

## XXXII. Don't Be a Stumbling Block

March 28/29/30, 2017

Romans 14:13-23

**Aim:** To actively love one another by foregoing legitimate Christian liberties if they might cause a weaker brother in Christ to stumble over their conscience.

We have seen that the God-given diversity in the Body of Christ can conflict with our Lord's high call to unity. Diversity and unity are in natural antithesis because we humans 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 today.

In answer to this problem, Romans 14 tells us three things we need to know if we are to maintain unity amidst diversity. First, genuine acceptance of one another is the only option available to believers. The tendency of the liberated Christian to look down on his less broad-minded brother and the tendency of that brother to judge his less restricted brother must be put away. Second, individual Christians can disagree over customs and social habits and both be perfectly right with God. Third, we must submit to the Lordship of Christ and refrain from judging others because we will all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ and give account of ourselves to Him. These three elements are essential if we are to maintain Christian unity amidst our amazing diversity.

In this study we will see what we need to *do* in order to experience unity in diversity. Perhaps we have understood and accepted the logic of Paul's argument against passing judgment. However, the extremely delicate conscience of the 'weak' brother remains. What are we to do?

Although Paul begins vv. 1-12 with a plea to the 'strong' and quickly moves on to address both the 'strong' and the 'weak' (v. 3; cp. v. 10), his focus is on the 'weak' (vv. 3b-4; cp. vv. 7-9). Paul balances this focus by concentrating in vv. 13-23 almost exclusively on the 'strong.' On the negative side, Paul exhorts the 'strong' not to use their liberty in such a way that they would cause their weaker brothers to suffer spiritual harm (e.g., 'stumble'; cp. vv. 13b, 20b-21). Positively, Paul urges the 'strong' to recognize that their freedom on these matters ('their good' in v. 16) must be governed by love for their fellow believers (v. 15) and concern for the 'building up' of the body of Christ (v. 19). Structurally, Paul's exhortation to the 'strong' takes a form that resembles the one he has used in vv. 1-12. Again his basic exhortation is found at the beginning and at the end of the text – 'don't cause a weaker Christian to stumble' (vv. 13b-16 and vv. 19-23) – while a central section sets forth the basic theological rationale for his exhortation – the nature of the kingdom of God (vv. 17-18).

### A. Walking in Love (Romans 14:13-16)

#### 1. Two Meanings of "Judge" (14:13)

##### a) "Condemn" (14:13a)

<sup>13</sup>*Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer...*

'Let us no longer be judging one another' is transitional. The exhortation sums up vv. 1-12 while preparing for the new focus in vv. 13-23. Both the 'strong' Christian and the 'weak' Christian, Paul has made clear, are to stop standing in judgment over one another; for God has

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accepted each one, and it is to their master, the Lord who has redeemed them, and not to any fellow servant, that they are answerable.

‘Therefore’ refers back to verses 10-12, in which Paul reminds his readers that God alone is qualified and has the authority to judge the minds and hearts of His people, who will all stand before His judgment seat (v. 10) and give account of themselves to Him (v. 12; cp. 2 Cor. 5:10). Judgment is God’s exclusive prerogative. Consequently, we must ‘not judge one another’ (cp. Mt. 7:1-5). It is the unloving attitude of contemptuous superiority by strong believers and the equally unloving attitude of self-righteousness by weak believers (v. 3) by which they ‘judge one another.’ From Paul’s day to ours, those wrongful judgments have been major causes of disrespect, disharmony, and disunity in the church.

### b) “Decide” (14:13b)

*...but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.*

In the second half of the verse, Paul turns to the ‘strong’ in faith, using a play on the word *krinō* to forge his transition. In the first part of the verse, this verb means ‘condemn’; in the second half, however, it means ‘determine,’ ‘decide.’ Rather than ‘judging’ (condemning) others, the ‘strong’ in faith are to ‘judge’ (decide) ‘not to place a stumbling block or cause of offense before their fellow believer.’

Here there is a wordplay, a rhetorical device much loved by Paul. First, he said in verse 13a, ‘Let us not judge (*krinōmem*) one another,’ but then he says, ‘but rather judge (*krinate*)...’ That second ‘judgment’ or ‘decision’ is: ‘not to place a stumbling block or barrier before a brother.’

Paul uses the same Greek verb (*krinō*) with two different connotations in verse 13. In the first phrase, ‘let us not judge one another,’ the verb carries the idea of condemnation, as it does in verses 3, 4, and 10. But in the following phrase, the same verb is translated ‘determine,’ which refers to making a decision. Those two connotations are also found in the English word *judge*. ‘Being judgmental’ carries the negative idea of denunciation, whereas ‘using your best judgment’ refers to making a careful decision, with no negative connotation. Paul’s play on words demands that we should never be judgmental of fellow believers but instead should use our best judgment to help them.

‘Stumbling block’ translates a word that refers to that which causes a person to trip or stumble. The word took on a metaphorical sense and is always used in the NT with reference to spiritual downfall. The original literal sense of the verb *προσκοπτω* (*proskoptō*), from which *προσκομμα* (*proskomma*) is derived, ‘fall, fall over something,’ can be seen in Mt. 7:27: ‘the rain came down and the floods came and the winds blew and that house fell.’ The *-μα* ending on *προσκομμα* would normally indicate that it denotes the result of the action of falling or tripping. But, like many such nouns in Hellenistic Greek, it can also refer to the activity of falling or stumbling or even, as here, the cause of that stumbling. The word occurs 11 times in the LXX, usually with metaphorical significance.

