

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

## Video Lecture Series

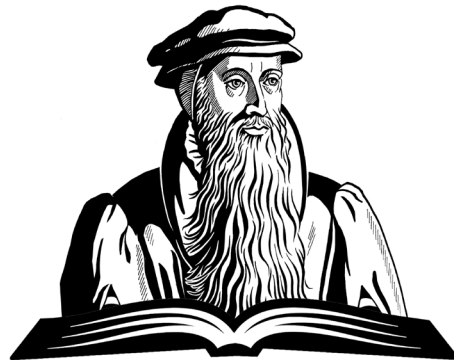
by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

*Module 1*

### CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CHURCH

*Module 2*

### THE LAW OF LOVE AND LIBERTY IN THE CHURCH



**The John Knox Institute**  
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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *Module 1 ~ Lecture 1* **Introduction**

Dear friends, welcome to the studies on the subject of the well-being of the church in the kingdom of God. This group of lectures will detail God's teaching on how to aim at the unity and the peace within the church, or more accurately, within the family of God. Unity and peace are critical to the kingdom of God. Division and disunity have always been Satan's chief weapons in weakening the church of God. And when that happens, it will be harmful to the further building of God's worldwide kingdom. And why is that true? Well, it's because the healthy and the well-functioning church is the tool God uses for the extension of his kingdom. As we all know, the family is the key, the cornerstone to the prosperity of our society. And likewise, the local church family, or the household of God, is crucial for the well-being of God's worldwide kingdom. All believers in the Lord belong to his universal or worldwide body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, it is a fact that we mostly interact personally with fellow believers in our local churches. It is with this local focus that we will study the Lord's various practical instructions about maintaining unity, or preventing disunity, as well as restoring unity.

Our first study will concentrate on Jesus' teaching from Matthew 18, verses 15 to 35. This passage lays out the Lord's orders in dealing with conflict resolution among the members of a local church. Friends, as long as we live outside of Paradise, there will always be issues that bring strain or stress among believers. Even worse, if not dealt with, these sin issues can lead to ugly divisions. The history of God's church confirms the truth that wherever God builds his kingdom, the devil begins to work full time to hinder it and to destroy it. And what is Satan's strategy in this warfare against God's kingdom? It always has been to divide and conquer. Now, the easiest way to destroy a strong, solid nation is to make it self-destruct. So, provoking a civil war will be the least costly and the most effective to an enemy. The exact strategy Satan has used effectively, as he seeks to destroy God's kingdom, is that—divide and conquer. Outright persecution tends to pull the kingdom people together and actually make them stronger. But inward tensions of division and infighting will quickly weaken the kingdom. It also will make it unattractive to the unbelievers. For who would want to join those who can't get along together?

So, in these studies, we will focus on the will of the Lord Jesus in how to resist Satan's destructive strategies of divide and conquer. His strategy is two-pronged. The Lord says, focus on maintaining purity in doctrine and life, and secondly, on maintain unity among the brethren. It is noticeable how both are uppermost in the Lord Jesus' own prayer in John 17. In John 17, verses 8 and 17, Jesus prays about the purity in truth. He prays, "For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, . . . Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." Towards the end of his prayer, he prays for unity among the brethren. He says, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou has sent me"—this is John 17:21. So clearly, both are intimately related. True unity can only exist in tandem with purity of doctrine and life. The well-known London preacher, Spurgeon, said rightfully, "I am quite sure that the best way to promote union is to promote truth." And Jonathan Edwards, used by God in the Great Awakening in America in the seventeenth century, said, "Christianity cannot flourish in a time of strife and contention among its own professors." So, it ought, therefore, not to come as a surprise that the Lord Jesus, through the words of his apostles, has spoken directly and abundantly on maintaining peace among the saints, and how to maintain this. So, let me walk you through a sampling of the main New Testament scriptures in which the Lord emphasizes the unity and the peace among the brethren.

First, let's go to the example of the new Christian church upon Pentecost. In Acts 4, verse 32, we read, "The multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul." The unity and peace is there. In Acts 9, verse 31, we read the beautiful testimony, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied." So the church grew in this setting of peace.

Now, quite a number of exhortations are given in the epistles of Paul and others. For example, Romans 12, verse 16: "Be of the same mind one toward another." Romans 14:19, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." Romans 15, verses 5 and 6, "Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded toward another according to Christ Jesus: that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now again, 1 Corinthians 1:10, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." Second Corinthians 13:11, "Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you." Ephesians 4:1 to 3, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation"—or the calling—"wherewith ye were called"—again—"with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." And we move on to Philippians 1:27, "That ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." And in Philippians 2:2, Paul adds: "Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind." Moving on to Peter's epistle, in 1 Peter 3:8, "Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous."

Now, clearly this repeated emphasis of scriptures ought to convince all Jesus' followers that to the Head of the church, unity and peace is high on the list of priorities. And the reason for this emphasis is not only that dwelling together in unity is good and pleasant for the brethren, it is mostly

good, and pleasant, and glorifying to God himself. As Jesus mentored his young and immature disciples, there were two clear occasions that the peace and unity among the little group was in great danger. The first one is found in Matthew 20, verses 20 to 28, where through the agency of their mother, James and John vie for the highest places. Yet it was not only the problem of these two, for in Matthew 20, verse 24, it is recorded, “And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren.”

Now, in the second example, in Luke 22, verses 23 and 24, we find the disciples busy in proving who among them ought to be considered the greatest. Almost teenager-like, they were bragging about themselves, all trying to establish their greatness. And why? to be excused from doing one another a favor. Now, most likely their efforts to be excused was in connection with the scene we read in John 13, where Jesus gathered with his disciples for his last Passover meal with them. Someone needed to do the washing of the feet—a task ordinarily done by a slave or a servant. But each of Jesus’ disciples considered himself too important to do that lowly work. The Lord’s response in both instances is stunning and exemplary. With a gentle rebuke and clear teaching, he nipped this threat to the unity in the bud. In Matthew 20, he did this with golden teaching about who in his kingdom is actually the greatest. He says, he that serves the others is the greatest. He concluded this with the example of himself. He says, “Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Now, in Luke 22, he repeated this teaching, but then he accompanied it with his personal action of washing his own disciples’ feet, as is recorded in John 13. My friends, what a moving display of the glory of our Master, Jesus Christ, the Son of God! And when finished, he gave this direction, as you read in John 13 verses 12 to 15—“Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.”

Now, in this study, we will sit at Jesus’ feet, to consider his teaching in Matthew 18, verses 15 to 35. I will combine this with other relevant scriptures on the subject, such as Galatians 6, verse 1, and Luke 17, verses 1 to 6. But in Matthew 18, Jesus has outlined the pathway how to maintain unity of the body in the face of a serious and disruptive sin. And the importance of this subject cannot be enough emphasized, for if we do not deal Biblically, and lovingly, and faithfully with the issues of sin and conflict, we will lose our main ally in the kingdom—the Holy Spirit. Paul warned about the grieving of the Holy Spirit in Ephesians 4:30—“And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.” In the context of Ephesians 4, Paul is dealing with effective and loving communication among the believers. And if the communication among the brethren is negative through sinful anger, lying speech, bitterness, lack of forgiveness—the Holy Spirit will be grieved. And brethren, no condition is more to be feared for the prosperity and strength of the kingdom, than when the Holy Spirit is grieved. The Spirit is grieved. He stands back. He will withhold his sanctifying and his uniting influences. He will let the wounds fester, and he may even depart from a fellowship, as Jesus’ warns abundantly, in the letters to the seven churches, in Revelation 2 and 3.

When, in those broken or Spirit-abandoned fellowships, we trace back where the decay began, it will often reveal that it began when one sin was excused. For departing from God’s ways always begins the same way! It begins with one small step onto the wrong path! One sin excused will lead to more sins excused. The way of sin is always a slippery slope. Leaving a sin issue in the church family, is like leaving a splinter in the ball of your heel. Now, left on its own, it will make walking difficult. If untreated, it will eventually fester, and infection which can even lead to more

dysfunction, and even death. So, let us implore God for his blessing, as we explore this vastly important subject together.

Our theme, on basis of Matthew 18, will be, in these next sessions, God's way of solving sin problems—loving, and gentle, but clear confrontation is the way. Now before we look closely and in detail at this scripture, let me lay down a few principles that will guide us. The first principle is that we need to be clear about the Lord commands us to confront our brothers, if they sin against us in any manner. This is clear from verse 15, in Matthew 18. He says, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go, and tell him." Jesus echoes the same direction, in Luke 17:3—"Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him."

Now, doing this confrontation is, according to the Lord's own teaching, an act of real love. Listen to Leviticus 19:17, where God says, "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him." Did you hear that? Leaving any sin undisturbed is allowing the sinner to be lost. And therefore, the loving act is not to ignore it, not to ignore a sin that disturbs, or destroys, or separates—it is to confront the offender in love.

Now, if you turn to Genesis 3—the opening chapters of the Bible—you see how God confronted Adam and Eve. He didn't come storming into Paradise, threatening, or thundering in his displeasure. Instead, he invited them in a gentle question: "Where are you?" In other words, he said, "I want to see you!" Though hurt, though offended, though dishonored by their actions, he seeks to make it right, and he doesn't want us to hide from him. And notice that God also didn't skirt or ignore the sin. Instead, he confronted them. He named it. He shamed it. He took off the cover. But what was God's motivation? It was love—it was love. By his seeking and by his confronting their sin, God said to them, "Look, Adam and Eve, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." In other words, "I have no pleasure in the state of separation between me and you through sin."

Now, you move on to Genesis, chapter 4—the same thing happened. He lovingly confronts Cain about his sin, in order to lead him to repentance, and to keep him from more sin! Now, God saw in Cain the first steps on the slippery slope of disobedience. There was jealousy in his heart, there was anger, there was murderous thoughts dwelling in his heart. And with love, he warned Cain, "If you do well, shalt you not be accepted?" And if you do not well, sin lies, like a crouching lion ready to pounce you at the door. Friends, what was God's motivation? It was his love—it was his care about Cain.

But perhaps you wonder whether confrontation contradicts another scripture, in 1 Peter 4:8, where God says, "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity"—or love—"shall cover the multitude of sins." Yet the principles the Lord Jesus here lays down are clear. He says when sins are committed out of infirmity, or immaturity, or weakness, or thoughtlessness, deal with them with love. Now, as parents, we don't call attention to every weakness and every mistake our immature and young children make. Now, they are young. They are clumsy. They are immature. They may spill the milk, or they may fail to do a chore perfectly, yet they didn't intend to do either. And so it is with sin. But when sins are done that cause bitterness, or anger, or irritation, or separation, or spite, and bring ongoing conflicts, they are to be confronted and removed, for they will continue to destroy, and destroy more and more.

So, the second thing we ought to be clear about is the truth that, contrary to our expectations, loving confrontation according to Jesus' detailed instructions, will bring blessings to all the parties involved. Notice in Matthew 18, verse 15, where it says it will gain you your brother. In James 5, verses 19 and 20, the Lord added this encouragement to confrontation: "Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converts the sinner from

the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” that lie in the train of one sin.

So clearly, after this introduction, we are ready to make a detailed study of our Lord’s orders, in Matthew 18, verses 15 to 20. And I look forward leading you into that study. May God add his blessings to our efforts. Thank you.



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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *Module 1 ~ Lecture 2* **Jesus' Instructions on Confrontation**

Dear friends, welcome again to the studies on The Conflict Resolution Among Believers. To warm up our hearts to this calling of the King, just for a moment consider these three scriptures on this similar subject. In Psalm 141, verse 5: “Let the righteous smite me; it shall be a kindness: and let him reprove me; it shall be an excellent oil, which shall not break my head.” In Proverbs, chapter 9, verse 8: “Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee.” Also in Proverbs 27, verses 5 and 6: “Open rebuke is better than secret love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.”

Now, as we consider these mandates of the Lord, we notice the unity of the scriptures on this subject. Sin needs confrontation—gentle, loving, clear, decisive, and wise. And in Matthew 18, the Lord has outlined the process how to do this. Experience has proven that following his orders brings blessings. And therefore, each church fellowship, or each local household of God should strive to follow Jesus' instructions.

As we will see in detail, there are four levels, in which we are to deal with the sin issue. First, it always begins on the personal level—examine yourself. This is followed, in the second place, with a private level, between you and the other person. Third, if that is not successful, it moves into the extended level—we are to add a witness to the process. And lastly, it comes to the congregational level, where the whole church is to get involved. Now, after the review of these four levels, I will conclude with a brief study on the desired and the undesired outcome. Obviously, the desired outcome is repentance, which should be followed with the exercise of genuine forgiveness. Now, the undesired outcome is the refusal to repent and reconcile, which, sadly, leads to the excommunication. Well, what is to be our relationship and our responsibility after excommunication? We will look at that in conclusion of our studies.

So now, the first level of confrontation begins with a personal confrontation, or, perhaps better put, a personal examination. Now notice an aspect that is not directly stated in Matthew 18, it is clearly taught in Matthew 7, verses 1 through 5, as well as in Galatians 6, verse 1. In the Matthew 7 passage, the Lord teaches us that we are not to judge others in unfavorable and condemnatory

judgment. In the Galatians passage, he directs us to deal with fallen brothers or sisters “in the spirit of meekness.” So first then, the passage in Matthew 7, verses 1 and 2, Jesus says, “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” Now Jesus does not mean we cannot judge someone’s actions to be wrong or right according to his divine standard. But, the Lord lays his finger at the spirit in which we are to do this. It must never be in the spirit of “I am better than you,” but instead, in the spirit of, “I am no different than you, for I am also a sinner. And if there is a difference between you and me and my walk, it is because of the grace of God which kept me and guided me.”

Now to get this point across, the Lord makes a remarkable and visual statement, that we first are to consider the beam in our own eye before we deal with the mote in our brother’s eye. The original word “mote” is like a piece of sawdust, while the beam, in the original, refers to the rafter that is used in the building—a beam, or rafter in your own eye; a mote in the other’s eye. Now the message Jesus pictures is powerful. To remove a piece of sawdust from your brother’s eye is a delicate job. Not only do you need gentle hands, proper tools, but you also need clear eyes. But friends, if there is a rafter-like beam stuck in your eye, you would end of doing an amputation of the eye instead of a delicate surgery removing dust. And how often this happens when we confront brothers and sisters within the church family of their trespass against us or the body of the church. Instead of saving their soul and restoring the fellowship, we end up losing him or her altogether.

