

Christian Liberty, Part 13

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And now, as we did last Lord's Day morning, we turn to Romans chapter 14, the 14th chapter of Paul's letter to the church at Rome. And I'm going to read that chapter. and the first three verses of chapter 15. And my translation of the first verse is to help us understand what the Apostle is saying.

"But him that is weak in faith receive but not for the purpose of quarrels over disputed matters. Him that is weak in faith receive, but not for the purpose of quarrels over disputed matters. One man has faith to eat all things, but he that is weak eats herbs. Let not him that eats set at nought him that eats not. And let not him who does not eat judge him that eats, for God has received him. Who are you that judges the servant of another? to his own Lord he stands or falls. Yes, he shall be made to stand, for the Lord has power to make him stand. One man esteems one day above another, and another esteems every day alike. Let each man be fully assured in his own mind. He that regards the day regards it unto the Lord, and he that eats eats unto the Lord, for he gives God thanks. And he that does not eat, unto the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and none dies to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord, or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you set at nought your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, to Me every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then, each one of us shall give account of himself to God.

"Let us not therefore judge one another any more, but judge this, rather, that no man put a stumbling block in his brother's way, or an occasion of falling. I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself, save to him who accounts anything to be unclean. To him it is unclean. For if because of meat your brother is grieved, you no longer walk in love. Do not destroy with your meat him for whom Christ died. Do not let your good be evil spoken of, for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he that in these things serves Christ is well pleasing to God and approved of men. So then, let us follow after the things which make for peace, and things whereby we may build up one another. Do not overthrow for meat's sake the work of God. All things indeed are clean, albeit it is evil for that man who eats with offense. It is good not to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor to do anything whereby your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have to yourself before God. Happy is he who judges not himself in that which he approves. But he that doubts is condemned if he eat, because he does not eat of faith, and whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

"Now we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each one of us please his neighbor for that which is good unto edifying. For Christ also pleased not himself, but as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached you fell on me. Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now the God of patience and of comfort grant you to be of the same mind one with another according to Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore, receive one another, even as Christ also received you, to the glory of God."

Thus far, the Word of God. Let us again pray.

Our Father, we remember those words of John the Baptist when he declared that a man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven. We are so slow to embrace that truth in our heart of hearts. We had hard, fibrous strands of creature confidence woven into the very texture of our hearts. And, Lord, we want them excised. We want them cut out. We want to learn in all things how utterly dependent we are upon your grace. So we call upon you. Send your Holy Spirit upon preacher and people alike, that we may be under your tutelage and guidance, under the direct and present influence of the Spirit with the Word, that we may be given understanding and a will to follow all that you will say to us. Help us then, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

The eyes and the ears of our nation have been focused upon the final respects given to a noble champion of political freedom and liberty. Many of the elements of the various proceedings exhibited a refreshing display of dignity and decorum, commodities tragically absent in our otherwise coarse and crude society. I hope you were refreshed just by the noble decorum and dignity. Above all, the proceedings laid bare before many of us the remnants of our Christian faith, and for me that was a tremendous encouragement. However, we turn from these things, as noble and refreshing as they have been, to resume our consideration as a sphere of liberty concerning which Mr. Reagan had nothing to do, which he could never, by whatever influence he was given, procure for any one of us. It is a liberty which in its consequences goes far beyond the political liberty of any nation in any period of human history, even the liberty procured for bound sinners by Jesus Christ.

We come this morning in a series that I've entitled "A Fresh Look at the Doctrine of Christian Liberty". I began by demonstrating from the Scriptures the reality and nature of our bondage and slavery in Adam. Secondly, the reality and nature of our liberty and freedom in Christ. I then set before you the warnings of Scripture with respect to the two great enemies to this God-purchased, God-offered enjoyment of liberty in Christ. Number one, the enemy of libertinism or license, in which we considered carefully Galatians 5:13 and 1 Peter 2:16, and the enemy of legalism, under which heading we considered a number of texts, not the least of which was Galatians 5 and verse 1.

Then in our last study, three weeks ago, we began to look at the watershed passage with respect to the application of the doctrine of Christian liberty to those non-moral issues, that is, things that are neither commanded in the Scriptures as our duty, nor forbidden as things we should not indulge in. And in that opening message seeking to lead us into a study of the major principles of Romans chapter 14, I sought to highlight several crucial issues, matters that are essential to a right understanding and a right application of this passage to our own lives.

