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Romans 14:13-23

31st Message

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GROUNDS FOR LIMITATION

SERIES: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ETHICS?

In Romans, the apostle Paul spends 36 verses expounding one issue: division in the church regarding how we express our worship of the Lord and how we exercise our freedom of conscience in the world. In the last message, I ended with the prophetic word about our differences: *"In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity."* In the second half of Romans 14, Paul now talks about charity and how older, stronger brothers in Christ who are freer in their consciences are to love their weaker, younger brothers.

I think few have demonstrated this wonderful spirit of love better than the great saint George Whitefield who lived in the 1700s. He was one of the greatest preachers of all times, and through his preaching and spiritual power he transformed a depraved England into a fountain head of revival. He also came to America and took part in the Great Awakening with Jonathan Edwards in New England. Even Benjamin Franklin who was not a believer considered him to be a close friend, and thought Whitefield was one of the most impeccable saints he had ever met.

Many are familiar with Whitefield's preaching, but few know how as an older, freer Christian he embraced younger, weaker Christians. One of these younger Christians was John Wesley. Because they had such different backgrounds, they approached life differently.

Whitefield grew up with parents who managed a public inn. As a small boy, he was involved in taking care of the traveling public and the world of business. He managed the dining room, the tavern and the overseeing of servants. In that world, he learned about the heart of humanity and about his own personal depravity. Even after his conversion, his upbringing contributed to his gracious, easy demeanor among people. He could speak to the poor and the rich, to the intellectual and the simple. When he began preaching in London at an early age, revival broke out and spread through London into Oxford and to all of the surrounding districts.

John Wesley's road to the ministry led through the academic world. He was separated from real life by many years of school. As a result, his method of finding God involved rigor and ritual—almost asceticism. He punished himself to try to seek God through external means. After he went through seminary, he immediately went to Georgia to be a missionary. There he imposed all of his religious ways upon the people. He made fasting the norm, and he refused to drink wine or eat meat. When he slept, he chose the floor rather than a bed. He kept his meals meager even though he had good food available. He thought that all of this led the way to holiness. Because his character was so stringent, he lacked wisdom in dealing with people. He was a rigid, domineering man who created antagonism. In the end, he returned to England an utter failure.

As God's sovereignty would have it, in 1738 outside of London in the port of Deal, two ships stood in the harbor. One had John Wesley on board, and the other had George Whitefield. Wesley was coming home dejected from Georgia; Whitefield was leaving for Georgia. God was bringing Wesley home to the fires of revival and

the freedom of grace that Whitefield had started in order to convert Wesley and his brother Charles. Simultaneously, he was sending Whitefield to Georgia to straighten out the mess that Wesley had left behind. Eventually these two men began corresponding.

Whitefield knew that Wesley was younger and weaker, yet out of God's grace he turned the entire revival movement over to John Wesley. Because of his background, even when he was set free as a Christian, Wesley could never quite fully enter into the freedom of Christ. He began teaching the doctrine of perfectionism which bothered Whitefield and many of the Christians in London who begged Whitefield to return and start a new denomination in his own name to end this wrong teaching. To his credit, Whitefield refused. Out of love, he continued this relationship so that the fire of the revival could burn bright even under the charge of what he thought was a weaker brother.

It is this display of love that is summed up in the statement of Martin Luther who said, "The Christian is lord of all, and subject to none, by virtue of faith; he is the servant of all, and subject to everyone, by virtue of love." This is the theme of the apostle in Romans 14. How can older, freer, stronger brothers and sisters relate to weaker brothers and sisters in the context of love? Paul gives us three main ideas in verses 13-23. First, he tells us how to use our mind to think critically. Second, he asks us to examine our goals. Third, he tells us what our activity ought to be. In verse 13, he tells us how to use our minds.