But how will we then approach the delicate eye surgery of our brother or sister in the proper spirit? How will we become the right tool in the hand of the Master? We become it by following our Lord’s direction with looking at ourselves first. The first direction is that we need to pray to see ourselves in the light of God’s Word. In the Psalms, we find very fitting petitions to help us in those prayers, as we examine our relationship to the subject. Take, for example, David’s petition in Psalm 139, verses 23 and 24: “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Now another such petition is found in Psalm 19, verses 12 and 13. David prayed, “Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me.” How does God answer these petitions, as we lay them before him? How will I be examined?

Well, that leads us to the second direction, in preparing ourselves for confrontation. God answers these petitions through his Word and Spirit. And when Jesus prayed in John 17:17, “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” So, in his truth that God uses, he sanctifies us. God’s Word is the mirror by which we learn to see ourselves more and more in coming short ourselves in every aspect. And it’s there for no accident that the petitions in Psalm 19, verses 12 and 13, are preceded by a description of the Word of God and the effect upon the believer. Hear these words: “The law of the LORD is perfect”—and what does it do?—“converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure”—what does it do?—“making wise the simple” (verse 7). “The statutes of the LORD are right”—and what do they do?—“rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure”—and again, what does that do?—“enlightening the eyes” (verse 8). So, the same point is made in 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17, where we read: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.” So, therefore, all Christians are to prayerfully place themselves before the searching of the scriptures, for it is through the Word of God that we personally are confronted with our own sins and backsliding, our own weaknesses, our own infirmities. His Word will open our eyes for the areas in our personal life, where spiritual

correction or spiritual growth is needed. And friends, seeing our own sins, that will prepare us to face a brother or sister with his or her sins, for what does it do? It makes us meek, by the blessing of God.

And so, the third direction that will prepare us personally to confront a brother or sister in the church family is the teachings of Hebrews 10, verses 24 and 25. We read there: “And let us consider one another to provoke”—or to stir up one another—“unto love and to good works: . . . exhorting one another.” Now any time you share with fellow saints is an exercise of confrontation, for your example exhorts, or convicts, or encourages others, and others do that to you. As iron sharpens iron, so the interaction of fellow saints with each other will sharpen us in the walk of life. It will also open our eyes for how we fall, as we see ourselves excel in love and good works. Now, seeing our own perpetual shortcomings is God’s tool to cultivate the meekness Galatians 6:1 instructs us about. And God says there, “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” Now, the spirit of meekness is one of the most essential characteristics needed to effectively confront a fellow believer on his or her sin. We are to prayerfully seek God’s ministry to make us meek. Meekness is always the fruit of getting to know God. It is the fruit of being in his Word. It is also a fruit of the fellowship with other saints, ministered by the Holy Spirit in us.

Now besides this personal benefit of spending time with fellow members, there is also a preparatory benefit to the exercise of confrontation. For good and positive interaction with others builds trust. You learn to know and you learn to appreciate each other—to trust each other. You learn that there is love and care in the heart of each other. And then, friends, if it then becomes necessary to confront your fellow believer on a sin issue, it will be easier to do so, as there is a basis of trust and respect, and there is a relationship of love. This may make confrontation much easier than having to confront a fellow member you have neglected or ignored, and therefore, have no relationship with.

So, let’s now move on and look at the second level of confrontation. This is to be done, first of all, in a personal setting. The Lord Jesus speaks, in Matthew 18, verse 15, his direction: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: and if he shall hear thee (then) thou has gained thy brother.” Now, there are four specific directions the Lord Jesus gives us in this order.

First, who is to confront the erring brother or sister. We learn that the Lord expects the offended to confront the offending sinner. Listen again, as the Lord Jesus says, If he shall trespass against you, go and tell him. In Luke 17:3, this is reinforced: “Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him.” So each Christian is responsible to be involved in preserving the unity within the body of Christ. Now, therefore, when we see sin, we don’t go and discuss it with others, or talk about it to our spiritual leaders, no, the Lord instructs you to act. You cannot leave it, or you cannot pass it on to others. You also cannot try to ignore it, or cover it with an hypocritical smile, as if no sin is done against you, or as if the sin never happened. The Lord commands you to become a part of the solution, by shouldering your responsibility for the well-being of his kingdom. If he sins against you, you go, and you tell him.

Secondly, whom should you confront? Well, Jesus calls the person “your brother,” and of course, that also includes your sister. So is it everyone who is a genuine Christian? Or is it only those I know personally as a Christian? Well, ideally, it’s everyone who belongs to the body of Christ by faith, yet it is clear that Jesus did not intend that you are to do this to every brother or sister in the worldwide church. It’s clear that brothers you don’t know or you don’t meet cannot

directly sin against you. Jesus is, therefore, instructing us to deal with brethren within our own local church family. It is from them we experience the ill effects of their sins.

So thirdly, what should we confront the brother or sister with? Jesus specifies that we are to confront them about their trespass against us. A trespass is a violation of God's law. It's a sinful act—something that is forbidden, or something that is commanded by God. Notice the Lord doesn't specify the sin in this passage, but all and each sin that is public and damaging to us and to our relationship is to be confronted. How far do we define "us" can be debatable. Now, is an unforgiving attitude that someone has against another member, a sin against us? Is a fellow member living in the sin of drunkenness, a sin against us? Now these are not easy questions to answer. But the point is, if such sins affect the body, then it could be argued that they are against us, and therefore, need to be confronted, even if they were not directly against us personally.

The Lord used the word "trespass." Clearly, he is pointing to an action, rather than an attitude or a motive. Attitudes and motives are impossible for us to evaluate in another person. Now, even though someone's words or actions may give us an indication about a sinful motive or attitude, we still are not able to judge the heart. Therefore, trespass is always an action that must be verifiable by facts, not based on feelings, or impressions, or second-guesses. A trespass is also something that is clearly forbidden, or commanded in the scripture, and identified as a transgression of God's moral law or doctrinal teaching. So, for example, a different view that a Christian has in the area of Christian liberty is not a trespass of God's law. And the use of our Christian liberty is not censurable.

Well, lastly, a trespass is also a sin that cannot be overlooked, or cannot be covered with love, as directed in Proverbs 19, verse 11, or 1 Peter 4, verse 8. In Proverbs 19:11, we are instructed this: "The discretion of a man deferreth his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression." In 1 Peter 4, verse 8, the Lord commands, "And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins."

Now examples of sins that may be overlooked or covered with love are, for example, when a brother or sister is unkind, or inconsiderate, or impatient, or they use a harsh tone of voice, or even acted immature. Now such mild trespasses, however, can eventually become a major force of division and destruction. So, love is to cover a multitude of sin, but there are some sins that throw off the cover. So how do I know what to overlook, and what not, in my brother's actions? Well, there are three questions you need to ask yourself.

First, is the trespass creating a tension in our relationship? That's the first question to ask. Does it begin to dominate my thinking? Is it making me turn negative or bitter towards the person? Is the impact of the sin causing friction and division among us as the household of God? That's the first question. Now, secondly, is the trespass I see in the person becoming a sinful habit? Is the person more and more entangled, or hardened to the deceitfulness of this sin, and is it leading in him or her to more sins? Now thirdly, is the impact of this sin doing damage to the cause of God's kingdom? Does his or her sin hinder, for example, the work of evangelism of the church? Is the name of God brought into disrepute among the unbelievers or the outsiders? Those are the questions to ask.

Well, next, how does the Lord instruct us to deal with the trespassing brother or sister? The direction is clear: "Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." So, before we involve any other person, we need to deal with him on a private level. And what a blessing for the trespasser, if this sin can remain a private matter between you and him. Friends, the world thrives on the gossip of the failures and the faults of others, but Jesus wants his people to thrive on truth and on holiness. And therefore, what is a private sin needs to remain private as long as possible. This not

only will be safeguard the name of the sinner, but also the name of God. We all know the damage to God's glory when the sins of his people are broadcast abroad. Keeping trespasses private is therefore God's way of minimizing the negative effects of his own people's sins. Now earlier, we already learned that to tell him his fault needs to be done in love, and in the spirit of meekness, considering that we all are what Paul confessed in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 10, "By the grace of God I am what I am."

So in conclusion, let's review what we learned. The Lord taught us that willful trespasses need to be dealt with locally. They are kind of like the hair cracks in the structural frame of an airplane. Neglecting them will lead to disaster. And that's why we are to be warned not to give Satan any advantage, as his main strategy is to divide and conquer. Thank you.

In our next study, we will finalize Matthew 18, verse 15, and tie it in with Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18, verses 21 to 35, as well as Luke 17, verses 1 to 5, and it will be good for you to read those passages ahead of time.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *Module 1 ~ Lecture 3* **Repentance, Confession, and Forgiveness**

Welcome to our third study on Conflict Resolution among believers, as laid out by the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, in Matthew 18, and particularly, verses 15 to 17. Now before we dig deeper on the Lord's directions, let me try to convince you of the five rich blessings and benefits that flow from Biblical confrontation. This is to motivate us.

First, dealing with sin honors the Lord of glory. As God's holiness is his beauty, so any neglect of holiness makes the cause of God contemptible. Now the second motivation is, dealing with the sinner saves the sinner from death, and stops the rippling effects in the wake of any sin. We noted that in a previous lecture, of James 5, verse 20, "Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." Now, the third motivation, dealing with sin benefits the offended. Jesus points out this encouragement, in Matthew 18, verse 15: you will gain your brother. And fourth, dealing with sin benefits the whole household of God—think of that. If there remains an Achan in the camp, like in Joshua's day, the whole family of God will suffer (Joshua 7). And Jesus warns about that, in the passages in Revelation 2 and 3, about holding onto false teachers or teachings. If they would not deal with those matters, the Lord would abandon them as a whole. And lastly and fifthly, dealing with sin even benefits the world, as they see the testimony of love and forgiveness, and that testimony will be unimpaired, when we resolve it. Jesus declares, in John 13, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (verses 34 and 35). What a powerful testimony to the King and his glory in such genuine and working love, also in the resolving of conflict.

So, let's recap what we have learned so far in Matthew 18, verse 15, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone." Now we have observed that our confrontation needs to be, first of all, soaked in love. According to Ephesians 4:15, we are to speak the truth, but in love. Second, it actually needs to be quick. Jesus' command is "Go," and in the original Greek, it has the meaning of, "be going"—don't delay; don't postpone

this confrontation. Thirdly, the confrontation should be purposeful: “Go and tell him his fault.” The purpose of the meeting is not to have a nice talking time, or a nice time for looking for an opportunity to broach the subject, if it comes up. No, our talk needs to be purposeful, to resolve an issue of sin. Therefore, be direct, and ask the person, “When is it a good time for you and I to talk about this issue that is on my heart?” Fourth, it needs to be verbal, for we are to “tell him his fault.” The Greek original “tell,” has the meaning of “reprove,” which is therefore, you are to seek to convince the person of his or her wrongdoing that’s hurting you and others. So let’s remind each other that problems are not solved by gestures, or by ignoring, or by avoiding the subject, or any other nonverbal communications. The Lord expects us to discuss it intentionally and Biblically. Now fifthly, he says it needs to be private—it’s “between thee and him alone.” We need to do this to protect the name of the offender, and therefore, our Lord commands us to keep the fault private, among the offender and yourself.

So let’s now trace further how our Lord wants us to approach conflicts, and drawing herein a few other scriptures where God enlarges on this subject. Now, we need to come in the spirit of the Apostle, as we confront each other. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2, verse 4, as he reflects on his brotherly admonishment he had to give in his previous letter. Note in these words the feelings of his heart. He says, “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that you should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you.” Friends, what a difference will it make, when we deal with each other with such anguish of love.

Now, we also need to be gentle, we need to be meek, as pointed out in Galatians 6, verse 1. There we read, “Restore such an one in the spirit of meekness.” Now a person caught in sin is like a person with his bone out of joint—out of its socket. Now if we don’t deal with that bone out of the socket wisely, our efforts to restore can end up in more or even permanent damage. So, be gentle. We need to, therefore, be meek and humble, as Galatians 6:1 indicates. And how? “considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” You and I are capable to fall into the same sins if the grace of God doesn’t keep us back from our own sinful remnants of the indwelling old man. Once, two brothers—let’s call them Senior and Junior brother—were on their way to confront an erring brother about his sin. And while driving, Junior remarked, “I simply don’t understand how our brother could commit such a sin.” Now, upon hearing this remark, Senior, who was driving the car, stopped the car and made a U-turn to return home. So Junior, somewhat surprised, asked, “Why are you going back? Did you forget something?” And Senior’s answer was very instructive, “No, I haven’t forgotten anything, but I’m going back to seek another brother to go along, for you don’t have the right mindset to plead with our erring brother.” Now that’s a powerful lesson.

So, lastly, therefore, we need to be prayerful. All our loving confrontations should be soaked in prayer. Plead with God; beg him to glorify himself through all this confrontation. Plead that the fruit of the Spirit may adorn your meeting with each other. Plead that love may dominate all speech, that longsuffering patience may control us, that gentleness may characterize all the interactions, that goodness and meekness may govern both of us as we speak about it. Pray that faith or faithfulness to the truth will guide us, and that self-control be displayed, and finally that joy and peace may crown all the efforts. Soak yourself in prayer. And the crown of all these labors on this private level is what Jesus described in these encouraging words, “If he shall hear thee”—follow thee—“thou hast gained thy brother.” What a wonderful motivation is this prospect, to restore one from the path of sin, and to be reconciled to each other.

Now, for full reconciliation to take place, we are also to consider what the Lord teaches us in

Luke 17, verses 1 through 5. So let's pull in this passage of our Lord's will, which is so crucial to conflict resolution. Jesus begins his instruction by reminding us of the reality of this life. In Luke 17:1, he says, "It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come!" In other words, Jesus recognizes that offenses are unavoidable, even among his own people. It cannot but happen, for our sanctification is not complete till heaven. In each household of God, there will be sins that grate, that offend, that wound, or that threaten the unity. We need to remind ourselves that God's visible church on this earth is not a museum of perfect saints. No, we are to consider the household of God, the church we are a part of, a construction zone, in which God, through his Word and Spirit, is perfecting his people. And, friends, not until God moves his people from grace to glory will there be perfection.

