

# Christian Liberty, Part 17

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Now, again, we turn this morning to Romans, Chapter 14, and I shall not read the entire chapter in your hearing this morning, but just selected portions. Romans, Chapter 14, the first four verses and verse 14, and then verses 22 and 23:

"But him that is weak in faith, receive, yet not for the purpose of quarreling over disputed matters. One man has faith to eat all things, but he that is weak eats herbs. Do not let him that eats despise him that does not eat, and do not let him that does not eat judge him who does eat, 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. I know, and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean of itself, save that to him who accounts anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Verse 22: "The faith which you have, have to yourself before God. Happy is he that judges not himself in that which he approves. He that doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat out of faith. And whatsoever is not out of faith is sin."

And now will you join me again in praying that God will help us as we enter into what, in my judgment, is spiritual neurosurgery as I attempt to speak to you this morning on divine counsels to the weak. And I am very conscious of the need of God's help, that I may accurately open up the principles of this portion of the Word. So let us together again seek God's face in prayer.

*Our Father, we know that we always stand in need of Your help. For did not our Lord Jesus say to us, Without Me you can do nothing? But we thank You for those times when You make us more acutely aware of how true that is. And, Father, You know the heart of Your servant, that he feels acutely his need of Your Spirit's help. and we pray that help will be given to him to preach and teach as he ought, and to Your people to hear and to receive as they ought. Lord, do this for us in our need, and by Your grace we will together praise You and bless Your name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

For the true child of God, that is, a person born of the Spirit, united to Jesus Christ in penitent faith, committed to self-denying, cross-bearing discipleship--to the true child of God (and that's how the Bible describes him or her, one born of the Spirit, united to Jesus Christ in penitent faith, committed to self-denying, cross-bearing discipleship), nothing, nothing is more important in life than knowing how to live so as to please the God who has saved us.

How to live in every single facet of one's life, and in seeking to live in such a way as to please God, not to earn His favor, but because we have received His favor in Christ, many things are clear. We need not pray whether or not we should commit adultery. We need not pray and meditate as to whether or not we should lie or steal or blaspheme or dishonor God's day. Whatever God addresses in the moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments, the will of God is clear. He tells us what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. In the many apostolic directives found in the epistles and in the many directives found in the gospel records in which the Lord Jesus tells us as His people how to walk, what to do, what not to do, with respect to those things, the will of God is abundantly clear.

However, there are things in our lives which, upon contemplation, as best we know, the Word of God does not clearly command that we do them, nor does it clearly forbid us to do them. And when we come into that area, we are generally talking about matters that we put under the title of Christian liberty. And in seeking to help you as God's people to sort these matters out that you might live a life more pleasing to God, we're in the midst of a series of studies that I've entitled, "A Fresh Look at the Doctrine of Christian Liberty."

In the first sixteen messages on this present series, we have looked at the broad foundation of the doctrine, the nature and extent of our bondage in Adam, the nature and extent of our freedom in Christ. We've considered the goal of that freedom, the two great enemies to that freedom, libertinism or license on the one hand and legalism on the other. And then we have begun a careful study of the principles embedded in what is the most significant passage on this dimension of Christian liberty, namely Romans 14:1-15:7. And several weeks ago, as we began our study of this passage, I underscored in your hearing four introductory concerns that are crucial to a proper understanding and proper application of the teaching of this passage of the Word of God.

We must remember the previous teaching on the Christian life in the Roman letter. When Paul begins to write page 14 of his letter, he has not forgotten all that he has written in the first 13 pages. And we must never come to Romans 14 forgetting what Paul has already told us about the nature of the Christian life in the earlier chapters. It is a life lived in the liberating reality: I am justified by faith. When I get up in the morning and look in the mirror, I can say I am a having been justified by faith man. "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

But furthermore, he has told us that we are a people who in union with Christ have died to the dominion of sin. We are a people who have had an exchange of masters from sin to righteousness. We are a people indwelt by the Spirit, led by the Spirit, mortifying the deeds of the body by the Spirit. We are a people committed to a serious pursuit of a life of universal holiness. We are not always saying, "What can I do that gets me up to the borders of sin and righteousness?" No. No true Christian is always saying, "What's wrong with it?" The Christian is saying, "What's right with it?" What pleases God in it is the great passion of his heart.