Similar is the origin and use of *σκανδαλον* (*skandalon*), ‘cause of offense.’ It, too, originally denoted a literal ‘trap,’ but it came quickly to have a metaphorical meaning, ‘occasion of misfortune,’ ‘cause of ruin.’ The words are essentially synonymous here.

The apostle’s choice of words here calls for a complete determination not to be an obstruction because the word for ‘stumbling block’ means something carelessly left over which someone stumbles, whereas ‘hindrance’ means something deliberately left to ensnare another. We must

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determine not to be a witting or unwitting cause of a weaker brother's stumbling as we exercise our Christian freedom. Our Christian lives must be salted with a refusal to do anything that will harm the spiritual life of weaker brothers.

Paul neither here nor anywhere in this paragraph delineates the exact manner in which the 'strong' believer might cause 'spiritual downfall' to the 'weak' believer. But Paul's concern to remind the 'strong' believers that food, while in theory 'clean, might be 'unclean' to the 'weak' believer (v. 14), coupled with his concluding assertion that a person who acts against 'what he believes' commits sin (v. 23), suggests that he is thinking of the possibility that the 'strong' believers' exercise of liberty might create pressure on the 'weak' believers to do what their consciences were telling them not to do and so fall into sin and potential spiritual ruin.

### 2. Two View of Cleanness (14:14-15a)

#### a) *Clean and Unclean (14:14)*

##### (1) Nothing is Unclean in Itself (14:14a)

<sup>14</sup>*I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself...*

In this verse Paul lays the groundwork for the suggestion, implicit in his exhortation of v. 13b, that the behavior of the 'strong' could bring spiritual harm to the 'weak.' Paul begins by stating a fundamental principle – one to which the 'strong' would no doubt give an enthusiastic 'Amen!': 'I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.' 'Unclean' (κοινός, *koinos*) translates a word that means 'common.' But Jews began using the word to denote those things that by virtue of what they considered inappropriate contact with the ordinary, secular world were ritually defiled or unclean. Paul clearly uses the word here in this sense, as the antonym 'clean' (*katharos*) in the parallel v. 20 makes clear. This connotation of the word 'common' or 'unclean' also makes clear that Paul is not here claiming that there is nothing at all that is absolutely evil or sinful. His statement must be confined to the point at issue: ritual defilement as defined by OT/Jewish law.

Paul is not requiring the Gentile to come under Jewish food laws. In verse 14 he states in the strongest terms possible his rejection of the proposition that food can bring 'defilement' (*koinos*). Later, Paul will put it another way, that is, 'Everything is pure' (*kathara* – v. 20). Almost certainly Paul is echoing a teaching of Jesus on the subject of defilement. The Pharisees taught that 'defilement' could be 'caught' by contact with utensils used by a Gentile so that such vessels must be purified by 'washings.' Jesus, however, taught that we are 'defiled' by the evils that issue from our hearts, and not from what we touch or eat (see Mark 7:15-23).

It is not clear what role 'the Lord Jesus' has in this emphatic declaration of Paul's. Three possibilities deserve consideration: 1) 'I know *through my fellowship with the Lord Jesus* that nothing is unclean'; 2) 'I know *through my understanding of the truth revealed in the Lord Jesus* that nothing is unclean'; 3) 'I know *through the teaching of the Lord Jesus on earth* that nothing is unclean.' Good evidence can be marshaled for this last interpretation. Jesus' teaching about true defilement was so important that Mark (writing in Rome at about this time?) added his own editorial comment to make the point clear to his readers: 'And so He declared all foods clean' (Mark 7:19b). However, it is not clear at all from context which of the three views is meant.

Paul was not stating a personal opinion or preference about such things but was 'convinced in the Lord Jesus;' that is, he knew by divine revelation. Having been a Pharisee, Paul doubtless had

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been extremely careful about what he ate and did not eat. But he now understood with absolute certainty the truth which the Lord declared to Peter three times in a vision: ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy’ (Acts 10:15; cp. Mk. 7:15; 1 Tim. 4:3-5).

In averring that ‘nothing is unclean in itself,’ the apostle was agreeing with Jesus’ statement in Mark 7:14-19 that nothing that man eats defiles him. Inanimate things such as food and drink are morally neutral. Things have no moral qualities.

### (2) But It May Be Considered Unclean (14:14b)

*...but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.*

The strong Christian is entirely right in his conviction that he is at liberty to enjoy anything the Lord does not declare to be sinful. The weak Christian, on the other hand, is wrong in his understanding about some of those things. But he is not wrong in the sense of being heretical or immoral. He is wrong in the sense of not having complete and mature understanding, which causes his conscience to be unnecessarily sensitive. For that reason, ‘to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean’ in his mind.

However, ‘it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.’ So if a new Jewish believer feels (however wrongly) that certain meats are unclean and should not be eaten, they are truly unclean to him, and he would sin by partaking and would be in danger of moral shipwreck.

Paul states that ‘nothing’ of itself ‘defiles.’ Yet, as he now adds, we may nonetheless *feel* defiled. Conscience controlled by a powerful religious culture may tell me I am defiled by eating a forbidden food, notwithstanding the Lord’s declaration that ‘all foods are clean.’ It may take a time to be free to eat what was previously forbidden, as Paul recognizes in this passage.