I. Exercise Proper Judgment (14:13-15)

Therefore let us not *judge* one another any more, but rather *judge* this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. (Rom 14:13 NASB)

As you recall from last week, when the church of Jesus Christ was born and the kingdom of heaven came to earth, a radical shift in the liberty of the believers occurred. In the days of the Old Testament, the Jews observed many rituals to express their holiness such as Sabbath days, holy feast days, dietary laws and circumcision. Everything was meant to demonstrate that they were set apart to God as a holy people. Yet the new Testament tells us that all of that ritual was a shadow, a mere visual aid, of the reality in heaven. Even the prophets said that one day the reality would come to earth. When Jesus came, he said, "I am the real temple. I am the heavenly sacrifice. I am the heavenly King. I am the fulfillment of the dietary laws. Now all foods are clean. When you eat me, you are made holy." For the first time, the Jews experienced freedom they had never had before.

This involved not only their worship but their relationship with the world as well. When Christ came, holiness was intensified. Jesus himself went into many situations in the world that would have normally defiled a Jew. He touched a leper; he related to the dead; he allowed a woman to touch him who had an issue of blood. He even went to Matthew's party, a gathering of tax-collectors and sinners. In-

stead of Jesus being defiled by all of this, he brought holiness to each situation and transformed it. Thus, in the Christian church, because of the presence of Jesus with us, we can take holiness into places it has never been before. Instead of us being defiled, we transform the community. Here is the new birth, a radical shift in holiness.

But Paul knew that not all would be able to accept this new freedom. It was very difficult for the Jews who had not eaten pork for 1400 years to now eat pork freely. He knew there would have to be a gradual process of change involved. Thus, when the church gathered to worship, or when the members expressed their freedom in the world, there would be the possibility of division.

Paul saw that the first step in overcoming this is to use our minds. But he says, "Don't use your minds to judge one another. Exercise judgement not on people but on things. Determine what is an obstacle to our brothers." The point is we are to get rid of our critical spirits while maintaining our critical minds. We are to use our minds to determine what constitutes something that is clean or unclean. He tells us in verses 14-15 what that is:

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.

Scripture tells us that everything God has created is good and is to be gratefully shared. When we partake of God's gifts, we are to give thanks with robust freedom and joy. Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:3-5, "Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer." Thus, he can say in Romans, "I know that nothing is unclean in itself, but cleanliness or uncleanliness is based upon a person's faith, not the thing." To the one reckoning it to be unclean, it is unclean. This is why in Acts 15, the apostles wrote to the Gentile converts, "You do not have to get circumcised to be in Christ, for you are justified by faith alone. But you have many weak Jewish brothers who do not see this. Therefore, in this transition period, we think it is wise that you abstain from foods sacrificed to idols and things strangled with blood, out of love for your brothers." Our focus is not to be on things; it is to be on our brother. Therefore, whenever we gather, we are to be concerned about the faith of our brother or sister.

Second, we are to understand the severity of stumbling blocks. In verse 13, Paul said, "not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way." What is a stumbling block? In the Old Testament, this word was used of a trap or snare. In fact, it referred to the stick that held the trap open. The term then began to be used of something that would cause a person to stumble and fall. Leviticus 19:14 says, "You shall not place a *stumbling block* before the blind." Life was to be considered a highway upon which some can see while others cannot. We are not to leave a stumbling block for the blind to fall over lest he fall in a trap and be killed or wounded.

Jesus used the same expression about himself. In Isaiah 8:14, when God talks about building his kingdom, he says of the Messiah, "He will be a stone of stumbling, a rock of offense." In the Rabbinical writings, the rabbis acknowledged the same principle: "The ways of God will themselves set dangerous obstacles for the ungodly." When someone stumbles over Christ and falls, this is designed to communicate something to the person. He is to wonder, "Am I spiritually blind? Why did I fall? What did I miss?" God places Christ the

foundation stone where everyone will to trip over him if they do not believe. Thus, they might come to understand that they are spiritually blind.

