

**“The ABC’s of the Christian Life (15);
Following Jesus Christ Rightly #9: Christian Liberty and Toleration**

Introduction:

In addressing the most important Scriptural lessons or principles for living the Christian life, that is, in order for us to follow Jesus Christ rightly, the subject we address today should certainly be included. The Word of God speaks of what is commonly referred to as *Christian liberty*. God would have His people serve Him with a clear conscience, so understanding Christian liberty is important in this regard.

Now a number of the lessons that we have already considered had to do with us as individual Christians living before our Lord in a right manner. But the principle of Christian liberty not only speaks to how we live before God as individual Christians, but it also touches on how we are to live alongside one another as Christians. We will see that it is important to live before God with a clear conscience, but it is also important that we allow and enable our brothers and sisters in Christ to also live before God with a clear conscience. In other words, not only does Christian liberty influence our personal relationship with God, but it also influences and effects our fellowship with one another in the local church, the body of Christ.

What is meant by the biblical teaching of *Christian liberty*? When one becomes a Christian, God sets him at liberty from the bondage under which he had formerly lived. He sets His people free. Our Lord Jesus said, “Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

From what bondage was the believer set free? *First, the Lord has set free the Christian from the penalty of sin* that had formerly condemned him. Paul wrote of Christians “having been set free from sin” (Rom 6:18). *Second, the Lord has set free the Christian from the enslaving power of sin under which he was before bound.* Paul wrote, “But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life” (Rom 6:22). *Third, the Lord has set free the Christian from the yoke or burden of God’s law as a covenant before God.* James could reason at the Council of Jerusalem as to what should be required of Gentile Christians. He said, “Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?” He then stated the conclusion of the Council as to what they would require of the Gentile converts:

¹⁹“Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,
²⁰but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. (Acts 15:19-20)

For the Christian, the Law of God is no longer an enslaving set of rules that must be kept else suffer damnation; rather, the law provides instruction and guidance in the way in which the Christian now desires to live. And *fourth*, similar to the above, *the Lord has set free the Christian from the rigors of the law that had been formerly imposed upon Israel.* Our confession states it this way, that the law still abides as a rule for the Christian, but it no longer is condemning letter, but that “the threatenings of it serve to shew what even their sins deserve, and what afflictions in this life they may expect for them, although freed from the curse and unallayed rigour thereof.”¹ The Mosaic Law had a total of 613 laws imposed upon the people of Israel that were to order their lives. The Christian has been set free from this list of rules and is now living under the principle of grace, which is able to produce true righteousness in him. The Christian is to resist having his conscience bound by a legalistic spirit of external standards being imposed by others, which are often purported to be the setting forth of the law of God. Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Stand fast therefore in

¹ *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Art. 19, Par. 6.

the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 5:1).

Sinclair Ferguson wrote a brief, but good article regarding the doctrine of Christian Liberty. He stated four principles that should govern our liberty.

Principle 1: Christian liberty must never be flaunted. “Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (Rom. 14:22, NIV)

We are free in Christ from the Mosaic dietary laws; Christ has pronounced all food clean (Mark 7:18-19). We may eat black pudding after all (A Scottish pudding made with blood)! *But you do not need to exercise your liberty in order to enjoy it.* Indeed, Paul elsewhere asks some very penetrating questions of those who insist on exercising their liberty whatever the circumstances: Does this really build up others? Is this really liberating you—or has it actually begun to enslave you (Rom. 14:19; 1 Cor. 6:12)?

Principle 2: Christian liberty does not mean that you welcome fellow Christians only when you have sorted out their views on X or Y (or with a view to doing that).

God has welcomed them in Christ, as they are; so should we (Rom. 14:1, 3). True, the Lord will not leave them as they are. But He does not make their pattern of conduct the basis of His welcome. Neither should we.

Principle 3: Christian liberty ought never to be used in such a way that you become a stumbling block to another Christian (Rom. 14:13).

We are given liberty in Christ in order to be the servants of others, not in order to indulge our own preferences.

Principle 4: Christian liberty requires grasping the principle that will produce this true biblical balance: “We ... ought ... not to please ourselves.... For even Christ did not please himself” (Rom. 15:1-3).

There is something devastatingly simple about this. It reduces the issue to the basic questions of love for the Lord Jesus Christ and a desire to imitate Him since His Spirit indwells us to make us more like Him.

True Christian liberty, unlike the various “freedom” or “liberation” movements of the secular world, is not a matter of demanding the “rights” we have... The Christian realizes that before God he or she possesses no “rights” by nature. In our sinfulness, we have forfeited all of our “rights.”

