

Christian Liberty, Part 15

by Albert N. Martin

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Hear then the reading now of God's Word from Romans, Chapter 14, as we turn to the Scriptures this morning. And as I've done for the past two Lord's Day mornings, I'm going to read the entire chapter in your hearing, and then just the seventh verse from chapter 15.

"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. [Verse 7]

Wherefore, receive one another, even as Christ also received you, to the glory of God."

Now again, let us pray and ask God's help upon the preacher and upon each of us as we seek to be taught of God by His Word.

Our Father, we are so thankful that we have Your written Word, and we pray that the Holy Spirit, Who wrote it through the various penmen, would this morning be our Teacher. Undertake for Your servant that he may be filled with Your Spirit, be given the gift of utterance, clarity, unction, O God, everything that would make preaching what it ought to be. And give to Your people every gift and grace of the Spirit to make hearing the Word all that it ought to be, that together preacher and hearer may be conscious of the present operations of the Holy Spirit as the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of yourself. Hear us, we plead, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

It is a frightening fact of biblical revelation and also of church history that there is no nourishing truth of gospel provision which the human mind and heart cannot alter in its internal chemistry and turn it into poison. No truth, no truth of gospel provision which the human mind and heart cannot alter in its internal chemistry, thereby turning that truth into poison, so that the thing that ought to nourish us ends up destroying us. And among the many proofs of this reality, perhaps none is greater than the way in which the biblical and gospel truth of Christian liberty has been altered by means of perversion, distortion, imbalance, and the devil's logic, and been made poison to the souls of men over the centuries. Therefore, out of genuine pastoral concern for the health and well-being of the members and friends of this congregation, and especially the rising generation of this congregation, I am preaching this series of messages that I have entitled, "A Fresh Look at the Doctrine of Christian Liberty".

In the first eleven messages, I sought to set before you, considering many portions of the Word of God, the reality and nature of our bondage and slavery in Adam, the reality and nature of our liberty and freedom in Christ. We then focused upon the goal of this liberty and considered Luke 1:74 and 75. And then we considered some of the real threats to this liberty, looking at key texts from the epistles of Paul and Peter, in which this doctrine was threatened in their day by libertinism, or license on the one hand, and legalism on the other.

And then several weeks ago, we turned to the passage that most people think about when they think of the doctrine of Christian liberty, because they associate the words Christian liberty with a subset of the broader biblical doctrine, namely, our liberty with respect to things neither commanded nor forbidden by the Word of God, often called things indifferent, that passage being Romans chapter 14 through 15 and verse 7. And as we, as it were, approach the table of that passage, I said it is absolutely crucial to a vital understanding and a legitimate application of the truth of this portion of the Word of God that we understand four basic things.

Number one: we must believe that Paul has not forgotten, nor is he negating what he wrote in the first 13 chapters of Romans when he comes to chapter 14 and 15,

especially what he wrote on the nature, the radical nature of the Christian life. When he comes to chapter 14 to deal with things indifferent, he has not forgotten all that he has taught in Romans 6 about the fact that in faith union with Christ the true believer has died to the dominion of sin. A true believer has come into the gracious slavery of God and of righteousness and is determined no longer to present his members instruments of unrighteousness unto sin, but he wants to present his members instruments of righteousness unto God. So that in dealing with Christian liberty, Paul has not forgotten all that he wrote in Romans 6. He has not forgotten what he wrote in Romans 8, that we've been delivered out of the realm of the flesh and into the realm of the Spirit, thereby enabling us to mortify the deeds of the flesh and to be led by the Spirit into a life of universal holiness.

And much harm has come when people take up Romans 14 and act as though Paul never wrote, or if he had written, he completely forgot what he wrote in Romans 6, Romans 8, Romans 12. "Abhor what is evil, cleave to the good." Some things are essentially evil, and by calling them liberty doesn't make them good. And you and I are to abhor what is essentially and intrinsically evil, and cleave to that which is good.

And especially--to me it's ironic--that the very last word of the 13th chapter is this: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ [wear Jesus in everything] and do not make provision for the flesh to fulfill its lust [especially under the guise of Christian liberty]." So, if we're rightly to understand and rightly to apply Romans 14 through 15, 7, and all that it teaches on Christian liberty, we must believe that Paul is not forgotten, nor is he negating the previous teaching of the Christian life.