The ‘strong’ in faith would certainly agree with the declaration of liberty in the first half of v. 14; indeed, their position may well be the result of their acquaintance, directly or indirectly, with Paul’s own bold stance on these matters. But, as he does in the very similar Corinthian situation (see 1 Cor. 8:4-7), Paul quickly adds a complementary and qualifying truth: ‘But to the one who reckons something to be unclean, to that person it is unclean.’ What Paul wants the ‘strong’ to realize is that people differ in their ability to internalize truth. The fact that Christ’s coming brought an end to the absolute validity of the Mosaic law (cp. 6:14, 15; 7:4), and thus explicitly to the ritual provisions of that law, was standard early Christian teaching. And, at the intellectual level, the ‘weak’ Christians may themselves have understood this truth. But Paul wants the ‘strong’ in faith to recognize that people cannot always existentially grasp such truth – particularly when it runs so counter to a long and strongly held tradition basic to their own identity as God’s people.

The principle here is clear: if we believe that something is a sin, even if it is not, yet we participate in it, then we have committed sin because we have done something we believe to be wrong, whether or not it actually is wrong. The sin is not eating the food or wearing the lipstick or playing Ping-Pong; the sin is doing something that we think is evil. In a word, we act against our conscience. At the Diet of Worms, Luther was called upon to recant his convictions, but he said, ‘My conscience is held captive to the Word of God ... to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.’ Luther understood the principles that Paul expounds in Romans 14. To act against conscience is neither right nor safe.

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Here we see not only Paul's grasp of the workings of the human heart, but also his big-hearted compassion for those Jews who would suffer through a Gentile's insensitivity. We are reminded of his concern for the 'weak brother,' that is, the former idolater who is now a believer who would be destroyed by a mature Christian's exercise of freedom to eat sacrificed meat in an idol's temple (1 Cor. 8:7-13). The details differ. In First Corinthians the 'weak brother' is a Gentile but in Romans the 'weak' are Jews. Yet Paul is pastorally concerned for both Jew and Gentile who are 'weak,' that is vulnerable and fragile in their relationship with the Lord.

### *b) Liberty and Love (14:15a)*

<sup>15</sup>*For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.*

Verse 15 probably relates especially to v. 13: Don't put a stumbling block in the way of a brother ... for this is just what you are doing – by insisting on exercising your freedom to eat food, you bring pain to your fellow believer and thereby violate the cardinal Christian virtue of love. The 'pain' that the 'strong' believer causes the 'weak' believer is more than the annoyance or irritation that the 'weak' believer might feel toward those who act in ways they do not approve. Its relationship to the warnings about spiritual downfall in vv. 13b and 15b show that it must denote the pain caused the 'weak' believer by the violation of his or her conscience. The eating of the 'strong,' coupled with their attitude of superiority and scorn toward those who think differently, can pressure the 'weak' into eating even when they do not yet have the faith to believe that it is right for them to do so. In behaving as they are, then, the 'strong' are ignoring what Paul has set forth in 12:9-21; 13:8-10 as basic to Christian conduct: love for 'the neighbor.'

Paul's major emphasis in this passage is on how our words and actions affect the spiritual welfare of fellow Christians. 'Is hurt' translates *lupeō*, which has the basic meaning of causing pain, distress, or grief. It is lamentable when Christians are harmed by unbelievers. But it is tragic when Christians hurt a brother Christian, particularly over matters that are not inherently wrong. A weak Christian can be hurt or distressed from watching another Christian say or do something he considers sinful. The hurt is deeper if the offending believer is admired and respected by the weaker one. A weak Christian also can be hurt when, by word or example, he is led by a stronger brother to go against the convictions of his own conscience. That is by far the greater offense. A Christian whose careless use of his liberty causes such hurt to other believers is 'no longer walking according to love.'

By 'made to suffer' Paul is thinking of spiritual confusion and discouragement that will lead to this Jewish believer falling away from his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Once more, Paul is calling on the Gentile to make practical concessions and to accommodate his behavior to the Jewish scruple (see v. 1). For the Gentile believer not to do so would be to fail to show love to his Jewish brother for whom Christ had died. Such 'love' (*agapē*) is the hallmark of the Christian. God's 'love' is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (5:5) and is to be shown towards our fellowmen. This is the truest fulfillment of the Law of God (13:8-10). That love is most chiefly shown in actions taken or not taken to seek and protect the salvation of others. Though he does not spell out what he means, most likely Paul's words mean that the Gentile will forgo eating meat when in the company of Jews.

Some commentators suggest 'what you eat' alludes to one's petty insistence upon having meat regardless of the consequences to others. The idea is flaunting or deliberately shocking the weaker brother with a display of Christian freedom. Paul is horrified at the thought. Rather, the key to exercising Christian freedom in all matters is 'walking in love.' Christian liberty does not

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mean flaunting your freedom and doing as you please. That would be license! Exercising Christian liberty is very much like walking a tightrope. As you walk the rope with balancing pole in hand, at one end of the pole is *love for others* and at the other is *Christian liberty*. When these are in balance, your walk is as it should be. We are all immensely free in Christ. Our only bondage is the bond of love to our fellow believers.

If we are the stronger brother, we are not to parade our freedom in the face of our weaker brother who is convinced otherwise. We are to be sensitive. The one with a misinformed conscience is our brother or sister in the faith.

It is our Christian duty, when exercising our freedom, not only to think about how our actions affect us but others. We must always remember that it is not our display of Christian freedom that commends our faith to the world, but our demonstration of *agape* love (cp. Jn. 13:35). The strong, mature Christian voluntarily limits his freedom out of love for his weaker brothers and sisters.

How far should one go in applying this? If we fully apply what Paul says, will not our conduct be controlled by the narrowest Christian in the Church? It is indeed possible for disordered personalities to dominate the Church. Voluntary limiting of our freedom is not meant to subject us to the prejudices of Christians who are well established in the faith but persistent in sub-Biblical legalism. In Rome the believers were relatively young in the faith, and their scrupulous consciences had an ostensible Biblical base. We must remember to wisely apply Christian self-restraint and never to unknowingly or knowingly, by our exercise of liberty, cause another Christian to go against his conscience.

