

Christian Liberty, Part 14

by Albert N. Martin

Edited transcript of message preached June 20, 2004

Now, as we have done for two Lord's Day mornings, I ask you to turn with me to Romans chapter 14, and follow as I read this chapter, and on into chapter 15. Occasionally people ask me, "What version do you read from Pastor Martin?" Well, I use the old American Standard, that's the 1901 American Standard, but I automatically change all of the ye's and the Elizabethan endings. I just do it automatically. They come in Elizabethan in my eye, and they come out my tongue contemporary English. So, it's not my own translation, technically, but in one sense it is. So if you are visiting among us and you wonder, what in the world is the translation he has, I wouldn't want your mind distracted, and so I give you that word of explanation. And then, of course, verse one, as I've indicated, I give you one of the renderings of one of the modern translations that makes it more clear.

"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 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."

Thus far, the reading of God's holy Word. "A fresh look at the Doctrine of Christian Liberty." This is the title that I've given to our present series of studies in the Word of God. And we began the series by considering together the nature and the extent of our bondage and our terrible slavery in Adam. And we looked at five dimensions of that bondage and slavery. Then we considered the nature and extent of our liberty and freedom in Christ, a nine-fold liberty in Christ. Then we asked the question, "To what end has Christ set us free?" "If the Son, therefore, shall make you free, you shall be free indeed." And with our chains broken, and the manacles lying at our feet, and the prison door open, and we ask the question, "Why, Lord Jesus, have you set me free?" There is no better answer in all the Word of God, in my judgment, than is found in the prophecy of Zacharias, Luke chapter 1, verses 74 and 75: "That we, being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve Him [that is, render priestly service unto Him] without fear in righteousness and holiness, before His face all the days of our life." That's the goal of our freedom, to render service unto God; to do it without fear that we shall ever be brought back into satanic bondage; to do it in the sphere of righteousness and holiness; to do it before His face, and to do it all of our days.

And then we looked at the two great enemies of our freedom in Christ and the outworking of that purpose defined in Luke chapter 1. And we looked at the enemy of libertinism or license and the enemy of legalism. And in so doing I opened up in your presence some of the key texts on the subject of Christian liberty: Galatians 5:1 and 5:13 and 1 Peter 2:16 and a number of other secondary texts.

The term "Christian liberty" is most often used in connection with those practices which are neither clearly commanded nor explicitly forbidden in the Word of God. And in this connection, no passage is of more importance than the one read in your hearing again this morning, Romans 14, 1 through 15, really verse 7. I stopped deliberately at verse 6. And so it has been my determination that we come to this

passage, and by the grace of God and the help of the Holy Spirit, be taught the truths deposited here, that in this subset of the doctrine of Christian liberty, namely, how am I to think with respect to my own conduct in relationship to issues neither clearly commanded nor explicitly forbidden? How am I to relate to my brothers who are wrestling with the same question, and who come up with a differing answer with respect to the matters which they feel before God they can with good conscience partake of, and those things that in good conscience they cannot partake of? It is this passage that is crucial in giving us God's answer to those concerns. And so, in the two previous messages, I have sought, as it were, to sort of spread the table so that, coming to the passage, we will not end up thinking things that the Spirit of God never intended we should think when we come to Romans 14 through 15 and verse 7.

We looked, first of all, at this principle, that in seeking to understand Romans 14, we must remember it comes at the tail end of the entire letter to the Romans. And if we liken the entire letter to a 16-page letter, we must credit the apostle with enough intelligence and integrity to believe that he would neither forget nor contradict in Romans 14 and 15 anything he had taught in Romans 1 to 13 about the nature of the Christian life. And in those earlier chapters, he has clearly taught us that if we are real Christians, we have, in union with Christ, died to the dominion of sin. If we are real Christians, we've had a change of masters from sin to righteousness and to God. And therefore, the focus of the concern of a real Christian is not, how many things may I indulge in under the guise of liberty? But how may I so live to make it evident I'm no longer a slave of sin, that I in union with Christ have died to sin and risen to newness of life?

Furthermore, Paul has not forgotten what he taught in Romans 8, that if we are Christians, we are no longer in the realm of the flesh, but in the realm of the Spirit. And we are in a constant process of mortifying the deeds of the body, and only such shall live. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God."

