

Degrees of Faith Contrasted

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I. Introduction

1. Did you know that the N.T. speaks of different degrees of faith?
2. There is a fascinating study in contrasting several degrees of faith spoken of in the N.T.
3. Let's consider each of them.

II. Discussion

A. THE N.T. REVEALS THAT JESUS HIMSELF RECOGNIZES SUCH A THING AS LITTLE FAITH AND GREAT FAITH.

1. Ist., the five occasions Jesus chastises his disciples for their "little faith."
 - a. When fretful about physical blessings, they exhibited "little faith," Mt.6:30-33.
 - b. When fearful during a storm, even with Jesus, their faith is "little," Mt.8:23-27.
 - c. Peter was rebuked for his "little faith" when he didn't trust his Lord for protection, Mt.14:25-31.
 - d. When the disciples' thoughts were focused on food rather than the truth of what he was saying, Jesus rebuked them for their "little faith," Mt.16:6-12.
 - e. When the disciples were unable to cast out a demon from a lad, their problem was their "little faith," Mt.17:14-21.
2. Then in two instances Jesus by way of contrast commended the "great faith" of another class of people.
 - a. A Gentile centurion expressed his confidence in Jesus Christ by suggesting, "Just speak the word, and my servant will be healed," Jesus applauded his "great faith," Mt.8:5-10.
 - b. Jesus met a Gentile woman whose daughter was tormented by a demon. The lady pled with Jesus for help. Testing her faith, the Teacher placed several challenges in her path. She readily overcame them. He praised her "great faith" and healed the child, Mt.15:21-28.
3. Note the contrast between these two Gentiles and his fledgling Jewish disciples previously referred to with their "little faith," and both of these with their "strong faith," even though they were thought to be by the Jews lowly heathen unworthy of the blessings of the Lord.

B. THE N.T. ALSO REVEALS THAT JESUS' APOSTLES RECOGNIZE BOTH A "WEAK FAITH" AND A "STRONG FAITH" OF A DIFFERENT CHARACTER.

1. The Apostle Paul in Rom.14 first introduces us to the "weak" and the "strong" by the example of two different believers in the same congregation.

- a. Rom.14 reveals that one of the believers among them could, with a clear conscience, eat all things.
 - (1) Which would include eating pork and even the meat that had been offered unto idols, 1Cor.8:1-6.
 - (2) As well as esteeming “every day alike”, Rom.14:1-5.
 - (3) And could do so without committing sin. (V.22)
 - b. Rom.14 reveals another believer among them who cold not do this same thing with a clear conscience.
 - (1) To this believer to eat all things and to esteem every day alike would be to sin, Rom.14:1-5. (See also V.23)
 - c. The one who, with clear conscience, can eat all things and esteem every day alike is said to be “strong” (15:1). The one who cannot, with clear conscience, eat all things, but “eateh herbs,” and who “esteemeth one day above another” is said to be “weak in the faith.”
 - d. But neither one is to “despise” the other, or to “judge” the other as sinful for doing what each one does.
 - e. Why is this the case? What were the circumstances that produced this situation?
2. To fully understand this situation we must be conscious of the fact that Rom.14 arises out of a transitional era in religious history when many converts to Christ were passing from a long history in one great divine system of law known as the Law of Moses, and another from the Patriarchal system, to another lawful system (the Law of Christ), the N.T. Dispensation, which was different and altogether new to both of them.
 - a. Because of these diverse backgrounds, religious and cultural, on the part of both Jews and Gentiles, many problems arose that threatened the unity of the Church.
 - b. Seriously, but briefly, consider some of the circumstances reviewed in Rom.14 and note the applications that are relevant for any age, including our own.
3. First, notice briefly the situation concerning the **WEAK vs. STRONG**.
 - a. In the larger contest of this Rom. Address, the Apostle contrasts those who are “weak” (14:1), with those who are “strong” (15:1).
 - b. A careful consideration of the relevant data leads to the conclusion that the stronger are those who have a greater, more accurate, degree of “the faith,” i.e., the faith of Christ, the system of faith, 14:1,2,22,23.
 - c. The stronger faith was that characterized by a more precise understanding of the faith, the doctrine of Chris. Cf. Rom.10:17. Cf. 1Cor.8:1,4-7.
 - d. The stronger (more knowledgeable) faith, for example, perceives that certain meats, formally “unclean” under the Law of Moses (Lev.11), are no longer forbidden to those in Christ, 14:6; 1Tim.4:1-5.

