

Handle with Care (Romans 14:13-23)

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Have you ever used the right thing in the wrong way? Think of perfume or cologne. If you use it in the right way, a small amount actually makes you somewhat appealing to most people, but use it in the wrong way—use too much—and you will be appalling to people. This is also true of salt. If you use the right amount in your food, it is a delicious seasoning, but use too much and it can ruin your meal. The same principle is true with most medicines as well. Aspirin, for example, is a good blood thinner, but use too much of it and it will thin your blood to the point that it could kill you.

The apostle Paul, likewise, argues that it's possible to use the right thing in the wrong way. He applies this adage to Christian liberty. Previously, in Rom 14:1-12 Paul stated that we are absolutely free to decide for ourselves on non-essential issues like eating, drinking, dancing, music, and movies. We learned to “be slow to judge others; be quick to judge yourself.” Now in 14:13-23 Paul presents the “other side of the coin” in our Christian liberty.¹ Those who are free to enjoy their liberty are responsible for not having an adverse effect on other believers.² Someone has recommended to Americans that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast should be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast. Such a balance would be a helpful reminder. We need to recognize the same balance in our Christian life. Rights bring responsibility.³ How do you handle liberty? The answer is: you handle it with care. *Liberty must be limited by love.*⁴ Paul provides three warnings against abusing your Christian liberty.⁵

1. Don't Harm Your Fellow Believers (14:13-15)

Paul commands you to limit your Christian liberty because not all believers have the same freedoms in non-essential issues. In 14:13 he writes, “**Therefore let us not judge one another anymore,⁶ but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.**” There is a classic wordplay in this verse. The verb translated “determine” (*krino*, 14:13b) is the same Greek word translated “judge” (14:13a).⁷ This verse can be literally rendered: “Let us not *judge* one another anymore, but rather *judge* this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.” Paul says: Stop judging other believers on “opinions” (cf. 14:1)!⁸ What are you more concerned about: what your brother or sister is doing or what you are doing? If we were as preoccupied with our own conduct as we are other believers' behavior we would really be spiritual! Here, however, Paul is concerned that those who have liberty protect those who don't. The word translated “obstacle” (*proskomma*)⁹ referred to something in the road that causes one to stumble.¹⁰ In this context, a strong believer who puts an obstacle in the path of a weak believer might set him back temporarily or even do permanent damage to his sensitive conscience. The term “stumbling block” is the Greek term *skandalon*,¹¹ from which we get the English word “scandal.” It literally refers to the triggering mechanism on a baited animal trap. The activity looks enticing until those jaws snap shut.

When I was in high school I was a bit of an athlete. I did not drink alcohol, but my teammates and friends did. I can recall a few times when they attempted to trick me into drinking alcohol. They would typically do so by putting Jack Daniels or some other hard liquor in a soft drink can. They would then casually offer me a drink. I always declined the drink because the scent of the liquor was overpowering. Of course, I also knew whenever they pressured me to have a drink it wasn't Pepsi or Coke. This was a *skandalon*!

Similarly, we must not tempt a weaker Christian to sin by partaking of our liberty and thereby violating his or her conscience. We must remember that we are either stepping stones or stumbling blocks.¹² Which one are you? *Liberty must be limited by love.*

Paul builds his argument in 14:14a: **“I know¹³ and am convinced¹⁴ in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.”** Paul is not saying here that anything goes because everything is good. However, he is absolutely confident¹⁵ that *nothing* is unclean in and of itself (cf. 14:5).¹⁶ In other words, a marijuana leaf is not sinful. A cocoa plant is not an evil thing. A gun or a knife is not wicked. Sex is not impure. These things in and of themselves are not unclean. Rather, it is how these things are used that leads to sin.

