

# Handling Disagreements in the Church (Col. 3:15)

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By  
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## At A Glance:

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- II. How Church Life is Supposed to Work
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*These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.*

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# Handling Disagreements in the Church

## I. Introduction

### A. Illustration: Last Week's Sermon

1. As a spiritual parent in our spiritual family, I want to bring attention to a concern that is going on, for some, instead of pushing it aside and ignoring it. As disciples, we should not run from disagreement, discomfort, or conflict because they provide tremendous opportunity for growth.
2. A portion of last week's sermon bothered some people—the documentary I watched. I unintentionally created a good opportunity for discipleship. Disciple making, in its most effective form, takes place amid life as life events are playing out. Jesus frequently used “in the moment” teaching to help those around Him grow and develop spiritually. I hope to do the same this morning.
3. While I was speaking, I witnessed some reactions that were clearly bothered by what I was saying, and I've had a few conversations with people who wanted to talk about my opening comments—which I greatly appreciate. If, even after today's message, anyone is still bothered, I welcome a conversation and encourage you to approach me so we can clear up any misunderstandings, division, or potentially harmful effects.
4. Instead of using this message to defend myself or my actions, I want to use current events to help instruct and encourage all of us to live in relationship with one another in ways that are pleasing to God. I want us to learn more about what it means to live peacefully with others within the church.

B. My hope as your pastor is to have a healthy church culture where we interact with one another in healthy ways—which we will define in a minute. My desire for our church is for us to live our faith out in our relationships to such an extent that other people are drawn to Jesus by it. Living in relationship with the people of God should be a pleasant experience that stands in clear contrast to the way the world engages in relationships with one another. As disciples we are called to treat one another better than the way people treat one another who don't know God.

C. All of us have a need to learn how to get along with people who disagree with us. While we will be focusing on how to do this in the church, this skill is also needed in the workplace and in the home. All spouses know that disagreements exist even in the closest of relationships. Learning how to handle disagreements well is not just a Christian life skill but a life skill in general. This topic is relevant for everyone. Without learning how to handle disagreements, life and relationships will continually be messy. Ultimately, we are talking about peacemaking and reconciliation.

## II. How Church Life is Supposed to Work

A. As a group of people who have been set aside by God to fulfill His desires and purposes in this world, there is a standard by which we should be interacting with one another as we build relationships and gather for spiritual purposes. While the church will never perfectly live by God's standards, these standards should still be our aiming point. Here is what church fellowship should look like:

<sup>12</sup> So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; <sup>13</sup> bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. <sup>14</sup> Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity. <sup>15</sup> Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. (Col. 3:12-15)

- B. Disciples have the responsibility of figuring out how-to live-in peace with each other, “Live in peace with one another” (1 Thess. 5:13). The church whose relationships and interactions are defined by these qualities will be a powerful and fruitful church indeed. Does this describe the tone and feeling of our worship services? Our small groups? Our relationships? Our interactions? I want to encourage all of us to think about the relationships we have with others in the church and think about whether our personal relationships demonstrate these qualities. It is obvious that if these character qualities are to define our relationships, we must first develop this type of character as individuals. It is impossible for our relationships express qualities that we ourselves do not have. The quality of our relationships is directly determined by the depth of our godly character which is one good reason among many why spiritual growth is so important.
- C. God wants His people to pursue character, “put on a heart of...” (v. 12). Inner character is in view here. What is a disciple’s character supposed to look like? The list of character qualities comes next, “compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience...love” (vv. 12-14). Each of these internal character qualities promote healthy interactions with others and relationships in the church. These character qualities then influence the conduct found within the church, “bearing with one another, and forgiving each other” (v. 13).
- D. Notice how insightful God is about relationships and interactions within the church. He knows problems will arise as they are inevitable, “whoever has a complaint against anyone” (v. 13). Even as disciples, we are going to hurt and wrong one another. There will be complaints between us. Righteousness is not an absence of wrongs or conflict but a proper handling of them. Real wrongs happening in the church are obvious by the advice that follows, “just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.” (v. 13). Forgiveness isn’t required if no real wrong was done.
- E. Notice also, in the church, we will have occasions when we need to be, “bearing with one another” (v. 13). Disciples will have to carry the burdens created by other people. Life in the church is not always easy. People are in the process of growing godly character. Disciples endure the annoying behaviors and insensitivity of others within the church. There will be some people we have a hard time getting along with. Some individuals in the church will make your life more challenging; that’s part of life in the church. While these burdens don’t have to be immoral, they might be. To bear with one another is to endure something unpleasant or difficult whether on one’s one behalf or on behalf of someone else.<sup>1</sup> This passage gives us an honest and accurate picture of what relationships in the church look like.

