

## Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 7 of 13)

Don't Destroy the Work of God

Romans 14:13-23

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<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. <sup>14</sup> I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. <sup>15</sup> For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup> So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup> So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. <sup>20</sup> Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. <sup>21</sup> It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. <sup>22</sup> The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. <sup>23</sup> But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Romans 14:13–23 (ESV)

The heart of Romans 14-15 is captured in this great and fairly well-known statement:

*In essentials unity;  
In non-essentials liberty;  
In all things charity;<sup>1</sup>*

The vision embedded in this mantra is that the church of Jesus Christ is to be unified on the things that really matter while allowing freedom on things that are of lesser importance (note that I'm not saying "don't matter"), making sure that we wrap all this with the love that should characterize the people of God who have been saved and justified by faith apart from works (Rom. 3:28).

This mantra acknowledges that Christianity involves living in a continual tension between essentials and non-essentials. If you were here last Sunday, you felt the tension when I listed things like politics, dating, education, alcohol use, worship style, clothing choices, smoking, movies, dancing, tattoos, divorce and remarriage, moms working outside the home, gambling, fertility and contraception. And I've heard from many of you this week who have a new level of interest in thinking through these issues. I hope it sparked some good conversations in your small group or in your conversations with friends.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/essentials-unity-non-essentials-liberty-all-things/>

Learning how to navigate essentials and non-essentials is really important. I'm sure you have had as many experiences as I have with seeing people offended, churches divided, friendships fractured, division taken root or people feeling judged. Romans 14-15 is very relevant to where we live and is something we need to keep thinking, praying, and talking about.

### **Last Week: "Welcome one another"**

Since there were many of you who were gone, and since the first twelve verses of chapter 14 are so foundational, let me review a few of the important points from last week:

- The target of Romans 14-15 is found in 15:5-6 where Paul envisions the church filled with harmony as its people worship together with one voice. Unity is the ultimate goal.
- The problem in the church was likely related to new Jewish converts who were having a hard time emotionally letting go of previous standards related to eating meat, drinking wine, and celebrating certain days.
- Pride could easily divide the church as non meat-eaters judged meat-eaters and as the meat-eaters disdained the non meat-eaters.
- The first of two principles is found in 14:1 and it is repeated in 15:7. It encourages the church to "welcome one another" and not quarrel over opinions. So, the first principle from last week was to **welcome one another despite disagreements.**
- I cautioned us to be careful that we don't use labels like "weaker" and "stronger" brother out of the actual context of Romans 14, lest we either think that more conservative people are "weak" or, as we'll see today, we define "stumbling blocks" in ways that Paul never intended. There are principles to be gleaned, but we need to limit Romans 14 to its context.
- When it comes to the general applicability of Romans 14-15, I talked about the importance of doing theological or ethical triage – determining not just what is true but determining how it ranks in order of importance.



This particular chart received the most comments and questions, and I'm not surprised. Absolutes are the things that define what it means to be a Christian – a heaven and hell issue. Convictions are views informed by the Scriptures, some more strongly than others. Preferences are less clear scripturally and are more about personal application of biblical truth. Legalism is treating a preference like it's an absolute, and liberalism is treating an absolute like it's a preference.

I don't think that I delineated very well the differences between convictions and preferences last week. Not every controversial thing I listed at the beginning is merely a preference. Depending on the person and the issue, some things can be preferences and some things can be more like convictions.

The key and the caution is to be sure that your emotional connection to that conviction for your own soul and how you treat others is appropriate, biblical, and thoughtful. I've found it helpful to ask myself the following questions as I work through what is an absolute, a conviction, or a preference:

- 1) Does this issue determine if someone is a Christian or not?
- 2) Is this a clearly forbidden or commanded moral issue?
- 3) Does the Bible provide teaching or instruction on this issue?
- 4) Are there warnings and cautions?
- 5) Are there biblical principles that apply?
- 6) Are there contextual or cultural issues in play?
- 7) Is the Bible silent?
- 8) Is this simply a matter of personal application?

