

Model Answer

Message to the "STRONG"

Where the strong are wrong. It is interesting to notice that Paul gives the strong more criticism than the weak, even though he tells the strong that their position is more Biblical (v.14)! While he certainly critiques the weak, he gives more criticism to the strong. Here's what he tells them:

1. They are not being loving.

v.15 When you deliberately do something you know is grievous to a Christian brother or sister, you are not being loving. (We are not talking about activities we are commanded to do, like tithing, witnessing, etc. We are talking about things we are allowed to do. When we deliberately do what grieves another, we are being unloving.)

2. Their unloving behavior destroys the work of God.

He tells the strong that they can "destroy" the weak brother (v.15). What does it to "destroy?" Some have thought that this means that the weak brother might be totally ruined and go to hell — but that is very unlikely. Most of Romans 8 was about how nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Are we to believe that the insensitivity of the strong to the weak is really going to send a Christian to hell? So we cannot conclude that the strong have the power to destroy someone's Christianity. It gets clearer in v.20, where we are told that the strong's insensitivity can "destroy the work of God." Now this is the work that God is doing in every believer [Phil 1:6 — the good work he began in you], to bring him or her into the fullness of the stature of Christ (Eph.4:13). In other words, the strong can retard or stymie the maturation of the weak into Christ-like wisdom and character. (Note: It is also possible the "the work of God" could mean the church, and thus the strong are harming the relationships within the church that God has built.)

3. Their unloving behavior causes the brother to fall.

See v.13: "...not to put any stumbling block or an obstacle in your brother's way," and v.21, "cause your brother to fall." Here we see how our insensitivity to the weak can harm the process of Christian maturation in them — it can lead them to "stumble" (Grk. word *proskomma* is used both in v.13 and v.20.) And this word must mean that the weak brother or sister is being tempted to sin. Now how can the strong's insensitivity lead the weak to sin? a) At least, it tempts the weak to harshness, a condemning spirit, to breaking off fellowship, and an unkind, ungracious spirit. b) But possibly, the strong's action could lead the weak to begin to do things that are against their conscience. In v.23 Paul says, "The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is a sin." This means that the weak might begin to do things (encouraged by the strong) that they are not convinced are right (v.5). If they are not convinced they are right, then to do them would be a sin! Paul says a person must not do something unless they have studied and thought it out (e.g. through Bible study and conference with others) and become fully convinced (v.5) that it is right.

But let's say the weak person is convinced that all drinking of alcohol is a sin, but sees another believer doing it. He could easily decide, "well, I guess it is OK," because the "peer pressure" of the strong may lead him to drink. But if he does so without thinking it through and being very convinced that it is not contrary to God's will, then that will hurt his conscience — he feels guilty. Yet now that he is ignoring that guilt, he may become open to doing other things that are truly wrong.

Here's a real-life example of this. I once knew a high school girl who had been raised in a strict church background that taught that it was a sin for women to wear makeup. But the peer pressure at school (from other Christian girls raised in other churches) led her to begin putting on makeup after leaving home in the morning (and wiping it off before coming home.) Now, though the Bible nowhere forbids makeup, the girl was violating her conscience as she did this. She was not "convinced." Spiritually, within herself, she was just choosing popularity over faithfulness to God. As a result, she soon found herself much more open to real violations of God's will in the area of sexuality. She had "stumbled" because of her Christian friends who mocked her scruples, even though they were wrong.

4. **The strong are forgetting that, because of Jesus' death, the weak are "precious."**

Verse 15 is a strong statement — "Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died." Paul is reminding the strong that Jesus paid for every Christian with his life — an enormous price. If Jesus died for a brother or sister, then no matter how weak they are, we must treat them with utmost care and sensitivity. We must value them.

5. **The strong are forgetting that, because of their concern to serve God, they must be respected.**

v.4 "Who are you to judge someone else's servant?" To his own master he stands or falls. This challenge is to both the strong and the weak, but let us apply it to the strong for a moment. They might see the weak as narrow-minded, but they should recognize that the so-called narrowness comes from a burning desire to serve their Master and not live their life as they wish. The strong need to be careful that there is not a spirit of selfish individualism in them. Paul's balanced handling of the "weak" shows that he is able to see the strengths and weaknesses of these people. He treats them gently and with respect because he sees their desire to serve and please their Lord (vv.7-8). For example, we know that some people in the early church centuries became Christians after living a very active and immoral sexual lifestyle. When they became Christians they turned away from all that and developed negative and prudish views of sex, and then they disapproved of Christians who didn't share their attitudes. This is another example of being "weak in faith." In zeal and gratitude for salvation, many people can develop strict attitudes toward food, clothing, sex, music, and other aspects of culture. Though Paul points out why such attitudes are not right, he also respects the zeal of these people and refuses to allow other Christians to offend and trample on their sensibilities.

