

Christian Liberty, Part 16

by Albert N. Martin

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Now if you will please turn with me to Romans Chapter 14, and I shall read in your hearing verse 1 through the first half of verse 13.

"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."

Now again, let us pray and ask God's help by the Spirit upon preacher and listener alike.

Our Father, we have sung together the prayer of our hearts. Divine Instructor, gracious Lord, be our Teacher. Holy Spirit, Author of the Book, come now in power upon preacher and listener alike that together we may be conscious of Your ministry in our midst, enabling us rightly to understand, believingly and obediently to receive all that the Spirit would say to us through the Word. Grant it, for Jesus' sake we plead. Amen.

It has been wisely observed by a man of God from another generation that when we are moving away from any error, we think the further we move away from that error, the closer we are to the truth. Do you follow me? We've been enmeshed in a given error. God opens our eyes to see the error. And we feel that the safest thing for us is to move as far away from the error as we can, and the further away we move from the error, the closer we are to the truth. When, as this man of God observed often,

"What we are doing is moving closer to an opposite error in our effort to move away from the previous error."

Or to state it under a different imagery, one man of God has suggested that we need to think of a pendulum. The pendulum on the clock, or wherever it is, always moves swiftest through the center of its arc, and it is temporarily stationary at both extremes of that arc. You follow me? In that little imitation, a fancy clock that operates by a battery in our family room--it has a pendulum. And when the pendulum is moving and comes to the extremity of the arc on this side, it's temporarily stationary. It begins back down, gains momentum, and it moves swiftest through the center of its arc, only to be temporarily stationary at the other extreme. And so it is with our efforts to understand the truth of God. Because of our remaining sin, which has an antipathy to God's truth and a built-in system of imbalances, in our efforts to grasp the truth so often we move swiftest through the center of the arc of a balanced grasp of truth, and we remain stationary at both extremes in that arc.

Now these observations are sadly true with respect to the doctrine of Christian liberty, that is, the Christian's attitude and practice regarding things that are neither expressly forbidden or commanded in the Word of God. And out of a pastoral burden that I have seen some of you In your effort to move away from some errors with which you've been acquainted in connection with this doctrine, you have moved far beyond the center point in both your understanding and your practice, thinking that the further you move away from the error, the closer you're coming to truth. And likewise, under the pendulum analogy, you have swung from this error only to find yourself tragically close to another error at the other end of the arc. And so, out of that pastoral passion and burden, we've been engaging in a series of studies that I have entitled, "A Fresh Look at the Doctrine of Christian Liberty".

Since this is message number sixteen, I cannot go back over and demonstrate the groundwork that has been laid in the first twelve messages. I can only say to those visiting among us, they're available on tape or CDs, some of them on the internet, But for the past three messages, we have begun to park in what is the watershed passage in the New Testament addressing this aspect of Christian living, namely Romans 14.1 through 15.7.

And in the initial message, as I sought to move into this passage, I said we must remember the larger context of the Roman letter, and not come to any conclusions about the teaching of Romans 14:1 to 15:7, that either contradicts or negates all of the previous instruction in the book of Romans, especially what the Apostle teaches us by the Spirit concerning the doctrine of the Christian life, that one who has been justified by faith in Jesus Christ is one who is united to Christ in the virtue of His death, burial, and resurrection, has died to sin, he is one who is indwelt by the Spirit, has been radically transformed from the realm of flesh to spirit, one who is mortifying the deeds of the body, one who is being led by the spirit. And we must ever keep that truth in mind.

Secondly, we must constantly remember the precise concerns addressed in this letter. The concerns are foods and days and wine, issues that are not clearly moral issues in and of themselves. And it is wretched spiritual butchery to take this passage and apply it to things that the Bible clearly identifies as evil. Paul said earlier in this letter, "Abhor that which is evil." There are some things intrinsically evil, and calling them Christian liberty does not make them anything other than evil.

Thirdly, we must understand the precise identity of the weak and the strong. And fourthly, we must understand the difference between the understanding and appreciation of our liberty in Christ, which is inward and Godward, and the exercise and practice of our liberty, which is outward and manward. Those distinctions are made in the passage

And then, in the subsequent message, we then considered what I called both the foundation and the goal of all that the Apostle is setting forth in this section of the Word of God. And the foundation is the mandate of 14:5: "Let each one be fully assured in his own mind." In other words, there must be no forced conformity within or by the church on legitimate matters of Christian liberty. No forced conformity--each one fully persuaded in his own mind.