Paul confirms this notion in 14:14b when he writes: **“but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”** If a believer thinks anything is unclean it becomes unclean for that person.¹⁷ This verse leads to a shocking truth: Some things are wrong for you that are right for others, and some things are right for you that are wrong for others. *This statement means that you can't always know in advance what will be “right” or “wrong” for another Christian brother.* It is a matter of one's conscience.¹⁸

A man consulted a doctor. “I've been misbehaving, Doc, and my conscience is troubling me,” he complained. The doctor replied, “And you want something that will strengthen your willpower?” “Well, no,” said the fellow. “I was thinking of something that would weaken my conscience.” While this may be amusing, it is especially true in the church. Many of us are caught between traditions and preferences and what the Bible really prohibits or doesn't prohibit. This reality should drive us to study the Scriptures to determine how our traditions and preferences affect what we believe. Like Paul, we must get to the place where we can honestly say, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself” (14:14a). However, it still may be that you can't stomach a particular activity or object. If so, it is “unclean” to you and would be sinful for you to participate in. Listen to your conscience! The conscience isn't always right, but it's always wrong to violate it (cf. 14:22-23).

In 14:15 Paul switches to the second-person singular “your” for greater clarity and conviction: **“For¹⁹ if because of food your brother is hurt,²⁰ you are no longer walking according to love.²¹ Do not destroy²² with your food him for whom Christ died.”²³** Paul explains that it is possible to “hurt” and “destroy” a fellow believer. When another Christian sees you doing what his own conscience condemns, it grieves him or causes him pain. When he then proceeds to do himself what his conscience condemns, he commits sin and is destroyed. Some scholars argue that the Greek word “destroy” (*apollumi*) refers to eternal destruction.²⁴ Yet, the word here does not mean “made to go to hell” or “made to lose his salvation.”²⁵ Paul is talking about the loss of peace, assurance, and effective ministry. He lays out two motivations for our conduct: (1) love for other believers and (2) Christ's death on the cross (cf. 5:8). If we are believers we ought to love one another. Furthermore, Christ's sacrifice should compel us to demonstrate sensitivity. If Jesus was willing to die for believers certainly we should be willing to make the smallest of sacrifices. Remember, *liberty must be limited by love.*

There have been several times when my wife, Lori, and I have had to get up on the steep roof of our house. Lori climbs a ladder, jumps on the roof, and begins walking back and forth across the roofline. I, on the other hand, experience absolute terror whenever I am on our roof. Due to prior basketball injuries,

all of the ligaments and tendons are torn off my ankle bones. I can sprain either of my ankles walking a straight line on a flat surface. I am a hazard—an accident waiting to happen! Furthermore, I have discovered I am afraid of heights. Whenever I am on the roof I am fearful that I am going to make Lori a widow. I can't see how I can walk across the roof without falling. Now it would be cruel for Lori call me a "girlie-man," take my arm, and drag me across the roof. I might lose my balance and fall off the roof and suffer injury or death. I don't share Lori's courage or liberty in this arena. It is like this with various non-essentials. Some believers just can't see themselves walking freely in a certain area that they have been brought up to think is wrong; they have difficulty doing so. Thus, we are responsible to be sensitive and thoughtful toward such believers. *Liberty must be limited by love.*²⁶

If your spouse firmly believes that a purchase is wise stewardship but your spouse is worried that the Lord will not approve, you should restrain your liberty for the sake of your spouse. If you are out to dinner with a friend from your small group who has struggled with alcoholism you should not consume alcohol in their presence or even discuss it. You shouldn't check the Lotto numbers when a friend who disagrees with gambling is nearby. You should never encourage a friend to dress up for Halloween who thinks it is idolatrous.²⁷ *Liberty must be limited by love.*

[Paul's first warning is: Don't harm your fellow believers. His second warning is . . .]

2. Don't Harm Your Testimony (14:16-18)

Since the world is always observing Christians, we ought to be wise in our use of freedom.²⁸ Paul writes in 14:16: **"Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil."**²⁹ The phrase translated "spoken of as evil" (*blasphemeo*) is translated from a word that literally speaks of being "blasphemed," which is usually used of unbelievers. The "good thing" refers to the liberty to eat meat or to do anything amoral. Paul is saying that unbelievers can legitimately speak of our freedom in Christ as "evil" if it results in the fall of another Christian or the compromise of our testimony. However much we wish it is not so, the world watches what we do.³⁰ When we use our liberty indiscriminately the world watches and shakes its head. Many unbelievers' biggest reason for ignoring God is what they have seen a Christian do. Now certainly, sometimes they have a wrong perspective on what it means to be a Christian, but many times our liberty can harm our ability to tell the world about the Lord. What we intended for good, and what really is good in our lives, can be spoken of as evil when we do not restrain ourselves when it is appropriate. Many non-Christians say, "Why should I be a Christian? You don't get along with each other, so why should I think becoming a Christian will bring peace or happiness?"³¹