6. **Accept the weak brethren.**

(v.1). The word "accept" (Greek, *proslambano*) means more than simply

acquiescence. A better translation would be “to welcome,” for the word means to receive someone into one’s circle and into one’s love. This is very important, because the tendency of the strong is to become more distant to the “weak” who disapprove of their behavior. Paul insists that there be an effort to keep up the relationship, and to not let the difference come between them. This is restated in v.19, when Paul says, “Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification.” In short, Paul says that the strong must not avoid or write off the weaker brethren, but seek to stay close to them.

7. Seek to respectfully convince him.

Here we have an example in Paul himself. In v.14 he tells us that he is one of the “strong” — he can eat anything! Well, what does he do with the weak? Notice that the whole of chapter 14 is, in a sense, a model of how the strong should approach the weak. He seeks to respectfully persuade the weak to re-examine their position. In v.14 and v.17 he reminds them about the nature of the kingdom of God. In other words, he is trying to help the weak become “convinced,” to think through, the broader more mature position. BUT, if the “weak” does come to a different position, Paul clearly shows a willingness to refrain from the offensive behavior. In v.5, Paul says that people need to carefully think through, Biblically and personally, their practice as Christians.

8. Refrain from a practice if weaker brethren are possibly stumbling

v.21 “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.” We must be careful here. “Stumble” and “fall” do not mean just to bother the weaker brothers. A grumpy Christian could blackmail a whole church in that case. Some churches have Christians who are very weak, and who have an enormous number of scruples. They are constantly getting irritated and upset because other church members are offending their sense of what is proper Christian behavior. The strong do not have to refrain from anything that “upsets” anyone else. But if the “weak” have a very deep and settled conviction — if they are “convinced” — and if they clearly are being tempted to bitterness or spiritual confusion, then the strong out of love should refrain. A good example of this is worship forms. If a “strong” person can enjoy and use a variety of music/worship forms, but a “weaker” person can only utilize one, then the strong should defer to the weak.

—Timothy J. Keller, and Redeemer Presbyterian Church 2003

Model Answer

Message to the “WEAK”

1. They are simply wrong about food and drink!

Paul very bluntly shows the weak that their position is not Biblical. v.14 “As one who is in the Lord Jesus I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.” Paul may be referring to Jesus own words here, for he argued with the Pharisees against the maintenance of the “clean” and “unclean” laws (Mark 7:14ff) and he gave a word to Peter about this, too (Acts 10:15,28). The reasons for this are at

least two-fold: First, God did not create any material thing as evil. All things are good, it is only our own sinful hearts that use material things in such a way as to produce evil. (See I Timothy 4:1ff.) The other is probably that the clean-unclean laws were ways for God to teach the Israelites that they could not just come into his presence, but that there needed to be a purity. But in Christ, we are brought to God's presence holy and without blemish (Col.1:22). Therefore, to hold on to a squeamishness about the use of any material thing is a failure to realize the full implications of the doctrine of creation and/or the doctrine of redemption.

2. They cannot distinguish between matters of basic principle and of individual preference.

v.1b says to not "pass judgment on disputable matters." The weak do not know when they are in the area of what Paul calls "disputable" and when they are in the area of "indisputable" issues. The Greek word used in v.1b is *dialogismoi*. Traditionally, these have been called "matters of conscience." A matter of conscience is a practice about which God has not specifically spoken in his word. He has not clearly forbidden it nor clearly commanded it. Today, one might say, an extreme "liberal" is one who thinks (wrongly) that nearly every area is a disputable matter of conscience, while the extreme "conservative" is one who thinks (wrongly) that hardly any area is a disputable matter of conscience.