And then the goal is the mandate of chapter 15, verses 5 and 6: "The God of patience and comfort grants you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, that with one accord you may with one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Mandate 1 is no forced conformity. Mandate 2 is pursuing God-wrought, God-glorifying unity in a context where there is no forced conformity, where the individual persuasion before God is allowed to work out its course among God's people.

Well, last Lord's Day I began to set before you four major apostolic directives that will enable us to maintain full respect to the mandate of no forced conformity while pursuing the mandate of God-wrought, God-glorifying unity. How in the world do we do that? Surely we've got to have some forced conformity if we're going to have unity. Paul says no. No forced conformity, yet the pursuit of God-wrought, God-glorifying unity will be realized if we grasp and internalize these apostolic directives. We looked at two of them last week. God willing, we'll finish the other two this morning.

Fully aware, this is number one; fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty. Here's apostolic directive number one: we are to receive one another into our hearts and into the church in a manner which mirrors the way Christ has received us in our conversion. Chapter 15 very clearly teaches this (verse 7): "Wherefore receive one another, even as Christ received you, to the glory of God."

Fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty, here is the second directive: we are neither to despise nor to judge one another because of these differing convictions and practices. The Apostle introduces this right at the outset (verse 3): "Do not let him who eats despised, look down his

nose upon the one who has scruples about eating this meat or that food, and do not let the one who does not eat judge the one who can eat with a good conscience."

There is to be no attitude of looking down one's nose at the weak and saying, "You stupid, foolish, silly person, get with it!" Or on the part of the weak, looking at the strong who can eat all meats, and who disregard any special days, and who can drink wine in moderation to the glory of God. The temptation of the weak is to say, "Don't be so worldly." And Paul envisions one group of believers saying, "Don't be silly", and another group saying, "Don't be worldly", and he says, "Stop it! Stop it! Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat. Let not the one who does not eat judge him who eats."

Now we come this morning to the third and fourth apostolic directives. Remember now, what is the goal? That there would be on the one hand no forced conformity, and yet by the grace of God blessed internal real spiritual unity. Fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty, here's directive number three: we are to recognize and respect in one another the fruit of saving grace, namely, the passion to please the Lord Jesus Christ in everything. That's the teaching of verses 6-9:

"He that regards the day, regards it to the Lord. He that eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks. And he that does not eat, unto the Lord he does not eat, and he gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and none dies to himself. For whether we live, we live to 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 of the living."

Now remember the setting. This is an amazing thing. Paul has never been to Rome. But he obviously has had a good bit of communication, because when you come to chapter 16, he names one after another of individuals, and he obviously has some individual understanding of them. There are little personal nuances as he says, "Greet this one, greet that one, greet the other one, greet this one." And it's not just a litany of greet them all and then just listing them. Little personal snippets. Paul had some means of interaction with people from Rome that gave him a real sense of the state of the church at Rome.

And Paul knows that the gospel has produced the Christian experience of those who are at Rome. And he knows that among those who are equally justified by faith in Christ equally dead to sin in union with Christ, equally indwelt by the Spirit of Christ, there are some weak and some strong--some who have not yet fully understood and in faith embraced the full extent of their blood-bought liberty in Christ; some who have understood and fully embraced in faith the extent of their blood-bought... He understands all of this, but He knows that they all have come in grace, with all their differences, to a common passion in their lives. And that passion is to please Christ in everything.

Now I want us to ask three questions of this section, verses 6 to 9, that will help me to unpack it in your hearing.

Question one: what is the common spiritual disposition of both the weak and the strong as they live out the differences of their convictions and their practices? Well, look at this little phrase again and again: "He that regards the day regards it unto the Lord. And he that eats, eats unto the Lord. None of us lives to himself. None of us dies to himself." You see what he's saying? He's saying the common denominator among the weak and the strong, though their external practice and though their internal conscience on matters of days and foods and wine may be as different as night and day, there's a common denominator of spiritual perspective. And what is it? It is the passion to please Jesus Christ. And he says the evidence of that is very tangible.

Here's a Wednesday morning, and you go to brother John's house for breakfast. And brother John is the weak one. He can have no bacon, no sausage, whatever other kind of meat might be appropriate in the morning. For whatever reason, whether he feels it might have been offered to an idol in a temple in its contempt, whatever the reason is, but when you come into his house and he welcomes you to his table, and it is spread with nourishing food. There is sufficient nutrients in whatever food is set before you to nourish you for the day. And brother John says to you, "Let's bow and give thanks to God." And you hear brother John pray. And he says,

"O God, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for this food that You've provided. You've granted daily bread to me and my family and to my dear brother who has joined me for breakfast this morning. Oh Lord, we take this food as from You, and pray that You would bless it to the strengthening of our bodies, that this day we may please You and honor You and live to Your praise."