Only when we recognize that we do not deserve our “rights” can we properly exercise them as privileges. Sensitivity to others in the church, especially weaker others, depends on this sense of our own unworthiness. If we assume that we have liberties to be exercised at all costs, we become potentially lethal weapons in a fellowship, all too capable of destroying someone for whom Christ has died (Rom. 14:15, 20).

That does not mean that I must become the slave of another’s conscience. John Calvin puts the point well when he says that we restrain the exercise of our freedom for the sake of weak believers, but not when we are faced with Pharisees who demand that we conform to what is unscriptural. Where the gospel is at stake, liberty needs to be exercised; where the stability of a weak Christian is at stake, we need to restrain it.²

In order to better understand these principles of Christian liberty, let us turn to **Romans 14**. This section of Paul’s epistle to the church at Rome addresses the matter of church fellowship. We will give our

² Taken from <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/4-principles-exercise-christian-liberty/>

attention to all of Romans 14, verses 1 through 23. Actually the subject begins with Romans 14:1 but continues into the next chapter, to 15:13. Here Paul gave instruction for the church members to develop and maintain fellowship between them. This was no easy matter to achieve, for there existed deep differences of opinion in the church at Rome on how Christians were to live according to the will of God. There were some whom Paul referred to as “strong” Christians, who had contempt for the “weak.” The “weak” Christians tended to pass judgment upon the “strong”, refusing to extend fellowship to them. The matters that separated these two groups were their different convictions on the foods they ate and the religious days that they observed. We will show that the problem was most likely due to the different convictions of the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians.

The problem of disrupted fellowship was a major issue for the apostle. It was not simply his concern that Christians were able to get along with one another and that there would be less tension and difficulty between the people of God for having done so. Paul viewed the fellowship of the church, particularly between Jews and Gentiles, to be the realization of the purpose of God in history that results in praise and glory given to God. Here is a summary of Paul’s concerns by **Thomas Schreiner**:

The resolution of this division is crucial, for it relates to God’s saving purposes and promises. Indeed, in 15:7-13 the theological center of Romans emerges once again. For the driving force of Paul’s ministry was not the inclusion of the Gentiles and the folding in of the Jews into the people of God, although these were crucial to him. The reason for the salvation of the Gentiles and the Jews was so that God would be glorified (v. 9). The same idea is expressed in verses 9 and 11. Gentiles have been included so that they will praise God along with the Jews. Glorifying God and praising him are two different ways of expressing the same idea. Paul’s passion for the Gentile mission, as we saw in 1:5, was motivated by the desire to bring glory to Jesus’ name. The recurrence of that theme here, along with the emphasis on the fulfillment of God’s saving promises in the Scriptures, demonstrates that 15:7-13 not only functions as the conclusion to 14:1-15:6 but also draws attention to the major theme (the glory and praise of God) of the entire letter.³

The first major division of this portion of Holy Scripture are the first 12 verses of chapter 14. The subject of this passage is “Do not judge your brother.”

I. Do not judge your brother.” (Rom. 14:1-12)

Let us read these verses in the English Standard Version (ESV):

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. ²One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. ³Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

⁵One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. ⁸For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Paul opened this section with instruction to include believers in Christian fellowship who are “weak in faith.” **Verse 1** reads, “*As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.*” He does not yet define what a “weak” Christian is, but from the larger context we understand that

³ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 704.

it is one who gives undue regard to matters of a secondary nature, of non-essential matters to the faith. Here we see that Christian fellowship within a church is of such importance that care should be given to include all true Christians in the fellowship of the body. Nonessential matters should not be elevated as a “test” whether or not we extend fellowship to other Christians.

Notice that Paul seemed to first give instruction to those he assumes are Christians who are “strong” in faith, although he does not use that term to define them. **John Calvin** said it well:

He passes on how to lay down a precept especially necessary for the instruction of the Church, — that they who have made the most progress in Christian doctrine should accommodate themselves to the more ignorant, and employ their own strength to sustain their weakness; for among the people of God there are some weaker than others, and who, except they are treated with great tenderness and kindness, will be discouraged, and become at length alienated from religion.⁴

More mature Christians should be sensitive to those who may be less knowledgeable in Christian doctrine and practice. There are some who may be “weak in faith” in that they have personal convictions that they hold that may not be the same as ones held by others within the body. With respect to matters that are not essential to the faith, we are to be patient with them and not alienate them or distance ourselves from them in refusing church fellowship to them. We are not to impose our “convictions” on secondary matters on others.

