

Building Up One Another Without Offending, Part 1

Scripture: Romans 14:13–15

Code: 45-110

INTRODUCTION

Jesus Christ has granted us great liberty in the New Covenant. We are free from the encumbrances of Old Testament ceremonial law. We are free to enjoy all the good gifts God has created for us, but we are not free to sin. As recipients of the blessings of the New Covenant, we are free to enjoy all that God has provided without any restrictions in terms of nonmoral issues. But certain people attempt to convince us that we're not free to eat or drink certain things. Others tell us our recreation is limited. Some tell us we cannot watch television or movies. Others tell us cigarettes or playing cards are in themselves evil. Some tell us that a man should not let his hair grow over his ears or wear a beard. Yet others tell us that not wearing a beard is unspiritual. All those things have nothing to do with what Scripture clearly delineates as sin. They are neutral—neither right or wrong according to Scripture—and are the elements of Christian liberty.

To understand how we should react to neutral things, we need instruction from the Word of God. In the church of Jesus Christ are strong believers, who understand their freedom and can enjoy the good gifts God has given them. However, they need to be careful not to abuse that freedom in a sinful way. Then there are weak believers, who bring into their Christian life taboos and scruples from their previous backgrounds. They believe some neutral things are not permissible. Therefore, the potential for conflict exists in the church between those who want to exercise their freedom and those who want to confine themselves to their limited perspective of freedom.

Paul's concern is that this conflict would disrupt the unity of the church, so he addresses the issue of personal preferences in Romans 14:1[en]15:13. Paul divides his discussion into four categories. We have already looked at the first one: we are to receive one another (see pp. xxxx). The second one we will begin to examine is: we are to build up one another.

A. Abstaining from our Liberty in Christ

Is it necessary to eat or drink or do whatever your liberty allows to prove you are strong? No. In fact, you will demonstrate greater spiritual strength when you don't exercise your liberty for the sake of weaker believers. Just because you possess liberty doesn't mean you have to exercise it. When a weak believer abstains from his liberty, it reflects his lack of understanding. When a strong believer abstains from his liberty, it reflects his love for a weaker brother. No believer should flaunt his freedoms to prove he is strong, and certainly no believer should be pressed into exercising freedom to prove he is strong when he is not. The weaker brother should abstain out of his unbelief and the stronger brother should abstain out of love.

1. Developing conformity

Conformity develops in a church when two things happen: the weaker brothers set limitations on their liberties because they believe in their consciences they are not free to exercise them, and the stronger brothers set up the same limitations out of love for the weaker brothers. Conformity develops as the strong confine themselves to what will be tolerated by the weak. They will build relationships with the weak that eventually will strengthen them and widen their scope of liberty.

2. Displaying love

Our freedom has been given to us by God. Whether we exercise it is another matter. I'm free to do many things I would never do because I need to demonstrate my love for those who are weak. My

liberty is vertical. I can enjoy my liberty in my heart before the Lord. But the exercise of my liberty is horizontal between myself and another person and that is limited by my love. Paul's concern is to teach the strong to restrain their liberty for love's sake, making sure they don't flaunt it before others. John Brown quotes an old commentator that said there is a great difference between Christian liberty and the use of Christian liberty. Christian liberty is an internal thing, it belongs to the mind and the conscience and has a direct reference to God. The issue of Christian liberty is an external thing, it belongs to conduct and has reference to man. No consideration should prevail on us for a moment to give up our liberty, since our liberty grows out of the teaching of the Word of God and the God who alone is Lord of the conscience. We should be willing to die for the maintenance of our liberty. But many a consideration should induce us to forego the practical assertion or the display of our liberty. We have liberty in Christ. But it should be controlled and not flaunted to prove one's strength. We need to discern the spirit of those in our assembly who are weak, and restrain our liberty to bring it in line with their weakness. In gaining their love we are able to move them toward a greater understanding of liberty.

B. Abusing our Liberty in Christ

The Bible places many restraints on our liberty. Paul deals with some of them in Romans 14:13-23, but there are others elsewhere in the Bible.

