

Don't Cause Your Christian Brother To Stumble

(Romans 14:13-23)

Story: Imagine with me if you will feeling the call of God to go to the mission field. You obey, and after raising your support and learning a new language, you start your work on the mission field. But after a few years you are so discouraged you end up coming home. And when you are asked, "What happened?" Your answer is: peanut butter.

Chuck Swindoll, in his book *The Grace Awakening*, tells the story of missionaries who were torpedoed by peanut butter: "The particular place they were sent to serve the Lord did not have access to peanut butter. This lovely family happened to enjoy peanut butter a great deal. Rather creatively, they made arrangements with some of their friends in the States to send them peanut butter every now and then so they could enjoy it with their meals. The problem is they didn't know until they started receiving the supply of peanut butter that the other missionaries they served with considered it a mark of spiritual immaturity to have peanut butter with your meals.

I suppose the line went something like this: "We believe since we can't get peanut butter here, we should give it up for the cause of Christ," or some such nonsense. *A basis of spirituality was "bearing the cross" of living without peanut butter.*

The young family didn't buy into that line of thinking. Their family kept getting regular shipments of peanut butter. They didn't flaunt it; they just enjoyed it in the privacy of their own home. Pressure against them began to intensify. You would expect adult missionaries to be big enough to let others eat what they pleased, right? Wrong. The legalism was so petty, the pressure got so intense and the exclusive treatment became so unfair, it finished them off spiritually." They resigned their post and returned stateside. **The older missionaries refusal to love, and allow liberty to the younger missionaries, destroyed their ministry for Christ.**

Intro: As noted last Sunday morning, Romans chapter 14 is all about Christian liberty. Paul began with an admonition for believers to stop passing judgment on one another (vv. 1-12). The believers in Rome were divided over diets and the observance of holy days. Gentile believers were passing judgment on their Jewish brothers for refusing to eat meat, and for their continued observance of Jewish

holy days. Paul concluded that believers are not to judge one another, for God has accepted each one of us, and He alone is our Judge.

Paul continues with a second admonition in verses 13-23: **“Don’t cause your Christian brother to stumble.”** Paul introduces the principle of brotherly love. Love prevents me from exercising what is, for me, a liberty when this would cause a weaker brother to stumble (v. 15). *Liberty must be limited by love.*

Paul’s exhortation falls neatly into three sections. Each section opens with *Therefore*, and features a negative (“Do Not . . .”) warning for believers to abstain from using their liberty if it might harm their Christian brothers.

First, Don’t Trip Your Christian Brother (vv. 13-15)

Second, Don’t Destroy Your Own Christian Testimony (vv. 16-18)

Third, Don’t Destroy The Work Of God (vv. 19-23)

I. Don’t Trip Your Christian Brother (vv. 13-15)

13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.

Verse 13 opens with a summary of the first 12 verses. **Therefore, don’t judge one another anymore.** Stop criticizing one another over the practice of doubtful things. Each person will answer to the Lord. Paul launches immediately into the next subject he will deal with through the remainder of this chapter. “but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” In other words, **Don’t Trip-up Your Christian Brother.** Paul admonishes mature believers not to use their liberty and thereby cause a weaker brother to stumble. The word translated “obstacle” (*proskomma*) referred to “*something in the road that causes one to stumble.*” In this context, a strong believer who puts an obstacle in the path of a weak believer might set him back temporarily or even do permanent damage to his sensitive conscience. The question is, will the exercise of my liberty cause my weaker Christian brother to sin? **Paul builds his argument in verse 14**

14 I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

Paul himself had become fully convinced that nothing was unclean. This may have been due to the direct teaching of Christ Himself who taught that nothing

is unclean in itself. Jesus said, “It is not what goes into the mouth that makes a person unclean but what comes forth from out of the heart (Matt. 15:10-11, 16-20) This reference to “unclean foods” refers to foods the Jews were not permitted to eat, according to dietary restrictions in the Law of Moses (Lev. 11). These restrictions no longer applied, but many immature Jewish believers still felt obliged to follow these regulations. And in order to insure that they didn’t violate the Law of Moses by eating unclean meat, they made a decision to abstain from eating meats, and ate only vegetables. Paul continues in verse 15,

15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

Paul explains that for a mature believer to eat foods in front of a weaker believer who feels it is wrong, is to tempt them to go against their conscience by eating. To influence a weaker Christian to act against their conscience is a very serious matter. When the weaker Christian proceeds to do what his conscience condemns, he commits sin and is destroyed. Some scholars argue that the Greek word *apollumi* “destroy” refers to *eternal destruction*. Yet, the word here does not mean “made to go to hell” or “made to lose his salvation.” Paul is talking about the loss of peace, assurance, and effective ministry. It hinders the weaker believers Christian growth/maturity.