Matthew Henry gave these words of introduction to this section of Paul’s epistle:

It is certain that nothing is more threatening, nor more often fatal, to Christian societies, than the contentions and divisions of their members. By these wounds the life and soul of religion expire. Now in this chapter we are furnished with the sovereign balm of Gilead; the blessed apostle prescribes like a wise physician. “Why then is not the hurt of the daughter of my people recovered,” but because his directions are not followed? This chapter, rightly understood, made use of, and lived up to, would set things to rights, and heal us all.⁵

The point that Paul made in verse 1 is that personal opinions about non-essential matters should not be allowed to alienate some of the brethren. These matters should not be brought into play respecting fellowship in the church.

In the **second verse** Paul defines whom he regards as the “weak” Christian. **“One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables.”** The one who believes that there was no restriction on the Christian’s diet would have been the “strong” Christian, in other words, the Gentile Christian within this context. The “weak” Christian would have been a Jewish Christian.

Paul declared that there were some who were “weak in faith.” This probably means that the faith they had was weak because they thought that that secondary matters had some bearing on their relationship with God. Their improper emphasis on their diet revealed deficiency in their understanding of the faith. The weak in faith thought that God was more pleased with the Christian who ate only vegetables than with the Christian who also ate meat.

Now Paul wrote specifically about the issue of varying convictions regarding diet among the members of this church. But the principle bears out that all of us probably have convictions about non-essential matters that, if we are not mindful and careful, can potentially grieve or discourage others in the body in their Christian walk.

We next read in **verse 3**, **“Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.”** Paul indicates that the “weak” were being **judgmental** toward those Christians who believed it was okay for the Christian to eat all

⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 19 (Baker, 1993), p. 491.

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 6, p. 826.

foods. The diet of these Gentile Christians would have shown no regard for the distinctions clean or unclean according to Old Testament classification. The Gentile Christians who felt free to eat all foods *despised* the more restrictive Christians because they were attempting to deny them their freedom to eat all things. And so Paul told the Gentile Christians that they were not to despise those who were “weak in faith.” He warned the weak not to judge the “strong”, that is condemn those who differed with them in their convictions about food, for God had accepted them. Paul was giving instruction to both groups. As **John Calvin** stated:

He wisely and suitably meets the faults of both parties. They who were strong had this fault,--that they despised those superstitious who were scrupulous about insignificant things, and also derided them: these, on the other hand, were hardly able to refrain from rash judgments, so as not to condemn what they did not follow; for whatever they perceived to be contrary to their own sentiments, they thought was evil. Hence he exhorts the former to restrain from contempt, and the latter from excessive moroseness.⁶

The challenge of **verse 4** is Paul confronting the “weak.” *“Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”* The “weak” who were condemning the “strong” were assuming the prerogative that was God’s only. He is the judge of His people. The weak Christian is mistaken to think that the “strong” one is at fault and is unapproved of God. It is God who has brought him to salvation and God will see to it that he will stand in the faith. The Lord is able and has purposed to sustain His people in their faith.

When Paul stated that *“the Lord is able to make him stand”*, he was affirming that the Lord Jesus will see to it that His people will persevere in their faith until they stand before Him on the Day of Judgment. It matters not what food the Christian may or may not eat, what day he regards as a holy day or not, the Lord is the author of his salvation and He will see to it that His own will be stand before Him.

With **verse 5** the other area of debate is introduced, which was the observance of special days as a religious duty before God. *“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”* There are some things that Christians can differ upon in their opinion that should never divide the brethren or disrupt their fellowship. The “day” that the “weak” Jewish Christian would have observed would have been any number of holy days that were observed by Israel under the Mosaic covenant. These would have included days such as the Passover, the Day of Atonement, or Pentecost.

Some say that verse 5 should include the belief of some Christians regarding the weekly observance of the Sabbath Day. They would argue that Christians who keep Sunday as their weekly Sabbath Day would be as these “weak” Christians that Paul was describing. Those who do not believe in an abiding weekly Sabbath, are ones who are “strong” in that they esteem all days alike. This is probably not what the apostle had in view. It would appear historically that Christians always set aside one day in seven as the weekly Sabbath day. The footnote in *The Reformation Study Bible* takes this position and gives this argument:

A pattern of holy days characterized the Jewish year, and it is probably to these that Paul refers, not the Sabbath. If the Sabbath were in view it would have been more natural to say, “One man considers the Sabbath above the other days.”⁷

Returning to our text, we read that Paul taught that as long as the motivation was to please or honor the Lord, it did not matter if the one observed the day or did not observing the day. This matter is wholly up to the conviction of the individual, as long as he is truly doing what he is doing with the motivation to please the Lord. As we read in **verse 6a**, *“The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord.”* The same principle applies to what one chooses to eat before the Lord. **Verse 6b** reads, *“The one who eats, eats*

⁶ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 19 (Baker, 1993), p. 494. “Moroseness” means unwarranted seriousness or somberness.