Secondly, we must clearly identify the precise concerns of this portion of the Word of God. What are the concerns? Meat, days, and wine. Those are the concerns, not pagan practices that Christians somehow still want to engage in and therefore can call them liberty. No, it's things that are not essentially evil in themselves, eating or not eating certain foods, keeping certain dates, drinking or not drinking wine, and only those issues in that category of things not essentially evil or virtuous in themselves. Only those things come within the corpus of the principles of Romans 14.

Thirdly, we must understand the precise identity of the weak and of the strong. When Paul speaks of him that is weak in faith, and in chapter 15:1 ("we that are strong"), the weak and the strong are to be understood in the context, not as weak and strong as a generic description of the totality of their Christian stature. He's speaking of the weak person as the one who is weak in this sense alone: his understanding of the extent of his liberty in Christ is limited, therefore his faith in that liberty is limited, therefore his conscience condemns him for things that ought not to condemn him, and restrains him from things that he ought not to feel restrained. He is weak precisely in the area of understanding and appropriating his liberty with respect to things not essentially sinful or virtuous in themselves. And the strong, likewise, are those who do have a full understanding of their liberty in Christ. They have embraced that understanding in faith, and therefore their consciences are free to engage in

anything that is part of their liberty in Christ. But the weak, in this sense, may be very strong in other areas. And the strong in this sense may be very weak. And the very passage shows it, and we will see that in great detail in subsequent expositions.

And fourthly, we must recognize the fundamental difference between the belief in, understanding, and enjoyment of our liberty before God, and the exercise and the practice of our liberty before men. Christian liberty is a matter of the heart in the presence of God. The exercise of liberty is a matter of actions and deeds in the presence of men. And while nothing must ever constrain us to yield our liberty before God for a moment (it is blood-bought liberty), to yield it is to show disregard for the blood of Christ that bought it. However, many things ought to constrain us to give up the exercise and the practice of our liberty before men. And if we don't understand that distinction, we won't understand this passage.

Then last Lord's Day, I tried to set before you from the text what I call the goal and the proper understanding of the practice of Christian liberty presented in two mandates from the passage. Here are the two mandates. Mandate number one, this is the foundation. Because of this, all of this has to be written by Paul. Here it is: the mandate that there must be no forced conformity within the church on legitimate matters of Christian liberty. No forced conformity.

Verse 5: "Let each one be fully persuaded in his own mind." Here liberty of conscience is not merely permitted. It is demanded. With respect to these issues, we must never hitch our wagon to someone else's conscience. "Let each one be fully assured in his own mind." And though the Apostle Paul had some pretty strong convictions about some of these very things, as he indicates in verse 14: "I know, and I am persuaded that nothing is unclean of itself." In the context, there is no unclean meat. There is none. "It is about time you people came to my knowledge." No, no. He backs off, though he has strong conviction. He says, "Until your conscience catches up with mine, you'll be fully persuaded in your own mind." Even an apostle won't force his understanding, appropriation, and enjoyment of his liberty upon the Christian community. And if he doesn't, God have mercy on you and me if we seek to do it. That's the first mandate. The mandate that there must be no forced conformity within the Church on legitimate matters of Christian liberty.

And secondly, the mandate that there ought to be God-wrought, God-glorifying unity within the church in the midst of this diversity of conscience and practice with respect to matters of Christian liberty. 15:5 and 6. "Now the God of patience and 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." No forced conformity, yet blessed God wrought unity in the midst of, fully conscious of, all of that diversity. Only God can do that. But He can do it. And Paul gives this prayer-wish exhortation to that end.

