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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #56

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Never Become a Slave to Your Own Freedom, or

How the Strong should relate to the Weak

Romans 14:13-23

Virtually every moment of every day every Christian is forced to make decisions or choices between alternative courses of action. Often these decisions are of little if any moral consequence: decisions such as what to wear to work, where to eat lunch, which of many differing cars one should purchase, and so on. Other decisions, however, are of great moral consequence. They are decisions that affect not only ourselves but also the people around us. These are the decisions we do not take lightly. As Christians, our first course of action is to turn to the Bible, for we know that in his written Word God has provided us with inspired, infallible, authoritative guidance to help us make the right choice in any given situation.

However, as we saw last week, the Bible is not an encyclopedia of ethics. There are going to be situations when we are forced to make ethical decisions for which the Bible provides no explicit instruction. These are the most difficult and challenging choices of all. What is a Christian to do when faced with a moral dilemma on which the Bible is silent? This is the question Paul asks and answers in Romans 14.

In our previous study of the first half of Romans 14, vv. 1-12 I tried to define the nature of legalism:

Legalism is the tendency to regard as divine law things which God has neither required nor forbidden in Scripture and the corresponding inclination to look with suspicion on others for their failure or refusal to conform.

I also pointed out that the “weak” brother or sister in Romans 14 is not necessarily a legalist. Their adamant refusal to eat meat or drink wine was due to their failure to understand the reality of Christian freedom in matters of food and drink. These aren’t people who refrain from meat and wine because of health concerns. They either mistakenly believe that abstinence per se is more godly than indulgence, or more likely, they fear some form of spiritual contamination or defilement from eating meat and drinking wine. I’ll say more about that in a moment.

But here is the truly ironic reality that we encounter in vv. 13-23. Those who feel the freedom to eat meat and to drink wine can themselves fall into legalism. They can hold to the truth of Christian liberty so tenaciously that they ignore the welfare of their weaker brothers and sisters. They insist at all times and under every circumstance to have the right and freedom to eat and drink whatever they want. In effect,

they have become slaves to their own freedom. They are in bondage to their own liberty. If you believe that you *must always* exercise your freedom, even to disregarding your fellow believer, not only are you not walking in love but you are also enslaved to your own liberty. It is truly ironic, is it not? So let's dive into the text.

A Short Review of vv. 1-12

Before we look at vv. 13-23 let me briefly summarize what we saw in vv. 1-12. First, Paul is not talking about issues or practices that relate to or affect our salvation. Whether one eats meat or only vegetables, whether one drinks wine or abstains, has no bearing on our acceptance with God. We know this because of what Paul said in Romans 14:3. Both the weak and the strong are “welcomed” by God. Both the weak and the strong embrace their positions because they want to honor the Lord and express their gratitude to him. This we see in Romans 14:6.

Second, the “weak” Christian is the person who does not fully understand that he/she has the liberty to eat and drink whatever they please. The “weak” person is also inclined to violate his/her conscience on such matters because of the influence of the “strong.” The “strong” believer is the one who fully understands Christian liberty on such secondary matters and has no qualms or scruples of conscience when he/she partakes. We'll see Paul discuss this further in vv. 13-23.

Third, *it is not sinful to be “weak.”* It simply means you haven't progressed in your understanding of what God's grace in Christ has secured for you, namely, the freedom to enjoy all the good things he has provided in nature. Fourth, Paul makes it clear that the “strong” should not “despise” the “weak” as if the latter is sub-spiritual, and the “weak” should not “judge” the “strong” as if he is falling down in his responsibility to God (v. 3).

The Responsibility of the Strong to Forego their Liberty in order to Love the Weak (vv. 13-19)

You may recall that Paul spoke directly to the weak believer in vv. 5-12. Beginning with v. 13 he turns his attention to the strong believer and describes the responsibility to love the weak. His main point is that *the liberty of the strong must be qualified by love*. Now, why do I say that in v. 13 Paul is talking directly to the strong Christian? I say this for two reasons. First, the opposite of judging a brother or sister is being careful not to put a stumbling-block in their path (v. 13b), something only the strong can do in relating to the weak. Second, vv. 14-15 are intelligible only if it is the strong who is being addressed.