⁷ R. C. Sproul, gen. ed., *The Reformation Study Bible* (Thomas Nelson, 1995), p. 1791.

in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.” Much behavior of a Christian is either right or wrong depending on his motivation. If he is doing it unto the Lord, it is okay; if not, it is wrong.

Paul next gave the reason for this in **verse 7**: *“For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.”* This verse is commonly misinterpreted. This is not an attempt by Paul to say that each of us are interconnected with one another; rather, it speaks to the truth that our life and death are before God. Each of us lives unto the Lord, not unto himself.

It is a misunderstanding to say that verse 7 teaches that no one is an island, and that we all need other people. Verse 8 constitutes an explanation of verse 7 and it shows that the statement that believers do not live or die to themselves means that believers consciously, whether in life or death, live to please the Lord.⁸

Verse 8, then, explains verse 7: *“For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”* John Murray explained this more fully:

Verse 7 does not mean, as sometimes popularly understood and quoted, that a man is not sufficient to himself in the social and economic spheres. It is not directed against selfish and self-assertive independence in the order of society. In this passage as a whole this attitude is condemned and the demand of considerateness for others is inculcated. But in this verse, as verse 8 clearly shows, what is being asserted is that the believer lives *to the Lord*, not to himself. It is a negative way of expressing what is involved in the thrice repeated “unto the Lord” of verse 6 and the living and dying “unto the Lord” of verse 8. In these two verses it is the principle regulating and controlling the believer’s subjective attitude that is in view, the disposition of subservience, obedience, devotion to the Lord, and it indicates, as noted earlier (cf. 12:2), that the guiding aim of the believer is to be well-pleasing to the Lord. In 12:2 this is stated in terms of pleasing God, now it is the Lord Christ who is contemplated. There is no conflict. If we discover by experience what the will of God is as the good and well-pleasing and perfect, it is because we have come to the recognition of the Lordship of Christ in all of our life.⁹

Paul declared this was the purpose for which Jesus Christ died and was resurrected. It was so that He would become the Lord of all. **Verse 9** records, *“For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.”* Jesus Christ is Lord over all. This Lordship, or authority, is not the same as the authority He had as the eternal Second Person of the Godhead, in which He had the same glory with His Father from eternity. Rather, this authority is that which the Father conferred upon Him that He had secured through His obedience to His Father as Jesus of Nazareth. This obedience was perfect compliance to the law of God throughout His life¹⁰, His obedience that resulted in the Father raising Him from the dead and causing Him to have all authority in heaven and earth.¹¹

The lordship of Christ here dealt with did not belong to Christ by native right as the Son of God; it had to be secured. It is the lordship of redemptive relationship and such did not inhere his sovereignty that belongs to him in virtue of his creatorhood. It is achieved by mediatorial accomplishment and is the reward of his humiliation.¹²

Paul then declared that we all will one day stand before Him in judgment. We read in **verses 10ff**:

⁸ Schreiner, p. 721.

⁹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 2, p. 180.

¹⁰ His *active obedience*

¹¹ His *passive obedience*

¹² *Ibid*, p. 182.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹for it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.” ¹²So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Paul had spoken in detail of the nature of this judgment back in Romans 2. It is a general judgment at the end of the age to which all mankind will be summoned. In Romans 2 we read of this judgment.

⁵But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

⁶He will render to each one according to his works: ⁷to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality.

Because each of us will give an account of our own belief and behavior on that great day, we would do well not to assume the posture of a judge over others within our church fellowship. There are some things that are well left alone and we are to give place to the Lord to deal with His people in His own way and in His own time.

We now arrive to the next portion of this section of the epistle. This may be identified as comprising the remaining verses of Romans 14, verses 13-23¹³. The subject of this portion of Romans 14 may be entitled, “Do not make your Christian Brother Stumble.”