Well, then, that's a condensing of fourteen hours of preaching into fifteen, seventeen minutes. I hope you find that helpful. Now we come this morning to begin to discover

from the passage the specific apostolic directives to the weak and to the strong. Now, as we work through the passage, you'll see that some of the directives are specifically to the weak. Some are specifically to the strong. But what I want us to do this morning, and God willing, complete next Lord's Day morning, I want us to look at four directives that apply both to the weak and to the strong, directives that we must seek to understand; we must internalize by reflection and prayer and assimilation, and then determine by the power of the Spirit to think and act in the light of them. If we do, then we will have a climate in which no one's going to be agitating, politicking, pressuring for forced conformity on matters of legitimate Christian liberty, and yet pursuing God-wrought, God-glorifying unity in the midst of all that diversity. You see, that mandate of no conformity and yet blessed unity, those two mandates can only be attained when these principles of apostolic directive are understood, internalized, and then work themselves out in our everyday thinking, emotional reactions, and personal interactions one with another.

What's the first of those directives? Here it is. Now I'm going to give you a mouthful. But there's no way to responsibly open up the passage and distill its essence into human language without a mouthful, at least for me. That may be because I've got three or four kinks in my brain, but it's with my brain I have to sit and think and study and prepare. And until I get glorified and maybe God will change some parts of that, you're stuck with it. So here we go. All right? Here's the first apostolic directive: fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty, we are to receive one another into our hearts and into the church in a way that mirrors the manner in which Christ received us in our conversion. I give it to you again. Fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty, days, foods, wine, earrings, makeup, and in the language of the King of Siam, "etc., etc., etc." All right? Fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty, we are to receive one another into our hearts and into the church in a way that mirrors the manner in which Christ received us in our conversion.

Now, where do we find that in the text? Well, look with me at what I call the bookend imperatives. Paul bookends all that he has to say with 14:1 and 15:7. Look at them: "Him that is weak in faith receive, yet not for the purpose of quarrels over disputed matters." And then 15:7: "Wherefore receive one another even as Christ also received you to the glory of God." Now in these two verses, the apostle uses a verb. And that verb is used in exactly the same form in both cases. It is a present, middle imperative. It is a duty that is continually laid upon us. In the middle voice, it is laid upon us with respect to ourselves. We are to continually do something with respect to ourselves, and it is a duty. It is a present, middle imperative. It is not a suggestion.

Now let's look at both texts in a little bit of detail. The first one, verse 1, obviously is directed specifically and explicitly to the strong. The assumption of Paul is that the majority of the believers in the churches at Rome, probably house churches, were strong believers. Perhaps from a Gentile background, they didn't have the hang-ups about Jewish feast days and Jewish kosher laws, etc. And so he says, "But him that

is weak in faith [that particular individual] receive. The one who's weak in faith, you are to receive. You are to receive him.

And what does that verb mean (receive)? It means to take to yourself with unrestrained affection and an open heart. It's the verb Paul uses in Philemon and verse 17, where he's sending back the slave who's been converted while he's been at Rome. And writing to Philemon, he says in verse 17, "If then you count me as a partner, receive him as myself. [Now Philemon, you owe a lot to me.]" And he's been telling Philemon what Philemon owes to him. And he says, "Now Philemon, when I send this slave boy back to you, you take him into your heart, into your arms, into your home, into your affection, into the church there at Colossae. You take him as you would take me." Well, how would he take Paul? Lovingly, unreservedly, unconditionally. That's the sense of the verb.

And so, he says specifically to the strong, "You are to receive the weak." Now think for a moment what that would mean. You know that if this weak man comes into the assembly and you begin to receive him into your heart, which means you're going to not avoid him while you just hobnob with your fellow strong believers, But you're going to develop relationships with this weak brother. That means you're going to go out for a meal together. And you would just love a glass of wine with your meal. But you know that this would really grind his socks that he's not yet come to understand. And it would not just irritate him, but would tempt him, looking upon you as a mature believer, to say, "Well, if this mature believer can drink wine, then I should be able to. And even though I have reservations in my mind about whether it's right or not, I'll follow his example." That's what being caused to stumble means. When a weaker brother is pressured by your example to do what is contrary to his own conscience. Not that he doesn't like what you're doing, and judges you like a Pharisee. No, no. We've come to see that (the strong people of Rome).

