

Romans 14:13-23

To live above with those we love, oh, how that will be glory. To live below with those we know, now that's another story. Or as Paul stated it in Gal. 5:1,13: *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery...For you were called to freedom, brethren only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.*

Yet it is this freedom along with the diversity in the body of Christ that causes much division and turmoil. This is particularly true when it comes to the issues upon which we disagree – what is often referred to as non-essentials as opposed to the essentials of the faith.

We humans, even we Christians tend to criticize and censor those who do things differently from us. Judging one another according to our little lists is one of the favorite sports of Christians.

That brings us to our study this morning in Romans 14:13-23. Paul continues his argument in the second half of this chapter focusing on the idea of how our love for one another (vv. 13a, 19) is to influence our attitudes and actions towards them. What he calls “walking in love” (v. 15a). Interestingly enough there is a lot of “do not” before we get to “do”: v. 13a – do not judge; v. 13b – do not hinder the growth of a brother in Christ; v. 15b – do not destroy the walk of a brother; v. 16 – do not let good be spoken of an evil; v. 20 – do not tear down the work of God.

These negatives show us what not to do in loving others while the positives – vv.17 and 19 show us how to love. Focus on the eternals of the kingdom (v. 17) and pursue peace and edification (v. 19).

So here is the outline:

Liberated Love Refuses to Set Up Hindrances 14:13-16

Liberated Love Focuses on the Eternals not the Externals 14:17-21

Liberated Love Lives by a Clear Conscience 14:22-23

I. Liberated Love Refuses to Set Up Hindrances Romans 14:13-16

There is a play on words in the Greek sentence, which contains a double use of the verb *krino*, ‘to judge’. Don’t “pass judgment” (pronounce an opinion of right or wrong; this applies to both the strong and the weak brother). In the context one may feel that eating meat sacrificed to idols is ok and judge, look down on, the one who thinks the opposite. The one who thinks eating that meat is wrong is not to judge the one who thinks it is OK. Don’t make that kind of judgment.

The word translated “determine” is also from the Greek *krino* so the judgment or decision which we are to make is to avoid putting either a hindrance (*proskomma*) or a snare (*skandalon*) in our brother’s path and so causing him to trip and fall.

The Greek word translated “obstacle” (NASB) (*proskomma*) refers to an object on a path against which someone strikes his foot and consequently stumbles or falls. Think of stumbling or tripping over a small rock or stump on a mountain trail.

Another Greek word translated “stumbling block” (NASB) (*skandalon*) describes a snare used to

catch an animal or victim as it walks by – something that is deliberately left. This is where someone decides to do whatever they want regardless of the effect it might have on another. He is talking about the mindset of the believer not to unintentionally or intentionally cause another believer to be hindered in their walk with God. It is the application of Phil. 2:3-8.

Now in Paul's day this primarily had to do with eating meat sacrificed to idols. This is very understandable because the Jewish food laws constituted one of the principle features which distinguish Jews from Gentiles. Among the house-churches of Rome, then, we should probably envisage a broad spectrum of varieties in outlook and practice between the firm Jewish retention of the ancestral customs and Gentile remoteness from these customs.

Paul is fully convinced as Christ himself taught that no food is unclean in itself – v. 14a. However if anyone regards something as unclean, because his conscience tells him then it is unclean for him and he should not partake of it – v. 14b.

The paradox, then, which faces the strong, is that some foods are both clean and unclean simultaneously. On the one hand, the strong are convinced that all foods are clean. On the other, the weak are convinced that they are not. How should the strong behave when two consciences are in collision? Paul's response is unambiguous. Although the strong are correct, and he shares their conviction because the Lord Jesus has endorsed it, they must not ride roughshod over the scruples of the weak by imposing their view on them. On the contrary, they must defer to the weaker brother's conscience (even though it is mistaken) and not violate it or cause him to violate it. Meaning – don't eat the meat. For to wound a weaker brother's conscience is not only to distress him but to 'destroy' him, and that is totally incompatible with love.

The word translated "distress" comes from the Greek word *luneo* which means "to make sorrowful, to cause grief or to offend". Don't grieve your brother in Christ by what you eat because then you are no longer walking in love – you are not demonstrating love for him. The one for whom Christ died.

To cause distress could "destroy" (*apollumi* – to render useless) his faith. You can seriously damage a brother's discipleship so that he ends up adrift in the Christian walk.

The point is this: it is easy to judge others and exercise our freedom to the exclusion of the weaker brother but much more difficult to exercise our freedom in love towards a weaker brother. But the exhortation is to think about him first before exercising your freedom. That is the first principle in exercising our Christian freedom now Paul gives the second – focus on the eternals and not the externals.

II. Liberated Love Focuses on the Eternals not the Externals Romans 14:17-21

We are prone to think that the Kingdom of God (the realm of God's rule not Millennial Kingdom) primarily involves what a person does or does not eat or drink, or what he wears, or what he does or does not do on the Lord's Day, and so forth. This is how the Pharisees lived, making a big deal of externals. But the Kingdom of God is not mainly a matter of externals but of eternals—"righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

The question here is Paul referring to objective truth – righteousness being our justification (declared righteous), which results in peace with God as we are now in shalom with God because

his wrath is satisfied and we are sons of God and joint heirs with Christ and therefore we have joy inexpressible and full of glory as Peter writes. Or is Paul referring to the subjective conditions of being righteous, peaceful and joyful? Can I suggest that it is both.