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<sup>1</sup> Logos 10 Bible Study Software Bible Word Study Guide on Col. 3:13 “bearing”

- F. If the church lives the way it is supposed to, we will quickly shine as a light in the darkness as Jesus put it. In our cancel culture where people are becoming increasingly unable to interact in healthy ways, let alone have relationships, with people who disagree with them, there will be an immediate clear distinction between those who follow God and those who do not. When the church uses our God given patience, kindness, gentleness, and forgiving nature, we will stand out from the world in a good way. People will take notice which may give us an opportunity to tell them about Jesus. I've experienced this firsthand on several occasions.
- G. Disciples learn how to interact and relate to those who disagree with them in loving ways through the character provided and developed in their lives through the power of God. Only individuals with the type of character described above will be able to interact with those they disagree with in pleasant and God honoring ways.

### III. The Nature of the Christian Life

- A. Some of these complaints and disagreements in the church come as a result of the nature of the Christian life itself. The source of the difficulty is found in a tension inherent to the Christian life. As disciples, we live in between two forces that move us in opposite directions. Paul points to and explains this tension found in the Christian life in a discussion about how disciples should respond to and act toward meat found in the marketplace that was used in temple sacrifices. This was a hot button topic in the early church as Paul addresses it multiple times in his letters:
 

<sup>29</sup> I mean not your own conscience, but the other *man's*; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? <sup>30</sup> If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? <sup>31</sup> Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. <sup>32</sup> Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; <sup>33</sup> just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the *profit* of the many, so that they may be saved. (1 Cor. 10:29-33)
- B. There is a tension between living in the freedom that has been provided by Jesus in which disciples stand and the restriction of personal behavior for the spiritual benefit of others. Paul specifically asks a question that points to the center of this tension, "why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?" (v. 29). Our freedom is extremely important (Jn. 8:36, Gal. 5:1, 1 Pet. 2:16). The way we treat others is extremely important. These two values can come into competition with one another which creates a dilemma. Which priority do we put first?
- C. The goal of life as a disciple is to, "do all to the glory of God" (v. 31). When disciples make it their aim to glorify God the natural result of doing so is going to be frequently giving "thanks" (v. 30) to God. But here's the problem, sometimes, when using our God given freedom, we can do spiritual damage to those around us which is why we are also to "please all men in all things" (v. 33). This is the tension found in the Christian life. Disciples must learn how to navigate these tricky situations of life in a way that we, "Give no offense" (v. 32) whether to people inside the church or outside the church.

### IV. Areas of Conscience

- A. As we participate in the life of the church as unique individuals in community, we will discover we are going to have disagreements with other disciples. Some types of complaints and disagreements fall into the category of what is called "areas of conscience". Areas of conscience

apply to areas of life where there are no specific commands of God telling us what to do so each person is free to decide how best to please God. Those who have been around the church long enough can even identify the types of disagreements that are expected. Usually, disagreements between disciples come in some of these areas:

1. Doctrine—we don't all understand the Bible the same way
  2. Values—what is important and how we prioritize our lives
  3. Ministry—the different strategies and ministries that will be most effective
  4. Worship—personal preferences and habits when it comes to church activities
  5. Conscience—how we think God wants us to live to please Him regarding specific points of application in non-commanded areas of life
- B. Since disagreements are unavoidable, disciples must learn how to live with the tension between our own personal freedom provided by Jesus and sensitivity to other people. Now we come to a very practical question, “how can we live peacefully in the church when we disagree with one another?”
- C. In Romans chapter 14 and 15, Paul gives us some very good and practical advice on how to navigate this tension in the church.<sup>2</sup> We will only review the most important principles as we learn to navigate disagreements within the church. To start, we will point to two spiritual dangers highlighted by Paul. The first spiritual danger is that of judgment. One warning is directed toward a mature disciple, “not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions” (Rm. 14:1) while the other is directed toward the immature disciple, “not to judge” (Rm. 14:3). The judgment in verse one is obviously critical.<sup>3</sup> It means to make a distinction in an especially contentious manner.<sup>4</sup> The judgment of verse 3 means to form a negative opinion of something or someone.<sup>5</sup> Mature disciples who have a greater knowledge and understanding of God's Word may tend to be judgmental toward the views of less mature disciples. Immature disciples will tend to view more mature disciples as immoral because they are participating in activities the less mature disciple will not. While the judgement is being done a little differently in each case, judgment is still the core of the issue.
- D. The second danger is, “not to regard with contempt” (Rm. 14:3) and “regard your brother with contempt” (Rm. 14:10). To regard with contempt is to treat someone as if they are worthless or despicable.<sup>6</sup> When we observe other people living by a different behavioral standard than we are living with, it is easy to think the other person is immoral while we view ourselves as the one doing what is right. That might be the logical conclusion if we are convinced our way of life is morally right and pleasing to God. However, Paul says, somewhat shockingly, that it is possible for two people living according to different behavioral standards to both be, “accepted” (v. 3) by God. How is this possible? Because the response or behavior is not moral or immoral in itself—it deals with an area of life in which there are no commands of God. These

<sup>2</sup> Another discussion on this topic occurs in 1 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9.

<sup>3</sup> The term for “judgment” is also used in 1 Cor. 12:10 and Heb. 5:14.

<sup>4</sup> Logos 10 Bible Study Software Bible Word Study Guide on Rm. 14:1 “passing judgment”

<sup>5</sup> Logos 10 Bible Study Software Bible Word Study Guide on Rm. 14:3 “to judge”

<sup>6</sup> Logos 10 Bible Study Software Bible Word Study Guide on Rm. 14:3 “to regard with contempt”

areas are either moral or immoral based on the person's attitude and response, not the behaviors.<sup>7</sup>

- E. Some examples of these “matters of conscience” could be what movies or TV shows we think are appropriate to watch, how healthy our diet should be, whether it's okay for disciples to drink alcohol, which holidays should be celebrated, whether Christians should own guns, or how to dress when attending church. There are plenty of areas of life and behaviors in which the moral commands of God do not directly apply, although biblical principles do influence.
- F. After listing a few dangers, Paul then gives a few principles that can help disciples navigate these tricky situations in a way that promotes peace and the glory of God.<sup>8</sup> The goal for everyone is to develop an informed personal conviction on the matter, “each person must be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rm. 14:5) so that, “The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God” (Rm. 14:22). Act consistently with what you think is good and right before God. It is never healthy for us to act against our own conscience even if our conscience is misinformed. Do the best you can with the knowledge and understanding you have. It is amazing how much our knowledge influences our conscience—our understanding of right and wrong. Paul points this out (1 Cor. 8:7, 10-11).
- G. As each person has their own conviction before God and we encounter other disciples whose convictions are different, entrust them to God as you, “accept one another” (Rm. 15:7). At the end, God is the ultimate authority, and each person will be accountable to Him, “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” (Rm. 14:10). Therefore, “who are you to judge the servant of another?” (Rm. 14:4). If someone is living in a way that is improper before God, in a way that is not a clear violation of the Word of God or His commandments, let God be the One to deal with it. Disciples should respect the freedom of others in these matters of conscience.
- H. Instead, we should focus on living our life in such a way that we help others spiritually. We are “not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way” (Rm. 14:13). This means to cause spiritual harm by leading them toward what they consider sin (Rm. 14:15, 21). We want to influence others in a way that builds them up spiritually and produces their genuine good (Rm. 15:2). When in the presence of others, it is wise to limit our own freedom when we know our freedom is creating spiritual issues for others. We are to only do what will build and strengthen others spiritually. Disciples who are filled with moral goodness and a knowledge of God and His Word will be able to confront and correct others in their sin.
- I. All of this is not relativism—everyone doing whatever they feel is right in their own eyes; this is situational. While it is dangerous to encourage disciples to live in the freedom provided by Jesus because many people already think they can live however they want and still be considered a Christian, our Christian freedom is valuable and ought to be protected. This freedom is not a moral free for all and it is perfectly consistent with confrontation and correction of sin—clear violations of God's moral commands as Paul is also fully confident that the church is still, “able

