

Articles and Sermons :: The tyranny of the weaker brother - RC Sproul

The tyranny of the weaker brother - RC Sproul - posted by davym (), on: 2010/10/22 18:08

The tyranny of the weaker brother - RC Sproul

One of the dangers that often goes unrecognized in the church today is the problem of the tyranny of the weaker brother. On Wednesday afternoon at our pastors conference, Dr. R.C. Sproul gave a timely lecture on the subject. His main text was Romans 14.

Sanctification

The Protestant Reformers were united in their affirmation that the Bible teaches justification by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone. Saving faith immediately, necessarily, and inevitably shows evidence of itself in the good works we produce in the process of sanctification. Paul tells us to work out salvation in fear and trembling, as God works in us to will and do (Phil. 2:12-13). We are not to be at ease in Zion or quietists that let go and let God. The whole Christian life requires labor with the godly fear that we call reverence and with the adoration that is ever present in the hearts of those who tremble before the living God. Sanctification is not to be undertaken in a casual matter.

There are, however, various pitfalls that undermine our sanctification. Predominant among them are antinomianism and legalism. Antinomianism means anti-lawism. It carries the idea that once I am saved by grace, I no longer have to be concerned about living a life of obedience, and I no longer need to heed to God's law. The favorite refrain of the antinomian is "free from the law, o blessed condition, I can sin all I want and still have remission."

One of Roman Catholicism's fears during the Protestant Reformation was that the doctrine of justification by faith alone would produce antinomianism. There were indeed some radical reformers who misunderstood the doctrine and moved in that direction. But the Reformed wing of the Reformation was convinced that though the ceremonial law had been fulfilled and abrogated, the moral laws rooted in God's character are still relevant for showing Christians how to please God, not for the earning of salvation.

Today, antinomianism is epidemic. Some say the Old Testament law has no further import to the life of the Christian. One of the most prevalent examples of this idea is the destructive epidemic of the carnal Christian. This is a contradiction in terms once we understand what is meant by the words carnal Christian, but there is a sense in which it has some application to us. All of us who are in Christ remain carnal to some degree because our flesh—the will and nature in opposition to God—is not eradicated until we are glorified. This is not, however, what advocates of carnal Christianity mean in calling some believers carnal. The idea of the carnal Christian says it is possible to come to true saving faith and receive Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. A truly converted person may never produce the fruit of a sanctified life but may remain utterly carnal and unconcerned with God's law unto death. Christ is in the life of the carnal Christian, but He is not on the throne of the person's life. The self sits on the throne and determines how one will live.

Where does this idea of carnal Christianity come from? Bad theology is one answer. But it may also originate as a way to explain why so many profess Christ and yet show no evidence of it. I knew a young man who lived with his girlfriend and sold drugs, but he excused his sin by calling himself a carnal Christian. He went forward at an altar call but made no effort to follow Jesus. He is an example of antinomianism with a vengeance.

The other main threat to our sanctification is legalism. What is legalism? It is not an easy question to answer because there is not one monolithic form of legalism. The worst legalism says that by our works we can satisfy the demands of God's law and gain salvation through our good deeds. This is the view of salvation held by all people who do not affirm biblical Christianity. But if this were truly the way of salvation, it could only cause us everlasting doom, for no one fulfills the law perfectly.

Other forms of legalism were perfected by the Pharisees. The Pharisees majored in the minors. This form of legalism gives great attention to minor matters of the law at the expense of the weightier matters of the law. Jesus castigated the Pharisees for only observing the tithe. People should tithe, he said, but not at the expense of other matters. We cannot pick and choose which commandments to follow (Matt. 23:23-24). We all know people who are scrupulous about some minor things but do not care whether they display the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-24).

The Pharisees also violated the spirit of the law to get around the law about traveling on the Sabbath day. Let's say the y calculated journey to be about a mile, which should have meant that they would not travel more than a mile away from their home on the Sabbath day. They created a loophole, however, that said a home could be established if they left a personal item like a toothbrush somewhere. If they wanted to take a journey on the Sabbath that was fifteen miles, for example, they could leave a toothbrush or other personal item every mile along their desired route. That way, they would never travel more than a mile from their home. Starting from their real house, they would get to the place where they left their first personal item after traveling only a mile. They were at their new "house" when they found their toothbrush and

everything started over again. They could then travel another mile to their next house, then the next house, all the way until their final destination.