Let's say you have the liberty to check your personal e-mail at work, but the unbelievers in your workplace do not share this same freedom. Or perhaps you sense the freedom to talk freely with your coworkers during work hours, but those you work with do not feel free to do so. Consequently, in both of these cases they look down on you. Your coworkers assume that you are lazy and are always trying to proselytize others. In your neighborhood, you may have "freedom in Christ" to let your yard go. Grass, weeds, and sticker bushes consume your yard while you are serving the church or taxiing your kids all over the place. Or, maybe God has given you a beautiful view, but you have allowed trees and shrubbery to block your neighbors' view. In both of these cases your unbelieving neighbors may be rather indignant because in our crashing housing market, you are further hurting the value of their house. While you may

argue that you have Christian liberty to do such things, I would caution you to think twice because your testimony could be on the line. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

In 14:17 Paul explains where true life is for the Christian.³² **“For the kingdom of God³³ is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** The “kingdom of God” here refers to the sphere over which God rules and in which all believers live and operate.³⁴ Yet, we are prone to think that God’s kingdom primarily involves what a person does or does not do. This is how the Pharisees lived, making a big deal of externals. But the kingdom of God is not mainly a matter of *externals* but of *eternals*.³⁵ In God’s kingdom, freedom comes from what He tells you on the inside, not what people tell you on the outside. But we spend so much time worrying about what people think that we never get around to finding out what God thinks.³⁶ However, Paul is asking: How can you fight about such little things and miss the big things. You are fighting over a gnat and not noticing a camel! You are concentrating on a pimple and not noticing Mount Everest!³⁷ Paul says the eternals are “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Righteousness refers to “ethical righteousness,” that is, behavior pleasing to God (e.g., 6:16, 18, 19). Peace refers to the horizontal harmony that believers should manifest. The result of these blessings is “joy.”³⁸

In 14:18 Paul sums up 14:13-17 and brings the reader back to the main point here: We must decide not to put obstacles or traps in other Christians’ paths. He writes, **“For he who in this way serves³⁹ Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”**⁴⁰ If we have a healthy balance in enjoying our liberty and limiting it when it is appropriate we will not only be acceptable to God, we will also win the approval of other people since they realize what is more and less important. When we live out our conscience before God we are accepted by God (14:3), and if we do not abuse our liberty around others we are also approved by people. In other words, they respect us for our restraint and concern for others. When we embrace kingdom priorities, our service to Jesus is pleasing to God and vindicated in the sight of people, even people who disagree with us. Our self-control may also open the door of ministry and witness to the unbelieving community (cf. 14:16).

[Paul has issued two warnings: Don’t harm your fellow believers or your testimony. Now he provides a third and final warning . . .]

3. Don’t Harm Your Church (14:19-23)⁴¹

Your highest priority is the building up of the church. Paul shifts gears in these transitional verses and moves from a negative to a positive emphasis. He moves from what we should stop doing to what we should pursue. In 14:19 Paul states: **“So then⁴² we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”**⁴³ The verb “pursue” (*dioko*) pictures a hunter chasing after his prey or a runner sprinting for the prize.⁴⁴ Paul says that we must pursue peace and the building up of one another over our own use of personal liberty. The Greek term “building up” (*oikodome*) is a construction term that was used to describe the process of making a building stronger. Our goal, then, is to strengthen and solidify the church by protecting other believers from violating their conscience.

Several years ago our men’s ministry was planning a night of card playing. A woman came into our church office and explained to me that her husband was a gambling addict. She said that if we were going

to be playing cards he would attend and that would most likely lead him into further sin. What do you think I said to this woman? I told her that I am confident that the men in our church would care more about her husband's holiness than their freedom.