So you have your meal and you go your way. John goes his way. Then at noontime, you're going over to brother Joe's house for a meal. And lo and behold, brother Joe's a strong brother. He can eat any kind of meat. He can even enjoy a glass of wine in the middle of the day with a good conscience. So there on his table, he's got hamburgers, and he may have a BTL sandwich, but there's meat there, and there's a glass of wine there. And he says, "Now, my brother, before we eat, let's give thanks to God." And so he says, "O Lord, thank You for all of Your good gifts. Thank You for the food and drinks set upon our table. Lord, it comes from You. Oh, Lord, as we eat, strengthen us that we may serve You for the remainder of this day and glorify You in all things. Lord, we would live unto You and to Your praise."

You go away and you say, "Hey, wait a minute. What did I hear at the breakfast table of my weak brother? He's living unto the Lord. He's got a passion to please the Lord Jesus. And then I went to the table and my strong brother, and he's got a passion to please the Lord Jesus." That's exactly what Paul says. Look at the text: "He that regards the day, regards it to the Lord." And then he switches to food: "He that eats, eats unto the Lord." How do you know it? "For he gives God thanks." His giving of

thanks is a manifestation that he's eating unto the Lord. And lo and behold, he says, "He that eats not, eats not unto the Lord." How do you know it? "For he gives God thanks." You'd never know one was strong or weak from the way they relate to the Lord. They receive their food as from the Lord. They ask to be strengthened that they might serve and glorify the Lord. The common spiritual disposition of the weak and the strong as they live out their differing convictions and practices is they want to please Jesus. You see that from the text? If you do, it ought to begin to get you excited, like it got me excited.

All right, second question: why is the common spiritual disposition of the weak and the strong the same? How does Paul know that this is true? And notice what Paul does. For the first time in this passage, he includes himself. Notice verse 7 begins with a for, the little Greek particle *gar* that ties things together logically. He's going to tell us, why does the weak brother, why does the strong brother, why do they both give God thanks and eat as unto the Lord? "For", he says (this is why) "none of us..." He brings himself into the orbit of any true Christian: "None of us lives to himself. None of us dies to himself [another logical connection]. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord. Whether we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether, therefore, we live or die, we are the Lord's." See the connection? He's identified the common spiritual denominator of both the weak and the strong. It's a passion to please Christ.

Now where did that passion come from? It came from the fact that neither of them is living to please himself. Each of them has experienced something in his or her heart that has brought them to this common denominator. Paul is asserting no true Christian lives for self. Pleasing self is not the basic perspective of life or of death.

And Paul makes it clear that this life of consecration unto the Lord in both life and death is rooted in Christ's redemptive possession of His people. Look at the text: "Whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord's." The reason we have a passion to live unto Him is that we recognize we've been purchased by Him to be His own. We are the Lord's.

The truth that Paul articulates in 1 Corinthians 6, 19b and 20a--look at this parallel passage (and it is crucial that we grasp this): "Know you not that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which you have from God?" Here's the phrase: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price." Yes, it's true, we are not our own in terms of God's creative claims over us. But Paul is not thinking of the claims of God as creator, but of God in Christ as redeemer. The language of Peter, you have been redeemed with precious blood.

And here in Romans chapter 14, though he's never been to the church, though he's never seen the people face to face, as Paul contemplates the weak and the strong and this common denominator of a passion to please Christ that finds expression even in the concreteness of the weak and the strong expressing their differing convictions and conscience and practice before God, he said the reason this is true is

because weak and strong alike as the purchased possession of Jesus Christ had come to the recognition, "I'd been purchased, that I might please Him in everything."

And then we ask the question, "What's the ultimate source and cause of that reality?" Look at verse 9: "For [another car, another logical connection] to this very end, Christ died and lived that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living." It shouldn't surprise us that among the weak and the strong there's a common denominator of a passion to please Christ in everything, and that this passion is rooted in the fact that neither weak or strong are living to please themselves, but to please Him.

