

THE ROMANS SERIES

“LIMITS ON LIBERTY”

Romans 14:13-23

STUDY (40)



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The early church found itself situated in a cauldron of racial tensions. The Jews despised the pagan Gentiles for their idolatrous religions and grossly immoral lifestyles. They were particularly proud of the distinctives of Judaism such as circumcision, dietary laws, sacrificial system, and special festivals that marked them out from other races. The Gentiles returned the compliment by looking down on the Jews as a backward, subjugated race that they saw as “barbarians” in contrast to their enlightened philosophies and practices.

The early church was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles. Initially, the church was dominated by Jews or by those with a close association with Jewish people. However, over time this balance changed as more Gentiles were converted. So the differences and prejudices from the wider society had the potential to be explosive issues within the local assemblies if they were not handled wisely and carefully. This led to all kinds of thorny questions. For instance, most of the meat sold in Gentile cities like Corinth and Rome was not prepared according to the Jewish dietary laws and had been offered to idols. This could pose a great dilemma in the minds of the young Jewish convert. How then should the church handle this type of issue in a way that respected the consciences of those weaker in the faith?

OVERVIEW

In v1-12 the apostle sets forth the principle of liberty on personal convictions and gave examples as well as reasons for it. Now in v13-23, Paul is careful to ensure that the stronger brother does not abuse the liberty he set forth in this area. In v1-12 Paul was dealing more with the attitudes of the stronger and the weak brother, whereas in v13-23 he is dealing more with the actions of the strong to the weak. Or to put it another way – in v1-12 Paul is asking, “can I?” whereas in v13-23 he is asking “should I?”

Theologically, Paul sides with the stronger brother on the issues of meat eating and holy days, but his loving pastoral heart goes out to the weaker brother. Paul’s overriding concern in all these issues is to maintain the unity of the body of Christ and to reach more souls with the gospel. The apostle would not cede an inch to the Judaizers who sought to add to the gospel, but he would give up everything to maintain the unity of the church. In Ephesians 4 he urged,

With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph 4:2-3)

The verb “*endeavouring*” here is in the present continuous tense. So preserving the unity of the saints is something that we must be continually doing. It clearly does not come naturally to us, else Paul would not have to call us to strive earnestly and continually to do so.

The more we grow in Christ the less we will be consumed with exercising our liberties and the more we will be concerned with others. Too often our attitude is, “everyone is entitled to my opinion.” That is not the Christian way. Liberty in Christ is not to be exercised irresponsibly or without care for the needs of others. Not every believer moves at the same pace in sanctification. The believer is to use his liberty, but never to abuse it. The strong is called to give up his rights in these areas of non-essentials.

Paul gives four more balancing principles to the stronger brother that should be thought through before we exercise our legitimate liberty in Christ:

- (1) DO NOT STUMBLE (v13)
- (2) DO NOT GRIEVE AND DESTROY (v14-15)
- (3) DO NOT UNDERMINE YOUR TESTIMONY (v16-21)
- (4) DO NOT CONDEMN YOURSELF (v22-23)

(1) DO NOT STUMBLE (v13)

The first thing that Paul warns the stronger brother is that before he exercises his liberty in peripheral matters, he must ensure that in doing so he does not stumble his weaker brother, “*Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way.*” (v13)

So Paul calls us to not only consider our right to do something but the effects it will have on others. This is not some passive duty that we can simply sit back and react when we see a weaker brother offended. Rather, it includes an active duty to consider before we exercise our liberty whether it will affect the weaker brother.

Doubtless, Paul has in mind the question of Jewish dietary laws in this context because he immediately follows this statement up with the principle of Christian freedom in this area, “*I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself...*” (v14a). This is the same point he makes in 1 Timothy 4:4, “*For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving.*”

So what Paul, in effect, is asking in v13 is that his stronger brethren avoid flaunting their liberty to eat meat that is ceremonially unclean under the Levitical laws before their weaker Jewish brethren. Gentiles must respect the conscience of their Jewish brother. That was the whole point of most of the restrictions decreed by the Jerusalem council on the Gentiles in Acts 15:29.