How does the image of the stumbling block apply to the church, to those of us who do see? Paul says, "I understand that I have freedom because I see the spiritual intent of things. However, I may have a brother who cannot see these things as well as I. When I practice something with utter freedom, it may be an obstacle to him when he tries to do the same because he does not have the same faith. Instead of being edified, he falls and is grieved." His grieving is not caused by his anger when he sees the stronger brother expressing his freedom. Rather, it is found in the fact that when he imitates the stronger brother, his weaker conscience condemns him. Paul says this action on the part of the stronger brother violates the law of love. If Christ laid down his life for this brother, is it too much to ask that we lay aside our rights to do certain things in order to build him up?

I grew up three older sisters who had no interest in playing sports with me. When I was eight or nine years old, one of my sisters dated a guy who took a liking to me. Every time he came over, he would play football at my level with me in the yard while he waited for my sister. I fell in love with this guy because he expressed an interest in me. Then my sister began to date a former high school quarterback, I became excited and could not wait to meet him. He was a gorgeous guy, and sure enough the first time at our house he threw the football with me. But when my sister came out, his focus changed. No longer was he interested in playing at my level. He wanted to impress my sister. Therefore he stepped way back and reeled a bullet pass straight at me. I was not about to let him see me drop that ball so I planted myself for the catch. It felt like the point of that pigskin pierced my rib cage! I did not drop the ball, but I sure had the wind knocked out of me. As they turned to leave, he yelled, "Great catch!"

I learned an important lesson that day: When one gives free expression to one's liberties, it may be hazardous to someone else's health. That describes all of us. When our focus changes from loving the body to giving full expression to our liberty in order to impress someone, we are certain to destroy someone in the process.

Jesus was so serious about these stumbling blocks he said, "Woe to the person to whom these come. It would be better if he tied a millstone around his neck and threw himself into the sea than to cause one of these little ones to stumble." That expression never made much of an impression upon me until I traveled to Capernaum where Jesus ministered. Some of the archeological finds have revealed that there are upper and lower millstones which are about five feet high and three feet wide. Imagine one of those around your neck as you lie at the bottom of the Sea of Galilee! The point Jesus is making is that no price is too costly to keep someone from stumbling.

In summary, our first step is to stop exercising our judgment in order to condemn our brother. Rather, we should use proper judgment to determine what might be a stumbling block to him. Get rid of your critical spirit, but maintain a critical mind.

The second step is to maintain a proper goal. Look at verses 16-19.

II. Make Peace Your Aim (14:16-19)

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.

Verse 19 outlines our text. The first half of the verse summarizes what verses 16-18 say—*pursue peace*. That is our aim. The phrase “*building up one another*” summarizes what follows in verses 19-23.

Since we are to make peace our aim, Paul gives us three motivations for doing this. First, abstinence done out of love for our brother puts an end to division. He says, “Do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil.” The point is we are to seek people not things. Therefore, when I abstain from something that may cause harm to a brother, even though it is good in itself, the weaker brother will have no occasion for complaint or developing a critical spirit. Thus, there will be no division in the body of Christ.

Second, abstinence costs us absolutely nothing. Paul says, “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” What do we lose when we abstain? The kingdom of God is not physical, it is spiritual. When the Spirit imparts to us joy, peace and righteousness, this is the essence of the kingdom—it has little to do with what we eat or drink.

Third, Paul says abstinence in this manner pleases both God and man. When we serve Christ in this way, we benefit in both our vertical relationship with God and in our horizontal relationship with our brothers. When our team went to Eastern Europe this summer, we were keenly aware of the fact that we were stepping into a different culture and that we would be working with Christians who might view life differently. Therefore, we decided to be careful not to put any stumbling blocks in their way.

In the country we visited, there was very little food. They export most of their produce in order to repay their national debt. Yet in their stores, there is plenty of alcohol available. Due to the depressed living conditions, many are alcoholics. In the city parks, we saw people strewn all over who were drunk or recovering from being drunk. In response to this, the church has decided to abstain from all alcohol. Thus, this was an area in which we needed to be sensitive.

