

The Freedom of Conscience
(Romans 14:1-23)

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Since Jesus accepts us, we are to accept our brothers also. May we not judge one another, but leave the judging to the Lord. Out of love, let us seek to build up one another instead of inadvertently stumbling others.

INTRODUCTION

I grew up in a pretty legalistic church with a lot of rules and regulations. Once Ellie went to a ballroom dancing class and she got in trouble for it. Is that right or wrong? When I was growing up, I was taught that drinking was wrong. That refers to any alcoholic beverages. Therefore, when I go to a wedding and champagne is offered, should I drink it or not? Should I confront those that do drink champagne? The Bible did not say anything specifically about drinking champagne.

Many times, Scripture provides guideline for our decision-making. It is clear what is right and what is wrong. However, there are times that it is not clear from Scripture, it is not black and white. It is more gray. That is when we get into conflict with one another.

As you remember, our conscience only deals with the category of right and wrong. It does not do well with gray areas. However, we do have Christian liberty that gives us freedom of conscience. What freedom do we have and how are we to use that freedom properly? If we are not careful, we can abuse our Christian liberty. As we continue on our series on the conscience, Paul in Romans 14 give us some principles as to what we ought to do when we face gray areas.

This passage can be divided into two sections. The first part is the believer's responsibility and the second part is God's responsibility. It shows us what we should do and what we should not do. Let us first look at the believer's responsibility. The first major point is that No believer should be judged by another believer down here. Let's read v.1, "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters."

I. No Believer Should Be Judged by Another Believer Down Here (14:1-8; 13-23)

We see clearly that there was disunity present among the believers at Rome. Christians were judging one another. The apostle Paul states a command in the beginning of the chapter. Accept him whose faith is weak. Paul makes a clear command that we should not judge one another.

As we have discussed from last Sunday's sermon, the Apostle Paul identifies two groups of people: the weak conscience and the strong conscience. There in Corinth, there were new Gentile believers and old timer Jewish believers. It might appear that Paul is using these labels of weak and strong to make value judgments- declaring some Christians to be better or more spiritual than others. But that is not the case. When Paul speaks of those with a weak conscience, he is not insulting them. By weak, he just means that individual's conscience is easily wounded (1 Cor. 8:12). It's hypersensitive to right and wrong, particularly when it comes to eating food previously offered to idols. The weak conscience or some of the new believers are theologically uninformed. They don't possess knowledge on his point (1 Cor.

8:7). And that's why their conscience is restricting them. It's telling them it would be wrong or sinful to partake.

So to have a strong conscience or some of the older believers on a particular issue simply means that their position is theologically informed. They possess some knowledge that frees them to partake in this or that activity. Because they see it as either morally good or neutral, that's what makes it a strong conscience.

Here in Rome, there was conflict between those with weak conscience and those with strong conscience. As a result, they would judge one another. For those that had a strong conscience, they were tempted to be prideful because they thought they knew better. They would look down at the other. They lifted their chin up and said, "I am glad that I'm not like him." On the other hand, the person that had a conscience that said it is wrong to eat idol meat would also judge the other brother by condemning him saying he was not spiritual. Both the weak conscience person and the strong conscience person thought the other was weak. They were both judging by criticizing and condemning the other. Instead of passing judgment, we are to accept one another. This word for "Accept" means to receive or welcome. It gives the connotation of befriending or showing hospitality.

There are two matters of conflicts among the believers: The matter of diet or food and the matter of holy days. These disputable matters are not essential to our beliefs. Don't get bent out of shape on secondary issues. This passage is not dealing with the clear commandments of God. It is dealing with behaviors where there are clear differences of opinions among men. There should be no dispute over commandments of God in Scripture. They are to be obeyed. READ vv.2-3, "One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him."

A. We are not to criticize others' legalism (14:1-8)

Basically the conscience of both groups was telling them what to do. Those who were strong in faith were those with a strong conscience. They understood what Christian liberty is all about. They had understanding that they could eat everything. Idols are nothing. Therefore, meat offered to idols does not mean anything. However, those who were weak in faith were those with a weak conscience. They felt that was wrong because they came from a background where they used to worship idols and eating meat offered to idol was sinful. The conscience was telling these two groups what is right and wrong and they were on opposite sides. The one who had a strong conscience was looking down at those that were at odds with them claiming that they did not know truths from the Bible. They were criticizing them for their legalism. Those that only ate vegetables are condemning the other for not being spiritual.

ILLUSTRATION: A contemporary illustration we face is drinking alcohol. Those with strong conscience feel free to drink in moderation, but recognize that drinking in excess is wrong because it leads to drunkenness. Others might feel drinking is wrong all together because he had an alcoholic issue in the past. It is easy to pass judgment on each other.

Instead of passing judgment on them, they are to accept them. These disputable matters are not essential to our core beliefs. Sometimes, we consider these disputable matters as rules, which will lead us to wanting to judge others. We hold strong conviction to these man-made rules that it can be legalistic as we impose it on others.

Application: There are various gray issues that are disputable among us like alcohol, playing cards, dancing, investing in the stock market, tattoos, and attending a gay wedding. May we not make it a rule when Scripture does not speak clearly on it. We don't want our conscience to be stricter or looser than Scripture.

1. The rules (14:1-6)

- a. Don't judge in matters of diet (14:1-4,6b)
- b. Don't judge in matters of days (14:5-6a):

There were two rules or matters that they were disputing over. First was the matter of diet as to what to eat or not to eat particularly pertaining to meat that was offered to idols. The second matter concerns sacred days. One man considered one day more sacred than another, another man considered every day as sacred. This controversy over days probably involved Sabbath observance. The Christian Jews' conscience demanded that they observe it. The Christian Gentiles' conscience argued that every day was equally special to the service of the Lord. The believer is not to worship the day, but worship the Lord of all days. How were they to resolve this difference?

