

# Liberty Must Be Limited By Love

## Romans 14:13-23

Have you ever used the right thing in the wrong way? Think of perfume or cologne. If you use it in the right way, a small amount actually makes you somewhat appealing to most people, but use it in the wrong way—use too much—and you will be appalling to people. This is also true of salt. If you use the right amount in your food, it enhances the natural flavor of the food, but use too much and it can ruin your meal.

In our Christian life it is also possible to use the right thing in the wrong way, especially when it comes to Christian liberty. Last time, in Romans 14:1-12 Paul insisted that we accept one another and not pass judgment on each other in regard to non-essential issues like what we eat or don't eat, and what religious days we observe or don't observe.

If we ended with Romans 14:12 it would be easy to get the impression that we must just stop judging and leave those who are different alone. But the rest of chapter 14 we'll see that we must be involved and engaged with one another. We who are strong in the faith know that we have liberty through Christ and we don't have to jump through a bunch of legalistic hoops. Nor do we have to follow someone else's rules or regulations that go beyond what the Bible commands. As Paul says in Galatians 5:1, **"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage."** That means that we can live as we please, right? No, not exactly.

Now in 14:13-23 Paul presents the "other side of the coin" in our Christian liberty. With liberty also comes responsibility. How do you handle liberty? The answer is: *Liberty must be limited by love.*

As I read our passage for today I want you to listen for ways you can show love for others in the body of Christ who have different convictions than you.

## Romans 14:13-23

**13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.**

**14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.**

**15 Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.**

**16 Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil;**

**17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.**

- 18 For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.
- 19 Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.
- 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.
- 21 It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.
- 22 Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.
- 23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

Back in Romans 13:10 Paul wrote, “**Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.**” Now in chapter 14 he applies that principle to our exercise of our liberty in Christ. How do you handle liberty? *Liberty must be limited by love.* Which means, the exercise of my liberty in Christ must do no harm to others.

So today I want us to see that love must limit our liberty in three major areas:

### 1. Love Doesn't Harm Fellow Believers (14:13-15)

Paul urges us to limit our Christian liberty because not all believers understand the same freedoms in non-essential issues. In verse 13 he writes, “**Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.**” There is a classic play on words in this verse. The verb translated “**resolve**” (*krino*, 14:13b) is the same Greek word translated “**judge**” (14:13a). This verse can be literally rendered: “Let us not *judge* one another anymore, but rather *judge* this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.” Or “Let us not be judgmental of one another but have the good judgment not to cause a brother to fall.”

In other words, stop judging each other and start judging yourself. If we were as preoccupied with our own conduct and our own motives as we are other believers' behavior we would do a lot more good. Keep in mind that in this chapter, Paul is talking about non-moral matters where the Bible does not give clear commands. He is not talking about judging your brother regarding sin or serious doctrinal error (which we need to do), but rather on non-moral or non-essential matters.

Paul is concerned that those who have liberty protect those who don't. The word translated “**stumbling block**” (*proskomma*) referred to something in the road that causes someone to stumble. In this context, a strong believer who puts an obstacle in the path of a weak believer might set him back temporarily or even do permanent damage to his sensitive conscience. The term “**cause to fall**” is the Greek term *skandalon*, from which we get the English word “scandal.” It literally

referred to the triggering mechanism on a baited animal trap. It is something that entices the weak brother and traps him in deadly sin.

We must not tempt a weaker Christian to sin by partaking of our liberty and thereby violating his or her conscience. We must remember that we are either stepping stones or stumbling blocks. Which one are you? *Liberty must be limited by love.*

Paul builds his argument in verse 14, **“I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”** Paul is not saying here that anything goes because everything is good. However, he is absolutely confident that *nothing* is unclean in and of itself (cf. 14:5). No foods are inherently evil. It is what people do with them and the meaning they attach to them that causes sin.

It is a matter of one’s conscience. If a believer thinks anything is unclean it becomes unclean for that person. In other words, it is wrong to violate your conscience, even if your conscience is not completely in line with Scripture.

