

SHOW SOME RESPECT!

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It is a policeman's job to search for misdeeds. He scans the crowd for faces of known troublemakers. He listens for the sound of angry voices, breaking glass, or gunshots. His eye is trained to notice things that are out of place, people who don't belong, erratic behavior. As a result, day after day, our men and women in blue see the underbelly of society, the worst of human behaviors—because it's there, if you look for it. When the Bible says, "No one is righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10), the police know it thoroughly.

Have you ever thought about what it might mean to come home from a day like that to your family? As little Johnny heads across the kitchen floor, suddenly he hears, "Halt, young man! What's that in your hand?"

"A cookie," Johnny replies.

"And how did you get hold of a cookie?" demands the voice.

"I gave it to him," replies his mother.

"Stand aside, ma'am! I have this situation under control. I'm talking to the boy. Son, where did you get that cookie?"

"Mom gave it to me."

"Just the one?"

"Yes, just one."

"And are your hands clean?"

"Yes, sir. I just washed them."

"Did you use soap?"

"Yes."

"Then, here's another cookie from me. Have a good day, son."

It can be difficult for anyone to separate work from family, to take off the uniform and just be dad, to stop policing and just be a friend.

Many Christians act as though they have been deputized by God to wrangle with non-believers and teach a lesson to misbehavers. They use the words of the Bible like a billy club to subdue reluctant Christ-followers. They taze them with Romans 3:23, cuff them with Romans 6:23, then throw them in a cell with Luke 12:59.

Many more don't think they've been deputized, but wish they had been, and imagine they have an unusual aptitude for identifying sin in other people. They call it a gift of discernment; I call it call it a suspicious nature and a critical spirit.

The Bible offers no "gift of discernment." The Spirit of Christ does not support that activity. God has not called us to correct each other's behaviors. Instead, He has instructed us to accept and respect each other, just as we are at this present moment, and to actively, fervently love one another from a heart that is pure. Such love covers a multitude of sins.

I am not suggesting you turn a blind eye to the sins of fellow Christians. I am suggesting that you treat them with the same respect you would want to receive.

Galatians 6

¹ Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who [have the Spirit] should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself. ² Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ. ³ If you think you are too important to help someone, you are only fooling yourself. You are not that important.

⁴ Pay careful attention to your own work, for then you will get the satisfaction of a job well done, and you won't need to compare yourself to anyone else. ⁵ For we are each responsible for our own conduct.

When another believer becomes trapped by sin, they need help—Christian compassion—to extract them from the situation and restore their walk of faith. Not just anyone can offer this. "You who have the Spirit" means those who are presently walking in the Spirit's fullness, those who are fully yielded to His guidance. Their objective is not punishment or quarantine, but restoration. And this is dangerous work, because those who understand the nature of pride and sin (and are, therefore, able to help) are also susceptible to being caught in the same web.

Generally, it is better to scrutinize your own behavior and work at keeping yourself in line with the Spirit of God. Comparisons usually lead to confusion and conflict. In the end, the one you are primarily responsible for is yourself. Beware of highlighting the sins of others in order to ignore your own. Each of us has plenty of work to do on our own.

We're inclined to major on the minors in others' lives, while we minimize the majors in our own lives. In fact, many of the things we label "sin" in others are the very things we rationalize and excuse in ourselves—white lies, errors or lapses in judgment, and gossip, to name just a few. Moreover, some of the behaviors we call "unchristian" are not even mentioned in the Bible!

We must learn to live with one another lovingly, even when there are departures from or differences of faith and practice.

Now, there are some absolutes, some non-negotiables. There are certain core doctrines, without which we cannot have true spiritual fellowship. If I say, "Jesus is Lord of all," and you say, "Jesus was just a godly man," or "There is no God," though we are friends, we cannot enjoy spiritual fellowship, we cannot share in the spiritual life. We are in disagreement about core values.

But there are far more matters which are merely peripheral or traditional, or uncertain because God has not said one way or the other, and these should not be permitted to divide us.

Many of our practices, as Christians, are not taught by the Bible, but by the church, or by our parents. We need to discern which of our concerns are rooted in solid Biblical doctrines and which are simply

learned behaviors or cultural customs (even Christian cultural customs—traditions). These may have profound emotional weight, but they should not be given the same authority as God's Word, and should not be allowed to separate us from other Christ-followers.

Sectarianism is sin. Prejudice is sin. Indifference is sin. You cannot practice these without failing to love as Christ loved.

The first passage I ever read in the Bible was Romans 14. At the time, before I was converted, it made no sense at all to me; I found it utterly confusing and quit trying to read the Bible at all. But it has since become something of a theme text for my life and ministry. Let's look at it together.

Romans 14

¹ Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. ² For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. ³ Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. ⁴ Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval.

⁵ In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable. ⁶ Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God. ⁷ For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves.

⁸ If we live, it's to honor the Lord. And if we die, it's to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead.

¹⁰ So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For the Scriptures say, " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess and give praise to God.' "

¹² Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. ¹³ So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall.

