

Romans 14:13-23 "What Are Christian Liberties And How Do We Practice Them?"

All of chapter 14 and part of chapter 15 address relationships in the Body of Christ as they deal with differing opinions on liberties we have in Christ. And by liberties I mean those areas of life which the word of God gives us freedom to pursue; areas that do not violate the clear teaching of Scripture.

These are the kind of areas which do not, in and of themselves, have any good or evil, but could be used in a way that could produce evil.

Last week we saw how those weak in the faith in Rome would only eat vegetables. Those who were more mature ate meat as well. The problem arose when both groups felt their position was the better one and they began to judge each other on such issues.

And keep in mind this does not preclude that judgments should never take place in the Body of Christ. There are proper biblical grounds for making judgments as they pertain to the health of any church.

Since I covered this ground last week I will only give one example where Paul makes a judgment to cut out evil which was persistent and evidently unrepentant of in the church at Corinth.

1Co 5:1-5 "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father's wife. 2 And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? 3 Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. 4 When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, 5 hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord."

This was an extreme case but there are many times when judgments had to be made to protect the flock as well as help those wayward Christians from a further downward spiral that would allow Satan to ruin their witness.

And these types of judgments, when they are appropriate, must be made in the Body of Christ even today. But the judgments Paul speaks of in our text has to do with areas in which lee-way is given by God.

And the two areas Paul has been dealing with, as I mentioned earlier, are the eating of meat and the observing of certain days as holy which, as we saw last week, had to do with Pagan practices that involved certain foods, and likely, Jewish Holy days.

Paul's point is not to divide the Body of Christ over such issues of opinion, but to point out the danger of using these issues as a wedge for judgment which would condemn each other. And so we continue this morning with our text and this thought.

Rom 14:13 "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."

And by this he means an obstacle which for you may be a good thing, but could be a source of contention for someone else, such as the eating of meat.

Judging people on such matters will only be detrimental and should not be the source for judgments in the first place.

This is a repetition of Rom 14:10-12 "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. 11 It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" 12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God."

'So, quit judging over matters which God doesn't judge', is Paul's point. But now he retraces his steps in pointing out that in such matters as eating meat there is no inherent problem.

Rom 14:14 "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean."

Paul is talking about the conscience of a person. Each one of us should be fully convinced in our minds that what we do before God is acceptable and not out of accord with His word. In those areas where we have liberty in Christ, and we choose to exercise that liberty, we should be convinced that what we do does not get in the way of our relationship with our Savior.

But there is something else to consider. We should also take into account how our liberty may cause another to falter in their relationship with Christ, and we'll see how Paul deals with this in a moment.

Paul is fully convinced that the eating of meat does not defile the body. In fact Jesus makes the same point in Mat 15:17-18 "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? 18 But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'"

F.F. Bruce makes this comment: "Defilement is located in people's minds, not in material objects." Tit 1:15 "To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted."

But for those who believe such material objects are a defilement, then for them they are, and we should not compound the problem by bringing judgment on them and further the process of a false condemnation.

Rom 14:15 "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."

Paul is basically saying, if you like eating meat then you certainly have the liberty to eat it. However, if in the eating of meat you cause the weaker brother to sin against his conscience then you should reconsider your liberty.

Now, this doesn't necessarily mean that one must give that particular thing up, but it does mean that discretion must be used. Let me give you an example.

And I'll make it as basic as I can. Suppose you wanted to go see the movie "The Lion King", by Walt Disney productions. Your conscience before God says there's not a problem with that. I'll take the kids and enjoy an afternoon out with some good entertainment.

However, another Christian says, not only will I not go see the "Lion King" because of its Pagan world and life view, I think it's improper to go to movies at all.

Now I don't want to get into a discussion on what particular types of movies are good or bad at this point, but for the person whose

conscience sees movies of any sort as being bad, for that person they are.

Now, with that understanding, you who have no problem with movies in general, let's say, you berate this weaker brother or sister, because they don't happen to agree with your position. At that point you are not building up but tearing down and Paul would say we are no longer walking in Christ's love.

Now that works in reverse as well. For the person who doesn't agree with movie going of any sort, and condemns the brother or sister who enjoys a movie once in a while, then they are no longer walking in Christ's love.

In fact, I would encourage that brother or sister to spend the time making a biblical case for their position and get back with me if they're that concerned over my position. That may even open up an opportunity for the two parties to sit down and reason together from the Scriptures which is always a good thing.