At one point, we heard that some of the women were offended by the fact that two of our women wore earrings. We know there is nothing to an earring, but it was a stumbling block in this culture. The girls freely gave them up in order to create harmony and love.

We even had to make decisions about what we ate. Because food was scarce, we were fed rye bread, tomatoes, green peppers, raw bacon fat and a processed ham that turned my stomach. When I thought how I might love these people, I decided they would probably rather have me healthy than sick. Therefore I chose to abstain from meat. My friend Jim Foster approached it in a different manner. He is a vegetarian for health reasons, but when he sensed that these people were treating him like Jesus Christ by giving him the best, he ate everything that was served to him in order to love them. Not only that, he ate the leftovers of everyone else who could not finish their bacon fat! By the time we left, he had so endeared himself to these people that they wept. This is how we can love our brothers.

The question is not whether we have a right to do something or not, but whether it will edify our brothers? What brings peace and harmony? What brings love to the body of Christ? Paul says we are to make peace our aim when we get together. To summarize: (1) use proper judgment; (2) make peace your aim.

The third ingredient is to pursue the things that edify. Look at verses 19-23.

III. Pursue the Things that Build Up One Another (14:19-23)

So then let us pursue...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. 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.

The goal in meeting together is to edify one another. We are to build up one another. Paul gives us four ways to do this.

First, determine what makes for purity. He says, “All things are pure, but they are evil to the man eating with offense.” We are to use our minds to determine what makes for purity.

Second, abstain when your freedom violates the conscience of another. He says, “It is not good to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else by which our brother stumbles.” In that culture, all the meat sold in the butcher shops came from idolatrous sacrifices. A portion of the meat went to the idol, and the rest was sold to the public. Many a Jew could not touch that meat. Paul knew that the meat was neither the better nor worse from its association with idols for it was created by God and could be received in faith. But he says, “If I am eating next to a brother with a weak conscience, I must abstain from the meat for it violates his convictions.”

They also had a problem with alcohol in that culture. That is why elders were told as part of their requirements that they could not be given over to much wine. Timothy’s response to the alcohol abuse of his day was to abstain completely while serving as an elder at the church at Ephesus. But what happened as a result was similar to what happens to us when we travel in Europe. If we drink the water, we become sick. Timothy was getting physically ill from his abstinence. This is why Paul wrote regarding eldership in the section of purity in the church, “Timothy, I know you have chosen to abstain, but take a little wine for your stomach because of your frequent ailments.” He was really telling Timothy, “It is far more important whom you choose to lay hands on as an elder than whether or not you have a little wine.” Although this verse seems out of context at first in the broader picture of the purity of the church, Paul is really giving more weight to who is being selected as elders than what Timothy chooses to eat or drink.

Third, do not change your convictions. When a fellow-pastor Kim Anderson interviewed at a church in Oregon, he discovered that they believed that the Bible teaches that all alcohol is sinful. They thought that the wine of the Bible was grape juice. Kim is as much of a teetotaler as you can get, but he did not agree with their convictions. He did not think it was wrong to occasionally have a glass of wine with dinner. When they asked him what he would do if he came to their church, he responded, “Do you want me to change my behavior or my convictions?” In other words, he was saying, “I will gladly change my behavior, but I will not change my convictions about the Scripture.”

We need to recognize that when we abstain it is something we are free to do, for we are doing it out of love. This does not mean that we can turn that step of love into a law and make an edict to put the consciences of others into bondage. In facing these difficult issues of

freedom of conscience, I think many churches try to simplify life by making rules that are not in Scripture. Therefore, as Christians, we no longer have to think for ourselves. Although this does simplify matters, it takes all of the love out of the community. It is imposing the law again, and we are no longer free to love.

I have been so thankful for the elders here at Peninsula Bible Church. We have been in existence for 39 years, and the board has always resisted the temptation to implement rules that are not found in Scripture. Although it would make life easier, they recognize that this would put people in bondage and eliminate our love. They have tried to walk the very delicate road of freedom without license without entering into legalism and bondage. This is how the church is to function. Abstain when you violate your brother's convictions, but do not change your own convictions.