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<sup>7</sup> One person may be able to drink a beer and thank God for being able to enjoy it while another person may struggle with temptation and resisting a strong desire to drink too much. The one who drinks does what is good for them while the person who doesn't drink does what is good for them.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:2-5

also to admonish one another” (Rm. 15:14). To admonish someone is to warn or counsel them in terms of someone’s behavior.<sup>9</sup> Allowing people freedom in areas of conscience doesn’t eliminate moral accountability in the church.

- J. If what I said last week had a negative effect on your pursuit of God, I want to apologize for that negative spiritual impact of my words. That was not my intention. In fact, I hoped to bring about the exact opposite, your edification. I hope the apology doesn’t prevent us from having the deeper conversation about these types of issues.
- K. I spent time this week laying myself before God asking Him to show me if there is anything that I need to confess and repent of regarding my actions in this matter (Ps. 139:23). I also reviewed my knowledge of the Scriptures to determine if there was anything I was missing. This is my normal practice when I am confronted by anyone else regarding something I’ve done. I spend time seriously considering the charge to discern if there is any truth in it. If, in good conscience, I think the charge is mistaken, I move on and don’t let another person’s opinion change my own conviction after trying to clear up the concern as best as I am able. It is impossible to live our lives according to other people’s convictions or conscience. Living in a morally sensitive way is good practice within the church.
- L. God’s people, knowing there is no condemnation for us (Rm. 8:1), should be open and willing to have these types of conversations with one another. Jesus teaches us that sin has a blinding effect on us so that we can’t see everything we ought to see. This is why we need one another to help us in our moral accountability before God. While these conversations may be uncomfortable from time to time, they are extremely important.

#### V. Conclusion

- A. As a church community, let’s strive in the power of God to develop the character qualities that produce healthy relationships so we can become a church that is marked by peace, unity, and love. Let’s not be afraid to have uncomfortable conversations with one another so we can help each other be more like Jesus in our character.
- B. Here is how each person is to go about serving God in a way that is pleasing to Him. Serving God is not primarily focused on rule keeping but the development and expression of godly character:

<sup>16</sup> Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; <sup>17</sup> for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup> So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. (Rm. 14:16-19)

#### VI. Questions for Further Thought

- A. Have you ever experienced being confronted or having to confront someone else for the purpose of correcting behavior? If so, when? What happened?
- B. What two different ways of understanding the Christian life are described in Col. 2:20-23?
  1. Which one does Paul emphasize as the true Christian life?

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<sup>9</sup> Logos 10 Bible Study Software Bible Word Study Guide on Romans 15:14 “admonish”

2. What is a central feature of the authentic Christian life?
- C. Can you identify other areas of conscience in which disciples form differing views?
- D. What hinders people from confronting others?
- E. How can a disciple determine if a behavior is in an area of conscience or a violation of the Word of God?