

The Practice of Christian Liberty
“Pursuing the Things Which Make for Peace”
Romans 14-15
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Introduction:

Romans 14:19 *“Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another.”*

One of the great issues facing the contemporary church has to do with the problems associated with maintaining proper relationships among believers who are rightly related to God but who differ over a particular matter of conscience. Often Christian brethren who love the Lord and earnestly desire to follow His Word find it difficult to understand how another brother can arrive at a different position when (to them) it seems so clearly presented in Scripture. As a result, good churches at times face needless division simply because believers who differ over matters of conscience fail to maintain proper relationships.

Paul devotes a major portion of Romans to this very question. In this passage, Paul sets forth the criteria for determining what really falls within the perimeters of Christian liberty and can be legitimately considered a matter of conscience. Furthermore, Paul gives specific instructions designed to help differing brethren preserve peace while living within the perimeters of their conscience.

I. The Problem at Rome: Preserving Relationships among Differing Believers

A. The Reality of the Division:

1. The situation was real
2. The division was real
3. Use of the present tense verbs and the presence of imperatives supports the conclusion that this was a real situation at Rome and not just general exhortations

Some argue Paul was really presenting general instructions that he had formulated earlier from the specific situation at Corinth. **BUT consider:**

4. The issue was different here than at Corinth.
Corinth – idol food / meals at temples
Rome – ceremonial law and fasting
5. The individuals described are different
Corinth – Gentiles with problem of excess
Rome – Jews/proselytes with hang up over ceremonial dietary laws

B. The Realm of the Issue: Asceticism not Legalism

Problem at Rome: Christian Asceticism – religious duty/obligation to certain elements of the ceremonial law as an evidence of holiness (not in an effort to earn it)

- This problem was different than the error of the Galatians – Paul does not refute those who advocate this position as he did the Judaizers. Obviously they are not claiming this will earn them salvation. They are claiming that because of salvation, we should be holy in this area.
- This problem is different than that at Corinth – the weak at Corinth are not having any objection to the practice of the “strong.” In fact that is the essence of the problem. They are being encouraged by the strong to participate in an activity that was destroying them. Here the weak are strongly opposed to the freedom of the strong – they are not tempted to participate. Instead, they are judging the freedom of the strong as worldliness.
- Problem therefore is religious adherence to ceremonial law not legalism or worldliness. This problem is compounded by judging and despising on the part of both parties.

II. The Contextual Background:

- A. *Galatians:* *Defends the Nature/Content of Gospel*
- B. *I Cor 8-10:* *Defends the Work/Result of Gospel*
- C. *Romans 14-15:* *Defends the Peace/harmony of the Gospel*

III. The Passage Examined: Exegetical Details

Note: The problem here does not relate so much to the eating or not eating but to the attitudes held by the differing parties toward each other.

Strong – contempt for the weak

Weak – judgement and condemnation of the strong

- A. Command to Mutual Acceptance (14:1-12)
 - Note the imperative to “welcome” – this means much more than toleration
 - Avoid doubtful disputation about doubtful things (command)
 - Accept (receive) one another – as genuine believers in full fellowship!
 - Why? This would be very hard for both parties to do given the situation so Paul lays out three important reasons why they need to do this!

1. In light of Divine Acceptance (14:1-4)

Why accept my differing brother? Because God has received Him!
Therefore: Weak – don't judge! Strong – don't despise! God has accepted your differing brother so you do the same. He answers to his master, not to you!

2. In light of the Individual Priesthood of Believers (14:5-9)

Paul lays out two commands/instructions

- a. Let every man be fully persuaded in his mind as to his obligation in this matter.
- b. Let every man decide his obligation to the Lord! Arena here is not personal enjoyment but religious duty! Did he have a religious obligation or duty to abstain or observe?

Illustration: wearing hats to church. Watching sports on Sunday.

3. In light of Future Judgement (14:10-12)

These believers were deciding how to relate and fellowship with each other on the basis of their willingness to conform to a certain practice. In other words, depending on where you come down on this particular issue, I can or can't fellowship with you.

Paul points out that this is flawed thinking. You ought to be determining the basis of your fellowship on the fact that they will stand before God and not you or your standard!

B. The Injunction to Avoid Offense (14:13-23)

- Note: two parties are told to receive each other.
- Now – Paul addresses the strong and tells them to stop judging their brothers but rather to judge whether their behavior was causing a brother to violate his conscience.

1. By Walking in Love (14:13-15)

- Don't be judgmental of another believer in these matters – rather – use your best judgment to strengthen him.
- Note: Command here is given to the strong! Why? Because they have more options than the weak!

2. By Understanding what is Important to God (14:16-19)

- Not in eating or drinking but in righteousness, peace, and joy!
These are all about right ethical relationships!
- These are what truly render a man acceptable to God and approved before men!
- It is amazing how easily believers defend what they perceive to be righteousness in very unrighteous ways!

3. **By Understanding the Seriousness of the Offense (14:20-21)**

- Don't tear down the work of God for food!
- Work of God in this context is the church or another believer
- All things are pure – talking here about created resources (in this case food)
- Not pure to the man who eats with offense – normally we see this as a reference to the “weak” who eats in violation of his conscience. However, the context really points out that this is the strong who eats with a clear conscience but gives offence – causes a brother to stumble – then his eating is evil!

