

That We might Bear Fruit For God

Lesson 17

The Christian's mind renewed in attitude towards God's Church.
(Romans 14:16 - 15:14)

By F. M. Perry.

"(16) Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; (17) for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (18) For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. (19) So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. (20) Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean; but they are evil for the men who eats and gives offense. (21) It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. (22) The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. (23) But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

“(1) Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. (2) Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. (3) For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached Thee fell upon Me.' (4) For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (5) Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; (6) that with one

accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (7) Wherefore accept one another just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (8) For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, (9) and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, 'Therefore I will give praise to Thee among the Gentiles. And I will sing to Thy name.' (10) And again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.' (11) And again, 'Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him.' (12) And again Isaiah says, 'There shall come the root of Jesse, and He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles hope.' (13) Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (14) And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another." (Romans 14:16 - 15:14 NASV).

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Questions for study.

1. Discuss the effect of "doubtful disputations" on the consciences of Christians. What does Paul mean by the inspired statement, "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking?" How can Christian service be acceptable to God and approved by men? (Romans 14:16-18).
2. Note that Paul addresses the "strong," not the "weak." Why? What should be the goal of all Christian service? How did Paul illustrate the goal of "edification?" What is to be the final result of Christian service in the church? (Romans 15:1-6).
3. Who were "the circumcision" to whom Christ became a servant? What does Paul mean by the phrase, "promises given to the fathers?" When, in the course of human history since the creation, did the Gentiles begin to "abound in hope? Who came from the "root of Jesse," and arose "to rule over the Gentiles?" What is Paul's conclusion concerning the Gentile Christians of Rome? (Romans 15:7-14).

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The effect of "doubtful disputations" on the consciences of Christians was taken very seriously by Paul. It was of great importance to prevent the consciences of people from "being seared." In Romans 14:14 Paul said, "To him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." In this Paul spoke to the one who violates his own conscience. It is sinful for him to do so. Then in Romans 14:20-21 Paul said, "All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the men who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles." In this Paul spoke to the one who may cause another to violate his conscience. It is sinful to cause another to violate his conscience. The evil effect of conscience violation was brought out in Romans 14:23, "He who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and whatever is not from faith is sin." Disputations about human opinions can bring about condemnation of a person. A person can be lost because of the effect on him of such disputes over human opinions.

Now the conscience is not an absolute authority to give us the last word on what is right or wrong. The conscience must be trained and influenced by external things. Paul taught in this Roman letter that God gave the conscience to people as a tool for good and that God gave the conscience its first original training to start us on the right way! In Romans 2:15 Paul said that the consciences of all people have been taught by what God has written on their hearts and otherwise made evident to them. God uses the conscience in bringing people to a

knowledge of sin, and to convict them, and to lead them to know that they need to be freed from law, that they need mercy. The conscience, then, is most important in leading a person initially to Christ as well as in the subsequent leading of the person's new life by the Holy Spirit.

Paul, himself, was at one time a persecutor of Christians, which, of course, was sinful. However, we have been told in Acts 23:1 that, even in Paul's sinful persecution of Christians, Paul lived in good conscience. He was convinced at that time that what he was doing was right even though it was not actually right. Later in Paul's life, in Romans 9:1, Paul said that his conscience bore him witness in the Holy Spirit. Thus we see that Paul's conscience was "retrained" by the Holy Spirit. It was possible for God to retrain Paul's conscience and to use Paul as a special Apostle because he had never "seared it (his conscience) as with a hot iron." (I Timothy 4: 2). Had Paul repeatedly violated his conscience at any time in his life it might have become "seared" and made him useless for further use by God.

In Romans 13:5 Paul said that the conscience must not be violated and that some things must be done for conscience sake. The conscience trained by the Holy Spirit will help the Christian to walk on the right path. So Paul admonished the Roman Christians not to violate and "sear" anyone's conscience, but to let every conscience be trained by the Spirit. Then the Christian was enabled to follow the Holy Spirit's lead without doubting. Isn't that something of what Paul meant when he said in Romans 14:5, "Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind?" And again in Romans 14:23 Paul said, "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin." The conscience has a part in establishing a person's faith. When a person violates his conscience, he cannot be walking in faith towards God.