### 3. Two Restrictions on Liberty (14:15b-16)

#### a) *Do Not Destroy (14:15b)*

*By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.*

Paul sharpens his point by issuing a direct command. This command raises the stakes in two ways. First, instead of speaking generally about the ‘spiritual harm’ (v. 13b) and ‘pain’ (v. 15a) that the ‘strong’ might cause the ‘weak,’ Paul stresses that their actions can ‘destroy’ (*απολλυμι, apollumi*) them. Pauline usage suggests that Paul is warning the ‘strong’ that their behavior has the potential to bring the ‘weak’ to ultimate spiritual ruin – failure to attain final salvation. If Paul is not simply exaggerating for effect, perhaps he thinks that the ‘weak’ in faith might be led by the scorn of the ‘strong’ to turn entirely away from their faith. As Hodge puts it: ‘Believers (the elect) are constantly spoken of as in danger of perdition. They are saved only if they continue steadfast unto the end. If they apostatize, they perish... Saints are preserved, not in despite of apostasy, but from apostasy.’

*Apollumi* (‘destroy’) refers to utter devastation. The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being, but of well-being. The term is often used in the New Testament to indicate eternal damnation (see, e.g., Mt. 10:28; Lk. 13:3; Jn. 3:16; Rom. 2:12), which applies to unbelievers. ‘To destroy ... him for whom Christ died,’ is not to cause his damnation but to seriously devastate his spiritual growth. When Jesus said, ‘It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish [*apollumi*]’ (Mt. 18:14), the context makes clear that ‘these little ones’ are believers. They have been ‘converted and become like children (v. 3) and ‘believe in Me’ (v. 6). Jesus was not concerned about their loss of salvation but about their loss of spiritual well-being, which, although not eternal loss, is an injury the Lord considers to be

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extremely grave. Even to ‘despise one of those little ones’ (v. 10) ‘for whom Christ died’ is a great offense to God. It is also important to note that the phrase ‘for whom Christ died’ is here used to describe believers. This is commonly called limited atonement, or particular redemption, the idea that Christ sacrificed His life on the cross only on behalf of the elect who come to faith.

Second, Paul accentuates the matter by reminding the ‘strong’ in faith about the tremendous sacrifice that Christ had already made to provide for the salvation of that ‘weak’ believer. If, Paul implies, Christ has already paid the supreme price for that ‘weak’ Christian, how can the ‘strong’ refuse to pay the quite insignificant price of a minor and occasional restriction in their diet?

### *b) Do Not Let (14:16)*

<sup>16</sup>*So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.*

The prohibition in this verse is a conclusion that Paul draws from what he has just said in vv. 14-15. Freedom from dietary laws is a ‘good’ thing, a legitimate implication of the coming of Jesus the Messiah and the New Covenant. But if the Christian were to use that freedom in such a way that a fellow believer was put in spiritual danger, that ‘good’ would quickly become something that would be ‘blaspheme’ – that is, it would become the cause of other people reviling and defaming that which is a divine gift. Paul is warning the ‘strong’ Christians that their insistence on exercising their freedom in ceremonial matters in the name of Christ can lead those who are spiritually harmed by their behavior to revile the legitimate freedom that Christ has won for them.

We find here another important ethical principle. We have to bend over backwards not to give the appearance of evil. We cannot do that perfectly, and there are some who are going to think we are doing evil no matter how careful we are in our behavior. However, as much as we can, we need to be careful that our good not be spoken of in evil terms.

It is possible to so abuse our liberty in Christ in regard to fellow believers that we create conflicts within the church that give the world cause to criticize and condemn those who claim to hold brotherly love in such high esteem. Although it brings much blessing and enjoyment to those who understand and exercise it properly, Christian liberty is not simply for our own benefit and certainly not for our selfish abuse. It is a gracious gift from God and a wonderfully ‘good thing.’ But like every other divine blessing, it can be misused in ways that are outside of, and often contrary to, God’s purposes. This ‘good thing’ of liberty is to be used carefully, with loving concern for our weaker brethren and with concern for its witness to the unbelieving world. It should not cause those brothers to stumble, be grieved, or harmed in any way; and it should never give the watching world an excuse for it to ‘be spoken of as evil.’

At the same time Paul is concerned that Gentiles are not brought under some kind of new Law in the matter of eating. Not only does meat of itself not defile; Paul actually calls the Gentile freedom to eat a ‘good’ thing. Paul is no legalist. But he understands that the Gentile believer’s freedom in Christ will easily be misunderstood, ‘blasphemed’ no less, by Jewish observers. It is his ‘blaspheming’ of the Gentile Christian that will cause the Jewish believer to ‘stumble’ (v. 13), to ‘suffer’ (v. 15a), and finally bring about spiritual ‘ruin’ (v. 15c). So Paul exhorts the Gentile, ‘Let not your good be badly spoken of.’

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### B. Serving the Lord (Romans 14:17-18)

In verses 17-18, Paul provides the theological underpinnings for his imperatives in vv. 13-16 and 19-23. The ‘strong’ need perspective; and this is just what Paul tries to give them here.

#### 1. Kingdom Matters (14:17)

##### a) *What the Kingdom Is Not (14:17a)*

<sup>17</sup>*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking...*

The ‘strong’ are placing too high a value on Christian freedom from ceremonial observances. By insisting that they exercise their liberty in these matters, they are causing spiritual harm to fellow believers and are thereby failing to maintain a proper focus on what is truly important in the kingdom of God. Theirs, paradoxically, is the same fault as that of the Pharisees, only in reverse: where the Pharisees insisted on strict adherence to the ritual law at the expense of ‘justice, mercy, and faith’ (Mt. 23:23), the ‘strong’ are insisting on exercising their freedom from the ritual law at the expense of ‘righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.’ For these are the qualities, Paul reminds the ‘strong’ that are what the kingdom of God is all about – not ‘eating and drinking.’