And yet notice that Jesus doesn't soft-peddle the sins found among his people here below. He says, "But woe unto him, through whom these offenses come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones." Now this among the fiercest language by our most gentle Savior. The warning is clear: Don't touch those little ones or lead them astray. But then the Lord turns his attention to the offended, in Luke 17, verse 3, "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him." What Jesus didn't add in Matthew 18, is what he added in Luke 17: "and if he repent, forgive him."

Now repentance is what we desire to see in our offending or trespassing brother or sister. Repentance is a change of our mind that leads to a change of action. Upon taking ownership of the sin, repentance is expressed in a confession, as well as a petition for forgiveness. Now, in repentance, you humble yourselves before the offended, and you say something like, "Yeah, I now see the way I talked, or the way I acted to you was very wrong, was very hurtful, and was sinful. Yeah, I was wrong! I've done this wrong, I've sinned to you in doing this," and then name the sin. And that should be followed with, "Will you please forgive me?" Why is that so hard to ask—to ask someone to forgive you? Because you are a proud people. We hate humbling ourselves. Humbling ourselves and confessing you're wrong kind of feels like a defeat, doesn't it? However, such humbling, and such confession is a huge victory! Now, it's not your victory as the reprover, or it's not your victory as the repentor, it is the victory of the Majesty of heaven, who makes our hearts willing in the day of his power to humble ourselves. If, by God's grace, you master your own spirit, you are stronger than he that conquers a whole city by himself (Proverbs 16:32). Nothing is harder to our proud human natures but to humble ourselves before a brother or sister, and to name and to shame our sins, seeking their forgiveness. That's the goal. That's what we're looking for when we confront a sinner, either on the private level, or in the subsequent steps of public or corporate attempts to lead someone to repentance.

So, let it be clear that the exercise of forgiveness is also commanded, but only when there is an expression of repentance. Listen again as Jesus says, "And if he repent, forgive him." God does not forgive sin when there is no repentance in our hearts, and no confession with our mouth is made before him. It is the absence of repentance and confession that makes the sin against the Holy Ghost unpardonable. The sinner who committed this sin never comes to a returning and a repenting, and a seeking of forgiveness. And when there is no repentance, expressed in confession, and seeking God's forgiveness, even the Lord does not forgive the sinner. Although he is ready to forgive at all times, he does not forgive the sinner. And so, you and I are to be ready to forgive. We are to communicate with our words and our attitude. But actual forgiveness is only possible when there is repentance, followed with confession, and the asking for forgiveness.

So, if our private or our subsequent corporate confrontation results in the expression of



repentance, the Lord's unconditional command is, "forgive him." "To forgive," literally, in the Greek, means "to send away as far as possible, out of sight, as far as the east is from the west." To forgive, friends, is like sinking a sin into the depths of the ocean, from where it is irretrievable. To forgive is to put away the sin, so that you will no longer dwell on it. It's not saying, "I forgive you," while you hold onto a grudge and will treat the repentant sinner as if he still is your enemy, and have nothing to do with him or her. Now, to forgive as Jesus commands us is one of the hardest things to do. It's not in our nature to be forgiving. Never think, therefore, about forgiveness as a glib exercise of words. It is instead one of the most demanding exercises of love.

And just as a side note, this is even more difficult for those who have been deeply and permanently wounded by the sins of others. Not all sin is the same. To be lied against, or to be cheated, or to have someone steal your money, or slander your name, that's definitely sin. But to be abused, to be violated, to be shamed, to emotionally mutilate someone are sins that leave the person deeply damaged and lifelong scarred. And the lifelong effects will be with that person. In such cases, when sin has had such serious impact, let us never think or speak lightly about forgiveness. For such wounded hearts, extra-special grace is needed to truly, truly forgive. And even when such forgiveness is exercised, in such cases of abuse and mutilation of emotions, we need to remember that this does not always mean a complete restoration of a functional relationship in this life. Now, for the protection of the fragile and the wounded victims, safe distances may need to be maintained, even from those who have repented, and who are forgiven abusers.

To top this all off, our Lord concludes his direction about forgiveness with an astounding extension. Here it is: "And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him." Perhaps the disciples looked at each other with a big question mark in their eyes, "Really, Lord? Is this truly what you require us to do? Really? Who is sufficient to forgive like that, and to do it again and again? How can we be so loving and genuine and generous to do this time and again?" In Matthew 18, verse 21, Peter ventured to ask the Lord Jesus if seven times was the limit. The Master's answer on that question is even more stunning: "Jesus saith unto him"—to Peter and to us—"I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven."

Well, notice how the disciples responded to his "forgive multiple times"—"Lord, increase our faith." Isn't it surprising that they didn't ask for an increase of love? For it is clear that great quantities of love are needed to forgive seventy times seven! It is true we need great amounts of love to forgive a great many times. But where does such love come from? Such love only comes from Christ's Spirit living in us. It comes when we believe how God forgives us, willingly, joyfully, and repeatedly, at the greatest possible cost to himself. It may seem unrealistic that my brother would sin against me seven times a day, and come back to me seven times a day. My friends, it is not unrealistic that I sin seven times a day against God. How often do we fail to love the Lord with all our heart and mind and strength throughout the day? How often do I fail to love my neighbor, including my spouse, my children; certainly not my enemies, with the same love that Jesus loved his neighbors, even his enemies? Besides the sin of action, there are the sins of lack of action—there are the sins of omission. And therefore, in that light, even seventy times seven each day is not unrealistic in our relationship to God.

And do you see now the connection why the disciples asked for an increase of faith? If I daily live in the joy of the forgiveness of my staggering debt to God, it becomes much easier to forgive the small sins others do to me. Then it becomes even possible to do what is, humanly speaking, impossible, as Jesus said, "If ye had faith as a grain of [a tiny little small] mustard seed, ye might

say unto this [huge] sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.” In other words, even if your faith in God’s magnificent forgiveness of your sins is as small as a mustard seed, it will enable you to show love to your neighbor in forgiving him.

And let’s remember that through forgiving my brother or sister, even though that may be difficult, it never carries the infinite cost God had to bear to forgive you. For him to forgive even one of our sins meant the cross-death of his only and well-beloved Son, Jesus Christ. And who of us can measure such love for us rebels, to sacrifice his Son to make our forgiveness possible. Seek grace to know, and to live, and to abide in the faith of God’s forgiveness of our sins for the sake of Jesus Christ. And only then will you and I be able to master the revengeful and the offended spirit against our brother who has trespassed against us, even if he did it repeatedly.

What if this personal confrontation does not lead to its desired goal? Well, in that case, the Lord Jesus lays out the specifics of our next actions, and we will consider that in our next study on this subject.

Thank you, and may God bless these words.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *Module 1 ~ Lecture 4* **Surrounded with Prayer and Love**

Dear friends, welcome to our fourth study on the Lord's instructions, regarding conflict resolutions within the household of the saints. Now these studies are mainly centered on Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18. Step by step, the Lord has detailed how we are to handle sins that bring stress and strain, and that could lead to deepening division in the local household of faith. Now, if the Lord's instructions are followed, it will prevent the easy-occurring disappearance of tenderness and affection for each other's true welfare. For when we do not confront each other on the sin issues openly, timely, and in love, we may end up bitter, or we may talk about each other negatively to others. And once this happens, the evil spreads like an infection or cancer in our own body, and it self-destructs the body. But most critical in following Jesus' instruction is to have the mind of Jesus Christ, for then nothing shall be done to strive for vainglory. Instead, we will, with lowliness of mind, esteem each other as better than ourselves.

So, as we have seen, there are four levels of confronting a trespassing brother or sister. First one is beginning at our personal level. We have to examine ourselves on our sins, and that is to be a continual exercise in our personal life. Seeing our own continual failures will, with God's blessing, bring meekness in our own lives—it's so essential. This mindset is so crucial, when we approach the delicate act of confronting a brother or sister with the trespasses of God's law that they are or have committed. And then comes the second step, on a private level between you and the other person. And again, let's pray for the mind of Jesus. And when God confronts us with our sins, he comes with a readiness to forgive. And that's his whole purpose—to make it right, even the willingness to sacrifice his rights to make reconciliation possible. Now, the third step is the extended level, when we add one or two witnesses to the process. And the last step is the congregational level, where the entire church, or part of that, gets involved. And we'll look at those in this session, as we explore God's directions on the extended and the congregational level.

Now back to Matthew 18, and verse 16. The Lord states this: "But if he will not hear thee." Well that means that the personal confrontation, as outlined in verse 15, has, sadly, failed. Having spoken and having pleaded patiently, the trespassing brother has chosen to resist the exhortation.

“He will not hear”—that means he has consciously chosen not to respond positively. Now maybe he disagrees with the allegation, or he is unwilling to repent about the sin that has been committed. So, when the Lord directs us to move to the second level of confrontation, he does not tell us to do this immediately. There’s no indication that the instructions in verse 15 means “only do this one time, and then at once move on the extended level in verse 16.” God himself shows great longsuffering with us personally, how often does he not plead, heaping coals of love upon the head of the wicked. How long does he persist in seeking to overcome evil with good? It would therefore be God-like to show patience with the sinning brother. Yet, there comes a time, when the Lord expects his people to make the next move to the next level. He says, “But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” This second level is called Confrontation at an Extended or Combined Level.” Now what are the exact details in this second tier?

First, we are to find one or two others to assist us in this reconciliation act. Depending on your personal confidence, or the nature of the trespass, or on the person you are to confront, the Master leaves it open whether you seek the assistance of one or of two fellow believers in this process. But who are we to take? Now that choice is totally influenced by the task these helpers are to fulfill. Notice, the task is not to strengthen your case, for then you would undoubtedly find your most supportive friends. Their task is to fight against the powers and the devices of the prince of darkness who is destroying the fellowship. And besides, their task is delicate, and therefore, it needs to be a person of spiritual maturity, and experience. Their task is to remove a trespass which is threatening the unity and peace among the brethren. In order for them to do this task well, they also need to be independent. For that to be the case, they ought to hear the story of the problem, not only from you. They have to do their own research first. For notice, that the Lord Jesus calls these helpers that you take along “witnesses.” Now witnesses, friends, are not people who have heard the story only from your side. They are people who have independent insight on the case that is at hand and are, therefore, able to provide their witness to the case. The persons who are to assist us are, therefore, people who need to hear all sides. For them to verify the truth independently is vital, for a pre-biased helper is not an independent or not a credible witness. He is merely more ammunition on your side to make your point. And what happens usually? Adding such to your effort usually does not bring healing, but it brings explosion. It is therefore so crucial that the one or the two assistants are qualified people. In the previous lecture, I likened this work to the precision work of an eye surgeon. Imagine an eye surgeon seeking the assistance of a blind person, or a rough miner who is used to work with big drills and hammers and explosives. No, we are not to look simply for those who are sympathetic to us, or are nice people, or are close friends. There may even be great wisdom in choosing someone among those witness who have close relationship with the offender, as long, of course, as this person is able to remain objective.

So to conclude, seek for persons who are people of integrity, meekness, impartiality, and credibility. James described the qualified persons as men who possess the wisdom that is from above, first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And notice, the witness also have to be aware of the seriousness of their task, once they agree to be your assistant. The seriousness of the task is described in another portion of the scriptures, in Deuteronomy 17, verses 6 and 7. It says there, “At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death.” And then, “The hands of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So thou shalt put the evil away

from among you.” Now in the New Testament times, the final act of the witnesses are to partake in the excommunication of the offender from the fellowship. Now all of this reinforces the seriousness of the task the witness is given. Let me add that each member in the household of God is to develop, or to grow themselves for such a role in the body of Christ. Friends, you never know when you may be called upon to act as a mediating witness in the resolution of conflict between fellow members in the church. Well, how do you prepare yourself for such a possible task? Scriptures tell you: a steadfast walk, and prayer, in which you may mature in the faith, in which you may get the wisdom from above. And those are important elements in the preparation you and I are to do for this, perhaps, future task.

Now back to Matthew 18. With the Lord’s blessings, these steps laid out by the King himself, they should resolve most problems that enter into our local household of faith. Yet, that is not the case. We are commanded, after ample time has been given to seek a resolution, to move the matter to the fourth and final phase—the congregational level. And the Lord’s direction is given us in verse 17: “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

Now first, let us note that the Lord again does not indicate a time frame. It’s not after one meeting with the trespassing brother or sister that we immediately enter into the last and the final stage of this process. In the medical world, no doctor will hasten the amputation of the arm or the leg of his patient. It would be his very last resource after all the means have been exhausted. It’s good to remind you that church discipline that we’re here talking about, as outlined by the Lord, is not a punishment. It is spiritual medicine. Its main purpose is to bring healing to the sinner and in the body, and restoration on a personal and on a communal level. Consider this church discipline kind of like the intensive care given to a patient in the hospital. It’s a whole team of doctors and nurses who apply their wisdom and their loving care to the patient, and likewise, the entire congregation is to marshal forth all their resources God has given to seek salvation of the sinner.

Now secondly, the Lord described the response of the sinner as, “But if he will not hear thee.” Again, the word “hear” as used by the Lord, in the Greek has the meaning of refusing. It has the character of the stubborn unwillingness to deal with the sin issue. Sadly, it reveals, therefore, a hardening attitude of resistance to amend and repent.

Thirdly, the instruction is that we are to tell it unto the church. That is not an option, it’s not a suggestion, it is a divine command. Christ does not allow us to drop the issue after the previous attempts have failed. Perhaps such a temptation will be felt, for in this last and this final stage, the sin issue will be made public to the entire fellowship of the congregation. And this could make a deep stir in the body of believers, especially if it is a sin that involves the leadership of the church. Well, let all God’s children follow the instructive example the Lord Jesus gives us himself in his letters to the seven churches, in Revelation 2 and 3. I’ve mentioned that before. He brought the sins in the open, to urge all to repentance. And if the congregations did not return to God’s way, the Lord would follow it up with his judgment. And so are we.