No, we receive the weak among us. It means there are going to be restraints about what we can order in the restaurant, what we can put on our own table. It means that there are going to be areas of self-denial. "So let's go ahead and receive him with one end in view. Sit the dude down and get him sorted out. Get him over his stupid hang-ups." Paul said, "Huh, huh, receive him. but not with a view to quarreling with him over disputed matters." You see Paul's wisdom. He knows the human heart. He said,

"You take him in for one reason alone. He's a brother. Christ has died for him. The Father loves him enough that He has in His own way and time drawn him by the Spirit through the Word and the Gospel. Now, you strong dudes, you receive him. You receive him. You take him into your heart and into the church. We're not going to have separate strong believer churches and weak believer churches with different standards of conduct. No. No forced conformity in the church. Take him in. Take him in. Receive him. Receive him."

Now then, look at verse 7. This is why I put it under the duties incumbent upon both weak and strong, because now, at the end of the passage, it is a fully reciprocal duty. Look at the language of the text: "Wherefore [same verb, exactly the same form, a present middle imperative] receive one another." "Hey, you weak dudes, You feel a little uncomfortable on the strong dudes, don't you? When you see them bowing over their meal, they've got a bottle of wine on the table, they say, 'Thank you, Lord, for our food. Thank you for wine that makes glad the heart of man. God bless our food and drink as we eat to your glory.'" The weak brother says, "Man, I don't know if I can say an amen to a prayer like that. I might want to pray under my breath, 'Lord, help him to get rid of demon booze.' Then I could say amen." You see, the weak brother knows, "If I get in with these strong brothers, I happen to be at their home when one of those special days come. Everything in me says, 'I've got to dress special; I've got to go to special activities. The day must be kept, and Lord, I know they're not going to keep the day. Lord, I don't like that. I mean, if they would just be concerned about preserving the best of the..." You see, he understands that the weak would have some trouble really receiving the strong, taking them into their hearts for who they are and what they are. So he says it's a reciprocal duty, not just a word to the strong. "Him that is weak in the faith, receive." Receive him for who he is, where he is, for what he is, not for what you think you can do to him by arguing with him and settling the issue. No, no. Take him for who he is, where he is, what he is. But hey, you weak fellas, you've got to do the same with the strong. Receive one another. That's the duty.

But now look at the standard. What's the manner in which we're to receive one another? The little Greek word "kathos", even as. "Receive one another even as..." And what's the standard? Look at it: "even as Christ also received you." Now there are some exegetes who say that the kathos, which is generally a matter of comparison, sometimes can have a causal sense: "Receive one another because Christ has received you." But I see nothing in the text, contextually, linguistically, syntactically, any way to take the kathos in any other way than its normal sense, which means you are to receive one another in a manner that mirrors the very way Christ took you into His heart and into His church when you came to him in your conversion.

Now here's the strong brother struggling with all it's going to cost him to truly receive the weak brother into close, intimate, personal church fellowship. And here's the weak brother contemplating what it's going to cost him of emotional trauma to fully receive that strong brother when something in him says, "Man, he's on the slippery slope. I mean, if he has wine on his table before long, he'll be a staggering, bleary-eyed, blubbing drunk." I said, "Lord, that's hot." But let's think. Think with me. You weak folks, you strong folks, I want you to think back. How did Christ receive you when you were converted, when by the Spirit through the Word you were brought to see your utter sinfulness, your wrath deservingness, your hell deservingness, and in the gospel you heard that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, and that in the person and work of Jesus, His perfect life of obedience under the

law, His bearing the wrath of God and the curse of God for the broken law upon the cross, His triumphant resurrection validating He paid the adequate price for the redemption of sinners? How did that Christ receive you when by the Spirit the gospel invitation laid hold of you? "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden. Him that comes to me, I will in no wise cast out." Hey, Mr. Strongman, Mr. Weakman, think, how did Christ receive you? He received you unconditionally. He took you in.

When you saw your sin, you were ready to leave the hog pens and the whorehouses and the dens of iniquity like the prodigal. This was the offense. Jesus receives sinners. And he says, "Yes. And you know how I received them? I received them in a way that mirrors the Father's love." When the father saw him a great while off, the son came back. He thought there'd be conditions. "Let me spend a while out in the slave shack in the back and be a servant." The father said, "No, I'm going to take you back as a son." He runs to him, throws his arms around him, puts on him the ring, the robe. That's how Christ received sinners. He said, "That's how Christ received you. Now that's the way I want to receive one another." "Yeah, but he's got these funny ideas about... He can't..." Receive one another as Christ received you unconditionally. Unconditionally.