Secondly, we must clearly identify the specific concerns of this passage. It does not have to do with things intrinsically, essentially evil or virtuous. It has to do with days. It has to do with foods. It has to do with wine. It has to do with issues that are not intrinsically sinful or virtuous. Some things are essentially, unchangeably evil. Paul has said in chapter 12, "Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good." And nothing is more sickening than when people try to put under the umbrella of Christian liberty things essentially and pervasively and unchangeably evil. You can't do it and responsibly handle this passage.

Thirdly, we must precisely identify the weak and the strong. In this passage, the weak Christian is the Christian who does not understand the full extent of his liberty in Christ. Because he doesn't understand it, he does not in faith embrace it, and because he does not in faith embrace it, he has a conscience that doesn't share its light and its glory. Therefore, his conscience forbids him to do things that God has not forbidden him. His conscience condemns him for things God does not condemn him. That is the weak man in this context. The strong is the man who has a full understanding of the extent of his liberty in Christ. Having that understanding, he embraces it in faith, and therefore his conscience is liberated from everything and anything but the pressure of the revealed will of God.

And then, fourthly, we must constantly keep in mind the radical difference between the understanding and appreciation of our liberty in Christ, which is Godward and inward, and the exercise or practice of that liberty which is manward and outward. And while we must never for a moment for any reason give up one one thousandth of a gram of our liberty in Christ before God, there may be many reasons to give up hundreds of our liberties in their exercise before man. And if we don't make that distinction, we will just go on the rocks and the shoals of a butchering of a proper application of these chapters.

Then we focused our attention on what I call the two great mandates that constitute the foundation and the goals of a proper understanding and practice of Christian liberty within the church of Christ. The foundational mandate is 14:5: "Let each one be fully persuaded in his own mind." There must be no forced conformity within the church of Christ. No forced conformity on legitimate matters of liberty. That's why Paul spends all this time sorting out this integration of the weak and the strong. He does not take a shortcut and say, "Enough of this nonsense. Here is what you ought to do if you are free in Christ." There is to be no forced conformity. But secondly, the mandate of 15:5 and 6 is we have to strive for a God-wrought, God-glorifying unity in the midst of our unforced, beautifully nurtured diversity of conscience in these matters.

Then we spent two Lord's Days looking at what I call the one-size-fits-all directives, the directives that are given equally to the weak and to the strong, the strong and the weak. And we looked at four of those directives, and what were they?

Fully aware of our diversity of convictions and practice, number one: we are to receive one another into our hearts and into the church in a manner that mirrors Christ's reception of us. 15 and verse 7: "Receive one another as Christ received you to the glory of God."

Secondly, we are neither to despise nor to judge one another. 14:3, 14:10a. We're not to have, if we're the strong, the don't-be-silly attitude in respect to the weak. And the weak are not to have, with respect to the strong, the don't-be-so-worldly attitude. There's to be no don't-be-silly, don't-be-worldly disposition fostered in the hearts of God's people.

Thirdly, we're to recognize and respect in one another the fruit of saving grace, namely, a passion to please Christ in everything. That's verses 6 to 9: "He that regards the day, regards it to the Lord. He that does not regard the day, does not regard it to the Lord. He that eats..." The whole unifying principle is we're to recognize in one another the fruit of God's saving grace, namely a passion that in everything we will live unto the Lord.

There is no such thing as the adiaphora, things indifferent. Nothing's indifferent when I have a passion to please Jesus. That's why I won't leave the house Sunday morning until the way my tie is tied is balanced that no eye will be distracted because they notice Pastor Martin's tie is crooked. You say, "You're kidding." I am not kidding. Because it would not please Christ to give the devil any unnecessary opportunity to distract one mind if I can sort it out by two more minutes or by untying and retying my tie. I tie my tie as unto the Lord. That's what we're talking about. Every facet of life we live unto the Lord. We don't mark one area and say that's a no man's land. Every single square inch of your life if you're a Christian is Jesus' land. Every square inch of it. And we need to respect that in one another.

So when the weak cannot do what he's free in Christ to do, the strong recognize he's got a passion to please Jesus. That's why he doesn't eat that meat. He's not silly. He's serious about pleasing his Savior. And I'm going to respect that. And the weak sees the strong bent over his juicy, well-marbled steak and giving God thanks for it. And he doesn't sit there and say, "Ha, it won't be long before he'll go to an idol temple to get that juicy piece of meat. Look at him, addicted to his juicy meat. He'll do anything to have it." No, no. Mr. Weak Man, you look at him and say, "Thank God for my strong brother. He's pleasing Christ. That's the fruit of God's grace in him. Thank you, Lord, for Your grace in my brother and his steak." And the strong says, "Thank you, God, for my weak brother and his bowl of veggies." That's what he's saying. That's exactly what verses 6 to 9 are saying.