This leads directly to another question: “Why does Paul place so much of the burden on the strong brother? Why does he ask the strong brother to curtail his liberty out of love, rather than ask the weak brother to change his convictions about what is permissible for a Christian to do?” The reason is this: the weak brother is *bound* by his conscience; there is no flexibility or freedom for him to adjust his behavior, for in doing so he would be violating what he sincerely believes is God's will. The strong brother, on the other hand, is at liberty in his conscience either to partake or abstain. He knows it is of secondary

importance, whereas the weak brother regards it as of primary moral significance. The strong Christian, therefore, is at greater liberty to *bend* and adapt to the concerns of the weak.

In v. 13 Paul refers to putting a “stumbling block” or “hindrance” in the way of another Christian. The stumbling block and hindrance refer, respectively, to something against which the foot strikes and a trap or snare in which the foot may be caught. Here the terms are used metaphorically and are synonymous. They refer to *anything that becomes an occasion for falling into sin*. Paul does not mean that the strong deliberately seduces the weak. He is speaking of the strong who, in the exercise of their liberty, fail to take into account the moral scruples of their weaker brethren and thus create an occasion for the latter to fall into sin. How this occurs will be explained later.

In vv. 14-15 Paul states clearly and unmistakably a truth that not all Christians understand. It is their failure to grasp this truth that has created the problem he addresses in Romans 14. What is that truth? It is that *“nothing is unclean in itself”* (v. 14a). Again, remember, that the word “nothing” is qualified by the Bible itself. In other words, “nothing” is unclean in itself except what the Bible explicitly says is unclean. Paul is not saying that child abuse or theft or lying or drunkenness are clean. This is something Paul asserts in several other texts, all of which we looked at last week. For example:

“For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:4-5).

“Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ‘For the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof’” (1 Cor. 10:25-26).

“Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (1 Cor. 8:8; cf. Mark 7:14-15).

But note the energy and zeal and confidence with which Paul makes this assertion: “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus” that all things are clean. This is not some personal, individual preference or some theoretical conclusion. This is a belief that has penetrated into Paul’s very conscience and has set him free from all perplexity. He has no doubts at all about the truth of this assertion. It admits of no exceptions. And as if to seal it once and for all, he says that he has come to this conclusion “in the Lord Jesus,” which probably means that his conviction is consistent with what Jesus himself taught (see Mark 7:19).

I pointed out last week that the word translated “unclean” suggests that the division between the strong and the weak in the church at Rome was probably a division between Gentile believers and Jewish believers. The word “unclean” was often used with reference to food and drink that were prohibited in the Law of Moses. These were items that rendered a person ceremonially unfit to participate in Jewish rituals. Evidently many of the Jewish believers in Rome believed that they were still under obligation to observe the dietary regulations of the old covenant and still were required to observe the feasts and holy days described in Leviticus, such as the Sabbath. It may also be the case that these “weak” believers were fearful that food and drink that came into contact with the secular world were tainted and thus spiritually

dangerous. Even though such divisions rarely are seen in Christian churches today, the principles by which Paul adjudicates the matter are still relevant and applicable to us.

The weak, then, argued that certain foods and drink were intrinsically or inherently *unclean* and therefore were defiling to the believer. This was their justification for abstaining. Paul's response is that, unless the Scriptures explicitly say it is unclean, you are wrong! See Mark 7:14ff. and Acts 10:15,28.

The key is the distinction in v. 14 between, on the one hand, what is *objectively true* and, on the other hand, one's *subjective perception* of that truth. Objectively, nothing inherently, in and of itself, is unclean. But, *it may become unclean if you THINK is to be so*. While it is true that nothing is inherently unclean or defiling, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 8:7 that “not all possess this knowledge.” Those who do understand this truth are the “strong” in Romans 14. Those who do not are the “weak.”

Paul's primary point in the second half of Romans 14 is to argue that if by partaking of what you correctly know to be clean causes your brother or sister to stumble because to them it is unclean, you are not walking according to love. And by “stumbling” Paul means the weaker believer is enticed, because of your example, to do something contrary to his/her conscience. As he says in v. 15, “if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.”

