

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Romans 14:13-15:1 “The Limits of Liberty”

Intro. Most churches have a mixture of viewpoints regarding what is appropriate for a Christian to do, or not do. That is certainly true in a denomination, or the larger Christian community. Imagine on my right a group of Christians who are very strict in what they think a Christian is permitted to do. This is often due to their moral upbringing, or due to the influence of the church they grew up in. To my left are a group of Christians who are much more libertarian or liberal in their viewpoints of what is permitted for a Christian. In some cases it's because they have a good understanding of the doctrine of Christian liberty. In other cases it is more of a case of wanting to do as one pleases, or due to a desire to fit in with others.

Last Sunday we began to discuss the fact that Christians are going to disagree over certain opinions of right and wrong. When we disagree, we tend to get into arguments. We tend to judge and condemn those who hold different views. We tend to reject them. In fact, feelings have been hurt, and churches have split over such disagreements. Even though love for our brothers & sisters in Christ is one of the greatest commandments, we too often end up violating the great commandment over differences of opinion over something that is far less important.

The church in Rome was evidently struggling with conflict over some disagreements. Some in the church, especially Jewish Christians, felt that no Christian should buy & eat meat from the marketplace if it came from an idol's temple. Others felt that eating such meat was morally permissible. The gods people worshipped did not really exist, and the soul could not be contaminated by such meat. Many Jews felt Christians should observe the Sabbath. Gentile Christians often did not.

Today Christians disagree over alcohol. Some believe it is OK to drink in moderation. We Baptists usually believe in totally abstaining from alcohol. We disagree over how much affection is appropriate between men & women in the church. I recently heard someone outside our church criticize some of our members for showing too much affection in terms of giving hugs, or even a kiss on the cheek. They probably think a handshake is as far as you should go. Some Christians still believe it is wrong for a woman to wear pants to church. They cite an Old Testament verse to support their position. Other women feel free to wear pants to church. I can go on and on citing examples.

What I'm going to do with morning is examine the positions of two different kinds of believers. I believe Paul's goal here is to promote mutual understanding, minimize conflict, and appeal to all to be thoughtful and considerate of others. Though Christian liberty is important, and though it is important to have moral convictions, we must keep in mind the importance of love in all of our relationships with one another. First of all, consider with me:

I. THE POSITION OF THE LIBERTARIAN BELIEVER

I want to present to you the biblical teaching of Christian liberty. It is an important doctrine of the Christian faith. Last week I shared with you that we are not bound by man-made rules and regulations, or even by the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. Instead, we are only

bound by the Word of God, by the leading of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, in our text today, we see that the “strong” believer understand that:

A. Material Things and Outward Things Are Morally Neutral – Paul says in v.14, “I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself....” “Unclean” is the word “common.” It is the opposite of the word “holy.” “Am persuaded” is from a verb in the perfect tense. What Paul speaks of in this verse is something he had a settled conviction about. Paul knew that material things were not intrinsically evil. Likewise, in the middle of v.20 he says, “All things indeed are pure.” This was Paul’s position. This principle is the refutation of all prohibitionists who lay the responsibility for wrong at the door of things rather than at a man’s heart.

We see a number of examples of this teaching in our text. We may reject certain foods for health reasons, but not for religious reasons (vv.2, 14). Among the early Christians were some with robust consciences who would even eat meat from an animal that had been sacrificed to an idol. Evidently, based on v.21, some believed it was OK to drink wine in moderation. Others felt free from special observances of certain days and seasons (v.5). On the other hand, the Catholic Church and 7th Day Adventist Churches are examples of professing Christians who continue to live by rules of diet and special days. Other examples might be playing cards, etc. Billy Sunday and many others used to preach against Christians playing cards, for cards have too many evil associations with gambling. But the Christian who understands v.14 knows that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with a deck of cards.

Furthermore,

B. Right and Wrong Are Basically Inward – Notice that Paul was persuaded “by” the Lord Jesus. Jesus Himself taught this. On one memorable occasion, He abrogated the food-laws by pronouncing all kinds of food to the “clean” (Mk. 7:19). He taught that:

1. Sin Is a Heart Problem – Turn back to Mk. 7:15. There Jesus said, “There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man.” Then He said in vv.21-23, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.” So what enters your body is of little consequence spiritually. Does it really matter to God whether a man has fish or beef protein in his digestive tract on a certain day of the week? But what does matter is what enters your heart and mind, & what you allow to come out.