Hopefully you can see the progression from absolute (Q1-2), conviction (Q3-5) and preferences (Q6-8). The real challenge is figuring out questions 3-7 and determining if an issue is a matter of strong conviction/close-to-absolute vs. a lesser conviction/maybe-a-preference issue.

In Romans 14 we are dealing with an issue that is emotionally very close to an absolute. It was a strongly-held conviction that was too close to an absolute, and Paul is trying to help the weaker brother grow in his faith while encouraging the stronger brother to be sensitive. Both brothers are to be reminded that "it's just food." Welcoming one another is far more important. And that leads us to the second principle in verses 13-23.

### **Principle #2 – Be considerate of one another's spiritual needs (vv. 13, 20)**

The second principle is found in verses 13 and 20. Throughout this section, Paul repeats himself for emphasis and application, so we will see a few points emerge from similar passages. These two verses communicate the importance of considering the effects of one's actions on the spiritual life of a brother in Christ.

*<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. (Romans 14:13)*

*<sup>20</sup> Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God . . . (Romans 14:20a)*

Both verses identify that welcoming one another is more than just an orientation of the heart. It involves a very practical step of deciding not to do something that creates a spiritual issue for another believer. Paul discourages actions that would create a stumbling block (v. 13), that would be a hindrance (v. 13), or that would destroy God's work (v. 20). In verse 15, he also uses the word "grieved" to describe the kind of conduct that should be avoided.

There is an important play on words in verse 13. The word for "judgment" is the same word as "decide." Instead of casting judgment on others, we should make a personal judgment to not hurt others with our freedoms. In other words, we should use the emotional energy that might be directed toward sinfully judging to instead being concerned for the spiritual well-being of others.

Last week's message emphasized the importance of freedom or Christian liberty. Paul was very clear (and he will be here as well) that the meat/wine/days issue is really not a critical spiritual issue. However, how that issue is handled certainly is a critical spiritual issue.

As we start to dig into this passage, you need to keep this principle front and center in your mind and heart. Paul engages in theological and ethical triage. He clearly identifies that Christian liberty is important, but it is not ultimate. There are limits to our freedom because something more important than freedom is at stake here. Freedom has some limits. For example, you may have heard it said before that "the right for me to swing my fist ends where another man's nose begins." For the Christian, the principle is simply that my right to exercise my liberty ends when it creates serious spiritual harm for a brother in Christ.

### **What is a Stumbling Block?**

What do we mean by "spiritual harm"? That is an important question because it is critical to the limitations of freedom to define stumbling block, hindrance, and destroying the work of God. Christian liberty stops where a stumbling block begins. Let me give you a few summary thoughts, and then I'll show you where I find these in the text as we make our way through.

First, we have to come back to the definition a weaker brother. Remember that in Romans 14-15 it is someone who is young in faith, spiritually in need of strengthening, and fundamentally wrong on the issue at hand.

Second, as we'll see in a moment, the weaker brother is significantly harmed by the stumbling block. Paul says that the brother is grieved (v. 15a) by what is eaten, and he is destroyed (vv. 15b, 20a). This strong language would point toward an issue that causes someone to go back to their former ways or perhaps even to reject the gospel. So a stumbling block is more than just someone being offended or disagreeing with you. A stumbling block creates significant spiritual devastation.

Third, there seems to be an implied social pressure connected to whatever is going on here. Paul commends private faith in verse 22 ("The faith that you have keep between yourself and God.") while also saying "it is good to not eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" in verse 21. Therefore, I believe that the stumbling block was putting a brother or sister in a situation where they felt pressure – implied or direct – to violate their conscience. The stumbling block applies to non-private or social scenarios that create a conscience issue for a weaker brother.

Therefore, I would define a stumbling block as putting a brother under social pressure to do something that he feels is sinful. It is a situation where a brother's faith in the gospel or how that gospel is expressed in the church through relationships has the potential to be seriously harmed.

Paul's main concern here is the balance of not allowing liberty to be limited needlessly on the one hand and not allowing a brother to be needlessly harmed spiritually on the other hand. Freedom has to reflect a theological and ethical triage set in the context of love for a brother.