Number one, we must remember the previous teaching in Romans with respect to the Christian life. If we liken the book of Romans to a letter from Paul to the Roman church of sixteen pages, Paul does not forget on page 14 what he has written in pages 1 to 13. And any understanding and application of Romans 14 through 15:7 that acts as though the first 13 chapters don't exist is dead wrong. It's dead wrong.

In those earlier chapters, particularly with regard to the Christian life, the Apostle is demonstrated that all justified sinners who are in Christ, in virtue of that union with Christ, have died to the dominion of sin. They have exchanged masters from sin to God and to righteousness. According to chapter 8, they are in the realm of the spirit and not in the realm of the flesh. They mortify by the Spirit the deeds of the flesh, and thereby prove that they are the sons and daughters of God.

They are described in Romans 12 as those whose hearts, suffused with the wonder of God's saving mercy, present themselves as a living sacrifice unto God, with a heart that yearns to know and do His will. And they are described as those who embrace the directives of those subsequent verses in chapters 12 and 13: abhor what is evil; cleave to that which is good.

Some things are inherently, essentially evil. When Paul says in chapter 14, "I know and am persuaded there is nothing unclean of itself"--context, context, context. Yes, there are some things essentially unclean. In fact, Paul uses that very term in other places in his epistles, and he says that uncleanness is a work of the flesh, and those who live in a pattern of uncleanness will not inherit eternal life.

And so when Paul writes chapter 14, he hasn't forgotten his directive, that as the people of God, we're to abhor that which is evil; we're to cleave to that which is good. Further on, he goes on to say, at the very end of chapter 13, we are to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lust thereof, especially under the guise of Christian liberty. So that principle must constantly be kept before us as we read, seek to understand, and apply the truth of Romans 14.

Secondly, we must clearly identify the specific concerns of this passage. It is dealing with foods and days and wine. It is not dealing with things that are essentially evil and worldly and sinful in themselves, but, as we saw, it's foods or no foods. special days or no special days, the drinking or the non-drinking of wine in moderation. They are not issues in Romans 14 that either compromise the integrity of the gospel, not issues which compromise the integrity of a life of serious universal gospel holiness. Paul is not dealing with the keeping of days with the thought that they will add to the

work of Christ. When people do that, as we find the Galatians were, he has an entirely different spirit. He deals with those aberrations of the gospel with white-hot passion. Here he is dealing with the issue of days and foods and wine with gentle, loving, sensitive, accommodating pastoral insight and tenderness.

Third principle, it is helpful to know the origin of these issues. Why did Paul have to address them, spend a whole chapter and a half addressing them? Most likely because Rome, being a cosmopolitan city, the church was comprised of people with a Jewish background and a raw pagan background, and each of us is conditioned by his cultural and religious heritage, and we bring baggage with us into the Christian faith and into the Christian church. And these things had, as we saw, fourthly, the problems that they could create. They threatened the attainment or the maintenance of unity within the church, and they had the potential to threaten the spiritual well-being of individuals within the church. He speaks about destroying the brother with your meat. Tragic! And so the Apostle is passionately concerned that these things be dealt with in such a way that they will promote unity and will promote the ongoing persevering grace of a life of holiness among God's people.

Now then, with that very brief, quick flyover, we come this morning--and I have another burden. You heard me last time say I had a tremendous burden that those principles be grasped. Well, these principles for three weeks now have been churning around in my mind and heart that again are crucial if we're to understand this passage aright and apply it as we ought.

And number one is this: the precise identity of the weak and of the strong. Look at the text. Paul introduces this whole section with these words: "But him that is weak in faith receive, yet not for the purpose of quarrels over disputed matters, one man has faith to eat all things, but he that is weak eats earth." So the word "weak" is immediately introduced to us. Whatever this chapter is about, it has to do with people whom Paul describes as weak: "him that is weak".

Now he doesn't use the word "strong" in these opening two verses, but obviously the one described in verse two is the strong: "One man has faith to eat all things [he's the strong one], but [in contrast] he that is weak eats herbs." And then, as he's drawing near the conclusion of his treatment of the subject, chapter 15, verse 1, both are found: "Now we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves." And the words "strong" and "weak" are found in what is a semi-parallel passage in 1 Corinthians chapter 8. So, it's crucial at the very outset, what we're confronted with on the very threshold of entering the passage is "weak" and "strong", "strong" and "weak". And if our understanding of the precise identity of the weak and the strong is skewed, everything we build upon that skewed understanding as we work through the passage is going to be out of plumb. It's crucial that we grasp the precise identity of the weak and of the strong.

