
Hijacked: The Weaker Brother Principle

Romans 14:1-15:7

Introduction:

The church has existed for sometime now with this guideline known as the “weaker bother principle.” Simply stated, it says, *I will not do anything that offends another brother.* As a result, the “really” strong make these blanket standards for themselves like: “I will not drink beer because it offends my brother.” “I will not listen to rock music because it offends my brother.” “I will only wear skirts because pants offend my brother.” While this sounds noble and all, it really is quite ridiculous. I think the weaker brother principle has been hijacked.

- First, what brother is offended? Do you know his name? Have you talked with him? I think this interpretation makes Christianity easy and requires little to no interaction with one another.
- Second, how is he offended? Do you make him stumble? What does that mean? This interpretation requires little discernment to really listen to what others are saying.
- Third, I am pretty sure that if I looked hard enough, I could find a brother somewhere out there who is offended by just about everything I do.
- Fourth, this passage, at first glance, does not offer me much hope. This passage seems to say that when it comes to the issues the weaker brother runs the day.

At First Glance

The camps: Weak/strong

- Weak: Those who are convinced that certain issues are wrong
- Strong: Those who are convinced that all things are free to be enjoyed

The tendencies: Judging and despising (v.3) / pushing and demanding¹

The instruction: stop judging/despising (v.13), strong: shut it and drop it (vv.21-22; 15:1)

Apparent message is: The weak are wrong in their content, but they love God. You that are strong need to put up with them so shut it and welcome them. Do not cause them to stumble. Put away your freedom and go home...The weak seemingly never have to change and the strong seemingly are always prisoners to the weak.

The impasse: Both sides are prone to be wrong, the weak get a pass and seem forever paralyzed in their weakness while the strong get reprimanded and are held prisoner to the failings of the weak.

Illustration: (The ridiculous nature of this interpretation when it comes to music...)

¹ I like Steve’s classification from last Sunday. There are four kinds of people in this text: *pushers*, *judges*, *spectators* and *welcomers*. Here, I am saying that judges tend toward demanding their position as a matter of “holiness.” I will also demonstrate later how spectators flow out of the text.

“Does anyone here take offense at the drums? You there! Just one? Alright, Rick (our drummer), sit down! No drums! How about with the guitars? Oh... You do? Alright. Eric, Ryan sit down! How about with choruses? Any hymns-only people here? Sure...you three, no problem. Dakota (our sound man), could you cut out the chorus slides and slip in only hymns? Is there anyone here who still objects to PowerPoint? Any hymnal people here? Yes! OK. Dakota, could you turn off the projector and...Dan, run up into the attic and bring down the boxes of hymnals. Thanks. Can we continue? No? Yes, you there. What is it? We should only sing the psalter? Oh boy! I don't even know what that means...

Do you feel something in your bones? The strong get really defensive and the weak get really smug. To the weak: “You're wrong on your issues but at least you worship God. Stop judging. You Strong: you're right, but don't get arrogant. Just cater to the weak for the sake of unity and put down your freedom. OK? Can we all get along?” ***And This is the way it will play out whenever we make the issue to be the issue.***

Take Your Corrective Medicine

The issue is never the issue. Do you see what the issue is? The issue is the glory of God displayed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the issue!

Look at v.17: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking...” Do you see that? The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking... Saturday or Sunday... watching and wearing..., singing and dancing..., buying and selling..., a mill or pre-mill.... The Kingdom of God is not about the issues. Instead, it is about “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

When it comes to loving brothers and sisters who differ from you, you have to ...

Know where to start: the Gospel-Center

- First, notice the gospel language that is throughout this text. There is language here of justification, reconciliation and joy that stems from pure worship.
 - In v. 3 you have the statement that God welcomes both parties – This seems to be the language of **reconciliation**.
 - In v.4 you have talk of God as judge before whom all will stand or fall. But God will uphold your brother and make him to stand. This is language **of justification**. Your brother will enjoy a right standing before God.
 - In v.6 you have language of **pure worship**: honoring the Lord with thanksgiving as He exercises lordship over one's life.
 - Then in v.17 you have all three again, only this time in the language of experience. The **experiential** way of speaking about reconciliation is peace, or justification is righteousness and of worship is pure joy.
- Second, notice that in this paragraph, Paul is addressing both camps: weak and strong.