And then, fourthly, we must not seek to usurp God's exclusive prerogatives as our judge. Verses 10 to 12 and 13a. Well, I got through 16 hours of preaching in 15 minutes of review, and that's what I'd hoped to do.

Now, this morning, we move from the one-size-fits-all four directives that come to both the weak and to the strong. And we're going to consider this morning, time

permitting, specific apostolic counsels to the weak. Now, a very cursory, quick reading through Romans 14:1 to 15:7 yields the conviction that the Apostle Paul has much more to say to the strong than he does to the weak. Since the strong are strong in faith, they've got to be strong in grace to bear with some of the hang-ups of the weak. So the apostle has much more to say to the strong, content-wise, than he does to the weak. However, he is not silent about his directives to the weak. The weak at times can be more of a pain in the neck and a disruption of church unity than the strong. And the apostle is aware of that.

And after his introductory exhortation to the strong, "Him that is weak in faith, receive." And who is that directed to? To the strong. The majority in the church at Rome, the strong. And when a weak one applies for membership, and you're aware of his weak conscience, receive him. But don't receive him with a view to sitting down and arguing with him and straightening him out in three weeks. Don't do that.

Then he identifies who the strong and who the weak are. Then he begins his one-size-fits-all admonitions to the strong and to the weak, but it isn't long before, beginning with verse 3b, he focuses on counsels to the weak. And so this morning, God willing, I want you to look with me at that section, plus the other two verses that I read, verse 14 and verses 22 and 23, as we take up five apostolic counsels to the weak.

Number one, you who are weak--and in the days to come, as God brings among us people who are weak in faith, weak in the understanding of the full extent of their liberty in Christ, what is God's word to them? Well, number one: humbly acknowledge and embrace your present identity as defined and described by the Word of God. If you're a weak brother or sister, humbly acknowledge and embrace your present identity as defined and described by the Word of God.

As Paul begins this section, he assumes that the strong can readily identify the weak. Look at 14:1: "Him that is weak in faith, receive." Well, how can the strong receive the weak if they don't know who they are? Paul assumes that the weak will be known. Their identity as weak will be obvious to the strong. That's why he can say in 15:1, "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak." So with no sense of judgmentalism and no sense of carnal pride on the part of the strong, as surely as the strong know who they are, and Paul assumes they will know who they are, he's also assuming the weak will know who they are. You see that from the passage. That's just assumption. He doesn't stop to prove it. It's self-evident. And not only is it self-evident that they will know who they are, but they are defined and described by the Word of God, not their brethren.

Look at the text again: "Him that is weak in faith receive, yet not with a view to sitting down and arguing with him. One man has faith to eat all things." There's the description, definition of the strong. "But he that is weak eats herbs." Now put yourself in the congregation there at Rome, or one of the house churches when this letter was circulated after it went to Rome. And here you've listened through. Maybe

they broke it up over several Lord's days, but you come to chapter 14, and you're sitting there, and your attitude is,

"Break Thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me, O Lord Jesus, risen Christ. who has united me to Yourself in the bonds of faith. You've broken sin's dominion. You've changed my wretched old master. I'm a having-been-justified-by-faith man or woman. I know I'm accepted in the beloved, adopted into Your family, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Lord speak."

And then you hear the pastor, one of the elders, one of the appointed readers, reading the letter, and you hear these words, "Him that is weak in faith, receive." And you sit there and say, "Well, wait a minute, some among us are weak. And the apostle is saying something to some among us who are weak. Who are the weak ones?" So you lean forward in your chair, and then you hear the reader read these words: "He that is weak eats herbs." And you say,

"Oh, Lord, that's me. I can't eat meat. I mean, if I eat meat, I just get this sense that somehow that meat has been defiled and it's unclean? How do I know it wasn't offered up to one of the many idols here in the city of Rome? The only way I can truly detach myself from any of my past idol worship is to just be a conscientious vegetarian. And I've just been told I'm weak. That's who I am. That's who I am. 'He that is weak eats herbs.' The apostle has labeled me. I'm a weak man. So when I get up tomorrow morning and I look in the mirror and I say, 'Who's looking at me?', you say, I'm a justified by faith man. All of the condemnation of my sin was laid on Jesus. I bear none of it. I am a having-been-justified-by-faith man. That's who I am, Lord. Thank you. Furthermore, I read that if I'm united to Christ, I am a man who has died to sin and been raised to newness of life in union with Christ. That's who I am, Lord. I'm a back-from-the-dead man. New life surging through me as one united to the risen Christ. And furthermore, Lord, You tell me that there is no condemnation. I'm a no-condemnation man. That's who I am. But, Lord, I found out in church yesterday I'm a weak man. Lord, the fact that I can't go down and have three patties of sausage with my eggs; the fact that for lunch I can't have a hamburger; the fact that I am a vegetarian out of conscientious scruples of conscience, that I can only please You, not earn Your favor, but I can only please You by steering clear of meat that in some way may be tainted with idol worship, and I want to put all that behind me. Lord, I'm weak."

