
“A Kingdom of Eternals, Not Externals”

ROMANS 14:13-18

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AT A GLANCE

When a church community confuses external behavior for internal transformation, that congregation is in danger of obscuring the Gospel. When conformity becomes the entry gate to the community, the gospel gets displaced by traditions of men. Paul warns the church in today's passage to not put a stumbling block in your brother's path and to not allow the weak in the faith to tyrannize the church. The kingdom of God is not about externals, but eternals.

INTRODUCTION

If you've been in the church long, you've likely encountered a conflation of externals and eternals. Externals are the habits, vices, or behaviors people leave behind when they come to faith. Eternals are the enduring fruits of the Holy Spirit — righteousness, peace, and joy.

Over time, it's easy to mistake external behavior changes for eternal fruit. For example, someone might say, “Our marriage is better because I quit drinking” rather than appreciating that the marriage is better, *and* I quit drinking because of the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, marked by growing righteousness, peace and joy.

Eventually, as more and more people who think like this congregate together, the emphasis shifts from God's transformative work to adherence to traditions and rules because rules are easier to regulate and control than fruit.

Entrance into the community shifts from the Gospel to conforming to traditions, which can end up obscuring the gospel all together. In today's passage, Paul reminds us that the Kingdom of God is about transformation, not behavioral modification; about eternals, not externals.

ROMANS 14:13-18

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.

A STUMBLING BLOCK

Verse 13 Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. Don't do things you know will cause your brother to fall. In favor of unity and harmony and out of love for our fellow brothers, let us voluntarily make sacrifices in our own lives in deference to our brothers.

What's the difference between a freewill offering and taxation, between sharing and socialism? The same difference as between love and legalism. In the one case the sacrifice is voluntary, in the other its coerced. Paul doesn't promote coercion. He encourages loving deference.

What does it mean to **put a stumbling block or hindrance** in the way of a brother? It means to cause a brother to sin by violating his conscience.

Paul will later tell us that whatever does not come from faith is sin. Thus, if I violate my conscience it is a sin regardless what freedoms others have. If I do something that contradicts what I believe to be right, I am sinning.

Therefore, to encourage a brother to do something he feels convicted about causes him to stumble and hinders his walk with Christ. Paul urges the liberated to suspend their freedom if exercising it means your brother will stumble. If you won't do that, you're inconsiderate; if you can't do that, you may be enslaved to what you call a freedom.

That's the heart of verse 13. Don't exercise your freedom at the expense of a brother's conscience. Enjoy your freedom, but don't use your freedom as a cover-up for evil. (cf. 1 Peter 2:16)

NOTHING IS UNCLEAN IN ITSELF

Verse 14 I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. The context is meat sacrificed to idols, but Paul broadens the application to anything when he says **nothing is unclean**. To be clear, he's not justifying sin. He's referring to *stuff* and stuff is amoral; it is neither good nor bad. It's how we *use* stuff that matters.

This is not just Paul's opinion on the matter. This is Paul speaking with apostolic authority, handing down what he received from the Lord, which is also in accord with the teachings of Jesus in Mark 7 and the Apostle Peter's vision in Acts 10. It's not what goes into the body that defiles a person, but what is in his heart.

Nevertheless, we've all grown up in certain cultures and traditions and we've had experiences and failures which combine to create deeply held convictions. Sometimes your convictions and my convictions don't align. In a diverse body, this is bound to happen.

The solution is not to hash out every personal conviction that differs from our own. It is rather to respect each other's convictions. Paul's point in verse 14 is that we are wrong to pressure anyone to go against their consciences even if doing so is not inherently a sin for anyone else. For them it is sin. And for us to be complicit in that is sin.

WALKING IN LOVE

It's not sin because it breaks a law. It's sin because it fails the test of love. **Verse 15 For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.**

Let's first set the tone, your brother is the **one for whom Christ died**. Think about what that says about his worth and value. The most precious substance in the universe, the blood of Christ, was poured out to save your brother. Remember that!