One of the most destructive forms of legalism then and now, and the one most seriously practiced by the Pharisees was their tendency to add to the law of God. They bound men's consciences where God had left them free to do what they wanted to do. This problem has plagued the church for centuries.

In any case, it can be helpful to ask ourselves where we fall on this wide spectrum of legalism and the atmosphere we have in our church.

Matters Indifferent

Connected to the matter of legalism and antinomianism is the idea of adiaphora and Christian liberty. Adiaphora are matters indifferent—those areas where one is commanded neither to do or to abstain, areas where God has not told us what or what not to do. Christians have liberty in matters indifferent; we can choose for ourselves what course of action we will take.

Christian liberty never gives us the liberty to disobey God. It is not a disguise for licentiousness. Once I had a teaching opportunity for a mission in a community outside of New York City. After the mission ended, I was invited back to the home of one of the mission leaders for a prayer meeting with the mission's leadership team. To my horror, people started to pray to their deceased relatives when the meeting started. I interrupted them and told them that Christians are not allowed to pray to the dead because it is forbidden in Scripture and is a capital offense in the Old Testament. The mission's leaders responded that the rule did not matter because it was an Old Testament rule. I asked them what had happened in redemptive history that would make a formerly abhorrent practice acceptable to God. They responded that they were not under the law, and that I shouldn't lay a guilt trip on them.

This exchange reflected a serious misunderstanding of Christian liberty on their part. Consulting witches and so forth is not adiaphora. Clearly, occultic matters are not matters indifferent, and there is no biblical reason to think otherwise.

On some occasions, however, we cannot agree on what is indifferent. The real, biblical concept of Christian liberty helps us coexist when we do not have the same understanding of what fits into the category of adiaphora. Where does our Christian liberty begin and end? This has been a problem in the church for ages.

In the body of Christ at Rome, there were some who ate meat and some who ate only vegetables, and the two groups did not agree on what was best (Rom. 14). Paul's response is that since God has not set forth a specific law in this case, neither group should judge the other. The vegetarian and meat-eater both belong to Christ, so how dare we judge one another. How dare we judge Christ's fellow servants where God does not judge them. We must evaluate others only according to the explicit standards of Scripture, not those invented by human traditions.

Fifty years ago, evangelicalism was plagued by a legalism that said you don't dance, drink, smoke, go to movies, play cards and so forth. Though things have improved on this front, this was such a matter for many evangelicals that one's entire spirituality and Christian profession was to be judged by conformity to these stipulations. But you cannot find any explicit laws about these things in Scripture. As an example of this legalism, I remember an occasion on which a woman took several of us out for dinner. We were all Christians, and when the waitress showed up to take our drink order, our hostess immediately chimed in and told the waitress that nobody would be drinking alcohol since we were Christians and Christians do not drink alcoholic beverages. I was embarrassed for that waitress, for she had been rebuked and because her idea of a Christian was now that a Christian is someone who would never take a strong drink. But Paul said the kingdom is not a matter of eating and drinking.

How many Christians have been taught that it is sinful to do things that God has not declared sinful? They have been told that some matters indifferent are actually not indifferent.

Dealing with Weaker Brothers

Here is the basic issue. If I believe it is a sin to drink alcohol and I drink alcohol, then I have committed a sin. This is not because it is sin itself to drink alcohol but because it is wrong to consciously do what we consider to be a sin. In willingly acting to break what we think is God's law, we show forth a rebellious Spirit. We must therefore be careful when it comes to judging the behavior of others on matters indifferent because we are not all at the same level of understanding. In Corinth, some Christians were troubled by buying meat that had been offered to idols even though it was being sold as meat, and this caused friction in the community. Paul said it was meat, and so it was not wrong in itself to consume it if one was buying it later and not taking part in the idol worship (1 Cor. 8). Those who wanted to avoid the meat entirely were acting as secondary separatists. Not only were they refusing to eat the meat offered to idols (primary separation), they were refusing to associate themselves with those who did eat the meat that had been offered to idols. Of course, to be consistent, secondary separatists would have to remove themselves from the planet, for everyone we know and everything we do can be connected with something we have scruples against or something that is sinful in some way.

How do you deal with the weaker brothers? Do you laugh at them? Jump on them with criticism? Or, do you respect their consciences and say, "I know you have this scruple, and I don't want to make you stumble and entice you to do something that you are convinced is the violation of the law of God"? This is what Paul was willing to do (1 Cor. 8:9–13).

