

41. Freedom with limits for others

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Freedom doesn't mean that we can do anything the way we want to. When we insist our ways to others because we want to, it is no longer freedom but it becomes our tyranny to others. In other words, we are invading others' freedom. This has been a part of the root problems of mankind from the beginning including the Christian community. Our freedom should limit itself within the confinement with others in mind.

Chapter 14 still carries the theme of "loving our neighbors as ourselves" from chapter 13. Apostle Paul is clarifying the gray area matters with simple principles we must learn.

A. RECEIVING THE WEAKER BROTHERS

Romans 14:1-2 Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. 2 For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables.

Disunity has always been a major problem with God's people. Even the Old Testament records the civil wars among the tribes of Israel, and almost every local church mentioned in the New Testament had divisions to contend with. The Corinthians were divided over human leaders, and some of the members were even suing each other. The Galatian believers were "biting and devouring" one another, and the church people in Ephesus and Colossae had to be reminded of the importance of Christian unity. In the church at Philippi, two women were at odds with each other and, as a result, were splitting the church.

The believers in Rome also were divided over special diets and special days. Some refused to eat meat because they feared it was meat sacrificed to a pagan god as in 1 Corinthians 8. Some refused the meat because they stuck to Jewish dietary regulations and traditions.

While these issues may not directly relate to most Christians today, there are plenty of issues where some believers disagree with each other and cause enough problems. When it comes to areas that are not clearly defined in Scripture, we find ourselves needing some other kind of guidance. Apostle Paul explains how believers can disagree on non-essentials and still maintain unity in the church.

First, we need to see two groups of believers:

1) The ones who were strong in faith.

They understood their spiritual freedom in Christ and were not enslaved to foods or special days.

2) The weak in faith

They were immature believers who felt obligated to obey legalistic rules concerning what they ate and when they worshiped. Many people also have the idea that the Christians who follow strict rules are the most mature, but this is not necessarily the case.

The key word in chapter 14 is 'receive' in v1. It is not our responsibility to decide every single requirement for Christian fellowship in a church. Only the Lord our God

can do this. To set up man-made restrictions on the basis of personal opinions or even convictions is to go beyond the Word of God and it is a down-right borderline.

Before we go any further, there are principles and truth that we must not argue over – such as, the deity of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and His bodily resurrection, trinity, the creation by God in literal six days, the rapture and the second coming of Jesus Christ, heaven and hell, utter sinful nature of man, the only way of salvation through Jesus, etc. These are the hills we must defend with our lives. But for other things, we need to agree to disagree.

I believe that St. Augustine put the matter best and eloquently: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”

B. IT IS NOT OUR PLACE TO JUDGE

Romans 14:3-4 Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. 4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

There is a lot of useless, harmful division among Christians over silly, bigoted things. If I may list a few of them: the version of the Bible (some insist that KJV is the only godly version and the rest is from hell), speaking in tongues, dancing, drinking alcohol, smoking, having tattoos, etc.

One thing I'd like to say about having tattoos done for young people. They forget one thing. Let's say you got an eagle tattoo on your bicep. But as you get old, your skin will start to sag. Someday your sharp-looking eagle will turn into a blurry Big Bird.

Paul isn't telling these Christians to ignore their differences. Rather he tells them to rise above them as Christian brothers and sisters.

In every church there are weak and strong believers. The strong believers understand spiritual truth and practice it, but the weak ones have not yet grown into that level of maturity and liberty. The weak must not condemn the strong and call them unspiritual. The strong must not despise the weak and call them immature. God has received both the weak and the strong, so they should receive one another.

It is encouraging to know that our success in the Christian life does not depend on the opinions or attitudes of other Christians. God is the Judge, and He is able to make us stand. The word “servant” here suggests that Christians ought to be busy working for the Lord instead of wasting time in judging or condemning other Christians.

C. JESUS CHRIST IS LORD

Romans 14:5-9 One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. 7 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ

died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

None of us is God last time when I checked. That means that we cannot and should not play the role of God to judge another Christian's life. This does not take away the need and the responsibility for admonishment or rebuke with right intentions to those backslidden Christian brothers and sisters, but we should not take the place of God.

There is an interesting illustration of this truth given to us in John 21:15-25.