And this is because that passion is the very fruit of the purpose of Christ dying on their behalf: "For to this very end, Christ died and lived again that He might be Lord [that is, Lord in the sense of this context]", that He might have a people who so embrace His sovereign rule over them, that in every detail of life, even in the piddling issues of Christian liberty, "what I eat, what I don't eat, my days honored or dishonored, the foods I eat, the beverages I drink, in every single thing, a passion to please Him." Why? Because that's why He died, that He might be Lord in this way over all His people in life, over all His people in death. Jesus didn't die! To have a bunch of people say, "I trust Him to take me to heaven, and with my liberty, I live the way I please." No. He died to have a people who say, "I've got a passion to please Him, right down to the details of what I eat and what I don't eat." Whether I keep a day or I don't keep a day, whether I imbibe or I do not imbibe, I don't take any area of my life and set it out here and mark it off with a fence and say, "That's the area of my liberty to do as I please." No! Jesus died that pleasing Him in every area will be my passion: "To this end, Christ died and lived again in order that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."

Some of you perhaps have already thought of the parallel passage, 2 Corinthians 5. Look at it with me in verse 14 and 15: "For the love of Christ constrains us [that is, it holds us in its grip, in its vice-like power] because we thus judge." His love constrains us not because there's some mushy, mystical, undefined impression of that love upon my spirit. No. His love constrains me because of the way it has caused me to think. "The love of Christ constrains us, because we thus judge, that One died for all, therefore all died." That is, Christ died for all of His people. All of His people died in Him. "And He died for all that they that live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto Him who for their sakes died and rose again." He died to have a people at Rome that Paul had never seen, but believing they had experienced biblical conversion, he could say, "None of us lives to himself, none of us dies to himself. Whether we live, whether we die, we are the Lord's."

And he was absolutely confident. Why? Because whenever God applies His saving grace in Jesus Christ, He does this radical work of changing the orientation of your life from self to Jesus in everything. And if that's not the orientation of your life, you're lost. You're still a slave of self and of sin and of the devil, and your claim to be a Christian is a mockery. To this end, Christ died, that Paul might say of you, "You do not live to yourself." None of us lives to himself. He said not a one of us. If you're part

of us, Paul says you don't live for yourself. You see it in the text. None of us. None of us. None of us lives to himself. If you're part of "us", Paul says you're not living for yourself. If you're living for yourself, you're not part of "us". Why? Because it would be a frustration of the very purpose for which Christ died. And He will not be frustrated in the purpose of His death. To this end He died, rose again, that He might be Lord in life, in death. And if He's not Lord of you in this way, in this life, and as you anticipate death, you're not one of "us", folk. You're not one of "us". You're not one of "us".

So, Paul says, "Now you Christians at Rome, this is what you need to do. When you're relating to your brethren, you need, as you see them with a differing conviction in matters of Christian liberty and differing practices, you need to recognize and respect in one another this fruit of saving grace, living unto Him, a passion to please him in everything." So if you see a brother, a sister, who seems to have all kinds of hang-ups about things that you think are silly, remember, they're respecting their hang-ups because at this point in their Christian pilgrimage, they believe that's the only way they can please Christ. And they're so passionate to please Him, they're willing to deny themselves many things that you know in Christ they are free to enjoy. But you will respect that passion to please Christ in all things. That's why you won't receive them with an idea, "I'm going to straighten them out. I'm going to batter them and bully them with my arguments as to why they should enjoy their liberty. No. I'm going to honor and respect their passion to please the Lord Jesus."

And you who have your scruples, and you see some of your brothers and sisters enjoying their liberties in Christ, don't you judge them as being worldly. Recognize and respect in them their passion to please Christ. Some of you find it unthinkable that Joe could really invite his brother to bow and give thanks for a lunch that had a glass of wine. But that's your problem, not theirs. They're accepting that wine as God's gift that makes glad the heart of man. They don't have a problem when they read John 2, that Jesus didn't make Welch's grape juice. The head of the feast even said, "Hey, you can save the good stuff till last. Usually, you give the good stuff first when people's taste buds are a little more active and a little more accurate. Then you give the Ripple at the end. You know, you give the Gallow jug wine at the end." He said, "You've saved the Sonoma Valley, real good stuff." You say, "Oh, but someone got drunk on it." That's their problem. If they abused God's gift, that's their problem, not Christ's problem. You see?

And you need to come to the place, my dear brother, my dear sister, who before God, you could never do that at this point. We respect your conscience, that you are seeking passionately to please Christ. And according to your present understanding and convictions, pleasing Christ means no wine. Pleasing Christ means no this, no that. But please respect the liberty of your brethren. If they are not violating the law of God and indulging in what you can demonstrate from the Bible is evil, is a contradiction of the moral law of God, of clear apostolic moral directives as found in the epistles, then, my brother, my sister, respect, respect the fruit of grace in the heart and in the life of your brother. That's Paul's passionate concern.