Paul wants us to understand that our conscience before God must be clear, but if we know that someone's conscience is not clear before God on such an issue, we must not go to war over it and destroy our brother in the process.

Don't lose me here or misconstrue what I mean. We're talking about issues where we have liberty, not about teachings and doctrines that are clearly laid out for our salvation and sanctification which cannot be compromised.

Rom 14:16 "Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil."

In other words, don't flaunt what may be a liberty and in the process become a stumbling block for someone so that you set yourself up for judgment. If you want to see a movie then do it, but don't invite your friend who abhors such things and then try to instruct them on how it's immature to have such an opinion.

This will only lead to battle. And contrary to popular belief, the war is with the enemy, not with one another as it relates to such matters.

Again, this does not preclude that a proper exegesis of God's word on the matter of liberty may not be brought to bear, as those in the body teach the whole counsel of God's word, to help the body

grow and appreciate what God says on the matter so that the weak can become the mature.

Rom 14:17-18 "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, 18 because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men."

Now, here is where we sometimes lose sight of the bigger picture. We sometimes think that 'my liberties are the most important thing and if someone doesn't agree with that then they're just baby Christians who need to be stepped on once in a while to get their attention.'

No, Paul is saying that you may have liberties in Christ, but that is not what the Kingdom of God is ultimately about. What the Kingdom of God is about is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

If we would keep these three things in mind and practice them then we would find we are practicing the love of Christ in all things. The Kingdom is about righteousness; righteousness as it pertains to God's righteousness.

But with God's righteousness comes a sense of dealing righteously with each other, which means considering one another as more important than ourselves. In other words, not a "me first" attitude.

The Kingdom of God is peace. Think about it. Is peace not the main issue with our salvation? Is not peace the very thing Christ accomplished on the cross for us? The reason He came in the first place was because we were at war with God because of our sin and rebellion.

Christ came to bring peace and reconciliation, so that we may have a peaceful relationship with our God. He accomplished that as His righteousness was put to our account. He accomplished that as He was forsaken by the Father even though He was guiltless.

For the sake of peace He took our sin and nailed it to the cross, and then defeated sin and death in His resurrection. If peace meant that much to Jesus Christ that He would die for the penalty of our sin, then peace means a great deal to Him concerning His Body, the Body of Christ, you and me.

And when peace is the motivating factor then joy in the Holy Spirit becomes a reality. Joy is not necessarily synonymous with

happiness. Life may not always bring happiness, because life can be a burden at times.

But God is never a burden. And when we realize that our joy is totally dependent on Him then even in the midst of the burden of life we may have a peace which passes all understanding because of the joy of our salvation.

And so, if we operate in this way of wanting to promote the Kingdom of God in righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, we please God and will be, as Paul says, approved of by men, which means that others will see us as people who only want to glorify Christ in His love. It won't be perfect, but it will be seen as "others-serving", "not self-serving".

Rom 14:19-20 "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 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."

We want to promote peace, because this a fruit of the Spirit. And as we practice that kind of peace we will be mutually edifying one another, or as the NAS puts it, "building up one another."

This should always be our goal. Building up each other. This doesn't mean we avoid issues like the eating of meat as opposed to not eating. But, it does mean that we treat these areas with understanding and love.

After all Paul wants these weaker members to grow up in their faith. He doesn't want them to remain babes all their lives. I dare say that most of us had problems in certain areas where we have freedoms, and yet over the years we began to mature and to see things from God's perspective instead of our narrow perspective.

This is what sanctification is all about. Sanctification is the biblical process the Holy Spirit uses to conform us into the image of Jesus Christ. And that means maturity is the process in glorifying Christ. It's growing up in the Lord.

Eph 4:14-15 "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."

This growing up process is always connected to the work of the Spirit, using the means the Spirit has given, not the least of which is the word of God, inspired by the Spirit.

1Pe 2:2-3 "Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."

To ignore the means of growth is to despise maturity in Christ and relegate yourself to perpetual infant-hood. But maturity in Christ is a personal matter. No one can force maturity on you. But growing up in Christ is certainly what the Spirit of God is constantly moving us towards as we are submissive to His will.

But often times, even when we share the truth in love, one of the best ways of encouraging maturity in Christ is to lead the way by example.

Rom 14:21 "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall."