Paul provides two powerful standards for limiting one’s conduct when it might harm a weaker brother: (1) love for other believers and (2) Christ’s death on the cross (cf. 5:8). Our primary responsibility as believers is to love one another. “For love is from God; and every one who loves is born of God and knows God (1 John 4:7). Love does not take liberties; it surrenders them for the benefit of a brother. **Love demands that we limit our liberty for the sake of our weaker Christian brother. Secondly, Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary should compel us to limit our liberty. If Jesus was willing to die for believers certainly we should be willing to make the smallest of sacrifices. Again, our liberty must be limited by love.**

Paul’s first warning is: *Don’t Trip Your Christian Brother*. His second warning is: *Don’t Destroy Your Own Christian Testimony* (vv. 16-18)

II. Don’t Destroy Your Christian Testimony (vv. 16-18)

Verses 16-18 sum up the essence of the matter.

16 *Therefore* do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; **17** for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. **18** For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Since the people of the world are always watching us, we have a responsibility to be wise in the use of our Christian liberty. **The “good thing” here refers to our liberty to eat meat or to do anything amoral.** The phrase translated “spoken of as evil” is translated as “blasphemed.” When a believer exercises his liberty to do what is right in his own eyes, and it results in the fall of a weaker brother; the people of the world will not see this as freedom but as evil. You are causing that which is good, Paul says, the good news about Christ, to be blasphemed because you are making too much of an issue over a minor matter. You are insisting that your rights are so important that you have to divide the church over them, or separate from a brother or sister who does not believe as you do.

Ray Stedman tells the story of a church that got into a ridiculous argument over whether they ought to have a Christmas tree at their Christmas program. Some thought that a Christmas tree was fine; others thought it was a pagan practice. One group dragged the tree out, then the other group dragged it back in. They got so angry at each other that they actually got into fist fights over it. They ended up suing each other in court and, of course, the whole thing was spread in the newspapers for the entire community to read. These believer’s foolish argument over a Christmas tree caused the name of Christ to be blasphemed.

Paul’s point here is that life for the Christian should not consist of eating meats or drinking wine, or doing any other host of worldly activities. The “kingdom of God” here refers to the sphere over which God rules, and in which all believers live and operate. Christians are to be busy serving God by extending His kingdom through **righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.**”

Paul sums up the importance of limiting one’s Christian liberty in v. 18,

18 For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Every believer who practices Christ-like love by limiting his liberty for the sake of his weaker Christian brother, is living as a servant of Christ—following His example of Sacrificial love (Phil. 2:5-11). This type of sacrificial love is acceptable to God, and approved by men. In other words, they respect us for our restraint and concern for others. Some may even praise you for limiting your liberty because of love.

Paul has issued two warnings: Don't trip up your Christian brother, and Don't destroy your own testimony. He provides a third and final warning in vv. 19-23

III. Don't Destroy The Work Of God (vv. 19-23)

19 *Therefore* [So then] let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. 20 Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. 21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. 22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Paul shifts his emphasis here in verses 19-23 from what we should stop doing to what we should actively pursue. We must stop judging one another (verses 1-12), and cease from exercising any liberty which might cause our weaker brother to stumble (verses 13-18). Instead, we should **“pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another”** (verse 19).

The verb “pursue” (*dioko*) pictures a hunter chasing after his prey, or a runner sprinting to win the prize. Paul says we must all pursue peace and the building up or edifying of one another over the exercise of our own personal liberty. The Greek term “building up” (*oikodome*) is a construction term that was used to describe the process of making a building stronger. **Our goal, then as mature Christians is to strengthen and build up the church by protecting other believers from violating their conscience.**

Paul states again that all food is clean, but anything that gives offense to a weaker brother is evil. Our liberty to eat meat or drink wine, or to do anything which causes our brother to stumble is wrong. Our rights are to be laid aside in the interest of love (v. 21). Paul advised the stronger believers in the Church at Rome, those who possessed the faith to eat and drink what they wanted, to keep their convictions private, between themselves and God (v. 22). Happy is the man who does not condemn himself in eating foods that he has approved.

23 However, the man who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

The weaker Christian is left with one exhortation: “Don’t act out of doubt, but only out of faith.” The principle governing his actions is simple: “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (verse 23). Doubt is the opposite of faith. Actions which proceed from doubt are not of faith, and thus are sin.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Romans chapter 14 is all about Christian liberty. Paul began with an admonition for believers to stop passing judgment on one another (vv. 1-12). The believers in Rome were divided over diets and days. Paul concluded that believers are not to judge one another, for God has accepted each one of us, and He alone is our Judge.

Paul’s second admonition in verses 13-23 calls on believers to “**Not cause their Christian brother to stumble.**” Paul admonition is based on the principle of brotherly love. Love prevents me from exercising what is, for me, a liberty when this would cause a weaker brother to stumble (v. 15). *Liberty must be limited by love.*

Warren Wiersbe concludes: “Believers may hold different convictions about many different matters, but they must hold them in love!”

May God help each of us to give serious consideration to our convictions. May we each be fully convinced in our own minds. And may the practice of our limiting our Christian liberties be done out of love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

Closing Prayer:

Closing Song: *Love One Another*