A man consulted a doctor. “I’ve been misbehaving, Doc, and my conscience is troubling me,” he complained. The doctor replied, “And you want something that will strengthen your willpower?” “Well, no,” said the fellow. “I was thinking of something that would weaken my conscience.” While this may be amusing, it a dangerous thing to go against your conscience. The conscience isn’t always right, but it’s always wrong to violate it (cf. 14:22-23).

In verse 15 Paul switches to the second-person singular “your” for greater clarity and conviction: **“Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.”** Paul explains that it is possible to “grieve” and “destroy” a fellow believer. When another Christian sees you doing what his own conscience condemns, it grieves him or causes him pain. When he then proceeds to do himself what his conscience condemns, he commits sin and is destroyed.

That word destroy is a serious word. It’s a very strong word, often translated as “perish” referring to eternal damnation. Paul uses it this way in Romans 2:12, **“For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law ....”** It’s also translated “perish” to refer to being eternally lost in John 3:16, **“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”**

Here I don’t think that Paul is saying that we will cause our brother in Christ to lose his salvation. That would go against everything that Paul has taught us in Romans about our eternal security. If sinning against our conscience results in perishing, we all would perish, because we’ve all sinned in this manner. But the Lord promises that those to whom He gives eternal life can never perish (John 10:28).

Down in verse 20 Paul restates this principle using a synonym that means “ruin,” **“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.”** Paul says the same

thing in 1Corinthian 8:11 where he writes, “**And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?**”

The practical application is that we should be very sensitive about not doing anything that might cause a weaker believer to violate his conscience. If we have sinned in this way, we should do all that we can to help our brother get back on track with the Lord. Love does not insist on its rights if doing so would damage a weaker brother's walk with God.

Why should we limit our liberty? Love. We must be walking in love. If we are believers we ought to love one another more than we love exercising our liberty. Furthermore, Christ's sacrifice should compel us to demonstrate sensitivity. That's why Paul reminds us that our weak brother is “**the one for whom Christ died.**” If Jesus was willing to die for believers certainly we should be willing to make the smallest of sacrifices. Remember, *liberty must be limited by love.*

It's difficult to come up with modern examples, but perhaps one example would be having a glass of wine or beer. The Bible does not prohibit drinking alcoholic beverages, as long as you do not get drunk and you're not depending on the alcohol to escape from your problems. But perhaps you're with a new believer who had a problem with alcohol before he got saved. Because of the devastating effects alcohol had on his life, he now believes that it's wrong to have even one drink. You're out to dinner with him and you order a beer or a glass of wine with your meal. Your brother sees this and wants to fit in, so he orders a drink with his food, but in so doing, he violates his conscience. His guilt causes him to stumble in his walk with the Lord. Perhaps he begins drinking to excess again. You have put a stumbling block in your brother's way. You have caused him to violate his conscience.

Does this mean that you must become a teetotaler? Well, there may be good reasons to do that, but the Bible does not require that. The entire church is not limited by the conscience of the weakest believers in its midst. But you should not flaunt your liberty in front of a weaker believer when you know that it's an issue for him (see 1 Cor. 10:23-30). Out of love for him, limit your liberty in his presence.

Personally I have made the decision to abstain from alcoholic beverages. Not because I think it would be a sin for me to have a glass of wine, but because as a leader in God's church, many people look to me for an example. I abstain because I do not ever want to harm one of my brothers in Christ. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

So love doesn't harm a fellow believer. Secondly,

## **2. Love Doesn't Harm Your Testimony Before Others (14:16-18)**

Since the world is always observing Christians, we ought to be wise in our use of freedom. Paul writes in verse 16: “**Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil.**” The phrase translated “spoken of as evil” (*blasphemeo*) is translated from a word that literally speaks of being “blasphemed,” which is usually used of unbelievers. Paul is saying that unbelievers can legitimately speak of our

freedom in Christ as “evil” if it results in the fall of another Christian or the compromise of our testimony.