Furthermore, in the instruction of the immediately preceding chapters, he has said we as believers are to abhor what is evil. We are to cleave to what is good. Some things are essentially, inherently evil. When he says in this passage, "I know and am persuaded there is nothing unclean of itself", that must not be wrenched out of context. He's saying there is no food that is essentially unclean of itself. He is not talking about the so-called fact that, "Well, a movie's a movie, a TV program's a TV program, nothing's unclean of itself." That's ludicrous. Some movies are evil, and you're to abhor them. And you are not to cleave to them. You are to cleave to what is good. Some things are unclean. "Yes", Paul says, "Let not uncleanness once be named among you." And so this cavalier, reckless use of Romans 14 has no basis when we remember this simple principle: Paul teaches nothing here that contradicts anything in the previous 13 chapters.

Secondly, we tried to identify the precise concerns of this passage. The concern is food, days, and wine, things that are non-moral in themselves. This dimension of Christian liberty has to do with things that fit the category of food and days and wine.

Thirdly, we noted that we must come to a very clear understanding of the precise identity of the weak and of the strong. The use of the terms "weak" and "strong" are not generic descriptions of strong Christians and weak Christians. In the context, the weak are those believers who, though they are united to Christ, they are free in Christ, they do not yet have an understanding of the full extent of their freedom in Christ. Therefore, their faith in the measure of their liberty is weak, and therefore, their conscience still pressures them to do things they don't need to do, and pressures them to avoid things that they don't need to avoid.

These are not things they are doing and avoiding to add to the merit of Christ. If they were, Paul would treat them as he did days and foods and those things in the book of Colossians and also in the book of Galatians. No, the weak are those who in this or that particular area are constrained to do things out of conscience that they would not be constrained to do out of conscience if they understood and believed the full extent of their liberty in Christ. That's the only area of their weakness. They might be very strong in many other areas of the Christian life, strong in their conscientious desire to please God, strong in self-denial, strong in zeal, strong in many other areas, but they are weak in that particular area.

Likewise, the strong, those are the believers who understand the extent of their liberty is broad, is comprehensive. Understanding it, their faith embraces it, their conscience releases them. They feel no constraint to keep special days. They feel no constraint to any dietary laws as a matter of conscience. Not as a matter of health things, but as a matter of religious conscience. They are the strong in the context, but they may be very weak in other areas.

The very passage shows some of them are weak in love. Paul had to rebuke them and say, "Here you go exercising your liberty at the expense of the spiritual stability of a weak man. You are not walking in love." And he rebukes them. They seem to be lingering off in the shadows, saying, "Ah, let the weak get with it." He said, "No, no, we who are strong ought to bear with the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves." Some of these strong Christians in the context were very weak in self-denial. They were weak in love. Strong and weak must be understood contextually. And I trust we now have a grasp upon that.

And then finally, we saw that there is a fundamental difference between the appreciation of our liberty in Christ with respect to non-moral issues and our exercise and display of that liberty before men. Our understanding is inward; our faith is inward before God. The exercise of our liberty is outward before men. And as one judicious commentator has stated,

'Christian liberty is an internal thing. It belongs to the mind and to the conscience, 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 upon us for a moment to give up our liberty. Not one thousandth of a gram of it. It's purchased by Jesus. Don't give it up. It's inward before God. Understand and grasp the full extent

of your liberty. However, many a consideration should induce us to forego the practical assertion or display of our liberty. And that's a vital principle."

Well, so much for that brief overview. And if any of you get weary with my reviews, remember that those who are experts in teaching say that a good teacher will take at least a third of his time to review. We have visitors among us. I didn't want to plunge in and not have the reference points for them. I trust this has not been wearisome to you who are here week by week. We come this morning to focus our attention, with this passage open before us, on what I'm calling the foundation and the goal of a proper understanding and practice of Christian liberty. In opening up the subject, I have but two heads, each comprised of a specific text within this larger passage.

First of all, and this is crucial. If I don't get to the second, I won't be happy, but I'll feel that if under God you get hold of this, it's worth a morning's work. Here is heading number one: there must be no forced conformity within the church on matters of legitimate diversity of conscience and practice. Look at verse 5: "One man esteems one day above another, another esteems every day alike. [Here is the key statement] Let each man be fully assured in his own mind."

Now, with respect to matters addressed by the moral law and properly applied biblical commands, the church must insist on an inflexible standard of holiness and righteousness. Where God's law speaks, the church can and must speak. We have been delivered to what end? That we might serve Him in righteousness and holiness. Righteousness is defined by the law of God. Matters pertaining to the moral law are never issues of Christian liberty. They are matters of Christian duty. And also, apostolic commands and prohibitions.