You follow me now? I'm not doing all of this to act. I want you to feel the weight of it. Paul assumes that when he defines and describes the weak, the weak will see themselves in the definition and the description, and that they will humbly acknowledge and embrace their present identity as defined and described by the Word of God. Such a weak person is not called carnal; he's not called a Judaizer, a second-class citizen, but he is defined and described as weak in faith.

Now why is this so important? Because the weak in faith often think they are the strong and the more spiritual. "I'm so spiritual that I won't even run the risk of being

anywhere near idol worship by eating a piece of meat. By God's grace, I'm willing to deny myself the pleasure of a well-marbled steak because I have put idol worship and the idol temple and everything connected with idolatry behind me." Or if it's someone with Jewish scruples, like Peter, remember when the Lord said to him in a vision, "Hey Peter, see what's in that sheet? All kinds of good stuff, all kinds of birds, all kinds of animals. Rise up, kill some of them and roast them and have a nice feast." "Oh no, Lord, nothing unclean ever comes into my mouth." God says, "You didn't get the message." So He does it again.

These may be people with Jewish background who have so associated personal separateness unto God with kosher food laws that this person, not trusting in those things for salvation like the Judaizers were doing. Paul would not have dealt with it so gently and pastorally. He would have dealt with the white, hot, fervent passion in showing them, "Don't you dare add to Christ foods and days, etc." No, no, he's dealing with people who've got conscientious hang-ups because of some of the barnacles on their hull from the past, whether paganism or Jewish ways of life. And he wants them to face the fact that their scruples are not an indication that they are strong and more spiritual, but they are weak in faith.

He wants them humbly to acknowledge this reality, because often they not only feel that they are more spiritual, they are the ones, Paul said, "Don't you judge." He says the temptation of the strong is to look down their snoot at the weak and say, "Well, you got all these silly scruples about your steak and about your special days. Silly stuff! Get over your hang-ups!" But he recognizes the peculiar temptation of the weak is to stand in judgment on the strong and say, "Hey, you're on the slippery slope. If you take a glass of wine, how do you know you won't end up a slobbering drunk. I mean, man, you're on the slippery slope that leads you back into idol worship if you eat that meat. You're on the slippery slope that leads you down into drunkenness if you have a glass of wine."

You see, they set themselves up as superior and more spiritually strong. Paul says, no, I want you weak ones to face up front who you are: "Him that is weak in faith eats only herbs." So I say to any weak ones among us, I'm not talking about people who, because they are persuaded they can best pursue a life of holiness by not indulging things that they are free to indulge in in Christ. You see, there's an entire difference between not indulging your liberty and not believing you have the liberty. See the difference? All the difference in the world.

And thank God there are many of you; there's one of them in a pulpit, that there are a number of things I believe I'm free in Christ to do that I do not do, but I do not do them out of a sense that they are no-nos in and of themselves. I don't do them because other higher concerns than indulging my liberties constrain me not to do them.

Paul says, "Do we not have a right to marry a wife? Yeah, we do." But he said, "I've used none of these things." Rights! But you see them as rights. You see them as

parts of your liberty in Christ. And so I say to those of you sitting here who have conscientious scruples, hang-ups, that somehow things that God nowhere condemns, things that God does approve, and yet you cannot touch them because you believe in your conscience it would be sin for you because the thing is in itself sin. God calls you weak in faith. You don't yet fully understand and in faith appropriate the full extent of your liberty in Christ. You are weak and you need honestly to face the fact of who you are.

The first word of apostolic counsel to you who are weak, with respect to your understanding and appropriating in faith the full extent of your liberty in Christ is humbly acknowledge and embrace your present identity as defined and described in the Word of God. And then you won't want the church to conform to you in your weakness. Do not seek to negate or to usurp God's position and action as welcoming host, exclusive Lord, and supreme judge in His house, the Church.

