

I recently watched the movie *Chariots of Fire* (I confess I had never seen it before), based on the true story of Eric Liddell, a devout Christian who was raised by Scottish missionaries to China. Liddell was a sprinter (1920's) who famously viewed his running as bringing glory to God. Due to his strong convictions, he refused to run in the Olympic 100-meter dash because it fell on a Sunday (which he viewed to be the Sabbath), he chose instead to compete in the 400-meter race (the next Thursday) with little hope of winning. The Movie focuses on his moral courage, his perseverance despite the criticism and pressure he received, and his triumph—he won the 400-meter race he wasn't supposed to win.

I got all that. But I saw the movie somewhat differently. In the first place, it occurred to me that his commitment to the "Sabbath" which he viewed as Sunday was wrong.

- Sunday is never referred to in the OT or the NT as the Sabbath. So, in his attempt to keep it, technically, he was in violation of it.
- Moreover, the Sabbath is the only one of the 10 commands (Exod 20) not repeated in the NT.
- And, Paul explicitly forbids Christians from judging others or being judged by their observance of this day in **Colossians 2:16** "Therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink, festival observance, or the observance of the Sabbath." Why? Because it is for freedom that Christ has set you free.
- Likewise, the author of Hebrews (Heb 4) spiritualizes the Sabbath day—all believers in Christ now "rest" from sin.

So, I couldn't help but watch the movie through the lenses of 1 Cor 8–10 and Romans 14–15. I thought, "Despite Liddell's sincerity, which category would he belong in these chapters? Would he be the weaker brother whose conscience was constrained by a non-essential and debatable matter? Or, would Liddell be considered the spiritually stronger believer who knows and is persuaded that he is under no biblical constraint ***not to compete*** on a Sunday?"

I think my answer would have to be that despite his apparent piety on the matter, his undoubted sincerity, his undeniable courage of conviction—he, in fact, was the spiritually weaker brother in that regard (not in terms of character or courage, but in his conscience).

Last week Pastor Patrick helped introduce this passage in Romans 14.

Paul gives instructions to all—both the spiritually strong and the spiritually immature/weaker brothers. For the legalist, whose conscience is weak on debatable issues of dietary laws, and sabbath and festival days—this person might be tempted to question the genuine faith of someone who doesn't share his or her convictions on a certain matter. Conversely, the spiritually strong believer might question the genuineness of someone's faith whose conscience is bound on this matter. And they might carelessly flaunt their freedom to the detriment of those who just aren't there yet.

For both camps, Paul prescribes the same three things: (1) don't judge each other. And (2) don't do anything to intentionally or unintentionally put a stumbling block or obstruct the growth of believers. (3) don't do anything that would tear down what God is building up. If it's going to offend or cause someone in the body to stumble, then practice it at home and keep your opinions to yourself.

Paul's message is clear: as Christians, we are called to live in harmony with one another, even when we have different convictions and preferences around debatable issues. We should respect each other's differences and make every effort to build one another up in the faith.

Now, he turns his attention to the spiritually strong as they have the greater obligation here.

1. Those who are strong in the faith are obligated to help the weak. Rom 15:1 “Now we who are strong *have an obligation to bear the weaknesses* of those without strength, and not to please ourselves. Each one of us is to please (prefer) his neighbor for his good, to build him up.” A couple of points of clarification here—*bearing the weakness* does not just mean “to tolerate” or “put up with” (it does mean that) but here it also refers to helping to shoulder the load and moving them on toward maturity and Christian liberty. *Not pleasing yourself, but pleasing your neighbor* does not mean we become people-pleasers. It means that those who are spiritually free and mature in conscience *do not insist on our preferences such that we damage the young and immature faith of those weaker in conscience on these matters.*

In Chapters 14, 15 Paul sides with the “spiritually strong”:

14:14, 17 “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself ... ¹⁷ for the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking (Who’s in that camp? The spiritually weaker brother), but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Who’s in that camp? The spiritually strong—those who think like Paul). Of all the people who could say this, it is remarkable that Paul here insists on this principle. You see, Paul was a Jew and a Pharisee at that. Giving up the Levitical dietary or Sabbath/Festival laws for him was a very big deal. And he would never have done so without a revelation. Fortunately, he tells us that he has such a revelation—because he “knows” and is “persuaded” in the “Lord Jesus.”

