

CONFLICT RESOLUTION *AND* THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Video Lecture Series

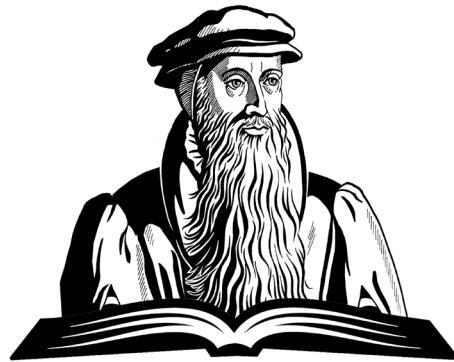
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

Module 2

THE LAW OF LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Lecture 4

The King's Instructions for the Strong



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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 2 ~

The Law of Love in the Church

1. Introduction
2. Three Principles for Harmony
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- 4. The King's Instructions for the Strong**
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Module 2 ~ Lecture 4 **The King's Instructions for the Strong**

Welcome to our fourth session on the subject of the Law of Love in the Matters of Liberty, as based on Romans 14:1 to 15:7. In our previous studies, we have reviewed four principles and are working on the fifth, that are derived from this passage in Romans. Now, we've learned so far that believers don't always think alike, on the issues not defined as essential. Number two, this area of Christian liberty has the potential to really bring strain and disharmony among the believers. And thirdly, to avoid this disharmony and division, we are to focus on the major truths of the gospel. And that is hard, for the fourth principle is that within a church family, we don't all have the same spiritual maturity in the faith. And that brings us to our fifth one, that the strong in the faith ought to bear the infirmities of the weak in the faith.

So this fifth principle is the main thrust of God's instructions on how to preserve harmony among a group of local Christians. In other words, the main responsibility lies within God's family on earth, on the shoulders of the strong in the faith. Such as it is in our normal life, the adults. Now this is clear with how Paul concludes his instructions, in Romans 15, verse 1, and let me read that again: "We then that are strong" in the faith, we "ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves." The Greek word for "bear" has the meaning of "pick up and carry." The word describes those who assist travelers in carrying their luggage. In Galatians 6, we find the same word, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." So, if you combine these two Scriptures, it helps us to understand what God's direction is here. We are to help those who are struggling in their pilgrim journey of faith. Either we do this through sharing the heaviness of their burdens, that is, Galatians 6, verse 1, or we do this in bearing their infirmities in the faith, as here in Romans 15, verse 1.

So it is in these instructions we hear Paul's fatherly heart beating through. He is pastoral, he is tender and gracious himself, as he deals with the weak in the faith. Now he began this chapter in his letter with discouraging the strong to enter into doubtful disputations, in chapter 14, verse 1. And why? Friends, it would make it harder for these pilgrims when we enter into forceful discussions. Paul also cautioned against despising them. Instead, we, the strong, are to bear with

them and with their infirmities. We are to make it easier for them, rather than harder to walk their spiritual journey.

So, how can we make it easier, and how will that promote the harmony, and thus the strength of God's kingdom? Now, we do that either by helping them to carry the load, or we do that by helping them to get rid of the load. But we don't help them when we cause them to stumble along their roads, for such stumbling would not only complicate their journey, it would harm them spiritually. So then what? What is the practical way here?

Paul's direction in Romans 15, verse 2, is clear. He says, "Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification." We're to edify—that means to build one up in the faith. So how do we build up the weak in the faith? We do that when we make them see more and more the liberty, the fulness, or the completeness of being in Christ. In other words, the ultimate goal would be that the weak would become strong in the faith. So what does that mean practically? How do the strong carry this out? Well, to answer that, let's return first into the study of Romans 14 to hear God's instructions to the strong in the faith.

Building up from the previous lecture, the fifth direction is found in Romans 14, verse 13: "Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way." Here, the Apostle touches the heart of the Christian's behavior. It is the call to love one another, not just as we love ourselves, no, but to the extent that Jesus loved his own, and even his enemies. Friends, our departing Master left us this commandment, in John 13:34–35, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another." And, "by this shall all men that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."

Harmony among believers is greatly preserved when the strong bear, in loving consideration, the burden of the infirmities of the weak in the faith. Well, what does that loving consideration to one of my brothers or sisters really look like then? Well, according to Romans 14, verse 13, it means that I don't put a stumblingblock, or an occasion to fall, in my brother's way. Practically, it means that I'll adjust myself—I'll adjust myself to refrain from doing what offends, or what troubles, or what—even worse—what destroys my brother. Listen to how God put that in verses 15 and 16: "But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Let not then your good be evil spoken of." And here, "your good" means the allowable things you do—let not that be evil spoken of. If I may paraphrase these words of Paul to make clear what God is commanding us, then it would sound like this: But if thy brother or if thy sister is grieved with your use of your freedom, don't do it—don't do it. Even if you are convinced it is acceptable or good to the Lord. Refrain from eating that food, or refrain from drinking alcohol, or whatever the weak in the faith in your fellowship finds unacceptable for a Christian. Hard, yes—that is the will of God. Don't use your freedom because it has an unwholesome effect on your brother and sister. It may even affect them personally, or it will break down your harmony with them. And to love him or her is far more important than the use of your liberty. If you don't refrain yourself, you are not building him up in the faith, or in the joy of salvation. As a matter of fact, you are destroying one for whom Jesus Christ was willing, not just to give up his freedom, but his life.

