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PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

Romans 14:5

PRAYER: Father, what a marvelous God you are. I thank you, Lord, that you left heaven itself and entered into this same world that we occupy, you lived the perfect life, and then you suffered the ultimate torment in our place. Father God, we do thank you for sending us your son. Lord, we thank you for being willing to offer up that incredible sacrifice, and it didn't stop just there. Lord, you not only have redeemed us and given us the ability to have eternal life because we are now seen as perfect in you, but you've also given us the means of living out this life for your glory. I thank you for the book, Lord, that you have given to us, I thank you for the wisdom your Holy Spirit imparts, and I pray this morning as we again look into that book to understand more of how we can glorify you in this life, that you would again give us that wisdom, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we have been looking at Christian liberty this summer. This is part 4, and this morning we're going to hone in on some of the practical aspects of what it means to have Christian liberty. So let me read to you our text this morning. This is from Romans 14:1-8.

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

Last week we saw the tremendous freedom that we have in Christ, and we also got a little bit of a hint of the trouble that that freedom can get us all into. As Romans 14:1 puts it: *Accept the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters.* Well, you know, the most basic disputable matter there is the question: "what is a disputable matter?"

There are many areas in scripture that are simply black and white. God says it; he forbids it, and that really should settle it. However, there are also many areas in scripture that are not black and white but instead are varying shades of gray. Those are the areas that scripture calls "disputable matters." Those are some of the areas that we looked at last week, and our primary example of a gray area was the problem the early church had with eating meat that had been offered to idols. Those who had weaker faith - they just simply could not do it. Those who had stronger faith had no problem with it. Verse 2 says: *One person's faith allows them to eat anything. But another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.* God's solution in this disputable matter is not to say "this one's right and that one is wrong," but rather to allow each person the freedom to examine his own conscience before God. To become, as Romans 14:5 says, *fully convinced in their own mind.*

Well, this morning, I want to spend a little bit of time looking at the flip side of freedom - that is, responsibility. How we become fully convinced in our own minds is a matter of great responsibility. I mentioned last week how valuable Gary Friesen's book on the subject is. In his book "Decision-making and the Will of God," Friesen describes five principles to follow when working through understanding what a disputable matter is. These are the five principles.

- 1) Number one, learn to distinguish between matters of command and matters of freedom.
- 2) Number 2, in disputable areas, cultivate your own convictions.
- 3) Number 3, allow others the freedom to determine their own convictions even when they differ from yours.
- 4) Number 4, let liberty be limited when necessary by love; and
- 5) 5, finally, follow Christ as the Model and Motivator of servanthood.

This morning we're going to look at the first 3. So we'll start off with the very first principle, which expands on what we looked at last week: "Learn to distinguish between matters of command and matters of freedom." You see, if Scripture explicitly forbids something, it is obviously forbidden. I mean, "thou shalt not bear false witness" means "don't lie." There's no getting around it. It's as simple as that.

However, if Scripture implicitly forbids something, it, too, is off limits. But here's where our view of Scripture is critical. You see, many 21st century Christians really struggle with the idea of accepting the authority of all of Scripture. They pick and choose which Scriptures are

authoritative and what they think is either ceremonial or culture or simply something that you can ignore. One of the things that you hear frequently today is the fact that Jesus had nothing to say about homosexuality. I mean, his apparent silence on this sin is taken either as tacit approval or an indifference that suggests that calling homosexuality sinful is an overreaction. Well, what that is actually suggesting is that the only things that are truly sinful then are only those things that Jesus specifically condemns. Jesus never had a thing to say about pornography or rape or drug addiction or identity theft. Does that mean that those things are okay? I mean, there's nothing I'm aware of in all of Scripture that says that pornography is forbidden, per se. That doesn't make it a matter of conscience. Because the principle is laid down in Matthew 5:27. It says: *"You have heard that it was said 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* Now, that principle applies explicitly to first century flesh and blood and implicitly to 21st century cyber-porn. You see, all of the implicit prohibitions in Scripture relate directly to explicit prohibitions, ones that God has made crystal clear in Scripture. You don't need to go before God to seek his will about dating a married man or a woman or about cheating on your taxes or spreading gossip or all of these kinds of things, because God has already made his moral will known, implicitly if not explicitly, in Scripture. Ed Welch had this to say about a phrase that we often hear today with regard to this. The phrase is, "I prayed about it." This is what he says: "This is code. It means 'I want it, I'm going to get it, and I don't care what you or anyone else says.'" He goes on to say,