Now, whoever they are, we know from the previous teaching in the epistle, they are all equally justified. There's no weak and strong justification. You're either justified in

Christ or you are yet in condemnation in Adam. There are no weak and strong ones before God's justifying act of righteousness in Christ. We're on equal ground. Likewise, with our adoption, if we have been adopted into the family of God, being given the gift of the spirit of adoption, our union with Christ in which we have died to sin and risen to newness of life, in which there's been an exchange of masters from sin to righteousness--all of those realities, those distinctions do not obtain.

It is when we get into this theater of foods and days and wine. It's when we get into the area where Christians have a differing conscience concerning matters not clearly forbidden or clearly commanded that the categories of weak and strong enter, not before them. Get them in that other category and you're in bad shape. If you sit here this morning regardless of the condition of your conscience concerning these issues (foods, days, and wine, matters not clearly commanded or forbidden), wherever you are on the scale of weak and strong, moving from strong to weak, from weak, wherever it is, never, never, never let go of all of those realities that are unshakable because you are in Christ.

Well, if weak and strong have nothing to do with justification, adoption, union with Christ, death to sin, the gift of the Spirit, slaves of righteousness, what in the world does it mean to be the weak? What does it mean to be the strong? Well, let's look first of all at the precise identity of the weak. Go back to your text: "But him that is weak in faith receive you, yet not for purposes of arguing over disputed matters. One man has faith to eat all things. He that is weak eats only herbs." The weak is the one who believes in Christ, embraces his liberty from the condemning power of the law, but still believes that he ought to be careful about foods that may be ceremonially unclean.

Look at verse 14: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself, save to him who accounts anything to be unclean. To him it is unclean." And Paul describes this as being weak in faith. He is not talking about weak in the faith that lays hold of Christ for justifying righteousness. No, he's talking about a faith that is weak with respect to laying hold of the full extent of his liberty in Christ from all the trappings of the Mosaic law. He has been brought up believing that certain foods are unclean. And some are clean. And so whenever he looks at food, conscience speaks to him according to that standard that has been driven, as it were, into the very bowels of his conscience. And he said, "Oh no, no, that's a no-no. That's unclean. Oh, that's a good good. That's clean. I can eat that. I can't eat that."

Now he's laid hold of Christ, and he knows that in Christ he's free from the condemning power of the law. He knows that in Christ he's adopted and accepted in the Beloved. He knows that in Christ he's died to the dominion of sin. His faith in Christ with regard to those blessings is firm and strong. However, his faith with respect to understanding and believing the extent of his liberty and freedom from all the trappings of the Mosaic system as they touch upon foods and days and possibly upon wine (and we'll get to why that enters into the picture), his faith is weak with respect to those specific things. Do you see that from the text? "He that is weak

[weak in faith], he eats only herbs." It doesn't say "He that is weak in faith is all the time doubting his salvation." He's not talking about his saving faith. He's talking about faith as it applies to the full extent of one's liberty in Christ.

And what's at the bottom of this condition of weakness? Well, if you'll turn to 1 Corinthians 8 in the parallel passage, we get some very helpful insights. What's at the bottom of that weakness of faith in this area? Well, the first thing is, his knowledge of the extent of his liberty in Christ is limited. Look at 1 Corinthians 8 and verse 7: "Howbeit there is not in all men that knowledge." As Paul is dealing with this whole matter of meats offered to idols and whether or not a Christian with good conscience can go and get a bargain piece of meat at the local meat market that operates under the shadow of a heathen temple, he said the well instructed Christian knows an idol is nothing. A piece of meat is nothing, so you can get a bargain piece of meat. Even though it had been offered to an idol in the temple, it's still a piece of meat. Idol doesn't ingratiate itself into the hunk of meat. So if you know that, you can buy the meat and eat it with a good conscience. But he says some people don't know that. Their knowledge is limited, and because their knowledge is limited, they look upon that piece of meat as a no-no. Therefore, their believing appropriation of their liberty--surely they are free in Christ to buy that bargain piece of meat and eat it, but they cannot do it because conscience is weak in the presence of limited knowledge, which in turn results in weak faith respecting those issues, and that's why in the Corinthians passage Paul can say that not only knowledge, but conscience is weak.