Now, what does it mean to be **grieved by what you eat**? To be grieved here might be referring to a situation in which he violates his own conscience. But with its connection to the word **destroy**, it could refer to something more serious.

Before we get into that, the heart here is **walking in love**. If you believe there's a reasonable chance that you are going to cause your brother to sin, love demands that you voluntarily abstain. It's about love for your brother, not about establishing a law.

Are you concerned about the well-being of your brother? If so, why would you exercise your freedom in disregard to him? Do you elevate your freedom over against your brother's well-being? If so, you are no longer walking in love.

DO NOT DESTROY

Let's come back to what it means to **grieve** your brother and potentially **destroy** him. That is some serious language! When Paul uses the word **destroy** elsewhere, it has eschatological implications. It refers to eternal destruction. Is Paul suggesting that my liberty might cause a believer to lose his salvation?

Just about all the commentaries I read agree that Paul's concern here is eschatological destruction, eternal destruction. He's not just concerned that someone might commit sin, but that he might actually abandon the faith. Perhaps a Jewish brother would be so grieved by what he saw in the liberties of his Gentile brothers that he might even leave the Church and return to his Jewish roots.

We have to concede that plenty who claim to be Christian fall away from the faith. We would correctly conclude they never had a true saving faith. However, what if God holds us responsible when our unloving actions contribute to that person's demise? Yes, God is sovereign, but man is responsible.

It is the height of hubris to imagine either that I am saved regardless how I behave or that my brother's salvation is unaffected by my careless behavior.

While I still argue that only God can save and everyone who is saved will always be saved, this verse serves, in the words of Daniel Doriani, "as an instrument God uses to keep people from falling away." I found his clarification really helpful as I wrestled with this verse.

As you consider God's sovereignty in salvation, you would err to conclude that God preserves the sinner *despite* his apostasy. On the contrary, "God preserves Christians *from* apostasy..." to quote Doriani, "He does not preserve us despite flagrant sin, He preserves us *from* flagrant sin."

Likewise, He does not preserve our brother despite our careless and unloving flaunting of our liberties, He preserves our brother *from* our careless and unloving flaunting of our liberties.

In other words, in His sovereignty God uses our love for one another, a love that prevents us from being careless and thoughtless and insensitive, to preserve each other, to bring us securely home.

HOW FAR SHALL WE GO WITH THIS?

Paul is calling for the maturer brother to act in love and *voluntarily* limit his freedom to keep his brother from potentially abandoning the faith. Which begs the questions Kent Hughes asked, "How far should one go in applying this? If we fully apply what Paul says, will not our conduct be controlled by the narrowest Christian in the church?"

Hughes recalled a time in which "a self-consciously pious Christian grimly said to [him] that scripture nowhere records that Jesus smiled or laughed, and he wanted [him] to know that godly people like himself followed suit." So, should we follow the whims of any and every brother?

I once had a deacon who always wore a tie to church. It didn't matter how hot it was outside, brother Bobby (not his real name) came to church wearing a tie. On many occasions he would imply, sometimes not so subtly, that any self-respecting Christian man would do the same.

Should we all follow his conviction and wear a tie because one man felt so constrained and was even upset at the idea of others not wearing one? Should the standard of the church be restricted down to the sensitivities of the most sensitive member? Absolutely not. Remember Paul has already warned the weak to not judge their free brothers. So there's a difference between grieving a brother such that he falls from the faith and evoking a brother's sinful judgment.

Paul deals with this in the following verse where he warns the church not to speak evil of Christian liberties. **Verse 16 So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.**

DO NOT ALLOW THE WEAK TO TYRANNIZE THE CHURCH

As I said, there's a difference between being grieved and being judgmental. There's a difference between a Christian flaunting his liberty to the extent that it causes his brother to have internal anguish, which if possible would even lead him to eternal destruction, and a brother enjoying a liberty while another swells in prideful judgment.

While verse 15 charges the one group to voluntarily lay aside their liberties in deference to their weaker brothers in certain settings, verse 16 exhorts them not to allow the sensitivities of the weak to tyrannize the church.