II. Do not make your brother stumble (14:13-23)

Let us read these verses:

¹³Therefore 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. ¹⁴I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. ¹⁵For 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. ¹⁶So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

²⁰Do 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. ²¹It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²²The 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. ²³But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Verse 13 is a conclusion and proposal of the apostle to his readers, *“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.”* Paul included himself in this word of instruction, “Let *us* not pass judgment...” This is

¹³ Here again is an instance in which translators differ on what constitutes a paragraph division. The ESV contains two paragraphs (vs. 13-19 and vs. 20-23). The NKJV has two, but differs from the ESV in that it has different verse divisions (vs. 14-18 and vs. 19-23). The New American Standard Version (NASV) has one paragraph, (vs. 13-23), as does the The Greek New Testament (3rd Edition, United Bible Society).

can be a good way to press home the command of Scripture to another person in a manner that gets the point across, but in a way that may lesson a strong reaction from the one that you are exhorting.

Paul included the words, “any longer”, which seem to suggest that Paul recognized that all Christians everywhere have a tendency to find fault and pass judgment upon others. Instead of passing judgment on others, let us purpose “never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” We might say,

“Let lesser matters slide. They are not essential. Do not try and make other Christians conform to your convictions about nonessential matters. You will cause more harm to the cause of Christ by converting others to your convictions, than if you had let the Lord be the Judge and Sanctifier of His people.”

Verse 13 depicts the Christian as walking “in the way” with His Lord toward the destination to which God called him. It probably speaks of placing in the path of a Christian a reason for him halting or struggling to continue in his Christian walk. In other words, we should purpose never to be a cause of discouragement to another who professes to be a Christian and who is attempting to live for Him. **John Murray** wrote:

A stumblingblock is an impediment in the way over which a person may stumble. An occasion of falling refers literally to a trap. Here these terms are used metaphorically and convey the same thought, namely, that which becomes the occasion of falling into sin. In the most aggravated sense an occasion of falling is placed before a person when the intention is that of seduction; there is deliberate intent that the person may fall. We are not to suppose that the strong in this case are conceived of as actuated by that express intent. But this only accentuates the care that must be taken by the strong in the circumstance of weakness on the side of their brethren. The strong are regarded as placing a stumblingblock when they do not desist from what becomes an occasion of stumbling for the weak brother. What is condemned is the inconsiderateness that disregards the religious interests of the weak.¹⁴

In **verse 14** Paul makes the rather profound statement: *“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.”* Here Paul is asserting the teaching that the distinction between clean and unclean foods as set forth in the Law of Moses is no longer to be regarded by Christians in the Kingdom of God over which the Lord Jesus reigns. The teaching of Christ and the implications of the realization of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ renders old behaviors obsolete; they are no longer applicable. For Paul the new era had dawned, and old things have been replaced by the new.

Now it should be emphasized that when Paul declared that *“nothing is unclean in itself”*, he was not speaking of foods being unhealthy or healthy. Clearly there are such things as healthy and unhealthy foods, but that is not Paul’s concern. He was declaring that what a person eats or does not eat has no bearing upon his relationship with God.

This change respecting God’s will of the diet of His people reveals a significant principle in our understanding of the nature of God and of His right to command His people in the way that He would have them live. We must not think that God’s law(s) are values or standards that are “above” God or to which God Himself is subject. What constitutes sin is what God has declared to be wrong. Wrong is wrong because God has defined it as such. This is not to say that standards of righteousness are not inherently moral in nature, for they are. The righteous standards of God’s laws reflect His holy nature. But respecting matters like foods or special days, they were only regarded by God as clean or unclean, holy or common, because He had designated them as such for a time, not because they were inherently holy in and of themselves. And perhaps it is in the matter of what kinds of food that God has permitted His people that this principle is best illustrated. What one eats or does not eat is right or wrong solely due to what God has commanded. This can be shown from the different dietary laws that God has imposed upon His people through history. (See the appendix to these notes.)

¹⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965, vol. 2, p. 187f.

It should also be noted that in Romans 14:14 in which Paul declared that all foods are clean and therefore permissible to eat, that eating various foods do not commend or condemn a person before God, ***Paul was aligning himself with those that he regarded as “strong” in the church at Rome.*** And as we have already showed, these would have been principally the Gentile believers in the church at Rome. The “weak” Christians in the church at Rome were Jewish Christians, who continued to have regard for the distinctions between clean and unclean foods according to the Mosaic covenant. We should also remind ourselves that Paul’s instruction here is directed principally to the “strong.” It was their responsibility, as directed by love for the brethren, to limit their liberty for the sake of the “faith” of the weak.

After Paul expressed that there are no “unclean” foods for the Christian, he stated in verse 14b, ***“but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”*** In other words, even though the former classification of unclean foods no longer applies to the Christian, if the “weak” believer eats those foods, while believing them to be unclean in his conscience, he makes them unclean unto himself. In other words, he is sinning when he eats those foods because he is violating his conscience.

