

Building Up One Another Without Offending, Part 2

Scripture: Romans 14:16–23

Code: 45-111

INTRODUCTION

In his epistle to the Romans, Paul deals with the subject of salvation by grace through faith. Having laid out all the elements of salvation in the first eleven chapters, he taught about the practical ramifications of that doctrine beginning in chapter 12. We all know that sin can be a blight on the fellowship of the redeemed, and Paul treats that subject in chapters 12 and 13. But another potential problem within the assembly is the conflict between strong and weak Christians. The strong understand their liberty—they can enjoy all the good things God has provided for them. But the weak can't understand their freedom—they remain restricted by nonmoral taboos, traditions, and habits from their past lives.

There are many things we as Christians are free to enjoy, provided we do not use them to excess. Some of us understand that; some of us do not. So there exists the potential for conflict in the church over those things. Paul sets out to help us resolve that conflict in Romans 14:1–15:13.

The basic truth of Christian liberty is that we are free from the outward requirements of the Old Testament ceremonial laws. We are free to enjoy all of God's good gifts. However we are never free to sin. Not all believers can accept that they are free to enjoy all God has provided. While the strong might feel they need to exercise their liberty, in so doing they greatly offend the weak and create conflict in the church. That ultimately disrupts the unity of the church and harms its testimony. Paul divides his discussion into four sections. We are looking at the second section: building up one another without offending (Rom. 14:13–23). To build up one another effectively, we must be willing to limit our liberty for the sake of a weaker brother. There are six ways to do that.

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."

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

"I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. But if thy brother be grieved with thy food, now walkest thou not in love."

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

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

A. The Concept of Destruction

B. The Cause of Destruction

C. The Contrast of Destruction

We are not to devastate our brother by plunging them into deep spiritual loss, possibly back into the milieu of pagan worship.

LESSON

When we read Romans 14:15 and realize that the weak believer is devastated by our exercise of liberty and our failure to love him, we are reminded that he was one for whom Christ died. We are to build up our brother in love by not causing him to stumble, grieve, or be devastated by falling into sin.

IV. DON'T FORFEIT YOUR WITNESS (vv. 1619)

A. The Christian Purpose (vv. 1618)

"Let not then your good be evil spoken of; for the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men."

It is possible to so abuse our liberty and create conflict with our weaker brothers that the world is turned off to Christianity because of how we treat one another. Instead of the world's seeing Christians as an admirable group of people, they disapprove of the conflict they see. Verse 18 says the church is to be "approved of men," a reference to people in general, not just to believers. The world is watching us, and it is important that we set aside our liberties for their sake, too.

First Peter 2:15 says, "So is the will of God, that with well doing [goodness of life and character] ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." That means you shut the mouths of those who criticize your faith. How do you do that? Verse 16 says, "As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness." If you want to silence the critics by your good life, you can't abuse your freedom, and you certainly can't use your freedom as an excuse to cover your sin.

1. An authentic love (v. 16)

"Let not then your good be evil spoken of."

a) A blasphemous problem What does "your good" refer to? The Greek word translated "good" is agathos. It refers to that which is qualitatively or intrinsically good. Paul has in mind our freedom in Christ that salvation provides, all the goodness of enjoying everything God has given us. When someone speaks evil about that good, it has just been blasphemed. We can enjoy everything God has given us. A strong Christian can give thanks for his freedom and rejoice in it. But if he damages other people by abusing it, and the world sees his indifference to the pain of his weaker brother, do you think they will conclude that Christians are a marvelous group of people? Not at all. In Romans 2 Paul tells us that while the Jews were trying to show the world how righteous they were, they destroyed the reputation of God. In verse 24 he says, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you." b) A scriptural principle In 1 Corinthians 10:28-30 the apostle Paul says, "If any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that showed it, and for conscience' sake; for the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other; for why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience? For if I, by grace, be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that which I give thanks?" This is what Paul means: suppose you go to dinner at a pagan's house with another believer. Your host serves meat offered to idols. You're strong in the faith, your brother is weak, and you're both trying to evangelize the pagan. Your weaker brother puts an elbow in your ribs and whispers, "I can't eat that; it's meat offered to idols. My conscience won't allow me to eat it." Your host is proud of the fact that he is serving you meat sacrificed to idols. What are you going to do? Offend the pagan or your weaker brother? Offend the pagan. If you offend your weaker brother, you've discredited the significance of Christian love. If you offend the pagan to show love to your brother, you've provided a profound testimony for that pagan. You have shown him that love overrules everything. That's the kind of fellowship most pagans would like to get into: a brotherhood where people care enough about each other to set aside their liberties. Perhaps the pagan will be drawn to the gospel by that example. The point of Romans 14:16 is not to forfeit your witness by overdoing your liberty and offending your brother before an unbeliever. The unbeliever needs to see your love for your brother. We don't need to show the world how free we are; we need to show them how loving we are.