Look at verse 10: "For if a man seeing you who have knowledge sitting at meat in an idol's temple, will not his conscience if he is weak, be emboldened to eat things sacrificed to idols. For through your knowledge he that is weak perishes, the brother for whose sake Christ died, and thus sinning against the brethren, and wounding their conscience when it is weak." So you see how he brings these three things together: knowledge, faith, and conscience. And the weak brother, the weak sister, weak in faith with respect to these issues, is weak because he does not know, he has not yet come to understand the full extent of his liberty in Jesus Christ, liberated from any demands of dietary laws, liberated from any demands of the special laws concerning this special day and that special day, and liberated from any qualms that the wine that he might purchase may have been offered in an idol's temple and therefore is also contaminated. The weak man, you see, is weak in knowledge, therefore weak in faith, which rests upon knowledge, and in turn that conditions his conscience. So as one commentator has very helpfully stated it,

"Explicitly, verse 2, however, "believe" has the notion of believing that something is legitimate. Paul is not, therefore, simply criticizing these people for having a weak or inadequate trust in Christ as their Savior and Lord. Rather, he's criticizing them for lack of insight into some of the implications of their faith in Christ. These are Christians who are not able to accept for themselves the truth that their faith in Christ implies liberation from certain Old Testament Jewish ritual requirements. The faith with respect to which these people are weak, therefore, is related to their basic faith in Christ, but one step removed from it. It involves their individual outworking of

Christian faith, their convictions about what that faith allows and prohibits. Paul's decision to use the pejorative phrase 'weak in faith' makes clear that his sympathies lie with the strong. We cannot avoid the impression through his pastoral, though his pastoral concerns lead him to keep it implicit. Paul would hope that growth in Christ would help those who were weak to become strong."

So that is the identification of the weak. That's the precise identification of the weak. Now then, let's spend a few moments to look at the precise identity of the strong. In the context of Romans 14:2, the strong is the one who has faith to eat all things. Now remember, that doesn't mean he has faith to eat poison. What's the all things? Context. Context. Context. The one who is strong is the one who has faith to eat any legitimate foods for nourishment. He does not think, whenever he contemplates eating this food or that food, where does it line up in dietary laws under the old covenant. He has absolutely no concern about those things. If he ever had them, he no longer has them. Most likely, from a pagan background and from a non-Jewish background, he never had them in the first place. And he is called the strong.

One man has faith to eat all things. Because he knows that the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, or in the language of Paul in Timothy, "Every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it be received with thanksgiving and with prayer." This man has proper knowledge of the nature of that food. It's the gift of God. It's not tainted because of some old covenant dietary law. It's food to be received with thanksgiving, and because he knows that, he can eat it in faith, and as he does, he reflects that his conscience with regard to his food is strong.

The same thing happens when he looks at the calendar and says, "Oh, that's written in the day, that's a special day for some of my friends with a Jewish background. And he can look at it and take his white out and just blot it out and say, "It's no special day for me. I have no obligation whatsoever to keep that day in any special way whatsoever." In Jesus Christ, all of the special feast days were types and shadows. They have their fulfillment in Christ. I have Christ. Every day is a light to me. He has knowledge. And based on that knowledge, he has faith and believes in the extent of his liberty, and therefore his conscience is free not to keep the day and not to have any sense of a twinge of guilt at the end of the day.

So, the precise identity of the weak is a true believer, completely free in Christ from all the demands of the dietary and ceremonial laws. But he does not know that. He has not in faith embraced it, and therefore his conscience will condemn him. If he eats food that in his understanding is still unclean; if he doesn't keep a day that to him God has marked out as special, his conscience will condemn him that it's sin. And furthermore, as we'll see, for him to eat that food while his conscience still tells him it's sin, even though it's not, and for him not to keep that day when his conscience tells him he should, for him it is sin, for whatsoever is not of faith, whatever we cannot do in the confidence before God that is well-pleasing to God is sin, even though the thing may not be sin in itself. That's what the Apostle is talking about. That's the weak believer.

The precise identity of the strong is this: he's a true believer in Christ who understands and believingly embraces the full scope of his liberty in Christ. Therefore, with a good conscience, he can eat all foods, regard all special holidays as the same, and drink wine in moderation with no scruples of conscience. But, but, to this precise identity of the weak and the strong, we must add this crucial pastoral observation, and it is this. The weak, as defined in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, may be very strong in other graces of the Christian life.