14:16 “Therefore, do not let your *good* be slandered”—this is an instruction to *the strong* to avoid an occasion for allowing their freedom in these matters *to be disparaged or smeared by the spiritually weak* who are prone to legalism on the matter. Notice Paul refers to the practice of Christian liberty in debatable issues (such as dietary and sabbath laws) as the “good.”

14:20 “Do not tear down God’s work because of food. *Everything is clean*, but it is wrong to make someone fall by what he eats.” If the spiritually strong flaunt their freedom before the spiritually weak on these dietary and calendar matters, then they run the risk of tearing down what God is building up.

15:1 “Now *we who are strong* have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves.” Here, Paul includes himself in the strong group. Those who know and are persuaded in Christ Jesus that they have liberty in these matters.

1 Cor 10:23 “Everything is permissible,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible,” but not everything builds up.” In the private exercise of my personal liberty I can do so with a good conscience. But not everything that I am free to do is

beneficial for nor builds up the body of Christ. Those who are strong in the faith are obligated to gently and carefully help the weak to grow in the faith away from the tendency toward legalism on debatable or non-essential issues. We are to “please” or prefer them until they are able to embrace liberty in place of legalism.

2. Christ is our example. Rom 15:3 “For even Christ did not please himself. On the contrary, as it is written, ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me’ ... ⁷ Therefore welcome one another, just as Christ also welcomed you, to the glory of God.” Paul wanted them to imitate Christ in putting others first. We are to die to ourselves for the sake of the weak in conscience for the building up of the body, and we are to be a welcoming, gracious community. Not a pugnacious nor careless, nor opinionated faction within the church. We see this clearly in Ephesians...

Eph 5:1–2 “Therefore, ***be imitators of God***, as dearly loved children, ² and walk in love, ***as Christ also loved*** us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God.” In all things we are to imitate and follow the pattern of Christ’s life. Let’s remember that between his advent and his ascension he lived to serve and minister to the people around him.

This is why Peter says, 1 Pet 2:21 “For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you, ***leaving you an example***, that you should follow in his steps.” He suffered in three ways (Phil 2): (1) obscurity—God the Son being found in appearance as a lowly, unremarkable human life in Nazareth; (2) ridicule and rejection by the super-religious, (3) death—and in his dying moments breathing out forgiveness for those who had sinned against him.

- Following Christ’s example is inconvenient: Luke 9:23 “Then he said to them all, ‘If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will save it.’” **Illus. This last week or so, we had 300 people show up and give generously (about 36k) so that our teens can go to Mexico and share the love of Jesus. Giving of our time, abilities, or resources is never convenient.** But we always look like Jesus when we do. Following Jesus means denying ourselves. In this life, we must lose to win, we must die to live, and we empty ourselves so that we may be enriched in every way—everything is flipped upside from the values we are taught and raised with in the world’s system. Paul wanted the Romans to imitate Jesus in following his example of selfless cruciform love for others. And that takes on a practical shape in the life of the church—it takes on the practical shape of living for the benefit of others, dying to my preferences, and the exercise of my free conscience.
- Following Christ’s example takes discipline: Proverbs 6:23 “For a command is a lamp, teaching is a light, and corrective discipline is the way to life.” ***The path to victory is to first conquer thyself.*** Christians, with a renewed mind in the Word and

in the Holy Spirit, have the capacity to master themselves. Along the way *we will be tempted, experience bouts of laziness, and failure. But we choose to pick ourselves up and persevere, moving forward one step and one day at a time.*

Practical: So let's get practical—if you've developed the habit of being an obnoxious, pugnacious and judgmental person who just can't help but "share" your opinion about all your personal preferences—it will take discipline, but you can grow into maturity. *And if you tend to enjoy your Christian freedom at the expense of the weaker brother—flaunting it to their detriment—then you'll need to follow Jesus which is always inconvenient, and always requires self-control.*

Question: Does the expression of our Christian liberty on debatable issues look like Jesus dying on the cross for others?