- e. These saints also understand that certain “days,” formerly esteemed as “holy,” henceforth are not to be viewed as such under the law of Christ, 14:5,6; Col.2:15-17.
- 4. Compassion for the “Weak” is required by Rom.14.
 - a. The strong in faith must exercise patience so as to understand that the weak have not reached the level of knowledge possessed by the more mature, 14:2,3; 1Cor.8:7.
 - b. Therefore the strong must extend compassion and longsuffering, allowing the weak time to grow in faith, thus reaching a level of comprehension wherein he can move forward in Christ without violating his conscience in eating all things and in esteeming every day alike, 14:5,6,13-20.
- 5. The necessity of unity among brethren is urged and emphasized in Rom.14
 - a. Paul strongly admonishes the brethren to be united in matters that do not affect the integrity of the faith; such as: the eating of all things and/or the honoring of particular days.
 - b. Those who conscientiously refrain from eating what they considered to be “unclean” meats were not to be condemned. Even though their knowledge was incomplete, they meant well; and their efforts, though misguided, were aimed at bringing glory to God, 14:5,6; Similarly, the one who refused to labor on the Sabbath, even though that restriction was abolished in Christ (Eph.2:13ff; Col.2:14-17), was doing so with the purest of motives – to honor his Creator (14:6).
 - c. The “weak” and the “strong” with equal sincerity held differences, with varying levels of knowledge, and with distinct degrees of conscience sensitivity were admonished to strive for oneness in Christ because the things about which they differed were not matters of faith but matters of opinion; neither one sinned in what he was doing or not doing; God accepted both!
 - d. Does this mean that fundamental doctrinal truths, matters of faith, may be pushed to the side for the sake of unity among brethren?
 - (1) Certainly not! If so, we would be forced to accommodate heretics and placate every “crank” in the church.
 - (2) Such a base view of this exalted text would force the scriptures into self-contradiction in many particulars.
 - (3) It would nullify all passages requiring discipline and, when necessary, the severance of fellowship from those who pursue dissolute lives and/or who advocate destructive anti-Christian teachings.
 - e. Christians must follow after things that make for peace; we must strive to build up one another, not the reverse, 14:19. All of this, of course, is to be accomplished in an atmosphere of loyalty to the truth at all cost.
- 6. The value of a soul, even one soul, is emphasized in this great discourse.

- a. Rom.14 cautions each child of God not to be a stumbling block nor to put one in his brother's way, Vv.13,14. Cf. 1Cor.8:9-13.
 - b. We do not live the isolated life (14:7). What one does affects others.
 - c. If a brother has a calloused disregard for the "weakness" of his brother in such matters of opinion, knowingly wounding his conscience, caring not for the brother's soul, and such results in the "destruction" of the weaker brother (14:15,20), has not the very work of Christ on behalf of that precious soul been in vain?
 - (1) And who will share the blame for that apostasy?
7. Rom.14 emphasizes that keeping the conscience sensitive is most important
- a. When a Christian proceeds with a certain action, he must "be fully assured in his own mind" that what he is doing does not violate his conscience, Vv.5,23.
 - b. The conscience is a sensitive instrument and is one's most valuable endowment in "nudging" him in the proper direction as he grows in the knowledge of Christ.
 - c. The conscience, of course, is not the final arbiter of right and wrong (Prov.14:12); it must be educated.
 - d. Yet, in its proper place, it is a prized gift of God, and the Christian must guard against it becoming hardened (Cf. Eph.4:19; 1Tim.4:2; Heb.3:15).
 - e. This is why, at the conclusion of the chapter, we are cautioned that doing something in violation of one's conscience (even though the issue be religiously or ethically neutral), is sin.
 - f. One must be able (in the case of eating "meat," for example) to eat or drink "of faith," i.e., with a clear conscience (V.23).
 - g. A clear conscience does not make a wrong act right, but a violated conscience can make a right act (in terms of its basic nature) wrong for that individual.
8. Rom.14 Emphasizes that ultimate judgment in all things belong to God and is especially applicable in this case of the "weak" vs. the "strong."
- a. No one has the ability to look into the heart of another child of God, and judge the motives behind his actions (1Sam.16:7; 1Cor.2:11).
 - b. Hence, in many matters we must leave final judgment to God, who will always do what is right (Gen.18:25).
 - c. In the **ultimate** reckoning, we are responsible to the Lord, not to our brethren, 14:4,8-12,22.
 - d. That being the case, we are not required to conform our entire lives to the personal convictions of our less-informed brethren in Christ.
 - (1) Where that the case, we would have no church building, no baptisteries, no Bible classes of the Lord's day, no Bible literature, no individual communion cups, no located preachers, no fully supported preachers, etc.

- (2) For over the years, well-meaning but misguided brethren have opposed these expediencies.
- e. Yet, not noted earlier, we do have the responsibility not to deliberately wound their spirits and engage in public, frivolous acts that could jeopardize another's salvation.
- (1) There is a delicate balance here, and much wisdom is required in pursuing it.
- 9. Paul's own example is set forth and is the ruling one. Cf. 1Cor.8:13; 11:1; Phil.4:9.
- 10. May God help each of us to digest and practice the scriptural principles of this magnificent discourse. The motto of each Christian should be: "Compassion without compromise."

C. FINALLY, THE APOSTLE JAMES RECOGNIZED THE ALL IMPORTANT FACT OF AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A "LIVING FAITH" AND A "DEAD FAITH."

- 1. For instance James draws a vivid contrast between "dead" or imperfect faith, and living, "perfect" faith, Jas.2:17,22.
- 2. The item that made the difference between these diverse levels of faith was "works" (found 12 times in 9 verses; 14-26).
 - a. These "works" are not works of "the law", which could not justify in God's sight, Rom.3:20.
 - b. Nor were they works of human effort or human "boasting"(Eph.2:9); nor "works of righteousness which we have done" (Tit.3:5).
 - c. They were word of obedience; the work of faith, as per Jas.2:14-24; Jno.6:27-29; Gal.5:6.
- 3. Such works are necessarily related to salvation or justification, Jas.2:14,24.

III. CONCLUSION

- 1. How is your faith? Where would, or where does the Lord classify your faith? "Little" or "Great"? "Weak" or "Strong"? "Dead" or imperfect faith? Or living "perfect" faith?
- 2. It has to one or the other of these. There is no other classification for our faith!
- 3. Remember this: The Lord approves of only one. And I think all of know which one that is!
- 4. Moreover, we know how to make our faith the right one – the one the Lord does approve; we know how to keep it the right one so that we stand approved of the Lord.
- 5. If we are lacking, what will it take to get us to do something about our situation?