

Matters of Conscience

Romans 14:1-4

Introduction

Andrew McRaven describes the ninth week of Navy Seal training – as it is referred to by others as ‘Hell Week’ Six days with no sleep / constant physical and mental harassment

Long runs / ocean swims obstacle courses – the purpose was to eliminate the weak!

Statistically speaking – more students quit during this week than any other out of the 6 month training period.

On one particularly grueling day – they paddled rubber boats from Coronado down to the mudflats. Soon after – they were ordered into the mud where various races and exercises took place designed to keep them cold, wet, and miserable. The mud clung to every part of your body – and by evening they could barely move from the coldness and fatigue.

At night – as the temperature dropped and the wind picked up - - - morale was declining rapidly. It was only Wednesday – with three more days to go. One of the instructors came by and said there was a fire started - where he had hot coffee and chicken soup – we could join him there – he just needed five of us to quit first.

One student began to move towards the instructor – McRaven grabbed his arm and held him tight – but he broke free of his grasp – there’s number one. Suddenly – above the howl of the wind came a voice – singing. It was raspy and tired – but loud enough to be heard by all. Soon one voice became two and two became three - - - and before long everyone was singing.

The student that had walked away – turned around and came back and rejoined the group – and began singing as well.

The instructor grabbed the bullhorn and shouted for the class to quit singing. No one did. With each threat – the voices got louder. In the darkness with the fire reflecting on his face – I could see him smile.

Somehow – in the midst of all that singing – the mud seemed a little warmer, the wind a little tamer and the dawn not so far away.

Life lesson: When you’re up to your neck in mud – start singing!

Martin Luther would agree with this lesson – and see it as the particular calling of faith

Martin Luther: ‘Reason sees the world as extremely ungodly, and therefore it murmurs. The spirit sees nothing but God’s benefits in the world and therefore it begins to sing.’

The Christian is one who is called to ‘rejoice in the Lord always’

One of the reasons we gather for worship

Hebrews 13:15 - '... let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.'

We give thanks to God for He is good

Does that mean life is easy – or that we never experience heartache or sorrows – or devastating trials?

Certainly not

But – through it all – we Christians gather and sing; - - 'It is well with my soul'

My Redeemer lives – and at the last He will take His stand

Paul has been giving us instruction on living out the Christian life – applying our doctrine

He has told us to offer up our bodies a living sacrifice unto the Lord / not be conformed to the world

He has called us to walk in love towards our neighbor and towards our brother or sister in Christ

He does not say it will always be easy to do so

We need to take up the spiritual armor of God in our fight against sin

We are to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh.

In Ch. 14 – it may seem like Paul is switching gears a bit here - - - but this teaching actually flows naturally from what Paul has told us about loving the brethren

Romans 14:1 - 'Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.'

Some Christians – are weak in faith – others are strong - - - and for the two to co-exist together in the church – there must be a mutual forbearance and tolerance of one another's practices

In theology – we sometimes refer to these issues as 'gray areas' – or matters of conscience – where two believers may take different approaches to some issue in life

The key issue for Paul is that we learn to be charitable towards one another with our differences

Christians are not clones of one another – and we often come from varied backgrounds with different values and traditions

If the Word of God does not say something is sin - - - then neither should we

Augustine: 'In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.'

I. The Weak and the Strong - v. 1

In the church - we sometimes distinguish between primary doctrines and secondary doctrines

Primary: The Inspiration of Scripture / The deity of Christ / substitutionary atonement / bodily resurrection of Christ / etc. / salvation by grace thru faith

Paul was unwavering if something infringed upon the message of the gospel

When the Judaizers tried to add circumcision as a requirement for salvation – Paul was immovable – He rejected their teaching outright!

Galatians 1:8, 9 - 'But even though we, or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.'

*** Don't mess with the gospel

Secondary doctrines / matters – would include views on the rapture / baptism / or perhaps one's choice of Bible translation – activities appropriate on Sunday – sabbath day / birth-control [yea or nay] / preferences in schooling [public school / Christian school / home school] / views on smoking / alcohol as well / speaking in tongues

These differences may or may not be significant – but they don't necessarily mean that someone is not saved or not a Christian

Here Paul argues – in the body of Christ – there is room for differences of opinion – in matters where perhaps the Scripture does not address it directly - - - or someone has a more sensitive conscience than another

Paul will go on to address the matter of meat [vv. 2-3]

Most commentators say – we're not sure which issue he is addressing but there are two very good options

- 1) One is the pagan who becomes a Christian and who now does not want to eat meat that has been sacrificed to an idol

Paul deal with this in I Corinthians – He said – 'it's not a big deal' - - - but if your brother is offended – then don't do it – don't use your liberty to cause a brother to stumble

2) The other option – is a someone comes to Christ from a Jewish background – where they have been eating kosher all their life – and now they are told they can eat pork!