Fourthly, he says we ought to tell it to the church. Now the word “church” refers to the body of believers united by faith through Jesus Christ. By all means, we are to avoid that the sins of a brother or sister will be made public in the wider community of the surrounding world. We are to tell it to the church. Now, the sins of God’s people, friends, do more damage than the assault of the devil and his followers can ever do to the name and the cause of our great God. And since the public nature of this last step is such a serious matter, some churches have adopted a wise rule, not specified in the scripture, but wise indeed. They have agreed among each other that before they

move to this last and final stage, that they would seek the independent review of this case by the leaders of another household of faith—a neighboring church. They ask others to review whether they have followed all of the Biblical steps in dealing with this straying member. Now, such an independent peer review is commendable, as it holds us to accountability in following Jesus’ instructions, as given in Matthew 18. It’s also following Solomon’s counsel, when he says, “In the multitude of counselors, there is safety.”

But then, who exactly is meant here with “the church?” Is it every single member of the church community, and of like in a combined meeting of all the local believers of the church? Or is it made known to those that are appointed to represent the church, such as pastors and elders, and maybe in a smaller congregation, including the deacons. Is that the church? Well, as the Lord has not given us the exact boundaries of this “church,” it is at liberty to develop their own methods, in according with the direction given in this verse.

But what is the purpose of sharing the sin committed to this enlarged audience? Well, the first purpose is to enlarge the circle of love that is going to be applied to this straying brother or sister. When a congregation is informed about the nature of the sin, it is a call to unite together in prayer and fasting. The well-being and the salvation of one of their own is in grave danger. Typically, churches convene in prayer circles, when one of their members is facing a serious crisis in health or in business, and we come together to pray and perhaps to fast. But the crisis a straying member faces is far more serious than a temporal sickness or a material setback. His or her soul, and her relationship with God is in danger. Now the second purpose for that additional effort may be applied to bring the straying member back from his or her destructive ways. Making the name and the sin public, that’s a serious step, and it needs to be done with great, great care. And each church family ought to develop their own guidelines on how to do this wisely. It is vital. It is so important that these guidelines are developed before a conflict arises. Now, you know it is wisdom to build your bridge in calm waters instead of a raging stream. And so, develop these guidelines ahead of time. I’ll give you an example of such guidelines, that could be followed and adopted by you, and followed in your church.

First, once a sin issue has become known to this last level, the leadership of the church would inform the sinner privately first that he or she is temporarily excluded from partaking in the Lord’s Supper, or from a leadership position within the body, until repentance has occurred. You could call this “silent censure.” And if no repentance is witnessed, the church leadership makes a public announcement that one of their members has been placed under a first level of censure for a particular trespass. Now the congregation is asked to join in supplication for one of their fellow believers—no name given, but simply there is one of us erring. Now, after sufficient time has been given the straying member to show remorse and make a confession, the church leadership moves to the next step of censure. Now the person’s name and his or her trespass are shared with the congregation. To mention the name and the sin is according to Paul’s direction and example. In 1 Timothy 5:20, Paul instructs Timothy, “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear.” One other example is Philippians 4:2, where he writes: “I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche that they be of the same mind in the Lord.” In 1 Timothy 1, verse 20, Paul singled out Hymenaeus and Alexander, and tells them they are men to avoid, as they caused divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which they learned. So the purpose of this public naming is not to inform the body of believers so everyone can talk about it. No, it is a call to the fellow believers to action. At this point, before the final act of excommunication, we are not to avoid this straying or this stubborn sheep which is entangled in sin. Instead, we are to surround them in prayer and in the practice of love.

And then fourthly, last step, and most serious step, is excommunication. Nothing, nothing is more serious than the carrying out of Jesus' last direction, "But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." The hardened and the unrepentant sinner is to be put out of the fellowship of the body. As a destructive cancer or a dangerously infected limb, the formal connection of this member to the rest of the body needs to be severed. Formally, the members, as well as the congregation, need to be informed that a brother or sister has been cut off from the household of saints. Other scriptures describe this action with the most solemn terminology. Paul referred, in 1 Timothy 1:20, to two brothers who were "delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme." That's strong language. In 1 Corinthians 5, verses 4 and 5, Paul gave instructions to a member in the church who lived in open defiance of the seventh commandment, and he instructed the church to do something. Now this man lived in a scandalous sexual relationship with his stepmother. The duty of the church was, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh"—for this purpose—"that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." How solemn is sin that will lead to the severing and the separation of close and beautiful relationships. May God prevent all of us ever to err so deeply that it becomes necessary to be excommunicated from the fellowship.

So in our next and our last study on this subject, of Matthew 18, we will explore God's reasons for the severity of this action. And we will seek to know his will how now are we to deal with the excommunicated. And may God bless us with his grace and his wisdom in all these matters.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *Module 1 ~ Lecture 5* **Excommunication and Restoration**

Dear friends, this will be the concluding study on the passage in Matthew 18, on the loving confrontation of brothers and sisters in your own fellowship. The Lord's detailed instructions in Matthew 18 is his good and his holy will. Following his directions in the spirit of love and meekness has time and again proven to be the path to blessings. For when we deal timely, and when we deal lovingly with the trespasses within the body, with God's blessing, it will prevent the destructive division that is ugly, and it will bring a mutual healing among God's children, which is so desirable.

So in this final study on the subject, let's first give attention to our Lord's words in Matthew 18, verse 17: "But if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." No action a church is to perform, on behalf of the Captain of Salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ, is more serious than the cutting off of a member from the church family and fellowship. And based on these instructions of the Lord, the Apostle Paul implemented this action in his letter to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul addressed the issue of a brother in the church, who was living in an open transgression of the seventh commandment. He writes, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as it not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife." Now Paul rebuked the church fellowship of having ignored this sore evil. And now, since it's no longer a private sin, because it's commonly reported, Paul immediately proceeds to instruct them to execute Jesus' command, as stated in Matthew 18, verse 17. And he writes, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh"—1 Corinthians 5, verses 4 and 5.

Now there are different interpretations of this passage. Must we consider this an Apostolic power or authority not given to God's church today, or must we consider this as a rigorous description of the acts of excommunication of a member? Now, though it may be that Paul's act was more than the act of excommunication, let us at least use it as the illustration of excommunication. Paul's purpose is not, get rid of the member, or, punish him with a number of physical afflictions inflicted



by Satan on him. No, not at all. Ultimately, the purpose of his rigorous action of this formal excommunication is that this brother may come to repentance of this soul-destructive sin. And therefore, notice that Paul added, “that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” In other words, this excommunication will, hopefully, be temporary, and has the sole intended purpose to bring healing to the sinner, and restoration of the relationship that is now broken.

All church discipline is always to be considered and used as medicine, administered to an erring member of the body. Never is a church called to punish a transgressor for their sins. The punishment of a sin belongs to the civil authority of the government, according to Romans 13, verses 1 to 5. They have the sword of justice.

So, what is now the Lord’s will after excommunication? What is to be the relationship of a faithful believer to this unfaithful and unrepentant sinner that is now cut off from the fellowship? Jesus’ next direction already answers the question. He says, “Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” The cut-off member is no more to be considered and treated as a spiritual brother or sister. We may not continue to maintain the same brotherly relationship as we did before, as far as this is possible of course. Again, let’s listen to how Paul fleshed this out in 1 Corinthians 5, verses 9 to 11. He writes, “I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world.” We’re not to be on terms of familiarity, or in a habit of close intimacy who professes to be a believer, while living wickedly and to the dishonor of God. In Jesus’ own words, “Let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

Now, the best way to understand this direction is for us to consider how Jesus himself interacted with the unconverted, and with the unrepentant Jews or Gentiles. What was his attitude, as well as his level of interaction or communion with those who openly lived a disobedient and dishonorable life? How did Jesus then live in relationship to them? Did he entirely shun and shame them? Did he do everything possible to stay as far away from such as possible? Or did he have an arrogant or a judgmental attitude towards them. Did he speak evil of them, so that everyone else would hate them? No, no, the Savior himself did not do any of these things. Instead, he sought them, as a shepherd seeking lost sheep. He prayed for them, as a father for his lost son. He shared the gospel with them, as a preacher full of compassion. He went out of his way to even sacrifice for them, all to win their hearts. Yet, he did not have a close relationship with them while they lived as unbelievers, as he did have with his faithful disciples. He drew a line. They were not his bosom friends. They were not his close friends. He could not have that relationship. That privilege is only reserved to those who love him, who walk with him, and who show their love in honoring his person and his divine will. And they will experience the promise Jesus gives us in John 14, verse 23, “If a man love me, he will keep”—he will honor, he will respect—“my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.”

Now all added up, the Lord calls us to seek the excommunicated brothers or sisters as the objects of evangelism. We are to seek to win them with our walk and our talk for God and his kingdom, to win them back. And if they’re hostile to us, we are to love them still. Isn’t the Lord’s command, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, and do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you”—Matthew 5, verse 44. Or, think of Romans 12, verses 20 and 21, where we are exhorted, “Therefore if your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head”—we cannot ignore that—“Be [therefore] not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.” That is what his will is, and what a joy, when such labor of love and compassion, and such riches of our goodness will lead to godly sorrow and repentance through salvation. And if that happens, we are

to receive the repentant sinner back into our fellowship. Paul also wrote about that, in 2 Corinthians, chapter 2, verses 6 to 8, referring undoubtedly to the brother who was excommunicated in the previous letter, when he says, “[Brothers,] sufficient to such a man is this punishment”—or the discipline—“which was inflicted of many”—meaning, the local leadership and the membership of that church. “So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and to comfort him [again], lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him.” You see this example in Corinthians of putting an unrepentant brother outside the fellowship, and receiving him back upon repentance, illustrates the truth Jesus stated in Matthew 18, verses 18 to 20: “Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Now Jesus reveals here that when his people on earth faithfully and prayerfully execute the discipline of fellow Christians, according to his revealed will here in Matthew 18 and other places, and in reality, it is his own personal authority that is executed on earth through his faithful church. The being together in his name referred to in verse 20, is not simply referring to being together for prayer or fellowship in Jesus’ name. No, in this context of Matthew 18, it refers to being together in the authority of Jesus Christ, and to act in his name in the matters of ecclesiastical discipline. Jesus’ revelation of his own presence in these discipline matters brings home the weightiness of these actions for his church. For, if we, as his people, act according to his revealed will with the straying and the unrepentant sinners, as well, of course, as with the repentant and the returning sinners, we truly represent Jesus Christ, as King and ruler upon earth.

Now, what a solemn truth this is. When an unrepentant brother, on Biblical grounds, is excluded from the fellowship, then the action is the revelation of God’s own exclusion of such a sinner from his fellowship. But the reverse is also true. When the church absolves the repenting brother from the excommunicating sentence, again, according to God’s word, then this again is the revelation of God’s own absolution of the sinner. One who sincerely repents, and sincerely confesses his sin before the church ought not in the least to doubt that he is assuredly received of God in mercy. For Jesus Christ said, in John 20, verse 23, to his apostles, “Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them”—remitted is forgiven—“and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.” What a sweet comfort is thereby also communicated to a trembling conscience. Such fearful souls may, by the official sentence of the church, be assured that they are freed from guilt in the sight of God, as they are reconciled with the body of the church. John Calvin concluded his comments on John 20, verse 23 with these thoughts—he writes: “For Jesus has appointed this as the pledge of heavenly grace. This has no reference to hypocrites who pervert the proper use of reconciliation. But it is intended to awaken in the godly an ordinary confidence, for as soon as they have obtained forgiveness from the church, they hear that their sins are blotted out before God and the angels”—so according to Calvin. This teaching, or this confronting a trespassing brother or a sister, and the command to forgive them prompted Peter’s question, undoubtedly when Peter says, “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?” Now Peter, perhaps, was reminded of the instructions Jesus gave in Luke 17, verses 1 to 5, that we have looked at in a previous session. And brother Peter wondered, in Matthew 18, verse 21, if after the seventh time, Jesus would release them from the requirement of forgiveness. And very gently, the Lord Jesus instructed his disciples that seven times wasn’t the upper limit—the upper limit is unlimited. “Jesus said

unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.” The parable that follows then, in Matthew 18, in the closing section of this chapter, is one of the most moving Jesus ever told. With the example of the unforgiving servant, Jesus reinforces the important principle. He requires of all his followers to be forgiving and remain forgiving. The main points that we need to take along from this parable, in Matthew 18, verses 23 to 35, they are as follows.

First, as you read it, the king represents God. He is the sovereign Father to whom we all owe a staggering debt. The servant in this parable represents us sinners, who have clearly abused God’s gifts and the tasks that we have as his stewards. Now the debt in the parable is represented as massive—ten thousand talents, which in today’s world, would amount to multiple millions of money. The amount pictures the infinite debt of sin we owe to God, and obviously are entirely unable to pay. And then, in the parable, the compassionate act of the king pictures God’s gracious pardon of all our sins against him. His forgiveness is total. It’s absolutely free for us, but we know, of course, that God bore the infinite cost for forgiveness, for God’s forgiving meant to condemn his Son, when he took the place as a substitute for our sins in life and death. And then, the reluctance of this forgiven servant to forgive the miniscule debt of a hundred pence to one of his debtors stands in stark contrast with what God did. We are forgiven a lifetime of sin against God. Well, God calls us to forgive others’ mere little acts of sin done to each other, and some of them, indeed, are big acts. Jesus called the unforgiving servant “wicked” and he has delivered him to jail. Now with this, Jesus condemns entirely the attitude, in which we are unwilling to forgive an erring brother or sister. Saved people are both to be forgiving, and they are forgiven, and therefore, a reluctance to forgive fellow sinners really questions any claim to be saved. So, with this very impressive parable, the Lord drives home our lofty calling to forgive fellow believers, even those who have repeatedly fallen into sin.