2. An appealing kingdom (v. 17)

a) The nonessentials (v. 17a) "The kingdom of God is not food and drink" The kingdom is the sphere of salvation; it is God ruling in the hearts of those who believe in Christ. We all belong to it when we're saved. The essence of that kingdom is not meat and drink. We haven't been saved to promote

externals or fight over nonessentials though sad to say we've done a wonderful job of it. I believe fighting over nonessentials has become widespread Christian recreation, and is probably a key reason that many people reject the gospel. That's sad because believers who fight over those things have missed the point of the kingdom. b) The necessary elements (v. 17b) "The kingdom of God is ... righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit." That is a comprehensive summary of the Christian life. (1) Righteousness The issue of the kingdom is righteous living holy, obedient, God honoring lives conformed to God's will. My chief concern is not liberty, but holiness. That's what the watching world is looking for. I want to be filled with the fruits of righteousness and wear the breastplate of righteousness. (2) Peace The kingdom is all about having tranquil relationships with God and your fellow man. Our peace is exemplified by our caring and our unity. The tranquility of our relationships can have a profound testimony. When the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) including love, joy, and peace are displayed in our lives, the watching world sees Christianity as something desirable. Righteousness means I seek to honor God; peace means I seek to have harmony with my brother. (3) Joy Someone who is right with God and at peace with his brother will have joy. It's the personal joy of knowing God and experiencing forgiveness, grace, mercy, and love. It's the happy life of salvation that rejoices in everything. We want the watching world to see Christians as those who are righteous, at peace, and filled with joy. We will be that way when we exercise self-sacrificial love at the expense of exercising our liberties. The strong must move down to the level of the weak brother or sister and respect their weaknesses until they can be nurtured into strengths. There are things we are perfectly free to do that we must choose not to do to demonstrate to the watching world that the kingdom is not a celebration of our rights. When the world sees lives marked by righteousness when it sees people with integrity and honesty, who are just and virtuous that is a loud testimony to the reality of Christianity. Even in the fallenness of man there is enough of the residual image of God for the unregenerate to long for what is unobtainable to them. Peaceful relationships are foreign to the world because the world is full of chaos. When the world sees deep, profound joy in the Holy Spirit, it sees the heart of kingdom living. Those attractive elements can bring people to Christ.

3. An acceptable servant (v. 18)

"He that in these things serveth Christ is acceptable to God, and approved of men."

a) To God Romans 12:12 says, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." One who serves Christ with righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit is pleasing to God. b) To men The true servant is also approved by men. In Titus 2:10 Paul says we should "adorn the doctrine of God." We are to live lives that make God and His gospel attractive. Titus 2:5 speaks about women being "discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed." How we live together in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit is essential to our testimony. The Greek word translated "approve" in Romans 14:18 is dokimos. It means "to be approved after close examination." We are under the scrutiny of the world, and it needs to see our love. We don't want to cause a brother to stumble, grieve, or be devastated and end up forfeiting our witness. In 1 Corinthians 9:1 the apostle Paul says, "Am I not an apostle, Am I not free?" He had every right to do as he pleased in areas that were not sin. In verses 4-5 he says, "Have we no right to eat and to drink? Have we no right to lead about a sister, a wife?" Paul had every right to get married. In verse 6 he says, "Have we no right to forbear working? Who goeth to war at any time at his own expense? Who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of its fruit? Or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock?" In verse 8 Paul continues to discuss his rights. Then in verse 15 he says, "I have used none of these things." Paul set aside all his rights because he didn't want to offend unbelievers. In verses 19-22 he says, "Though I am free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I

became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, not being myself under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ), that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak; I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." We should never reach the point where the exercise of our liberties causes us to be unconcerned about whether we might be offending the lost. In verse 23 Paul says, "And this I do for the gospel's sake." The ultimate freedom is to have freedom yet choose not to use it for the sake of others.