Fourth, do not change the behavior of others without first changing their convictions. Paul says, "Whatever is not from faith is sin." Many stronger brothers look at their younger brother with disdain and try to coerce him into behaving differently without changing his convictions. Therefore, when the weaker brother worships or partakes of something as they would, he is sinning because he does not have the liberty established in his conscience yet. In his conscience, he is still responding to his old convictions.

Dr. Bruce Waltke shared with me about his brother-in-law who is a Wycliffe missionary in South America. It is interesting to hear how this principle is working for these missionaries. When entering a foreign culture, missionaries have to be sensitive about these issues because they can overturn an entire culture. Although many of the practices in the little church still carried the influence of the former idolatrous practices of the culture, the missionaries never confronted them until they first translated the Scripture. In the beginning, all they had was half of the gospel of Mark, but they never took those Indians beyond that text. As more was translated, the Indians read it, their convictions were changed, and they would give up an old practice or take on a new freedom. Thus, the missionaries were teaching them not to base their convictions on the opinions of men but on the Scriptures.

Let us review the three steps for loving our weaker brothers. First, we are to maintain a critical mind and get rid of our critical spirits. Second, we are to pursue the things that make for peace. Third, we are to build up one another. I wonder how many of us are like my sister's boyfriend who for a while can focus on the younger brother but then we want to show off our liberty or give full expression to all we can do. In the end, we always end up damaging one another.

The church of Jesus Christ does not fit the image of an athletic contest where people compete with equal abilities and express all the liberties they have in order to win. The church better reflects the image of a multi-generational softball game—grandparents playing with children, and everyone trying to get everyone else to play. In this atmosphere, there is tremendous love and freedom and enjoyment in the game.

George Whitefield wrote to John Wesley a letter that expresses this heart of love. By this time, Wesley had turned much of Whitefield's movement against him. He was even taking the church into some doctrines that were not biblical. Yet George responded to the

heart of the issue in this letter from Savannah, Georgia, in March of 1740:

I could now send a particular answer to your last; but, my honored friend and brother, for once hearken to a child, who is willing to wash your feet. I beseech you by the mercies of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, if you would have my love confirmed towards you, write no more to me about misrepresentation wherein we differ. To the best of my knowledge at present, no sin has dominion over me, yet I feel the strugglings of indwelling sin day by day; I can therefore by no means come into your interpretation of the passage mentioned in the letter, and as explained in your preface to Mr. Halyburton. The doctrine of election and the final perseverance of those that are truly in Christ, I am ten thousand times more convinced of, if possible, than when I saw you last. You think otherwise: why then should we dispute, when there is no probability of convincing? Will it not in the end destroy brotherly love, and insensibly take from us that cordial union and sweetness of soul, which I pray God may always subsist between us? How glad would the enemies of the Lord be to see us divided? How many would rejoice, should I join and make a party against you? And in one word, how would the cause of our common Master every way suffer by our raising disputes about particular points of doctrines?

Honored Sir, let us offer salvation freely to all by the blood of Jesus; and whatever light God has communicated to us, let us freely communicate to others. I have lately read the life of Luther, and think it in no wise to his honor, that the last part of his life was so much taken up in disputing with Zwingli and others; who in all probability equally loved the Lord Jesus. Let this, dear Sir, be a caution to us, I hope it will to me; for by the blessing of God, provoke me to it as much as you please, I do not think ever to enter the lists of controversy with you on the points wherein we differ. *Only I pray to God, that the more you judge me, the more I may love you.*

I wish you as much success as your own heart can wish. Were you here I would weep over you with tears of love, and tell you what great things God has done for my soul. May God use you as a choice and singular instrument of promoting His glory on earth, and may I see you crowned with an eternal and exceeding weight of glory in the world to come!

Yours most affectionately in Christ Jesus,

George Whitefield

Remember our watchword:

*In essentials unity,
in non-essentials diversity,
in all things charity.*

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