So in conclusion, let us learn and practice church discipline on each other. Let us see it as medicine administered to patients. That medicine is usually not sweet; it may taste extremely bitter, but we administer it to the patient, though it is bitter. And so, church discipline, it may feel bitter, it might look rigorous, and therefore, we may feel the temptation to not ruffle the feathers or disturb the feelings of a fellow brother or sister in the church. Far be it from us to fall into such an attitude. It was the attitude of Eli, as we quoted in 1 Samuel. His rebuke to his sons was attempted with a soft touch, but it was not followed with the decisive action of tough love. We need to read it in 1 Samuel 2, verses 23 and 24, when God says, “And he”—Eli—“said unto them”—his two sons—“Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the LORD’s people to transgress.” Now, later, a man of God came and spoke to Eli, and he accused him of serious neglect. And he said this: “Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering, which I have commanded in my habitation; and honour your sons above me” (verse 29). And finally, the Lord spake to Samuel about the judgment he would bring upon the house of Eli, and this judgment would make the ears of everyone that hears it tingle. And why? What was the crime of Eli? Again, let us hear God’s own words in 1 Samuel 3, verse 13, where God says, “For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not.” So together, as Christians, we are to heed the severe judgment God brought upon the house of Eli, as a warning to us. Eli was negligent to use his authority as a father and as a priest, and thereby he brought great destruction upon the nation of Israel. So what was true then will be true today. Well, let us live by God’s own words: “For them that honour me, I will honour; and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed” (1 Samuel 2:30). So, God bless us all to be healthy churches, and a

healthy church is a church in which, besides the faithful preaching and teaching of his word, we also use the faithful means of church discipline, and then, in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God, and to the building up of each member of our fellowship.

So, this completes our review of Jesus' teachings in Matthew 18. Our next study will be on Jesus teaching on conflicts that often arise in the realm of our Christian liberty. And we'll look particularly then at Romans 14, and the first verses of Romans 15.

Thank you, and may God bless his word to his glory and to our profit.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *Module 2 ~ Lecture 1* **Introduction**

Dear friends, a hearty welcome to our introductory study on the subject of the Law of Love in Matters of Liberty. It shall be based on Romans 14, verse 1 to chapter 15, verse 7. I address myself to those belonging to the spiritual kingdom of Jesus Christ. In other words, those who, by the grace of God, are born-again believers. You were, by the grace of God, delivered from the power of darkness, quickened from being dead in trespasses and sin, and united to Jesus Christ through faith. As such, you have become part of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and none of this was based on our works or merits, but as Paul pointed out in Ephesians 2:10, “we are his workmanship”—His workmanship—“created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.” A part of these good works is to live in fellowship with all the spiritual family of God. Many of your fellow saints you will never meet in this world, but we will live closely with fellow believers in our local church family. With them, we are called to live in harmony, not pleasing ourselves, but serving one another. Paul stated God’s will in the concluding verses of Romans 15, the section we’re looking at: “That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another”—how?—“as Christ also received us”—and is receiving us—“to the glory of God.” Now I admit, that’s a huge assignment. That’s much too large for our weak hearts and weak knees, especially when we live with challenging people, or even worse, when we struggle ourselves with the baggage of our indwelling sin. How needed to daily pray what Jesus taught us in the Lord’s prayer: “Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9–10). The Heidelberg Catechism expounds these petitions brilliantly in these words: “Grant us to know thee, to sanctify and glorify thee. Rule us so by thy word and Spirit, that we may submit ourselves more and more to thee; and preserve and increase thy church. Grant that we and all men may renounce our own will, and without murmuring obey thy will, which is only good; that so every one may attend to, and perform the duties of his station and calling, as willingly and as faithfully as the angels do in heaven.” So, the Heidelberg Catechism.

Now how to attain and how to maintain such a God-glorifying and harmonious life in the

church family is the subject of this series of lectures. Our main focus will be on the Scriptures from Romans 14 and 15. Living at peace and in harmony in a local church family, and doing God's will without murmuring is a real challenge. And what are the challenging factors we face in this task? Well, there are a number of them.

First, we face the normal stresses and strains of life in general. Our bodies and our minds are human and they can be tired. Sickness can add significant burdens, as well as economic or social poverty. Now add to this mixture any racial tensions that exist all around us. Now these realities can easily spark friction and fractures in our harmony and peace.

The second challenge is that even though we are, and may be, by the grace of God, partakers of God's saving grace, we still wrestle with the remnants of our indwelling sin. The best of God's saints still experience weakness and infirmities in their faith. So it's good to remind ourselves that a Biblical church on earth is never a showcase of perfect people. Instead, let us consider our church as a hospital of recovering sinners, who are to assist each other in this journey of recovery.

Now a third challenge, among God's saints, we have a wide variety of characters. As in a natural family, so in a spiritual family, the dynamics of different personalities can create friction and disharmony. Now every father and mother knows how young and impulsive or stubborn children can quickly upset the peace, and even cause those of us who are mature to act in sin. Now add to this the differences in our natural makeup or our temperaments. Brothers and sisters, grace does sanctify sinners, but it does not change our personalities. The raw truth is that not all believers are as easy to get along with. Other saints are more reserved, while others love the publicity. Some are assertive or ambitious in character, and many others would rather follow directions than lead. So this uniqueness in our Creator's design and purpose, we cannot undo. We are meant to complement each other, rather than to compete with each other. And yet due to sin, these differences can easily become a cause of disharmony, especially when one begins to dominate, or even worse, abuse his power or authority.

A fourth challenging factor is the spiritual journey each of us has made prior to being saved. Some that are saved have come into the kingdom with a deeply troubling life history behind them. There are those who have experienced deep trauma. Others come with loads of emotional baggage due to neglect or abuse. Then there are those who have grown up in their families like little kings or queens, and such may find serving, or to be the last or the least, very difficult to do. As a result, we find tensions building up in the relationships among the believers. Well, then there are those in the fellowship who have lived a sin-indulgent, or rebellious lifestyle. Though all saved by grace, and all turned away from their sins, their outlook on life may differ greatly of those who have always lived a tidy, strict, and devout religious life. How easy it is for the one to judge the other, or to look down on the other. Perhaps fellow saints, who may make different allowances in things that are undefined in Scripture, we either judge or we look down.

So that brings us to the fifth challenge that could facilitate disunity. This factor is the difference in spiritual maturity, in grasping the fulness of the gospel. That's kind of what the apostle here is dealing with in Romans 14 and 15. Now imagine, for example, the Philippian jailor mentioned in Acts 16. All his life, he lived a rough lifestyle in the darkness and the grip of heathenism. Then we know God sovereignly saved him, and he began his brand new life in Christ. I'm sure the man was full of zeal, freed from the burden of sin, and filled with the joy in the Holy Ghost. And though he experienced rejection and opposition from his former friends, he might have been like those Peter described in 1 Peter 1:7 and 8—"ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls." And he's filled with that.

And now imagine that living next door to him, lived a strict Jewish family. All their lives, they have lived according to the Mosaic laws and the rabbinical traditions. They avoided any close contact with their heathen neighbors. Each Sabbath day, they went to the synagogue. Each day, they ate and dressed exactly as they were taught by their Jewish teachers and forefathers. But now, through the gospel preaching however, they also have become believers in Jesus Christ. Recently, they have joined the Philippian local church family, of which also the jailor is a member. And though these Jewish people's trust now is in Jesus Christ for salvation, now they struggle to let go of the practices they used to do, thinking that they were pleasing God with them. Their consciences are still bound by their many religious practices of former years. For them, for example, to omit the Sabbath day services still feels wrong. Or to stop that yearly ritual of the Passover felt like a sinful neglect. For them to mix with other Christians like the jailor and his family still feels awkward, as all their life they were taught not to fellowship with those people. So you see, the Jewish family felt that various things their brothers and sisters in Christ did are a trespass of God's law. Now, isn't it easy to see how these different mindsets of genuine Christians can lead to disharmony within the local body of the church.

Possibly another example of this tension was actually felt between Jesus and his own early disciples. Undoubtedly, the disciples felt unease when they saw their Master in various actions. We know that Jesus often acted or spoke so different than what they were raised with or what they were used to. Jesus wasn't like the rabbis who taught them all those years in the synagogue, and who walked or strode through the village streets. You know, their Master wasn't like that. Their Master Jesus healed the sick. He went to eat at the Pharisee's house on the Sabbath day. He went on a long walk on the Sabbath day, while even plucking the ear of corn and rubbing it between his hands, and eating it, and not disapproving it, as the rabbis did. He did not insist on their washing their hands before the meal. He even touched an unclean and untouchable leper. His interactions with the Samaritan woman, as described in John 4, literally shocked them. No rabbi would ever talk to a woman in public, and certainly not a Samaritan one of that character. Now it is recorded in Luke that he ate with publicans and harlots. At one meal, he allowed himself to be touched by a woman who broke all the social norms, as she unveiled her hair to wash his feet; the woman had even a bad reputation. So Jesus' kind and decisive actions, as you know, did anger the hypocritical Pharisees. They wrote him off as no good, but most likely, it also brought real unease in his own disciples. There were moments they felt that Jesus was too radical, or went too far in his deeds. Peter's reaction, even after Pentecost, supports the suggestion that Jesus' disciples would have struggled with the liberties Jesus took. When, in a vision, God instructs Peter to do something very, very un-Jewish, you know, it went too far for Peter. God told him to rise up and to eat, and Peter's response is instant and fierce, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean" (Acts 10:14). Doing that would have violated every fiber of Peter's conscience, while he was a believer in Jesus. Yet the Lord instructed him that this was no more a conscience matter.

Now can you see how these different views can create a real tension in your church family? Can you see how difficult it may be to maintain an open and a loving fellowship, while you do not see eye to eye on all matters of life and faith? Now, gladly, we're not on our own to resolve this stress and strain so common in our church families. The Lord of his church has given very clear and actually very extensive directions on dealing with these issues. These instructions are mainly found in Romans 14, verse 1 up to chapter 15, verse 7, as well as in 1 Corinthians 10, verses 23 to 33. And in this series in Christian liberty, we will explore the principal teachings of these Scriptures. So in the following lectures, are aims are three. First, let's consider the will of the Lord in

how his people are to live in this unity of Christian liberty. And secondly, let's define what are the matters that fall actually under Christian liberty. And thirdly, to consider practically how are we to bear and to forebear each other in the spirit of meekness and love, while we may differ on matters of Christian liberty.

Well first of all, what is the will of God in how his people are to live in unity? Well, there ought to be no doubt that living in unity is God's will. To live in unity requires a great deal of love, and this genuine love is never a matter of education, or of culture, or even of our best intentions. Genuine love, as defined by Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, verses 4 to 8, is the work of Jesus Christ. It is only when Christ is truly living within us, by his Spirit, that we will see that kind of love—love that suffers long, that is kind, that doesn't envy; love that doesn't brag or blow their own trumpet, or acts rudely. But instead, a love that seeks the well-being and peace of others first. Or a love that is not easily provoked or irritated by the behavior or the choices of others. A love that doesn't think evil of others, that doesn't suspect them, or judges them. But instead, in love we bear others, we think the best of them, we hope the best of them, and we endure faithfully in loving each other. Such loving action in the body of Christ is an enormous power to promote unity. Satan knows that. Satan knows that love in action is a mighty weapon in the hand of God, and it is therefore in his best interest to do all to disturb it. And one method is that he will blow things out of proportion. You could call that the method of distortion. Distortion is when we major on the things that are minor, or when we turn the minors into majors. And what do we mean with major matters? Major matters are the clear revelations and instructions of God's will for our faith and for our life. Doctrines like justification by faith, regeneration by the Holy Spirit, inspiration of the Scriptures, the Godhead of the Son of man—Jesus Christ, the divinity of the Holy Spirit, the Ten Commandments. Those are all examples of major matters. As Christians, friends, we must be united on these cornerstones and pillars of divine truth. Though culture, and though language may differ, all Christians will find unity in confessing the articles of the Christian faith. That is the unity of the majors, as they are confessed in the Apostles' Creed.

So what are the minor matters—some examples of that? Well, they are the matters of life and faith that are not specified in God's revealed will. For example, are all Christians to observe the traditional celebration of Christ's birth in December? Is this celebration a must or a "may"? Other examples of minor matters in life are clothing styles, the use of jewelry, drinking alcoholic drinks, or even certain foods. A minor matter related to the faith may be, also the question between infant or adult baptism. No, what may be a minor matter of disagreement in one culture, may not be a matter at all in another setting. In other words, the minor things may be very localized, or even part of your denomination. So this part of the Christian life and faith is referred to as Christian Liberty. Well what happens if someone begins to proclaim an undefined aspect of life as God's expressed will for life or faith. For example, there's nothing wrong if believers desire to fellowship together on a week night or a Saturday morning for prayer and Bible study. Well, what if the leadership or a number of members begin to "guilt trip" others who don't attend these weekly or Saturday events? What if they begin to teach that it is God's will for everyone to join these prayer and Bible study times at all appointed times, unless you're dreadfully sick or out of town? What if some will judge you for not attending. What if those who attend begin to think and to talk about the non-attenders as second-rate Christians? Well, you see that will create tension, and can even lead to great disharmony. Now how to avoid this, and how to handle this—the King did not leave us without his detailed instructions, and they again prove to be a well of life for each church family, if honored and followed.



So, we are now ready, after this introduction, in our next presentation, to look into the Scriptures of Romans 14 and 15. And may God bless us all and make us a blessing, as we share with each other in our local churches. Thank you.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *Module 2 ~ Lecture 2* **Three Principles for Harmony**

Again, welcome to our second study on subject of the Law of Love in the Matters of Liberty, found in Romans 14, verse 1, to 15, verse 7. Now instead of expounding these chapters verse by verse, I will present to you the principles that are given in these chapters, and bring it all together, following it up with various applications.

The first principle is that believers don't think alike about the issues that are unessential to the Christian faith. The church of Rome is a good example of this fact among Christians. One group of the members viewed all the ceremonial details of the Mosaic law as annulled by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, another group of believers in the Lord Jesus held that a number of the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic law were not repealed. This becomes clear when we read Romans 14, verse 3 and 5: "Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. . . One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike." Now these differences of opinion are fomenting disharmony among the brethren in the Roman church. One group not only is conscientiously observing various aspects of the Mosaic law, but they also appear to judge the others as second-rate Christians. Now, perhaps they were even seeking to impose their view on the other segment of the church. And the group who didn't share these Mosaic convictions is also not acting right. They were clearly despising or looking down on the others. Perhaps they might even call them names, like "narrow-minded." Now Rome wasn't the only church experiencing these differences and stresses because of it. The church of Corinth also experienced strain around the question whether Christians could eat food that was somehow connected to the idolatry of the age in which they lived. Undoubtedly, your own church will have such issues in which brothers or sisters in the body have different views. Perhaps on clothing styles, or use of jewelry, or our level of involvement in our culture, or the use of technology, to just give a few examples. And there may also be differences in how we view certain aspects of our worship service, and what we include or exclude, as we gather together in our congregational worship. These variations pertaining to minor points of faith and practices are to be expected, and to be allowed. The challenge is how to dwell in unity,

how to bear and forebear each other in the spirit of meekness and love, when we deal with matters that are unessential.