1. Selfdeception

The exercise of our liberty is certainly not for the purpose of selfdeception. In 1 Peter 2:16 Peter tells believers not to use their liberty as a cloak over their wickedness.

a) An addiction to alcohol Suppose you have a drinking problem. That is sin according to the Word of God. But to cloak your problem, you flaunt the fact that you are free in Christ to drink because drinking alcohol is not inherently wicked in and of itself. Don't do that. b) An addiction to television Suppose you watch television all day long or every night when you get home. Whatever garbage parades across that screen parades through your mind. If anyone were to call to your attention what was happening, don't say, "But I'm free in Christ! Besides, TV is just mere electrical impulses." Don't use your liberty in Christ to cloak what is basically a sinful preoccupation something that is sucking the life out of your spiritual development. c) An addiction to golf Suppose you like to play golf on Sunday mornings. You might say, "I'm free; I'm worshiping God in creation instead of in church." There's nothing inherently evil about a little white ball. But claiming your freedom in that area is nothing but a cloak to cover the wickedness of a heart that is not interested in worshiping God.

2. Selfdestruction

Selfdestruction goes against the intentions of our liberty in Christ. There's nothing inherently evil in a tobacco plant, or in hanging it out to dry over a rack, cutting it up, stuffing it in paper, sticking it in your mouth, and blowing smoke. But when it sucks out your energy, gives you the shakes, and dominates your life, then you have allowed a nonmoral thing to become the source of your selfdestruction. I know of a man who was so committed to drinking beer that he left the church rather than set aside his liberty in Christ. He claimed it was his freedom to drink; the truth is it was selfdestructive.

a) 1 Corinthians 6:12 Paul says, "All things are lawful unto me." He doesn't mean unlawful things are lawful; he means all things that aren't unlawful are lawful. He continues, "But all things are not expedient." Paul is saying that even though all things are lawful, it isn't smart to do all things. If you smoke cigarettes long enough, it will hurt you. Smoking it isn't immoral, but it isn't smart. You could say the same thing about movies or television. When they become something that destroys a person, they are unlawful. A wellknown evangelist about twenty years ago decided to play golf all the time. Eventually he was playing golf for \$4,000 a game. It totally destroyed him. He lost everything, including his ministry. There's nothing inherently evil in playing golf, but when it results in selfdestruction, it is an abuse of freedom. b) 1 Corinthians 10:23 Paul repeats the same idea: "All

things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient." It doesn't make sense to engage in all things if I cannot control them.

3. Selfbondage

The purpose of Christian liberty is not to bring you under the control of something so you become its slave, yet that can happen. Some people are controlled by chocolate. Some people are controlled by soap operas if they can't get home to see the next serial, they're miserable. Those people are slaves; they've been brought into bondage. First Corinthians 6:12 says, "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of [lit., "be entangled by"] any."

Man was created to be the king of the earth. He was created and then given dominion. But because of man's fall, things now hold dominion over him. People can be controlled by cigarettes, candy, and food. Some people literally live to eat. Many restaurants are like a side show. They can't give you food just on a plate; they have to give it to you in a bucket, a shoe, or on a piece of wood! All the amenities in restaurants result in food that is priced three times what it's worth. It's a shame, but in a fallen world God's good gifts to us can become our master.

4. Selfretardation

In 1 Corinthians 10:23 Paul says, "All things are lawful for me, but all things edify not." Our freedom is not for the purpose of doing things that tear us down. Since I value my relationship to the Lord, I want to avoid anything that tears me down. There may be things in your life that tear you down spiritually because they keep you away from the people of God. Television or movies may keep you away from studying God's Word. (I would venture to say that 99.9 percent of all movies are immoral to one extent or another, either in what is depicted or implicit.) We do not have freedom to engage in an activity that tears us down.

I have liberty in Christ. But my liberty is not for the sake of selfdeception not to cloak my vice. It is not for self destruction not to get me in habits that ultimately destroy my effectiveness for God. It is not for selfbondage not so I can be controlled by some thing. And it is not for selfretardation not so whatever I engage in pulls me down spiritually.

Those are all personal restraints, but in Romans 14:13 Paul talks about how the abuse of Christian liberty affects my brothers and sisters in Christ. That ultimately affects the church. Paul's concern is how other Christians are to build up other Christians without offending. That calls for limiting our exercise of liberty. Don't let anyone threaten your liberty by binding your conscience to things that are not in themselves evil. But at the same time, don't flaunt your liberty to prove you're strong. That may result in your own bondage or in division among the fellowship of believers.

How do we avoid offending each other? The key point is in Romans 14:15: "Wallest thou not in love?" You need to be sure that the exercise of your liberty is not unloving and insensitive to other believers. The objective of a strong believer in the church of Christ is to conduct himself in love toward a weaker brother.

I. DON'T CAUSE YOUR BROTHER TO STUMBLE (v. 13)

"Let us not, therefore, judge one another any more; but judge this, rather: that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother's way."