For example, when you come across a string of apostolic commands and prohibitions in Ephesians chapter 4, beginning in verse 25, one after another, ethical and moral demands laid upon the people of God: "Putting away falsehoods, speak truth, each one with his neighbor. Be angry and do not sin. Neither give place to the devil. Let him that stole steal no more. Let no corrupt speech proceed out of your mouth. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor be put..." These apostolic commands are not matters of liberty. They are divine mandates. And with respect to matters addressed in the moral law, matters addressed in apostolic commandments and prohibitions, the church must speak with one voice.

But not only in these areas, but properly applied commands from the Old Testament. In 1 Corinthians 9 verses 8 to 12, Paul takes a little demand in what we would call the civil law of the Old Testament ("You shall not muzzle the ox when he treads out the corn") and he says God has wrapped up in that command a directive for new covenant Christians. He says, "Did God say this for the sake of the ox alone?" He said, "No! He said it for our sakes, upon whom the ends of the age are come." And what God was intending to teach us, if a dumb beast works in treading out corn, and it's right for him to tip his head down and eat some of the corn, God is far more concerned for his laboring servants who preach the gospel. Therefore, those who

preach the gospel should live of the gospel. And he said that is a divine commandment embedded in an Old Testament directive sunk in the midst of civil law. But that's a properly applied principle.

Now when someone comes and says, "Women should never wear slacks. The Bible says in Deuteronomy chapter 25 and verse 5, 'Thou shalt not wear that which appertaineth to the woman and the man.'" No, no, that's condemning cross-dressing in conjunction with sexual perversion. It's not saying that a woman must never wear slacks or a modest feminine pantsuit. That's nonsense. Excuse me if you hold that view. It's nonsense. That's nonsense. That's an improper application. Because read it a verse or two later: if you've got any cloth on you of mixed material, you're sinning. God says you shall not wear any clothing made of mixed cloth. So if you've got a cotton polyester dress on, you're sinning. Repent. No, properly apply.

Now, with respect to those issues, the church must never, never, never back down from biblical standards. However, in matters such as days, food, wine, and things in that category--shall a woman help the color of her face with some makeup? Shall she or shall she not, or will she or should she not, pierce her ears and wear earrings? Should there be any mixed bathing among the people of God? Should there be the moderate use of wine, or should we all become confirmed teetotalers? Should we this? Should... matters that are not directly touched by the moral law, by apostolic commandment, by properly applied principles embedded in Old Testament moral directive?

What are we to do? This text is absolutely crucial because it answers that question. Look at it again. "Let each one be fully persuaded in his own mind." I want you to note two things in that part of the text. Notice the focus on individuality. "Let each one in his own mind." Within the theater of my own mental activity before the face of God, seeking to live unto the Lord in all things, I am to be fully persuaded as an individual. It does not say, "Let each one be aware of the church's dictates on these things and obey them." It doesn't say it. It never says it. And God have mercy when we get wiser than God. "Let each one be fully assured in his own mind." The focus on individuality.

And notice secondly, the focus on settled persuasion of mind. The verb that is used here, "Let each one be fully persuaded in his own mind" is an imperative passive. In other words, it's a duty, but it's a duty with respect to something that is done in my mind. My mind must come under influences that cause it to be fully persuaded, fully assured.

This is the verb used of Abraham in chapter 4 in verse 31 of Romans, and it wonderfully illustrates the force of the verb. Speaking of Abraham, back up to verse 20, "Looking unto the promise of God, he wavered not through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God, being fully assured that what He, [God] had promised he was able to perform." Abraham's faith was manifested in this full assurance that what God had promised He was able to perform. Now God says,

"Let each individual within the assembly at Rome with respect to such matters as food and days and wine and anything else in the category of those things that are not clearly forbidden, clearly commanded by the moral law, by apostolic directive, by properly applied principles out of the Old Testament, whatever doesn't fit in those categories, let each one be fully persuaded in his own mind."

As Professor Murray stated, the injunction to be fully assured in one's own mind refers not simply to the right of private judgment, but to the demand for private judgment." It's an imperative. Each one is under obligation to come to full persuasion on these non-moral issues in his own mind. Professor Murray goes on to say, "Compelled conformity or pressure exerted to the end of securing conformity defeats the aims to which all the exhortations and reproofs of this chapter are directed."