This is the first time in the passage that Paul has said anything about ‘drinking.’ He may add the word here simply because it is a natural complement to ‘eating.’ But it is also possible, in light of the reference in v. 21, that drinking wine was another issue that separated the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak.’ We would therefore assume that it was the ‘weak’ who abstained from drinking wine, while the ‘strong’ insisted on using their liberty to do so. But it is important to note that, supposing this to be the case, the ‘weak’ would have abstained not because they were afraid of the intoxicating or enslaving potential of alcohol, but because they were afraid that the wine had been contaminated by association with pagan religious practices.

The disputes concerning trivial matters that tear churches apart would not happen if we would just grasp the principle that the kingdom of God is not about eating, drinking, lipstick, or any external thing.

Here Paul, with finely tuned pastoral insight, lifts the entire discussion to a higher level than mere eating and drinking. We are prone to think that the Kingdom of God 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, or how he combs his hair or does not. 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 and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.’ Paul’s words and their inspired arrangement are supremely beautiful and truly spectacular.

God’s governance of His people (His ‘kingdom’) as expressed in history ahead of the End, says Paul, is not expressed in what they eat or abstain from. Eating and drinking are not unimportant but they are secondary, that is, they are peripheral. Rather God’s kingdom here and now is the enjoyment of His gift of ‘righteousness’ in Christ crucified and risen, with its accompanying ‘peace’ with God (5:1) and the ‘joy’ of heart brought by the Holy Spirit (5:3, 5).

##### b) *What the Kingdom Is (14:17b)*

*...but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

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Instead, the kingdom is about ‘righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.’ We have here a triad of virtues that describes what the kingdom of God is about.

### (1) Righteousness

‘Righteousness’ is, of course, a central theme of Romans, where it usually refers to the ‘justifying’ action of God in Christ and the resultant status enjoyed by believers. But the context focuses on relations among believers. Probably, then, the main reference here is to ‘ethical’ righteousness – right behavior within the community of believers.

‘Righteousness’ in our daily living should always be more precious to us than the exercise of our liberties. Even though those liberties are God-given, we should seek continually to be ‘filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God’ (Phil. 1:11).

The primary eternal element of God’s Kingdom is ‘righteousness.’ The experience of God’s righteousness in our lives produces an infinite longing for holiness, a driving desire to know Him better, an intense thirsting in the inner parts (cp. Ps. 42:1-2a). Jesus enjoined the pursuit of righteousness as the recommended pursuit for all humanity in Matthew 5:6—‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.’

First, the kingdom is about righteousness. The goal of the kingdom is not spirituality. The goal of our Christian life is not spirituality. Spirituality is a good thing, but it is not the goal; it is a means to the goal. The goal of the Christian life is righteousness, and we are to seek it. We are to strive to be righteous people. The Pharisees majored in the pursuit of righteousness, but true righteousness is not a pharisaical parading of a holier-than-thou attitude (cp. Mt. 5:20). Our first priority is to pursue God’s kingdom and His righteousness (Mt. 6:33). We know, however, that all our righteousness is as filthy rags. The epistle of Romans was written to show that the only way we can stand before God is if we are clothed not in our own righteousness but in the righteousness of Christ.

Justification is not the end of the Christian life; it is the beginning and it is to be followed by a rigorous pursuit of holiness. That is what righteousness is. To be a mature Christian is to live according to the principles of God. Righteousness is not defined in categories of eating and drinking. Churches that elevate trivial matters as the true test of Christian living are destructive. To say people are Christian only if they do not go to movies or dances is nonsense. Anybody can refrain from those things. It is the fruit of the Spirit that Christ wants for us—love, patience, longsuffering, meekness, humility. Paul is basically telling the church at Rome to grow up.

### (2) Peace

‘Peace’ as v. 19 strongly suggests, will have a similar horizontal meaning: harmony and mutual support of the believers with one another.

‘Peace’ in the church—the loving, tranquil relationship of believers who are more interested in serving others than in pleasing themselves—is also more important than individual liberties and is a powerful witness to the unbelieving world. It is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

Properly following the eternal element of righteousness is ‘peace,’ that profound inner satisfaction that only God’s presence can give. Peace with God is the secret of peace with one another. Kingdom peace is an inner unflappability that remains undisturbed by minor irritations, a quiet assurance that God is at work.

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Second, the kingdom of God is about peace. There are so-called peace-makers in the church who say that since doctrine divides, we must not enter into debates about theological matters. Luther called that *carnal* peace, because it is born of the flesh and comes from fear of conflict or cowardice. Of course, we are not to be bellicose people, looking for a fight and being contentious over every minor point, which happens when immature people major in minors.

### (3) Joy

It is when these blessings are experienced that the community will also be characterized by ‘joy.’ All three blessings come as a result of the believer’s experience of the Holy Spirit.

Like peace, the ‘joy’ of believers is a product of righteousness. It is both a mystery and a strong attraction to the world and is often used by the Holy Spirit to draw men and women to Christ. Also like peace, joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, there is the eternal element of ‘joy in the Holy Spirit.’ This joy is the outward mark of Christ’s presence. The Kingdom of God consists not of externals but of eternals. How wonderful it would be if we would concentrate on these things. How easy it is then to forgo some external freedom for the sake of another believer.