2. Pleasing God Is An Inward Matter – In our text, Paul said in v.17, “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” When questions of food and drink become our chief concern, then it is apparent how far removed from the interests of God’s kingdom our thinking and conduct have strayed (cf. Mt. 6:31-33). 1 Cor. 8:8 tells us, “But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse.” The Pharisees put more emphasis upon external things than upon inward, spiritual matters. So many Christians are like the Pharisee: they clean up the outside and look like good Christians in outward conduct, but inwardly they are quite sinful and not pleasing to God.

It is important to note the sequence of these characteristics of the Kingdom of God in the heart. Righteousness comes first, peace second, and joy third. One reason for the terrible

frustration of mankind is that peace and joy are sought without righteousness. You can't have true, lasting peace & joy without first gaining righteousness. That means that you must first be saved. You trade your sinfulness for the imputed righteousness for Christ, by repentance of sin, and faith in Jesus Christ. Then, when you are born again, God actually creates a right spirit within, and gives you His Holy Spirit. God actually begins the process of making us righteous in our daily experience. Then, we also begin to enjoy peace & joy. You can't have peace without living right. Yet too many are trying to find peace & joy in booze or drugs.

Imagine a man who has been in an automobile accident. His leg is twisted out of its socket and the bone is broken. He tells the doctor, "Give me some sedative quickly so that I can be at peace and rest. I want to sleep. Just give me a drug and go away and leave me alone." The doctor says, "Don't you want me to treat the problem that is causing your pain?" He says, "No, just make the pain go away." What a fool he would be! No man in his right mind would say such a thing, and yet millions are seeking for some opiate of peace without first getting God's righteousness. If a believer is not joyful, it is almost certain that he does not possess the peace of God; and one may even doubt whether he has the righteousness.

In London, Buckingham Palace flies the royal standard to show that the sovereign is in residence. Day or night the flag can be seen and the people know that their Queen is not away, but at home. Thus joy flies as the flag over our lives to show that Christ our king is in residence.

Then Paul says in v.18, "For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men." Paul is saying, "For he who serves Christ in this manner, as described in v.17, is acceptable to God." The one who truly pleases God is not the one who lives by outward, man-made religious traditions, but who lives in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Such a manner of life is well-pleasing to God and should gain the approval of men. "Approved of men" is the opposite of the disrepute referred to in v.16. One may serve Christ either eating or abstaining, but no one can serve Him whose conduct exhibits indifference to righteousness, peace, and joy.

So as you formulate your own moral guidelines, make sure your focus is on the heart first, and not merely on physical things.

II. THE PROBLEMS THE LIBERTARIAN CREATES FOR OTHER BELIEVERS

Other Christians have a different opinion on such matters. They do not understand or accept these truths. The Jewish Christian in Paul's day usually still found bound by Jewish law. A new Gentile Christian who had been saved from idolatry may have been very sensitive about having anything to do with anything that came from an idol's temple. In 1 Cor. 8 Paul teaches about Christian liberty, but then in v.7 he says, "However, there is not in everyone that knowledge." They either do not yet know about the New Testament truth of Christian liberty, or they haven't been convinced enough to reject old beliefs. So while some believers want to express their liberty in Christ, there are other believers who still feel bound by certain religious traditions. Now let me set the stage for the problems that can develop:

A. On the One Hand, We All Must Not Violate Our Conscience – When it comes to formulating our moral guidelines, here is an important one. In the last of v.5 Paul said, "Let each be fully convinced in his own mind." In the last of v.14 Paul adds a qualification to what he has just stated in the first part of the verse. Though nothing is unclean of itself, he says, "but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." The word "considers" (*logizomai*)

means “to reckon, evaluate, look upon as, think; be of the opinion.”¹ If you think that playing cards is sinful, then to you it is sinful to play cards. It is always a sin to go against what our conscience thinks. It is better to live according to your conscience, even when your conscience is wrong.

Next look at the last of v.20, “All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.” This is literally translated, “through a stumbling block” (*dia proskommatos*). The idea is that even though the believer has an obstacle in his way, namely his conscience, he goes right through it anyway “and eats,” which is evil for him.²

This truth is explained further in v.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.” “Condemned” refers to a guilty conscience, a sense of guilt. This is an important principle of right & wrong. If you have doubts about the rightness or wrongness of a certain activity, then it is wrong for you to go ahead and do it. Here it is in the perfect tense, “he stands condemned.” We may not tone down the condemnation to which the weak believer is subjected when he eats without a clear conscience.