And note closely that by “grieving” your brother he means you “destroy” your brother. He says much the same thing in v. 20 – “Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.” What does this mean? Some argue that the *destruction* in both v. 15 and again in v. 20 is eternal, and refers to the loss of salvation on the part of the weak brother or sister. But there are several reasons why this cannot be true. First, “are we really to believe that a Christian brother's single act against his own conscience – which in any case is not his fault but the fault of the strong who have misled him, and which is therefore, an unintentional mistake, not a deliberate disobedience – merits eternal condemnation? No, hell is reserved only for the stubborn, the impenitent, those who willfully persist in wrongdoing” (Stott, 365-66).

Second, Paul just affirmed in unequivocal terms the eternal security of the believer (Rom. 8:28-39). If nothing in all creation can separate one from the love of Christ, then surely another believer's callous disregard for a weak brother's religious scruples cannot do so! Third, Paul says in v. 15 that a Christian can “destroy” another Christian. But Jesus said that God alone destroys body and soul in hell (Matt. 10:28). Fourth, Jesus said explicitly in John 10:28 that his sheep will “never perish”. Clearly, then, the “destruction” in Romans 14:14 must refer to something less than and different from the loss of eternal salvation.

If not eternal destruction or the loss of salvation, it certainly means more than simply causing the weak believer to feel emotional distress or mental annoyance. There are occasions when it is deeply painful for the weak Christian to see his strong brother or sister exercising their freedom in a way that the weak believer considers improper and defiling. But Paul surely has something more serious in mind than simply the possibility that the weak believer is offended. I think Paul has in mind a scenario in which because of something the strong Christian does the weak Christian is enticed to sin against his/her conscience.

Paul envisions a situation in which a strong Christian, in the legitimate exercise of his/her liberty, causes a weak Christian to sin. The weak believer sins when he/she is influenced by the strong believer's behavior to act contrary to his/her conscience.

The "sin" in question is the violation of one's conscience when a person is induced or influenced to do what he/she esteems to be wrong. So, the "grievance" and the "destruction" that Paul has in mind in v. 15 is that vexation of conscience when a weak believer violates or acts contrary to what he truly believes is the will of God for his life. The "destruction", therefore, presents an obstacle to one's *sanctification*, not to one's *justification*. This is the simple reality that a strong believer must take into account when he/she exercises their liberty in secondary matters of behavior.

This is where we see the massive difference between the "legalist" and the "weak" Christian. The legalist would never for an instant consider doing something contrary to his/her conscience. The legalist is not in the least enticed to do something he considers sinful simply because of something you do. Let me illustrate my point.

If I am having dinner with a person and I choose to order a glass of wine or a beer, what am I to do when that person objects? I ask them a simple question: "Are you a weak believer?" The legalist will angrily protest: "I am not!" My response again would be: "So let me make doubly sure. Are you in any way enticed or seduced or influenced to drink alcohol because I have chosen to do so?" The legalist will always respond: "No! I am not! And you shouldn't either," he self-righteously shouts across the table.

That person is not a "weak" Christian. That person is not grieved in that he/she feels pressure to act contrary to their beliefs. That is a person who is convinced that he is more godly than I am for the simple reason that he refrains from an action in which I participate. And that person will not settle until he can bring me under his religious thumb and rob me of my freedom by insisting that I comply with his beliefs. The "weak" Christian, on the other hand, is in fact tempted to drink because I do, and in doing so violates his conscience and is tripped up in his walk with Jesus. And my responsibility in such a case is to forego the exercise of my legitimate liberty for the sake of loving my weaker brother.

So, if it is a legalist who is protesting your exercise of legitimate freedom, never yield to his demand. To concede to a legalist and abide by his/her insistence that you forego your liberty as a believer in Jesus, will do more harm than good. My response to a legalist is to say: "Are you sure you won't have a beer? I'd be happy to pay for it!" Love the weak! Defy the legalist!

One more thing before leaving this point. If you do choose to give up your liberty for the sake of a weaker brother or sister in Christ, be extraordinarily careful to explain to them that you are doing so *not* because *you* think it is a sin, but because *they* do. If I choose to abstain, the weak person needs to know my reason for doing so. It is out of love for them and from a genuine concern for their conscience and relationship to Christ. It is not because I agree with the reasons for his abstinence. My prayer is that we would continue our discussion of the matter and that this weak believer would eventually come to understand his/her freedom and grow up into greater maturity in Christ.