"My daughter was three years old and enjoying a snowy, wintry day when she discovered both snow was great for both sledding and eating. When my wife saw her eating the snow, she told her that snow was not for eating and that she needed to stop. That night our daughter added this to her prayer before she went to bed, 'And Jesus, is it okay if I eat snow?' Immediately her eyes opened wide, 'Mommy, he said yes!' Things are not so innocuous in the adult version. 'I prayed about it' adult-style is invoked when Scripture clearly teaches one thing and the person wants to do another. For example, a Christian woman is somehow granted the coveted spiritual exception to marry an unbeliever. When challenged by her friends, she says, 'I prayed about it,' or another follower of Christ is startled to hear the Spirit say a resounding 'Yes, you can move in on your girlfriend or yes, you can leave your spouse, because after all, I want you to be happy.' What God are these people praying to? This perverse, self-deceived foolishness is apparent to everyone except the person involved."

This foolishness comes from a false view of Scripture as not really representing the entire will of God. And we only have two options concerning that will: either obedience or rebellion. "I prayed about it" will not turn a black-and-white moral issue into a gray one, and it is only in those areas where God's will is not explicit that we have a responsibility to distinguish areas of

command in which there's no choice but obedience, and areas of freedom, in which we are responsible to become fully convinced in our own minds.

Now, the second point that Gary Friesen raises regards those gray areas. He says, "In those areas we are responsible to cultivate our own convictions." I said last week that we evangelicals are often times guilty of leading unexamined lives. I've often said that many people will do almost anything to avoid actually having to think. Many times when it comes to discerning God's will, instead of doing the relational work involving prayer and meditation and petition, we basically say, "Look, just tell me what to do. I'll do whatever you want. Just tell me what to do." Many of us are even willing to accept a yoke of bondage so long as we don't have to think.

This is certainly not a new phenomenon. The Pharisees were only too happy to draw up this huge list of commands that they insisted were not optional. Instead of cultivating a relationship with God, they produced convictions that did not flow out of relationship. Instead, they cultivated legalistic rules. They developed many commands that required only external compliance. "You want to be right with God? Do this, do this, do this, do this, and that's what you need to do. Don't think, don't pray, don't seek, just do what we tell you." So much of the Pharisees' rule-making descended into minutia that included long discussions -- I've said this before -- on whether an egg laid on the Sabbath could be eaten, because after all, laying an egg is labor and it's the product of labor, so you shouldn't eat an egg laid on the Sabbath. They actually pondered on whether or not could you spit on the Sabbath, and the answer they came up with was well, that depended on whether or not the spit you spat created a furrow when it landed, because if it created a furrow when it landed, that was plowing, that was labor, that was work, therefore you couldn't spit that way.

Now, the Pharisees came up with over 600 of these rules. We may think they're absurd, but really not a whole lot has changed in the last couple thousand years. Whole denominations are organized around external rules, laws and regulations that really only require an external form of compliance. You know, the priests and the clergy, they take care of the relational part. You just do the works part. And it's really no different than it was in Jesus' day. In Matthew 23:23, he said this. He said:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: Justice and mercy, and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!"

Jesus says you are oh, so meticulous when it comes to giving God a tenth of your spices, but giving him the relational things, the important things, things like working out justice and mercy and faithfulness, that's asking way, way, way too much, isn't it?

You see, Jesus understood that these petty rules often times just stood in the place of a relationship, and that we cultivate genuine convictions only when we really care about the relationships that are behind them. Paul gives us a perfect example of that in Romans 14:5. Listen to how he describes this. He says:

One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.

Now, what stands out in this passage is that both the eater of meat and the one who abstains, they both have the same motivation. That motivation is pleasing the Lord. He says: *Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; whoever abstains does so to the Lord, and gives thanks to God.* Now God goes on to say: *If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.* You see, it's not meat that is important to Paul here, what is important is the Lord. We lose sight of that primary motivation when we lose sight of that as pleasing the Lord. All we do is we fall back on the rules and the regulations that define our faith.