How this thing has gripped me in this recent study in preparation for these sermons. If compelled conformity with the will of God, why does Paul bend over backwards in pastoral sensitivity and divine wisdom to give all of these directives? "Don't you judge? Don't you despise? Don't you be insensitive? Don't you be careless? Don't you recognize...?" All of these directives are unnecessary if there should be compelled conformity in the church at Rome. All the church needed was an apostle to say, "Here's what you ought to do regarding days and foods and wine. To make everybody happy, let's have one day a month recognized as a special day. Let's have one meal a month where you can have... Compelled conformity!" No! The apostle will not abide any thought of compelled conformity.

While he has subtle suggestions to the weak to help them become strong, he's not at all reserved to say, "Now, you want to ask my opinion about these things? I'll tell you. I am persuaded, I know and I am persuaded, that you guys that think certain foods because they don't meet Jewish dietary laws, or because you're fearful they might be tainted from being connected with some idol worship, you can't eat them." He said, "I don't share your persuasion. I know, and I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that there's nothing unclean of itself." What's he doing? There's rather not so subtle instruction that "If you come to think as I think before the Lord Jesus, based upon the revelation of His will, you'll get over your hang-ups." But he doesn't drive the issue with that. He accommodates to them. He has a whole section in this chapter, and on into chapter 15, in which sensitive, loving, pastoral counsel is given. Why? Because of this principle: there must be no forced conformity within the church on matters of legitimate diversity of conscience and of practice.

Now, what happens when men and churches become wiser or they think more gracious or more passionate for holiness than God is, and they set up a framework of forced conformity on these issues in the church? And it has happened historically. It happens in our day. There are churches all around us where there is forced conformity on these very issues. Now, what happens when men and churches do this? Well, I want to set before you three tragic results.

Number one: forced conformity cuts the nerve of a believer's consciousness of his direct accountability to his Lord and to his God. Notice what follows verse 5: having stated this principle, "Let each one be fully persuaded in his own mind." Now notice, verse 6:

"He that regards the day regards it unto the Lord. He that eats, eats unto the Lord, for he gives God thanks. He that eats not, unto the Lord he eats not, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself or dies to himself. Whether we live, we live unto the Lord. 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 why do you judge your brother? Why do you set it not your brother? We shall stand before the judgment seat of God. As I live, saith the Lord, to me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall confess to God, every one of us shall give account of himself to God."

What is Paul doing? In seven verses 6 to 12 is seven verses; eight times he mentions the Lord and three times he mentions God. See what he's doing? Eight times in seven verses "the Lord", three times "God". What's He saying? He's saying, "O dear believers there at Rome, the essence of the Christian life, as Zacharias told us, was rendering priestly service unto Him, without fear, in righteousness and holiness, before His face." That's the issue.

And Paul is jealous to guard that blessed reality that the Christian life is lived not before the checklist of those who have settled the issue for you and said, "This is a no-no. This is a yes-yes. This is a no-no. This is a yes-yes." No. Be fully persuaded in your own mind. Why? Because the very spring of all true godliness is living one's life before the face of one's Lord. And he makes that abundantly clear in these words.

So he sees this person who is a weak brother, but in his weakness, this special day comes that he is conscience-bound to keep, and what's he do? He gets on his knees in the morning and he says, "Lord Jesus, thank you for the privilege of this special feast day. Thank you that on this day I can look back and remember what all of those things in the old covenant pointed to, and I now have them in Christ. Lord Jesus, thank you." Paul says, "He that regards the day regards it to the Lord. Don't mess around with him. Don't put your man-made list in the place of the Lord. He regards it to the Lord."

Then he goes on to say, "He that regards the day, regards it to the Lord. He that eats, eats unto the Lord." Here's a man who's got no hang-ups. No hang-ups. His conscience is free in Christ. So he takes that food and he bows over it. He gives God thanks. Ah, but here's the other guy. He can't eat that food with a good conscience. He believes that it's off-limits; his conscience won't allow him to eat it either, for the reason of thinking there's still some pressure from the dietary laws of the old covenant, or it might be tainted by association with idol, temple idol worship. But he bows over his veggies and he says, "Oh God, thank you for my veggies. Thank you, Lord, that I can eat them with a good conscience. Thank you, Lord, that these will

sustain me and strengthen me." He eats as unto the Lord. He eats not as unto the Lord.