Paul has made it clear that there is a path of progress in the Christian life for developing and training the conscience. The conscience is never fully trained. As it gets better and better trained by the word of God's Spirit, the actions of the Christian life change to reflect the new conscience. The Christian may abstain from certain foods at first

because his conscience will not allow him to eat them. But later, through walking as the Spirit leads, the Christian learns better – that all foods may be taken with thanksgiving – then his conscience becomes better trained and he can start eating without sin. But at all times the Christian must follow the direction of the conscience so that all things may be done without doubting, and so that all things may be done in faith.

Paul has made it clear that the conscience is God-given to help keep us in the faith. When we doubt, it is the conscience that stimulates the doubt. When we go ahead with an action even though we have been stimulated to doubt that we ought to do it, then the conscience accuses us of wrong doing. If we are fully convinced that the action is right, then we do not doubt and the conscience defends the action. Paul said in Romans 2:15 that this is how the conscience served the Gentiles and led them in the proper direction toward God. The message of Romans is that salvation is by faith. (Romans 1:17). The gospel of Christ produces faith in us by training out consciences. Then our consciences help us to accept God's gift of faith and to keep us in that faith. This is important for whatever is not from faith is sin.

Jesus said in Matthew 21:21, “If you have faith, and do not doubt, you shall be able to ‘move mountains.’” God wants to lead us to “move mountains.” The tasks He gives us in the Spirit-led life are, in the eyes of the world, like the moving of mountains. If we are to let Christ work in us to move mountains, we must let the Spirit lead us in a life like that described by Paul here in the 14th chapter of Romans, where we allow God to use us all, even we who are weak in faith.

In Romans 14:15 Paul said that judgments about a Christian's opinions may cause that Christian to be hurt, and the one doing the judging may no longer be walking according to love. Actually a Christian may be destroyed by disputations concerning opinions. Paul went on to say in Romans 14:15, “Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.” The warning seems to intimate that “doubtful disputations” may drive some from the church causing them to reject Christ.

In fact, Paul went on in Romans 14:16 to say that Christians should not let opinions considered good by some to be spoken of among themselves as evil opinions. Why? In Romans 14:17 Paul explained, "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The righteousness of God cannot be exhibited in the lives of Christians in the church unless peace and joy in the Holy Spirit prevails. Paul went on to say in Romans 14:18, "For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men." In other words, Christ is served and God accepts the service of Christians who are at peace among themselves, who do not hurt one another in disputes concerning opinions.

Then what is to be done when disputations about opinions arise in a congregation? In Romans 14:19 Paul said, "So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another." This clearly indicates that "doubtful disputations" should be brought to a halt and discussions making for peace and edification should be pursued instead. If this is not done, and "doubtful disputations" continue, the worst in human nature may begin to be exhibited among the brethren. Christians may go back to living in their "old man of sin" instead of living in their "new man" who was created in them by God's Holy Spirit when they were baptized. "New lives" in Christ should be led by God's Holy Spirit. Paul made clear that the Holy Spirit does not lead Christians to pass judgments on the opinions of their brethren. Such disputes tear down the work of God. It is by God's grace that people have become Christians. It was God who added them to His church. When "doubtful disputations" of human origin persist, the work of God may be torn down for the mere sake of human passions expressed in opinions. And the opinions are not the stuff upon which the church has been founded. For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking.

There are many congregations of the Lord's church in crisis situations during these days of the 1990's because of "doubtful disputations" about opinions. Many congregations are "splitting" or seem to be "about to split" over their members inability to accept one another's right to hold differing opinions about arbitrary matters, matters which the Lord has given Christians to work out in peace and joy and to the edification

of all concerned. By labeling these disputed matters as arbitrary, we are not belittling them. They are serious matters about which the Holy Spirit gave Paul specific guidance to include in his Roman letter. They are matters about which the Lord has given Christians specific instructions to work out peaceably among themselves, while always exercising love toward one another. And He expects Christians to work them out while remaining united in Christ before God and the world.

