

Handeling differences of opinion between believers

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Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. 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. 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. 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 surely 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. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. (Romans 14:1-13)

Introduction

In our series on practical Christian living we now come to a new section where the apostle deals with the matter of handling differences of opinion between

believers.

This was clearly a major issue in Rome. The apostle devotes the best part of two chapters to it. It was also a big issue on Corinth. Paul devoted long section in his first letter to the Corinthians to the matter.

What was the nature of the problem? The matter came to the surface over the question of what to do about meat that was bought at the market place. The problem was that if you bought meat down at the market there was a high probability that it had previously been offered on an altar to an idol.

Some believers felt that if there was a chance that meat bought in a market had previously been offered in a sacrifice then they should not eat meat at all, because they felt that by doing so they would be participating in idol worship. These are the ones that the apostle describes as the “weak”, because their understanding of God’s grace was relatively weak, and they could easily come under a sense of condemnation.

Other believers, on the other hand, thought that what had happened previously to meat was of no consequence. They knew that idols had no power of themselves, and that any ceremony that might have been performed on an animal prior to its death had no effect on the animal itself. They knew that they were not idol worshippers, and they knew they were justified before God. So they ate meat with a clear conscience. These believers the apostle calls the “strong”.

This difference of view threatened to destroy the unity of the church. The “strong” were tending to look down on the “weak” with a sense of superiority, and regard them as deficient in their understanding. The “weak” were tending to have a judgemental attitude to towards the “strong” and condemn them for what they felt was their disobedience. The apostle in this chapter is urging love and toleration between believers who have such differences of opinion.

Before we look at what the apostle says about handling such differences of opinion, it is worth making clear that the apostle is *not* dealing here with differences of opinion about fundamental issues to do with Christian belief and lifestyle. The apostle’s view on such differences he has made quite plain elsewhere.

As regards preaching a different doctrine he has made clear in his letter to the Galatians that someone who teaches a different Gospel is not to be tolerated. In Galatians 1.8 – 9 he wrote,

Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

As far as the apostle is, there is only one Gospel, only one Christ, only one Saviour. If someone comes and says that they have a different “interpretation”, and that they think the Bible does not say that Christ is the eternal Son of God, or that they think that you can get to God through works or through ceremonies, such a person is not to be regarded as a fellow believer.

Equally, as regards living a way of life that plainly contradicts the Bible, again the apostle’s position is quite clear in his first letter to the Corinthians. In chapter five verses 9 to 13 of that letter we read,

I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

If a professing Christian directly and persistently contradicts the clear moral teaching of the Bible, and without repentance, then this is not just a matter of difference of opinion over some non-essential issue. There should be no toleration of such a person until he or she comes to repentance.

But there *are* issues where there are genuinely held differences of opinion between true Bible-believing Christians. Such issues which are not fundamental to salvation or to Christian living. The Scripture is clear about salvation and the fundamentals of Christian living, but not so clear about issues on the edge of the Christian faith, and so it is possible for genuine believers who love God and his Word to have differences of opinion about such things.

Here are some examples about which there are differences of opinion between believers today:

- The use of alcohol. Some would say that all believers should have a policy of total abstention. Others would say that drink in moderation is acceptable.

- Dress code in church. Some would say that we should wear only "Sunday best" for church. Others would say that it is fine to wear anything as long as it is decent.

- Issues about the education of children. Some would say that if you are going to be obedient to God you *must* teach your children at home. Others would say that it may be necessary to send children to school and indeed may be beneficial.

- Use of TV, going to the cinema, watching videos. Some would say that a Christian should not do any of these things, others would say that controlled watching of TV or films can be helpful.

Other present-day issues which could be mentioned include the question of which translation of the Bible to use, the sort of hymns and songs to sing, the mode and subjects of baptism, church government, and what to expect prior to the second coming of Christ.

In this passage there are three things that the apostle says about how such differences are to be handled. He says that we should:

1. Accept each other, vv. 1 – 4

2. Believe the best about the motives of others, vv. 5 – 8

3. Not judge each other, vv. 9 – 12

Accept each other

Firstly, the apostle says that we should accept each other. Let us read again verses 1 – 4:

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must

not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. 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.

We have already seen how, in the issue to do with the eating of meat there were two groups. There were those whom the apostle called the "weak", who felt that they could not eat meat in case it had been offered to idols. And there were those whom the apostle called the "strong" who felt happy about eating anything.

Paul addresses both groups. To the "strong" he says, "Accept him whose faith is weak without passing judgement on disputable matters" (v. 1). He also says, "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not." (v. 3a)

And to the "weak" he says, "the man who does not everything must not condemn the man who does" (v. 3b).