But I want to say, by way of application, as we've seen with the other principles, do you see how vital it is to have right views of the gospel if we're going to have right practice in practical matters? Paul is drawing from his rich theology of the nature and fruit of genuine conversion. And it is his understanding that in genuine conversion there is a fundamental turning from the disposition of pleasing self to the disposition of pleasing Christ that gives him the ability to write to a church he's never been to and say, "None of us lives to himself. None of us dies to himself. Whether we live, whether we die, we are the Lord's." And that's why a solid, biblical, vigorous preaching of the doctrine of conversion is vital if we're going to maintain biblical ethics in the life of this church.

A weak doctrine of conversion that leaves people tripping around saying, "Oh, I'm trusting Jesus on the way to heaven", who are not committed to live to Him in everything, consumed with a passion to please Him. You can't build biblical ethics in all of their noble loftiness upon the rotten foundation of a notion of salvation that leaves sinners still wedded to the idol of self-pleasing. Can't do it, folks. Can't do it. Can't do it. And nothing's more sickening when such people as that then parade, "Well, I do this because it's my liberty." As one writer said, "The madman who has mistaken his tattered garments for the flowing robes of majesty and his chains for golden bracelets studded with jewels has not erred so widely as the man who has mistaken carnal license for Christian liberty."

Well, then we come to number four. The fourth general apostolic directive in this chapter is this: fully aware of our differing convictions and practices in matters of legitimate Christian liberty, we must not usurp God's prerogatives as our judge. And that takes us to verses 10 through 13. I read them again in your hearing: "But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you set it not or despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, As I live, says 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." What's Paul doing? He's addressing both the weak and the strong. He uses the very language from verse 3 where he addresses the peculiar temptation of the weak and of the strong, and he groups them together under this concern of not usurping God's prerogatives as our judge. Four lines of thought.

First of all, the question asked in verse 10: "But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you set at naught your brother?" And as Professor Murray says so helpfully, "To get the feeling of the pressure of the original, we could read it this way: 'Who are you [underlining you] to judge your brother? Who are you to despise your brother?'" In other words, Paul wants the Christians at Rome to stop and reflect for a minute. Here's the strong believer looking down his nose at the weak believer, and he wants him to pause and think, "Hey, wait a minute, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, back up a minute. Who in the world are you to be doing what you're doing?" And then he wants the weak believer who is judging the strong believer to pause and say, "Whoa, whoa, wait a minute, Mr. Weak Believer, in your heart, judging that strong believer, saying he's on the slippery slope and he's going to fall, though God can

make him stand; saying that he's worldly because he can indulge in things that you could not with a good conscience, Mr. Weak Brother, stop! Who in the world are you to be assuming that place with respect to your brother?" So he takes in both weak and strong, and he asks the question, "Who in the world are you?" He wants them to think. And he wants us to think. Whenever we are in that posture of either despising or judging one another because of differing convictions and practices in legitimate matters of Christian liberty, we need to hear God thundering in our ears, "Who are you?" I'm Albert Martin. "Yes, and what are you?" I'm a creature. "And where are you heading?" I'm heading to the day when I'll stand before you. "Then who in the world are you to usurp my place? Stop it." That's the thrust of the passage. The question asked.

Then, secondly, the assertion made and proven from Scripture. "Who are you?" Now notice the assertion: "For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God." That's the assertion. Now he buttresses it with Scripture, "For it is written, as I live, says the Lord, to Me every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess to God." The question is asked, "Who are you?" And whatever answer we give, if we're sane, we can't say, "I'm the judge." Can't say that. He says, "That's right." And here's the assertion that there is One Who is the judge: "And we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God", not of one another, but of God Himself. And then by conflating, bringing together a phrase from one part of Isaiah, and then quoting from Isaiah 49:18, he buttresses with this Scripture proof: "As I live, says the Lord, to Me every knee shall bow, not to fellow believers, and every tongue shall confess to God."

And then thirdly, he draws a conclusion (verse 12): "So then, each one of us [individuality] shall give account of himself to God. Individuality in the presence of Almighty God, not give account to one another.

And then what's the implication for the people of God with respect to this matter? Here it is: "Let us not, therefore, judge one another any more." Paul has obviously heard that some within the Roman church are taking the place that belongs only to God in their dealings with one another. And he says, "Stop it. Let us not, therefore, judge one another any more. Who are you? We're going to stand before God. We'll give account of ourselves to God, not to one another. Therefore, stop judging one another." In other words, it is possible for us to be fully conscious of our differing convictions and practices in matters of Christian liberty and not indulge in sinful judging, usurping God's prerogatives as the sole judge of His people.