So I would say really the right question to ask ourselves this morning is: are you known - am I known - as someone who loves the Lord, or am I known as somebody who is strictly religious? I mean, is your identification Baptist or Presbyterian or nondenominational? Or is it as a lover of Jesus Christ? because that's what Paul is getting at in this passage. *Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.* Pleasing him is my primary motive. *If we live, we live for the Lord.*

So how do we fully convince ourselves on these matters of personal freedom? Well, first and foremost, we have to want to. That has to be our desire. We have to desire seeking the Lord's will in areas where most folks are only too happy to tell you how to think. Now, I gave you an example last week about birth control, and that was really an agonizing decision for Janice and me because, obviously, the consequences were huge. We earnestly sought God's will about our family size, and God earnestly blessed us again and again with more babies. And I confess to my shame that I didn't always welcome that as good news. You see, decisions like these have obviously lifelong consequences, and we often felt the weight of that decision. It was so much easier to practice birth control for the simple reason that we're Protestants, and that's what Protestants do. Here was an area that the Scriptures did not really address. But you see, that didn't mean that God did not want us to address it, that he did not want us to just go with the flow.

You see, he delights in us seeking his will. And he tells us in James 1:5: *If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.* And so we sought out his wisdom in this area, and God was happy to give it. And sometimes he's happy to give it in a way that completely enriches your Christian life.

I do remember one time when we had almost given up with this issue, and it was a particularly difficult time in our lives. We had no money, no prospects, were facing a very grim winter, we had all of these kids, and Jan's health was becoming a factor: she was starting to get older. Jan and I were both seriously questioning the wisdom of our approach, and I would have to say it was a time of great discouragement for us. And so I vividly remember one night getting a phone call completely out of the blue from a good Christian friend that I had had who had moved to Texas. He had eight daughters. He's since gone on to be with the Lord. He died at a very young age of leukemia, but this night he just picked up the phone, and I got this phone call literally out of the blue. And he called and I picked up the phone and he told me he just felt compelled by the Lord and told me and asked if I had been struggling by the issue of birth control. I told him that's exactly what we had been struggling with, and that I was astounded that that's what he was calling about. He said "Well, the Lord just told me to call you and encourage you that you're on the right path." You know, I remember hanging up the phone, and I remember Janice coming up to me and saying "Who was that on the phone?" and without hesitation, I said, "God." "What?" I said, "I'm telling you, God was just on the phone." It's the truth. You see, that decision which was so fraught with anxiety and angst, that was one of the best decisions Janice and I have ever made in our lives. But here's the important point: it was our decision, not yours. And every one of us individually is going to have to make those decisions uniquely. It was a decision we both made prayerfully and carefully, and it came from a desire to be fully convinced in our own minds.

You see, you need to want to know God's will and you also need to know how to know God's will in these areas. You could say that Romans 14:5 constitutes an obligation for believers: *Let everyone be fully convinced in their own minds.* Now, a fully convinced mind seeks to please the Lord in everything. It determines the positive merits of conviction not because it suits me but because it pleases the Lord. Again, verse 8: *In everything we do, we live for the Lord, we die for the Lord, we belong to the Lord.* You see, in every decision we make in disputable matters, our heart's motivation is the key. And that is the great equalizer. Romans 14:12 says: *So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.* It is God who sees our heart's desires in these areas, and it is he who asks us whether it is for him or for ourselves that we live.

Gary Friesen points out that 1 Corinthians 10 also gives us some helpful guidelines in this area. Let me just read you these. This is 1 Corinthians 10:23ff.

"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the grounds of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience -- I don't mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give for offense to Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

What Paul is doing here is giving us a kind of checklist to work through for disputable matters. So he says first, "is it permissible?" Are we free to engage in this activity? Next he says, if we've asked if it's permissible, can we say then therefore that it is beneficial? He says, "*All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful.*" So we ask: does it bless others? And if it blesses others, does it do so constructively? Does it build them up? Again, he says "*All things are lawful, but not all things build up.*" And so we ask: are you seeking your own good or are you seeking the good of others? Again, Paul says "*Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.*" We say, can we thank God for this? Can I participate in this with thankfulness? And again, Paul says: "*If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced for that for which I give thanks?*" Will it glorify God? That's the most important question. Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Finally, Paul says, is it worth imitating? Follow my example, says Paul.