Secondly, do not seek to negate or to usurp God's position and action as welcoming Host, exclusive Lord, and supreme Judge in His house, the church. That's just putting into Martin's words the teaching of verse 3b and 4. Look at verse 3: "Let not him that eats set at naught him who does not eat. Do not let him that does not eat [that's the weak one] judge him that eats for [don't do it--why?] God has received him." In His house, the church, God has been a welcoming Host to the strong man whom you are now judging, and thereby saying in principle, "If I had my way, I'd keep him on the outside till he got his act together. I mean, there's no way we're going to take someone into the church and lower our standards. We're going to keep a high standard of holiness. Oh, yes, we go a bit beyond God's clear revelation in the law of God and in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, but it's the only safe thing to do. We've got to put a hedge around the standard." God says, "I'm the welcoming Host. I've received him. Don't you dare try to negate My disposition."

But then he goes on to say (look at the text), "Who are you that judges?" And then Paul uses a word (it's the only place he uses it), not *doulos*, standard word for bondservant, but the word for a household servant, an *oiketēs*, a household slave or servant. He wants to keep the emphasis on the church as the family of God, and he says to the weak, "Who are you that judges the household slave of another? To his own Lord he stands or falls." He says,

"Who in the world are you, having been brought into the house where the household Master has been the welcoming Host, and He is the only one to whom all the household servants owe their allegiance? What are you doing as a fellow household servant taking the place of the Head of the household. Stop it. Stop it. It's not your business. It's his business. It's his business. Who are you that judges the household servant of another? To his own Lord he stands or falls. Yes, he should be made to stand, for the Lord has power to make him stand. To his own Lord he will stand or fall. The welcoming Host is the exclusive Lord and the supreme Judge in His house, the church. Weak Christians don't seek to negate or usurp God's position in his house."

One commentator has very perceptively noted,

"This is a sharp rebuke. It is presumptuous when a weak brother sets himself up as if he were the one who is really strong, yay, as if he were the real master in the Lord's house. Even the beginning of such an attitude must be corrected without mincing of words. Paul is just as alive to the opposite danger and corrects that. Yet the paradox remains, the weak often do more harm in the church than the strong. The term "oiketēs" is well chosen. A servant in the master's own house belongs to his immediate family, thus in personal contact with his master. Whose business is it to pass any kind of judgment, either favorable or unfavorable, upon such a servant? Certainly the master's alone. To his own lord, to him alone he stands or falls, stands as being approved in his position, or falls by losing his position. We see no reason for dropping the idea of judgment--stands or falls as his master may judge him."

It is quite an amazing thing that the weak in faith are often quite strong in their opinions of what others should and should not do in matters of legitimate liberty, and even ready to push God aside in His sole position as welcoming Host, supreme Lord, and only Judge in His house. And while we await some stinging, searching, withering reproofs of the unloving, insensitive strong (and they are going to come in the next several messages), Paul is not easy on the arrogance of the weak. He says, "Just remember who you are and keep your place." God's the welcoming Host; God is the sole and exclusive Lord in His house and the supreme judge of all His servants. Don't usurp His place. That's the second great principle.

Third principle--this is precious. Weak believer, you don't fully understand or appreciate and enjoy the full extent of your liberty in Christ, and therefore you're not comfortable with others who do. Third counsel: do not doubt God's ability or His commitment to cause the strong to stand. Now get this: in the midst of their Christ-centered use of their Christian liberty, don't doubt God's ability or His commitment to cause the strong to stand in the midst of their Christ-centered use of their liberty. Look at 4B: "Who are you that judges the servant another to his own lord he stands or falls? Now, yea, he shall be made to stand. Why? For the Lord has power to make him stand." You see what he's saying. Mr. Weak Believer looks at Mr. Strong Believer and says,

"There's no way. I mean, that man is exercising his liberty with regard to what he eats and disregard... I mean, he'll be a solely secularist. He doesn't keep this special day and that special day and this special day. I mean, he's going to end up just living like a pagan. He won't have all his special religious days to prop him up and to keep him close to Jesus. I mean, he's eating all kinds of meat, all kinds of fish, all kinds of seafood. I mean, it won't be long before he's going to get such an appetite for those things that he's going to end up in the meat market outside the idol temple. And then before long, he's only going to be 30 yards from the temple itself. I mean, the poor man, he's going to fall in the exercise of his liberty. Look at him with his bottle of wine on his table with his evening meal. It won't be long before he'll be stroking his bottle

of Jack Daniels when he goes off to bed, and he's going to be a slobbering, stupid drunk."