The weak, who are they? That's not a generic term of overall spiritual weakness. No, it's weakness with regard to one's understanding and believing appropriation of the full extent of his liberty in Christ. That's weakness. But that weak believer there may be very strong in other graces of the Christian life. He may and often is very strong in a life of scrupulous care to please the Lord. So scrupulous that he's willing to drool while others eat that succulent lobster tail because for him it's unclean. And he won't bloody his conscience for the sweet taste of the succulent lobster tail on his taste buds. He is so determined to walk with a good conscience before God that he will not touch that lobster tail. He's strong in his determination to walk with integrity before God.

Often he's very strong in the grace of self-denial. Often, because his conscience does not allow him the full range of his liberties. For him there are certain no-no's that God didn't make no-no's. And there are certain do things that God did not make do things for him, but because he believes they are no-nos and things he ought to do, he in loving obedience to his Lord abstains from issues that he need not abstain from and engages in things that to him are duties that are not duties. He manifests not only great strength of integrity to walk before God, self-discipline and determination to please God.

Many times the weak brother is very strong in those graces, in the graces of self-control, self-denial, walking with a tender conscience, often very strong in zeal for the honor of God and for the progress of the gospel. Often. So, any of you who sit here and say, "Oh, I ain't the weak one. The pastor described the weak; that's not me? I know my full liberties in Christ." You may be weak as water in a lot of other areas of Christian grace. And that's the second pastoral observation I want to make.

Conversely, the strong, as defined by Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, may be quite weak in other graces and disciplines. Look at the context. Paul begins with the assumption that some of the strong there at Rome might receive their weak brethren not out of disinterested love. But they've received them only for an opportunity to nail them and try to straighten them out. He says, "Him that is weak in faith, receive." Who's he talking to? He's talking to the strong. Yet not for the purpose of quarrels over disputed matters. The strong may be very weak in the love that embraces the weak brother, not for an opportunity to pick on him and straighten him out, but to take him where he is and to love him for who he is.

Furthermore, he speaks to the strong, and it's clear in chapter 15 that Paul assumes that they may not be strong in self-denial. We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves. Strong believers are often notoriously self-pleasing believers: "It's my liberty. You ain't going to make me not exercise my liberty" without considering what that liberty exercised before the weak may do to them. And as Jesus did not please Himself, but laid Himself out in self-sacrificing love for our redemption, we are called upon, if we are the strong, to follow His example, yielding up a thousand rights and liberties for the sake of the weak.

You see, the strong may be very weak in love and self-denial in the maintenance of a tender conscience, in a passion to edify. That's why he has to say in verse 19 of chapter 14, "Let us follow after the things that make for peace and the things whereby we may build up one another." You don't establish the kingdom of God by eating and drinking. You go around proving your liberty by what you eat and what you drink. That doesn't establish the kingdom of God. Strong believers weak as water, in sensitivity, self-denial, self-sacrificing love for others. So we've identified the weak and strong, and we can't change that identification. The Bible has locked it in for us.

But we need this very crucial pastoral observation that the weak in faith with regard to things indifferent may be very strong in other Christian graces, and the strong in faith with regard to things indifferent. Though I said last week I wasn't going to use that term for the lack of a big, long explanation, I'll use it. They may be very weak in other Christian graces. Now, the weak in faith may be weak in some other areas, because apparently they were sitting in judgment under strong, saying, "You unspiritual bunch, look at you, swiveling down your wine. If you were spiritual, you'd be a teetotaler like I am." So the weak, you see, can be weak in other areas as well as strong. And the strong can be weak in other areas. So don't pigeonhole where you are in your generic spiritual state by whether or not you fit the weak or the strong in Romans 14. That's my great pastoral burden that none of you would be so foolish as to do what the Bible does not allow you to do.