We should also take note of the basis of Paul's appeal to the strong believer. He points in v. 15b to the death of Christ. If Jesus loved the weak person enough to die for him/her, how utterly contrary to this sort of love would it be for me to rigidly insist that I exercise my liberty and do damage to his/her soul? It is the contrast between, on the one hand, the extreme and glorious sacrifice that Jesus made in dying for the weak person, and, on the other hand, my selfish insistence that I exercise my freedom regardless of the spiritual interests of the weak brother or sister.

Let me put it in the form of a question. Do you regard it as a great imposition on your life that you are asked to suspend your exercise of liberty for the sake of the spiritual welfare of another Christian? Do you think of your decision to suspend your liberty as a burdensome sacrifice or a heavy load that is being placed on your shoulders? If you do, think of what Christ did. Consider the sacrifice he made. Then repent!

None of this changes the fact that Christian liberty is a good thing. Paul makes this clear in v. 16. But we must be careful lest a good thing be regarded as evil by the weak. If we insist on our freedom in defiance of love, the weak can speak ill of our freedom and bring disgrace on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, yes, says Paul, one of the beautiful and glorious things about being in the kingdom of God is that we have liberty in secondary issues. We are not enslaved to the demands of the legalist. At the same time, however, let us never reduce the kingdom to issues of eating and drinking. The kingdom is far more than that. The kingdom is primarily about righteousness and peace (between the strong and the weak) and joy in the Holy Spirit (v. 17). The "righteousness" here is probably ethical, daily right living in the community of faith. Simply put, the essential character of God's kingdom, that which attests to its presence in the hearts of believing men and women, is not demanding that we always be granted our freedom, regardless of how it may affect others. The kingdom is not about eating or drinking. Nor is the kingdom about *not* eating and *not* drinking.

When matters of food and drink and observing some days as more holy than others become our chief concern rather than righteousness and peace and joy in the Spirit, it points to how far removed we are from the interests of God's kingdom.

What, then, is Paul's conclusion? He says in vv. 18-19 that the "strong" believer who serves Christ by happily and voluntarily giving up his exercise of freedom to serve the interests of his weaker brother or sister is "acceptable to God and approved by men" (v. 18b). Simply put, God is pleased with the person who thinks more highly of the spiritual welfare and building up of his weak brother or sister than he does of his own liberty in such matters. The "peace" in v. 19 that we are to pursue is peace with one's fellow Christians, specifically, but not limited to, the weaker brother or sister.

The Strength of the Strong also includes the Freedom to Abstain (vv. 20-21)

Once again in v. 20 Paul affirms the principle that “everything is indeed clean.” As noted earlier, he probably has in mind the dietary restrictions of the old covenant. Jesus is said in Mark 7:19 to have “declared all foods clean.” God spoke to Peter in a trance and said, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15). So, enjoy your bacon for breakfast and thank God for shrimp cocktail!

But, and this is a significant “but,” if your enjoyment of food or drink causes a weaker brother to violate his conscience by enticing him to engage in what he (wrongly) believes is off limits, “it is wrong” (v. 20b). That being said, “the work of God” that should be built up or edified rather than destroyed is both the local church, the Christian community as a whole, and the individual weak believer. “Paul is warning ‘strong’ believers that they can seriously damage the church – destroy its unity and sap its strength – through their attitudes and actions toward the ‘weak’” (Moo, 860).

V. 21 is an authoritative declaration designed to summarize the principle outlined in vv. 13-20. Paul declares as *good* the unselfish action of the strong brother who, although possessing liberty, foregoes such out of loving deference to his weaker brother.

This raises a question that needs to be answered. “Why were some abstaining from wine?” Perhaps it was due to the fact that wine is potentially intoxicating, and they had seen the disastrous consequences when people got drunk. But we must remember that not even the strong Christian is permitted to drink to excess. Perhaps like the meat of 1 Corinthians 8-10 it was associated with idolatrous practices. It may have been used as a libation in animal sacrifices. Or perhaps they opposed drinking wine for purely ascetic reasons. That is to say, they believed that self-denial *per se* was essential to holiness.