A. Reaffirming God's Sovereignty

The word "therefore" takes us back to the first twelve verses of Romans 14. Since the Lord receives every Christian whether weak or strong since He is able to hold up both strong and weak, since He is sovereign over each, and since the Lord is the final judge, we are not to judge one another. The weak are not to judge the strong because they think they are abusing their freedom, nor are the strong to condemn the weak for their lack of faith and small mindedness.

B. Removing Stumbling Blocks

Paul tells us we do have a decision to make. And he puts it in the form of an aorist imperative, which calls for action. Our decision should be not only to stop judging one another, but also to stop putting

stumbling blocks in the way of others. That has to be the preoccupation of our lives. Picture a brother or sister walking along the path of the Christian life, then someone puts something in their path to cause them to fall. We don't want to stop a fellow believer in their spiritual progress by causing them to fall into sin.

1. Scriptural instruction

In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul was dealing with some of the Gentiles in Corinth who had trouble eating or drinking what had been offered to idols. Some of the more liberated brethren were not concerned about that because they knew an idol was nothing; therefore anything offered to nothing is nothing. So there was potential for conflict in the church. In verse 9 Paul says, "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak." How does that happen? Paul continues, "For if any man see thee, who hast knowledge, sitting at the table in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols, and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" (vv. 10-11). When you exercise your freedom, and your brother sees that you are free to do what he thinks is wrong, he might be tempted to follow your example. But when he does, his conscience is guilty because he truly believes it is wrong. So the strong believer has inadvertently created a guilty conscience in the weak brother, causing him to stumble. It is possible the weaker brother might return into an old pattern of sin. He might go back to an idol feast and get caught up in the orgy and debauchery of it, with disastrous results.

2. Contemporary illustrations

a) Drinking People often ask me if I drink alcoholic beverages. I don't, for many reasons. One is that the last thing I want to do is give someone the idea that ministers and other servants of God are free to do that. When someone who was an alcoholic before he came to Christ thinks he is free to drink because he has been emboldened by what he has seen someone else do, he could return to the pit of his drunkenness. We must not cause someone else to stumble. b) Dancing People also have asked me if I dance. Now if I wanted to dance with my wife at home, that would not be sinful. But because I want to be a good example, I choose to set aside certain things, like dancing, that some believers might object to. My parents raised me not to dance. In fact, very few Christians used to dance. This saying was popular in Christian circles: "You don't want to dance because people who go to dances later go out and neck." When I was being raised, dancing was a far cry from what is called dancing today. When I was in the ninth grade in public school, we had a class dance. A particular girl came up to me and said, "I want you to dance with me." I said, "No. You don't want me to dance with you. I don't dance. I don't even know how to dance." She became upset with me. I think she liked me because she always wanted to wear my jacket. (I didn't let her wear it.) She told one of the teachers, who happened to be my algebra teacher. The teacher told me that if I wasn't on that dance floor in five minutes, I would flunk algebra. If you happen to see a transcript from North Downey Junior High for one John MacArthur in the ninth grade, it will have an "F" for algebra. I didn't dance. I think I only had a "D" at the time anyway. Math was never my strong point. I think the limitations most Christians impose on dancing are based on the things associated with its environment. With the exception of folk dances possessing inherent beauty and dignity, most dancing environments are not the kind that would stimulate a weaker brother to godliness. As a strong Christian, you might be able to go dancing with your wife at a disco and quote Bible verses to each other, but many aware of your example wouldn't be able to do that at all. To them it would be a tremendous stumbling block. When you trip up a believer and cause him to fall on the road of spiritual progress, you have acted in less than a loving manner. To build up your brother without offending him, you must be sure not to do anything that might tempt him to do something that could cause him to fall.

II. DON'T GRIEVE YOUR BROTHER (vv. 14-15a)

A. The Absence of Sin (v. 14a)

"I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself."

Paul states emphatically that he didn't receive his teaching by hearsay; he received it directly from his personal, intimate communion with the Lord Jesus Christ. That was the unique privilege of writers of Scripture.

Paul is telling believers not to go to the other extremes and give up their liberty entirely. He wants them to understand and enjoy their liberty. After all, the strong are right: sin does not reside in food, drink, film, electronics, games, recreation, or cigarettes.

1. 1 Timothy 4:34 Paul said that all things, including food, are to be received with thanksgiving. Don't let anyone tell you to abstain from certain foods.

2. Titus 1:15 Paul said, "Unto the pure all things are pure, but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled."

3. Mark 7:15 Jesus said, "There is nothing from outside of a man that, entering into him, can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man."

