

Freedom With Consideration

Romans 14:13-23

We are wrapping up our study of Romans 14 today and have one more sermon in this series next week. We have a situation in this chapter where some who didn't fully understand their freedom in Christ were struggling because of some things that those who were more mature in faith were doing. They were eating meat, drinking wine, and not observing certain holy days and the ones who were weaker in faith felt like these were wrong and sinful, and they had a really hard time knowing that people in the church were doing them. The question I have is, what should those who were more mature do in that situation? Theologically speaking, they were right – they had the freedom in Christ to do what they were doing, the only problem was that some people in the church thought they were wrong and were having a hard time with it.

Should those who are mature keep doing what they're doing when they're in a situation where it offends someone else? Should they try to convince the others that there's nothing wrong with it? If they fail to convince them, should they shrug their shoulders and keep doing what they're doing? Does it really matter what other people think if we know we're right before God?

I've been in those situations before. I become aware of something that I'm fine doing before Christ that someone else thinks is wrong. And I know that if they found out I was doing it, they would struggle. All of us have personal convictions we live by and sometimes people think something is wrong that you have no problem with doing: drinking alcohol, smoking, getting a tattoo, listening to secular music, watching PG-13 or R rated movies, trick-or-treating, yoga, playing Pokémon, reading Harry Potter, voting for Trump, voting for Biden, wearing or not wearing a mask...

When people at church have a hard time with where we land in our Christian freedom, what should we do when we're around them? What's God's will for us? How can we represent Christ well? Paul walks us through the answers to these questions in our passage for today.

Read Romans 14:13.

¹³ Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

So Paul just got done telling this church to not pass judgment on each other over their differing opinions about eating meat, and it would be easy to walk away at this point with kind of a stubborn attitude toward those who disagree, especially if you've been feeling judged: "That's right, don't judge me! I'm free to do whatever God leads me to do." So in Paul's situation the person who feels the freedom to eat meat might feel like they can do so whenever and wherever they want. Is that how we should respond when we know someone is offended by what we're doing?

That's not where Paul goes. After teaching them to stop passing judgment on one another, he then turns around and tells them they have the responsibility in their Christian freedom to take into consideration where the other people are coming from. "Don't judge each other – you're free to follow your convictions regarding meat – but in your freedom be careful not do anything to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another."

According to Matthew Poole's Commentary, a stumbling block is the part of a trap or snare that is sprung or falls in order to catch an animal and bring about its demise. So Paul is talking about anything we do that might trip up or hinder a fellow believer in their walk with the Lord. Even though we have the freedom in Christ to do things that might be offensive to other people, we have the responsibility before Christ and before our brothers and sisters, to avoid doing them in their presence.

A common example people point to in the church today is drinking alcohol. Some Christians feel the freedom before God to drink an alcoholic beverage – they're not drinking to get drunk, they're just drinking because they enjoy it. But others feel strongly that they shouldn't drink and that God has called them to completely abstain from alcohol for various reasons. So the first person has the freedom to drink, but the other may be offended or struggle if they do. They might struggle with judgmental or condemning thoughts; they might struggle with anger and feel like that person is leading people astray, they might be so uncomfortable they can't be around that person, or, in some cases, they might end up being tempted to do something they feel is a sin.

What should you do in this kind of situation? It's like you're holding your Christian freedom over a certain behavior in one hand, and the faith of your fellow believer

in the other hand who will be tripped up if you exercise your freedom. What should you do? Paul would say, “Don’t do anything to trip them up. You’re free to act upon your conscience, but not if it causes your brother or sister to stumble.”

I want to share an example from Paul’s life that I ran across that was very eye opening for me. One of the issues Paul felt very strongly about was that Gentiles should not be pressured into getting circumcised in order to join the church. Circumcision was a big deal to the Jews because it was the sign that they belonged to God, so they felt very strongly that Gentile converts should get circumcised. But whenever Paul came up against them in the church, he argued strongly against that idea. Gentile converts had the freedom to not get circumcised.