Furthermore, unfeignedly and sincerely. There's no reservation in his heart, no plastic smile on his face, and no limp arms when he embraces us. You ever have somebody receive you with a plastic smile and a limp arm? I felt like saying, "Why bother?" You know what it's like to be received with a plastic smile and a limp arm? Am I the only guy who knows that? He says, "You receive like Christ received. I don't mean to be irreverent. When Christ receives us and embraces us, He comes close to breaking our backs, piercing our sternums with His. He embraces us, receives us. Now there's the standard. Mr. weak man, Mr. strong man, I want you to listen. Receive one another even as Christ also received you. There's the duty: receive. There's the manner: as Christ.

And then look at the end in view: to the glory of God. "Receive one another as Christ received you to the glory of God." The manner of Christ receiving sinners brings the fullest display of the outshining of the perfections of God. When a holy, exalted, sinless Savior embraces defiled, hell-deserving, ungodly, unworthy sinners, what is shining forth in noonday brilliance? It's the glory of the love of God, the glory of the wisdom of God, the glory of the righteousness of God. All of God's glorious attributes shine in their greatest brilliance in the gospel when Jesus receives sinners. And he says, "I want to see in the church the gospel glory displayed in the way the weak and the strong receive one another."

That get you excited? Gets me excited. When I saw that, pondering the text--it's one of those--I said, "Lord, I know I can hold that, but I'll blow the fuse trying to get it out." Dear folk, do you see why this is such a crucial doctrine? Do you see how crucial it is? The glory of God, the nature of the gospel, the nature of Christ's reception of sinners is at stake. And if you have a church that has forced conformity or disunity over diversity of convictions and practices, what happens when sinners come in?

They don't see the glory of Christ. They see a bunch of religious people with their little checklist of do's and don'ts and say, "If you line up with mine, then you can get close to me. If not, you stay over there." What will happen if God starts sending a whole bunch of sinners from all kinds of backgrounds in this community? And we've got them in this community. All kinds of backgrounds. With all kinds of differing consciences about everything from dress to days to who you name it, it'll be there.

They need to see among us, "Hey, anybody that's been received by Jesus and loves Jesus and is ready to live to please Jesus, they are welcomed into the heart and into the fellowship of this church." Now listen, if they still want to live out in the warehouses and the hog pens and the honky-tonk joints, and say, "Come and set up shop with us and prove you appreciate Christian liberty." We say, "No, no. We welcome returning sinners, not remaining sinners." You see, that's the abuse of it. But folks, this is the glorious use of it. Receive one another. That's the first foundational apostolic directive.

And it contains, dear people--and this is what has gripped me--a vital principle, and the principle is this: if we are fully aware of our differing convictions and practices on legitimate matters of Christian liberty, but yet receiving one another into our hearts and into the church in a way that mirrors the manner in which Christ received us, (here's the principle) the gospel by which we are brought into the church is to shape our thinking and conduct within the church. You see what Paul is saying? He's giving directives about who should be received and how they should be received in the church. And he says the gospel is to shape that issue.

The gospel determines our ethics. What God does for us in Christ is to shape and mold how we relate to one another within the body of Christ. You follow me? He can assume that when he writes to the Romans and says, "I know there are those strong brothers and sisters, and the thought of fully receiving those weak ones with all their hang-ups and knowing all the self-denial that's going to mean for them and the cultivation of sensitivity when you're in their presence, it's not going to be easy." But he said, "I know I've got them if I can get them to think, how did Christ receive you? I've got them. I've got them." Because he knows that's touching the deep springs of every true believer.