Paul clearly confirms the importance of conscience in this text. Yet our society is tearing down the role of conscience. Certain leaders of society proclaim freedom of choice, and they deny there are moral absolutes. They say right & wrong is determined by the individual, not by God. As a result, more and more people even commit crimes without their conscience bothering them. We should maintain a healthy conscience, & always listen to the voice of conscience.

So Paul affirms the importance of following our conscience. Imagine that deacon so and so is strong in understanding Christian liberty. He doesn’t believe there is anything wrong with eating pork or doing some sporting activity on Sunday afternoon. But some new Christian sees him doing so, and yet there is something in his upbringing that makes him believe that that activity is wrong. From this kind of a situation, one of the following two problems is likely to result:

B. Some Will Judge Such a Christian – This is what we talked about last week. When we judge others, we also get into arguments over difference of opinion. Yet in v.13a Paul sums up his word to such people. As we saw last week, we are not to judge any longer. Judging ourselves should be enough to keep us busy. We may advise, we may seek to enlighten, we may point to the Word of God, we may cite our own experiences, we may pray, but we may never control the conscience of another believer. Paul said in v.16, “Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil.” The “good” probably refers to the liberty which the strong believer enjoys. The phrase “evil spoken of as evil” is from one word (*blasphemeo*), which refers to the fact that Christian liberty will inevitably get a bad name if it is exercised in an inconsiderate loveless fashion. What for you is a good thing must not become an occasion for slanderous talk.

In contrast to criticizing or flaunting our Christian liberty, Paul says in v.19, “Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace....” The exercise or defense of liberty can lead to arguments and conflict with those who have a different point of view. For the sake of peace the

¹ William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the NT & Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957).

² Likewise, he says in the last of v.22, “Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.” “Condemn” is simply the word “judge.” “Approves” is the word for putting to the test and approving. The Christian should put his convictions to the test in light of God’s Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit, and then if he determines that they are of God, approve them. That Christian is blessed if he does not still question the rightness of his conviction.

Christian should be willing to forego any exercise of liberty that gratifies self, but does nothing to build up anyone else. We should not tear down God's church by arguing over opinions.

Another possible result of expressing our liberty is this:

C. They May Be Tempted to Follow the Libertarian's Example – He thinks, "If deacon so and so can do it, then I guess it is OK for me to do it." Yet they haven't been convinced by Scripture and the Spirit that what they see you do is right. All they have to go on is your example.

In so doing, we have done what Paul said in v.13b that we should not do: put a stumbling block or cause him to fall into the sin of violating his conscience. Paul names several bad consequences for that weak Christian brother when you go ahead and exercise your liberty.

When this happens, notice what can happen to that weaker:

1. You Cause Him To Grieve – Paul says in v.15, "Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love." I believe he is talking about grieving over violating his religious convictions. Even while he is doing that activity, he is grieved with a guilty conscience.

2. You "Destroy" Him and the Work of God – Paul says in the last of v.15, "Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died." Likewise, he says in v.20, "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food." The strength of the word "destroy" underlines the serious nature of the stumbling that overtakes the weak brother. This word does not refer to apostasy, or to loss of salvation. The word is the opposite of the word "build up" in v.19, for it literally means "to loose down", i.e. to tear down (a building). "The work of God" may most properly be understood as referring to God's work of building up the weak believer, or perhaps to the church. The exercise of liberty must always be constructive, never destructive. [Example: tongues]. Paul further emphasizes the seriousness of this sin by saying that the one who is being "destroyed" is the one "for whom Christ died." That is God's measure of the worth of a human being! Is it worth it to harm a Christian brother just so I can enjoy some food? No! My liberties must be stepping-stones by which men climb closer to God, not stumbling blocks over which they fall to their own hurt.

I'm sure in a crowd this size we have some who feel that you are free to play the lottery. You claim that you can afford to blow a few dollars a week, that you use it as a form of entertainment, and you feel you have the ability to keep this from becoming a case of compulsive gambling. Perhaps you even argue that because it is legal, it is morally acceptable. But suppose that another Christian sees you playing the lottery, and follows your example. Because they have been taught that gambling is wrong, they feel guilty about what they have done. Yet they ignore the voice of conscience and keep playing. Before long they have become hooked by the dreams of winning big and they become compulsive gamblers. They get deeper and deeper into debt due to all the money they are losing in the lottery.