- In v.13 he brings back the category of judging which he applied to the weak brother earlier (cf. v.3). Then he introduces both parties in v.14 before he turns to the stronger brother in v.15.
- In v.18, the way you gain approval by men is not by agreement on all issues, it is by agreement on the centrality of the gospel. Notice that true approval by men will be preceded by acceptance by God. If you are accepted by God (i.e., justified), I approve of you – no matter your stance on a particular issue.
- In v.19, the way you pursue peace and mutual upbuilding is not by pushing your particular franchise of Christianity but by pursuing a radical gospel-center.
- Caution: Do not destroy the gospel (v.20). We destroy the work of God in the gospel when we blur the line between our issue and the gospel. For example, is it **Jesus (i.e., faith in Jesus) + something else = justification/sanctification**? The moment I answer in the affirmative, I have just destroyed the work of God in the gospel.
- Caution: Do not destroy your brother (v.15). The issue is always acceptance/approval. The moment I communicate that a brother is not accepted by me, I take the place of God. The issue is always one of peace. The issue is always where you are looking for the source of that acceptance/approval and peace. Does the weaker need my approval? Or do I demand your agreement? You see, the issue is the gospel.

When it comes to loving brothers and sisters who differ from you, you have to ...

Know your role: Be radically intentional

The Gospel demands you be radically intentional – in your personal stance on issues and in your relational stance before others.

First, you must be firmly convinced in your own mind as to the nature of the faith (the gospel). You must be sure that the content of the gospel requires no law. There is no issue that you can observe or abstain from that helps/hinders your standing before God.

Notice vv.22-23

²² The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. *Blessed* is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.

²³ But whoever has doubts is *condemned* if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

The issue here is blessing and condemnation. The issue at stake here is eternal life and eternal condemnation. The issue at stake here is the gospel. If you doubt the content of the gospel and the nature of faith, you are in real peril. You had better be clear that a person's standing before God comes by Jesus + nothing! ***If you doubt, you're damned!*** That is what v.23 says.

That means that if you and I are entering into a debate on any issue and I ask you, "Now wait a minute, sir. Are you telling me that I cannot do this thing and be a Christian?" If

you answer in the affirmative, you are not the weaker brother who is in view here. And I will not cater to your position one bit.

Furthermore, if I ask you, “Are you saying I cannot enter into this thing and be sanctified?” If you answer in the affirmative, you are not the weaker brother in view here. For neither justification nor sanctification comes by any formula of Jesus + something. Be firmly convinced of that.

When your heart wants to head down the path of judgment... “They are not godly...” “They could not possibly be saved...” You are not the weaker brother in view here and you are in need of a radical re-definition of the gospel.

Second, you must be firmly convinced in your mind as to the nature of your fight.

I believe that the truly (healthy) weak and the truly strong, as reflected in this passage, are a rare breed. The greater party in Christendom falls into the classification that Steve gave last week as the spectators. These types are the unconvinced – the unintentional Christians. Here me well: **You ought to have a radically God-centered, gospel-glorifying reason for everything you do!**

If the Gospel is the center, the core of our soul, then every belief and every behavior flows out from that center. And you and I need desperately to be defining our beliefs and our behaviors by the gospel. This is the point of the second part of v. 23, “For whatever does not proceed from faith (the content of the gospel) is sin.” Furthermore, he had stated earlier, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (v.5). Do you live with conviction? In everything!?

You ought to be able to give me a gospel-centered answer as to why your behavior is fitting and proper given the content of the gospel. You see, we are to be defining our lives from the center-out as opposed to defining it from the margins-in. The question for radically intentional Christians is not whether or not we can do the thing. The question is whether or not the thing flows from the gospel.

Illustration: One individual might say, “I cannot watch TV. I just can’t see how that activity helps me live-out the gospel. There are so many other things I can do with my time than get sucked-in to mind-numbing television.” Now when it is stated this way, it is being stated by an intentionally gospel-centered, God-glorifying *weaker* Christian who is speaking for himself. He says, “I get sucked-in, *you* probably don’t. It numbs *my* mind. I rejoice it doesn’t numb *yours*.” Wow! He is gracious. He is loving – assuming the best about you and he is nothing of judgmental.

When the brother who is intentionally gospel-centered and God glorifying and strong invites this weak brother over for dinner after church on Sunday, he marvels at the weaker brother’s devotion to the gospel. They never bring up the subject and the strong brother forgoes watching the Packers. He doesn’t turn on the tv. He is humble and gentle.

Listen, there is nothing in this passage that indicates Paul is condemning the weak and praising the strong. The weak, are intentionally weak. They hold their issues with conviction. They hold them with a radical God-centeredness. They are doing it with God’s glory in view and no one else. No one else matters. Their approval is before God.

Their acceptance is in God. They are simply aware of their own weaknesses and limitations or they may still be processing how they can do certain activities for the glory of God. But in the meantime, they are not judging the strong and they are gracious. And the strong are Gospel-centered and God glorifying as they patiently endure with the weak. They demonstrate great humility.