And then he goes on to say--and this is true because, and this is where his doctrine of the Christian life in the earlier chapters bristles and oozes through the chapter. Why is this so? "For [verse 7] none of us who is a true Christian lives to himself." None of us lives to himself when deciding, "Shall I or shall I not? I don't live to myself. There is someone who bought me with His blood, Who made me His willing slave. I am His servant. I do not live to myself. I do not die to myself. Whether we live We live unto the Lord. Whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live, therefore die, we are the Lord's." That's not speaking of all men generally. That's talking about real Christians.

He said, "Don't tamper with that precious nerve center of vital, real, saving Christianity." People who once lived unto themselves, who now live unto the Lord, and they're so jealous to live unto Him, that right down to the niggling details of things where the Bible gives no clear commands or clear prohibitions, everything they do, they do as unto their Lord. You see it?

If that don't get you excited, either I'm not making it plain, or you're not getting it. That's the joy And that's why we don't want any rule-setters on issues where the Bible is silent, because forced conformity cuts the nerve of a believer's consciousness of his direct accountability to his Lord and to his God, which, for the true Christian, is not a burden, but it is his greatest joy, his greatest joy.

So, in matters not specifically commanded, specifically forbidden, the Christian is still passionate about pleasing his Lord. That's why I told you a couple of weeks ago I'm not going to call them what they've traditionally been called the adiaphora, things indifferent. They're not indifferent. Whether I do them to the Lord or I cannot do them to the Lord, the issue is I want to please my Lord. So in all of these issues, the Lord is central. And when the church makes rules on these issues and enforces them, what happens? This vital nerve of a believing, joyful, universal acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ is severed, and in its place is a barren checklist. Don't push my Lord aside and replace it with a checklist.

Secondly, what happens when the church ignores this and comes up with its rules? Forced conformity places believers in the dangerous position of violating the present pronouncements of their own consciences. Now this is crucial. The voice of conscience is not infallible, but its authority is absolute. Are you hearing me? This passage, and many others, show the voice of conscience is not infallible. The person whose conscience says, "You can't eat that meat", is a weak conscience. It is not speaking according to truth. In Jesus Christ, no meat, no food is essentially inherently unclean. Jesus taught that. The apostles taught that. Paul could say anything of God's gifts are to be received with thanksgiving. Nothing is to be refused. But this man's conscience is limited in its understanding. It's not infallible. But Paul speaks very clearly and says if you doubt, and you choose that concerning which your

conscience does not say you have a right to choose it, that's sin for you. Though the thing in itself is not sin, it's sin for you to choose the thing which you think may be sin. The voice of conscience is not infallible, but its authority is absolute. It's never to be violated. Never to be violated. Never to be violated.

Now when the Church makes its own rules, what happens? Someone whose conscience is not free before God, says, "Ah, but the church says this is okay." And so, though his own conscience is not persuaded, he indulges against the whisperings and the reservations of his own conscience. For him it is sin. Rule-making causes that man to violate his conscience. Conversely, here's a man, a woman who has free conscience before God concerning this issue. "Ah, but the church says that's a no-no. You can't touch that. You can't go near that. You can't do that. You can't wear that." And the person says, "Well, I don't want to fall out of favor with the people in the church." Now he has a problem of conscience. "Do I relinquish this as a matter of conscience and thereby violate my conscience and what I know I am free to do, to go, to be in Christ?" You see what it does? It starts tampering with this precious, precious dimension of who and what we are, the human conscience.

And Paul says, "No, no, no, whatever else you do, don't mess around with conscience." Why? Well, Paul himself gives us the answer in Acts 24:16. He said, "In the light of the coming day of judgment, herein do I exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offense to God and to man, [a conscience that does not condemn me, whatever I'm avoiding, whatever I'm doing, to have a conscience that affirms the rightness of what I avoid, the rightness of what I do.]" And later on in 1 Timothy 1:19, he says, "Some have cast off a good conscience and have made shipwreck concerning the faith." When you start messing around with your conscience, you're putting your feet in the way of apostasy. Once you start tampering with your conscience, you put yourself in the way of apostasy. Paul understands that, and so he's deeply concerned that there be no man-made rulemaking in the church at Rome, because forced conformity places believers in the dangerous position of violating the present pronouncement of their own consciences.