That's why any church that's going to maintain biblical ethics in its life has got to throb with the free, clear, constant proclamation of the gospel. It's only when this church drips with gospel dew that this church will embody gospel duties. When the proclamation of Christ and His free and full salvation for sinners, when that begins to be a subdominant note, we are cutting the nerves of godly living and God-honoring church life. The gospel feeds the springs of our church life. The day anyone stands in his pulpit and no longer gets excited about the gospel, get him out of here, even if his name begins with A, That's what's got to thrill us and throb in our life together. That's why the gospel must be central, the biblical gospel, not some man-made, watered-down, shaved-off version of the gospel, but the vigorous gospel of God imputing the

sin of men to His sinless Son. God making Him who knew no sin to become sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

And that's why the leadership of this church and you as a people must insist as much as we can discern anyone coming into this church that they've experienced the power of the gospel. Otherwise, an appeal like this doesn't mean anything. Say to someone who's never known the embrace of Jesus in conversion, never known what it is to experience the exquisite delight of knowing sins forgiven through Christ, "You receive one another as you were received. He says, "As I was received? What's that mean? I don't know what that means. I believe in Jesus. I believe the Bible. I believe this little bit of..." You see, if the experience of being received is not wonderful and personal and real, this exhortation has no bite to it. "Receive one another, even as Christ received you." Paul's assuming that those in the Roman Church knew what it was to be received by Jesus.

And I must hasten on. I want to get through two. I'd hoped to get through four this morning, but when I got into my final preparation yesterday, I said to myself, "Albert, you only get through two." So I want to get through two. Fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty, we are neither to despise nor to judge one another because of those differences.

Now, these directives are found in verse 3, and they are very pointed and very personal. For you who are interested in such matters of grammar, Paul now uses third-person singular imperatives, not second-person plural imperatives, but third-person singular imperatives. Look at verse 3: "Do not let him who eats set at naught him who does not eat [that's the strong]. And do not let him who does not eat judge him that eats [that's the weak]." So what does he do right at the outset, in a perfectly balanced statement with unusual pastoral perception? He could have said, "Do not let either the eater or the non-eater judge one another or be critical of one another." But he doesn't do that. Paul understands that there is a peculiar temptation for the eater and a peculiar temptation for the non-eater. That is, a peculiar temptation for the weak and a peculiar temptation for the strong.

Let's look at them as they come to us in the text. 3a: "Do not let him who eats [that is, the man who with a good conscience, understanding his liberty in Christ, to eat all meats, so long as they are nourishing for him, prepared in a way that will aid and abet that nourishment]..." This one is not to set at naught or despise the one who cannot eat that meat, either because He has a hang-up in his conscience over old kosher Jewish food laws or because he fears that that meat may have been offered to an idol in an idol's temple. (1 Corinthians 8 addresses this issue.) And somehow he can't separate how the meat was used from what the meat now is. It's not just a hunk of flesh on the table. "It's a hunk of flesh that's got an umbilical cord to an idol in an idol's temple, and I've rejected idolatry and all that goes with it, and I want nothing to do with it, so I cannot with good conscience eat." So whether it was Jewish kosher laws or a sensitivity about idle meat, in either case, he says, "Do not let the one who eats judge him; eats not, judge him who eats."

Now we take the first, the prohibition to the strong. The one who can eat all foods with a good conscience is the strong in faith. He is here forbidden to despise or to set at naught the weak brother who has scruples about eating that very meat that he can eat with a good conscience. Now, there are several vivid uses of this verb in the New Testament, but I turn you to just one that's very familiar to many of you. This is the very verb used in Luke, chapter 18 with regard to this Pharisee who went up to the temple. Verse 9: "He spoke also this parable unto certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set all others at naught." There's our verb. They trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and they set others at naught. They despised others.

Well, what did that mean? Well, just listen to this man in his prayer. Verse 11: "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank you I'm not as the rest of men." He's already put himself up as a pedestal, detaching himself from the common stuff of humanity. "I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week..." You see the climate of the use of this verb? He set all others at naught, looked down his nose, despised them as something beneath his dignity, to even be considered in the same class with them. Whereas the publican takes his place and says, "God be merciful to me, [the sinful one] the sinner.

Now, the Apostle Paul recognizes in his astute knowledge of human nature that when the strong who understands his liberty in Christ, based upon an accurate proclamation of the gospel, that in Jesus Christ all the distinctions that were set up by the Mosaic law are abolished. They come to abolition by fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And he knows that and appreciates that as a dimension, a facet of the pure gospel of God's liberating grace in Christ.