He says, "Wait a minute. I want to tell you something. See that strong believer who is exercising his liberty? Why and how? He has come to see the extent of his liberty in Christ. In Christ, all meats are now clean." Paul says it right down there in verse 14: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, nothing is unclean of itself." There is no meat, no food, no grain. Essentially sinful. The sin is not in the thing. That's blasphemous. That charges the Creator with creating sin. No. This man has come to understand his freedom in Christ with regard to food and drink and days and a host of other things. And out of love to Christ, living before the eye of Christ, described in verses 6-9 in this chapter, he does not live to himself. He does not eat to himself. He does not keep or not keep days to himself. Christ is at the center of his life.

And Paul says, "You silly, weak brother, you think that as this man appreciates what he has because of the death of Christ, and as he works it out in communion with Christ, with an eye to please Christ, that that's the way to apostatize? You silly, weak brother, listen to me." Look what he says: "He shall be made to stand. Why? For the Lord has power to make him stand, the Lord who has set him free." Free from the dominion of sin, free from loving sin as a way of life, free from sin as a master.

The Lord who has done what Paul says He does for every real Christian in the earlier chapters, it's that kind of a man exercising his liberty, not someone who's half-converted, who still loves the world, who still loves sin, who still wants to indulge his flesh, giving himself over to licentious living and calling it Christian liberty. Paul says, no, I have nothing to say about that right here. I'm talking about this man. He does not live to himself. He does not die to himself. Whether he lives, whether he dies, he's the Lord's. He lives his life before the face of Christ.

Don't you think that Christ, who's done that for him, can make him stand without your silly rules, without all of your restrictions being imposed upon him? Don't you think God is able to make him stand? He says, "I've got news for you. Whether you think it or not, He is, he shall be made to stand!" By whom? By the Lord who has put him on his feet as a free man in Christ. I don't know if that gets you excited, but that gets me excited. All the times I've read this passage, I never saw that before. Probably the reason is some of the remnants of that old weak believer are still in me that needed to be slain by the truth of God's Word. That's the third counsel. Don't doubt God's ability or His commitment to cause the strong to stand in the midst of their Christ-centered exercise of their liberty.

Council number four: do not follow the example of the strong in their legitimate use of their liberty until you are persuaded by the word of God in your conscience that it is indeed your liberty to do the same. Oh, my dear people, weak brothers and sisters, get hold of this. Get hold of this. That's the teaching of verse 14, verses 22 and 23. Look at them: "I know", Paul says, "and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean of itself."

Can you imagine how that went down with somebody's weak brethren? "You didn't mean it. Excuse me, Pastor So and So, would you read that again? I think you missed something in there. Did I hear correctly that you just read that the Apostle Paul says that nothing in the way of foods is essentially, inherently unclean?" He said, "Well, I'd be glad to read it again, my brother. I know and am persuaded in connection with the Lord Jesus, what Jesus himself taught, what Jesus has revealed in His work, abolishing all of the ceremonial law in Himself, abolishing by fulfillment, nothing is unclean of itself."

What a radical statement for someone who marks this is unclean, that's unclean, this is clean, that's unclean. "And he says all those distinctions are nonexistent in reality. But then he gives this caveat: "Say, except, except to him that it counts anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Though it is not essentially, inherently, before God and in reality unclean, if the man's conscience perceives it is unclean, to him it is unclean.

Let me use a silly illustration. There's no cyanide poison in the folds of this handkerchief, unless my wife got to it and said, "You know, I know of nothing in this that is dangerous. It's a nice, clean, duly washed, properly ironed handkerchief." But if for some reason, in my mind, I am persuaded that within its folds there is deadly poison, and if I were to open it, those fumes would be released. Or if I were to put it on my skin and wipe my mouth, it could have a deadly effect. It's obvious, if I'm persuaded of that, I've got to steer clear of it.

Now this is what Paul is saying. There's no meat that is essentially inherently unclean now that all the dietary laws of the old covenant are abolished, totally abolished. All meats are essentially inherently clean. Anyone can eat them to the glory of God. But he says, "If in the conscience of a man something is still unclean, (can't eat certain kind of fish that doesn't have scales; can't eat a certain kind of meat if it doesn't chew the cud and split the hoof--unclean!), then to him it is unclean.