But then, secondly, here's my second great burden this morning, and I think we'll have time to lay it before you. It is this: not only must we understand the precise identity of the weak and the strong, and this pastoral observation that the weak in faith may be strong in other graces, and the strong in faith may be weak in other graces, but now, secondly, we must understand the fundamental difference between the appreciation of our liberty in Christ and the exercise or display of our liberty in our actions. Let me give it to you again. We must, we must understand the fundamental difference between the appreciation of our liberty in Christ and the exercise or display of our liberty before men. One very insightful commentator has captured the essence of my burden in this with these words:

"Christian liberty is an internal thing. It belongs to the mind and the conscience and has a direct reference to God. The use of Christian liberty is an external thing. It belongs to conduct and has reference to man. No consideration should prevail on us for a moment to give up our liberty [understood in the presence of God, purchased by

Christ, that nine-fold freedom that we examined some weeks ago, freedom from rules and regulations of men, freedom from all the trappings of the Mosaic system, as well as free from the devil in the world and sin]. "For a moment we must not give up our liberty, but [but] many a consideration should induce us to forego the practical assertion or display of our liberty before men."

You see the distinction? Christian liberty is an internal issue when we stand before God with our understanding of what He has done for us in Christ and our conscience that is telling us right or wrong with this or that action or behavior or relationship when we live unto Christ. That's internal Godward. The practice, the exercise of our Christian liberty is outward and visible among men. It has a manward reference. And this writer, old John Calvin says, "For a moment we must not for any reason relinquish our blood-bought liberty before God in Christ. But there will be a hundred things that will constrain us if we're spiritually minded to relinquish the exercise and the practice of our liberty before men."

The Apostle Paul is the great champion of Christian liberty: "For freedom did Christ set us free. Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free." Look at Romans 14:14: "I know [look how certain] and am persuaded [in reference to the Lord Jesus] that nothing is unclean." Now, context. What does he mean, "nothing is unclean"? No meats are unclean. No days are unclean. No beverages are unclean. And he says, "I know this. I am persuaded of it, and my knowledge and persuasion has reference to my Lord Jesus Christ who has purchased this liberty for me. I know and am persuaded."

Here's a man saying, "You are not going to rob me of one gram of my liberty before God in Christ. I know it. I'm persuaded of it. Don't you dare touch it." However, in this very chapter, and in 1 Corinthians 8, and in 1 Corinthians 9, this very champion of Christian liberty, this one who with respect to himself and with respect to those whom he influences through his epistles, he calls us to stand in that liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, listen to what he says about the exercise of that liberty (Romans 14:13): "Let us not judge one another anymore, but judge this rather, that no man [no man] put a stumbling block in his brother's way or an occasion of falling."

You mean I'm under obligation to know the things that may cause a brother to stumble or to fall in the areas of my blood-bought liberties before God? Yes, I am to study the consciences of my brethren. And if there is something that if my brother sees me doing, or I encourage him to do, that would embolden him to violate his conscience, the apostle says, "What am I doing then by the exercise of that liberty?" Verse 15: "If because of your meat your brother is grieved [that grief is the grief of stumbling and possibly apostasy], you no longer walk in love. Do not destroy with your meat him for whom Christ died."

You mean you're going to assert your liberty in the presence of a man that you know could not eat that succulent lobster tail? And you're going to chew it, and drool over it, and rhapsodize, and say, "Well, wouldn't you like just this?" All the while you know for

him that's unclean ("to him that esteems it unclean"), and you embolden him to do that which for him is sin, you may start him on the road to apostasy. And he says, "Are you willing to destroy the work of God for the sake of a lobster tail?" What kind of love is that where your lobster tail means more than the never-dying soul of one for whom Christ died?

That's why he goes on to say (verse 21) "It is good not to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor do anything whereby your brother stumbles." The faith which you have-- remember what the context is, not your saving faith, but your faith with respect to the extent of your liberty. Have that before God. Don't give it up. Hold it before God. "Happy", he says, "is the man that does not judge himself in that which he approves." But it's one thing for me to prove it. It's another thing for me to indulge it indiscriminately, with insensitivity to the weak conscience of my brother or my sister. The difference between the appreciation and the tenacious holding to my liberty and the external exercise and display of that liberty.

Look at the strong language in 1 Corinthians 8 in a similar vein, beginning in verse 9:

"Take heed lest by any means [pay attention constantly, carefully] lest this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to the weak. For if a man sees you who have knowledge sitting at meat in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be emboldened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge, he that is weak perishes, the brother for whose sake Christ died, and thus sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak. You sin against Christ."