Paul says – if he doesn't want to eat meat – he doesn't have to

Key principle: don't judge one another

Romans 14:17 - 'For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.'

Christians come in many different shapes and sizes

The differences here are in matters that are morally indifferent / do not infringe upon the gospel

*** Christians are to preserve the unity of the Spirit – not fanning the flames of unnecessary dissension

What brings us together is our common faith in Christ as Redeemer

We are to be governed by the Scriptures

But the Scriptures do not speak to every issue

The Puritans did not believe in the observance of Christmas – they saw it as a pagan addition to Christianity – no biblical command to observe Christmas / Christmas Eve / etc.

Most Christians today do not share that view – we have liberty to observe Christmas - - - even if we are not commanded to – lets just do so in a way that honors Christ

Somebody one year asked me why the church didn't have a nativity set – on display - - during the Christmas season – 'where is our nativity scene?'

It was an anonymous note – so I don't think I was able to get back to the person

But – to this person – the nativity display was an important reflection of faithfulness to the Christmas Season

It's helpful at times to know how Christians have dealt with issues in different periods of history - - - to challenge our assumptions and cultural baggage that we bring to the faith

Someone one year asked our elder board – why don't we observe Lent? [give something up for 40 days / before Easter]

A lot of times it comes down to what someone grew up with

When I was a kid – we always had fish on Fridays for lunch at the public school – out of deference to the RCC – who didn't want their kids to eat meat on Fridays

Paul: Exercise charity / grace towards one another – [it didn't hurt me to eat fish]

It's ok to be a vegetarian – but the moment someone says – if you are not a vegetarian – you cannot be saved – then we have a problem

*** We are to make room in the body of Christ – for everyone whom Christ accepts

John Piper once said – he would hate to pastor a church of which Jonathan Edwards could not be a member – or John Calvin [infant baptism]

Piper – was the Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist [BGC]

We have taken the position that believer's baptism by immersion is the proper form - - - but we do not insist upon it as condition of membership / salvation - - - essentially saying if someone's conscience tells them that their infant baptism is good enough - - - we don't bother them!

We encourage people to read the Scriptures – and make a determination based on what they see

MLJ once attended a church service where the man leading the communion service said that anyone who owned a TV set – was not welcome to partake of the communion elements

Where did he get that?

Not exactly church of the open door!

C.S. Lewis: 'One of the marks of a certain type of bad man is that he cannot give up a thing himself without wanting everyone else to give it up.'

God may lead us to give certain things up – but that doesn't mean everyone else has to!

Christians are not pressed out of a cookie cutter mold

Alexander Strauch: 'Some believing Christians are so argumentative and combative that I think they would argue with Jesus Christ if He were here!'

Alexander Strauch: 'There is debate whether or not we will be quizzed at the judgment seat of Christ as to why we were premillennial or amillennial. But there is no doubt that we will be judged as to our love for God and neighbor.'

Take the issue of alcohol / smoking

MLJ says that it wasn't until around the 1830s that preachers and leaders of the church began giving up alcohol

You can see in the records – a stipend for hay for his horse / a certain amount for beer / a certain amount for tobacco

Martin Luther - - - In talking about the Reformation – he said

Martin Luther: "I simply taught, preached, and wrote *God's Word*; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.'

That may shock some - - - but in the Scriptures - - - alcohol is not sin - - - but drunkenness is

Personally [my opinion] – I see no point in alcohol unless I'm getting drunk – so I avoid it

Paul includes drunkards with the unregenerate

I Corinthians 6:9-10 - 'Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.'

Paul said – 'do not be drunk with wine – but be filled with the Holy Spirit'

He also told Timothy to use a little wine for the sake of his frequent ailments

In many cultures - - - fermented drinks were better for the stomach than the drinking water available – certainly true in the 1st century

II. Showing Grace to One Another - vv. 2-3

We are to walk in love – which entails refraining from adultery / murder / stealing / coveting / etc. [13:8-10]

2 errors to avoid:

- 1) Antinomianism – license / abuse of grace [anything goes] – ignore clear commands of Scripture
- 2) Legalism – which puts us under man-made rules

We seek to avoid both extremes - - - and strive to be faithful to the Scriptures

Some other helpful principles in talking about gray areas:

Moderation is considered in many traditions to be an important virtue

In politics – a moderate – is a kind of middle of the road [not necessarily good or bad]

But when it comes to many behavioral practices in life – moderation is often good

Let's say a person likes video games - - - pretty soon they are playing video games 40-50 hours a week / becomes a video game addict / doesn't show up for work - - - he neglects his wife and kids

We'd say – this person has a problem – a problem with moderation

Are video games inherently evil? [of course not] / [at least the ones I've seen!]