What's his temptation when he looks at this man whose conscience is all tied up about meats that he can eat and can't eat and days that he should keep and can't keep and he can't bring...? What's the natural tendency of the heart of a man in the presence of the weak? "Ah, come off it, will you? Get over these silly hang-ups. Don't be so silly. Don't be such a legalist. Man, get with it, don't you...? Grow up."

Paul understood the human heart. And he says, "To you who are strong, who can eat your meat with a good conscience, do not look down on your weak brother with disdain. Do not look upon him with a kind of condescending pity because of his hang-ups." But he also understands the particular temptation of the weak. Here the weak man, whose conscience is bound, and he feels--follow now--he feels that in following his conscience that says,

"No meat. That meat may be something offered to an idol, and I am going to prove that I have left idol worship behind, lock, stock, and barrel, idols in me. We have divorced one another. Anyone who's really divorced from idols will act like I do. You take any compromising position. You eat the idol's meat. The next thing you know, you're at the idol's table. The next thing you know, you're in the idol's temple. The

next thing you know, you're lying, laying with the idol's prostitute. No siree, man. I am a separated one. And if this guy over here really understood how dangerous it is to exercise his liberty, he would stop it."

So what does the weak one do? He stands in judgment of the strong. He sets himself up as a Lord over his conduct and says, he's on the slippery slope, as we shall see when we come to enlarge directives to the weak. That's why Paul goes on to say, "Who are you that judges the servant of another? To his own Lord he stands or falls. He shall be made to stand." You weak one think, "Uh-oh, that man over there exercising his full liberty. He's on the slippery slope. He's going to end up a drunkard. He's going to end up an idolater. He's going to end up... She's going to end up looking like a streetwalker. She's got her ears pierced. She's going to end up looking like a whore out for business. She's got paint on her face."

You see how Paul understands the human heart. And the weak is the one who then does not look down his nose at the strong, but he stands in judgment of the strong. He becomes censorious of the strong, and Paul says, "No, you who cannot eat don't stand in judgment." So look at the contrast. Here is the strong that looks at the weak, and he says, "Ah, don't be so silly." And the weak looks at the strong and says, "Don't be so worldly." Well, isn't that a lovely set of affairs? Here they come and sit down in the same place to worship with the same mouth, the same God, and the same Savior. And when they get in each other's sight, when they're looking left or right, there's the weak, there's the strong. One is saying of the other, "Heh, look at that worldly Christian.." And the other one's saying, "Heh, look at that silly Christian." Isn't that a marvelous climate in which to worship God? Paul says,

"No, I don't want this. I don't want this. I want you with one soul, with one mouth, with one heart to glorify your one God and your one Savior. Therefore, here is my second directive: not only must you receive one another into your hearts and into your fellowship as the Lord Jesus received you, but you must mortify every tendency, you strong ones, to despise and look down your nose at the weak. And you weak must resist every bit of temptation to stand in judgment on the strong. And because you could not with a good conscience assume they must be violating their conscience because they can. Stop judging! Stop despising."

Do you see the masterful pastoral wisdom and insight of the Apostle? It has thrilled me as I've pondered this. I said, "Lord, I'd have just done them all with one fell swoop, one slice of the sword and say, 'Stop standing in judgment on one another.'" Paul says, "No, don't despise, don't judge."

And I want you to see this by way of application as well. As surely as the first principle, receive one another, is buttressed by the gospel truth of how Christ received you, this exhortation, "Don't judge, don't despise", is rooted in Paul's clear understanding of the biblical doctrine of remaining sin.

Now think for a moment. He's not forgotten what he wrote in Romans 6: "We, in union with Christ, have died to sin. We have risen to newness of life. We stand in the

posture of presenting our members instruments of righteousness to God." According to Romans 8, we have been taken out of the realm of the flesh into the realm of the Spirit. And we are now mortifying by the Spirit the deeds of the body. We are being led by the Spirit into a path of universal holiness. We are committed to abhor the evil and cleave to the good; to put on the Lord Jesus and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof. Paul hasn't forgotten all of that.