Paul says in the latter part of v.5, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." Basically, Paul is saying that everyone must decide for himself what is acceptable. This was not a black or white issue. There were good reasons either way. On non-essentials matters, both views can be right with God. Each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience. Let your conscience make the decision.

Notice that both the one with weak conscience as well as the one with the strong conscience have the right hearts. They both want to give thanks to the Lord. They both want to honor and please God. They both have proper attitude. If the Lord convicts you that something is wrong in your life, you better not do it, even if other Christians are doing it. Instead of judging our brothers, Paul commands us to accept one another on these non-essential matters. [What is the reason to accept our brother and not judge? Let's read vv.7-8, "For none of us lives to himself alone and one of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."]

2. The reason (14:7-8)

Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. God has accepted both those that have weak conscience as well as those with strong conscience. We are both sinners and Christ has died for all of us and we belong to the Lord. (2 Cor. 5:15) "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."

God has accepted us whether we have strong or weak conscience. The Lord alone has the right to judge them. Believers do not have the right to play God and to judge each other. They do not belong to each other, but they belong to the Lord. Therefore, we are to also accept our brothers, who might have another point of view on non-essential behaviors just as God has accepted us.

[There are two extremes to Christian liberty. On the one side, we become legalistic by setting extra rules that are not in Scripture. On the other side, we say that we are free from sin and we can do whatever we want. That is abusing Christian liberty. In verses 1-8, we are not to criticize other's legalism. In verses 13-23, we are not to corrupt our liberty. Both extremes are not right. We need to find a proper balance by not becoming a stumbling block, but by becoming a stepping-stone. Let us read v.13, "Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way."]

B. We are not to corrupt our liberty (14:13-23)

1. The mature Christian is not to become a stumbling block (14:13-18)

- a. He is not to permit good and lawful things to be viewed as evil and lawless (14:13-16)

What Paul is saying here is that there might be good and lawful reason to behave in a particular way, but let us not impose it upon another and make it a stumbling block to another brother just because he might be less informed about what Scripture might be saying.

Paul made it clear that we are not to judge, but to accept. There is another thing that we should not do. Believers are not to be a stumbling block to another brother. We see this in verse 13, God commands us not to be a stumbling block. The word "stumbling block" means an obstacle placed in the way of someone. It has the understanding of leading or causing someone to sin.

[The mature Christian is not to permit good and lawful things to be viewed as evil and lawless. In addition, he is not to forget that love is more important than personal liberties. Let read v.15, "If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died."]

- b. He is not to forget that love is more important than personal liberties (14:17-18)

We are to use love as a basis to decide what we need to do when there is a gray area and it causes conflict. Love is wanting the best for the person that you love. Out of love, we put the other person's desire above ourselves. We are willing to forego our personal liberties in order not to stumble our brother. This does not mean that we do whatever the other person wants. But only those things Scripture is not clear on. The reason why we should yield our personal liberties for our brother is because Christ died for our brother. If Christ loved him enough to die for him, then we must also love him enough to give up a few personal preferences (1 Cor. 8:11).

2. The mature Christian is to become a stepping-stone (14:19-23)

Instead of judging others, we need to be judging ourselves. May we examine our own lives to make sure that we are not a stumbling block to others. If a believer is

constantly looking at his own life and guarding against becoming a stumbling block, he does not have time to judge his brother. May we not only take into consideration what we think, but more importantly, what others are thinking. Out of love, we put others above ourselves. Out of love, we are willing to forego our Christian liberty when we are around a weak conscience brother. Read vv.19-21, "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall." Instead of being a stumbling block, may we be a stepping-stone as we seek peace and mutual edification.

ILLUSTRATION: A brother has the liberty to drink champagne. However, because he realizes that another brother, who was an alcoholic, the strong conscience brother chooses to not drink champagne although he has every right to do so. He makes the sacrifice in order not to stumble his brother. Instead of being a stumbling block, we are to be a stepping stone. We are to edify others and not tear them down.

II. Every Believer Will Be Judged by the Savior Up There (14:9-12)

We need to distinguish the difference between our role as believers down here on earth and God's role up there in heaven. Paul says that no believer should be judged by another believer down here. But we should accept one another. Instead of being a stumbling block, may we be a stepping stone. We need to get a clear understanding of God's role. From vv. 9-12, we see that every believer will be judged by the savior up there. May we not play God and allow God to be God because we are accountable to Him. We need to accept the Lordship of Christ. Let's read v.9, "For this reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living."

A. Accept the Lordship of Christ (14:9)

Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, we are no longer condemned because of our sin. Christ has paid the penalty on our behalf, freeing us from eternal condemnation. Therefore, we owe our life to Him. Just as He has accepted us to be his child, we are to accept the Lordship of Christ. He is our Lord and master. We are to obey and please the Lord. May we live for Him and not for ourselves. When we judge others, we are elevating ourselves above others. Because Christ is Lord, he has the right to judge us. Let's look at v. 10-12, "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written, "As surely as I live says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God." [Not only should we accept the Lordship of Christ, but we are also to leave the judgment to God.]

B. Leave the Judgment to God (14:10-12):

Don't compound our problems up there by judging our brother down here. Why do we play God by criticizing and judging others? Be careful because we are all going to stand before the Lord, the ultimate Judge. We will be held accountable for our deeds. Leave the judgment to God.

Conclusion:

So in summary, since Jesus accepts us, we are to accept our brothers also. May we not judge one another, but leave the judging to the Lord. Out of love, let us seek to build up one another instead of inadvertently stumbling others.