Paul was willing to give up meat altogether for the sake of his weaker brother. If a person has a scruple I do not share and it is a scruple unto the Lord, then I have to bend over backwards to be caring and not flaunt my liberty in their face. I s

should do the act that is indifferent but offends another believer in private. Our freedom in Christ is not an autonomy whereby we can do anything we feel like doing. It must always be accompanied by a charitable sensitivity toward those who have scruples.

But what happens when weaker brothers want to elevate their personal scruples to a level of a moral standard for Christianity or when they want to require it of all those who want to be members or officers in the church? Here the weaker brother becomes the legislative brother and begins to take a personal scruple and bind the consciences of people, destroying Christian liberty. The question is what do you do and how do you discern the identity of the weaker brother?

We have to be very sure that the standards we impose on others in the church are biblical standards and not our own scruples. Some ministers have required their elders to sign a pledge never to consume alcohol for any reason, even wine. But this would violate the qualifications of Paul and Jesus, who both drank the beverage. The same minister will say that they can make the rule because first-century wine was not alcoholic, but that is a false assumption. Jesus was not called a wine-bibber (Matt. 11:19) because he drank Welch's grape juice. To assert that first-century wine was not alcoholic is the imposition of an American cultural norm out of a desperation to maintain a non-biblical position on alcohol. There is no doubt a vehement prohibition of drunkenness in Scripture, but not a condemnation of the proper consumption of alcohol.

Can a minister be the weaker brother? Ministers should not be weaker brothers, and they should know how to handle the Scriptures rightly. Still, we have some ministers who are weaker brothers, and we are not the first generation to experience this reality. Galatians 2:11–14 shows the conflict between Peter and Paul wherein Peter, an apostle who should have known better, was clearly the weaker brother. At first Peter ate with the Gentiles freely, but then he later separated himself and would not dine with them as they ate their non-kosher food. Paul did not have a private word with Peter, he withstood him in public. Peter should have known better because of his encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10. Here the weakness of the weaker brother escalated into the serious Judaizing heresy of Galatia. The imposition of the law that many found a justification for in Peter's moment of weakness was threatening the gospel itself, for soon the Galatians were adding other works of the law as requirements for salvation, including circumcision. Jesus gave us liberty not only out of kindness but out of profound theological concerns related to the way of salvation. If you impose circumcision and other laws after their fulfillment, you are putting yourself under the same old covenant terms symbolically. You are leaving the new covenant. What was a matter of the weaker brother's scruples become a threat to the very understanding of the gospel.

Paul was willing to adapt his behavior to the scruples of weaker brethren when they did not impose them on others. The example of Titus' circumcision in Galatians 2:1–10, however, shows us that as soon as the weaker brother tried to enforce his weakness as the law of the church, the gospel was threatened. Rather than deny his own Christian liberty in this case for the sake of the weaker brother, Paul fought tooth and nail for the gospel. Once a person with a scruple tries to make his scruple the rule of the church, then he must not be allowed to enforce a law where God has set us free.

These principles of matters indifferent and the stronger and weaker brother are easy to grasp, but applying them takes a lot of wisdom. We must apply the gospel wisely and in love so that we might be patient with those young in the faith, but at the same time we cannot let the weaker brother impose his view on others. Do we impose rules and regulations in our churches where God has left us free? We must be careful not to do this for the sake of Christ and His little ones.

Re: The tyranny of the weaker brother - RC Sproul - posted by MyVeryHeart (), on: 2010/10/22 18:25

Galatians 5:14

For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

We have great liberty in Christ. But let's be aware of the weaker brother as to not cause him to stumble as a result of our Liberty. Please God give us wisdom in this matter so we know how to love our brother as we ought to.

Re: - posted by ADisciple (), on: 2010/10/22 20:18

And please give us wisdom-- and courage-- to speak forthrightly to the weaker brother who is trying to make his scruples the rule of the church... and thereby undercuts our Christian liberty. That's the point of this message.

It's a good message.

Re: - posted by NewCovWinDor (), on: 2010/10/22 21:25

QUOTE:

The favorite refrain of the antinomian is "free from the law, o blessed condition, I can sin all I want and still have remission."

That's spot-on, brother.

This is a meaty article. Thanks for sharing it.