John 21:20-22 Then Peter, turning around, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following, who also had leaned on His breast at the supper, and said, "Lord, who is the one who betrays You?" 21 Peter, seeing him, said to Jesus, "But Lord, what about this man?" 22 Jesus said to him, "If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you? You follow Me."

Jesus just restored Peter from his denials of the Lord. But when Peter saw John, he wanted to know what was supposed to happen to him because there was a rivalry between these two disciples. Jesus' answer is just a classic: "What is that to you?" In my rendition, "It is none of your business, boy."

Whenever I hear believers condemning other Christians because of something they disagree with, something that is not essential or forbidden in the Word, I'd say, "It is non of your business. Follow Christ."

D. JESUS CHRIST IS THE ONLY TRUE JUDGE WE HAVE

Romans 14:10-12 But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. 11 For it is written: "As I live, says the Lord, Every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall confess to God." 12 So then each of us shall give account of himself to God.

I know what some of you are thinking. You are thinking about what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7.

Matthew 7:1-2 "Judge not, that you be not judged. 2 For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

Is the Bible contradicting? Absolutely not. Here Jesus teaches us to understand that whatever the standard we use to judge others, we will be judged.

Both strong and weak must stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ to be judged by Him. This is not the Great White Throne Judgment at the end of the Great Tribulation that unbelievers will ultimately face Jesus Christ and be judged before they are all cast into hell.

The word for "judgment seat" in the Greek is 'bema', meaning the place where the judges stood at the athletic games. If during the games they saw an athlete break the rules, they immediately disqualified him. At the end of the contests, the judges gave out the rewards.

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay,

straw, 13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

The work we are building should have the right motive – the glory of Jesus Christ. If our work is to glorify ourselves or we take the credit for good works, then it would be like wood, hay and straw and they will be burned up. But if we did our work all for the glory of God, then they are gold, silver and precious stones. If our works pass the test, we receive a reward. If they are burned up, we lose the reward, but we are still saved.

So how does the Christian prepare for the Judgment Seat of Christ? By making Jesus Lord of his life and faithfully obeying Him. Instead of judging other Christians, we had better judge our own lives and make sure we are ready to meet Christ at the bema.

E. DON'T BE A STUMBLING BLOCK

Romans 14:13-18 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. 14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15 Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. 18 For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.

We should be encouragers to each other rather than stumbling blocks. Getting our balance means adopting an attitude of concern for others. If Jesus was willing to give up His life for the sake of that brother, we can certainly give up what we want or would like to do for others.

If you consider yourself a mature Christian, please consider what kind of effect you might give to those who are immature in the Lord when they see you drinking or smoking or the things that are disputable matters. Would that cause them to stumble? If so, for the sake of them, stop doing it. Yes, you have freedom in Christ to do so, but if you insist doing it even though you know that you are going to cause someone to stumble, now you are sinning.

1 Corinthians 8:9-13 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. 10 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? 11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Not the externals, but the eternal must be first in our lives: righteousness, peace, and joy. Where do they come from? The Holy Spirit of God at work in our lives. If each believer would yield to the Spirit and major in a godly life, we would not have Christians fighting with each other over minor matters. Spiritual priorities are essential to harmony in the church.

F. HELPING EACH OTHER TO GROW

Romans 14:19-23 Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. 21 It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. 22 Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

Though we know better, unfortunately it is not our natural tendency to seek ways to edify others. Even if we have the personal freedom, we do not have the freedom to stumble, offend, or weaken a brother.

We are saved by faith, not by works that we may boast. We don't need to be concerned about which food is allowed or not allowed; or which day is the day we worship the Lord. All foods are good if we take them with thanksgiving to our Lord. Everyday is a good day to worship the Lord and to serve Him with all of our hearts, minds, souls and bodies. He is telling those who are weak in faith, "Grow up."

This study has been a wonderful reality check on our tendency to justify ourselves in the things we like to do.

G. APPLICATIONS

1) We agree to disagree in non-essentials.

If the Bible does not give a clear guidance in the matter you think is important, it is a non-essential. Don't try to make it as an essential and insist it upon others.

2) Building up others spiritually is more important than our own comfort and freedom.

3) Be a rock that others can lean on, rather than being a stumbling block that hurts them.