

LESSON 281

STRENGTH OF FAITH

Related Scripture: Romans 14:10-23

KEY VERSE: "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves."
—Romans 15:1.

Lesson Scripture: Romans 14:1-4;
I Corinthians 8:4-13

Introduction:

Such is the inherent depravity of our sinful nature that we tend to become proud of our faith, as if we had invented or created it, while despising or condemning those whose faith is weaker than ours. We forget that by nature we also were unbelievers in sinful rebellion against God (Eph. 2:3), and if God has dealt to us a measure of faith (Ro. 12:3) we ought to be thankful rather than proud.

If we suppose that we have more or stronger faith than others, the scriptural way to prove it is not to assume an attitude of superiority and condemnation, but rather in all humility to be considerate and helpful to our weaker brethren. This is the essence of this week's lesson.

A brief outline follows:

1. Competence, Romans 14:1-4
 - a. Difference in faith, 1, 2
 - b. Deference to faith, 3
 - c. Dependence of faith, 4
2. Confidence, I Corinthians 8:4-6
3. Conscience, I Corinthians 8:7-12
 - a. Weaker conscience, 7-9
 - b. Wounded conscience, 10-12
4. Consideration, I Corinthians 8:13

Notes on the Printed Text:

Competence, Romans 14:1-4.

Baptists through the centuries have insisted on the competence of the individual soul to render its own account to God. (Ro. 2:6; 14:12.) Yet even among Baptists there exist meddling busy-bodies who imagine that they have a right to make other people's decisions, or to force their own opinions upon others.

Surely we do have the right and the obligation to bear testimony, in love, to our understanding of God's word; but a proper understanding of that word and a decent respect for our fellow creatures should keep us from being arrogant, domineering, or hypercritical. Especially when we know we are right, we shall rather pity than blame those who blindly insist on being wrong.

In our present imperfect state, the person most disturbed by differences of opinion is generally the person most unsure of his own position.

Difference in Faith, 1, 2.

Fellowship is more or less limited by differences in faith, but if we demand perfect agreement at all points in this life we shall have no fellowship at all. We must allow for minor differences, particularly on the part of those who are weak in the faith, who may possibly grow stronger. Of course, this does not mean that a church should have "doubtful disputations" among its members.

Deference to Faith, 3.

Sincerity is no substitute for truth, but it is due some respect. There are some questions on which we may agree to disagree without being disagreeable. Eating meat that had been offered to idols was such a question. Sincere believers were of different opinions on this question, as today there are many questions, not clearly or explicitly answered in the scriptures, on which believers of equal sincerity may differ. Let us then defer to the other man's faith at such points, and hope that he will defer to ours.

Dependence of Faith, 4.

Let us not forget that we are merely fellow servants, having no authority to condemn another in doubtful matters. His faith, like ours, looks to God for justification; if we really are depending upon God's judgment, we have no need to judge hastily before the time of judgment (I Cor. 4:5.)

Confidence, I Corinthians 8:4-6.

Idolatrous superstitions cannot shake the faith of true believers in the true God. In reality there is only one God; all other so-called gods are mere shams and frauds; "an idol is nothing in the world" to those who really know God. This complete confidence in the true and living God comes from a living experience with Him in and through Jesus Christ.

Conscience, I Corinthians 8:7-12.

Human conscience is not a safe guide except as it is instructed by the word of God and illuminated by the Spirit of God. Since there are varying degrees of instruction and illumination, and since the conscience shares in the general depravity of human nature, one man's conscience may condemn what another man's approves.

Weaker Conscience, 7-9.

The weak conscience is the uninstructed conscience. "There is not in every man that knowledge" that an idol is nothing. Paul and other well-instructed believers understood that eating or not eating certain foods could not make a man morally any better or worse in the sight of God. But a weaker conscience would not understand this fact, and so might stumble over an act which was really harmless in itself.

Wounded Conscience, 10-12.

Uncharitable Christians could ignore the unintended consequences of their deeds and insist on exercising their liberty in Christ. After all, if weaker brethren stumbled, it was their own fault! But while this is true, it is not the whole truth. Love has a further comment. When an otherwise lawful act wounds a weak conscience, that act becomes a sin against Christ.

Consideration, I Corinthians 8:13.

Paul therefore announced his own decision, though he would not force his decision upon others. In consideration of his weaker brethren, in circumstances which might cause them to stumble, he declared: "I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend (stumble)."

Key Verse:

"We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves."—Romans 15:1.

Are we weak or strong? If we know ourselves to be weak, let us seek strength in Christ. (Philip. 4:13.) If we think that we are strong, are we willing to bear the infirmities of the weak? If not, is it because we love them less than we love ourselves, or is it because we love ourselves more than we love them? The scripture tells us that in this connection we ought not to please ourselves.