In Jesus,

Re: , on: 2010/10/23 9:16

I see what he is trying to say, but I think he is going about it the wrong way. Because, the "weaker brother" in Romans 14 is not associated with legalism.

It should have been titled "The Tyranny of the Legalist".

The Legalist is deceived. The Weaker Brother is not deceived, but just does not have the faith to "enjoy" some liberties that other Christians enjoy. There is a big difference. And our liberties never involve sin.

Let's not look on weaker brothers as tyrannical.

My daughter went to a Bible Study at her college where the "leader" of the Bible Study was proudly a 5 point Calvinist. He said that he liked country and rock music and that his friend, a Christian who is not Calvinist, asked him to turn it off. His friend objected to the lyrics in the song and the Calvinist says he only listens because he likes the music.

So, during the bible study, the Calvinist was using this example (that took place in his car between he and his friend), to show that his friend was the weaker brother because he could not listen to rock music. It seemed tyrannical to him that his brother was grieved with the music. And he calls him "Weaker", in front of many of the students.

My daughter did not say anything but she thought that the self-avowed 5 pointer was the weaker brother.

As you can see the whole thing is ridiculous, thinking that the Christian who did not like the words of the music, which did not glorify God, was the weaker brother.

So, tyrannical and weaker are not synonymous and RC Sproul seems to be creating a whole new theology and using the "weaker brother" term, which he is not properly using.

I see what he is trying to say, but I think he was trying to be a little too cute just to make a nice sermon. It missed its mark to those who know the difference between legalism (tyranny) and weaker brothers.

We are supposed to think on good things. These songs glorify cheating on spouses, getting drunk, etc. The weaker brother is supposed to be "considered" by the spiritually mature and we are not to make them stumble.

Re: , on: 2010/10/23 10:02

Gal 2:4 And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage:

Gal 2:5 To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you.

The legalists in this example are called false brothers, who despise the liberty that is to be found in Christ. Typically it is the legalists that start shouting about "antinomianism" which means "a flagrant disregard for God's commands." It's an old charge made against anyone who talks about liberty, true liberty in Christ. Does the genuine Christian who walks in liberty have a license to sin? As Paul says "God forbid." This accusation can only be made by someone who has no knowledge

, ' of Christ. The last thing, the very last thing that any genuine new creature in Christ wants to do is sin. The freedom found in Christ is exhilarating, once tasted, will never, not even for an hour, be given up. To be imprisoned all one's life, the n to find freedom in Christ is beyond imagination and will never be given up, not even at the point of death, hence the martyrs down through the centuries. This is something the legalists (typically the torturers and killers of the martyrs) could never understand.....brother Frank

Two pitfalls: Legalism and Lawlessness - posted by Renoncer, on: 2010/10/23 11:39

How easy it is to fall on either sideÂ... legalism or lawlessness.

Legalism tries to set boundaries that have not been set by God; it denies the fulfillment of the Law in Christ. Lawlessness twists the grace of God to make it a license to sin; it perverts the definition of freedom.

To the legalist, I would quote Galatians 5:1 and Colossians 2:14 (amongst other passages)
To the lawless, I would quote 1Corinthians 6:12 and Romans 6:14 (amongst other passages)

In the end, the issue of the freedom that we have in Christ is summarized in 1Corinthians 10:23-33. The question that we should ask is, "What am I making of this freedom? Am I using it to indulge and serve myself? Am I denying it and putting an undue yoke on others? Or am I using my freedom to serve others and glorify God?"

Those who put heavy yokes on people do not know the freedom in Christ. Those who endorse revelry have a counterfeit freedom. Those who know the true freedom in Christ will use it to glorify Him, serve others out of love, and even deny themselves for the sake of others. However, all of the above will be done out of a heart of gratitude and love, unbound by chains.

In either case, the following question remains: Who are you to judge your neighbour? Before God does he stand or fall, not before you. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification. For even Christ did not please Himself, but took on the form of a servant. Let us follow Him.

Re: Two pitfalls: Legalism and Lawlessness, on: 2010/10/23 20:24

I agree with you Renoncer. It is easy for our flesh to fall on either side. Hence, we must walk in the Spirit so that we do not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.

The only thing God allows us to judge is what is produced. Fruit (Matt 7). We do not have to eat bad fruit or associate with bad fruit. But we are not to judge the eternal destination of anyone.