Welcoming a brother means that there are times when limiting one's freedom is morally right even when there isn't a truly moral issue at hand. In other words, you can be sinful in how you handle a non-sinful issue. Remember that.

### **Rationale: Five Reasons for Limiting Your Freedom**

Now that I have detailed Paul's main message for this section, let's go a little deeper and see how Paul handles this, and as we do, let's look for what we can learn about how to handle situations that fit Romans 14-15 perfectly and how to handle those that are close but not exactly the same.

#### **1. Some ethical issues are situational (vv. 14, 20b)**

The first thing to consider relates to a basic understanding of ethics and morals. Paul identifies that there are scenarios where right and wrong are determined by the individual or the context. There are times when ethics are appropriately situational.

<sup>14</sup> *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. Romans 14:14 (ESV)*

<sup>20</sup> *Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. Romans 14:20 (ESV)*

Notice that food is not fundamentally a moral issue. Paul has clearly sided with the stronger brother as being in the right by virtue of the pure morality that is being considered. However, there is more at stake here than just food. Paul highlights another moral category, one that he'll fully unpack at the end of this pericope. For now, it is simply important to recognize that moral decisions are not always just about the issue alone. There are often contextual dynamics. Even though everything is technically clean, it is wrong 1) for the one who thinks it's wrong and 2) to make someone stumble.

Unity in the church happens in the midst of this tension. The church will always be filled with these scenarios. Paul's solution was not to make a comprehensive list and bind everyone to it, but to allow for some tension to be worked out in love. That leads us to the second point.

#### **2. Your freedom is less important than your brother's soul (vv.15, 21)**

The next thing to consider in dealing with these issues is the weighted priority of one's personal freedom versus the impact on a brother's soul. Paul cherishes and values freedom in Christ. He's even gone so far as to clearly say "nothing is unclean in itself" (14:14). So you ought not accuse Paul of saying that freedom is unimportant. However, Paul sets the boundaries for freedom by establishing that it is not more valuable than the spiritual health of a brother.

<sup>15</sup> *For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. Romans 14:15 (ESV)*

<sup>21</sup> *It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. Romans 14:21 (ESV)*

Walking in love, not destroying a brother, and not doing anything that causes a brother to stumble are clearly more important than the expression of one's freedom. Even if you are technically right, you can be still be wrong. Therefore, there are situations where restricting your freedoms is not only wise, but the right thing to do.

### **3. Do not sacrifice the witness of the gospel (vv. 16-18)**

Loving one's brother is not the only higher value that is in play here. The witness of the gospel, in terms of what people think about the kingdom of God, is also an issue that needs to be considered.

*<sup>16</sup> So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Romans 14:16–18 (ESV)*

Christian brothers and sisters need to remember what is really important. Emotionally we can begin to act as if certain issues or the expression of our freedoms are more central than what they should be. And in so doing, the beauty of the gospel ("what you regard as good") can be spoken of as evil. The stronger brother risks making people think about the gospel poorly if he does not handle his freedom well.

What's more, a church can be known more for its views on secondary issues than it is known for righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. I am sure that you have seen it happen, where a church's name in the community is more associated with some needless controversy than with the gospel message or gospel behaviors. Listen! No one intended for that to happen. But it does happen because people lose perspective. The failure to adequately and lovingly work through absolutes, convictions, and preferences has done great harm to families, churches, and denominations. The enemy has historically had a field day with these kind of situations, but if love and freedom are taken together, it can actually create the kind of obedience that is "acceptable to God and approved by men." Both God and mankind say, "That's beautiful." And it is.

### **4. Value unity (v. 19)**

The fourth thing to consider is the impact on unity. Paul prizes unity in the body of Christ, and he exhorts us to put effort into trying to maintain that unity. In other words, if you are passionate about freedom, be sure you are equally passionate about unity.

*<sup>19</sup> So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Romans 14:19 (ESV)*

The posture of a believer in his continual pursuits needs to create peace and mutual edification. So as we pursue our freedom, we need to think or ask ourselves, "Will this create peace and help others grow? Or will this create spiritual harm on other people?"

