

Subject: *The Limits of Christian Liberty*

Subject: *Romans 14:13-23*

Two primary issues always threaten to hurt the church: sin and disunity. Two things are always at stake: the purity of the church and the unity of the church. It should not surprise us that Christians disagree. We even disagree with ourselves on some things. Have you ever changed your mind about something? A man had been stranded on a desert island for over a year. Finally he was rescued, and when they did the rescuers noticed three shacks he had built. He explained: “That one is where I lived, and that second one is where I went to church, and the third one is where I used to go to church.”

Two small struggling churches in a small town felt it would be wise for them to merge into one larger, stronger congregation, and so they set plans in motion. But it never happened because they couldn't agree on the wording of the Lord's Prayer. One group preferred “forgive us our trespasses,” while the other wanted “forgive us our debts.” The local paper reported on the failed merger noting that one group went back its trespasses and the other returned to its debts.

Paul is dealing with maintaining unity in the church when believers disagree on minor matters. He is not dealing with major issues concerning doctrine or morals, but issues of personal preference based on someone's background and tradition. The two particular issues that they faced were religious diet (what they could or could not eat) and religious days (special feasts and holy days). Some in the church came out of a Jewish background and some out of a Gentile background.

To understand what Paul is saying in Romans 14:1-15:13, we need to understand that he is addressing two groups in the church: strong believers and weak believers. The strong believers know that their salvation in Christ gives them spiritual liberty. They are no longer bound by customs and traditions as to religious diet and days. None of these things affect their relationship with God. The weak believers were also saved but they didn't understand they had liberty in these areas. For them to eat certain foods and violate certain religious holy days was wrong. Paul writes primarily to the strong believers and not the weak. He reminds them that there are limits to the spiritual liberty they have in Christ. Someone wrote a little poem about a man who drove a car and insisted on his rights:

*Here lies the body of Benjamin May
He died defending the right of way.
He was right, dead right, as he sped along.
But just as dead as if he were wrong.*

Sometimes it is wrong to exercise our rights. Sometimes we must restrain our liberties for the sake of other believers.

1. Don't pass judgment on other believers (vs. 13)

Don't be judgmental. That was a principle for both strong and weak believers. The strong are not to judge the weak for their hang-ups and the weak are not to judge the strong for their liberty. Jesus warned about this.

Matthew 7:1-4¹ *Judge not, that ye be not judged.* ² *For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.* ³ *And why*

beholdest thou the mote (speck) that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam (log) that is in thine own eye? ⁴ Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote (speck) out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam (log) is in thine own eye?

2. Don't be a stumbling block for other believers (vs. 13)

A strong Christian needs to consider how his actions will affect his weaker brother. The question is not, "How will this affect me?" but "How will it affect my brother?" Ever since the days of Cain and Abel, men have been asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In other words, am I responsible for my brother's welfare? And the answer is yes, we are.

We should ask, "Will this cause my brother to stumble or cause him to fall?" Don't be a hindrance to your brother's spiritual walk and spiritual progress. Be a stepping stone and not a stumbling block.

3. Don't cause grief or devastate other believers (vs. 14-15)

The grief and devastation mentioned here is someone grieving or being devastated when they violate their conscience. Verse 15 is a powerful statement. If Jesus loved someone enough to die for him, then we must love him enough to give up our personal choices for him. Love is more important liberty. Now there are a lot of applications of this, but I'm going to use the example of church attendance. How often you attend worship services and Bible studies is a matter of personal choice, but we need to ask the question, "If I miss the service or don't take part in the class, how will that affect my weaker brother?"

4. Don't damage your Christian witness to the world (vs. 16-18)

When we fail to maintain unity over trivial issues the world sees it and they say, "If that's what Christianity is all about, I don't need it." The kingdom of God is not about trivial things like what we eat or drink, but it is about righteous living and true peace and joy. Don't major on minor things. The kingdom of God is essential. What we eat or drink is trivial. If we serve God as Christians ought to, then God will accept us and the unbelieving world will approve in the sense that they will know our faith is real. The word "approved" means to approve something after careful examination. We must always remember that God is watching and the world is watching.

Matthew 5:16 *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*

Philippians 2:14-15 ¹⁴ *Do all things without murmurings and disputings: ¹⁵ That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.*

Before a watching world it is much more important to demonstrate our love than to demonstrate our freedom.

5. Don't tear down God's work in other believers (vs. 19-20)

Verse 19 doesn't mean that we compromise on the truth or fail to stand for what is morally right, but this refers to making peace with regard to matters of personal preference. We seek ways to edify (build up) other believers and not tear them down. We are in a building

campaign. Our job is to build up one another. We must consider our weaker brothers. Whenever someone in a church insists on having his way, he can destroy God's work. Most church splits take place over petty little things. We were appalled when terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center and tried to destroy the Pentagon on 9-11, but how much worse is it to tear down the work of God.

6. Don't abuse your spiritual liberty (vs. 21-23)

The last two verses in this chapter describe the role of a person's conscience. "Faith" in this context means the belief that you can do a certain thing and it is acceptable to God.

Verse 22 is addressed to strong believers and verse 23 is addressed to weak believers. The strong believer may have liberty to do things that the believer would not feel free to do. He shouldn't flaunt his liberty before others, but exercise that liberty in private. Though we have the liberty in Christ to do some things, we are not free to use our liberty to the detriment of our brother. The weak brother has a tender conscience and should not violate it. Verse 23 is a new definition of sin for the believer. If you have a doubt about something as to whether God will approve it, you need to leave it alone.

Believers would be wise to follow this principle: 1) in essentials let there be unity; 2) in non-essentials let there be diversity; and 3) in all things let there be charity (love).

APPLYING THIS MESSAGE

We've looked at the text as *DON'Ts*. Let's look at it from the other side as *DOs*.

1. Do understand the difference between essential and non-essential matters

Every hill is not a hill worth dying on.

2. Do consider the spiritual welfare of other believers

We have to know other believers well enough that we know how they feel, and we need to care enough to make careful choices.

3. Do focus on the primary issues of the kingdom of God

What really matters is not dietary rules but spiritual realities (righteousness, peace and joy).

4. Do keep your personal convictions and preferences to yourself

Don't flaunt your freedom in Christ, but exercise that liberty in private. Take for instance the matter of drinking alcohol. First of all, the Bible is clear that drunkenness is a sin, and I'm convinced it is wrong to drink, period. Some Christians have no problem with drinking in moderation, but it would be a stumbling block or worse to other believers. If a person is convinced it is alright to drink in moderation, he should not flaunt that liberty before others but keep it to himself.

5. Do everything in faith and good conscience

6. Do make loving others more important than exercising your personal liberty