Third, the kingdom of God is about joy. It does not consist of a company of sourpusses. We should be happy people. The kingdom of God is about the joy that has been shed abroad in our hearts because we have been redeemed by the Lord our God. Why should we be glum and fuss over who eats meat and drinks wine? Such things are not what the kingdom of God is about, according to Paul. Life in the kingdom is about loving the things of God and loving those for whom Christ died. That is the recipe for mature Christian unity.

## 2. Kingdom Service (14:18)

<sup>18</sup>*Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.*

Paul now underscores the point that he has just made: the one who serves Christ in ‘this’ both pleases God and is ‘esteemed (*δοκιμος, doikmos*) by people.’ It is preferable to interpret ‘this’ as the proper kingdom focus that Paul has delineated in v. 17, with the phrase as a whole denoting the manner of service: ‘the one who serves Christ by focusing on those matters that are truly central to the kingdom.’ It is only as the ‘strong’ submit to Christ and the demands of His kingdom in this matter of ceremonial observances that they will meet with God’s approval. At the same time, by following Christ in love and putting ‘righteousness, peace, and joy’ ahead of ‘eating and drinking,’ the ‘strong,’ rather than being ‘blasphemed’ by the ‘weak,’ will be esteemed by them.

Notice that ‘serving Christ’ is by serving the brother believer. Christian service as stated here is not vague and unfocused but practical and ‘down to earth.’ In serving the risen Christ, Paul was concerned above all for the welfare of the fellow-Christian, in this case the *spiritual* welfare of the marginalized Jewish believer. This ‘service,’ says Paul, is ‘pleasing to God’ (*euarestos tō theō*), a term originating in a temple sacrifice ‘acceptable’ to the Lord but used in the New Testament for living acceptably in the presence of God ahead of His end-time judgment (cp. 12:2; 2 Cor. 5:9; Eph. 5:10; Heb. 13:21). At the same time, this ‘service’ is ‘approved by men,’ that is, it ‘passes the test’ (*dokimos*), a blacksmith’s term for ironwork that is ‘tried and tested.’

*Dokimos* (‘approved’) refers to acceptance after careful examination, as when a jeweler carefully inspects a gem under a magnifying glass to determine its genuineness and value. When we serve

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Christ selflessly, we prove ourselves ‘to be blameless and innocent children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation among whom you appear as lights in the world’ (Phil. 2:15).

We are then acceptable to God who sees our hearts and approved by men who see our actions. The overall principle here is this. Whether we be ‘weak’ (limited in freedom) or strong (more liberated), we make a great mistake if we focus on externals. The weak shrivels his Christianity by seeing the externals as a road to greater righteousness. The strong trivializes his faith by insisting on his rights to the externals. If we flaunt our freedom, we are far less emancipated than we imagine.

The Kingdom of God is not operative in your life if your rights are so important to you that you are willing to separate from a brother who does not agree with you. The fact is, the man who feels he must demonstrate his emancipation on every possible occasion is a slave in spite of his apparent freedom, for the need to prove his liberty has become a tyranny. Whether we are strong or weak, we are to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God, focusing not on the externals, but on the elements of eternity—‘righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.’

### C. Pursuing Clear Consciences (Romans 14:19-23)

After his ‘indicative’ interlude, Paul turns back to ‘imperative,’ exhorting the Roman Christians to put into practice in their relationships with each other the principles of the kingdom that he has just set forth (vv. 17-18). Verse 19, then, introduces the concluding section of commands in this paragraph (19-23), a section that matches in both structure and, to a lesser extent, content, the opening series of exhortations (vv. 13-16).

#### 1. Exhortation (14:19-20a)

##### a) *Do Build Up (14:19)*

<sup>19</sup>*So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.*

Paul now exhorts the Roman Christians to ‘pursue those things that make for peace.’ This ‘peace,’ more clearly here than in v. 17, is horizontal: peace with other Christians. As v. 20 makes clear, Paul is still addressing the ‘strong’: he calls on them to maintain the kind of attitude and behavior with respect to the matters of dispute in the Roman church that will foster harmony between the two factions. Humility, selfless love, and compassion for the needs of others are among the things which ‘make for peace.’

Here we find a conclusion that comes from Paul’s previous reasoning. It is a call to action. When we pursue something, we chase after it not casually but with a degree of earnestness. We are to chase after and seek diligently the things that make for peace. The opposite of peace is war; it is conflict. God’s people are not to chase after fights and look for conflict. We are to search for things that make for peace, and the sort of peace we are to chase is peace that passes understanding. It is the peace that Jesus left as His legacy (Jn. 14:27).

Paul exhorts them also to pursue ‘those things that make for edification of one another.’ Paul probably is thinking more of the edification, or ‘building up,’ of the church as a whole than of the edification of individual believers. ‘Those things’ that edify the church are probably, then, a more specific way of describing ‘those things’ that lead to peace. The strong believers will foster peace in the community by making the interests of the church as a whole their priority.

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To edify, to produce an edifice, involves building, which is the stark opposite of destroying. Paul is concerned about that when it comes to manifesting love in the body of Christ. He wants his readers to recognize that it is much easier to destroy our brother than to edify him. Christ came not to destroy us but to destroy the works of the Devil. He came to build for Himself a people that will manifest His image. That is what we are to pursue in the church. We are not to be known for being critical, for attacking each other and gossiping. Slander is the principle work of Satan, which is why his title is Slanderer. He is the destructive one who brings false claims to tear people apart. We are called in the name of Jesus to build up, not tear apart.