And then thirdly, this is what happens when people make their own rules: forced conformity cultivates a pharisaic checklist mentality. Now, what do I mean by a pharisaic checklist mentality? Well, in Matthew 23, Jesus said, when indicting the Pharisees, verse 23, "Woe unto you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites, you tithe, mint, and anise, and cumin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith. But these you ought to have done, but not to have left the other undone, you blind guides that strain out a gnat and you swallow the camel." You have a checklist mentality, and people don't think in terms of their life before God and in terms of the great principles. He said, "You Pharisees, you've got your rules: not only are you to bring the generic tithe that God directed, you got it all specified right down to this particular herb, this particular thing, mint and anise. You got it all sorted out. But while you're all occupied with ticking off your checklist, you overlook the weightier matters."

Then he uses one of the most grotesque, humorous metaphors in all of the Bible. He says, "You blind guys that strain out the gnat and swallow the camel." What's he referring to? Well, here you've got a wine skin. It's an old goat skin. The wine was put in when the skin was fresh and tied off at the four legs. And here you're going to have a cup of wine. Well, you don't know whether in the course of the wine going into that skin, or sometime when the thing was open, maybe a gnat got into the wine. So, you take a piece of muslin, and you put it over the top of your cup. This is my piece of muslin. I didn't come prepared for the illustration. Okay, here we go. Then you open up one of the legs real slowly. Let it drain through. "Oh, hey! Hey, got a little couple of gnats in there." So you flick them away, and you can sip your wine with the confidence that you don't have gnats plus wine. He says, "You strain out the gnats." But He said, "While you're straining out the gnats, lo and behold, one of your camels gets loose. He gets in your cup." You say, "A camel can't fit in the cup." That's right. It's a grotesque, exaggerated metaphor. And He said, "All the while, you're rejoicing. 'Oh, no gnats in my wine.' You're gulping down camels." You see how grotesque it is? You gulp down the camels; you strain out the gnats of this nitpicking thing here, nitpicking thing, but you swallow down the camels of your lovelessness, your pride, your externalism, things that are an abomination to God. But all the while you keep your little checklist.

And my brothers and sisters, I have seen that with my own eyes in those circles that I came out of. They felt they had a right to legislate on non-moral issues. I can remember being in circles where they said, "No Christian would ever take to his lips anything with alcohol in it. Alcoholic beverages are of the devil." And I saw some of those very preachers that preached that stuff who were addicted to Coke and Sprite and other soft drink, chewing up their stomachs and bloating out their bellies with an addiction to soft drinks, doing far more harm to their body, which is a temple of the Holy Spirit, than they ever would have done with a moderate use of wine. And it never occurred to them, never even entered their consciences. Sit down and place their huge overblown bellies on the table and belt down fat laden food that was clogging up their arteries, sending them to early heart attacks with not a twinge of conscience because they didn't touch demon rum. They didn't touch the devil's brew.

My friends, that's the mentality it cultivates. That's why your leadership in this church are jealously determined that we will not go beyond the Word of God with respect to issues concerning which the Bible gives no clear direction. Ah, but someone raises an objection, "But if we don't enforce conformity on matters not commanded or forbidden, how can we have peace? How can we have unity? How can we have a consistent testimony to the world? How can we avoid personal spiritual disaster?" Well, the answer is, this is what this chapter is all about, the answer to that very question. It's what it's all about: to tell us how we can pursue spiritual health within spiritual credibility to the world without. And so we will learn from this passage that respect to these issues, there must be no forced conformity within the church on matters of legitimate diversity of conscience and practice. God's mandate is, let each one be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Now quickly, the second principle--and it won't take me as long to open it up--is there must be God-wrought unity within the church in the midst of legitimate diversity of conscience and practice on matters of Christian liberty. There must be no forced conformity, but there must be God-wrought unity within the church in the midst of legitimate diversity of conscience and practice in this matter of Christian liberty. If the prohibition against forced conformity is the foundational principle of all these exhortations, then the capstone is Paul's prayer-wish exhortation to unity in chapter 15, verses 5 and 6. And I want us to look at those verses.

When he's done giving all the principles that he's going to give to the church at Rome--verse 5: "Now the God of patience and of comfort grant you to be of the same mind one with another, according to Christ Jesus, in order that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." What we have in these verses is not a direct exhortation, not exactly a prayer. It's what many of the commentators call one of Paul's prayer wishes/exhortations. He expresses the sanctified desire of his heart as that which you can well imagine he would be praying for the Romans, that he would want them to pray for themselves, but that he would want them to seek to pursue by the grace and power of God.

So let's look briefly now at this prayer-wish exhortation. Notice the author of this unity identified: "Now the God of patience and of comfort grant you to be of the same mind one with another in order that with one accord you may with one mouth..." If this is to be attained, Paul is conscious, and he wants the Romans to be conscious, that the author of this unity must be God himself: "May God grant you to be..."

