

Christian Harmony: An Invitation to Edify One Another **(Romans 14:13-23)**

The world is filled with turmoil. Conflicts are prevalent around the globe. Homes are riddled with strife. Peace is lacking everywhere. But the church of Jesus Christ has the opportunity to stand out as a people of peace. We must learn to get along with each other within the context of the church so that the world will see the difference God makes in our lives. Paul devotes a significant portion of Romans (14:1—15:13) to emphasizing the importance of unity in the church. Christians must accept one another into vital relationships (Romans 14:1). We must also edify one another as a demonstration of interpersonal peace (Romans 14:19). The early church, like the church today, faced challenges because of varied views regarding debatable practices. Paul exhorted the Christians in Rome to look beyond their differences, to surrender their personal rights, and to live in harmony with one another. There will always be debatable practices. How we work together while holding diverse views will speak volumes to a world that isn't accustomed to getting along. In spite of different perspectives and preferences, Christians must live in harmony. Paul presents some guiding principles to help us work through our differences.

**When it comes to debatable practices,
follow the guiding principle of love (14:13-18).**

The first guiding principle that leads to harmony in the church is love. When we truly love one another we'll work hard to get along with each other.

Instead of judging others we should determine not to cause others to stumble (14:13).

Paul identified “weaker” (Romans 14:1) and “stronger” (Romans 15:1) Christians in the church in Rome. These terms refer to levels of maturity regarding debatable practices. Paul is not saying that every practice is acceptable to Christians—we can't simply live by our own standards of right and wrong. God has clearly revealed His holy standard. But there are many practices that, while neutral or acceptable, cause some Christians to cringe depending on their personal awareness of their freedom in Christ. For many of the first century Christians who came out of a background of Judaism, observing the kosher food laws still seemed to be equivalent to holiness. Jesus freed us from such regulations (Mark 7:19), but debates arose in the church whether or not Christians were still bound to these traditions. The “strong” knew that they were free from these laws, while the “weak” remained bound to them in their consciences. Each would cast judgment on the other, producing division within the church.

It was time to stop passing judgment on one another. In particular, it was time for the strong to stop making life difficult for the weak. Paul uses the word “judge” twice—to stop

“judging” one another, but instead to “judge” or “determine” not to cause others to stumble. By pressing their Christian freedoms regarding food and days on the calendar, the stronger Christians were laying before the weaker Christians a “stumbling block” (anything that would cause someone to trip and fall) and an “obstacle” (a trap). It makes no sense to trip or trap a fellow brother or sister in the faith. Such flaunting of freedom only produces animosity, never harmony.

While certain practices may be acceptable, we must respect an individual’s personal perspective (14:14).

We do have freedom in Jesus Christ. Paul had become “persuaded” of this truth by the Lord Jesus Himself—possibly through his faith relationship with Jesus or through direct revelation from the Lord. Paul knew that no type of food is “unclean” (literally “common”) in God’s sight (compare 1 Timothy 4:4). However, some Christians still believed that certain foods were off limits—common, or unclean. Those who are strong should respect the personal perspectives of the weak.

Love should motivate our actions toward those for whom Christ died (14:15).

Those who were strong and ate anything they wanted were a source of grief toward the weak. The weak were hurt by the insensitive actions of the strong. By hurting their weaker brothers and sisters, the strong were no longer walking according to love. Love is a guiding principle when it comes to decisions about debatable practices. If we love one another, we won’t engage in practices that would “destroy” the faith of someone for whom Christ died. Jesus loved them enough to die for them. We should love our brothers and sisters enough to sacrifice our privileges for them!

Our spiritual freedoms take a back seat to the higher values of God’s kingdom (14:16-18).