Another question raised by v. 21 is this: Should a Christian take a vow of total abstinence to be observed throughout one's life?” Certainly, if one *wants* to take such a vow, he or she is free to do so. But I don't think this is what Paul is recommending. First, Paul himself did not take this approach (see 1 Cor. 10:23-33). The exercise of liberty is dependent on the immediate circumstances (see 1 Cor. 9:19-23). Paul's behavior on matters non-essential to salvation was dependent on those to whom he ministered and their attitude to the issue at hand (see 1 Tim. 5:23). Second, it would be inconsistent with his emphasis on liberty in vv. 1-12. To endorse liberty so strongly, only to universally and unconditionally wipe out every possibility of its exercise, is inconceivable. Third, it is completely impractical. If we permanently forsook everything that was offensive to others, it is doubtful we could survive long in this world.

It must also be remembered that taking a vow of permanent abstinence is not necessarily a sign of weakness. One must determine one's *motive* for such a vow. An otherwise *strong* believer may choose to abstain for reasons other than deference to the weak or a personal inability to resist temptation.

Enjoy your Freedom, but don't Flaunt It (vv. 22-23)

In v. 22 Paul issues yet another exhortation to the strong. He urges them not to flaunt their freedom or to parade it around as if it were a badge of Christian maturity. They are not to overtly display and trumpet their rights and liberties to the detriment of the weak. The word “faith” here does not refer to saving faith

in Jesus or even confident faith in the promises of God. It refers specifically to the firm persuasion and confidence in one's conscience that all things truly are clean in themselves, and the consequent sense of freedom in Christ to enjoy such things with gratitude and to the glory of God.

When Paul says you are to keep this faith “between yourself and God” he means two things: (1) Keep it privately; don't be ostentatious or make a public point of the fact that you are “above” the scruples of the weak. (2) But neither should you renounce your freedom. Keep it. It is good. Be thankful for it. Certainly, you should never apologize for it. Christian liberty is a precious gift, but it does not have to be expressed outwardly to be enjoyed.

The word “doubts” in v. 23a implies that a weak brother has qualms and misgivings about the moral propriety of eating or drinking or whatever the decision may be with which he is faced. He is unsure. His conscience lacks confidence. He does not feel free to partake. He does not have the *faith* that all things are clean. Paul thus envisions a situation in which this weak brother or sister, perhaps in order to escape the disdain or rejection of a strong believer, eats or drinks contrary to his scruples. His own misguided, but sincere, conscience says: “Do *not* eat. Do *not* drink.” But under the influence of the example of stronger brethren, he violates the dictates of his conscience and engages in what, to him, is wrong. In such a case, says Paul, both he and the strong brother whose unloving example he followed have sinned.

If you are not sure whether eating meat or drinking wine is wrong and you think it *might* be, but you go ahead and eat or drink it anyway in spite of your scruples, then you are “condemned,” that is, guilty of sin. To be “condemned” here, once again, like the reference to “destruction” back in vv. 15, 20, does not mean eternal destruction in hell or the loss of salvation. It means condemned in your conscience. You will suffer the pain and distress of guilt for having lived not from faith but from doubt and fear and hesitation. But it also likely includes incurring God's disapproval. He won't altogether reject this person, but he is not pleased with their choices.

Sadly, the second half of v. 23 has been greatly misunderstood. We need to be careful that we do not extend the application of this principle beyond how Paul makes use of it in this context. His point here is that a Christian sins when he or she does what their conscience forbids. Paul isn't talking about “doubts” in general, as if to say that if you ever struggle to believe a promise God has made or a truth revealed in Scripture that you are sinning. We should hope and pray and study so as to grow out of our doubts and into a more confident embrace of all that God has revealed. But in this context the reference is to “doubts” about whether it is appropriate to engage in certain secondary activities, such as eating meat and drinking wine and observing certain days as more holy than others.

Conclusion

These truths in Romans 14 and the actions they require apply only within the community of faith. In other words, Paul is addressing how we are to live out our freedom in Christ *in relation to other Christians*. He is not speaking to those situations in which a non-Christian protests your exercise of freedom.

Furthermore, Christian liberty may legitimately manifest itself in abstinence or asceticism. Christian liberty includes the right to abstain from otherwise legitimate pursuits if one is convinced in his/her own mind that such is the will of God *for them personally*. In other words, you may fully believe in the truth of Romans 14:14a, and yet choose to abstain anyway.

However, Christian liberty does **not** include the right to insist that others likewise abstain simply because **you** do. Far less does it include the right to judge them as sub-spiritual for choosing a different course of action from you.