



LIMITING OUR LIBERTY

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 14:13-23

29th Message

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The world ought to see in Christians the fragrance and beauty of our Lord Jesus. It is an aroma so sweet that they can't get it out of their minds. Being a Christian is not a matter of being rigidly correct but of loving people the way our Lord did.

In the closing chapters of his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul emphasizes what authentic love looks like. In 14:1 through 15:13, he sets forth an example to help us. He describes two groups within the church at Rome, referring to them as the "weak" and the "strong."

I will begin by summarizing what we have already learned in the opening twelve verses of chapter 14. When Paul refers to one who is "weak," he is not talking about weak character, but about one who is weak in faith, one whose weak faith does not permit him or her to do certain things. It isn't self-control such a person lacks, but freedom.

Paul raises two issues. The first has to do with food, the second, the Sabbath and holy days. The church in Rome was a very cosmopolitan, diverse body. Jewish believers in that fellowship were "weak" in their conscientious commitment to Old Testament regulations regarding diet and days. For 1,500 years, diet had differentiated Jews from their pagan neighbors. But Jesus swept all that away when he said that it isn't what goes into your mouth that defiles you, it is what comes out of it. In his gospel, Mark comments, "Thus Jesus declared all things clean." Issues like whether certain foods were clean or unclean no longer were relevant for Christians. But what about Jews who had always avoided consuming pork? Eating a ham sandwich was a major problem for them. Many Jewish believers in the church in Rome gave up eating meat altogether, because it was hard to find kosher meat in the city.

As for holy days, these "weak" Jewish believers were still observing the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals. They had always worshipped on Saturday, the last day of the week, and now they were part of a fellowship that celebrated the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week. There are numerous historical references indicating that the early church worshipped on the first day of the week, including a couple of references in the New Testament, but that was never mandated. Christians can worship on Tuesday night or Saturday night. It makes no difference. Every day is a day to worship. The fact that we gather on Sunday morning is a convention.

So, the issue in this lengthy text is what do Christians do with these gray areas in which we disagree. This is not a question of morality. Where Scripture is absolute, and truth is stated in such a way that it is unmistakable, it is sinful to debate those areas. But there are all sorts of matters about which the Bible is not clear, and in these gray areas, Christians may disagree. We discussed some of these last week. The lists differ, depending on where you live. They include things like alcohol, smoking, political preferences, educating our children, musical tastes in worship, and certain areas of theology.

So these opening twelve verses of chapter 14 reveal what the attitude of a stronger Christian should be toward a weaker brother or sister. The apostle's primary exhortation is that their attitude should be one of genuine acceptance. Paul commands, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions" (14:1). Do not challenge others to debate these issues. Don't accept your brother into the fellowship and then invite him over to your house to straighten him out. That seems to be the Christian's favorite indoor sport – straightening out other Christians.

In the verses that we will look at today, Paul's argument moves from how we should regard "weaker" Christians to how we should treat them. There is a switch from our attitudes (not despising or condemning) to our actions (not causing them to stumble or destroying them).

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, [this summarizes what he has said in the first 12 verses] **but rather determine this— not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.** (Rom 14:13, NASB)

John Stott points out that there is play on words in the original Greek, which has a double use of the word "judge." The NEB catches this with its translation, "Let us therefore cease judging one another, but rather make this simple judgment..."¹ Christians should refuse to do anything to harm the spiritual walk of a "weaker" believer. We must choose to limit our freedom if it causes our brother or sister to stumble or fall in their Christian walk. We will talk more about what that means, but we must commit ourselves to this principle.

Next, Paul gives the rationale behind this call to careful living. As always, he gives the theological foundations for his exhortation.

I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. (14:14-15)

Paul acknowledges the predicament that every strong believer faces with regard to these peripheral issues. First, the strong believer knows, "nothing is unclean in itself." Paul wrote to Timothy: "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude" (1 Tim 4:4). There was only one forbidden tree in the garden, not a whole forest of trees. There are not a lot of absolutes. The Christian who is strong in faith understands that the world is ours to enjoy. But there is another truth that must be faced that poses a dilemma for the strong Christian: "but to him who thinks anything to be unclean [because of his conscience], to him it is unclean." So the "strong" Christian faces what looks like a paradox. Some activities can be both good and bad at the same time. The "strong" Christian believes that a certain activity is all right while the "weak" Christian thinks it isn't. What does the one who is "strong" do in such cases?

Stott writes: "Although the "strong" believer is correct, and he (Paul) shares his convictions (because the Lord Jesus endorsed it), he must not ride roughshod . . . over his brother's conscience (even though his conscience is mistaken)...by imposing his view on him."² The reason is that we may harm our brother. And not merely because he sees us doing something he disapproves of; that isn't the issue. The concern is that he may be swayed to follow an example that goes against his conscience. When we do that we are no longer walking in love, because love never disregards a weak conscience. Love limits its own liberty out of respect for others. Wounding a weaker brother's conscience by imposing our views on him is not only to distress him, it may destroy him. If exercising your freedom leads your brother to sin, then don't do it. Don't force people to do things they don't feel free to do.

Imagine crossing a swaying bridge over a mountain stream. Some people can run across a bridge like that even though it doesn't have handrails. They are not alarmed by that; they have good balance. But others can't do that; they are afraid of falling into the torrent below. They shake and tremble, inching their way along. They may even get down on their hands and knees and crawl across. But give them time, let them go at their own speed, and they will make it. After a few crossings they gain courage, and eventually they are able to run right across.

It is the same with these issues that Paul is speaking about. Some people just can't see themselves moving in a certain area which they have been raised to think is wrong. As with the swaying bridge, it would be cruel for someone who has the freedom to cross boldly to take the arm of one who is timid and force him to run

across. He might even lose his balance and fall off the bridge.