4. **By Understanding the Role and Responsibility of Personal Conviction (14:22-23)**

Note several important points:

- a. The strong are told to keep their freedom from the obligation to ceremonial law (faith – vs1) to himself and not to parade it before the weak.
- b. His position (strong) is described as fortunate or happy and he is blessed of God.
- c. The weak are instructed to obey their conscience and they incur guilt when they ignore its dictates. (Damnation here is not a reference to hell)

C. The Exhortation to Corporate Unity (15:1-13)

1. **By Following Christ's Example (15:1-6)**

- Addressed to the strong
- Commanded to bear (not just tolerate) – carry – the infirmities or weaknesses of the weak!
- Example: Christ! He did not look to his own interests (life) in order to help us!

2. **By Understanding God's Eternal Purpose (15:7-13)**

- Accept one another – as Christ did – why? For God’s glory!
- Weak and Strong were Jew and Gentile respectively.
- They needed to get past merely tolerating one another – to the point of being genuinely appreciative and in love with each other.
- Gentile (strong) – remember, Christ became a servant for the Jews
- Jews (weak) – remember, It has always been God’s intent to include Gentiles (note the 4 quotes from LXX).

IV. Key Issue Defined

A. *Defining the Weaker Brother*

- To determine who is truly weak, you must look at the motive for abstaining.
- Here we are told they are weak in faith (14:1). Faith here is not a reference to faith in God but rather to his belief that he is truly free to eat and drink that which was formerly prohibited by the ceremonial law or OT example.
- Weak here in Rome abstained on ceremonial/religious grounds to avoid condemnation. Weak in Corinth were given to excess and should abstain (but did not) in order to avoid temptation.
- Modern writers would have us believe that any one who would in any way limit freedom (his or another’s) is the weaker brother. In other words, the stricter the brother, the weaker the brother.
- It is interesting to note that here in Rome, Paul is advocating a third category: A strong brother who looks and acts just like the weak brother (he abstains) but for a very different motive (harmony and edification).

B. *Defining the Perimeters of Legitimate Liberty*

- The area in view here is religious duty or obligation to:
 - a. Ceremonial law
 - b. Use of created resources such as food
- What is not in view here is worldliness!
- Wrong comparison: Roman meat and drink issue to movies, dancing, drinking, etc. Issue here is not whether this is my religious duty to do, but rather is this activity worldly. This is a very different question than what Paul is addressing here.
- Better comparison: What is my religious obligation in relation to hats on

women, Sunday/Sabbath day activities, etc.

· They were not arguing about the legitimacy of the meat and drink, they were arguing about when and how they could be utilized.

V. The Principles Uncovered:

A. *Each believer must determine his religious duty in certain matters relating to his conscience and worship.*

B. Each believer must operate under the parameters of his own conscience.

C. Each believer must respect and protect the religious convictions of a differing brother in such matters.

D. The greater burden of maintaining the right kind of relationships falls on the shoulders of the strong! (15:1)

Note: Both are commanded to welcome/receive the other
Both commanded to stop judging and despising
But the strong are given an additional command – bear the burden of the weak! Why? Because you have more options!

E. *Each believer must fulfill his duty in preserving biblical unity!*

1. The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink
2. The work of God must not be destroyed for food.
3. We must each come to our position on meat and drink issues, but our greater focus should be on righteousness, peace, and joy!
By this shall all men know ye are my disciples (by your position on eating and drinking? – no –) by your love for one another.

VI. Common Misconceptions

A. Regarding the Role of Separation

1. Recognize that a differing brother is not necessarily a disobedient brother.

· Paul did not address either the weak or the strong in this context as he addressed other disobedient believers elsewhere.

2. **Mutual reception and peace does not necessarily mean working together.**

- Sometimes biblical unity demands that two differing brothers choose to walk apart. This is not the same as disciplinary separation. Example: Abraham and Lot (Gen 13:1-9)

3. Recognize the difference between a double standard (sinful) and a double practice (right and prudent – Paul did this!).

B. Regarding the Role of Regulation

Note the paradox between freedom/restraint

1. Moral Rules – universal
2. Functional rules – determined by size, function, and nature of org.
3. Missional rules – determined by objective and goal of org.

Problems come when we try to add spiritual significance to #2 and #3 or when we try to universally apply #2 and #3 to all organizations.

VII. Towards a Solution

Story about child and candy on ground.

A. Two Common Approaches:

1. Regulatory Instruction: Lists and Do's and Don'ts == Frustration
2. Subjective Individualism: let the Spirit lead.
2 problems:
 - a. We don't follow this approach in any other area (classes, etc.)
 - b. Those who adopt this approach immediately demand a letter of the law when challenged.

B. A Biblical Model: Word Oriented Maturity (Hebrews 5:11-14)

- Real problem is Spiritual Immaturity! We will need to give lots of guidance early on but the goal should be growth in the knowledge of God!
- Teach your people to be spiritually mature
- Teach your people to become word oriented
- Teach them to stop looking for the easy answer – lists – and force them to wrestle through what the word really has to say!