This issue came up in his home church in Antioch. At the beginning of Acts 15 Paul and Barnabas had a big argument with some Jewish Christians in Antioch about this issue, and they finally decided to go to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem so they could settle the dispute. The apostles and elders agreed with Paul and wrote letters to be sent to the churches about this decision. Paul was one of the messengers sent to deliver the letters. So he’s carrying a letter from the apostles and elders that supported what he strongly believed.

He got to a place called Lystra and met a young disciple named Timothy who had a Gentile background, so he had never been circumcised and Paul would have felt strongly that he did not need to be. Paul was so impressed with Timothy that he wanted him to accompany him as he went to churches, delivering the letter. Timothy would be a great example of how a Gentile did not have to be circumcised to be a faithful disciple of Christ – a living example that demonstrated a Gentile’s freedom in Christ.

But I want you to see what happened in Acts 16:1-5. *“Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. ² He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.”*

Did you catch that? This really stuck out to me when I saw it this summer. Paul willingly laid aside his strong convictions about Christian freedom – convictions that he had a fresh letter from the apostles and elders of Jerusalem to support. He was going to churches that had Jews in them who would have really struggled with Timothy, and instead of coming against them and pushing the fact that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised, he chose not to do anything that would cause them to stumble. The man who felt very strongly that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised, had his Gentile accomplice circumcised. And because of that they avoided any unnecessary barriers to the gospel – their time in those churches was very fruitful and the letter was well received.

Paul didn't have a stubborn attitude. Instead, he considered where the Jewish Christians were coming from and refused to put a stumbling block in their way. He laid down his personal feelings for the sake of his brothers and sisters in Christ who weren't yet where he was. I love that story – he's doing exactly what he told the Romans to do in Rom. 14:13: *“decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.”* He says it like this at the beginning of Romans 15: *“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. ² Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”*

Now as he continues in Romans 14, he gives several reasons why we should go that route.

Read Verse 14: *“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”*

So Paul knew that in Christ, people were free to eat meat – Jews and Gentiles alike – nothing is unclean in itself. But he also took into consideration that there were some Jews who didn't see it that way yet and for them to eat meat was a sin. Whether they were right or wrong didn't matter in that situation. What mattered was where those Jewish Christians were coming from. And if the Gentiles decided to just go ahead and eat meat anyway, they would be causing their Jewish brothers and sisters to really struggle. We need to give consideration to where other people are coming from, even if we know we're right and free do to what we're doing, so that we don't cause them to struggle. Php. 2:3-4 says, *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more*

significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

So if we take the issue of drinking alcohol as an example, even though you may feel the freedom to drink, and even though you may know that theologically you are right, if you're around people who think it's wrong – that's more important than your freedom. They think it's wrong, so in that situation, you need to abstain. Don't do something that will cause a barrier and trip them up. Your unity and fellowship and their faith is much more important than your freedom.

Read Verse 15: *“For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.”*

To walk in love is to consider the interests of others as more important than your own. It's to be willing to make sacrifices for the benefit of others. And that's what Christ calls each of us to do – it's a very central aspect of what it means to be a Christian.

When we don't do that and we decide to exercise our Christian freedom in spite of the fact that we know it offends someone, we no longer walk in love. We put ourselves first and we devalue the other person. If I know someone thinks trick-or-treating is a sin and I do it and don't care if they find out, I'm not walking in love. I may still go trick-or-treating, but I need to do it in a way or in an area that doesn't create an issue. If I know someone thinks drinking is wrong, I'm not going to invite them over and offer them a drink. I'm not going to order a drink if I'm out with them at a restaurant. My freedom isn't worth causing problems with them.

Read Verse 16: *“So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.”*

When you know something is good and you're free to do it, but you know someone else sees it the opposite way, if you go ahead and do it without being considerate of them, you will cause that to be spoken of as evil. And in a way, you will kind of turn it into something that is evil because you are turning it into something that is unloving and inconsiderate.