You see, men can create organizations with man-made rules and standards and do fine. But men can't create unity in the midst of this climate that has such potential for obvious diversity. Men can't do that, because with that much diversity, people would lose their sense of cohesion and unity. This is why men can concoct religious systems with enforced conformity and do very well. And Islam is the great witness to that. Five times a day, dress a certain way, eat certain foods, don't eat certain foods, don't touch certain beverages--all force conformity, a conformity that the consistent Muslim wants to enforce upon the world and will not be content until Sharia law governs the world for the glory of Allah. Allah is only glorified when there is this strict, extensive, multifaceted, enforced conformity.

But you see, only God can so work as to enable men and women to embrace one another with differing consciences and practices on a whole spectrum of non-moral issues because they've got something at work in them that the world doesn't have in its clubs or in its man-made religions. It's called the grace of God. It's called the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And Paul wants these Romans to know, if you're going to implement these directives, to the end that you have a God-glorifying unity, remember, God's the One that has to do it. He's the author of the unity. It is God himself.

But then, it is God working by means of the Scriptures. Now where do we find that? Let's look at the passage. Having exhorted the believers, the strong believers, in verse 1 of chapter 15, "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 for edifying." And then he says, "Christ your Redeemer is also Christ your example, for Christ also did not please Himself."

How do we know that? Well, He could have cited All kinds of incidents from the earthly life of our Lord validated by the gospel witnesses, etc. But he doesn't. What does he do? He reaches back to a statement from Psalm 69: "Christ pleased not Himself, but as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproach Thee fell on Me." And it's as though someone says, "Wait a minute, Paul, why are you reaching way back into the Old Testament to prove that Christ did not please Himself?" He says, "[I'll tell you.] For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Now, he hasn't forgotten what he's dealing with. He says,

"In this whole matter that I'm seeking to lay upon you, how a church can dwell together to the glory of God in spirit-wrought unity in the midst of all of this diversity on matters where the Bible does not clearly speak, we need to have this grace: we are the strong, to bear with the weaknesses and infirmities of the weak, and in so doing we'll be like Christ, the Christ whom the Old Testament pointed to as the one who would take our reproaches."

And furthermore, Paul says, In giving us that directive, God is demonstrating that it's by the Scriptures that we have patience, endurance. It's the Scriptures that set before us the path of endurance and the consolation, the comfort, the exhortation by which we are enabled to endure. Now, he says, "The God of patience and comfort..." He picks up that couplet: through the Scriptures we find patience and comfort. "Now the God of patience and comfort..." You see what he's doing? He's saying God and His Word are so inseparable that what God gives you, the Scriptures give you, and what the Scriptures give you, God gives you. So when they are to think of this matter of the unity that is to be the great goal of their absorption of these principles, they're to understand the author of this unity identified is God Himself, but it is God working by means of the Scriptures.

You see, dear brothers and sisters, it's when we are determined to have all of our thinking and all of our feelings and all of the ways we relate to one another tethered to our Bibles that we're going to be safe; we're going to be unified. It's when we begin to allow our background, our personal taste, our own personal conscience to begin to be the norm for everyone else, we get into trouble. And we get off the path of God-honoring, Bible-disciplined perseverance and exhortation. And so the author of this unity It is God Himself, God working by means of the Scriptures.

But then look at the essence of this unity described: "Now the God of patience and comfort grant you to be [here it's described] of the same mind one with another according to Christ Jesus." The essence of this unity is to be of the same mind one with another according to Christ Jesus. Now this cannot mean of the same mind uniformity of perspective on all areas of differing conscience and practice. He's already told us, "No, one man has faith to eat. Another one is weak; he cannot eat. One keeps the day." Is he at the end of all this saying, "Now folks, forget all that I said and sit down and have a powwow and come to agreement"?

Should enlightened believers under the liberty of the new covenant have any problem with any meats, any days, any wine? Yes or no? Settle it. Let's get no. When he says that here's the goal that the God of patience and comfort would give to you, it's to be of the same mind one with another; here's the key: according to Christ Jesus. With Christ Jesus as your standard, with Christ Jesus as the One who articulates how you are to relate to one another, with Christ Jesus speaking through me, His apostle, with Christ Jesus speaking in His Word, with Christ Jesus as your great example. He has just mentioned that up in verse 3. As you are tethered to Christ, to Christ's Word and Christ's authority and the grace of Christ, the essence of that unity will be that your attitudes and your actions will measure up to the standard of Christ himself. You will not allow these issues to become prominent and divisive, the strong and the weak together aligned under the Word of Christ and under the will of Christ, filled with the Spirit of Christ.