But in the midst of this, there's this huge caveat. What Paul says is we are to feel free to eat meat offered to idols up to the point where a weaker conscience can be caused to stumble. That's critical. Paul says: *Eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience.* So what Paul is saying here is that great freedom carries with it great responsibility, and in disputable areas, that includes cultivating your own convictions.

Now, that responsibility carries over to our final point this morning, our third point, and our third point is really a matter of simple arithmetic. God loves to multiply; the enemy loves to divide. And ever since the very first church, the devil has been about the work of division. You know, we read the book of Acts, and we find out all of these things that happened in the past,

how the church divided over issues of Jew and gentile, slave and free, widow and married, meat eaters and vegetarians.

Well, today, we divide over parenting styles, educational choices, theological positions, and a whole host of other positions from worship styles to politics. See, the important thing is not that we disagree. The important thing is how we disagree. I was taught that the very first sign of a gentleman or gentlewoman was that he or she knew how to disagree agreeably.

Our problem stems from seeing diversity as a problem rather than as an asset or an opportunity. You see, one of the most important lessons that the church has to teach the entire world is that God is bigger than our differences. Unfortunately, it is a lesson that we have failed at miserably as a church. A church divided is a church without power, a church divided has no hope of multiplying, and a church divided is the devil's triumph, and that's what he seeks for in every church. In fact, knowing that is really half the battle. Now, there's only really two different ways to fight the devil's attempts to divide us. One is to make sure that there's no diversity of thought, word, or deed, and that everybody, everywhere, thinks and looks exactly alike. Number two is to realize that God seeks not a uniformity of opinion, but a uniformity of relationship.

And that leads to our third point and final point this morning: Allow your brothers and sisters the freedom to determine their own convictions even when they differ from yours. There's nothing the devil loves more than to pit homeschoolers versus public schoolers, spankers versus non-spankers, Calvinists versus Arminians. You name it. It goes all the way down to chorus singers versus hymn singers. There's no shortage of these little battles. The devil does it because his intent is to divide. And we do it when we lose sight of the devil's intent and God's desire. Again God says: *Accept the one whose faith is weak without quarreling over disputable matters.*

Our problem is that we are threatened by people who see things and do things differently from us. God has some good advice for all of us: get over it. Paul says in Romans 14:4: *Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall.* Each of us will stand alone before God to give an account of our lives. And that alone should be encouragement not to demand that people do things my way.

Now, I've counseled folks to consider birth control at certain times in their lives when it was obvious that Jan and I did not, because their circumstances were not my circumstances. I've encouraged others to begin or continue homeschooling even though we never did, because their lives are not my life. One size does not fit all. We all have different gifts, personalities and circumstances. Paul says in Romans 12:5: *So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and*

individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. You see, what is genuinely God pleasing for me might not be for you and vice versa.

Let me give you another example. When I lived in California, I was a brand new Christian, and I went to a lovely, wonderful church but I went, to put to charitably, dressed casually. I did. I wore shorts and a t-shirt, sometimes I didn't wear shoes, stuff like that. Unbeknownst to me, my dress really offended an older gentleman in the church, and this went on for a while. Janice and I were the first new people to come to this church in years and years and years. They were so astounded that new people would actually walk into this church that we got away with murder for literally, for a couple of years 'cause they were afraid of offending us. I didn't realize that for years. That being the case, this one gentleman quite just kind of steamed over the way I had dressed. And I didn't even know this, but one day he came up with a unique solution. He came up and presented me with a suit that he had gone out and bought. Okay.

So I was stuck because I didn't want to offend the man. He was fully convinced that wearing a suit to worship was showing respect to God, and not wearing one was showing disrespect. I believe that God looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart. So I had heard about being a stumbling block or giving offense, and I didn't want to do or be either of those, but at the same time in my own heart, I was not at all convinced that God demands that we wear suits to go to church. Fortunately, I had an older brother in the Lord to help me sort it out. And basically what he pointed out is that first you need to have some definitions. You need to understand what God is saying when he talks about what a stumbling block is, what giving an offense is. What does it mean to "stumble" somebody? I mean, if I didn't wear the suit, would I be "stumbling" a brother? Well, after all, Paul said this in 1 Corinthians 10:32: *Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.* See, I needed to know if that scripture applied to me. I needed to become fully convinced in my own mind about what was right in this circumstance. Did that scripture apply to me?