You can judge what you hear and what you see. Not what someone tells you. Out of the abundance of one's mouth the heart speaks. You can hear what has captured someone's heart by listening to their words. If Jesus has their heart you will hear that in their words. If something else has their heart, you will hear that.

Luke 6:45 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.

Mat 12:33 Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit.

Mat 12:34 O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

Re: - posted by Renoncer, on: 2010/10/23 22:13

Pilgrim777,

I agree; we are indeed called to judge in the sense of discernment and appraisal. However, we are forbidden from judging in the sense of conceited pretension.

You can certainly tell a tree by its fruit; that is, you can tell a believer from an unbeliever (notice that those who don't bear good fruit are thrown in the fire). However, there are many passages that warn us against a pretentious judgment, such as James 4:12-13 and Romans 14:4. This latter concept is especially important in the context of the freedom of the believer.

iever.

So, if a false teacher drops by, I will be the first one to warn the sheep. However, in the matter of the believer's freedom and personal conviction, I should refrain from passing judgment on someone else (to be honest, I need to work on that).

Understanding both pitfalls (legalism and lawlessness), we should endeavour to glorify God as much as possible and have an attitude of humility before others.

Re: , on: 2010/10/23 23:14

Yes, you provide scriptures that show the balance and always humility is the key. I would say we all need to work on that. :-)

We are not to go around self-righteously exposing everyone and everything that does not line up with Scriptures (Mt 13). Who would or could survive that? You would crush everyone's spirit.

An earthly father does not correct his child (who is growing and maturing) on each and every little thing that they say or do wrong. Yet, they will provide wisdom about what will hurt them. "My son, heed my words". They will also protect them from strangers.

We do not always know who an unbeliever is. Every believer has sometimes acted as an unbeliever. Just like every child throws fits and fights with their siblings. Discernment and love is needed to know how to assess (judge) what is happening and counsel and restore a brother or expose/run from a wolf. That's why they come in sheep's clothing; they look like sheep but they are here to devour prey.

John 4:1-2 is spoken to all believers. We are all to learn how to try the spirits. False brethren, teachers, preachers make a name for themselves and take advantage of sheep. Their name is always a bit higher than Jesus. Their flesh uses Jesus to draw people to themselves instead of to Jesus. Their root is pride and greed and they never repented of that. Those who used pride and greed in the world to take advantage of people and never repent of it, just pick up where they left off (in the world), except now they are in the church exploiting people with their selfish ambition and covetousness. They were in the world trying to get to the top and step on anyone that was in their way and now they just do the same thing in the church. They flatter the sheep and draw men unto themselves. They are man-pleasers and not God-pleasers. They won't teach the part of the Bible that would conform you to the image of Christ else they step on toes and lose money. Man-pleasers will not teach the whole counsel of God.

And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not. Ezekiel 33:31-32

We are in a war, and sadly, the Church has not shown up for it. And because of it, many are easy prey, especially to the flatterer who "praises" Jesus.

Each time the Lord gives us more wisdom to try spirits, we need double the wisdom in humility.

Blessings Renoncer, Pilgrim

Re: - posted by Renoncer, on: 2010/10/23 23:49

Pilgrim777,

I agree with your assessment. I also agree that sometimes we can't tell if someone is truly saved or not.

In the light of the discussion on the believer's freedom, I think that the word of the day is "humility".

May God help us to walk humbly before others, for the glory of His Name.

Re: , on: 2010/10/24 0:00

Quote:

-----May God help us to walk humbly before others, for the glory of His Name.

Amen, bro.

Re: , on: 2010/10/24 17:43

R.C. says some things here that are just plain sensible, and the perspective is greatly appreciated. There's so much truth here in few words.

Yet, at the same time, it's wondered how he reconciles our body being the Temple of the Holy Ghost and filling it with trash by whatever of the senses and or doings we employ???

Who really is the weaker brother?

Personally, i look at it as a matter of trying not to offend another --starting with God-- through what is done through our bodies, whether we think another weaker or not.

There is always someone ahead of us on the straight and narrow. When we quit looking to people around us as our examples or for results, it's Jesus we see leading us forward.

Honestly, we do well not to think of another as weaker at all. In the spirit of humility, it is the power of impoverishment that shows us we are here to serve Jesus Christ and not serve ourselves.

This starts with intentions and shows out in our ways of serving all those around us.

Foremost, if we are not serving through Christ those who are of the household of faith, we are the weaker brother.

It's time to wash some feet.

Shalom,
gregg