But I'll tell you something else. He hadn't forgotten what he wrote in Romans 7:14 to 25. In the first person, present tense, statements, "I am carnal, sold under sin. The good that I would, I do not. The evil that I would not, that I do. I find then a law that to me who would do good, evil is present with me. O wretched man that I am who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" He has not forgotten what he wrote in Romans 7, verses 14 to 25. That in the midst of the reality of the definitive breach with sin by union with Christ in death, burial, and resurrection; in the light of the marvelous transferral from the realm of flesh to spirit in Romans 8, Paul has also said there is another dimension to real, earnest, bona fide Christian experience. And it's the dimension of the tension brought on by the reality of remaining sin, of indwelling sin. And as John Owen said, "It is never more active than when it appears to be least active."

And so as Paul thinks of the congregations at Rome, thinks of these people who have experienced all that he wrote about them in the earlier chapters of God's sanctifying as well as His justifying grace in Christ. He also sees them as the people who have this other law within their members. He perceives them as a people who have this horrible potential for sin arising out of the fact of their remaining sin. And he takes that into full account when he's going to give them counsel about how do we deal with differing convictions and practices on matters of genuine concern in the area of Christian liberty. He said, "However we deal with it, I must look straight into the eye of this reality: remaining sin is there in the hearts of all those Roman Christians waiting to take advantage of these differing convictions and practices. And how shall I address it? Ah, I'll address it letting them know that I've not forgotten the reality of indwelling sin."

And dear people, it is vital for you, for me, as one of your pastors, never to forget in any counsel and directives we give to you of this reality. For if we do not take into account the reality and the vicious activity of remaining sin in a kind of spiritual naivete, we will be surprised and overtaken by the very actings of that sin. If we don't take account of it in our congregational life, we'll be disillusioned when we see it break out and say, "Oh, what's wrong with this church?" We've got an outcropping of some people that are drawing back from some others because they won't do this or they don't. My friends, this is biblical realism.

I never get shocked when I see indwelling sin breaking out among you. I'm grieved if you don't deal with it biblically. I'm not shocked when it breaks out in me. I'm grieved! I'm pained! I know what it is to cry, "Wretched man! And Lord, how long, how long, how long before I can serve You without sinning?"

"When I see Thee as Thou art,
Love Thee with unsinning heart,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then how much I owe."

But, dear people, we've got to recognize this is not going to be easy. You've got something inside you, and I've got something inside me that wants to make a mess of this whole thing. You're either going to sit yourself up as a judge of others and think that your strict standard must be the standard for all or they're not spiritual or they're going to fall. Or you're going to be over here looking down your snoot and saying, "When in the world are these poor, hyper-sensitive people, over scrupulous people going to wake up and appreciate their liberty in Christ?" God says you're not to do either.

Now, let me ask you. Do you ever find either or both of those things in you? If not, come and tell me your secret, all right? I'll empty out my savings account and buy it from you. Now if you're honest and if you know your heart, you know it's there. And you say, "Oh, Paul, by the Holy Spirit, knows me." Yeah, he does. He knows you. He knows me.

And dear people, if we, by the grace of God as a congregation, are going to be an instrument to the praise of God's grace and the power of the gospel, we have got to be a people that fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty are committed to receive one another into our hearts and into the church in a way that mirrors the very manner in which Christ has received us. And we will be committed neither to despise nor to judge one another because of those differing convictions and practices.

And one of the proofs that we're doing that is we will not develop little unwritten cliques. They used to say the official way to pronounce it was cliques. But if I said cliques, you'd think I was cliquey. And so I'll say cliques like you say. That we don't develop little cliques of the strong who feel comfortable with other strong ones. And little cliques of the weak who feel very comfortable only with the weak. Because you know what will happen? You will end up--mark my word--you strong ones, talking about how you despise the weak in the church. And you weak will end up talking together with your kind in judgment upon the strong. Don't do it. It's forbidden. It's forbidden. It's an imperative. Do not despise. Do not judge.

And what's the answer? We come back again to a realistic understanding of the gospel. The gospel promises marvelous, amazing dynamics of grace now. But it also says the best is not yet. We live in the now and the not yet. And that's how we've got to understand our life together. The age to come is broken in upon us, and we have a taste of heaven, but we've still got a little bit of hell yet in us. But the hour is coming when what we've tasted of the not yet will be fully the now. And we won't need to worry about matters of Christian liberty then. But we've got to deal with it now. May God help us.

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