We next read in **verse 15a**, ***“For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.”*** Again, Paul was giving directions to the Christian that he earlier described as “strong.” The Christian who is strong, who knows that no food in itself is clean or unclean and it matters nothing before God if eaten, he should order his diet when in the presence of a weak brother so as not to cause him to be grieved. Now this is not speaking about offending a Christian because he does not think that you should eat a donut or have a piece of cake. The “weak” Christian that Paul was considering here is one who thought that by eating a certain kind of food that one was defiling himself before God, that he could not live rightly before God because of what he was eating. The bottom line is that we should be concerned that our behavior does not cause others to fall short of the blessing that is in Jesus Christ.

Paul then declared in **verse 15b**, ***“By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.”*** What did Paul mean to “destroy” the one for whom Christ died? Paul was speaking of the damnation of this “weak” (professing) Christian by having become grieved by the behavior of another Christian.

“Being grieved” on its own is a vague term, but in this context it is linked in the closest possible way with ἀπόλλυε (destroy) (see v. 15). Thus the grief inflicted on the weak is not merely a general feeling of sorrow or injury. The grief causes one to go astray in the faith and experience ruin.¹⁵

John Murray, however, differs from this position. Even though he addressed the nature of the very strong wording of Paul respecting the “grief” of the weak brother and the association of the word “destroy” with the matter of salvation, Murray stops short of saying that Paul was concerned about the final salvation of the weak.

The strength of the word “destroy” underlies the serious nature of the stumbling that overtakes the weak brother. Are we to suppose that he is viewed as finally perishing? However grave the sin he commits it would be beyond all warrant to regard it as amounting to apostasy. The exhortation “destroy not” is directed to the strong. In a similar situation the weak person is represented as perishing (1 Cor. 8:11). But here likewise it would be beyond warrant to think of apostasy. Furthermore, the destruction contemplated as befalling the weak should not be construed as eternal perdition. All sin is destructive and the sin of the weak in this instance is a serious breach of fidelity which, if not repaired, would lead to perdition. It is upon the character of the sin and its consequence that the emphasis is placed in order to impress upon the strong the gravity of his offense in becoming the occasion of stumbling. It would load the exhortation with implications beyond this intent to suppose the weak believer by his sin is an heir of eternal destruction. It is a warning, however, to the strong believer that what he must consider is the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 734.

nature and tendency of sin and not take refuge behind the security of the believer and the final perseverance of the saints.¹⁶

Although I am sympathetic with Murray's position and would prefer to take his view of the matter, it would seem that his view is not best here. The words that Paul used, the mode of expression that Paul employed, seem to suggest that he was concerned about the "weak," that is professing believer, was in danger of apostatizing if the strong did not deal with him in "love." This was the view of **John Calvin**. Regarding verse 15 he wrote:

He now explains how the offending of our brethren may vitiate the use of good things. And the first thing is, -- that love is violated, when our brother is made to grieve by what is so trifling; for it is contrary to love to occasion grief to anyone. The next thing, --that when the weak conscience is wounded, the price of Christ's blood is wasted; for the most abject brother has been redeemed by the blood of Christ; it is then a heinous crime to destroy him by gratifying the stomach; and we must be basely given up to our own lusts, if we prefer meat, a worthless thing, to Christ.¹⁷

The point Paul is making is that he was concerned about the final salvation of the "weak" being put in jeopardy by the careless and unloving behavior of the "strong" Christian. This is also the position of **Douglas Moo**:

Paul sharpens his point by issuing a direct command: "Do not because of food destroy one for whom Christ died." 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" them. "Destroy" might refer to the spiritual grief and self-condemnation that the "weak" incur following the practices of the "strong" against their consciences. But Pauline usage suggests rather 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 away entirely from the faith.¹⁸

In **verse 16** Paul gave further instruction to the "strong." "*So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.*" What was it that was regarded as "good"? We might assume that Paul is speaking of the otherwise "good" meat that the strong Christian eats, but leading the weak Christian to think of that food as "evil." But actually what Paul is referring to as "the good" here is the gospel that brings salvation. He was concerned that the "weak" Christian may come to view the gospel believed and proclaimed by the "strong" Christian to be "evil." By his refusal to believe the true gospel, he would then perish in his sins.