In the exercise of our freedom, we must always ask ourselves if what we are doing is building up others, especially those younger and less experienced in the faith. If we cannot answer in the affirmative, we must refrain.

### *b) Don't Tear Down (14:20a)*

<sup>20</sup>*Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.*

This prohibition is the flip side of the positive exhortation to ‘pursue ... those things that make for edification’ (v. 19b); for ‘tear down’ (*καταλνω, kataluō*) is a natural antonym of ‘build up’ (*οικοδομew, oikodomeō*). ‘The work of God,’ accordingly, probably refers to the Christian community rather than to the individual ‘weak’ believer. Paul is warning ‘strong’ believers that they can seriously damage the church – destroy its unity and sap its strength – through their attitudes and actions toward the ‘weak.’ And they cause this damage ‘for the sake of food’ – because they persist in behaving in a certain way in a matter that is peripheral, at best, to the kingdom of God.

‘Do not tear down’ translates the present imperative of *kataluō*, suggesting that Paul was commanding certain believers in Rome to discontinue something they were already doing. In the broader context of Romans 14 and 15, Paul’s warnings about food and drink relate to *anything* not sinful in itself that might be said or done that would cause a weaker Christian to be offended and spiritually harmed. Also in this context, ‘the work of God’ clearly refers to believers. We would consider it an appalling crime for someone to deface a Rembrandt painting, to shatter a sculpture by Michelangelo, or to smash a Stradivarius violin. How infinitely worse is it to ‘tear down a work of God, a man ‘for whom Christ died (v. 15).

## **2. Principle (14:20b-21)**

### *a) Stating the Principle (14:20b)*

*Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.*

To be sure, Paul admits, the strong believers are right to think that they possess the freedom as the New Covenant people of God to eat and drink without any restriction from the Old Covenant law – ‘all things are clean (*καθαρος, katharos*).’ But, as he did earlier when making the same point (v. 14), Paul immediately qualifies this assertion of liberty. In the former verse, Paul’s qualification had to do with the perception and attitude of the ‘weak’ believer: ‘to the one who reckons something to be unclean, to that person it is unclean.’ But context and grammar make it more likely that the ‘person who eats’ here is the ‘strong’ believer. Paul is therefore warning the ‘strong’ believer that it is wrong for him or her to eat ‘while causing offense’ or ‘if it cause [another] to stumble.’

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The apostle reminds us again that he is not speaking about sinful and unholy things, but about discretionary liberties that are good gifts from God. All such things ‘indeed are clean’ and good in themselves (cp. vv. 14, 16). The danger is that, when they are exercised selfishly and carelessly by strong Christians, those very blessings can become ‘evil for the man who eats and gives offense.’

### b) Applying the Principle (14:21)

<sup>21</sup>*It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.*

Paul again uses antonyms to elaborate: as it is ‘wrong’ (*κακος, kakos*) for the ‘strong’ believer to eat while causing offense to the weaker brother, so it is ‘good’ (*καλον, kalon*) ‘not to eat meat or to drink wine or to do anything’ that might cause that brother to stumble. The ‘stumbling’ will again (cp. vv. 13b, 20b) consist in the ‘weak’ in faith, under pressure from the arguments and example of the ‘strong,’ doing what they still think is wrong. The ‘weak’ probably abstained from meat because they feared that it would not meet the ritual requirements of the OT law. Paul’s reference here to ‘drinking wine’ probably implies that the same believers avoided wine out of similar concerns: for wine was widely used in pagan religious libations (see also v. 17). But Paul clearly intends to make the principle he states here as widely applicable as possible by adding ‘or anything else.’ The believer who seeks the peace and edification of the church should gladly refrain from activities that might cause a fellow believer to suffer spiritual harm.

Paul speaks of the ‘wrong’ (*kakos*) and the ‘good’ (*kalos*) these Gentiles can do their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters. The greatest ‘wrong’ we can do is to deflect another person from finding eternal salvation in Christ. Likewise, the greatest ‘good’ we can render is to facilitate another’s salvation. ‘Eating meat’ and ‘drinking wine’ in themselves are not the issue; both are ‘pure’ and neither is ‘defiled.’ The only question is: what will be the effect of this eating and drinking on the Jewish believer’s place in the body of Christ in Rome. Paul is in no doubt. For the sake of the Jew’s salvation the Gentiles need to make concessions and to accommodate their practices to Jewish scruples.

Paul is not prohibiting all drinking of alcoholic beverages, which neither the Old nor New Testament forbids. The issue concerns doing ‘anything’ at all ‘by which your brother stumbles.’ The pleasure of eating offensive food or drink, or the pleasure of doing anything else our liberty allows us to do, is absolutely trivial compared to the spiritual welfare of a brother or sister in Christ. It is worse than trivial. It becomes actually sinful if we have reason to believe it might cause one of the little ones for whom Christ died to stumble.

This is a fine summary statement and even finer if we translate the word ‘good’ in its root sense of ‘beautiful’; ‘It is *beautiful* not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to stumble. Such behavior or thought is beautiful because it shows there is love among the brethren. It is beautiful because arrogance is gone. It is beautiful because it is unselfish. It is beautiful because it means one has a finely tuned sense of spiritual proportion, recognizing secondary issues for what they are. It is especially beautiful because it puts others first.

The Christian must regulate his freedom to take into account the feeble conscience of a weaker brother or sister. We must actively pursue those things that make for peace and mutual building up of one another. This is never easy, but it is the way of love.

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### 3. Conscience (14:22-23)

Paul gives advice to the strong regarding the use of his conscience in verse 22 and advice to the weak in respect to his conscience in verse 23.