What is meant with what we call “unessentials”? Unessential matters are all those matters that do not determine or define your soul relationship with God in Christ. They have nothing to do with your actual salvation—that is unessential. Let it be clear that unessential does not mean “unimportant.” How we live is important. Details of our personal choices in the realm of Christian liberty may not affect our relationship with God. We will not lose our salvation, for example, by eating or not eating pork. Observing Christ’s birthday on December 25th will not hamper our communion with God. Sitting or standing during our singing or praying or Scripture reading does not make me more or less saved. All these behaviors or choices may affect our relationship with fellow brothers and sisters in our local church. Though ranked “unessential” with regard to salvation, they actually are essential with regard to our relationship to fellow believers.

So the second principle: the area of Christian liberty has the potential to strain harmonious relationships among believers. It’s clear from Romans 14, that this was the case in the congregation of Rome. Paul pointed out that some were despising, while others were judging. In verse 3, he wrote, “Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth.” Now verse 15, he noted, “But if thy brother be grieved,” and then he added a warning, “Destroy not him.” Now these are words highlighting the critical nature of this matter in the church at Rome. In verse 16, the Apostle admonished, “Let not then your good be evil spoken of.” Evil speaking among brethren is hardly conducive to promote peace and happiness. In verse 19, Paul urged everyone, “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things where-with one may edify another.” To edify means to build up each other in the faith, and in the walk of life. Well, that implies that what they were doing wasn’t only breaking relationships, but it was having an ill effect on the personal faith life of their fellow believers. Now, in verse 20, Paul added another dimension to verse 15’s warning about grieving. He says, besides destroying and grieving fellow believers with indulging in the use of our liberty, the strong in faith are warned—he says, “For meat”—for food, or for a little food item—“destroy not the work of God.” And in verse 21, Paul details more of the evil effects. He says brothers stumble, or are offended, or are made weak. And in his concluding admonition in verse 23, and there he adds a most dreadful result, for some of the weak in the faith do things that go against their own conscience, and such actions will bring harm in their communion with God, and rob the believers of the precious benefit John mentions in 1 John, chapter 3, verse 21, where he says, “Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.” So these are serious matters.

The subject, brethren, of Christian liberty on unessential matters is a wise administrative aspect of the Lord’s kingdom. Jesus gathers his elect church from all tribes, all languages and cultures. There will, of necessity, be a huge variety among his people. If you place side-by-side a believing brother raised in the midwest America, and a brother raised in the ghettos of India, you will encounter formidable differences between those two. The western brother heartily eats his steak with knife and fork and napkin, sitting at a table. But the Indian brother, he may still have difficulty eating beef, but he has no problem eating his rice and sauce with his bare hand while sitting on the floor. These are differences, but not essential. Or, when we observe the worship service of an African congregation of Christians, and compare it to an Asian congregation, you will again notice vast differences. The one may feel rather uncomfortable with the music or the worship style, while the others may feel that God is worthy to receive suchlike praises. A personal example, I always grew up thinking that a guitar belonged to the world’s musical instruments. It took me some years

to get used to the idea that a guitar is as much a musical instrument as a piano or an organ, and therefore has equal rights to be used in an official worship service. Yet other brethren in the Lord, they hold the view very tenderly that no musical instruments are to be part of the worship service, for they say we're only to sing with our hearts and voices. Now, isn't it a wise aspect of our Lord's administration of his very varied worldwide kingdom, that he has not specified every detail of the matters that are unessential.

For sure, the New Testament brilliantly expounds God's holy law. Those are the nonnegotiables in the kingdom life and practice. Faith in Christ's finished work and repentance, they are God's call for every sinner, no matter where he comes from. Holiness in walk and talk, or Christ-like behavior, remains the bottom and the top of every Christian. Loving God and every neighbor as ourselves, including our enemy is a cross-cultural demand for every human being and every Christian for sure. But in matters of unessential character, the Lord allows freedom. There is a great amount of wisdom in that administrative regulation in his Word.

However, our adversary, Satan, knows how to use Christian liberty to create unchristian divisions and hostility. Sadly, the history of Jesus' kingdom on earth has many sad and shameful chapters, in which brethren in the Lord become divided and estranged from each other. A number of them are related to points that do not involve any Biblically-defined doctrine or principle. Brethren in the Lord have separated, even though they hold firmly to the doctrines of God, of Jesus Christ, of salvation through grace alone, etc. Now, how sad, children of God have been engaged in back-talking, in judging, condemning, infighting, and creating unnecessary divisions. And why? Why? Only because of their insistence on matters which even the Captain of Salvation did not specify in his Holy Scriptures. And all this is a sad witness to the world, it is disgraceful to the King, and harmful to the kingdom.

Abram recognized the impropriety of this, in Genesis 13. The herdsmen of Abram and Lot were striving about grazing rights. Moses noted that the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled in the land, so they were witnessing all this. Now they witnessed this unholy squabble between the holy family. And therefore, Abram spoke up unto Lot, "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren." Now, the issues that bring division in churches are usually not grazing cattle. After a careful review of the issues that can explode our relationships, must we not often conclude that it was as small and insignificant as a loose thread on clothing? We all know that once we begin to pull these loose threads, we may end up unraveling an entire section or seam of the garment. So, insistence on loose threads, while ignoring the wrong of the heart, doesn't serve anyone except Satan and his kingdom. It's easy to spend hours arguing whether piercing your ears is a Christian thing or not, while we get neither hot or cold about all those who pierce the King with unbelief or mockery. Again, sometimes Christians divide on how to dress, while forgetting that multitudes around us are not ready to stand before the judgment seat of the Lord Jesus Christ. How many have not put on the Lord Jesus Christ, while making provision for the flesh to fulfill all the lusts thereof? They are not ready, and we ignore that while we are fighting among each other.

Among the Romans, they argued about which foods were clean or unclean, or which Old Testament feast days they were to observe, even though the gospel ministry did not specify any details about it. Yet, in the meantime, thousands around them were perishing because they were not even knowing about the Bread of Life. So, brethren, let's aim to keep things in perspective. What would you think of those who are dying of cancer, and yet they are worried about their nails, or their hair, or their clothing? Will you not encourage them to focus on the essentials, how to be at peace with

God, and how to be at peace with your family and friends? Will you not admonish them to turn to Jesus Christ and to turn away from their sins, and to labor for that which endures to eternity? So, to conclude this principle, watch out for Satan's strategy to turn the minor points related to faith and practice into explosive points that will destroy the work of God. When a company of soldiers are divided through infighting, the enemy laughs. He knows full well what Jesus says, in Matthew 12, verse 25, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand."

Now that brings me to a third principle: To avoid disharmony and division, focus on the major truths of the gospel. Fighting evil is sometimes best accomplished by focusing on the good. In other words, avoiding disunity and disharmony about differences can be best accomplished on focusing on what unites us. After all, is it not often true, after having resolved an argument with someone, that you realize that our difference were either a miscommunication or a misunderstanding about a tiny matter? This is also the instructions in Romans 14, verses 17 to 19, where Paul writes, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." So, as believers, we need to major on the majors that make for peace, instead of focusing on the minors of faith and life. We need to stand together in unity on those matters which are God's law and gospel. And let's be clear that Paul did not list all the major doctrines in this chapter. Those major truths of the Scripture you can find defined in Romans 1 to 11. Now as Christians, we cannot differ on such teachings as God as the Creator, evidencing his glory and his power in the creation of the world. We cannot differ on the definition of man's total depravity and our inability to save ourselves by our choices or by our works. Christians all over the world are united in their faith in the only name given under heaven whereby we must be saved and can be saved. Justification by faith in Jesus Christ only is a nonnegotiable truth in the Christian faith, so is the doctrine of the Trinity, the necessity of regeneration, and the sanctification of our human nature through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The Scripture, in Romans 14, verses 17 to 19, reminds us that the kingdom of God does not consist of the trivialities of using or abstaining food and drink. There are no rules given either way in the gospel. And therefore, as a Christian, we are to allow freedom in those matters that are undefined. Now this teaching is totally in line with Jesus' own instruction, in Matthew 23:23. He rebuked the Pharisees for straining at a gnat or swallowing a camel. Listen to this, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" he said. "For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and [you] have omitted the weightier matters of the law, [like] judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone." So in these words, Jesus called them out on tithing miniscule amounts of herbs, while not focusing on the major practice of the law of love—behaviors that promote peace and joy. So by focusing our energy and arguments on these minor things, we do damage—we do damage to the glories of Christianity. One expositor said that we degrade Christianity by such contentions on the trivial matters. Friends, the great privilege of the gospel is not freedom from various Old Testament restrictions. The great privilege of the gospel are the teachings about justification by faith in Jesus' righteousness, about peace with God, about joy in God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, let's strive to be united in the truths of God's revealed law and gospel. And being united in that does not mean we think alike on every issue which is not black or white in the Scripture. Or, to say it differently, unity in the ranks doesn't mean uniformity of the saints. God allows differences

like you see among the trees in the woods. All the trees are united in the essentials, but are far from uniform in color, in shape, in size, or even in the fruit they produce. So may God enable us to embrace these first three principles, and so glorify his name. Thank you.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

*Module 2 ~ Lecture 3*

## **The Strong and the Weak in the Faith**

Welcome, dear friends, to this third study on the subject of the Law of Love in Matters of Liberty. We're finding this material in Romans 14, verse 1, to 15, verse 7. In our previous study, we have reviewed three principles that we have derived from the passage in Romans. Just to review, we've learned so far that believers don't think alike about issues that are unessential. And a second, that the area of Christian liberty has the potential to really strain harmonious relationships among genuine believers. And thirdly, that to avoid this disharmony and this division, we need to keep focusing on the major truths of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now in this study, we will review another two principles that are based on these instructions God gives us in Romans 14.

So the fourth principle, believers within a church family do not all have the same maturity in faith. The apostle opens this chapter with referring to a specific category of believers. Listen to what he wrote, in verse 1, "Him that is weak in the faith receive he." He contrasted these with the strong in the faith, in which he includes himself, as you'll see, in chapter 15, verse 1, where Paul wrote, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak." Now, it's very important for us to define the weak and the strong in the faith, to understand this chapter. Who are the weak in the faith within our church family? Are they the narrow-minded? Are they legalistic? Are they even superstitious people? They are none of these. All these labels are wrongly used to describe those believers who hold to different views in the area of Christian liberty. As a matter of fact, these weak in the faith may be very tender-hearted. Many of them are sincerely seeking to serve God and to please him. Now, it's of course possible that a number of them are judgmental, or controlling, or even legalistic, but that isn't always the case with the weak in the faith. Many of them who felt it was wrong to eat certain foods or to omit certain feast days, they did so because their consciences felt violated. It is therefore important for us to define clearly the weak in the faith well.

So, first of all, make sure we read well how Paul described them. Notice, Paul did not write that they were weak "in faith," they were weak "in the faith." A person who is weak in faith is one who struggles to believe or to trust in Jesus' gospel. They may struggle to believe in the promises of the forgiveness of all their wrong. In other words, the weak "in faith" struggle with assurance of faith.

In this chapter, Paul is not writing to them. He had them in mind when he wrote chapters 5 through 11 in this book, and in those chapters, he addressed the matters of assurance of faith from various angles. But in chapters 14 and 15, he is addressing the weak “in the faith.” So who are the weak in the faith? Well, these are the persons who are still unclear about the teachings about the gospel of salvation. Let us be clear, the weak in the faith are real Christians. They are born again, repentant, looking to Christ for salvation, while putting no confidence in themselves or anything they do. Yet, they have only a feeble grasp of the fulness and the freedom of the gospel. They’re still imperfectly understanding the Christian doctrines of salvation in Christ alone. In Rome, they probably were former Jews, raised in the traditions of the Pharisees, and they had not yet understood fully that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament have been cancelled by the death of Jesus Christ. So, these very God-fearing brethren still feel conscience-bound to uphold the old ways. They live largely still by the “touch not,” “taste not,” “handle not” principles of the Jewish laws and traditions. And possibly, possibly some of them were legalistic, leaning towards a work-based religion, but we must resist the temptation to place all of them in that category.

Today, we still find such believers in our fellowship, who have grown up, perhaps, within a Christian setting, while unregenerate. Through that, their consciences are shaped by how they were brought up, and having been brought up under the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, we all sense, of course, then an urge to clean up our lives, and when such finally have come to trust in Jesus Christ, they still have a very sensitive conscience about certain matters of lifestyle that they were raised with. Indeed, sometimes they become more zealous in those aspects, thinking that this belongs to being saved. Let me explain this with an example. Imagine a Jewish believer, who, in midlife, became a Christian. So all his life, he has been immersed in a very strict religious environment. His beloved parents, and grandparents, and family, and neighbors, leaders, and teachers have emphasized total separation from the world, or cleanliness, and various strict codes of behavior. It’s basically hammered into them that those who lived like that were super-spiritual. And for example, they may never use a car. Let’s think of that. This upbringing has become so habitual, and has shaped their conscience. And now, he’s become a Christian. He’s experienced the joy of salvation through Jesus’ merits in life and death. He worships God. He rejoices in Christ and his work, and he has no confidence in the flesh. Yet, he still has a huge conscientious issue with stepping into a car. It just feels wrong. His conscious feels defiled when he steps into a car. Now, we might feel tempted to ridicule that, or to oppose it vigorously. We might get impatient with his burdened heart about our use of cars. But what is now the Lord’s will on how to walk along with him? Now that answer is found in Romans 14, verse 15, as we will review.