The answer was no, it did not. And let me explain to you why. You see, there is a very big difference between being socially and spiritually offended. A social offense is given or taken when we violate somebody's idea of what is socially acceptable. As you well know, that varies from culture to culture. It's not something that anybody is ever going to do lightly. In fact, missionaries study culture in order to make sure they give no social offense to make the gospel more difficult to accept. Even common sense tells us not to offend someone's sensibilities if we can avoid it. But a spiritual offense, a stumbling block, is a far more serious event, and that happens when a spiritually stronger person expresses his freedom in such a way as to make a weaker brother or sister sin against his or her conscience. Paul uses the same example of meat offered to idols to explain what a stumbling block involves in 1 Corinthians 8:7.

Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food, they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

What Paul is saying here is that my freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols extends right up to the point where my eating it would cause a weaker brother to sin against his conscience. That's what a stumbling block is. My not wearing a suit wasn't a stumbling block to this older man because he wasn't the weaker brother. I was the brand new Christian; he was the seasoned vet. Now, my style of dress may have angered him and it might have offended his sense of decorum, but it didn't cause him to sin against his conscience. In fact, he and I both had the freedom to see those issues differently, but he wanted to take my freedom away.

And so I politely refused. But I confess, for the longest time I've struggled with the idea that I was "stumbling" this man. It was 1 Corinthians 8 that convinced me that I was not. Verse 9 says: *Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.* Again, I was the weak one; he was the strong one. I wasn't even capable of "stumbling" him, but I didn't even know that.

You see, it's easy to see Christian liberty as something hard to maintain without some sense of guidelines. Many a church has abandoned those guidelines in favor of a cookie cutter approach to Christian liberty. It's easy to make the rules black and white. Far less controversy, far less angst. It's easier to avoid the gray areas altogether, but you know what that does. That invites the sin of legalism and it frustrates God's mandate for the church. This is God's mandate for the church as expressed in Ephesians 3:10. He says: *His intent was now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.* And since God's wisdom is manifold, that means it's multifaceted. If you picture a diamond, all those different facets on the diamond, when light hits those facets, it scatters in many different directions. That's what it's saying. God's wisdom goes in many different directions. And one of the ways that we see it expressed is through Christian liberty.

But you know, even liberty has its struggles, because freedom always carries with it responsibility. And frankly, for many, it's just far easier to avoid the idea of community altogether. Just keep everything light. "How's the wife? How're the kids? How's the job? I'll see

you next week!" I think that's too easy. Do you think that's all that God intends for his bride, that kind of level of community? Ephesians 5:25 says this:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her with the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

Now, the place where that cleansing takes place is often within a Christian community, within the local body of Christ. Christian liberty gives you the opportunity to see God at work in practical ways in your brothers and sisters first. First, in learning to discern those areas of Christian command and Christian freedom; second, in cultivating your own convictions on disputable matters; and third, in allowing one another the freedom to determine their own convictions even when they differ from yours. As Gary Friesen says, "It was God's intent that people with divergent personalities, nationalities, gifts, abilities, tastes, and backgrounds should become unified in Christ without sacrificing personal distinctiveness. What God desires then is not uniformity of opinion, but unity of relationship."

Next time, we're going to look at the two final issues. How are we to limit our liberty when necessary by love? And how are we to follow Christ as the model of what servanthood really is? And until then: *Accept him whose faith is weak without judging on disputable matters.*

Let's pray. Father, I do thank you for the prescription that you've given us here. It's a prescription that I -- frankly, most people don't even know about, don't even care about because they're not involved enough in the community that the body of Christ is supposed to be, so that it becomes an issue. Or if they do get involved, they get burnt or they get hurt or they get damaged in some way and they leave, they seek out another place where this conflict can be avoided. But Lord, conflict is what you are after, working through conflict for the love of Christ is what glorifies you, is what demonstrates the manifold wisdom of God. Father, I pray that you would continue to build us as a community, as a reflection of your grace, as a reflection of your wisdom within the context of Christian liberty. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.