Therefore, what is he to do? Look at verses 22 and 23: "The faith which you have [faith with respect to your liberty in Christ, touching food and days and wine]. have to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not judge himself in that which he approves." If I can pick up my handkerchief and wipe my mouth with a good conscience, it's not going to kill me and hurt me. I'm a happy man! I get the sweatballs off my mouth. But read on: "He that doubts is condemned if he eat, because he does not eat of faith, and whatsoever is not of faith is sin." What is he saying? He is saying that if I still regard the matter as that meat is unclean and I see my strong brother eating it, and I say,

"Well, he's a spiritually minded man. He has a reputation for being a godly, stable, well-proven child of God with great influence. He walks with God. He prays. He quickly owns his sin. He's the essence of what I would want to be as a mature spiritual man. If he can eat that meat with a good conscience, then surely there must be nothing wrong with it. But I still think of it as unclean, but he's a good and a godly

man, and I'm going to follow his example. Maybe if I eat it and realize that I don't get a thunderbolt out of heaven and God doesn't strike me dead or give me leprosy, maybe I'll persuade myself it's all right."

And Paul says, "If you go ahead and eat while not persuaded in your own conscience that it's clean, to you it now becomes sin because you didn't eat out of faith." And in that context, to eat out of faith means to eat out of the persuasion that what I do is according to the will of God and therefore I can do it with a good conscience. What am I doing then? If my conscience still tells me no, I think it may be unclean. I'm not a hundred percent sure now. My convictions are being shaken, but I still can't believe it's utterly, unquestionably pleasing to God to eat it. Then if I choose it, I'm choosing that which to me and my conscience is sin. So what is not sin in itself becomes sin to me. That's what the apostle is teaching in this passage. He is saying, "He that doubts is condemned if he eats, for he does not eat out of faith. And whatsoever is not out of faith is sin." Now let me read from one of the commentators (very helpful).

"What he here labels sin, rather, is any act that does not match our sincerely held convictions about what our Christian faith allows us to do and prohibits us from doing. For a Christian, not a single decision or action can be good which he does not think he can justify on the ground of his Christian conviction and his liberty before God in Christ. Violation of the dictates of conscience, even when the conscience does not conform perfectly with God's will, is sinful. Their faith must be strengthened, their conscience enlightened, and then they can follow the strong in exercising their liberty together."

So the great principle (and this is a word to you who are weak, and to you who are basically in the category of the strong), as you are wrestling with other dimensions of the outworking of your liberty in Christ, you must never, never, never, never simply follow the example of someone that you believe is strong in a given area and do what they do until your conscience is persuaded from the Word of God that it is right for you to do it.

So this weak brother is invited out to a meal with his strong brother. And he sits there and he sees his strong brother eat his meat. All the others eat their meat; give thanks to God for it. He's the only one that has reservations about the meat. What is he to do? Is he to allow the group pressure of all the meat eaters to cause him to violate his conscience? No. He's to say very graciously, "Brethren, I deeply appreciate that with joy and thanksgiving in the presence of God you can eat your meat. I rejoice with you. But I ain't there yet. Would you please give me a bowl of veggies?" And what the brethren do is say, "Brother, the last thing we would do is put group pressure upon you to violate your conscience. Don't ever violate your conscience at this table. In fact, the next time we have you over to a meal, we'll have veggie burgers. They don't particularly like them. But if it'll make you feel a little more at ease..." And you know what that weak brother will do if he's grasped these principles? He'll say, "No, don't give up your liberty for me. You're not pressuring me. You're not seeking to make me

stumble. Brethren, you enjoy your meat, and you give thanks for your meat, and I'll enjoy my veggies, and I'll give thanks."

Isn't that what Paul just says? "He that eats, give thanks to God. He that eats not, give thanks to God." In other words, no forced conformity, but, but, but, no succumbing to the pressure of the conscience of another. Let each one be fully persuaded in his own mind. Do not follow the example of the strong in the legitimate use of their liberty until you are persuaded by the Word of God in your conscience that it is indeed your liberty to do so.

Then finally, here's the final counsel to the weak, and it's implicit. It's not explicit in the passage, but it's implicit, and I hope to demonstrate it. Diligently pursue the spiritual disciplines that will cause you to progress from the category of the weak into the category of the strong. You see, our Christian liberty is a dearly purchased privilege. It's purchased by the blood of Christ. "For freedom [for liberty] did Christ set you free (Galatians 5:1). John 8:36: "Whom the Son sets free is free indeed."

