
“It Is Good Not To...”

ROMANS 14:19-23

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PASTOR BRIAN SMITH

WILDWOOD CHURCH

EAST MOLINE, ILLINOIS

AT A GLANCE

“Where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus says, “I am there.” Unfortunately, so is the opportunity to disagree and divide! Paul knew that when it comes to ambiguous matters, the church needed help navigating sometimes tumultuous waters. He calls us to pursue peace and willingly set aside liberties for the sake of our brothers.

INTRODUCTION

We pick up today where we left off last month in Romans 14. As a brief reminder since it’s been a while, Paul is addressing the Roman church, a Gentile majority, Jewish minority community of believers regarding some controversies concerning food and drink and observance of days.

These are what we call “open-handed” issues. They are not clearly addressed in scripture and therefore believers have freedom to disagree in the Lord. There were, and are, matters over which genuine Christians disagree and these can become major sources of tension, disharmony, and even division.

Perhaps the hardest thing for Christians to do is agree to disagree because we are fundamentally a believing community, saved by belief in the Gospel. As a gift of grace to the Church, God provides for us in Romans 14 instructions for how to navigate these sometimes tumultuous waters.

ROMANS 14:19-23

¹⁹ So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. ²⁰ Do 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. ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. ²² 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. ²³ 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.

PURSUE PEACE

Verse 19 So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Peace with God necessitates peace with others. Both the weak and the liberated in the faith have a responsibility to pursue peace and mutual upbuilding. The diverse body of Christ does not drift toward unity, but division. Where two or three are gathered in His name, Jesus is there, but so is the opportunity for disagreement.

On some matters, we must agree in order to be unified. But on other matters, we may disagree. Paul is addressing the latter, open-handed issues. In this context, he is addressing Christian liberties.

While there are things that require correction, which can sometimes lead to offense, Christians are not called to pursue fights and conflict. We are to actively pursue peace and the well-being of one

another. It's something that requires intentional and deliberate action. Paul challenges us to actively pursue peace, not sit idly by while division spreads within the body.

“Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled;” Hebrews 12:14-15

Where a church fails to make peace a deliberate pursuit, the enemy sneaks in and plants a seed of bitterness. The soil of apathy is ripe for that seed to germinate and spread bitterness to many people. Bitterness is a cancer in the body of Christ which must be removed. Better that it is prevented than removed, though. Pursue peace and mutual upbuilding.

NO STUMBLING BLOCK

Verse 20 Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Here Paul returns to the concept he introduced in verse 15. There he warns us not to destroy the one for whom Christ died by what we eat. Here again he warns not to allow food to destroy the work of God.

This a warning not to allow your freedom to be the reason a brother stumbles, falls, and is destroyed. Love for your brother may lead you to abstain from certain liberties for their sake.

“But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.” 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

By choosing to never put a stumbling stone or hindrance in the path of my brother and choosing to pursue peace instead, I can ensure my freedoms will never cause a brother to stumble.

IF YOU ARE TRULY FREE

Paul continues in **verse 20, Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.** Paul concedes and sides with the liberated. Yes, you have that freedom. You have that liberty. But if you are truly free in Christ, you are also free to abstain in favor of relationship and in favor of supporting your brothers.

It is ok to enjoy meat, but it is not ok for you to be so callous about it that you make your brother stumble into sin by violating his conscience, pressuring him to eat what he believes is wrong to eat. It's wrong to cause someone else to sin even if for you it is not a sin.

With this in mind, Paul continues in **Verse 21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.** You say it is good to eat meat. It is good to have a drink. It is good to...whatever it is. Whatever the Bible doesn't say is sin. Yes. It is also **good to not eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.**

It is good to abstain. It is good to discipline yourself. It is good to practice self-control. It is good to be constrained by love for your brother. It is good to put your sister first. It is good to enjoy water instead of wine at dinner so that your brother enjoys his meal without a conflicted conscience, without feeling pressure to conform for the sake of acceptance.

Remember the one in view here is a weaker brother or sister who feels restricted in conscience about certain things. He feels he cannot partake. She feels it is sin. Paul warns the weak not to judge the liberated. He assures them, Jesus is more than capable of making the liberated stand on the judgment day. They, like the weak, are made righteous by faith.

On the other hand, the liberated are invited to imitate Christ in giving up what is rightfully theirs, not clinging to their 'rights,' but setting them aside for the sake of their brothers.

By **[cause] your brother to stumble**, Paul does not mean 'get offended and judge.' Paul is certainly not advocating that the liberated curtail their freedoms to appease the judgmentalism of the weak. This passage does not mean the weak should expect the liberated to conform to their convictions. To **stumble** is to violate your conscience and engage in something you believe is wrong. We'll address this more when we get to verse 23.

It would be a violation of Paul's intent in Romans 14 for the weaker brother to impose his convictions upon his liberated brother. The heart of Romans 14 is loving and mutual self-sacrificing, not legalistic conformity.