However much we wish it is not so, the world watches what we do. When we use our liberty indiscriminately the world watches and shakes its head. What we intended for good, and what really is good in our lives, can be spoken of as evil when we do not restrain ourselves when it is appropriate. Many non-Christians say, “Why should I be a Christian? You don’t get along with each other, so why should I think becoming a Christian will bring peace or happiness?”

In verse 17 Paul explains where true life is for the Christian: **“for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** The “kingdom of God” here refers to the sphere over which God rules and in which all believers live and operate. The kingdom of God is not mainly a matter of *externals* but of *eternals*.

Paul is asking: How can you fight about such little things and miss the big things. You are fighting over a gnat and not noticing a camel! You are concentrating on a pimple and not noticing Mount Everest! Paul says the eternals are **“righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** God’s kingdom is not about DOs and DON’Ts even if those rules are wise and proper. Remember, rules aren’t always wrong. Sometimes they save us from making terrible mistakes. But rules don’t change the heart. We need righteousness from God, peace from God and joy in the Holy Spirit. Where these things are found, God’s kingdom is also present.

Verse 18 says, **“For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.”** If we have a healthy balance in enjoying our liberty and limiting it when it is appropriate we will not only be acceptable to God, we will also win the approval of other people since they will see that righteousness, peace, and joy in our life. When we embrace kingdom priorities, our service to Jesus is pleasing to God and vindicated in the sight of people, even people who disagree with us. Our self-control may also open the door of ministry and witness to the unbelieving community (cf. 14:16).

So love does not harm your fellow believers or your testimony. Thirdly,

### **3. Love Doesn’t Harm the Church (14:19-23)**

Paul shifts gears and moves from a negative to a positive emphasis. He moves from what we should stop doing to what we should pursue. In verse 19 Paul states: **“Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.”** The verb “pursue” (*dioko*) pictures a hunter chasing after his prey or a runner sprinting for the prize. Paul says that we must pursue peace and the building up of one another over our own use of personal liberty.

The word **“edify”** (*oikodome*) means to build up. It is a construction term that was used to describe the process of making a building stronger. Our goal, then, is to strengthen and solidify the church by protecting other believers from violating their conscience. Your highest priority is the building up of others in the church.

Paul makes another strong statement in verse 20, **“Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.”** There is contrast here between **“edify”** in verse 19 and **“destroy”** in verse 20. We are to be building each other up, not tearing each other down. This verse is similar to verse 15. There the danger was destroying the weak Christians, and here it is expanded to encompass the destruction of **“the work of God”**—the church as a whole.

Paul reminds us again—it’s just not worth indulging yourself. Yes, **“All things indeed are pure”** but to indulge in them in front of a fellow Christian who is a weaker brother or sister may be **“evil.”** Paul has chosen his words carefully, and rightly so. Some Christians may disagree with our convictions. They may very well be upset that we have acted as we have. But unless these Christians are so weak that they follow our example, and thus violate their own convictions, they are not the “weaker brother” to whom Paul is referring. If I am fully convinced it is right to eat meat, and I do so in front of some believers, they might be upset by my actions, but they will not do as I have done. A weaker brother is one who thinks it is wrong to eat meat, but who is tempted to do so because he has seen me do it, thus violating his own convictions. When the exercise of my liberty causes a weaker brother to stumble, I have sinned in exercising my liberty, I have done evil, even though it is consistent with my own convictions.

So what are some steps we can take that will help keep other believers from stumbling over us? Paul gives three practical applications.

**Be considerate.** In 14:21 Paul writes, **“It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.”** Paul urges the “strong” to abstain but because their example might lead the “weak” to eat or drink something that would violate their consciences (14:22-23). Paul himself is willing to forego any particular food or drink to avoid causing spiritual growth problems for a brother. In 1 Corinthians 8:13 Paul writes, **“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.”** Certainly we should be willing to do the same.