We could apply what the apostle says to many of the issues about which there are differences of opinion between believers today that I mentioned a few moments ago. Let us take just one example, that of dress. Some believers think that a Christian should wear "Sunday best" to come to church. They would argue that you would dress smartly to go to meet the Queen or to go to a wedding, and that when we come together at church we are meeting with Someone more far important than the Queen, and so as a mark of respect we should be as smartly dressed as possible. Others believers would say that, as long as you are decent, it does not matter what you wear. They would argue that God looks on the heart not on the outward appearance. Besides, they would say that if you put a lot of effort into looking smart, church can become a sort of "fashion parade" and attention may be turned away from God. They would argue that visitors would be put off from coming to church because they may feel that to come to church you have to be very well dressed.

We can see how those who take the "anything goes" view might look down on those have the "Sunday best" view. And those who have the "Sunday best" view might judge and condemn those who take the "anything goes" view. We could legitimately adapt what the apostle says in this section to say, "The one who feels happy wearing anything on Sunday must not look down on him who wears his "Sunday best", and the one who wears only "Sunday best" must not condemn

the man who wears anything.”

The apostle then goes on to speak of the reason for this. He says, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant. To his own master he stands or falls. And he will make him stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand”

We should accept each other and not look down on each other or condemn each other because,

- a) Our fellow believers are answerable to God, and not to us
- b) If they are true believers, God has justified them, and so we are in no position to condemn them.

So we see that we should accept one another in Christ as fellow believers, whatever the differences of opinion we may have over minor points of Christian living. It would be quite wrong to separate from another believer over the sort of minor issues that I have mentioned.

We should believe the best about the motives of others

Secondly, the apostle says that we should believe the best about the motives of others. Let us hear again what he says in 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.

The apostle mentions now another issue which threatened to divide Christians, the issue of “holy” days. He may have been referring to a difference of opinion over Sabbath observance, or he may have been referring to a difference of opinion about the observance of other “holy” days of the Jewish calendar such as the new moon festival and different feast days. Some felt that these special days should still be observed. Others felt that they no longer had relevance for the believer.

The point that the apostle makes is that each person should be fully persuaded in his or her own mind as to the appropriate way to behave. In these disputable matters you must not do what you think others would expect you to do. You should do what you believe the Lord would have you to do.

This is because every true believer is seeking to serve the Lord in his or her life. "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."

We need to respect the decisions that different ones of us are making. Unless the thing that the person is doing is a clear breach of the moral teaching of Scripture, we should believe that the person has acted in the best motives, seeking to serve the Lord. Of course motives can be false, but we should immediately assume the worst about other believers.

The apostle goes on to speak generally about the Christian life. For the true Christian, life is not about pleasing yourself but pleasing the Lord. "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."

Our lives are not our own. We have been bought with a price. Our time, energy, strength, money, gifts are for the Lord nor for ourselves. In everything we should be thinking, "What does the Lord want me to do" not "What do I want to do".

This should be your attitude. You should assume that this is why your fellow believer is making his or her decisions. It is very easy to jump to conclusions about another, and condemn him out of hand, and attribute the worst motive to him, just because he decides to do things differently from the way you would do things. We should believe the best about others, unless forced by irrefutable evidence to believe the alternative.

We should not judge each other

The third thing the apostle says is that we should not judge each other. He says in verses 9 – 12:

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 surely 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.

He reminds his readers that Christ died and was raised again. And he says that the reason was that that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. If Christ is Lord, then ultimately he is the one to whom we must all give an account. You are not in a position to sit in judgement on your fellow-believer, because he must give an account of his life to Christ, not to you.

So we are in no position to judge each other in disputable matters. "You then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother?"

As we have seen, the apostle is not saying that we are to suspend all judgement in all matters about lifestyle or beliefs of professing believers. If someone directly contradicts the moral teaching of the Bible, or denies the Gospel, then we are to take steps to discipline that person. But in other, more disputable matters, we should leave it to God to judge our fellow believers.

He goes on to say, "For we must all appear before God's judgement seat". Note, every believer will be judged. It is not just unbelievers who will be judged, but believers as well. This verse is an interesting parallel with 2 Corinthians 5.10, where the apostle says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of *Christ*, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." In that verse he says we must appear before the judgement seat of Christ. Here he says we must appear before the judgement seat of God. The comparison of the verses shows us that Christ is God. To appear before the judgement seat of Christ is to appear before the judgement seat of God, because Christ is God, as much as the Father is God.

Then he quotes from Isaiah 45.23. "As surely as I live" says the Lord, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God." Again we see another striking parallel with Philippians 2.10 – 11, where the apostle says, "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." This also proves that Christ is God, because Isaiah says that the One to whom every knee will bow is God.

The point that the apostle is making is this: we are all going to have to give an account of our lives to God. Therefore, in disputable matters, we should not pass judgement on fellow believers. We should leave them for God to judge.

Conclusion

We have been talking about the handling of differences of opinion between believers about matters which are not essential to the faith or to Christian obedience.

We have seen that we should

- Accept each other

- Believe the best about the motives of others

- Not judge each other.

Let me ask you this question as we finish: have you been maintaining a critical, judgemental spirit towards other believers? Do you need to repent? Is your lack of love for other believers actually because in fact you are not a believer yourself? If so, come to Christ that he may wash away your sins and give you eternal life. Then you will be able to love other believers as you should.

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