The crises these days seem to be primarily about whether or not congregations should change certain human traditions which, when adopted, were arbitrary anyway. The crises usually are not about the essential elements of the gospel plan of salvation, not about the essentials of Christian living, Christian worship, or Christian outreach as expressed in the Bible, but about things which have been left up to Christians themselves as incidental to the essential things. There are disputes among brethren about church houses, whether there should be one at all, how it should be furnished, and how it should be used. There are disputes about corporate worship services for the whole congregation, whether the whole congregation must meet together simultaneously in one group or in several smaller groups, and how the elements of worship should be arranged and scheduled in the worship service. There are some who raise disputes over their dislike of certain arrangements of worship services. Some do not like to start worship meetings with periods of joyous greeting and handshaking and introduction among the brethren as some congregations are prone to do today. Instead some prefer to sit quietly until acts of worship take place. Some Christians like to sing before, and even during, the time when the Lord's supper is eaten. Others prefer to have all other activities stop and to sit in silence while the Lord's supper is eaten. Some like to sing songs only from the song books which they have traditionally used and are distressed to have contemporary songs introduced in the worship. Others are looking for new songs to stimulate their spirits to commune with the Lord and their souls to engage in fellowship with the souls of their brethren.

One might think that people with these different preferences could always worship peaceably together, but some have come to consider

their traditional ways of worship to be Biblical imperatives. They consider it heresy to change anything. These Christians may feel their consciences would be violated should they sanction the changing of certain traditions. Indeed, the violation of consciences should be avoided. But some consciences have been trained, not by the Scriptures, but by traditions of men which through continuous use have come to be considered as sacred. Should a series of judgments based on human opinions be the basis for training Christian consciences, or should God's word be the basis for training consciences?

The righteousness of God will be revealed through Christians to the church and to the world only when we cease to engage in "doubtful disputations."

2. Note that Paul addresses the "strong," not the "weak." Why? What should be the goal of all Christian service? How did Paul illustrate the goal of "edification?" What is to be the final result of Christian service in the church? (Romans 15:1-6).

Romans 15: 1-6. "(1) Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. (2) Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. (3) For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached Thee fell upon Me.' (4) For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (5) Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; (6) that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In Romans 14: 1 Paul said, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith." Then in Romans 15:1 Paul said, "Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength." To whom did Paul address himself? He addressed himself to "the strong," didn't he? The admonition, to accept the one who is weak, is obviously addressed to the one who is strong. Then Paul directly addressed we who are strong. We

perceive that Paul showed here a very good understanding of human nature in addressing these admonitions. Which of us are "the strong" and which of us are "the weak?" Does anyone admit to being one of the weak? Paul bypassed the problem of determining which of the Christians were "strong" and which were "weak" by addressing all admonitions as to the "strong!" If every Christian in Paul's time had complied with these admonitions as one of the "strong," and had obeyed the admonition to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, then problems of passing judgment on opinions would never have arisen. Likewise in our time, if we, whether of "the strong" or of "the weak," will obey these admonitions, "doubtful disputations" about opinions will not arise.

Paul continued in chapter 15 in the same vein as in chapter 14, telling the Christians to safeguard their consciences and the consciences of their brethren, even when they differed, and even when some were weak and some were strong. Individual Christians do not need to please themselves but to do what is good to the "building up" of his neighbor. Christ was the example in this. He was the extreme example as the strong One who did not please Himself but bore the weaknesses of all who are without strength. Christians must come to be of the same mind as Christ Jesus, and then, as many as are of the same mind as Christ Jesus, will be of the same mind also with each other.

When Christ accepted us, even when we were yet sinners, and died for us, even when we were yet enemies, God was glorified! We do not understand this but how grateful we are! How marvelous! How wonderful! Now when we accept one another, even those who disagree with us in important matters, God is glorified!