Now tell me, what has your so-called liberty done to that brother? Will you still defend the exercise of such liberty when it can bring such harm to another believer? Either way, bad things often result when the so-called "strong," liberated believer flaunts his liberty before other Christians, who feel that what they are doing is wrong. You will either lead another believer to violate their conscience, or you will create a situation that will tend to lead to conflict over differences of opinion. So how do we resolve or avoid the problems raised by our text?

III. THE PROPER SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

So what are we to do? Paul tells us in the last of v.13, “rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way.” The word “resolve” is used in the good sense to “determine” (cf. 2 Cor. 2:1). A “stumbling block” (*proskomma*) is from a word literally meaning “an obstacle of a rough road.” “A cause to fall” (*skandalon*) is literally the trigger of a trap or an enticement. We must resolve or determine that we will do neither. We will not do anything that might lead a brother to violate his conscience. This obligation not to cause a brother to stumble is especially true in regard to new or young Christians.

A. Abstain – In light of what he has taught, Paul said in v.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.” That word “good” here probably carried the meaning of “noble” here. The noble, beautiful, & commendable thing to do in cases of conflicting opinions is to abstain from that activity that might offend a fellow believer or cause them to stumble. In Paul’s day that could mean abstaining from “flesh” (*kreas*), which refers to the flesh of a sacrificial animal. In Acts 15 the Jerusalem council concluded that Gentiles should abstain from eating certain foods, lest they offend their Jewish brothers.

The world champion automobile speed racer years ago was an Argentinean who could drive a car at 150 miles an hour, and who had won the great road races of Europe. But on the public highway he was the most careful and conscientious of drivers. Young men would drive alongside and gun their motors, while grinning at him. He could have left them as though they were standing still, but he never used his ability for his own ends. If he saw that someone wanted to pass him so as to brag about it, he would drive under the speed limit. He sacrificed his pride for the sake of his example. Can a Christian do less?

I believe v.21 makes a strong case for total abstinence from alcohol. While you can argue that drinking alcohol in strict moderation may be morally acceptable, yet if so doing sets a bad example, and causes someone to stumble, then it is far better to abstain completely from alcohol as a beverage. I made that commitment to the Lord as a young person, and I have never violated that commitment. I challenge you to make the same commitment. I do not need alcohol as a source of peace & joy. The Lord is my source of peace & joy.

B. Exercise Your Liberty in Private – Paul says in v.22, “Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God.” The faith of the strong is a personal conviction, to be kept between the Christian and God, not to be flaunted in reckless ways over the weak in faith. However, sometime it’s hard to be truly private in the exercise of liberty.

C. Bear with the Scruples of the Weak – Paul concludes this section by saying in 15:1, “We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” Paul admonishes the strong to respect the dietary scruples of the weak. We must be patient and loving toward the weaker Christian brother. Strong, knowledgeable believers can try to convince them that they are wrong. But it’s similar to the situation where a child is afraid of the dark. You cannot reason their fear away. You must love them, and reassure them with your presence. Even so, you often cannot argue and reason with someone into changing old ideas overnight. Until they do change in their understanding, we must be patient with them, and limit the exercise of our liberty in front of them.

The primary motive that will cause us to follow this course of action is not self-centered desire, but love. In v.15 Paul refers to the believer who selfishly exercises his liberty, regardless of the consequences. He says of such a believer that he is “no longer walking in love.” “In love” (*kata agapen*) literally means not dominated by love. Thus, love will lead one to refrain from any selfish exercise of liberty that could hurt or damage another believer.

Conclusion: I spoke earlier about the true way to have peace and joy. It is by obtaining righteousness by repentance and faith in Christ. It also comes by living right. If you lack peace and joy, then why not trust in Jesus today, and receive the forgiveness of sin. He will make you right with God. Though you walked into this building condemned by your sin, you can walk out free from that condemnation.

Most of you are already Christians. Which type of Christian are you? Do you tend to feel like you are liberated to do as you please? Or do you tend to be strict in your own moral conduct, and in how you expect others to behave? Either way, God’s Word is clear from this text to both types of Christians. If you feel strictly bound by your religious traditions to avoid certain behaviors, then you should follow your conscience. Don’t do as others do, but do as your conscience tells you to do. And don’t judge other believers when they don’t follow your personal convictions. And don’t impose your personal convictions on others.

On the other hand, if you feel much more at liberty to engage in certain behaviors that some Christian find offensive or wrong, then you should let love be your guide, and not flaunt your liberty before other believers. We should be free to obey God, but we are not free to tear down or harm another believer. Let us take these principles, and apply them to our lives in the coming days.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, “God’s Discipline” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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