So here are the four apostolic directives to all the people of God with respect to legitimate issues of Christian liberty: receive one another in a way that mirrors Christ's reception of us; neither judge nor despise one another; recognize and respect in one another the fruit of saving grace, and don't usurp God's prerogatives as judge. Now, you think that's easy in a context where we're determined to have no forced conformity and where we are committed to a God-wrought, God-glorifying unity? No, it's not easy. And the only thing that will enable us to do it is to have our souls constantly suffused with the realities of the gospel.

As I've shown you in point after point, the tap roots of the specific apostolic directives Paul gives are embedded in gospel realities. Receive as Christ received you. Don't judge. Why? Because God is the Judge. Respect the work of grace in one another. Why? Because if we are truly brethren in Christ, none of us is living for himself. And let's respect that in one another. When Joe bends over his herbal meal and Mike bends over his meat-laden meal, let's believe that both Joe and Mike are seeking to please Christ in the meal for which they give thanks. And in that context, you see, our very liberty becomes a manifestation of the mighty power of the gospel in which outsiders come among us and see we're not a bunch of cookie-cutter people all the time making sure that every little facet of how we dress and our entertainment standards, and all a host of things in which there is legitimate diversity. We're not a bunch of cookie cutters. We are free in Christ to be what Christ intends us to be.

And someone says, "Well, won't that create a climate of looseness?" If the gospel no longer lives in our hearts, yeah, sure. But if the gospel no longer lives in our hearts, there's a host of other demons that'll come. But as long as the gospel is living in our hearts, that gospel that constrains us joyfully to say, "I'm the Lord's, I belong to Him lock, stock and barrel, all that I am, all that I possess. And I want all that I do down to the most minute details of my life, whether I eat, or drink or whatsoever I do, I want to do it to the glory of God. My friend, God's grace is safe in the hands of God's grace. It doesn't need your piddling little rules or mine or any church council making up a bunch of man-made rules. God's grace is safe in the boundaries of God's grace. But let that grace no longer be that which percolates through our hearts, and the whole fabric of true godliness is gone.

And what's the answer? Not man-made rules. That'll just produce a whole new race of Pharisees. We need to come back to the gospel and back to the power of the grace of God. And when that grace takes hold of us, then we'll say with Paul, "The love of Christ constrains us because we thus judge, that if One died for all, all died in Him, and that He died for all, that they who live should henceforth no longer live to themselves, but unto Him Who for their sake died and rose again."

You see, in principle, what happened to the Apostle Paul, not in the external details, but in principle, happens to every single person who ever is laid hold of by the grace of God. The moment Saul of Tarsus, murderer of Christians, abuser of the people of God, has a revelation of God's grace and glory in the face of Christ on the Damascus road, what is the first verbal response from the mouth of this man who is apprehended by a gracious Savior? What were his first words? Once he said, "Who are you, Lord?" he knew this was a divine manifestation. And he says, "Identify yourself, Lord." And when the Lord says, "I am Jesus", what are his words? "Lord, what will you have me to do?" The revelation of a gracious Savior to this one who knows he ought to have been banished to hell for what he did to God's people: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? [You're on a rampage against me!]" And that One Who could have consumed him, instead revealed Himself as gracious. And the response of Paul's heart was, "Lord, it's all over." Saul of Tarsis, he's done living for himself: "What will you have me to do?"

And when the Spirit of God reveals Christ in His grace to your heart, that will be your response as well. And you'll join those of whom Paul could say, "None of us lives to himself. None of us dies to himself. Whether we live, therefore or die, we are the Lord's", and say it with a sense of joy: "We are the Lord's." The "Knuckle under. Got to be careful how I live"-- oh, what nonsense. We are the Lord's. And when we are the Lord's, what do we experience? "Whom the Son sets free is free indeed." Free enough. And I can seek with joy to please my Redeemer in every facet of my life. With joy, as he goes on to say, "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but..." What? "Righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Ah, my dear brothers and sisters, may God help us to internalize these apostolic directives, so that we will be a company whose hearts percolate with the reality and the glory of God's saving mercy in the Lord Jesus, and that we will find none of these directives a burden to us, but a delight, so that in our midst, as the people of God, we will manifest the liberty wherewith Christ has set us free.

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