3. The Scriptures provide examples of Christ's self-giving love. Rom 15:4 "For whatever was *written* in the past was written for our instruction, so that we may have hope through endurance and through the encouragement from the *Scriptures*." The byproduct of studying and knowing the Scriptures (and here he is most certainly talking about the OT) is that the Scriptures give us lots of examples of believers who endured and were encouraged—which in turn gives us hope.

Let me give you a few principles here to help you mine the OT for encouragement and endurance in your Christian walk.

- The OT provides examples of overcoming faith. Paul tells the Corinthians this very thing: 2 Cor 10:6 "Now these things took place as *examples for us*, so that we will not desire evil things as they did." Likewise, the author of Hebrews selects characters from the OT to highlight one thread running through the book—*that Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Moses, the Judges, the Prophets all persevered by faith*. Heb 12:1–2 "Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, ² keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." They stayed true and strong despite the fact that the promises in Jesus had not yet been received—so how much more should our lives reflect an enduring faith having now received the fulfillment of that which was promised? Jesus has come. God's Son has defeated death, hell, and the grave. *And, the OT gives us numerous examples of persistent, persevering faith.*
- The OT provides principles of wisdom. We need to exercise good judgment how we raise our kids, manage our resources, and serve God in the Christian life. And the OT provides lots of examples of how to act wisely and counter-examples of how not to act wisely. 2 Timothy 3:15 "and you know that from infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you *wisdom* for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." The OT also serves the purpose to instruct us in paths of wisdom namely by giving us lots of examples of people who acted wisely and unwisely. David is commended for his faith in God and his killing of Goliath and the defeat of the Philistines. But David is censured and punished for his unwise choice to sleep with Uriah's wife Bathsheba. Likewise, Saul's choices, Israel's idolatry and faithlessness are all counter-examples of faith and wisdom.
- The OT foreshadows Christ and the Christian life. Paul has told the Romans in 5:14 that Adam was a "type" or an archetype of Jesus who is the New and better Adam. The author of Hebrews wrote that Jesus' life and death was foreshadowed in the priestly tabernacle and temple system to point toward Christ. Matthew tells us that Jesus is the new Jacob who has been called, like Israel, out of Egypt. In addition to the myriad of things that foreshadowed Jesus and the

Christian life, the OT directly points to Jesus through prophecy. Both Nehemiah and Ezra are examples of this. They both could've had cushy government careers by just staying in Persia. But they led the backbreaking effort to return to Israel to rebuild the city and the temple. That sacrifice cost them dearly—they almost failed multiple times, their hearts failing within them from exhaustion—but they persevered and made it to the end.

Paul says to the Romans—Jesus is your example, and we also receive hope as the byproduct of the encouragement and endurance that comes by way of the Scriptures. The Bible provides lots of Christ-centered examples, principles, prophecies, and foreshadowing of Jesus and his way.

Conclusion: These last two sentences are not stated in the form of a command but a blessing: Rom 15:5–6 “Now may the God who gives endurance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another (Paul’s goal in this entire section), according to Christ Jesus (according to Jesus’ example and teachings), ⁶ so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice.” A unified church where the spiritually strong bear the burdens of the spiritually weak, helping them along carefully and thoughtfully toward spiritual maturity—committed to the unity of the faith brings glory to God the Father and God the Son—who is the Lord of all.

This is the blessing of a church that commits itself to these things. Amen.