

The Believer's Use of Christian Liberty

Romans 14:14-23

Romans 14:14-23 - *"I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. ¹⁵ Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ Therefore let us pursue the things that make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. ²¹ It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. ²² Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin."*

Background Notes

Relating to fellow believers is not always easy. How should we treat areas of disagreement in the church? If it is a doctrinal matter or a moral problem, the church leaders must deal with it -- even to the point of putting someone out of fellowship if that person refuses to stop propagating false teaching, or refuses to stop sinning in a moral area. But how do we deal with "minor matters" where Christians don't see eye to eye -- those non-doctrinal minor matters such as what color to paint the walls of the church, or the schedule of Sunday services, or what hymnals or translations of the Bible should the church purchase? You see, these are "minor matters," but they can become major issues. People have been known to leave a church because they don't like the new hymnal! Churches split because of changes in schedule or changes in the format of services.

How do you deal with these non-doctrinal matters in the church? You **work them out** so that it's best for the most people involved, and best for the work of the Lord. Read the book of Philippians in this connection. Church leadership should work toward maintaining unity in the church as best they can, knowing that there will not be uniformity in every minor, non-doctrinal area.

There is a third area where Christians disagree -- it's the area of scruples, and that's what Romans 14 is all about. Scruples involve matters that are morally neutral in themselves, and yet they affect the conscience. Is it OK to go skiing or play golf on Sunday? Is it OK to drink a glass of wine with your dinner? Is it OK to play the lottery? Is it OK for a

woman to use heavy makeup? Is it OK for a man to wear an earring? Is it OK to listen to Christian rock music? Is it OK to hunt for sport? Christians disagree on these morally neutral matters. In fact, some Christians feel so strongly about these matters that they would move them into the moral category!

In Romans 14 we see that scruples are not to be a test of fellowship or spirituality. Furthermore, we are not to judge or despise one another in these areas that are morally neutral. Now, in verses 14-23, we see that in addition we are to properly use our Christian liberty in this area of scruples.

Doctrinal Points

1. Christian liberty should be governed by the principles of a clear conscience.

Verse 14: *"I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."* Also verses 22-23: *"Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin."*

In the early church many Christians had a troubled conscience about eating meat because of the dietary laws of the Old Testament, and also because some of the meat sold in the market places in the first century had been dedicated to idols. The teaching of the New Testament was that there was nothing unclean of itself about eating meat, and a Christian had liberty to eat any kind of meat without a guilty conscience. However, the apostle Paul continued, if you do have a guilty conscience about eating meat, you should not eat it, because then it would be sin! Look at verse 23 once again: *"But he who doubts is condemned if he eats..."* In the same way today, in these morally neutral areas, if you have a tender conscience about watching football on Sunday afternoon, you should not do it. Even though it is morally neutral and not condemned or condoned in black and white Scripture, if you feel it's not the right thing to do you should not go against your conscience. Christian liberty should be governed by a **clear conscience**.

2. Christian liberty should be governed by the principle of not stumbling.

Verse 15: *"Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died."* And then down to verses 20-21: *"Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. ²¹ It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak..."* Remember, in the context of Romans 14, the "strong" Christian is the one who has a clear conscience of matters of moral indifference. The "weak" Christian is the Christian who has a tender or worried conscience in certain areas. The point here is that the strong Christian is not to "stumble" the weak Christian by the use (or misuse) of his Christian liberty.

To stumble means to hinder the Christian growth of the believer who has a tender conscience in a certain area. Let's say that you're going to put on a church supper and you have a newly saved Jewish couple in your congregation. They were

formally orthodox Jews, but now they have become Christians. I would suggest for the first church supper they attend that you don't have a pork roast or a ham dinner! You could hinder the growth of these new converts who may have a tender conscience about eating pork products. Another example. Let's say that a few of you go out for dinner, and you feel that it's OK to have a glass of wine with your meal, but you know that there are some in the group who have a tender conscience in this area. Don't flaunt your Christian liberty! Drink ginger ale or iced tea instead! Don't destroy the work of God for the sake of food!

Look at verse 1 again, *"Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. ² For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables."* This is addressed to the strong Christian. Christian liberty should be governed by the principle of **not stumbling**. Now how far should we carry this principle? Well, we don't carry it to the point of living under the tyranny of the weaker brother's conscience. Suppose a Christian in your fellowship group feels that it's wrong to drink coffee, because after all coffee has caffeine and caffeine is a drug. Well, you don't cancel your coffee break between services or ban all caffeine because one brother thinks that it's wrong to drink coffee. The church leaders should discuss the matter with the "weak" brother, but do what seems right for the entire fellowship.

Furthermore, remember that we are talking about the "weak" Christian -- **not the legalist!** The weaker Christian has a tender conscience about something **because of a lack of understanding** about the faith or a lack of understanding about Christian liberty. The weaker Christian needs to be taught about Christian liberty. The legalist, however, is usually **not** a weaker brother. **The legalist** has his **set opinions** and **pet peeves** and his **own non-biblical list of requirements for spirituality**. The fellowship group does not have to live under the tyranny of a legalistic member's opinions in morally neutral areas of life and faith.

Having said all that, we must be careful not to stumble weaker brothers and sisters. Christian liberty should be governed by not stumbling.

3. Christian liberty should be governed by the principle of peace and edification.

Verses 16-19: *"Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another."*

So the bottom line in all this discussion about eating meat and drinking wine and using makeup and working on Sunday (or anything that causes scruples) – is the bottom line defining if it's OK for me to do something, or what does my Christian liberty allow me to do? No, the **bottom line is peace and edification** in the body of Christ! Read through verses 17 and 19 again.

So, strong Christians -- don't flaunt your Christian liberty! Keep the weaker brothers and sisters in mind and be careful not to stumble them. Notice that verse 18 indicates that this is a form of service to the Lord! Christian liberty should be governed by the principle of peace and edification.

Practical Application

When in doubt, don't!

"When in doubt, don't!" is not a verse in the Bible, but it is a biblical principle when it comes to the proper use of Christian liberty. Whether you're a weak Christian or a strong Christian, **when in doubt, don't!**

If you're a weak Christian and you do something against your conscience even though it is morally OK, it is still wrong for you at this point in your understanding of the faith. If you're bothered in your conscience about going to the beach on Sunday afternoon, then don't go! When in doubt, don't!

If you're a strong Christian, and there is the possibility of stumbling or hindering the growth of a weaker brother or sister by what you do, then don't! Don't order a glass of wine at a restaurant if there is any doubt as to who is watching. When in doubt, don't!

Now one more point for the stronger Christian: there is always a danger that a stronger Christian can let his liberty go to license. An activity that starts out as morally neutral can sometimes end up as morally wrong. A glass of wine can lead to a drinking problem. Participation in the office Super bowl pool can lead to a problem with gambling. We **all** need to be careful in the way we live as believers. The best rule of thumb for all Christians is: When in doubt, don't!