Incidentally, if there were no other argument in the Bible that condemned the taking of alcoholic beverages in our culture, this is one. For alcohol has proven to be the most potent stumbling block on the planet for mankind. Just ask Noah and Lot! In the USA it is estimated that 10% of drinkers are addicted to alcohol. It claims around 100,000 lives a year. Just to put this in context – that is 25 times as much as those who die from all illegal drugs put together!

(2) DO NOT GRIEVE AND DESTROY (v14-15)

Paul continues the illustration of eating meat to further limit the exercise of our liberties. He adds in the second stage of this filter that we should not grieve or destroy our weaker brother, “*But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died*” (v15). Paul does not forbid making the weaker brother think through his position. However, he makes it clear that it is wrong to continue exercising a liberty when it is unacceptable for your weaker brother’s conscience.

Now, this word, “*destroy*” here does not mean that the weaker brother loses his salvation. It has more the idea that his spiritual faith is greatly inhibited or no longer usable for its intended purpose by being grieved by the inconsiderate actions of the stronger brother. The Greek syntax here indicates that there were some in Rome who were already destroying the faith of their weaker brethren by their inconsiderate assertion of their liberties. This was a real problem – not some hypothetical scenario painted by Paul.

The reason a weaker brother is grieved is a failure to exercise *agape* love, “*now walkest thou not charitably.*” (v15) This *agape* love is not a mere sentimental love, but one that expresses itself in actions. Paul has already declared that such love, “*worketh no ill to*

his neighbour” (Romans 13:10). Remember what Jesus said in John 13:35? He said, “*By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another.*” This *agape* love for our brethren is like a shock absorber, as it allows us to absorb a curtailment of our liberties for the sake of others. The classic chapter setting forth the actions produced by *agape* love is 1 Corinthians 13,

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. (1 Cor. 13:4-7)

The apostle then points to Christ to stir the hearts of his believing readers *for whom Christ died.*” This is the ultimate motivation. The life of this weaker brother has been redeemed at such an incredible cost - the precious blood of the Lamb. For how can I stumble or destroy a brother or a sister in Christ when the Master has given His all for them and for me. Don’t think more about your food than Christ did about His life. One writer put it well,

Paul sets before us the dramatic contrast between the outcome of our self-indulgence and that of Christ’s ultimate self-sacrifice. By demanding to exercise my liberty to eat meat, I could destroy a brother.....How could I even conceive of exercising this liberty when my Lord gave His very life, His all, on the cross of Calvary to save my brother—and me! If Christ gave His all to save my brother, surely I can sacrifice eating meat, so as not to destroy him.

Paul is effectively calling for a denial of self. This is how he lived as he testified, “*If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth*” (1 Cor. 8:13). Parents sacrifice for their children. They go out of their way to avoid hurting or stumbling a child – so should we for our brethren.

(3) DO NOT UNDERMINE YOUR TESTIMONY (v16-21)

Paul adds a third test in v16-21 of undermining your testimony. In v16 he makes it very simple, “*Let not then your good be evil spoken of.*” The word “*evil*” here has the idea of blasphemed. Again the Greek syntax indicates that they were commanded here by Paul to stop doing something that was already going on in Rome. So when we flaunt our liberties irresponsibly we effectively lead others to blaspheme the gospel. This is a delicate balance as we have liberties but the moment our “*good*” causes “*evil*” for another, it becomes evil.

The apostle then reminds his readers that the glory of God’s kingdom is not in temporal things of this world but in spiritual qualities of righteousness, peace, and joy, “*For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.*” So eternal – not external should be our priority. All of us need to focus on the big picture. Do not insist on your rights under every circumstance. Learn when to yield for the greater good. The strong are called to bear that burden.

The great Baptist preacher, CH Spurgeon in the early days of his ministry smoked cigars. In those days it was felt beneficial for ailments, especially for the throat before preaching. He testified, “I have found intense pain relieved, a weary brain soothed, and calm, refreshing sleep obtained by a cigar.” However, it was said that one day Spurgeon noted in a Tobacco store an advertisement using his name to sell cigars with the words,

“*The brand that Spurgeon smokes.*” His conscience smote him that his testimony as a preacher was being undermined so he gave up smoking.