Now, in the fellowship of the church where weak and strong exist together in blessed spirit-wrought, God-empowered unity, in the fellowship of the church, the weak are to grow in their understanding of their liberty in Christ, not by the strong meeting them right after they are welcomed into the church on a Lord's Day evening, taking them back to their home, and giving them a lecture on Christian liberty. He said, "You who are strong, receive the weak, but not for the purpose of arguing over disputed matters." No, receive him because he's a brother, bought by the blood of Christ, received by Christ.

Does that mean you just abandon him to his perpetual weakness? No. Paul does not do that in this very passage. He says, "If you've got scruples about eating meat, you are weak in faith." Well, that's not a very flattering title, is it? I don't like to be called weak in faith. Well, then become strong in faith. Then when he says in verse 14, "I know as an apostle, and I am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, nothing is unclean of itself", a weak brother would have to sit there and say,

"Look, if that's the mind of the Apostle in connection with Jesus, and I'm in connection with the same Jesus, and I'm under apostolic authority, I've got work to do until I can say with the Apostle, 'Amen, Paul! That's where I'm at too.' And therefore, I'm not going to be content with my weakness. I'm going to use the spiritual disciplines in the fellowship of the church to seek to become strong. I'm going to read and reread the apostolic documents that tell me the nature and the extent of my liberty in Christ. I am not going to start a little click of the society of the weak within the church so that we can sit around our bowl of herbs and criticize these people on the slippery slope of liberalism who eat their meat and drink their wine with moderation, and actually have a television in their house. No, no. I'm going to open my heart to my strong brethren. And as I interact with them, I'm going to ask them questions and say, 'Look, Brother John, were you always in the place where you could eat any kind of meat with a good conscience?' 'Oh, no. There was a time when I had...' 'Well, how did you get from

there to here?' 'Well, Henry, if you'd like me to tell you, I'd be glad.' 'Yeah, I'd like you to share it with me.'"

And in the fellowship of the church and in the interaction of brothers, Paul says in chapter 15, "I'm persuaded of you, brethren, that you are full of virtue, that you are full of knowledge, able to admonish one another." It's in the communion and fellowship of the church in a climate of mutual, unconditional acceptance of one another that the strong are able to help the weak to grow out of their weakness. And then under the preaching of the Word of God, and as you pray for light, and all of these God-appointed means, my dear weaker brethren, don't be content with your weakness, but use the God-appointed means with a view to becoming strong.

Now that does not mean, as we shall see, that when you become strong in faith with respect to understanding the full extent of your liberty in Christ, that you are automatically going to begin to exercise that liberty in all the areas in which now you know have it. No! You may end up relinquishing more liberties as liberties than things that you stayed away from as no-nos when you were weak in faith. You're now strong enough in Christ to be able to say,

"Yes, I have this liberty and that liberty. And if my brethren are indulging in those liberties, I give them the field with goodwill that they exercise them to the glory of God, to the good of their own souls. And I know I am free in Christ to join them. But for reasons A, B, C, or D, I choose not to, not because what they do is unclean, but because, for me, it would not be in the best interest of the pursuit of my own growth and grace, my testimony to my children, etc., etc., etc. But you see, I haven't relinquished my freedom. I've only curtailed the exercise of that freedom."

So I lay before you these five basic counsels to the weak: Humbly acknowledge and embrace your present identity as defined and described by the Word of God. Do not seek to negate or usurp God's position as the welcoming Host, the exclusive Lord, or the supreme Judge in His house, the church. Do not doubt God's ability and commitment to cause the strong to stand in the midst of their Christ-centered exercise of liberty. Don't follow their example until you're persuaded from the Word of God in your conscience that it's your liberty to do so. Diligently pursue the spiritual disciplines that will cause you to progress from the category of the weak into the category of the strong.

As we shall see, God willing, in the next two weeks, in opening up the apostolic councils to the strong, no church will be healthy, unified, and a monument of gospel grace if the strong are marked by loveless insensitivity in the presence of the weak. Paul goes after loveless insensitivity with a vengeance. And I'm going to go after it, I hope with a vengeance equal to the text.

However, it is just as true that no church will be a healthy, unified monument of gospel grace if it capitulates to the tyranny of the weak. Loveless insensitivity is the great danger of the strong in the presence of the weak. But a kind of pharisaic tyranny is the great danger of the weak in the presence of the strong.

And what a monument of God's grace we will be if by that grace neither loveless insensitivity nor pharisaic tyranny mark our life together in matters of Christian liberty. I'm just, I hope, I hope, confident enough in God's grace that to the extent we have known that, we can abound yet more and more by the grace of God.

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