You mean when you go to eat what you know is nothing but a piece of meat, and you can eat it and give thanks to God for it, but you know there's someone in whose conscience eating that meat is engaging in idol worship, and you carelessly go ahead anyway and eat your meat. He says you sin not only against that brother, but against Christ Himself. Now look at what Paul says (this is what blows my mind--you talk about love): "Wherefore, If meat causes my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh forevermore." Paul says, "If it were necessary for me to restrict my liberty to the point where I never again tasted a succulent steak or a succulent lobster tail, I'm ready to go to my grave a vegetarian. If I can find enough vegetables to give me the nutrients to support my life system, I'll be a vegetarian till I die."

I said, "Lord, I don't love You that much, nor do I love my brothers that much." I had to be honest when I read that. I said, "Am I ready to swear to a vegetarian life if I were in a setting where I know I could be offending and wounding?" Now, as we're going to see, this does not mean that exercising my liberty, you don't like it, and you judge me. God says, "You stop judging me." You see, the weak can sit around saying, "You offend me because..." I say, "What do you mean I offend you? Are you tempted to do what I'm doing against your conscience?" "No, I want the world to do what I do." Paul says, "You stop that. That strong brother has a Lord to whom he answers, and it ain't you." So the "offending, my brethren" does not mean you don't

like what a strong brother or sister does, and you'd like him to stop it because you think he'd be more spiritual if he stopped it. That's Phariseeism.

And when in the presence of Pharisees, you know what Jesus did? He had no scruples about offending Pharisees, nor do I. But a sincere brother who's got a weak conscience, really seeking to walk with integrity before God, who says to me, "My brother, I understand that you have all the marks of a man that wants to live with integrity, even as I do. But I simply cannot go where you can go. I can't eat what you eat. I can't drink what you drink. And brother, just pray for me that God will help me." I say to him,

"Brother, you pray for me, and if there's ever any time that where I go and what I eat and what I drink in any way nudges you to do that which is against your conscience, tell me, because I'm going to stop it in your presence. I'm not going to give up my internal knowledge that it's my liberty to go there, to do it, to eat it, to drink it, but I'll give up the going, I'll give up the eating, I'll give up the drinking."

You got it? You see what he's talking about? Christian liberty is internal before God. The exercise and practice is external before man. And while we must not for a moment yield the reality of our liberty in Christ (it is blood-bought; it is too precious to yield a gram of it), if we are walking biblically, we will yield up many practical expressions and exercises of that liberty for the sake, not only of our brethren, but as we shall see as we get into 1 Corinthians 9, for the sake of sinners who do not know the Savior.

That's why Paul can go on in that passage in Corinthians saying, "Am I not free? I know my liberty. Am I not an apostle? Have not I seen Jesus our Lord?" He says, "Do we not have a right [verse 4] to eat and drink? [And for Paul, eat and drink meant eat and drink all foods and beverages that God has made me free in Christ to drink and to eat.] Have we not a right to lead about a wife who's a believer?" He says, "Yeah, I've got all these rights, but I give them all up. Why? Not because I've become a legalist, but because I'm a Christian free enough in Christ to make myself servant to all that I might win all. I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some." That abused verse that a bunch of immature young kids with their hats on backwards and their baggy pants who can barely plump four chords get their little Christian rock band together: "We're becoming all things to all men. We're going to win it." Nonsense. Paul is saying,

"I'm willing to become a kosher Jew in the presence of kosher Jews." All the self-denial that means, no, this meat and that meat and this drink and that drink, I'm willing to deny myself that I might get inside their affections and their consciences and win them to my Savior. And when they understand their salvation, and I teach them how free they are in Christ, We'll go off to the local seafood place and we'll have us a big three pound lobster together."

But until they got converted and their conscience told them they could have that lobster, no lobster around Paul. You got it? I don't know. Am I making sense? And you

see what happens then, when as a congregation, when as the people of God, we internalize this. We don't feel that the only way we can prove we're a church that believes in Christian liberty is to parade the extent of our liberty indiscriminately wherever we are.

I'll never forget the first time I saw this, coming out of my fundamentalist Salvation Army background. I mean a list of no-nos that are never mentioned in the Bible. That was my background. When I began to understand what's called the Reformed faith, and with it the historic, classic, biblical doctrine of Christian liberty, God had a lot of work to do with me, a lot of work to do with me in a lot of areas.