If your Christian liberty is causing someone else to not only not grow in Christ, but to actually go backwards, then you being the more mature in Christ must consider not continuing in that liberty for the sake of that fellow Christian.

'But, I have certain freedoms in Christ and I can't allow all of the weak brethren to dictate how I live my life!'

That may be true, and Paul certainly wouldn't demand that you not be able to exercise your liberties in Christ, but he would caution how you practice those things and when, with the understanding that the goal is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

This was an issue which wasn't limited to the Roman Christians. The Christians in Corinth also had to deal with their liberties in Christ and Paul helped them to put it into perspective.

1Co 8:10-13 "For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? 11 So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. 12 When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall."

What this means is that eating meat sacrificed to idols may not offend your conscience before Christ, but another brother may then follow suit while his conscience is screaming that this is wrong. If he partakes with that attitude, then in his own mind and heart, he is sinning against God and he stands condemned by his actions, even though there is no condemnation from God.

This will give the enemy an opportunity to accuse this weaker brother and it may even cripple his ability to mature in Christ, always thinking himself to have committed some sin which is always hanging over his head.

In such cases Paul says, 'I'd rather not eat meat at all if it's going to cause such devastation in the life of another person for whom Christ loved enough to die for.' And God will certainly honor such an attitude.

I remember a friend of mine years ago who judged me and other Christians because we celebrated Christmas. His reasoning was that the Bible didn't sanction such a day of celebration and that this particular event had at its roots Pagan practices, from decorating a tree to hanging garland around the house.

And he's absolutely right from an historical perspective. But neither I nor any other Christian that I ever met used that day to honor a Christmas tree or worship the fire god who gave light to that tree as it was practiced by Pagans in the past.

Keep in mind too that whether we realize it or not there are always two holidays being celebrated on days like Christmas and Easter or Thanksgiving.

There is the secular celebration and the religious celebration. Most unbelievers would continue to celebrate Christmas and Easter whether Christ were involved or not. They are usually involved in celebrating only one aspect of such holidays.

They're more interested in good cheer and tradition. Christians usually end up celebrating two holidays. They celebrate the secular as well as the religious. And sometimes it's hard to distinguish between the two.

Are they wrong? No, not necessarily. Secular practices are not always inherently evil. But, if your conscience will not allow you to practice such a day as Christmas, as was the case with my friend, then to him it is evil.

His problem was that he couldn't distinguish between a liberty in Christ and an area in which the word of God would not allow compromise.

In his judgment on me I could have gone to war over this because I had the liberty to celebrate that day as I saw fit, but instead he allowed me to meet with him and share my point of view from a biblical perspective; a perspective which allowed me to enjoy traditions with my family and friends and to use the time of year to honor the birth of my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

It didn't change his mind, but it did allow him to see that another Christian could practice such a liberty from a Christian perspective. Interestingly enough, a year later, which would have been the next Christmas, I saw him at a red light and he smiled and said, 'Merry Christmas Drew.'

And I said, what? And he said, no really, Merry Christmas. Just from sitting down with him and opening the word of God and sharing with him, the Lord allowed his conscience to be softened to this liberty and he decided to participate in Christmas. We all need room to grow in such areas. And if we will approach these areas in love God can work.

But if for some reason that opportunity does not open for a dialogue regarding such issues, sometimes it's just better to be quiet and pray for that brother or sister in Christ until the opportunity is opened up.

Rom 14:22-23 "So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. 23 But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin."

My friend, according to his perspective, would have sinned if he had celebrated Christmas that one year as his conscience before God would not have allowed him to do it in faith. And the faith Paul speaks of here is the kind of faith that understands that God allows such things and that we can trust that God does not condemn us in such things.

Happy is the man who does not condemn himself in what he approves as the NAS puts it. 'Oh, you mean that if I simply approve something that it's okay?' No, that's not what Paul means. Always keep it in the context.

He's speaking of approving things in which we have liberty. And the way we measure that is to approve all things according to the word of God. The word of God does not approve of sin in any form. And on occasion, as we have seen, it does not always approve of good things which are being used to cause another to sin.

I like the way William Barclay sums it up. Christian freedom means that we are free to do, not what we like, but what Christ likes."

And what Christ likes is that we love Him above all and our neighbor as ourselves.

Let me end with an exhortation from Paul as he wrote to the Philippians.

Phi 2:3-11 "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."