3. The weak are forgetting that God is the only judge.

While vv.13b-21 are mainly a criticism of the "strong," vv.4-12 are mainly a criticism of the weak. Verse 4 is a strong warning against making a denunciation of a Christian who differs from you in a matter of conscience. The word "judge" here does not mean a simple evaluation, but a condemnation and denunciation. Paul says, "What you believe about these things [*dialogismoi* – v.1b] keep between yourself and God. Don't dump on people with whom you disagree. For example, as Paul says here (vv.14a and 21) that drinking alcohol is not sinful in itself. There is no Bible text that forbids it to all. But a Christian may decide to abstain. In that case, it is very wrong to judge and condemn others for drinking. Why?" "Who are you to judge someone else's servant (v.4)?" That means that the person is not your servant. Let the master, Jesus Christ, do the judging about whether the other person is serving him properly. We are not qualified to be judge. Paul continues in v.9 that Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord... then, why do you judge...? This is an important matter. When the Bible does not clearly prescribe behavior, we must leave a person's conscience alone — for Jesus alone is Lord of our conscience: "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord..." (v.8)

4. The weak are forgetting that we are all justified by faith

Paul hints that the "weak" are forgetting that we are all justified by faith when he says "the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him" (v.3b). This word "accepted" is the same word used in the initial exhortation for them to "accept" one another. In other words, Paul is saying, "you should welcome one another, because God has welcomed and accepted you." This is powerful! Paul says we must remember that, whatever a Christian's strength or weakness in behavior or views, he or she is completely loved and accepted by the Father through Christ. That is what the whole book of

Romans is about. Now Paul applies the gospel to such disputes. “You need to be controlled by the knowledge that God accepts the other person and finds him or her ‘holy and without blemish’.”

“...the reason both the despising and the condemning of a fellow Christian are wrong is that God has accepted him (v.3). How dare we reject a person whom God has accepted? Indeed, the best way to determine what our attitude to other people should be is to determine what God’s attitude to them is. This principle is better even than the golden rule. It is safe to treat others as we would like them to treat us, but it is safer still to treat them as God does.” – John Stott, Romans

5. Keep your views to yourself.

v.22 “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.” Here he tells the “weak” to recognize when some practice is in a “disputable” area, when it is among the *dialogismoi*. When something is not clearly forbidden or commanded in Scripture, don’t press or loudly display your views and practices on the subject. Keep them to yourself. We must not press this to an extreme — Paul is not saying that you cannot give your opinion if it is asked for! Paul is not saying that you can never make evaluation. After all, Jesus told us to watch out for false prophets, etc. Rather, Paul means that, once we recognize that this is a “disputable” area, we should mind our own business.

6. Get a more mature view of the kingdom of God.

In v.14 Paul tells the weak that they are plainly mistaken about created things, and in v.3 he hints that they have not worked out the full implications of the doctrine of justification. (See remarks on this above.) In other words, Paul warns them against a legalism tendency. He brings this out in v.17, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” They must see that rules and regulations about material things miss the point of the kingdom. The point is transformed character — joy, peace, wisdom, love.

7. Think through and get convinced about the rightness or wrongness of any practice.

Verse 5 is quite interesting and important: “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” In other words, Paul says that we need to reflect upon and think out our behavior. First, we need to see whether the Bible really enjoins/forbids or leaves the conscience-free in some areas. Second, even if the Bible leaves us free, we may decide to abstain from some practice because it leads us as individuals to sin, or it leads others to sin. So determining all this takes thought! Paul is especially telling the weak to do this — because many people with a tendency to legalism are full of scruples because they haven’t studied the Bible or thought things out.

“Alongside this explicit instruction not to violate the conscience, there is an implicit requirement to educate it.” – John Stott, Romans

But they cannot practice in that area unless they have thought it out and are firmly convinced in their mind that it is right. Notice, Paul even gives some idea of how to think out whether a practice is can be done or not. v.6 “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.” So the Christian must look at any practice and say, “Can I do this before Christ? Can I do it with an eye upon him? Can I do it in his name, thanking him for it?”

8. **Until you are convinced something is right, avoid it.**

Why? Paul says several times, that if you are doubtful about something, it is important to avoid it. v.14b “If anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. v.23 “The man who has doubts is condemned if he eats.” Refer to the story above about the girl who wore makeup. If a person proceeds to do something when the conscience is against it, it damages that person spiritually. Indeed, it is a sin to do something if you think it is a sin. Why? Even if you are mistaken about what God’s will is, it is a sin to put your will above his.

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