B. The Christian Pursuit (v. 19)

"Let us, therefore, follow after the things which make for peace, and things with which one may edify another."

We are to follow after (Gk., di[ma]ok[ma]o, "pursue") two things.

1. The things that make for peace

Humility produces peace because someone with humility doesn't care about his own rights; he is more concerned about another's rights. Meekness, unselfishness, and love are the things that make for peace.

a) 2 Corinthians 13:11 Paul said, "Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace." b) Ephesians 4:3 Paul said we're to be "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Peace is part of our testimony, so let's learn to pursue the things that make for peace. If you find a weaker brother in the fellowship who doesn't understand his liberty, reach down to where he is and make peace with him. Don't flaunt your liberty, especially knowing that unbelievers are watching you.

2. The things that build up others

We should pursue the kinds of things that will bring about spiritual strengthening in a brother. In 1 Corinthians 14:12 Paul says, "Forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church." Seek the things that will build up your weaker brother, not that which will cause him to stumble, grieve, and be devastated.

V. DON'T TEAR DOWN THE WORK OF GOD (vv. 2021)

A. The General Command (v. 20)

1. Examined (v. 20a)

"For food destroy not the work of God."

Paul has in mind the idea of offending a Jew with food that wasn't kosher or offending a Gentile with food that had been offered to idols. But "food" is symbolic of any discretionary thing you might have a right to do. We are not to destroy the work of God over discretionary things.

Verse 20 tells us that a weak believer is a work of God. Ephesians 2:10 says, "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus." God is at work in every Christian, even the weaker brother. We are not to pull down what God is building up. Some people are so proud about their liberation that they don't care if they tear down a weaker brother instead of building him up.

The present imperative is used in Romans 14:20 for "destroy not." Paul is saying to stop what you're doing. Within that Roman assembly there must have been some liberated brethren who were tearing down what God was trying to build up. So Paul tells them to stop. They were not merely dealing with a man, but a man for whom Christ died a man who is part of the kingdom and who has the Holy Spirit indwelling him. Now Paul adds that he also is a work of God. Would you take a black marker and scribble on the masterpieces in a museum? Would you cut through a Rembrandt with a knife? Would you crush a Stradivarius over your knee? If you wouldn't do those things, then why would you tear down the work of the ultimate master?

2. Explained (v. 20b)

"All things indeed are pure; but it is evil for that man who eateth with offense."

One who exercises his freedom at the expense of his brother is doing evil, even though the thing he is free to do isn't wrong in and of itself. All things are pure, but they become evil when they cause a brother to stumble, be grieved, or be devastated. That's why Paul says, "If food make my brother to offend, I will eat no meat" (1 Cor. 8:13).

B. The Specific Instruction (v. 21)

"It is good neither to eat meat, nor to drink wine, nor anything by which thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak."

Drinking wine is not a moral evil; however drunkenness is a sin. Drinking wine is not a sin if it does not contribute to losing your senses. The wine consumed in Paul's day was invariably mixed with a high amount of water to avoid drunkenness. The fruit of the grape fermented and mixed with water in and of itself isn't wrong, but anything that causes your brother to stumble is wrong. If drinking wine causes your brother to stumble by tempting him to sin, it then is wrong. That is the primary reason I don't do a lot of things I could do, including drinking wine or any alcoholic beverage, because I know some believers would be offended by it. If I were to drink wine, some would look down on me and deny me any godly virtue. But I joyously set such things aside because the greater issue is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Wine, food, cards, TV, and recreation are only things. It is how we use those things that matters. Sadly, many Christians will drink their beer and wine and flaunt their liberty no matter what anyone thinks. Consequently, there is a rift in the fellowship.