When you holding hands, walking with a small child, don’t you have to walk slower than you would normally walk so he or she will not stumble? How much more should we be willing to alter our Christian walk for the benefit of a weaker brother or sister in Christ whom we are leading? We must learn the sensitivities of other believers and we must respect differing convictions. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

**Be convinced.** In verse 22 Paul says, **“Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God.”** If we are engaged in certain activities that are not clearly prohibited by the teaching of Scripture, then we should be confident in our thinking that they are right. If we entertain any doubts about the goodness of these activities, then we should give them up. What Paul is saying is: If you have faith, have it between yourself and God. That is, let God’s Word and His Holy Spirit be the basis for walk, and nothing else. Don’t flaunt your liberty to show off how strong your faith is.

Keep your convictions between yourself and God. This is especially important if you find yourself around other Christians whose practice doesn't match yours. Unless they are attempting to coerce you into their point of view, you don't need to offer an opinion on the disputed point. Or if you do feel compelled to say something, you certainly don't need to defend yourself or to condemn them. There is nothing wrong with an honest disagreement honestly stated, but you shouldn't let that disagreement destroy your unity in Christ or provoke an angry confrontation.

***Be consistent.*** At the end of the chapter Paul writes, “**Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.**”

Paul says you are a happy (blessed) person if, in exercising your liberty, you do not condemn yourself by harming another. You are blessed if your exercise of freedom is free from doubt. When we arrive at the conclusion that something is right, unless we receive solid confirmation to the contrary, we should not waver in our conviction. For doubts concerning our beliefs may lead us to violate our conscience and we will be condemned because we do not do it from a position of faith and trust in God.

Consistency in belief will bring us happiness. In this context, “**faith**” (*pistis*) does not refer to the teachings of Christianity but to what a person believes to be the will of God for him. If a person does what he believes to be wrong, even though it is not wrong in itself, it becomes sin for him. He has violated what he believes to be God's will. His action has become an act of rebellion against God for him.

God has called us to a life of faith. Trust is the willingness to put all of life before God for His approval. For a Christian, not a single decision or action can be good which is not done in faith and for the glory of God.

Many tales are told about the greatest preacher of the nineteenth century, England's Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He ruffled the feathers of not a few Christians in his day by his lifestyle choices—particularly his fondness for fine cigars. Compared to today, there was relatively little public awareness of the ill effects of tobacco on the human body, but smoking was shunned nonetheless by many Christians, but not Spurgeon. On one occasion, a young man approached Spurgeon and asked what he should do with a box of cigars he had been given. “Give them to me,” Spurgeon replied, “and I will smoke them to the glory of God.” Some time later, at the height of his fame, Spurgeon was walking down the street and saw a sign which read, “We sell the cigar that Charles Spurgeon smokes.” After reading this sign Spurgeon gave up the habit. He came to see that what was for him a freedom might cause others to stumble.

Do you truly love others? Could God be calling you to limit your Christian liberty in some area because you love your brother or sister? Christ died for your fellow believer, what will you sacrifice to live a life of love? *Liberty must be limited by love.*

In verse 15 Paul warns against destroying your brother **“for whom Christ died.”** Jesus Christ is the central issue of time and eternity. Nothing is more important than His death and resurrection.

When you stand before God. he’s not going to ask,

“Did you eat meat?”

“Did you drink wine?”

“Did you vote Democrat?”

“Did you go fishing on Sunday?”

Those questions won’t be on the agenda when we stand before the Lord. Only one question will matter: “What did you do with my Son?”

On that great day the only thing that will matter is what we did with Jesus Christ. Did we love Him? Did we serve Him? Did we believe on Him as Lord and Savior? Did we live for Him to the best of our ability? Nothing else really matters. Jesus is the central issue—always has been, always will be. Let’s lift up Jesus Christ and all these secondary issues will take care of themselves.

In a few moments we will invite you to participate in the Lord’s Supper. It is a time to remember Christ’s death and resurrection. It is a time to get our priorities straight. It is a time to repent of any known sin. It is a time to reconcile with others in the body. It is a time to love.