That's what's happened with a lot of these things we've talked about. We make them more offensive by ignoring the feelings and convictions of others and

insisting on doing them, so people dig in their heels and strengthen their arguments against them. Paul says, “Don’t do that. Don’t let what you regard as good (your freedoms) to be spoken of as evil.”

Read Verses 17-19: *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”*

Here Paul points out that these things that divide us are so trivial compared to what the kingdom of God is about – it’s not about eating and drinking; it’s about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. So the one who chooses to not make them an issue by laying down their rights and being considerate of where others are coming from is serving Christ – they are acceptable to God and approved by men. Let’s not get hung up on squabbling over these divisive issues! Instead let’s pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding. Let’s focus on what’s most important and not get distracted by these things. We tend to make these issues ultra-important in the church – and they just aren’t when you compare them with matters of the kingdom of God which are the matters of the church. They just aren’t that important – they aren’t worth it like I tried to point out a couple weeks ago.

Read Verses 20-21: *“Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”*

This is really a summary of what Paul is saying. Your Christians freedoms are not worth destroying the work of God, so don’t make them an issue. Don’t insist on being able to do them or prove why you’re right. It’s just not worth it. You may be right about the issue, but you’re wrong if you push the issue and make someone stumble over it. God’s will is that you don’t do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

And then a final word for the members of each party. For those who were free to eat meat he says in verse 22: *“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.”*

I was confused by what he meant, but then I read a good explanation in Ellicott's Commentary: For those of you wishing to exercise your freedoms in Christ, *"reserve the exhibition of your faith to the privacy of your own direct communion with God, and do not display it ostentatiously in public where it may do harm."* In other words, if you're one whose faith gives you the freedom to eat meat, or drink alcohol, or whatever... keep that a private matter between you and God. You don't need to post it on Facebook or make it public. Keep it between you and God. By doing that you will be blessed, knowing that you're not passing judgment on yourself by causing others to stumble.

And to those who were choosing to abstain from eating meat, Verse 23: *"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."*

Again I was confused, but in a nutshell I think what he's saying is this: If you don't feel the freedom to eat meat, or drink alcohol, or whatever, then don't. Follow your conscience. If you do something contrary to what your conscience is telling you to do, it will be sin for you, so don't do it.

I feel like these verses we've looked at today are some of the most valuable verses for us to apply to our lives today in the midst of all the controversy in our nation and the divisive issues that have come to the surface. People in the world are going to be self-seeking and insisting on their own way, no matter what other people might think. But we are called to be different in the family of God. We are called to be considerate. We don't have to go against our convictions and agree with those who differ from us. We can hold to what we believe and act upon our convictions. But when we're around those who differ, we're to be careful to not make our convictions the focus – don't make them an issue. Don't do anything that will cause your brother or sister to stumble. Keep your opinions private, between you and God. Don't insist on doing things your way. Focus on the things that are most important – matters that pertain to the kingdom of God.

When it comes to wearing masks, I think the Lord is calling us to "read the crowd" we're in. If you're with people who will be offended or bothered by you not wearing a mask, put a mask on. It's that simple. Don't destroy the work of God for the sake of a stupid mask. It's just not worth it. Be considerate of where they're coming from and put the mask on. Likewise, if you're with people who will be

offended by you wearing a mask, consider taking the mask off – leave it on if you’re wearing it for your own safety – but if you’re wearing it to protect other people and those people aren’t wearing masks and you can tell they’re going to be bothered if you wear one, maybe you should take it off. Again, it’s a really simple rule to follow and you can know you are pleasing to God – whether you put it on or take it off.

When it comes to promoting a political candidate, again I think the Lord is calling us to “read the crowd.” If you’re with people you know support the other candidate, don’t start pushing your candidate. It’s just not worth it. Don’t destroy the work of God for the sake of politics.

I hope these instructions from Paul bring clarity and simplicity to some of the issues we’re dealing with. I hope you can see the heart of God behind what’s being said. Christ has given you the freedom to follow your conscience in these issues, but he has not given you the freedom to do so in a way that causes other Christians to stumble. The kingdom of God is far more important than these other things. So be considerate, put others first, and let’s keep our focus on the most important things.