VI. DON'T FLAUNT YOUR LIBERTY (vv. 22-23)

A. A Word for the Strong Believer (v. 22)

"Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth."

According to Paul the one who has faith is a strong brother--one who believes he has legitimate freedoms. If he understands his liberty then he should enjoy it before God. The person who does not condemn himself in what he approves is happy. He can enjoy his freedom and not feel self-condemned because he doesn't have a guilty conscience and he hasn't caused a brother to stumble. He can fully enjoy his freedom before the Lord.

B. A Word for the Weak Believer (v. 23)

"He that doubteth is condemned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; for whatever is not of faith is sin."

The weak Christian shouldn't try to emulate the strong until he believes it is right. Otherwise, he will be condemned by his conscience.

How can the strong Christian be happy? By setting aside his liberty and enjoying it only before the Lord. He will be happy because he won't be condemning himself for the things he is doing that cause problems for others. The weak believer will be happy when he doesn't participate in things he isn't ready to handle. If he does he will go against his conscience, and that will be sin to him. It will result in guilt and a loss of joy. Don't flaunt your freedom; enjoy it before the Lord.

Conclusion

To maintain unity in the church we are to receive one another and build up one another without offending them. Paul sums it up well in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33: "Whether, therefore, ye eat, or drink, or whatever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, neither to the [unsaved] Jews, nor to the Greeks [unsaved Gentiles], nor to the church of God; even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved." The ultimate goal of unity between strong and weak believers is a profound testimony to the world that brings about the salvation of many.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Since Christ went to such great lengths to save the weak believer, what significance does that have for the strong believer's treatment of the weak?
2. What is limited atonement? What Scriptures support that position? What is unlimited atonement? What Scriptures support that position?
3. What Old Testament event provides a parallel to unlimited atonement?
4. What can cause people in the world to disapprove of Christians?
5. How can Christians silence the critics of the world (1 Peter 2:15-16)?
6. When you find yourself in a situation where you have to offend either a believer or an unbeliever, whom should you offend? Why?
7. What three elements characterize the kingdom of God? Explain each (Rom. 14:17)?
8. What will attract the unsaved to Christianity?
9. Who does the Christian gain approval from when he limits his liberty for the sake of his weaker brother (Rom. 14:18)?
10. According to 1 Corinthians 9:23, what was Paul's reason for limiting his liberty?
11. What two things should a believer pursue? Explain (Rom. 14:19).
12. What does "food" represent in Romans 14:20?
13. What does the "work of God" refer to in Romans 14:20?
14. When do things that are pure become evil (Rom. 14:21)?
15. What concluding words does Paul have for the strong? for the weak (Rom. 14:22-23)?
16. What is the ultimate goal of unity between strong and weak Christians?

Pondering the Principles

1. Many passages of Scripture show us that Christ died for the world. Review the verses on pages 3-4. Knowing that God wants all men to be saved, what changes do you need to make in your commitment to evangelize the unsaved? Ask God to help you acquire the right attitude toward unbelievers. Look up the following verses: Matthew 9:36-38; 18:11-13; 2 Corinthians 8:9. What kind of attitude did Christ display toward the unsaved? Seek to be like your Lord, especially in His attitude toward the lost.
2. Put yourself in the shoes of your unsaved relatives or neighbors. What can they conclude about Christianity based on what they see in your relationships with other Christians? Are there aspects of those relationships that might lead them to think less of Christianity? What changes can you make to improve your testimony to your unsaved relatives and neighbors? What liberties do you need to give up to demonstrate love to your weaker brothers? Memorize Romans 14:16 as a constant reminder against abusing your liberty before a watching world: "Do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil" (NASB).
3. On a scale of 1-10, rate yourself in your practice of righteousness, peace, and joy. Which one is your strength? Which one is your weakness? How do you think the unsaved people you know would rate you in each of those areas? Which one would they classify as your weakness? Make it your goal this week to improve your weaknesses. Look for place where you need to be more obedient. At every opportunity strive to be at peace with all your fellow believers. See if your joy doesn't improve when you become more obedient to God and develop peace with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

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