

I remember once hearing about an odd family tradition. In this particular family (whenever they baked a ham) the woman of the kitchen would always slice off an inch or so from one side and throw it away before it was put in the oven. One day a husband asked why this was done. The woman cooking the ham replied, “*Because my mother always prepared ham that way.*” But it made her curious so she (in turn) asked her mother about the ham tradition. Her mother said, “*Because my mother always prepared ham that way.*” ... When she then asked her great-grandmother about it... the very old woman laughed and explained: “*The oven in our first home was so small that a whole ham would not fit into it. So I had to cut off part of it.*”

Most of us probably have better reasons to maintain traditions. But, understandable or not, we all have them, and they have great value in giving us a sense of identity.

In high school and in college I was in a lot of theater productions. Performing in dramas and musicals was a big part of my life. ... Perhaps one of the most well-received productions that I have ever been in... was my high school’s production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. My family to this day cringes when I suddenly break out with any of it’s songs.... (like)...

TRA-DI-TION! ... “Tradition!”

This Broadway musical has impacted a lot of lives over the years (including my own) about the importance of tradition... and how it gives our lives a sense of stability. ... “*Without it... our lives would be as shaky as – A Fiddler on the Roof!*” ... All of us have certain traditions we maintain that serve to link us with past generations of our relatives... or to bind us tightly

with other people in our social or religious group. ... But (perhaps) none have made tradition so important as the Jewish people have.

This morning as we return to Romans 14... we will understand this passage of Scripture better... as well as the application... and how it is often abused... in our own day... by fully recognizing our context here: the power of tradition. ... (You see)... The Jews who lived in Rome in Paul's day were especially in need of identity-reinforcing traditions. They were a minority religious group trying to survive and preserve their identity in the midst of a pluralistic and often hostile environment.

Faced with both persecution and forced re-location... (in order to preserve their identity and stability) Jews magnified Old Testament-based traditions such as circumcision... the avoidance of unclean food... and the observance of ritual days (especially the Sabbath.) ... The Jewish believers had been taught by parents and peers that these practices were essential for all good Jews.

Now.. (as Christians)... many of them acknowledged that the Gentiles did not need to follow those customs that gave identity and stability to Jews. However (as you may well understand)... they had a hard time grasping why they (personally) had to abandon what gave their lives stability... by not continuing to follow the rules they had been taught since childhood.

Even those who agreed (in theory) that the rules were no longer necessary had difficulty discarding what was so integral to their cultural and religious identity. It was not easy to throw them overboard... no matter how persuasive the arguments for their abandonment might be.

If you are a parent... you can probably recall times of trying to get your child to abandon their belief that they had a monster hiding in the closet... or under the bed. ... **You** knew that your child was safe... but knowledge and logic (alone) could not convince your child. (You can never argue a child into abandoning their fear.) ... So what did you do...? You sat at their bedside... spoke lovingly to them... and assured them that they could go to sleep without fear. ... Here is the point: KNOWLEDGE PLUS LOVE... HELPS THE WEAK PERSON GROW STRONG.

This is what Paul wanted the church at Rome to grasp. (You see)... from his own background... Paul knew well... how powerful tradition was among the Jews. ... He sympathized with Jewish Christians who found it difficult to abandon overnight what was so ingrained in them. So he wrote that the mature Christians in Rome needed to “cut them some slack.” Knowledge and love are called-for. *You are either a stepping stone... or a stumbling block!*

In contextualizing Romans 14... we must realize that people in our own day who accept the good news and join our church... come from cultures and religions with traditions that will not always be easy to give up. ... (Just ask any former Catholic you may know.... or hard-shell Baptist who grew-up believing playing card games... wearing make-up... and going to movies is wrong.) ... Romans 14 calls for us to take a slow and loving approach.

God is building His church very uniquely... like the Temple of the Old Testament was built. We are told in 1 Kings 6:7 that when the great temple of Solomon was constructed *"only blocks dressed at the quarry were used, and no hammer, chisel or any other iron tool was heard at the temple site*

while it was being built." To my knowledge, no other building in history was ever built in this way. Silently... silently the stones were added... and the building rose.

So it is with the church. We do not hear what is going on inside human hearts as the Holy Spirit creates new life and adds individuals to the temple He is building. ... We do not even fully realize the part we are playing as we seek to build these other people up by focusing on the important matters... laying aside petty differences... and teaching the Word of God to each of them faithfully. ... But God is working... and the temple is rising. ... In the days of the apostles... God was adding Gentiles to his church. ... God added the high and low... slaves and freemen... Greeks... Romans... and barbarians.

He is still building His church today... and we are His workmen... laborers together with Jesus Christ. ... We have a responsibility to allow Christ to do His work... and to do our work with a lot more silence – without being so critical about the lingering practices of others. ... It requires brotherly love. It takes love to let Christ do His work - and to let others be! ... You are either a stepping stone... or a stumbling block!