BETWEEN YOURSELF AND GOD

Ultimately, our freedoms and our convictions are between us and the Lord. **Verse 22a The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.** By **the faith that you have**, Paul means your freedoms. Your faith is what guides you into your freedoms. You know, you are fully convinced, that you have this freedom to enjoy a juicy steak and a nice glass of wine before you enjoy a cigar while watching a movie and then taking your wife for a spin around the dance floor. Sweet! Do it in private. Do it with friends. But don't go flaunting it in the faces of those who you know believe it's wrong.

Do you have liberty? Yes! Enjoy it privately. In the wise words of Daniel Doriani, "One way to avoid unnecessary offense is to stop talking so much." And in the words of one of my former Sunday School teachers, Donnie Lord, "You ain't gotta tell everybody everything." This is typically the way this verse is interpreted. Enjoy your freedoms with discretion. Not shame, but discretion.

But there's another interpretation that I should mention, presented by Colin Kruse in his commentary. This can be translated "have the faith that you have in accordance with yourself in the presence of God." Kruse suggests the issue is "*integrity* not privacy or discrete silence." He argues that in this case, "both the weak and the strong should act with integrity before God in accordance with their faith..."

This frees us from having to be secretive and requires instead that we act with integrity in the way we exercise our faith. He warns, "In the case of the weak, it would remain that they, too, should act with integrity and abstain from doing things they believe are wrong...and to do so without adopting a judgmental attitude toward those who think differently."

THE BLESSING OF A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

I tend to lean toward this understanding. Not only does it free us from having to hide our freedoms, but it also accords with what follows in the rest of **verse 22b, Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.**

It's a blessing to have a free and clear conscience knowing you are submitting all things to the Lord. Knowing you have this freedom because you're fully convinced in your own mind that the Lord has granted you this freedom and you're not living licentiously is truly liberating. You examine your heart regularly and you're sensitive to the things you know are controversial.

You pray about ambiguous freedoms you enjoy. You listen to your spouse, your parents, your elders, and your trusted friends in the faith. You read the Word of God with a sensitive conscience, eager to receive His guidance.

Whether its alcohol or meat or sugar or fatty foods or wearing leggings instead of dresses or having internet in your home or social media on your phone, or how you use technology, you live your life submitted to the Lord in all things.

And the faith you have that lets you enjoy those freedoms, you cherish. You enjoy that freedom to the glory of God! And you enjoy knowing that the freedom does not enslave you and you're willing and able to set it aside for the sake of unity among the body of believers. No one is stumbling because of your freedom; that's a blessed and beautiful thing!

WHATEVER IS NOT FROM FAITH IS SIN

It really does benefit us to make sure the things we enjoy we really do have the freedom to enjoy. Because if you doubt your freedom, you need to listen to your conscience. **Verse 23 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.**

Doubt is a lack of faith. To act in doubt rather than in faith is inconsistent with a Spirit-led life. To go against our conscience on matters the Bible has left open-ended is sin.

Paul is not teaching that if we eat meat with a conflicted conscience, we lose our salvation. That would contradict what Paul has already said and what the rest of scripture clearly teaches.

Rather, Paul is saying that we sin against the Lord even if the thing in question is not objectively sinful. Even if our brother can do it with a clear conscience, if we cannot, we should not. If you cannot do something fully surrendered to the Lord, you shouldn't be doing it. If you cannot maintain a clear conscience aware that Jesus is part of the activity, you shouldn't be doing that.

The thing we need to remember is this: the righteous shall live by faith. We walk by faith. We live by faith. Our life is a life of faith. And the Father desires that each of His children follow Him without wavering.

"So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." 1 Corinthians 10:31

Faith is fundamentally trusting in God and being satisfied in Him. To act outside of faith is to either not trust or not be satisfied. Either way, we fall short of His glory, which is sin. *"...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23*

LOVE FOR BROTHER

What is truly in view here is not meat or wine or anything like that but love for our brother. That is Paul's point and concern in all of Romans 14. He spends two minutes agreeing that we have Christian liberty and an hour exhorting us to be willing to set that liberty aside for the sake of unity and mutual upbuilding of the body.

Why would we want to lead our brother to sin against the Lord by pressuring him to engage in our freedoms? Why would we want to cause our brother to stumble into sin for the sake of our freedoms?

A few points of application as we close:

1. You are free to live by your conscience in matters the Bible remains ambiguous. A clear conscience is a blessing.
2. You are free to refuse to be the source of your brother's stumbling. Love dictates that you seek to avoid tempting or pressuring your brother.
3. You are free to live as Christ lived. What should govern our minds as we consider our freedoms is the supreme example set by our Lord Jesus...

“...who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Philippians 2:5-8

If anyone could have claimed the right to exercise His freedoms, it was Jesus. Those who have been set free in Him, should be quick to set their freedoms aside for others.

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