And what is the great goal of that unity? The Author, God Himself, God working by means of Scripture, the essence of it. What's the goal of it? Verse 6. You Greek students, a Hena clause of purpose ("in order that"). Here's the great goal: "that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Here's the goal: that inwardly, "that you may with one accord..." That's Luke's favorite word in the book of Acts: "They were all together with one accord." Acts 2 later, when God incorporated 3,000: "They were of one accord." One accord, one accord, "that you may with one accord." It describes the inward bond of spiritual unity. One mouth--that's the outward expression of it in worship and praise to God.

Here's the great end in view. Paul says, "If you all understand and absorb what I've written to you there at Rome. I've received some intimations that those with Jewish background and those with Gentile pagan backgrounds are having some tension. Some responsible commentators say it was the major purpose of the book of Romans was to reconcile some real fissures in the church at Rome. Whether that's so or not, it's obvious Paul was aware that there could be these fractures. This could be the fracturing of their unity, and he said, "No, I want you with one heart, one accord, and then with one mouth that is not hypocritical to glorify God." What is it to glorify God? It is so to speak and act that who and what God is and does may be accurately displayed among men. That is what it is to glorify God. So to speak and so to act that what God is and what God does may be accurately displayed among men.

Now do you get the vision of what that would mean at the Roman Church? Here's the brother with his sensitive conscience about wine, another brother over here with his sensitive conscience about special days, another one about special foods. Here's the brother absolutely free in Christ to use his wine in moderation. Here's another one absolutely free in Christ to regard all days alike, another one absolutely free to eat any food that is nourishing, and to eat it in moderation to his physical strength. And here they are fully aware of their differences, not putting them under the rug and saying, "Well, if we become aware of it, that's going to get..." No, fully aware of it. Fully aware. Paul, you see, writes in the whole context as though everybody knows these are issues--fully aware of it.

But what happens? Recognizing the principles in this passage, that there is no judging on the part of the strong, looking down their schnoot at the weak, no despising. There is no judging by the weak of the strong, that they are unspiritual and too liberal. There is mutual acceptance from the heart that each is walking with a good conscience before God. There is sensitivity on the part of the strong, that they do not flaunt their liberty in order to embolden some who cannot eat that meat, who cannot drink that wine, who must keep that day. They're very careful that they exercise their liberty in context that will in no way provoke the weak brother to go beyond what his conscience says he can do.

And he sees this mutual sensitivity, this mutual forbearance, this mutual deference, and he says, "When a bunch like you gets together, and people find out, 'Hey, some are wine drinkers, some are teetotallers, some don't have televisions, some do, some go mixed bathing, some don't, some women wear makeup, some don't, some have earrings, some don't.'" They say, "How in the world can you be such a happy, worshipping bunch?" You say, "This is what God does. This is what God does! Go ahead and have your club with all your rules, but you ain't got God! We've got God here! This is what the Spirit of God does!" And Paul says, "[That's what I want to see at Rome.] Now the God of patience and comfort grants you to be of the same mind one to another according to Christ Jesus." "These principles", Paul said, "I've articulated in the name and authority of Christ that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Does that get you excited? Brethren, in great measure, that's what we've had in this church for years. And by the grace of God, some of us are ready to spill blood to maintain it. Periodically, we've had people that wanted to make the rules, some subtly, some not so subtly. Well, I mean, if we come to this, I mean, aren't we going to let down the bars? My friend, God can take care of the bars. We just make sure we're tethered to this Book. We need not be more fastidious to pursue our holiness than God is. And if God has not said this practice, this activity, this food, this drink is an enemy to holiness, don't you say it is and be wiser than God. And don't look at your brother and what he does or doesn't do and stand in judgment on.

We'll come to those principles, but the passage in a beautiful way is introduced to us very much on the front end with saying, "Look, however these issues are going to be

addressed and dealt with, no forced conformity." And as you seek to work through them and absorb them and implement them. Here's the great end: a unity inward and outward that brings glory to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, both now and forever.

Well, that's what I wanted to say this morning. And I pleaded with God that God the Holy Spirit would help us all with spiritual understanding and perception to grasp it, and then, by the grace of God, to implement it.

www.eternallifeministries.org