But I was thrust almost immediately into a context where here were a bunch of young seminary students sitting around drinking beer and smoking pipes while they discussed theology. I tell you, it's only the grace of God that I didn't say, "If this is what it all leads to, forget it. I'm going back to Salvation Army." What was wrong with those young men? Well, probably some of them weren't even converted. But the fundamental problem was they didn't understand this principle. They knew something of my background, and they figured, "Well, we're going to help this preacher. God's given him some gifts to preach, and he's come to embrace the Reformed faith, and he can help our cause, but he needs to get loosened up. So we're going to teach him the doctrine of Christian liberty, break out our pipes and our beer." What a bunch of nonsense, carnal nonsense.

And I fear that some of you have yet to grasp this principle of saying to yourself, "Look, this is not a matter of whether or not I have a right to this, to that, or the other. The issue is, what will the effect of the exercise of my liberty be in the presence of this one, that one, this one, the other one?" On the other hand, I must say I'm proud of not a few of you, because I know and I have watched you in your sensitivity with regard to these matters that are part of the corpus of things that are neither commanded nor forbidden. And when pastors come and when guests come, you're very, very sensitive to do absolutely nothing that would cast a negative reflection upon the gospel of the grace of God and upon a genuine love that draws near to people, even with their hang-ups, and are willing to accommodate to those hang-ups for the sake of the gospel.

Well, that was the burden on my heart this morning. Two things: to give a precise identity to the weak and to the strong and to underscore the fundamental difference between the appreciation of our liberty in Christ and the exercise and display of that liberty in our actions.

As I close, I want to say a word to you who are unconverted. There's some of you sitting here this morning, and no doubt you're thinking, what a crazy bunch of people, so concerned about this little thing, that little thing, and the other little... My friend, listen, you know why that's the way we live? Paul gives the answer here in Romans chapter 14. In the midst of dealing with this, as we shall see in our subsequent expositions, he says in verse 6, "He that regards the day, regards it to the Lord. He

that eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks. He who does not eat, he does not eat as unto the Lord, for he gives God thanks." None of us who are true believers lives to himself. None of us dies to himself. Whether we live, we live to the Lord. Whether we die, we die to the Lord. Whether we live, therefore, or die, we're the Lord's. He's not talking about all men in general. He's talking about the weak and the strong. All true believers, they live to the Lord. They want to know that if I drink that glass of water, I can in my heart say, "Lord Jesus, I take it as your gift. I drink it as unto you. If I'm going to eat that lobster tail, I want to be able to eat it in the presence of God with a good conscience. For me, there are no things indifferent."

Paul says, "Every facet of life." Here a man comes to that special day, and he says, "O God, though I do not trust in this feast day, this fast day, in any way to add to the merit of your dear Son and my salvation in him, I believe it would glorify You if in a special way I keep, as it were, just a little bit of the remnants of that day that was so sacred in my past and that caused me to be restless for something I did not know. And now I see in Christ I have everything that day pointed for. And Lord, as unto you, I want to keep that day a special day."

He says, "You keep it unto the Lord." Why? Because a true Christian lives unto the Lord. The other brother gets up and sees that day on the calendar and says, Thank you, "Lord Jesus. All that that day pointed to is fulfilled in You. And therefore, having You, I don't need to cling to anything of the shadow. Lord Jesus, thank you. I can go out and dig around the shrubs and go fishing today to your glory." That's what Paul's saying.

You see, if this all seems kind of wacko to some of you, it's because you're spiritually wacko. You're living to yourself. You've got the wrong focus of your life. You weren't made to live for yourself. You're all twisted and turned inside out. If you go on that way, you'll end up in the place where all such twisted, inside out people go. It's called hell. And what you need is a sight of God's saving mercy in Jesus Christ, Who came to deliver us from the tyranny of living unto self and bring us into the liberty of living unto Him Who for our sakes died and rose again. And we plead with you to go to that gracious Savior.

And to you, the people of God, if you're weak, according to Paul's description, don't be content with being weak. I know people sitting here who, when I first met them, they were very weak. They had all kinds of scruples about all kinds of things. And by degrees, they've become strong. In terms of these issues, there are others of you who are strong in this context. But if you're honest, you'll have to admit you're weak in love, you're weak in zeal, you're weak in fervor for the advancement of God's kingdom. Don't make your understanding of Christian liberty the benchmark of your spiritual stature. That's a big, bad mistake. You cry to God, that as He has enabled you to be strong in faith with regard to your liberty in Christ, the fruit of that liberty will be that you grow strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might, in the full-orbed graces of a mature, godly, Christlike man or woman.

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