Having been declared righteous produces in us a desire to live that way, a driving desire to know God and honor him with our conduct. Then because we are righteous and have peace we live with a profound sense of God's presence. Peace means that we do not need to look over our shoulder expecting judgment, but instead we can look into the eyes of God and receive grace. We are at peace with God. Therefore we are joyful not only in an objective sense but also in practice. Joy is an outward mark of Christ's presence.

The point being that the Kingdom of God, the rule of God consists not of externals – food, drink and other activities but of eternals. Those eternals produce a lifestyle consistent with them. Therefore pursue the things that make for peace and edification – v. 19. “Pursue” is *dioko*, a verb which indicates more than a slight interest; it means earnest application – to run after to seek eagerly. What we pursue are the things that result in peace (more literally “the things of peace”, harmony in relationships). In the New Testament the most important thing about peace is that Christ has brought about peace with God, but in passages like this one the thought is rather that of peace with one another. Here the word is used in parallel with edification so that it clearly means peace with other people. It is the responsibility of those at peace with God to pursue the kind of conduct that will promote peace with people.

Edification is a term which properly means the erection of a building, but in the New Testament it is used in the metaphorical sense of building people up – the act of one who promotes another's growth in Christian knowledge, wisdom and conduct. So here he exhorts the Roman believers to build one another up. Their aim should be to help one another rather than to criticize, judge, condemn or despise one another.

‘*The work of God*’ could mean the individual weaker brother, but in the context it seems to refer to the Christian community. ‘*Destroy*’ translates a different verb from the one which Paul has used in verse 15. *Kataluō* means to ‘tear down’ or “to dissolve, to overthrow, to render vain or bring to naught” particularly in relation to buildings. It appears to be deliberately contrasted with the previous verse. Our responsibility is to seek to build up the fellowship (v. 19) individually and corporately, not to tear it down (v. 20). And in particular we must not tear it down for the sake of food.

So here is your question: How far does that extend? Do we who are strong, who understand our freedom in Christ give it up for all the weaker brothers who do not understand their freedom in Christ? Are we always to cater to the narrowest and most prejudiced person in the congregation?

It seems to me if that were the case Christianity becomes very narrow and we end up focusing on the very externals from which we are free. To love and build up a brother is to help them grasp their freedom in Christ; to understand what it means to be justified, to be at peace with God, to know the assurance of salvation and the certainty of future glory. Or to put it another way we need to educate them in biblical doctrine, the character of God and who they are in Christ. That is what builds up the church so that it reflects the character of God not the opinions of men.

So love refuses to set up hindrances, love focuses on the eternals building up one another and

finally love lives by with a clear conscience.

III. Liberated Love Lives by a Clear Conscience Romans 14:22-23

Paul concludes (vv. 22–23) by drawing a distinction between belief and action, that is, between private conviction and public behavior. So, he writes, as regards the private sphere, whatever you believe about these things, whether you are strong and believe you can eat anything, or weak and believe you cannot, keep between yourself and God (v. 22a), keep it a secret.

The strong Christian is blessed because his conscience approves of his eating everything, so that he can follow his conscience without any guilt feelings. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves (v. 22b). But the man who has doubts, that is, the weak Christian who is plagued with misgivings because his conscience gives him vacillating signals, is condemned if he eats (probably by his conscience, not by God), because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith (‘which does not arise from conviction’) is sin (v. 23).

If a person does what he believes to be wrong, even though it is not wrong in itself, it becomes sin for him. He has violated what he believes to be God’s will. His action has become an act of rebellion against God for him.

This final epigram exalts the significance of our conscience. Although, as we have seen, it is not infallible, it is nevertheless sacrosanct, so to go against it (to act not from faith) is to sin. At the same time, alongside this explicit instruction not to violate our conscience, there is an implicit requirement to educate it.

Conclusion

The goal is not our freedom but how to exercise our freedom in such a way as to build unity and maturity in the church. Biblically we are called to freedom (Gal. 5:1) but our freedom is to an avenue to serve others (Gal. 5:13). Here in Romans 14 Paul has given us some principles to guide us in doing just that.

1. Determine never to be the source of stumbling for another believer. Be discerning in this area – v. 13. Think about them first – how to serve and help.

2. Live as citizens of the Kingdom of God concentrating on the eternal rather than the externals. It may take a paradigm shift on our thinking but it is worth it as that pleases God. Besides that is the goal of Rom. 12:2 – be transformed in your thinking which in turn will transform your living.

3. Actively pursue the things that make for peace and edification. Are the words I am about to speak or the attitude I have and the service I am doing promote peace and maturity or are they all about me?

4. Do all that you do with a clear conscience. The conscience is not perfect and it can be seared but it is one of the ways God directs our choices and keeps us on the right path.