¹⁶ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1965), vol. 2, p. 192.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Baker Book House, 1993), vol. 19, p. 505. Interestingly the editor of Calvin's commentary, **Henry Beveridge**, felt compelled to write a qualifying footnote lest Calvin's words be misconstrued as teaching that true Christians can lose their salvation. He wrote, "From the words, 'destroy not,' &c., some have deduced the sentiment that those for whom Christ died may perish forever. It is neither wise nor just to draw a conclusion of this kind; for it is one that is negated by many positive declarations of Scripture. Man's inference, when contrary to God's word, cannot be right. Besides, the Apostle's object in this passage is clearly this, --to exhibit the *sin* of those who disregarded the good of their brother, and to show that sin was *calculated* to do, without saying that it actually effected that evil. Some have very wisely attempted to obviate the inference above mentioned, by suggesting, that the destruction meant was that of comfort and edification. But no doubt the Apostle meant the ruin of the soul; hence the urgency of his exhortation,--"Do not act in such a way as tends to endanger the safety of a soul for whom Christ has shed his blood;" or, "Destroy not," that is, as far as you can do so. Apostles and ministers are said to "save" men; some are exhorted here not to "destroy" them. Neither of these effects can follow, except in the first instance, God grants his blessing, and in the second his permission; and his permission to his people he will never grant, as he expressly told us. See John 10:27-29."

¹⁸ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 854f.

The strong should not cause sorrow to the weak by what they eat but rather should refrain for the sake of the weak. They must beware lest they **destroy** the faith of a brother or sister. If the strong do not act in love, the goodness of the gospel may be wrongly identified as evil, for their lack of love for the weak contradicts Christ's love. God's kingdom centers on the gifts of **righteousness, peace, and joy** granted by the Holy Spirit, so that bodily appetites become secondary.¹⁹

The offense that a "strong" Christian could cause toward a "weak" believer could be similar to the idea conveyed in our Lord's warning of Matthew 18:5 and 6:

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!"

Paul is concerned about a callous lack of love shown by some toward others in the church that could result in people turning away from the truth of the gospel.

We then read in **verse 17**, "*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*" If the "strong" Christian were to grieve the "weak" Christian because of what the strong Christian ate, it might result in reaffirming the errant belief (or faith) that the kingdom of God is received due to what one eats or does not eat, rather than upon the reception of the grace of the Holy Spirit in righteousness, peace, and joy. Here these three gifts of the Spirit are set forth as blessings of the kingdom that persons of faith receive.

Paul concluded this paragraph by stating that the "Strong" Christian who limits his own liberty due to love for the brethren is serving Jesus Christ and is acceptable to God. He will also tend to be approved by others. The paragraph concludes with **verses 18 and 19**:

Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Paul then gives further encouragement for the "strong" Christians in the church at Rome to live in a manner that will build the body. He first gives a negative command in **verse 20**:

²⁰Do 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.

Here we see the great potential harm that the Christian may bring to the cause of Christ. For the sake of food, one can "destroy the work of God."

Now how do we understand this? Is not God omnipotent in all of His works? How could the work of God be destroyed by something you or I do or fail to do? Of course God accomplishes all of what He has decreed to take place in history. No one can restrain or frustrate God from accomplishing all of His will. But sometimes God begins a work of salvation in a person's life but it is not in His purpose to carry it through to completion. In other words, He may illuminate a person to the reality of his sin, show him the way of salvation through Jesus Christ, that man may even embrace Jesus Christ in "faith", but that faith is not of a saving nature. Then someone comes along and God allows him to "destroy" the work that had been done to that point. Why would God do or allow such a thing? It may serve as warnings to His people that they do not fall into the same error or practice. It may cause some true Christians to repent of belief or behavior that would have resulted in their ruin, but observing another's fall, they are warned.

¹⁹ *The ESV Study Bible* (Crossway Bibles), p. 2181.

Now in verse 10b Paul again affirmed that belief and practice of those that he had designated as “strong.” “Everything is indeed clean.” But if the “strong” Christian is not careful, that is, if he is not loving so as to curb himself, then he commits wrong when he causes a brother or sister to stumble.

Paul declares his views plainly in **verse 21**: *“It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”* The practice of the “weak” was not to eat meat or drink wine. The common practice of the “strong” was to eat meat and drink wine. But the “strong” would be doing a good thing if he did not eat meat or drink wine, or do anything that would result in a Christian brother to stumble. Here “to stumble” would be to abandon the faith. In other words, we are to do all we can do for the spiritual benefit of those about us so that they too would experience the kingdom of God.²⁰

Paul again gave approval of what the “strong” may do in the next verse. **Verse 22** reads, *“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.”* Paul pronounced the one “blessed” who eats meat and drinks wine with a clear conscience before God. Paul commends this one for the knowledge that he has of God and His ways and for his practice before the Lord. He congratulates the one who is “strong” in these matters and can practice these things before the Lord with a clear conscience.