Now you need to know that our Western American culture is not inclined to think about unity first. We cherish our rugged individualism, our liberty, and our freedom. Other cultures, like the Far East, cherish the group over the individual. So the idea of limiting our freedoms in deference to another is a bit counter-cultural for us. So let me just encourage you to realize that there is something really important here.

## **5. Be mindful of the conscience (vv. 22-23)**

The final thing to keep in mind as we consider our freedoms is that obedience is not just an issue of what is right and wrong as identified by an external code of conduct. Obedience also includes an internal issue as it relates to the conscience. There are many things in life that do not fit nicely into categories that are always clear and consistent. And for those situations we need to activate our conscience that will help us decide between what is right and wrong. However, the challenge here is that there were some who had weak consciences. Those with weak consciences struggle with what to do and what not to do.

*<sup>22</sup> The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. <sup>23</sup> But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Romans 14:22–23 (ESV)*

There are two things that Paul says about the issue of conscience in verses 22-23. First, it is a personal matter – something between you and God. In other words, there needs to be some level of personal determination as to what you should or shouldn't do. The standard for right and wrong comes from the heart – from your heart.

Second, Paul identifies that if a person is internally convinced that something is wrong, or if he is unsettled such that he is doubting if something is right, then to act against his conscience would be wrong. In other words, if peer pressure, social acceptance, or some other motivation drives you to do more than faith in God does, then it would be wrong.

I'm not sure that this means that we are always 100 percent about everything we do. Some of you are plagued with doubt often or you feel guilty when you shouldn't. Paul is directing us to look closely at our hearts and ask ourselves, "What is motivating me here? Am I doing this unto the Lord? Can I give thanks for this? Am I doing this in faith?"

And the reason that Paul is saying this is because he doesn't want the one brother to cause another brother to violate his conscience. Paul is elevating the value and importance of the conscience in how we approach our liberties.

Paul is doing theological and ethical triage in this text! He is showing us that unity, love for your brother, gospel witness, and a brother's conscience are closer to the center than our freedoms. Even if the brother is wrong, we still need to think carefully about how we use our freedom.

### **More Pastoral Applications**

The more time I spend in this text, the more applicable it becomes. It is helpful at many levels. There are personal and church-wide applications for us to consider.

First, one of our values here is Unity in Diversity. Our vision for this is that in the framework of sound doctrine we value an atmosphere of theological freedom with humility and a non-divisive spirit. That means we value freedom to be different, but not on everything and not in a way that is sinful. Let's be sure that we keep learning, thinking, and loving one another.

Second, this text helps us to see our freedom and our preferences through a lens of love for one another and of the gospel. Be careful not to flaunt your freedom and not to become overly emotional about your freedom. Don't use your freedom as a weapon of shame. As well, be careful that your preferences are informed by Scripture and that you distinguish between what you have just chosen to do and what the Bible commands everyone to do. Don't use your preferences as a weapon of needless guilt.

Third, remember that the effects on others is always a part of your decision-making process. It is never right to not consider the impact on other people. It always needs to be a part of the thought process and sometimes may require you to modify your behavior or actions. What you do privately is between you and the Lord. But what you do socially and with others is different. Your freedom is not just about you.

And sometimes there are scenarios that legitimately fall into a clear classification in Romans 14. In my first church, I experienced this as it related to which translation of the Bible was used. My former church was a great group of people, but they had a history where they had been taught that the King James Bible was the preserved Word for English speaking people. When I became their pastor in 1996, I slid my NASB back on the shelf and for the next nine years I preached from the 1611 KJV.

When my pastor friends would ask me why. My answer was, "Because I love my people more than I hate where they are at." The issue would have split the church in the late nineties and caused many people spiritual ruin, and it would have brought shame on the gospel in our community. For over 10 years I limited my freedom because I did not want to destroy the work of God over which translation we were using. In 2006 we shifted to another translation without any issue, and the Bible that I use every Sunday was given to me as gift from the church. When they gave it to me, they said "teach College Park like you taught us."

The church grew strong in faith over ten years, and I believe not making an issue over a translation in 1996 was a critical part of why that happened.

*In essentials unity;  
In non-essentials liberty;  
In all things charity.*

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