We are to notice that Paul didn't just preach this. Now, the admirable servant of the Lord Jesus lived it out what he illustrated here in verse 14, "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Paul is persuaded from his understanding of the gospel that the scruples some believers

had about food being unclean, or other minor matters, were not necessary. We also note that not all of his fellow believers had the same views of conscience. And in order not to offend them, Paul would refrain from using his liberty in their presence. In 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19 and 20, his magnificence as a disciple of Jesus shines forth admirably: “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew”—why?—“that I might gain the Jews;” and, “to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law.” Yet, the next verses make clear that in a different setting, the Apostle adapted himself, for he says, “To them that are without the law”—that is, the unsaved, outside the church, the heathens—I became “as without the law, . . . To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak.” I made myself “all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.” And dear friends, this gracious adaptation, to make himself the most effective as a gospel preacher, Paul never compromised his allegiance to God’s revealed law. Now, listen, he added for our clarity, in verse 21, “being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ.”

How did Paul become that way? He learned this from his Master. And therefore, he directs our thoughts to Him, in Romans 15, verse 3. He says, “For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me.” The Lord Jesus was willing to endure all the trials the will of God demanded of him. He did not seek to avoid them or shrink away from them. He also denied himself to seek the well-being of others. Besides living for the glory of his Father, Jesus lived to seek the good of sinners, and part of that was that he bore with patience the immaturity of his disciples. At one point, he even gave up his liberty to be exempt from the temple tax. He was willing to suffer reproach. He was willing to suffer contempt, in order to do good to others. Now we know how far the Lord took this, and shall we not follow his footsteps? Shall we not give up a few of our liberties to help our fellow believer bear his infirmities? As Christ did experience, so will we. Jesus brought reproach upon himself for his exercise of love. Paul experienced the same, as he was slandered all over the world. And if you and I follow the Master’s example, expect reproaches.

So with an apostolic plea, but even with an apostolic authority, Paul urged the strong, in Romans 14, verses 19 and 20. He says, “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another”—build up the faith of others that means—“For” something as insignificant as “meat, destroy not the work of God.” The motivation of all we do as Christians is to be charity. For when Paul has urged the strong in the faith to be charitable, it is not that he is compromising his views on Christian liberty. Instead, he is urging the strong to sacrifice their Christian liberty to spare the weak in the faith. Now this he once more emphasized in verse 20 of chapter 14. He says, “All things are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.” Now in the context of this chapter, the phrase “all things are pure” only refers to the matters of food and drink, or special days, and the unessentials. Paul indirectly confirms here that the limitations of the ceremonial law are no more binding on us as Christians. Yet, take note of this strong word, “evil.” Though the food is pure, and though eating allowed, doing it may still be evil. What’s the evil that is highlighted in verse 21? “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.” That’s the evil. If the life you live in your Christian liberty brings offense to a brother, it is evil. Or, if your example leads one to act contrary to his own conscience, it is evil. For, according to Romans 14, verse 23, “whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” Or, if your actions would weaken the spiritual relationship between you, and destroy the comfort of the weak in the faith’s spiritual life, it is evil. Now, Paul didn’t say that you can never do those things that a weaker brother is troubled by. In verse 22, we read, “Hast thou

faith? have it to thyself before God.” In other words, faith here refers to the matters concerning the Christian liberty—what we’re speaking on in this chapter. So Paul says that if you believe that eating pork is your liberty, then eat it, but don’t do it in front of your weaker brother. Be satisfied with having this liberty privately, and avoid making it an issue of disturbance in the church family. Bear with the infirmities of the weak, as long as their minds are still unenlightened, in the extent of their Christian freedom and fulness in Christ.

Friends, have you and I heard God’s call in this chapter? The Master has called us to lay aside and avoid all those matters that bring division and strife among you. Division within the ranks is such fertile ground for Satan and his agents. Disharmony is like breaches in an ancient city wall. Disharmony is like cancer in the body, and this will lead to weakening, can lead to disfiguring, and ultimately, can lead to destruction of a local church family. Therefore, in conclusion, on God’s direction to the strong focus on that which unites, we all know that the major themes, and the major truths of the Bible matter most. We all know that the only thing that really matters is whether we are united to Jesus Christ by true faith. So major on the majors. Let not the minors distract us from the majors, brethren. And what things that would be today? What about the preaching of the gospel to the lost and perishing sinner? That’s a major. What about instructing our youth in the simple truth of the gospel? What about living out the message of hope and love in this suffering, and lonely, and needy world? That’s a major. A world that is ignorant of the only and the sure cure. What about a life of serving one another in pure love and meekness? What about the care for the orphans, and the widows, and the poor, and the lost, and the needy, and the addicted, and the broken? What about the distribution of Bibles and the work of that in different languages? What about supporting and standing as one with the persecuted church? What about encouraging each other? What about sharing the burdens of life, and so fulfilling the law of Jesus Christ the Lord? The more that we focus on suchlike major points that are concerning our soul and body of fellow man, the more we will learn to agree to disagree on minor matters.

So, having reviewed God’s instructions to the strong in the faith, we will next consider God’s will to the weak in the faith. Thank you very much, and may God bless these instructions.