In v18 the apostle Paul points again to Christ as our motivation, “*For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men.*” We need to keep reminding ourselves that we are serving the King of kings who gave everything for us. So these little sacrifices to serve Him are nothing in light of His great sacrifice. Paul then adds we must continually limit our liberties so that we are promoting peace and edifying one another, “*Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another*” (v19).

In v20-21 Paul repeats in summary fashion, like a good teacher, the truths he has expounded in v13-19, “*For meat destroy not the work of God. All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.*”

Paul, however, pointedly highlights the danger of neglecting this, “*but it is evil for that man who eateth with offence.*” Even though it is consistent with the conviction of the stronger brother, offending the weaker brother is no insignificant matter, but “*evil.*” Many weak and trembling saints has been stumbled or deeply hurt by the thoughtless word or deed of a fellow believer, who should have known better. Such behaviour is a dangerous form of self-indulgence.

(4) DO NOT CONDEMN YOURSELF (v22-23)

If all of this was not enough, Paul adds a final test that the stronger brother must satisfy in v22-23. He argues that liberty must not be exercised over matters that there is any doubt, “*Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth.*” But he strengthens this by warning, “*And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.*”

So, we are not to do or say something that there is a doubt in your mind over. We are always to adopt the path that is the safest. That is what got Lot into all the trouble in Sodom. He was always flirting with the world. Unlike Abraham who sought to walk in safe areas, Lot wanted to see how close he got to the edge of sin without falling. However, the truly spiritual believer adopts a different strategy.

So, if in doubt – don’t! Grey areas are not for a Christian. Spurgeon wisely advised, “in all cases of doubt be sure to take the surer side.” Always act from a settled conviction based on the Word of God, “*Hast thou faith? have it to thyself before God.*” We are called to exercise our convictions vertically, “*have it to thyself before God,*” as well as horizontally before our brethren, “*for whom Christ died.*”

CONCLUSION

So, before going out to exercise the liberties we believe we have in Christ we must ask ourselves the following questions:

- (a) Does it stumble my brother? (v13)
- (b) Does it grieve my brother? (v15a)
- (c) Does it destroy the spiritual life of my brother? (v15b)
- (d) Does it make my good to appear evil? (v16)
- (e) Does it make me approved of men? (v18)
- (f) Does it promote peace and harmony? (v19)
- (g) Does it edify my brethren? (v19)
- (h) Does my conscience cause a doubt in my mind? (v22-23)

If the answer we have to any of these questions is in the affirmative, then we are required to surrender these liberties for the greater good. It should also be noted that *all* these tests have to be objectively satisfied. The onus is on the stronger brother to ensure so. **It is not enough that you have passed one or two.**

People like to wave around Romans 14 as a license to flaunt their rights over others in the church. Yet Paul makes clear, just because you have the right to do something does not mean that it is the right thing to do. So, it is quite possible to be right in the issue of liberty and wrong on the issue of exercising it. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not*” (1 Cor. 10:23).

Love never takes liberties at the expense of our brethren, but rather yields them to strengthen and edify a brother. Love always sacrifices liberty for peace and edification of the local assembly. Don't let your testimony be undermined on a peripheral matter by the fact that you misuse your freedom. You are free to help but not to hinder you brothers in Christ. These are the limits of Christian freedom.

Are you living this “sanctification filter” before others? Is it about your rights or are you living for others? Meekness, sacrifice, and forbearance are not natural to us. To exercise these costs and is painful. The only way to be motivated to live like this is to meditate upon the sacrifice of Christ (v15b) and recognise that you are doing it for Him (v18). That truth draws the sting from the pain.

There is great wisdom in these words from Paul. If all of us were to follow them, our churches and homes would be much more harmonious. If they are ignored, offence and division will invariably follow. The only one who benefits from that is the devil. Jesus Christ is building His church. The devil is seeking to destroy it. We are not meant to be joining forces with the evil one in the demolition business.

It would make our lives easier if there were no weaker brethren in our midst. But there are. So we are called to exercise caution and restraint in exercising our liberties for their sakes. It is the mark of Christian maturity when we have come to the point in our pilgrimage when the needs of others are placed above our personal desires and wishes. May God give us the grace to live this life.