Freedom in Christ is “good,” but that good freedom could become a source of “blasphemy” on the part of the weaker Christian. The strong should be the first to recognize that the kingdom of God has higher values than personal spiritual freedom. By “kingdom of God” Paul refers to God’s rule over His people both now and in eternity. Our submission to the rule of God allows us certain spiritual freedoms, but never the freedom to hurt other believers. Freedom regarding what we eat or what we drink is trumped by the higher kingdom values of “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Our right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ prompts us to live in a right relationship with one another. Our peace with God prompts us to live at peace with one another. Our Spirit-granted joy prompts us to help one another experience joy instead of grief over. We are servants of Jesus Christ, submissive to His will. We serve Him with a view toward honoring His kingdom and its values. By doing so, we

are pleasing to God and, in addition, we receive the approval of others, other believers who are still growing in their faith. When it comes to debatable practices, we must follow the guiding principle of love.

**When it comes to debatable practices,
follow the guiding principle of edification (14:19-21).**

A second guiding principle is that of edification. Do our practices build up others or tear them down? As God's people, we must always seek to build up, to edify one another.

Every Christian should pursue peace and the edification of God's people (14:19).

Having mentioned peace as a value in God's kingdom (verse 17), Paul again emphasizes this quality of the Christian life. "Let us pursue the things of peace." As a corollary to peace, we're also to pursue "the things of edification," that which builds up the body of Christ. Edification is a term for construction. Our actions should be constructive in the lives of others.

Every Christian should surrender his or her rights for the sake of others (14:20-21).

The opposite of construction is destruction. Paul warns, "Do not destroy the work of God" for the sake of our spiritual freedoms—the kind of food we eat or the kinds of practices in which we engage. Paul again states that "all things are clean," speaking in the context of debatable practices, not referring to those things that are clearly revealed as sinful. But if eating a certain food or engaging in a certain practice presents a stumbling block (compare verse 13) for another believer, that good practice becomes "evil." In fact, the "good" practice is to refrain from eating meat, drinking wine, or engaging in any practice that causes a brother or sister to stumble. Apparently the weaker Christians in Rome were not only concerned about certain types of food but about the use of wine that might have been offered to pagan gods. The Bible never condemns the moderate use of wine, just the misuse of wine. The guiding principle of edification, however, will in some settings make it necessary for the strong believers to refrain from practices that will hurt the weak. Our goal is to build up, not to tear down.

**When it comes to debatable practices,
follow the guiding principle of personal conviction (14:22-23).**

A third guiding principle in deciding on debatable practices is that of faith, or personal conviction.

Our belief, or conviction, about debatable practices never serves as a source of flaunting our spiritual freedom (14:22).

Those who are strong in their faith regarding debatable practices have arrived at certain personal convictions about their spiritual freedom. However, it's totally inappropriate to flaunt these freedoms. In fact, Paul says that we're to keep these convictions to ourselves, meaning that we're not to force the issue with a weaker Christian. Our personal convictions regarding debatable practices are a matter of our relationship with God. By flaunting our spiritual freedoms we run the risk of bringing judgment on ourselves. Of course, when there is an appropriate opportunity to help a weaker Christian grow to appreciate his or her freedom in Christ we should do so through patient, loving instruction. But engaging in debatable practices for the sake of proving our freedom reaches beyond the limits of love.

If we violate our belief, or conviction, about certain practices we're actually sinning against God (14:23).

Those who are strong should be willing to surrender their spiritual freedom for the sake of others. In contrast, those who are weak, the ones "doubting" when it comes to certain practices, bring judgment on themselves by engaging in practices which go against their personal convictions. "Everything that does not come from faith is sin." The one who, by personal conviction, believes that a certain practice is wrong and engages in that practice in spite of his or her convictions is, in heart, disobeying God—sinning. We must honor the guiding principle of personal conviction.

Those who are weak can, indeed, become strong in their faith through proper and loving instruction in God's Word. Those who are strong must, however, willingly surrender their spiritual freedoms in the presence of those who are weak. In spite of different perspectives and preferences, Christians must live in harmony.