There is no place for Christians to pander to the judgmental legalism of the weak in the faith, nor of the weak to impose their restrictions upon the free. This, I believe, is just as important of a guardrail as not grieving a brother.

Church communities can err in either direction. They can become so full of pride that they flaunt their liberties with no regard for how it impacts their brothers. And they can become so full of pride that they allow their weak consciences to impose their legalistic limitations upon the entire body. Neither is right and both miss the point, because the point is not externals.

THE ETERNALS

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. Let's establish clearly that it would be wrong to completely dissociate how we live from the kingdom of God. That is the *antinomian* view, a heresy that goes back to the beginning of the Church. It denies any moral law and any obligation to righteous living.

Think of easy-believism and cheap grace, synonymous with antinomianism. The idea is that since we are declared righteous by God's grace through faith and not of works, the Christian life has nothing to do with works and works have nothing to do with the Christian life. You can do whatever you want.

Paul flat out denies this, "*What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!...*" *Romans 6:1-2*

Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*" *John 14:15*

James says, "*Faith apart from works is dead.*" *James 2:26*

So we cannot argue that the kingdom of God has nothing to do with obedience. However, Christians are prone to make the kingdom of God, the Christian faith, Christian living *primarily* about externals: what you put into your body, whether you wash your hands, what you wear, what you cannot do on the Lord's Day.

This is exactly what the pharisees did and Jesus called the pharisees, "whitewashed tombs." (Matthew 23:27) On the outside, regarding externals, they were clean, even "beautiful." They had the appearance of goodness because the externals were there. But regarding what really matters eternally, they were dead inside.

There was no righteousness, there was no peace, and there was no joy because there was no Holy Spirit and therefore no life. Jesus told them they were "filled with dead people's bones and all uncleanness."

RIGHTEOUSNESS

The kingdom of God is not about externals, it's about **righteousness**. Entrance into the Kingdom of God is marked by being declared righteous by faith in Christ. This is the starting point. In one

moment of time, we are declared righteous and clothed in the righteousness of Christ. This is the free gift of grace! We cannot earn it and we certainly do not deserve it! Christ died to secure this for us. Christ died to secure this for us.

The ongoing fruit of entering the Kingdom of God is a growing thirst for righteousness. *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Matthew 5:6* What does this produce? Obedience and repentance of sin. What does this produce? Increasing obedience.

The very essence of entering the Kingdom of God is to coming under His righteous rule because He is King; He is Lord. We enter the kingdom clothed in the righteousness of Christ and thirsting for His righteousness. Growing obedience is the fruit.

Those who have been made righteous by faith, righteousness will be expressed by their works. Relative to today's passage, righteousness will be demonstrated in how we treat our brothers and sisters, especially those with whom we disagree, how we exercise liberties and how we handle restrictions.

PEACE AND JOY

The Kingdom of God is also about **peace and joy in the Holy Spirit**. Peace and joy of the Holy Spirit is unwavering. It is not greatly impacted by circumstances. It exists within the storm and despite the trials because it comes not in the absence of these but **in the Holy Spirit**.

We need to remind ourselves that the most fulfilling, peaceful, joyful life we can live is not found in chasing our freedoms and flaunting them in our brothers' faces. Nor is it in being a stick in the mud, a prude, who disapproves of everything other Christians do. The answer is neither licentious exploits, nor legalistic drudgery. It is instead, life in the Spirit.

When we walk by the Spirit, we will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Be they impulses to carelessly flaunt freedoms or to judgmentally impose convictions, the Holy Spirit will help us see these as sin and guide us into righteousness.

The result will be peace and joy, not only internally, but also communally. There will be greater peace and joy *within* you as you submit yourself fully and completely to the Lord and follow Him by the power of the Holy Spirit.

There will also be greater peace and joy *among* you as you prioritize personal relationships over personal convictions. You will demonstrate that you are truly being led by the Holy Spirit and you will become a much more likeable member of the body of Christ. For in the words of Paul in **verse 18** **Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.**

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