#### a) *The Conscience of the Strong (14:22)*

<sup>22</sup>*The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.*

This is the first time since the beginning of the chapter that Paul has used the language of faith to characterize the parties in the dispute. As in v. 1, ‘faith’ does not refer to general Christian faith but to convictions about the issues in dispute in Rome that arise out of one’s faith in Christ. Paul is not, then, telling the ‘strong’ Christian to be quiet about his or her faith in Christ – a plea that would be quite out of place in the NT! Nor is he necessarily requiring ‘strong’ believers never to mention their views on these matters or to speak of their sense of freedom before others. As the context suggests, the silence that Paul requires is related to the need to avoid putting a stumbling block in the way of the ‘weak.’ This will mean that the ‘strong’ are not to brag about their convictions before the ‘weak’ and, especially, that they are not to propagandize the ‘weak.’

Verse 22 obviously is directed to the strong Christian, the one who understands and appreciates his freedom. When by sincere ‘faith’ and a correct understanding of Scripture we have a ‘conviction before God’ that a custom, a practice, or an activity is worthwhile and good, we dare not denounce it as sinful. Nor should we allow our conscience to ‘condemn’ us for exercising it—with Paul’s repeated stipulation that we gladly relinquish that freedom for the sake of a brother or sister in Christ.

Paul is saying, what you believe about neutral things is between you and God. Keep it that way. Moreover, you are a happy (blessed) person if in exercising your liberty you do not condemn yourself by harming another. You are blessed if your exercise of freedom is free from doubt. You are blessed if no one is being scandalized and led toward sin by you. You are blessed because you feel God’s pleasure.

The blessing that Paul adds at the end of the verse can be taken in two different ways. 1) Paul might be commending believers who have no reservations about their own beliefs on these disputed matters and therefore have no cause to ‘reproach’ themselves for their conduct. 2) Paul might be encouraging ‘strong’ believers to ‘walk in love’ toward their ‘weak’ fellow believers and so give themselves – or God – no reason to ‘condemn’ themselves. The first alternative is preferable. Paul’s point, then, is that the ‘strong’ should be content with the blessing God has given them in enabling them to understand the liberty that their faith provides them, without feeling it necessary to flaunt that liberty before their ‘weaker’ fellow believers.

#### b) *The Conscience of the Weak (14:23)*

<sup>23</sup>*But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.*

In contrast to the Christian who acts from conviction is the ‘weak’ Christian who has doubts or ‘who wavers’ (*διακρινόμενος, diakrinomenos*). The doubts of such Christians arise from the fact that they do not have a strong enough faith to believe that they can ignore the ritual elements of the OT law. Doubters such as this, Paul says, are ‘condemned’ (*κατακεκρίται, katakekritai*). Condemnation comes not because of the eating itself; as Paul has already explained (vv. 14, 20), God’s condemnation is eating when one does not have the faith to believe that it is right to do it.

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This, Paul claims, is ‘sin.’ Why? Because, Paul goes on to explain, ‘everything that is not out of faith is sin.’

Verse 23 just as obviously is directed to the weak Christian, the one whose conscience is still offended by certain religious carryovers from his former life. And the apostle’s counsel to him is just as simple and direct. The corresponding stipulation is that, just as the strong believer commits sin by causing a weak brother to go against his own conscience, the weak brother sins, ‘is condemned,’ when, contrary to the convictions of his own faith, he succumbs to that which his conscience condemns.

Paul here asserts a general theological principle. But it is necessary to describe accurately just what that principle is. Most important is to realize that ‘faith’ here almost certainly has the same meaning that it has elsewhere in this chapter (vv. 1, 22): ‘conviction’ stemming from one’s faith in Christ. Paul is not, then, claiming that any act that does not arise out of a basic trust and dependency on Christ is sinful, true as that may be. What he here labels ‘sin,’ rather, is any act that does not match our sincerely held convictions about what our Christian faith allows us to do and prohibits us from doing. Ridderbos says, ‘For a Christian not a single decision and action can be good which he does not think he can justify on the ground of his Christian conviction and his liberty before God in Christ.’ Violation of the dictates of the conscience, even when the conscience does not conform perfectly with God’s will, is sinful.

Paul has advice for the man who is weak in the faith, the man with the scrupulous conscience. It may be that this may disobey or silence his scruples. He may sometimes do something because everyone else is doing it. He may do it because he does not wish to stand in a minority of one. He may do it because he does not wish to be different. He may do it because he does not wish to court ridicule or unpopularity. Paul’s answer is that if, for any of these reasons, a man defies his conscience he is guilty of sin. If a man in his heart of hearts believes a thing to be wrong, if he cannot rid himself of the ineradicable feeling that it is forbidden, then, if he does it, for him it is sin. A neutral thing only becomes a right thing when it is done out of faith, out of the real, reasoned conviction that it is the right thing to do. The only motive for doing anything is that a man believes it to be right. When a thing is done out of social convention, out of fear of unpopularity to please men, then it is wrong. Conscience is not an infallible guide, but it is wrong to go against one’s own conscience. We ought to never sin against our conscience, no matter who pressures us to do so.

And we must remember that Paul cites this theological point to buttress his exhortation of the ‘strong.’ The ‘strong,’ he is suggesting, should not force the ‘weak’ to eat meat, or drink wine, or ignore the Sabbath, when the ‘weak’ are not yet convinced that their faith in Christ allows them to do so. For to do so would be to force them into sin, to put a ‘stumbling’ block in their way (cp. v. 13, 20-21). First, their faith must be strengthened, their consciences enlightened; and then they can follow the ‘strong’ in exercising Christian liberty together.

For next time: Read Romans 15:1-13.