4. Acts 10:13-15 After Peter saw a sheet containing unclean animals descend from heaven, the Lord said, "Rise, Peter; kill, and eat [God was setting aside the Old Covenant dietary laws]. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. And the voice spoke unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." The Greek word translated "unclean" means "common," but came to mean "impure" or "evil."

B. The Attitude of Believers (vv. 14b-15a)

1. The rejection by the weak (v. 14b)

"But to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Not everyone can handle what is right. In 1 Corinthians 8:7 Paul says, "There is not in every man that knowledge [that an idol is nothing]; for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol, and their conscience being weak, is defiled." A godly person who understands his liberty in Christ should not be dissuaded from exercising it, but those who are ignorant of their liberties shouldn't be shown a pattern of behavior that will cause them to stumble. They shouldn't be encouraged to violate their conscience; they need an example of love that meets them on their own ground.

a) Developing a guilty conscience I don't believe Paul is teaching that sin is subjective that it is only what you think it is. Sin is explicitly defined in Scripture. But Paul is not talking about those things that are inherently sinful. If a person believes it is a sin to do something that isn't inherently sinful, yet does it, he will have a guilty conscience. One weakness I have is on how I spend my time. It's hard for me to relax. There are some days when I decide to do nothing for a couple of hours, but I can hardly get through those hours because I have such a guilty conscience. People around me will say, "Why do you feel guilty? Everyone is entitled to a few hours of breathing without being encumbered with some task." But that weakness in me shows me what the weaker brother's conscience is like. I overheard someone say, "I never miss a morning without having my personal devotions in the Word of God." Another individual replied, "You need to stop doing that so you can prove you're not a legalist. Skip a few days." And if I remember correctly, the person took that advice and suffered tremendously from a guilty conscience. Is it a sin not to have your morning devotions? Surely it isn't addressed as such in the Bible. But if your conscience tells you it is wrong not to have it, and you don't have it, then you will suffer with a guilty conscience. b) Desiring a clean conscience Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's commentary remarks, "Whatever tends to make anyone violate his conscience tends to the destruction of his soul; and he who helps, whether wittingly or no, to bring about the one is guilty of aiding to accomplish the other" (Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.], p. 1178). The Lord wants a clean conscience. You should never train yourself to violate or ignore your conscience. That would be training yourself to ignore the instrument through which the Spirit of God subjectively leads you. Desire to have a conscience void of offense toward God (Acts 24:16). When a stronger brother tempts a weaker brother to violate his

conscience, the weaker brother will have painful, bitter sorrow in his heart. Instead of helping him grow in his spiritual life, the stronger brother has caused him to be even more afraid of his liberty.

2. The responsibility of the strong (v. 15a)

"But if thy brother be grieved with thy food, now walkest thou not in love."

How would a weak brother be grieved? Simply by seeing a strong Christian do what he felt was wrong. If you are strongly convinced that something is wrong, and you see a strong believer do it, you will be grieved over his seeming abuse of liberty. But in the context of Romans 14, I think Paul is saying that the weaker brother is grieved not just because of that, but because he thinks he must follow suit. But by following the instruction or example of the strong believer, he does what he believes is wrong and has to live with the remorse and guilt of his conscience. He forfeits the peace and joy of his Christian walk.

You need to set your life on a path that will not grieve others that will not make them follow you into something their conscience tells them not to. That means you have to get close enough to each other to know where you stand on those issues. You have to know the hearts of the people around you so you can be sure to have an unselfish love for them.

III. DON'T DEVASTATE YOUR BROTHER (v. 15b)

"Destroy not him with thy food, for whom Christ died."

A. The Concept of Destruction

The Greek word translated "destroy" is apollumi, which means "to ruin." It is a very strong and serious word. It is translated frequently in Scripture as "perish." It can have several meanings:

1. Damnation

John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Second Peter 3:9 says God is "not willing that any should perish." Other verses using apollumi are Matthew 10:28, Luke 13:3, Romans 2:12, 2 Corinthians 4:3, and 2 Thessalonians 2:10. The word can have the meaning of eternal destruction when referring to unbelievers.

2. Death

Apollumi also can be a general term for the death or elimination of something.

a) 1 Corinthians 1:19 "It is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." God will wipe out the folly of those who suppose themselves to be wise in their worldly philosophies. b) 1 Corinthians 10:9-10 Paul said that the people of Israel were "destroyed by serpents." Then he said, "Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed by the destroyer." The word is used in this general sense also in Hebrews 1:11, James 1:11, and 1 Peter 1:7.