This is what Paul is warning against. It is unloving to force people to move at your pace. Refusing to indulge a freedom that you enjoy, for the sake of someone else, and adjusting to his pace, is surely one of the clearest and truest exercises of Christian love. And notice the clear perspective that love has on the weaker brother's worth. He is one "for whom Christ died." If Christ loved him enough to die for him, ought we not love him enough to refrain from wounding his conscience?

The issue here is not a matter of offending a brother or sister, but the possibility of injuring them spiritually. It is matter of someone's conscience being weak, not of someone's prejudices being irritated. There are many instances of people being offended by our actions that have nothing to do with losing their faith or hindering their growth.

That is not what Paul is talking about. If that were the case, we could scarcely do anything without offending someone. The church would be controlled by the narrowest and most prejudiced person in the congregation. The gospel itself would become identified with that viewpoint, and the watching world would think that Christians are narrow minded people whose only concern is to prevent the enjoyment of the good gifts of life that God has given. No. Jesus offended a lot of people. He offended the Pharisees. He offended the Sadducees. He offended politicians. He offended the Jews. He offended the Gentiles. Paul is referring to acting in such a way that someone will be damaged by our behavior. He is speaking of people who, if they emulated us in that behavior, would be in danger of damaging their spiritual life. That is the issue.

Paul continues his rationale for the limiting of our liberty. He moves from speaking about the cross of Christ to the Kingdom of God:

Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. (14:16-21)

There are more important issues than eating and drinking. We should not regard as central the things that are peripheral and trivial. Don't confuse external and eternal things. What matters is the kingdom of God and his gracious rule in the lives of his people. We need to be concerned not with personal freedom but with the building of the kingdom of God and helping people grow. It is righteousness, peace and growth in grace

that counts. God is in the process of building a glorious new community. If the exercise of your freedom is going to curtail that process, don't do it. It isn't worth it. If your use of alcoholic beverages is turning a family member off, so that he or she will not listen to you, then don't do it. You can do without it. That is the apostle's point. Let us pursue the things that build up others. Anyone can destroy things, but it takes a craftsman to build something.

In particular, says Paul, don't tear down God's work for the sake of food. In verse 20, the Greek sentence begins with that clause: "Surely for the sake of a plate of meat we aren't going to wreck God's work." Stott comments: "Paul uses a little irony to expose our tendency to value food above peace, the health of our stomach over the health of the community."³ Paul concludes that thought by saying, "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles" (verse 21). That word "good" could be translated "beautiful." It is beautiful not to eat meat, not to drink wine, not to do anything that causes your brother to stumble. It is beautiful because it is loving. It is beautiful because it is unselfish. It is beautiful because it puts others first. It is beautiful because it so Christ-like.

More than once I have said to a young man about to embark on a ministry in a small community where believers are not well taught, and often are caught up with these peripheral issues, to teach freedom, but to be very careful how he exercises it. If he immediately demands to exercise his freedom, he will lose the right to be heard.

Paul concludes by drawing a distinction between belief and action, between our private convictions and public behavior.

The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin. (14:22,23)

Whatever you believe about these neutral issues is between you and God, says Paul. Keep it that way. Whether you are "strong" and feel free to do a lot of things, or whether you are "weak" and feel that you can't, keep it a secret. You don't have to put your views on display or force them upon others.

In terms of behavior, Paul concludes with a word to both groups. John Stott puts it this way: "To the 'strong' Christian, he writes: 'Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.' The 'strong' Christian is blessed because his conscience approves of his eating everything, and he can follow his conscience without guilt. To the 'weak' Christian, he writes: 'But he who doubts [he who is plagued by misgivings because

his conscience keeps giving him vacillating signals] is condemned if he eats, [probably by his conscience, not by God] because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin."⁴ Here Paul seems to elevate the significance of our conscience. Though conscience certainly is not an infallible guide, and we ought to educate it, we ought not go against it.

Let me conclude with a story that Ray Stedman shared about Dr. Harry Ironside, which illustrates the apostle's point:

At a church picnic, Dr. Ironside met a man who had been converted from the Moslem faith. While they were talking, a girl brought a basket of sandwiches up to this man and asked if would like one. He said, "What kind do you have?" "Oh," she said, "I'm afraid all we have left are ham and pork." He said, "Don't you have any beef?" She replied, "No, they are all gone." "Well," he said, "No thank you. I don't eat ham or pork." The girl responded, knowing he was a Christian, "I am really surprised. Don't you know that now you are freed from those food restrictions and you can eat whatever you want?" He said, "Yes, I know that. I know I am free to eat pork, but I am also free not to eat it. I'm still involved with my family back in the Near East, and I know that when I go home once a year, and I come up to my father's door, the first question he will ask me is, 'Have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?' If I have to say to him, 'Yes, father,' I will be banished from that home, and have no further witness in it. But if I can say, as I have always been able to say, 'No, father, no pork has ever passed my lips,' then I have admittance to the family circle and I am free to tell them the joy I have found in Jesus Christ. Therefore I am free to eat, or I am free not to eat, as the case may be."⁵

We are just as free to say to no as we are to say yes when it comes to choosing whether to exercise our liberty. That is true freedom. If you cannot limit your liberty for the sake of building up others, then you may not be as free as you think. True freedom is the power to give up your rights for the sake of others. That is the kind of freedom the watching world needs to see.

1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 364.

2. Stott, *Romans*, 365.

3. Stott, *Romans*, 367.

4. Stott, *Romans*, 368.

5. Ray C. Stedman, *What's Behind Your Influence?* A message preached at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto CA, October 22, 1978.