Now the other group Paul identified are the strong in the faith. These are the Christian believers who have a much better grasp of the full extent of their Christian privileges. The strong have made the most progress in understanding the New Testament revelation of salvation. They realize that through Christ’s atoning death, they were delivered from the yoke of the law, which Peter refers to, for example, in Acts 15:10, when he says, “Now therefore,” brethren, “why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” And through the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit, the strong in the faith understood their liberty in Christ. They understood that the small details of meat and drink—food and drink, and other restrictions that were imposed by the Mosaic laws, as well as the various traditions of the Jewish men, were now obsolete. Awareness about these differences, and the degree of understanding of the gospel within the church family is crucial. Every church leader, like Paul, ought to carefully study these chapters, and teach the principles within their congregations. Well then, these are to



teach by example, as the Apostle did. Paul practiced what he preached in this chapter. Though he was strong in the faith, hear how he carried out his own convictions, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19 to 23: “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, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,)”—why?—“that I might gain them that are without 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 this I do for the gospel’s sake.” Now, for now, let us accept this fact as true—Not all believers in the Father’s spiritual family have the same spiritual maturity.

How are we to hand this is the fifth principle. For the fifth principle is, the strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak in the faith. In exploring this fifth principle, we are actually getting into the heart of God’s directions how to handle the matter belonging to Christian liberty. In this fifth principle, I will first follow Paul’s instructions to the strong in faith.

The first action is given in verse 1: “Him that is weak in the faith receive.” A beautiful example of this word “receive” is found in Acts 28, verse 2. The people of Melita “received the survivors of the shipwrecked boat with great kindness, and they surrounded them with the ministry of love. That’s the word “receive.” In that same manner, we are to receive the weak in our affections with kindness and understanding of their needs. And though tempted to avoid them or isolate them, the strong are to do the exact opposite. The most beautiful example of “receive” is what God himself does. In verse 3, Paul wrote, “for God hath received him.” Friends, if God received the weak in the faith with his or her scruples, why should not we? In chapter 15, verse 7, Paul draws our thoughts to the example of Jesus Christ himself, “Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.”

Now secondly, Paul added, “receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.” The strong were to be careful not to bring disturbance to the conscientious views and practices of the weak in the faith. Now the strong are forbidden to aggravate an issue that was tender to the weak. In other words, no pushing them, no forcing them, with fierce debates or strong objections. Also, no cold shoulders, no harsh repulses. No, we are to receive them tenderly, recognizing their different practices or convictions. They were to allow them to be their own without undue pressure to step away from their convictions. Here, the strong in the faith are to be shepherds of the younger lambs. They are to be led instead of being forced by our strong reasoning. So, this initial instruction of the Lord does not mean we are never to make efforts to enlighten the weak in the faith, so that they also may become strong in the faith. But the details of this very important matter, we will discuss more in depth in our following sessions.

So thirdly then, the Apostle exhorts in verse 3, “Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not.” How easy this is to do, with those who hold on scruples the strong find unnecessary. Quickly we shrug our shoulders as we look down upon them, and we despise them for their views. Now, to despise is to consider someone with contempt, as being unnecessarily scrupulous about something. This despising response can be verbal, but more often, even nonverbal. Friends, our unspoken language felt by the weak, could be, “Ah! Your views are ridiculous. We will put up with them, but you are holding us back. Your position hinders this church. I just wish you would grow up.” Now that is a form of despising the weak, rather than of receiving of them in love.

Well, fourthly, and this applies to both groups, the strong and the weak in the faith, they are to show respect to the convictions of fellow brothers or sisters. We aren’t even called to make a

judgment on things where God has not communicated his will, but left us with liberty. God is the judge. And to him, each believer is accountable. And Paul reminds us of this in verse 4. He says, “Who are thou that judgest another man’s servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth.” Now, this question implied in this verse is, “Who gave you the right to sit in judgment on others?” So, Paul sets down the will of God, in verses 5 and 6, to show respect for each other’s convictions. He says, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks.” Now again, this exhortation applies both to the strong and to the weak in the faith. Both may disagree on matters in the area of Christian liberty, yet both are seeking to honor their Lord. Both are eager to do what pleases their Lord and their Redeemer. Both give thanks for what they eat, or for what they set aside for a sacred purpose. Both are not acting in their own self-interest, as verses 7 and 8 reflects, for it says, “None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord’s.” In other words, both the strong and the weak are united on this point. They both desire to live and to act to the honor of God, doing his will.

And therefore, the course of action is that each believer examines the Scripture and himself, and acts accordingly. God’s will is clear: “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind”—verse 5. The words, “be fully persuaded” denotes the highest conviction. In other words, it’s not just a matter of opinion, or prejudice, or feeling. No, rather, it is to be a matter on which the mind is made up by the personal conclusions of the study of the Word of God. Now, just to make sure that we don’t misinterpret this, this direction does not pertain to the subject of morality that is defined in God’s Word. No, it applies to the context here: to the ceremonial things, to the personal liberties, to the family customs, to the social matters or the cultural aspects that are not defined in the Holy Bible, as God’s will for life and faith. And if, as a believer, you are convinced that it is wrong to eat certain foods, then by all means, abstain. If you’re of the opposite opinion, then enjoy it, while you give thanks. Or if you feel convinced to fast each Lord’s Day, by all means, do it unto the Lord. And if, as a church, you are convinced that for your personal edification and profit, it is helpful to set aside a day to commemorate the birth, or the death, or the resurrection, or the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, well, by all means, do this unto the Lord. But if someone devotes that time to the common labor of the day, being convinced that there is no Biblical mandate to set aside such a day, no one should uncharitably judge them for that. Many Christians mark, for example, October 31 as a Reformation Day. Nowhere does the Bible command this, but neither does the Scripture forbid us to commemorate God’s deeds on a special annual day set aside for that. So no one is to be reproached or to be opposed for doing this, but neither is anyone allowed to push others to observe this as a matter of conscience, or perhaps reproach others for not celebrating the start of the Reformation.

So, let me conclude this session with a beautiful counsel given by one of the seventh-century pastors, who said this, “In things necessary, unity; in things indifferent, liberty; but in all things, charity.” Thank you.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *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.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

## *Module 2 ~ Lecture 5* **The King's Instructions for the Weak**

Welcome, dear friends, to this fifth session on the Law of Love in Matters of Christian Liberty. We're studying this together from the Book of Romans, chapter 14, verse 1 through chapter 15, verse 7. So just to refresh and review, in our previous studies, I had derived five principles from this passage in Romans. And we've learned that first, believers don't think alike about the issues that are unessential, and that secondly, in the area of Christian liberty are many potentials to strain our relationships among believers. And therefore, the third principle to avoid this disharmony and division, we need to keep our focus on the major truths of the gospel, as the Scripture itself does. And fourthly, that within a church family, we're not all having the same maturity in faith. Some are young believers, some are mature believers. And fifthly then, that the strong in the faith are to bear the infirmities of the weak in the faith. In this study, we will consider our sixth principle in the Law of Love in the Matters of Liberty. And the sixth principle is that the weak in the faith are to stop judging the strong.

So these wholesome teachings of our wise and sovereign King are without dispute. Jesus himself once said, "Wisdom is justified of all her children"—Luke 7:35. And the churches that have wholeheartedly embraced and obeyed these instructions of the Lord are the living commentary on that truth. We know the wounds, and we know the divisions and destruction that could have been prevented, if both the strong and the weak in the faith lived by these instructions that are given to us, in the chapters in Romans.

So last session, we learned that the strong are to receive the weak in patience, instead of despising them. Now let's give our attention to the King's orders to the weak in the faith. And the weak in the faith are to love their brethren, and not to judge them and condemn the strong in the faith for their use of Christian liberty. How easily the weak in the faith attach labels to the strong, as being carnal Christians, or being second-rate Christians. How often do the weak in the faith even demand that others should be like them out of respect for their ideas or their convictions.

So what is God's will then for the weak in the faith? In Romans 14, verse 2, Paul stated the case of the weak in the faith in these words. He says, "For one believeth that he may eat all things:

another, who is weak, eateth herbs.” In other words, a few brethren only ate vegetarian meals, but the reason was not out of, let’s say, animal rights, or out of concern for health, or health issues. They did so because they were thoroughly convinced that all meat is forbidden. Now, strangely, this conviction wasn’t even based on the Old Testament legislation of Moses. For God the Lord allowed the Jews to eat the clean animals, and therefore, it appears to go even farther than the Old Testament revelation. The weak in the faith were conscience-convicted that all meat should be avoided. And why? Probably since the Roman society abounded in idolatry, they argued that all meat was polluted. Commonly, the meat was first dedicated to the false gods before sold on the market or put on the table of your neighbor. So they said, to avoid participating unknowingly in such idolatry, the weak felt no one should ever eat any meat that came from the Roman market. Paul has dealt with this issue already, or as well, in 1 Corinthians 10:22 to 33, and his counsel there is timeless. He simply counseled, Don’t ask. “Whatsoever is sold in the shambles”—which is like the meat market—“that eat, asking no question for conscience sake.” So why such counsel? Is ignorance bliss? No, that’s not his reasoning. His reason is, it doesn’t really matter whether the meat was offered to idols, for idols are nothing—they don’t really exist. All the heathens did was offering it to an empty nothing. For, he says, the earth, and the fulness thereof is the Lord’s. So the same thing, he counseled with regard to sharing a meal with unchurched people outside your home. He says, “If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake.” So why did Paul teach that we should not ask? One reason is that we would not defile our conscience. That if you would think it is wrong to eat anything that is offered to idols, you would eat or drink in disobedience, rather than in faith, if you are eating or drinking that. Now that is taught clearly in Romans 14, verse 22 and 23, so let me read this with a few clarifying comments inserted. “Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he allows”—or approves. “And he that doubts”—doubts that he is doing the right thing in eating—“is damned.” Now “damned” here means conscience stricken and burdened because he does things that he thinks are wrong to do. And Paul continues, “because he eateth not of faith”—that is, out of a tender belief that he is doing God’s will. “For whatsoever is not of faith is sin,” Paul concludes. Now, Paul did not teach that the doing of the thing—eating, or observing a special day, or whatever else it is—is sin. But if eating, or observing, or doing while thinking you are disobeying God, that is sin. Now why is that sin, while the think itself is not sin. Well it’s because we do it while we are convinced that God is displeased with what we do, and we are to do all what we do, or not do, to the glory of God, in love to him. But if I eat when I feel it’s not to God’s glory, or not good to do, well, I sin against my own conscience. So Paul counseled the weak in the faith never to violate their conscience.

But he has more counsel to give. So let’s turn back to Romans, chapter 14, and verse 3b. And he says there this: “And let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth.” In verse 10 and 12 to 13, Paul added, “Why dost thou judge thy brother? . . .for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. . . So then, every one of us shall give account of himself to God.” And notice, “Let us therefore not judge one another any more.” Now in these verses, the word “judge” is the key word—that’s emphasized. “To judge” here means to censure others with the purpose of condemning them. And it’s not just that the weak in the faith doesn’t agree with the actions—it’s not just that, no, the weak were voicing their strong condemnation about the actions of the strong in faith. Now, they may even go further than condemning their action. Often they begin to classify the strong in the faith as carnal, or as second-rate Christians, or perhaps they write them off as no Christian brother at all. Or the weak in the faith demand that others begin to do as they do out



of respect for their view. But do they have the right to judge others on the unessentials? Do they have the right to demand or insist that others cease to make use of their God-given liberties? Well God's answer upon these questions is given in Romans 14, verses 3 to 12. Now let's consider verse 4: "And let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand." God gives us three reasons why not to judge fellow Christians in their use of their Christian liberty.

First, these brothers and sisters in Christ have been received by God. Now, notice the word "received" also found in verse 1, but here it is stated that God has received them. That means that Jesus Christ himself acknowledged them as brethren. Well, we need to, therefore, be very careful not to judge those whom the Lord himself acknowledges as his own children. You say, "But how will we know that the Lord has received them? Is that simply to be accepted by their claim?" No, a person's claim needs always to be matched by the walk of his life. So, is there repentance of the sins God's Word defines as sin? Is the person showing a life conformed to God's standards as seen in the Scriptures and in his Son? Is the fear of God and tenderness for God's name evident? Is there a seeking of God's pardon through the mediatorial work of Christ alone? Do we see a love for the brethren in which we're anxious to please them in charity? Do these people show a zeal and a burden for the unsaved? Now friends, if these matters are evident in their lives, these are the core matters. We are to judge of them in a most favorable manner. We must see them as received by God, and therefore, if received by Jesus Christ himself, who are we to judge them?

Paul's second reason why not to judge them is verse 4: "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand." In other words, we don't have a right to judge. We have no right to criticize. We have no rights to condemn Jesus' servants. Every believer is to give an account of their use of the Christian liberty to their Master, and for any of us to intermeddle with the Master's business is intruding ourselves on his throne. And if, in addition, we judge something a sin which he did not, then notice, then by default, we even judge God as wrong. Who are we to be so audacious? God is the judge, and let us leave all matters on which he has not spoken, to him.

The third reason for Paul's counsel is that they need not to worry about their fellow believers. Now Paul wrote this: "Yea, he shall be holden up" of God, "for God is able to make him stand." Now friends, this is one of the loveliest touches of the weak in the faith. Let me repeat what I have said earlier. It is really incorrect and uncharitable to label all the weak in the faith as legalistic. Many of these are very tender-hearted in their love for God. Many are moved by a genuine concern about the well-being of their fellow believers. Since the weak in the faith is not yet made perfect in love, there is still a great measure of fear in them. They worry—they worry about their brethren's salvation. They also still think that a number of these very unessential matters are a condition for salvation, or are mandatory for the saved. They're afraid—they're afraid if their brethren wander off into backsliding or spiritual compromise by their doing what they do in these unessential matters. And therefore, with very pastoral tenderness, Paul assures them that God is their security. And listen again, "Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand." He will be able to make him stand firm in the faith of the gospel.

Do you notice how Paul brings both groups together, in verses 5 to 8, when he drew attention to the inner motivation of both of the groups, the weak and the strong? Let me just glean the main points from that portion of Scripture without reading all of it. First, if each is living upright, then each group is refraining or doing with an eye on the Master. Each are as the servants or the

maidens in Psalm 123: “Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress; so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God.” Each in prayer, and on the basis of the study of the Scriptures, have come to a different conclusion about how they will live their life before God in the subject of Christian liberty. This is how Paul put it, in verses 5 and 6: “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth” (with his eyes) “to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and” (also) “giveth God thanks.” In other words, both parties are seeking to please their Master. Both are convinced it is God’s will, and both seek to honor the Lord with obedience. So in this aspect, the weak and the strong are actually united.