3. Spiritual loss

Apollumi is also used in Scripture to speak of believers. When it is so used, it has some latitude.

a) Matthew 18:14--Matthew 18 is a familiar chapter on the childlikeness of the believer. Verse 14 says, "It is not the will of your Father, who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish." That verse is part of a passage about not offending Christians. It is a great parallel to Romans 14. Matthew 18:6 says that true believers are like little children. Verse 3 says, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of God." In verse 6 Jesus says that anyone who offends a believer would be better off drowned. In verse 10 Jesus says, "Take heed that ye despise not [Gk., kataphroneo, "look down on"] one of these little ones; for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father, who is in heaven." In verses 12-13 Jesus shows how concerned the Father and the angels are over believers: "If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more over that sheep than over the ninety and nine which went not astray."

God is the shepherd and the sheep are His own. Verse 14 says, "It is not the will of your Father, who is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish." Can you offend a believer to the degree that he will perish forever in hell? No. But he will suffer spiritual loss or experience disaster in his life. He could leave the church. He could lose his joy. He could lose even his effectiveness in ministry. b) 1 Corinthians 8:11--Paul, speaking to believers, said, "Through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" In context apollumi cannot mean eternal destruction; it must refer to suffering loss. c) 2 John 8--John, addressing believers, said, "Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward." The same word is used to mean the loss of reward. Apollumi, when used in reference to believers, indicates the loss of spiritual blessing. When you cause your brother to stumble, to grieve, or to lose spiritual blessing, you have not acted in a loving way.

B. The Cause of Destruction

Romans 14:15 says, "Destroy not him with thy food" (emphasis added). Food was emblematic of their liberty. Paul was talking to a liberated Jew who would flaunt a pork chop in the face of a newly converted Jew, or a liberated Gentile who would eat meat offered to idols in front of a newly converted pagan who just came out of an idolatrous system. Why let something as unimportant as food do something as awful as causing spiritual loss for a weaker brother or sister?

C. The Contrast of Destruction

Paul concludes by telling the strong not to plunge the weak, "for whom Christ died," into spiritual devastation (v. 15). That's a virtual repetition of 1 Corinthians 8:11. How could a strong believer treat in a loveless way someone for whom Christ died in an act of supreme love? What a contrast! Since Christ, the perfect Son of God, loved that weaker brother enough to die for him, shouldn't the strong believer, who is to emulate Christ, love his brother enough not to devastate his spirituality by insisting on his own liberty regardless of the circumstances?

Paul calls us to build one another up by not causing each other to stumble, to grieve, or to suffer spiritual loss.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Is it necessary for the strong believer to do whatever his liberty allows to prove he is strong? Explain.
2. When will conformity in the church develop?
3. Describe the difference between having Christian liberty and using it.
4. What are four common personal abuses of liberty? Describe each one.
5. What is the key point in Romans 14:13-23? Explain.
6. In what sense are we not to judge other believers?
7. What should be the preoccupation of strong believers (Rom. 14:13)?
8. According to 1 Corinthians 8:9-11, how does a strong believer create a guilty conscience in a weak believer?
9. What was Paul communicating in Romans 14:14a?
10. Why shouldn't weak believers be encouraged to exercise their liberty against their better judgment?
11. Why shouldn't any believer train himself to violate his conscience?
12. How is a weak brother grieved by a strong brother (Rom. 14:15a)?
13. What are the various meanings of the Greek word apollumi in Scripture?
14. What passage makes a great parallel to Romans 14? Explain its significance.

Pondering the Principles

1. Are you in danger of abusing your liberty to the point of hurting yourself? Review the section on abusing Christian liberty (see pp. 2- 4). Be honest in your evaluation as you answer the following

questions: Are you using your freedom to cloak any evil you might be practicing? Are you participating in any activity that is either potentially harmful to your health or to your ministry? Are you involved in anything to the point that you have become a slave to it? Are you doing anything that might result in your being torn down spiritually? If you answered yes to any of those questions, you are abusing your liberty in Christ. Stop your involvement in those things. Limit your liberty for your own sake.

2. Are there people in your fellowship you may have hurt by exercising some of your freedoms in Christ? Have you caused a brother to stumble, to grieve, or to suffer spiritual loss? If so, then you need to show him your love by limiting your liberty. What kinds of things can you do to reach down to him at his level of maturity? Only when you see things from his level can you begin to encourage him through Scripture to release some of his inhibitions in exercising his freedoms in Christ. But be cautious. Don't encourage him beyond what he is able to handle. Better you should love him where he is at than force him beyond his secure position.

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