We might consider something like the way we dress for church

It's common to say – God will take us any way we come - - - come as you are!

There is truth to that – but we can go to extremes – should we all come in our swim suit? Should we come with muddy face and flip flops?

I once met a guy from a church in Newton – and one of his first questions was whether or not I wore a tie when I preached? / that to him was very important

There are extremes on the issue

A consideration we can't overlook is that various cultures have ways of signifying respect or significance to an event

If we show up for grandma's funeral wearing a t-shirt and shorts - - - probably get frowned upon

I remember one year – as a kid - - - my family visited Arlington cemetery - - - and me and my brothers were teenagers and so we didn't necessarily grasp or appreciate the gravity of the place

And it was super-hot that day – and we were waiting in the parking lot - - - took our shirts off

A soldier came by and told us that we needed to put our shirts back on as a sign of respect – we were way out of line – and we didn't know it!

*** Cultural standards play a role

R.C. Sproul once did some study in the Netherlands with the famed professor G.C. Berkhouwer - - - and Sproul said – in European culture - - - at the time - - - wearing a jacket was a sign of decorum – in the classroom

Well – it was hot – and Sproul took his jacket off - - - and the professor said – ‘Would the American in the back please put his jacket back on!’

Sproul said – he knew – only an American would be so informal [in his mind – rude!] in a theological class room

Love leads us to bear with one another who have different opinions

Try not to give offense – sometimes it will happen

Chuck Swindoll shares a story about food - - - some missionaries on the field – there were a group of about 4 couples

And 3 had decided that if they could not get a particular food where they were living – they would go without – ‘give it up for Jesus’

The 4th missionary couple – regularly had family members send them peanut butter back from the states

This caused such a rift that the peanut butter eaters ended up leaving the field

The other adults in the room could not allow them to eat their peanut butter!

Principle: Don’t make things sin which the Bible does not call sin! [show some grace]

Lewis said these words at the beginning of ‘Mere Christianity’ – talking about denominational differences

C.S. Lewis: “When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house.”

Many Jews brought up under the Mosaic Law – had trouble adjusting to the full liberty of the gospel

Some messianic Jews today want to observe Jewish festivals – the bar mitzvah / Passover

Such things are not particularly relevant – if we understand they have no bearing upon our salvation

For Messianic Jews – as long as they don't try to force Gentiles to observe festivals and rituals - -- it's immaterial

We might look at the Amish with their horse and buggy / and not using electricity / etc.

Why impose such restrictions upon yourself ?

But – Paul would say – if he thinks it is wrong – let him be [if He believes in Christ as Lord and Savior] - - - they are fine

Now – if they think it's necessary for salvation - - - we would call that a cult / and a distortion of the gospel

Paul is not arguing for an anything goes view in the church

We simply must distinguish between the essentials and the non-essentials of the faith

God doesn't care so much about what we eat / or what we wear – He does care about the heart! / that we walk in love - - - rejoice in Christ and His salvation

III. Judging the Servant of Another - v. 4

We are not to reject our brothers in Christ over incidentals of Christian living

God is our Master – and to Him alone all are responsible

He's the judge – not us

Leon Morris: 'When the meaning of justification by faith is grasped, questions like the use of meat and wine and special days become irrelevant.'

Well – I thought that if my brother sins – I am supposed to go and correct him

Matthew 18:15 - "Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have gained your brother.'

The key is that we are only dealing with real sins – not peccadilloes / differences of opinion

If the Word of God does not say something is sin - - - then neither should we

Conclusion

If we rest on Jesus Christ alone for our salvation - -- we are on the solid ground of the gospel

Colin Smith: 'A Christian's confidence before God in life and death does not rest on the quality of his or her Christian life, which will be patchy at best. Our confidence is in the character of God who is faithful and just, and the work of our Savior who has sealed our justification by paying our debt through the shedding of His blood on the cross.'

We are saved by grace alone thru faith alone in Christ alone