Key thoughts in this passage are:

- Accept those whose faith is weak
- Don't argue over right and wrong
- Don't look down on people who hold different beliefs
- They're not *your* servants
- God can correct them
- You will have to give a personal account for your own life
- Focus on eliminating stumbling stones for others

Romans 14

¹⁴ I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. ¹⁵ And if another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good. ¹⁷ For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. ¹⁹ So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up.

²⁰ *Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble.* ²¹ *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another believer to stumble.* ²² *You may believe there's nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don't feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right.* ²³ *But if you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.*

Key thoughts in the final part of this chapter are:

- No food is by nature forbidden
- Your conscience is a significant guide for behavior
- Be assured of what you believe
- Your freedom may be someone else's bondage
- The Kingdom of God is not about rights, but about loving service
- Watch your attitude
- Where there are differences, keep your freedom to yourself
- Conscientious doubts are to be heeded
- Whatever does not proceed from or express faith in Jesus is sin

One thing that becomes clear in this chapter (and elsewhere in the Bible) is the need for having the right attitude. Behavior is often less important to God than attitude and intention. God overlooks many errors, if the attitude and intent were right (not pretentiously, but genuinely).

In this chapter, Paul tells us to be happy with our own faith. Know what you believe and rest in that. Be assured within yourself. At the same time, be carefully disinterested in the way others express their faith, unless you bear a delegated responsibility for training them. Everyone is not accountable to you!

This is so difficult for us! Many have such insecurity about their own faith and practice that they constantly try to get others to conform to their perspective and ways, in order to strengthen their own sense of rightness (self-righteousness). They criticize and argue about what is right and what is wrong, defending their own beliefs and positions. (Too many actually call this "witnessing for Jesus." It is not.) Others simply like to be "in charge" and have the last word.

In our recent study of Peter's second letter, we came across a similar admonition.

2 Peter 2

¹⁰ *[God] is especially hard on those [false teachers] who follow their own twisted sexual desire, and who despise authority. These people are proud and arrogant, daring even to scoff at supernatural beings [demons] without so much as trembling.* ¹¹ *But the [holy] angels, who are far greater in power and strength, do not dare to bring from the Lord a charge of blasphemy against those supernatural beings.*

Even in the presence of such clear evil, the holy angels do not bring railing accusations against demons. Respect is appropriate, even though their ways and deeds are blatantly evil. Don't imagine you have a godly attitude while you run roughshod over the devil. Even he deserves your respect, because he was created by God and his presence has been permitted by God.

Similar respect is owed by us to other people, even those who do not follow Christ or those who do not practice their faith as we do.

Some things we believe and practice have been taught to us by the Holy Spirit. They are personal lessons and personal commitments to obey. Everyone is not to be ruled by *our* personal disciplines. They are for *us* to practice, not necessarily for others.

There are Christians who have no qualms about drinking wine with a meal or sharing a beer with friends, for there is no clear prohibition in the Scripture, except with regard to excessive drinking and drunkenness. Even so, the evil effects of alcoholism are well-documented, destroying families and marriages, taking innocent lives, corrupting the minds and behaviors of those who drink, and costing employers and taxpayers billions of dollars every year. The ubiquitous presence of 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, also confirms that the problem is rampant. So many people expend countless hours and efforts just to stay sober.

However, with no conclusive teaching in the Bible, we are left to the direction of our Spirit-taught and Spirit-led conscience. What guidelines have been given us with which to build a conscientious life-style? Here are some that come to mind:

- Be moderate in all things
- Do everything to the glory of God
- Do no harm to yourself or others
- Actively love one another
- Accept the weaknesses of others (respect)
- Become a slave to no one and nothing but Jesus
- To thine own self be true (diligently practice *your* faith)
- Don't let the sun set while you remain angry
- Forgive others as Christ has forgiven you
- Pray fervently for each other
- Do not cause a brother or sister to stumble
- Pursue reconciliation for yourself, and restoration for others

The Assemblies of God is a tea-totaling denomination. That doesn't mean every adherent or member is alcohol-free, but it is the preferred and recommended position of the movement. Why? I can suggest several reasons. Temperance promotes:

- Clean habits
- Clear minds
- Economic stability
- Close families
- Dependable workers
- Readiness to serve

But the greatest reason is none of these. The greatest reason is to love other people. To set a clear example for young children. To strengthen those who are weak. To encourage those who are practicing sobriety. To guard those who suffer tendencies to addiction.

I speak of alcohol and its dangers only as an example that is familiar to most of us.

I have known people who held their own family members in contempt because they smoked cigarettes, even though smoking is nowhere mentioned in the Bible. Why the contempt? Because it is unhealthy for those who smoke, as well as those who must be near them? That's often the answer that is offered, because it is widely accepted, but sometimes, there are more subtle issues connected to their concerns: embarrassment by association, contempt for weakness and addictive behavior, self-

righteous condemnation. Until you can discern your own sins and overcome them to gain a Jesus-like attitude, you have no business confronting someone else, no matter how obvious their error seems.

In summary, every person—made in the image of God—deserves your respect, even if they believe differently from you, live differently than you. If the devil is owed respect by holy angels, sinners are owed respect by Christ-followers.

Remember this: You will not love someone whom you do not respect. You cannot win someone to faith whom you do not respect. Think about it!