Know your role: Be radically incarnational

Both Jesus and Paul made it very clear that nothing is unclean in itself. Paul says so twice in this text (vv. 14, 20). And in a later letter to pastor Titus he said, “To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure...” (Tit. 1:15). Jesus said it in Mark 7:15, “There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him.” Mark comments later in v. 19, “Thus he declared all foods clean.”

So here is the question in my mind: *If everything is clean, then what is at stake in eating?*

Again, Paul’s answer is twofold: Your brother! (v.15) The gospel! (v.20)

The most loving thing you can do for a brother is to be Christ to him. Model the gospel. Model Jesus. The issue is how you hold your issue. You either play God or redefine the gospel. You either destroy your brother or destroy the gospel.

Look at all the ways Paul says you have opportunity to live-out the gospel in interacting with weaker brothers. Let me point out two:

v. 15 – walking in love plays out the death of Christ.

15:1-3a – Christ did not please himself and we are to please our neighbors.

You have opportunity to flesh out again and again the nature of the gospel. Jesus, who was infinite in freedom, took on limitation in order to die for weak sinners. Jesus, who was free to do what he wanted, submitted to do only what the Father wanted so he could obey to the point of death. Now, you flesh out the death of Christ every time you lay aside your freedom for the sake of enduring a weaker brother. You manifest that the gospel is far greater than anything. You manifest that your brother is of far greater value than any mere issue.

When Kingdoms Clash

The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking. But the kingdoms of man are. When earthly kingdoms clash, it is a sign that we have lost sight of the gospel and we are following a different king.

The Christians who are radically intentional and incarnational, both the weak and the strong, that Paul has in view here, can welcome one another in peaceful harmony around God’s glory because neither one needs to be right on the issue in order to be right with God.

For discussion time

The divine “shut-it” does not mean we do not try to sharpen one another.

By DEBORAH FELDMAN / KING 5 News²

SEATTLE - The Mars Hill Church in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood is not your grandma's church. On Sunday, the pastor's sermon was being broadcast on large video screens to accommodate his laryngitis and the congregants in church were broadcasting on their iPhones.

They weren't talking, but “Twittering,” typing in brief thoughts or messages for their friends to read in real time.

"How does the service impact them, what does worship feel like to them and its a good way for them to kind of tell their friends what church is about without their friends even coming in the building," aid Kyle Firstenberg, Mars Hill Campus Administrator.

Twittering goes on throughout the entire service, with the messages, or Tweets, popping up on Facebook pages or the church's official Twitter page.

"You see literally dozens and dozens of people during the service writing #MHC and you can search that on Twitter and just see everything that our people's thoughts, their ideas," said Mike Anderson.

"We're a little bit behind where America is in a lot of things," said Lichlin Payne.

Payne is from Australia and is spending a year visiting numerous churches around the states.

² http://www.king5.com/localnews/stories/NW_030809WAB-mars-hill-church-twitter-SW.178c314d.html
accessed May 28, 2009 10:52 a.m.

He enjoys being able to Twitter his religious experience with far away friends, and says church etiquette hasn't disappeared, its just evolved.

"I remember 10, 15 years ago you couldn't wear a hat in church, and now you can get out your mobile phones and your iPhones and you can Twitter so these things change and you've got to move with the times," he said.

Mars Hill Church has seven campuses around Western Washington, and twittering is welcome at all of them.

Should We Use Twitter in Church?³

Lately I've been hearing the question of whether Twitter has a place during a church's worship services. If people use Twitter to comment on every aspect of their life during the week, should they continue the practice while their pastor is preaching? TIME magazine did an article entitled "[Twittering in Church, with the Pastor's O.K.](#)" that described several congregations that are actively encouraging their congregation Twitter during church. One church had training sessions and even has a feed of Twitter comments projected on the screen.

While I personally enjoy Twitter and find it to be a useful tool for sharing and receiving information, I'm not excited about encouraging people to use Twitter during the Sunday meeting. This isn't to pass judgment on pastors who do encourage its use and I'm happy to hear evidence that it adds spiritual benefit, but here are a few reasons why I won't be encouraging the members of [Covenant Life Church](#) to Twitter during the meetings. I'll apply this to myself:

1. Playing with my iPhone (or cell phone or Blackberry) during the sermon will likely distract me. I'll be tempted to check my email or read my Twitter feed that has nothing to do with the sermon.
2. Even if I didn't look at anything else, the mere act of "tweeting" some quote or question or thought from the sermon would be several minutes in which I wasn't actively listening to the sermon. Brain space would be taken up with typing and getting my word count under 140. God's word preached is so important, so precious, I don't want anything to distract me from hearing it. What if those two minutes in which I'm distracted are the two minutes my soul needs the most?
3. The most important thing I can do while I'm sitting under the preaching of God's word is to listen to what God is saying to *me*. I need to actively engage my heart and mind to *receive*. Twitter, takes the focus off of hearing and receiving and makes it broadcasting and sharing. So instead of my mind being engaged with thoughts of "What

³ http://www.joshharris.com/2009/05/should_we_use_twitter_during_c.php accessed May 29, 2009 10:50 a.m.

is the Word of God saying to me?" when I start "tweeting" my focus becomes, "What do I want to say? What do I want to express? What am I thinking?"

4. I think we all need to ask what our example says to other people we're worshipping alongside. Can a person look at me during the worship and see from the way I sit, listen and engage that the Bible is worthy of honor, that preaching is valuable? Of course this applies to a lot more than the issue of Twitter. If I'm nodding off to sleep, reading the bulletin, staring off into space or filing my finger nails it can send the wrong message, too. So what does someone think if they see me playing with my cell-phone during the sermon? *"Oh, he must be so enamored with the truth of God's word that he's using Twitter to share the truth he's just heard with the world! God, your word is glorious!"* Uh, I really don't think so. They'll probably think, "I should pull out my phone...wonder if I've gotten any email."

5. Just because something is incredibly popular in culture doesn't mean we have to accommodate it in our worship. Who cares if the whole world is talking about Twitter? When the church gathers and the Word of God is opened, God himself is speaking again. Everybody else can shut up. Lost people in this world don't need to see that we're current with the latest trend, they need to hear God's unchanging truth. They need to understand that God's word makes a demand on their life. And they should see from us a reverence and holy awe in the presence of God and his word that points them to the fact that what happens in a Christian church is completely different than anything happening in the world.

6. My final reason for why Twitter should be left at the door when we come to church is very simple: you can tweet about the Sunday service *after* church. I'm not a Twitter hater. In fact I love the idea of members of my church reviewing their notes and tweeting about what God spoke to them during the message. But they can do that later on Sunday afternoon and nothing will be lost.

Twitter is a useful tool. If you're a Christian and you use it I hope you actively consider how it can reflect the supremacy of Jesus Christ in your life. Ask God to help you use it to share the gospel and build up the saints.

One way to do that is to use Twitter (after the Sunday service) to share what you learned from the Sunday sermon. I think it's a great witness to unbelieving friends and an encouragement to fellow-Christians who follow you on Twitter to see that you're hearing and seeking to apply the sermon you heard Sunday.

But it's also a good witness for them to see that something so important, so essential, so holy happens on Sunday morning when God's church gathers that Twitter takes a back seat. When God is speaking again through his word, we should all be silent--and so should our Twitter feeds.

By Piper⁴

Josh Harris has done us a good service. He explains [why many of us think it's a bad idea to "tweet"](#) while participating in corporate worship. That is, we think you should use Twitter *before* and *after* corporate worship to say what you take in and take out. But when you are *in* corporate worship, Worship! There is a difference between communion with God and *commenting* on communion with God.

Don't tweet while having sex. Don't tweet while praying with the dying. Don't tweet when your wife is telling you about the kids. There's a season for everything. Multitasking only makes sense when none of the tasks requires heart-engaged, loving attention.

There is an assumption that Josh and I share, which is not understood or embraced by all. Preaching and hearing preaching *are* worship. Preaching is expository exultation. The preacher is explaining the Bible and applying the Bible and EXULTING over the truth in the Bible. The listener is understanding, and applying, and joining in the exultation. Hearing preaching is heart-felt engagement in the exposition and exultation of the Word of God.

This is a fragile bond. The fact that an electric cord is easily cut, does not mean that the power flowing through it is small. It produces bright and wonderful effects. So it is with preaching. Great power flows through fragile wires of spiritual focus.

Perfume can break it. A ruffled collar can break it. A cough can break it. A whisper can break it. Clipping fingernails, chewing gum, a memory, a stomach growl, a sunbeam, and a hundred other things can break it. The power that flows through the wire of spiritual attention is strong, but the wire is weak.

So read [Josh's six points](#) and let's pursue God with all our might and focus during corporate worship. *Then* tell the world what God did. If it's God's power, it can wait an hour.

⁴ [http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/1828 More on Not Using Twitter During Worship Services/](http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/1828_More_on_Not_Using_Twitter_During_Worship_Services/) accessed May 29, 2009, 12:04 p.m.