Our passage today will help us to be “stepping stones” instead of “stumbling blocks” by giving us three principles for church life:

- Nothing is clean or unclean by itself.
- The essence of Christianity is not found in external matters.
- When liberty hinders the work of God, our liberty must yield.

Watch for these... as we study this passage. ... Knowing them... as well as knowing the situation in Rome that Paul was addressing... may help us answer a question that often arises from this passage: "*How far should we go in seeking to accommodate ourselves to the legalists in the church today? Do we need to continually imprison ourselves because of their special quibbles and feeble understandings?*"

- Nothing is clean or unclean by itself.
- The essence of Christianity is not found in external matters.
- When liberty hinders the work of God, our liberty must yield.

Romans 14:13-23

I love the way that Ray Stedman paraphrased the opening verse of our passage (verse 13.) ... "*Scripture does not merely say, 'Stop judging'; it says, 'Stop judging others; if you want to judge, start with yourself.'*"

You are either a stepping stone... or a stumbling block!

Now... what does verse 14 mean...?

Romans 14:14

One thing that it means is: somebody's list of external rules (their preferences of do's and don'ts) is not necessary. God's Holy Spirit working through our individual conscious will determine right and wrong for us. It means that I'm going to have to ask God... and I'm going to have to say: "*God, is this thing wrong for me? God, you're going to have to show me.*" And God has given me a responsibility to come to Him as an individual. I don't have to come for you. I have to come for my own self. And... if there

is something that may be wrong... or... if I think it's wrong... I just leave it alone.

One of the authors that I read said it is like this: A man was in his bedroom getting dressed... and he called out to his wife... who was in another part of the house. He said, "*Sweetheart, is this shirt clean enough for me to wear?*" She said, "*No.*" ... So... after a while... he came out buttoning up another shirt. He said, "*You didn't even come in and look. How did you know?*" She said, "*If you had to ask, it wasn't.*" That's what Paul is saying: "*If it's doubtful - it's dirty. Just leave it alone!*"

Paul states that 'nothing' of itself 'defiles'. Yet (as he now adds)... we may nonetheless feel defiled. ... For the one who thinks something is unclean - it truly is. ... So do not try to force your liberty to drink alcoholic beverages (for example) on someone who does not share your sense of freedom to partake. ...And certainly don't flaunt your freedom in front of them!

Picture a brand-new Christian carefully trying to discern what is appropriate for a believer and what is not... perhaps taking her cues from the example of mature Christians. ... Now picture a reckless believer who flaunts his sense of freedom to drink... and she sees him out in public doing so. ... He knows that she sees him... but he defends his choice as "his freedom in Christ." ... He might even recite the first part of Romans 14:14 "*nothing is unclean in itself...*"

But his reckless example has set a trap for his new sister in Christ. (She imbibes in it herself... but afterwards she feels a load of guilt for it... which leads to a lot of confusion about God using her conscious to lead her. Or

maybe she concludes that ignoring her conscience is the way to go from now on...) ... That can happen! ... One of the primary ways that God leads us as believers (conscience) has been destroyed for her. Having avenues for God's leading being destroyed is what verse 15 is about.

Romans 14:15

When verse 15 mentions “*destroying the one for whom Christ died*” it does not mean a believer can lose their salvation. ... The Greek verb *lypeō* at the beginning of the verse (“*For if your brother is grieved...*”) sets the tone of this verse. ... It speaks of a devastating injury that is emotional... **not** physical. It is an emotional injury that affects a relationship. ... Verse 15 and the general context that surrounds it... is relational unity in the body of Christ.

The second thing for us to realize... is that a lesser... (but common) definition of the Greek term translated “*destroy*” ... is “*to suffer the loss of*” ... which fits this context better. It seems to be saying: “*If we emotionally upset another believer by ignoring what their conscience says is important... the relationship suffers and (therefor) they will lose the ability to learn from us.*” ... “*The one who Christ loved enough to die for... will have an avenue for God's leading destroyed in them.*”

You are either a stepping stone... or a stumbling block!

Jesus said... (John 13:5) “*All men will know that you are My disciples... if you stand up and demand your right to exercise your freedoms...*” ... No! ... “*All men will know that you are My disciples - if you love one another...*” ... The strong (mature) Christian... voluntarily limits his freedom out of love

for his weaker brothers and sisters. ... Whenever you find yourself in the company of someone you think may be a “weaker brother or sister”... voluntarily set aside your liberty for a time. Choose a better environment (perhaps the privacy of your own home) to enjoy it.

Now let me address something that I have been putting-off until now...

Some Christians use “*an invisible weaker brother*” to support their own opinions... prejudices... or standards. ... “*You must live by these standards,*” they say... “*or you will be offending the weaker brother.*” ... In truth... however... it is manipulation... and the only one who is offended... is the person who does not have their opinions... prejudices... and standards being placed on others.