Throughout this passage Paul never congratulated the “weak” for eating only vegetables and refusing to drink wine. They were “weak” for doing so. In fact he warns the “weak” in **verses 23 and 24**: *“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.”* But the apostle cared for the “weak” and taught the “strong” to curtail their liberty for the well-being of the “weak.” He was in fact encouraging the Gentile Christians to be patient and loving toward the Jewish Christians who had difficulty in understanding and living according to the truth of the kingdom of God.

Martin Luther summed up this matter well when he wrote on Christian liberty:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

May the Lord enable each of us as Christians to be mindful of what we do and not do and may the Lord enable us to govern ourselves according to our genuine love for the brethren.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.” (Rom. 15:13)

²⁰ Now one might ask, since this is the case and the “strong” Christian should abstain from eating meat or drinking wine in the presence of those who have a conviction against doing so, should we not therefore exclusively use grape juice in the Lord’s Supper? I do not believe that Paul would have ever allowed the changing of the cup of the Lord’s Supper to be grape juice rather than wine, for that would have been a stumbling block for all the Jews, who would have only used wine in the observation of the Passover Meal, the context in which the Lord’s Supper was instituted.

God's Changing Laws regarding Foods

In the Garden of Eden and after the fall, even unto the occasion of Noah's ark the flood, God had permitted mankind to be vegetarian only; they did not eat meat. We read of our Lord's instructions to Adam in Genesis 1:29, "And God said, ***Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.***" We also read of this being declared to Adam in Genesis 2:

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food... The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ***"You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."*** (Gen. 2:8f, 15-17)

God's will for what people could eat for food changed, however, after the flood. To Noah God declared,

"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. ²The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. ³Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.

However there was one limitation. We read in Genesis 9:4, "But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood."

But with the Law of Moses God again changed the diet of His people. He established the categories of clean and unclean. Only clean animals were permitted as food. We may read of these detailed laws in Leviticus 11.

And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying to them, ²"Speak to the people of Israel, saying, 'These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. ³Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat. ⁴Nevertheless, among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, ***you shall not eat these***: The camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁵And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁶And the hare, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. ⁷And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. ⁸***You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you.***

⁹"***These you may eat***, of all that are in the waters. ***Everything in the waters that has fins and scales, whether in the seas or in the rivers, you may eat.*** ¹⁰But anything in the seas or the rivers that does not have fins and scales, of the swarming creatures in the waters and of the living creatures that are in the waters, is detestable to you. ¹¹***You shall regard them as detestable; you shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall detest their carcasses.*** ¹²Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you.

¹³"***And these you shall detest among the birds; they shall not be eaten***; they are detestable: the eagle, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, ¹⁴the kite, the falcon of any kind, ¹⁵every raven of any kind, ¹⁶the ostrich, the nighthawk, the sea gull, the hawk of any kind, ¹⁷the little owl, the cormorant, the short-eared owl, ¹⁸the barn owl, the tawny owl, the carrion vulture, ¹⁹the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe, and the bat.

²⁰"All winged insects that go on all fours are detestable to you. ²¹***Yet among the winged insects that go on all fours you may eat those that have jointed legs above their feet, with which to hop on the***

ground. ²²Of them you may eat: the locust of any kind, the bald locust of any kind, the cricket of any kind, and the grasshopper of any kind. ²³***But all other winged insects that have four feet are detestable to you...***

⁴¹“Every swarming thing that swarms on the ground is detestable; ***it shall not be eaten.*** ⁴²Whatever goes on its belly, and whatever goes on all fours, or whatever has many feet, any swarming thing that swarms on the ground, ***you shall not eat, for they are detestable.*** ⁴³You shall not make yourselves detestable with any swarming thing that swarms, and you shall not defile yourselves with them, and become unclean through them. ⁴⁴For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. ⁴⁵For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”

⁴⁶***This is the law about beast and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms on the ground, ⁴⁷to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten.***

The Lord Jesus Himself removed all distinctions between clean and unclean foods. We read in Mark 7:14ff:

¹⁴When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, “Hear Me, everyone, and understand: ¹⁵There 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. ¹⁶If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!”

¹⁷When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable. ¹⁸So He said to them, “Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?”

And here in Romans 14 Paul could say, ***“I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.***