When Paul admonished us to be of the same mind with one another, was he telling us that we must all fully agree on every opinion? Obviously not! Such a conclusion would be entirely out of context with Paul's message of Romans, chapters 14 and 15. He meant that we must all agree that we will not let "doubtful disputations" arise about our differing opinions. He meant that we must accept each other despite differences of preference and opinion. Only when we accept each other

can we with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Romans 15:5-6, Paul said that we who make up Christ's church are to be of the same mind and with one accord and with one voice we are to glorify God. The surprising thing is that we can obey this admonition even when we differ in opinions, even when some are weaker than others. The only imperative is that we accept one another. Then we can with one voice, glorify God. This is of utmost importance.

3. Who were “the circumcision” to whom Christ became a servant? What does Paul mean by the phrase, “promises given to the fathers?” When, in the course of human history since the creation, did the Gentiles begin to “abound in hope? Who came from the “root of Jesse,” and arose “to rule over the Gentiles?” What is Paul’s conclusion concerning the Gentile Christians of Rome? (Romans 15:7-14).

Romans 15: 7-14 ."(7) Wherefore accept one another just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (8) For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, (9) and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, 'Therefore I will give praise to Thee among the Gentiles. And I will sing to Thy name.' (10) And again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.' (11) And again, 'Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him.' (12) And again Isaiah says, 'There shall come the root of Jesse, and He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles hope.' (13) Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (14) And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another."

Paul said in Romans 15:7 that we have an example in one Person of how, in spite of differing opinions, we are to accept one another. Christ exhibited to us in His life on earth how to deal with contentious brethren. We are to accept one another just as Christ has accepted us.

We are reminded of Paul's statement in Romans 14:4, "Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls, and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand." We are reminded that we did not become sinless even after we were baptized and even after Christ took us "into Himself." Even "in Christ" we are all somewhat at odds with Him because of our sinfulness. We each are servants of our Master, Jesus Christ. We "stand" in Him, not because we are good enough to do so, but because Christ is able to make each of us "stand." If we accept one another just as Christ has accepted us, there will be no bickering among us concerning the differences of opinion among us. All our opinions are but part of our imperfections. Thank God that Christ accepts us in spite of imperfections. Surprisingly, Christ's acceptance of imperfect human beings contributes to the glory of God! Thank God for that!

Do we not reject the precepts of God the Father and Christ the Son when we try to veto their acceptance of certain fellow Christians by refusing through "doubtful disputations" to accept some of them ourselves? The righteousness of God is revealed in His acceptance of sinful human beings into His family of Christians. When, through "doubtful disputations" we reject one another, we reject the revelation of God's righteousness toward us!

Perhaps many of the problems of "doubtful disputations" in the church at Rome came about because of the differences of opinions between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. In Romans 15:8-13, Paul pointed out that there is but one Christ for both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The one Christ became the all sufficient Servant to both the Jews and the Gentiles. Christ became a servant to the circumcision (the Jews) on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers. And Christ became a servant for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy. And if any Jewish Christians had doubts about the acceptability of Gentile Christians into God's fellowship, in Romans 15:9-12 Paul quoted Old Testament prophets who foretold how the Gentiles were also to receive mercy through Christ just as the Jews were to receive it.

Christ did not just please Himself (as from a human standpoint), but He became a servant to both Jews and Gentiles. The salvation of both the Gentiles and the Jews has always been the purpose of God. And the purpose has been carried out in Jesus Christ. So now all Christians may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit who leads them in their Christian "walk."

In Romans 15:13-14 Paul began to bring his monumental Roman letter to a close. With the phrase, "And concerning you," he turned to comments concerning his personal relationship with specific Christians at Rome. The rest of the letter was given to personal notes about himself and a number of specific Roman Christians whom he knew or had heard about. In verses 13 and 14 Paul expressed confidence that the Roman Christians were allowing their lives to be led by the Holy Spirit and were enjoying the manifold blessings of the spiritual life in Christ about which he has written in this letter.