a right to be flaunted.

Paul gives another issue for the strong to consider: "For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; ¹¹And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" Paul says that if a weaker brother sees a stronger doing the opposite of his own conviction, he will violate his own conviction and fall. Perhaps a new believer swears off TV. He comes to visit a stronger believer and all he sees is soap operas on. Pretty soon he thinks, "you know, this guy does it, it must be OK". He goes back to TV, and it is not right for him at this stage in his life, and he falls. The point is, the strong are supposed to care for the weak. The strong are supposed to take responsibility for the weak. That means slowly and patiently shepherding them into an understanding of the doctrine of grace. Do not demand that a person share your conviction; you will harden them into life-long weak brothers, or worse, legalists. Let God open their eyes, as they observe you blamelessly obeying Christ. Weaker believers do not need confusion. If younger believers will be confused by seeing me at the movies, I won't go. If younger believers will be confused if I invite them to a braai on Sunday, I won't do so. I must respect and honour a weaker believer, who is like that newborn antelope, trying to find his feet when it comes to grace. It's a new and often frightening concept. Suddenly it's all about the internal, not the external. It's not as measurable. He will prefer extremes; they seem easier to grasp and understand. Allow him to do that. Don't confuse him in the meantime. Let him grow and accommodate his strict conviction in your life and your church.

4) Everyone must receive the other

Paul says in Romans 14:1: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, *but* not to doubtful disputations." We are to receive one another. The strong must accept the weak. The weak must accept the strong. We must not have disputes over these moral non-issues. Later in the chapter Paul says, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." Anyone who has effectively dealt with conflict

knows that that often means not getting all of my way. If I am strong, it may be withholding my right to exercise my liberty in front of a weaker brother. If I am weak, it may be withholding judgement and questioning of others for their convictions. Paul sums it up in I Corinthians 10:32-33 “Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: ³³Even as I please all *men* in all *things*, not seeking mine own profit, but the *profit* of many, that they may be saved”.

Ultimately the problem lies in thinking that because I work out my convictions personally, I have a right to be selfish in my use of them. But the truth is that I must work them out personally because they will be different for different individuals. I must live them out with a *God first, others second, me last* mentality. We don't live or die for or to ourselves as believers. It's really about grace. A pastor I know used the word *deference*. Deference means I defer to my brother or sister in Christ. I do not judge, despise or offend them. I receive them and their conviction. If they are weak, I will be patient with them and give them time to grow in grace.

I can never exercise my liberty in a way which offends others or else I am literally sinning against Christ. Phil 2:3-4 “*Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.* ⁴Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others”. My brother first.

The final principle comes out of Romans 14:16.

5) Don't let your good be evil spoken of. Paul means, don't let this liberty in Christ earn you a reputation as something it shouldn't. Remember, we are Christ's ambassadors. If the ambassadors of another country are reported to have been involved in a drunken party, it reflects on the whole country. How much more with Christians reflecting a Lord that the world hates, and longs to discredit Him and His servants? Never do anything that is doubtful, that has the appearance of evil, that gives any occasion to the flesh, or that may make the world even raise an eyebrow. John MacArthur used the example of two Christians who go to dinner at an unsaved man's house. The man puts meat before them offered to idols. The stronger brother has no problem eating it. The weaker one does. What does the stronger believer do? If he eats, his brother stumbles. If he doesn't eat, the unbeliever is offended. The right answer is, he doesn't eat. He refuses to cause his brother to stumble and politely says, “I'm sorry, but my brother here is coming out of idolatry, and it would be offensive for him if we ate this”. The unbeliever, though he may be offended, will be impressed with the love the stronger one has for the weaker. Rather than eating, there being a division between the two, and the unbeliever thinking, “those Christians can't even agree between themselves, and they don't respect each other.”

Don't let your good be evil spoken of. Be cautious and wise in the use of your liberty. It is like an engine that has more speed on it, but wisdom uses the brakes more often than the accelerator in the area of non-moral issues. Christian liberty is more often the liberty to say 'no', the liberty to abstain, than it is the liberty to partake.

So, graciously living with the convictions of others means understanding there are strong and weak in the same body. It means the weak must not judge. It means the strong must not despise or cause the weak to offend. It means strong and weak must receive each other with grace, deferring to the other and putting their needs above their own. It means guarding our testimony in these areas, so that our liberty in Christ is not evil spoken of. God has a fervent desire for grace and humility in the local church. Let us each be fully persuaded in our own minds of our convictions, and then let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.