A while back we made a practical decision to put tables in the back of our auditorium... so that families with children could come into worship and take better care of their children... (We also knew of other worshippers who had disabilities and sitting at a table was better for them.)... But we had a family leave our church over it. They said that the atmosphere of a few tables in back created the same atmosphere of a night club that serves alcohol. They implied that “the invisible weaker brother” might be offended.

If we would have thought that having tables set-up in a worship auditorium would communicate our endorsement of going out (carousing at night-clubs)... or if we saw that it had the real possibility of making someone who struggles with alcohol want to go intoxicate themselves – we would have taken them down and issued a sincere apology.

Paul urges us to be sensitive to those whose faith may be harmed by our actions... Stay close to Christ and let Him show you where you need to limit your liberty for the sake of another. However know this... (as well): some people try to abuse Romans 14... simply to get their own way. ... If you suspect that this may be the case – pull-up close to Christ and look for Him to create a teachable moment... where He might use you to lovingly educate them... concerning what the Kingdom of God primarily involves.

Romans 14:17

The Kingdom of God is not mainly a matter of **externals** but of **eternals**— "righteousness... peace... and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Paul is saying that the kingdom of God is seen in whatever God does inside the lives of Christians. And what is God doing...? He is developing righteousness... granting peace... and bringing joy in the Holy Spirit.

Righteousness in this verse means the same as it does in chapters 1 and 3. It means to be right with God. It means a life lived well-pleasing to Him. ... It's all about **ETERNALS** – NOT **ETERNALS!**

The **peace** that God is granting is so we can have an inner unflappability which remains undisturbed by minor irritations... and have a quiet assurance that God is at work. ... It's all about **ETERNALS** – NOT **ETERNALS!**

The **joy** in the Holy Spirit that God brings is the outward mark of Christ's presence.

My wife and I visited London a few years ago and got to tour Buckingham Palace. Many of us Americans think that this is where the Queen of England lives. While it is the OFFICIAL residence of the Queen... she doesn't really live there. Only on rare occasion is she at Buckingham Palace. She resides mostly at St. James Place. And St James Place flies a banner whenever she is at home. When joy flies as the banner over our lives... the world knows that the King of Heaven is in residence of our hearts.

It's all about **ETERNALS** – NOT **EXTERNALS**!

Romans 14:18

Whoever serves Christ by focusing on **ETERNALS** rather than **EXTERNALS**... is acceptable to God and approved by men.

He is pointing out that God is looking for a living... vital faith - not legalism. Legalism contributes to the pride of the flesh... because whenever we measure up to some moral code of our own... or some other person's devising... we think of ourselves as being better than people who do not measure up to it. ... Jesus is not served in that way or with that kind of thinking.

The final phrase of verse 18 is startling... because it tells us that the one who serves Jesus Christ in this way will not only be pleasing to God... but will also be "*approved by men.*" ... Wait a minute! This seems to contradict Luke 6:22.

Luke 6:22 (ESV)

²² *“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!*

Which is it...? Are we blessed by being accepted by men... or are we blessed because we are spurned by them...? ... Clearly we are not out to please the world... and we will not please it. If the world hated our Lord and Master enough to crucify Him... we can be sure that it will hate us too.

But what Romans 14:18 speaks of... is that there should be within the true follower of Jesus Christ enough of His character... truth... love... and integrity... that some looking- on will (reluctantly perhaps... but nevertheless genuinely) acknowledge that the believer is indeed living an exemplary and truly pious life. ... The world cannot help but admire such genuine Christians. They are real people... not religious hypocrites.

Romans 14:19-21

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.

You are either a stepping stone... or a stumbling block!

Romans 14:22-23

Paul is saying: “*What you believe about neutral things is between you and God. Keep it that way...*” ... Paul's strongest advice for Christians was to keep their mouths shut about their positions on these minor issues. If the issue is unimportant - let it go. We should not beat others over the head with our personal preferences.

Creating an atmosphere of contention for the sake of one's personal preference... is not worthy of our calling before Jesus Christ. (Let me go back to something that I said earlier.) ... We should never allow someone to abuse the principle we have seen laid out for us here in Romans 14.

When we succumb to peer pressure... or do something simply because a legalistic Christian tells us we should (or shouldn't) do it - we are on shaky ground. ... 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. ... When it comes to insignificant issues... we can do what we believe is right without feeling guilty.

So here are four things we find in today's passage to ensure that we are stepping stones – and not stumbling blocks. First... we must determine never to be a source of stumbling. ... Second... we must live as citizens of the Kingdom of God (concentrating on the eternals rather than the externals.) ... Third... we must actively pursue that which benefits other believers. ... Fourth... we must do all that we do with a clear conscience.