So, are we giving each other that liberty to be fully persuaded in our mind? Well, brethren, if we detect in each other a sincere desire to do the will of God, then let us rejoice, and let us be charitable, even if we have a different opinion and judgment on these minor matters. If one, in his devotions to God, feels he is at liberty to eat meat, or to devote some common employment time to something sacred, and others who do not feel that they should not be accused of indulging their appetite or being carnal. And likewise, if someone senses that Jesus’ will regarding minor matters is different, such a person should not be despised or put down as narrow-minded.

Paul state in verse 5, “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” That word, “fully persuaded” is a strong phrase. It’s not just an opinion, it’s not just based your feelings, it’s not based on your prejudice or your traditions. It is based on a deep conviction of a careful study of the Word of God. Later, in Romans 14:22 and 23, Paul asks, “Hast thou faith?” In other words, “Are you convinced that Jesus’ will is, let’s say, “A”?” “have it to thyself before God.” In other words, don’t condemn the others, and don’t push your convictions on those who are convinced that Jesus’ will is “B”. Be satisfied cherishing your view and act upon it in private, without bringing it forward to produce disturbance in the church. “Happy is he that condemns not himself in that thing which he allows. And he that doubts is damned”—or feels condemned—“if he eats, because he eats not of faith.” So the chapter ends, “for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” So the happiness of the mind promised here is only and always experienced in obedience to what we believe is Jesus’ will. So whatsoever is done in the realm of Christian liberty, as we have been searching this out, is sin, if it is done without a full conviction that it is the right thing to do. It will create great unhappiness, as your conscience will condemn you. Therefore, be fully persuaded in your mind you do the Lord’s will. And if you are, then do it, but judge not your brother who is at liberty, but despise not your brother who lacks the liberty. What a joy and a blessing of the Lord will be experienced, when in these minor matters, we allow each other the freedom, and give each other respect. Allow fellow Christians to commemorate, for example, the birth of Jesus Christ, or the death of Jesus Christ, or the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ on a specifically set aside day, if they deem this profitable for their edification. But please equally allow other brethren to omit such special days, if they feel totally convinced from Scripture that to mark such a day would be wrong. Judge not the one, condemn not the other. Allow liberty without enforcing your position. Now, with all matters that fall within the Christian liberty, let us leave it to Jesus to judge.

Paul draws our attention then, in verses 8 to 11, that as long as we live, we are bound to the will of our Lord. He is the Lord, both of the dead and the living. He is the sovereign Lawgiver over all. And one day, you and I will all stand alike before the same tribunal, and we must answer for our choices and conduct, not to our fellow man, but to Jesus Christ our Lord. And therefore, sit not in

judgment on each other, in all matters our Lord has not specified in his Holy Book.

Now, how fitting therefore to conclude this session with the words of verse 11 once more: “For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” Then we will all be given the opportunity to hear the final verdict of the King on our conscientious choices in the matters of Christian liberty. In the meantime, let’s be reminded: In all things essential, unity. In all things unessential, liberty. In all things, charity. That’s worth repeating again and again. Thank you.

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

by Rev. A. T. Vergunst

*Module 2 ~ Lecture 6*

## **Conclusion and Exhortation**

Welcome, to the final session on this subject study from Romans 14 and 15, on the Law of Love in Matters of Christian Liberty. So as we wrap up these studies on this important subject, I have reviewed with you a number of principles that we have derived from this passage in Romans, and hopefully it will help you to read Romans 14 and 15 well. We saw that believers don't always think alike, and they will always remain that way about unessentials. We know that Christian liberty issues can have the potential to really strain our relationships among us in the local churches. And to avoid that was the third principle, and that helps us to focus on major, nonnegotiable truths of the Bible that are black and white. And let's carry one another. We're not all of the same maturity—that was the fourth principle. We're not all having the same level of understanding of the gospel. And Paul has given, in the fifth principle, the main call to the strong in the faith, to bear with the infirmities of the weak in faith. And the weak in faith are told to stop judging the strong in the faith.

So now, in this final study, I want to do two things. First, let's look at the first part of Romans 15, expound this concluding passage, and then we'll wrap it up with just a few practical observations as we close this study.

So, Romans 15 is Paul's conclusion of the King's orders about how to maintain Christian fellowship and mutual respect among the believers. So, let's remember that Paul considered himself as one of the strong in the faith. That's totally clear from how he begins Romans 15 with, "We." He includes himself, "We then that are strong." And what are the strong to do? Well, we've looked at the previous chapter, that we are not to despise them. We are to do what it says in chapter 15, verses 1 and 2, we are "to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves." Instead, "Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification."

Now, if we compare Scripture to Scripture, this passage in Romans 15 is expounded best by Paul's own example, and I've already referred to that, but I'll refer to it once again in 1 Corinthians 10. Now I'll only quoted it partially, just to illustrate Romans 15. Paul says, "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more" (Romans 9:19).

Paul became servant unto all. Now, he gave up his rights, as a Christian. And he, at times, adjusted himself to be a Jew with the Jew, a Gentile with the Gentile. What a gracious and magnificent glory of Christ has this apostle shown in his own example. Yeah, he literally gave up his privileges. He often bound himself again with things that were totally unnecessary, in the practice of his Christian walk, so that he would not be an offense. Paul accommodated himself regularly for one purpose, to be effective in sharing with one the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, again and again, in 1 Corinthians 10, you read, “that I might gain the Jews,” or, “that I might gain them that are under the law.” And in referring to the lost Gentiles, “that I might gain them that are without the law.” And again, referring to the weak, “that I might gain the weak.” And then finally, in one sweeping summary, “I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.”

Now, if you turn to 2 Corinthians 11:29, Paul gives us an additional insight that’s quite revealing. He writes, “Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?” The weakness Paul referred to could be general weakness or sickness, but the second half of the verse 29 forces me to conclude that the “weak” refers to the weak in the faith. Thus, when Paul met the weak in the faith, he became weak with them, in order to love them. And he didn’t do that to indulge them in their views, but he did that to build a bridge. He did that to nurture a relationship with them. This man accommodated himself to establish a connection on their level. Well, what did he mean with, “who is offended, and I burn not”? If the strong in the faith, by their actions, made brothers stumble into sin, Paul experienced some kind of a righteous anger—“I burn.” Such a lack of charity towards a fellow brother, he says is sin, and that made him angry—righteously angry. The exercise of Christian charity is an essential duty. However, does that then mean that the strong is always and only to bow to the views of the weak? Well, that question is answered in Romans 15, the first four verses, where the King’s orders are: “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us”—that is, the strong—“please his neighbour for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me. For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”

Now earlier, we called attention to the word “to bear” or to take up the infirmities of the weak. You’ll remember that that word described the porters who carried the luggage and assisted the travelers. That’s God’s direction. The strong are to give assistance to the weak in the faith to help them, as they are lagging behind in their faith journey, burdened. So in this context, that contains a significant direction. No, the strong are not simply to bear their views for the sake of peace, but they are to help the weak in the faith to be freed from their burdens, their scruples, which are experienced as bondage and fear. Friends, ignorance is never the mother of true devotion. And therefore, in due time, in the right manner, we are to deal with the weak in the faith, as Aquila and Priscilla did with Apollos. We read about that godly couple, they expounded to Apollos the way of God more perfectly. Now that’s how the strong in the faith are to do with the weak in the faith. And the best way to do that is not so much to focus on the issues that divide. It is rather to focus on the larger picture of the glory of Christ’s salvation. One learned expositor wrote these words I will quote: “It is both our duty and our privilege to pass on to fellow Christians the light that God has given us. Yet, that instruction must be given humbly, and not censoriously. It has to be given in the spirit of meekness, and not with contention. Patience must be exercised. The aim should be to enlighten the minds, rather than to force their will. For unless the conscience is convicted, the actions would be hypocritical.” Now perhaps it is nicer to leave the weak in faith alone, and to

ignore them as much as possible. But friends, that is not the King's order. His order is different—assist them, bear with them. Do not please yourselves, in verse 2, does not mean, just don't eat the meat, just don't keep special days, or just keep the special days. No, it's not just a direction like that—that we abstain from something they really like. No, it is instead a call to a task that you and I might even dislike. And the task is expounded in verse 2, we are to instruct the weak. Notice, we are to instruct them “for his good.” We are to edify our neighbor or our brethren in the faith. And to edify is to build them up in their faith. We are to do everything to remove their ignorance. We are to do all gently, lovingly to free their conscience from these unnecessary scruples, by deeper instruction in the divine things.

Now, this might not be so pleasant, but we are not called to please ourselves, the Scripture tells us. True, it may be a thankless task, as you may not succeed, or worse, it may bring upon you a measure of reproach, instead of appreciation. For Paul alludes, in verse 3, to what happened to Jesus Christ himself. As Jesus sought, out of love, to instruct the Pharisees on their misinterpretations of the law, what happened? He was reproached as a lawbreaker. One example is John 9, verse 16, where it records an example that must have grieved the Lord Jesus to hear. It is said there, “Therefore said some of the Pharisees, This man is not of God”—why?—“because he keeps not the sabbath day.” Count on it, friends, as the Master was reproached, so you, his servant, will be. One other commentator on Romans 14 and 15 stated this, he says, “It is often necessary to assert our Christian liberty at the expense of incurring censure. We may offend good men in order that right principles be preserved. Our Savior consented to be regarded as a sabbath breaker, a wine bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. Christ did not, in those cases, see fit to accommodate his conduct to the rules set up. He saw more good would arise from a practical disregard of the false opinion of the Jews on various aspects of their life.” So to be reviled for doing our duty has been the experience of Jesus and others, and therefore, in verse 4, Paul refers, in general, to the various people in the Old Testament, like the prophets, who spoke often very unpopular truths. He says, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we”—the strong in the faith—“through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” Now, patience is needed when we work with the weak in the faith, who often are slow to let go of their views. But comfort is also needed, when for doing God's word of instructing the weak in the faith and trying to help them, you meet with reproach, you will be labeled, you may even be rejected.

Well, this brings us to the end of Paul's instruction. Now, as usual, the Apostle brought his teaching either to a doxology, or to a prayer. And notice, in this case, it brought him to prayer, in Romans 15, verses 5 and 6: “Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: that ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That's a prayer for all believers, whether strong or weak in the faith. Without Jesus Christ, and without his Holy Spirit within us, fights and failures will be the outcome of dealing with these explosive issues in the Christian liberty. Now let us therefore be fervent in lifting up these petitions, as they are given here before God. For it is not only a wall of ignorance that blocks the light, it is also stubbornness or pride that binds our heart to our views that could be wrong. How easy it is to become the devil's advocate when we deal with the matters of Christian liberty. Soak, therefore, every effort to enlighten your weaker brother, in prayer. Beg him to subdue the workings of pride in your own heart. Implore God to prepare the soil for the seeds of truth that you will share with him or her. And please, let us pray for the meekness, for the graciousness, for the wisdom to guide our dialogue. Seek God's help to choose the right time, as well as the right words. Wrestle to have your heart filled with glory of God as

your supreme purpose. When Paul directs us to pray for like-mindedness, he is not thinking about uniformity of our opinions. It is harmony, in the midst of diversity, that we are to aim at. Clearly, babes, younger believers, and older believers will not be like-minded about matters in this subject of Christian liberty. But they should be filled with affection toward each other. And it is in such a relationship that quarrelling would be gone, ill feelings set aside, and forbearance and acceptance practiced in charity. And what an amiable company this would be!

Let us pray for a church in which the older bear the infirmities of the younger believers—a church family where the younger believers look with respect to the older ones, even if they don't necessarily share all their light and their understanding. And such a unity among diversity would be God-glorifying, and according to Christ Jesus. It will be according to his will, and it will be according to his example, and it will infect, and it will enflame the spirit of worship, as we come together, as verse 6 concludes, "That ye may with one mind and with one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." One said it well, "If God, who will not receive an offering while one is alienated from his brother,"—Matthew 5:23, 24—"that God will not accept the praise of a company of believers where there are divisions among them. Tongues which are used to back-bite one another in private cannot blend together in singing God's praises." So Paul concluded in one final exhortation to all parties, "Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God."

And finally, friends, let us part with a pastoral side note. Romans 14 and 15 is never endorsing a relaxed morality among Christians. God's standards of morality are unchanged and are of the highest degree according to his holy law. Holiness is God's chief beauty, and the believer's chief duty. Hebrews 12:14 exhorts us, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord." One Thessalonians 5:22 exhorts, "Abstain from all appearance of evil." And Peter exhorted his readers, in 1 Peter 1:15, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation." And Jude 23 echoed that with saying, "Hate even the garment spotted by the flesh." Christian freedom and liberty go hand-in-hand with the strictest moral tenderness. And therefore, if a brother or a sister is seeking to walk in obedience about the matters that God requires, and raises conscientious objections based on the Scriptures, such a person is a tender believer. He's not just a weaker believer who needs to grow up, or who needs to be pitied for being narrow-minded, but such are believers who ought to be followed in their devotion of walk and talk towards their Lord and Savior.

So let's all take a look into our bosom first, and let's ask whether the boundaries that we draw are God's boundaries. Let's all be convinced that whatsoever does not raise the moral standard of a church community is not of God. Now, it is doubtful you can be a Christian in anything, unless you are a Christian in everything. Now the cross of Jesus is rough and deadly to sin, and anyone claiming to be crucified with Christ, while dallying with sin or what leads towards sin, better think again. And therefore, I leave you with three questions to make your own, and to ask often. They will prevent much harm, and they will bring much good.

Question 1 is—Is my motive for living to glorify God, or to indulge myself? Let that question be uppermost asked in all we do, and also in all we refrain from doing.

Secondly—Will my choice be a source of contention to my loved ones, my church family, and to others? Now let that question guide you, if you have to deny yourself, or patiently and gently instruct others in the truths of God.

Now thirdly, and lastly—Will my choice in Christian liberty weaken my Christian usefulness, and distract me from my main purpose for living? And our main purpose for living is to glorify

God and to enjoy him forever.

May God bless these studies on this word that we have done in this session in Christian liberty.  
To him be all the glory. Thank you.