It is worth noting that sometimes the authority you may be under will restrict your choices. Female teaching and discussion leaders in Bible Study Fellowship (BSF) are required to wear dresses. Some women may see this as a violation of their Christian freedom; however, the women who serve in this capacity whom I have spoken with are more concerned with the joy of serving in this great ministry. Bible Colleges, Christian organizations, and churches also have certain rules and expectations that may not be explicit in Scripture. Nonetheless, if you choose to be a part of such an entity, you need to pursue peace and honor the guidelines that have been established. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

Paul makes another strong statement in 14:20: **“Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food.⁴⁵ All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.”** There is a play between “build up” (14:19) and “tear down” (14:20). Both are construction metaphors. Paul uses the verb “tear down” (*kataluo*),⁴⁶ which functions as a synonym with the verb “destroy” (*apollumi*) in 14:15.⁴⁷ In 14:15 the danger was destroying the weak Christians, and here it is expanded to encompass the destruction of “the work of God”—the church as a whole. Paul reminds us again—it's just not worth indulging yourself. Yes, “all things are indeed clean” (cf. 14:14a)⁴⁸ but to a fellow Christian who is a weaker brother or sister they may be “evil.”⁴⁹ The “weaker brother,” then, is not the one who simply disagrees with what I do, or who gets upset by my freedom;⁵⁰ the “weaker brother” is the one who is likely to imitate me in what I do, violating his own conscience and convictions. The “weaker brother” is the one more likely to sin because he gives in to another's convictions rather than living by his own.

So what are some steps we can take that will help keep other believers from stumbling over us? Paul gives three practical applications.⁵¹

Be considerate. In 14:21 Paul writes, **“It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything⁵² by which your brother stumbles.”⁵³** Paul urges the “strong” to abstain, not because their example might lead the “weak” to drink to excess, but because their example might lead the “weak” to drink, and thus to violate their consciences (14:22-23).⁵⁴ Paul himself is willing to forego any particular food or drink to avoid causing spiritual growth problems for a brother.⁵⁵ Certainly we should be willing to do the same.⁵⁶ We willingly alter our pace of walking while leading a small child by the hand so he or she will not stumble. How much more should we be willing to alter our Christian walk for the benefit of a weaker brother or sister in Christ whom we are leading? We must learn the sensitivities of other believers and we must respect differing convictions. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

However, I do think it is a healthy thing for a Christian who has liberty in some of these areas to indulge it on occasion. I do not think the cause of Christ is ever advanced by having every strong Christian in a congregation completely forsake their right to indulge in some of the things God has given them the freedom to enjoy. What happens, then, is that the whole question is settled on the basis of the most narrow and most prejudiced person in the congregation. Soon, the gospel itself becomes identified with that kind of view. That is why the outside world often considers Christians to be narrow-minded people who have

no concern except to prevent the enjoyment of the good gifts of life that God has given us. Because we tend to major on the minors, we're known for what we're against, not what we're for. Ultimately, exercising Christian liberty is very much like walking a tightrope. As you walk the rope with balancing pole in hand, at one end of the pole is *love for others* and at the other is *Christian liberty*. When these are in balance, your walk is as it should be.⁵⁷

Be convinced. In 14:22a Paul states, **“The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God.”**⁵⁸ If we are engaged in certain activities that are not clearly prohibited by the teaching of Scripture, then we should be confident in our thinking that they are right. If we entertain any doubts about the goodness of these activities, then we should give them up. Unfortunately, the NIV provides a rather misleading translation. It suggests that you are to keep quiet about your liberties. However, that is not quite accurate. What Paul is saying is: If you have faith, have it between yourself and God. That is, let God and His Word be the basis for your faith, and nothing else. Be sure that what you are doing is not because of pride on your part because you want to show off how free you are; you are doing this because God has freed you by His Word.⁵⁹

Be consistent. In 14:22b-23 Paul writes, **“Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.⁶⁰ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”**⁶¹ You are a happy (blessed) person if, in exercising your liberty, you do not condemn yourself by harming another. You are blessed if your exercise of freedom is free from doubt. When we arrive at the conclusion that something is right, unless we receive solid confirmation to the contrary, we should not waver in our conviction. For doubts concerning our beliefs will yield condemnation, but consistency in belief will bring us happiness. In this context, “faith” (*pistis*) does not refer to the teachings of Christianity but to what a person believes to be the will of God for him. If a person does what he believes to be wrong, even though it is not wrong in itself, it becomes sin for him. He has violated what he believes to be God's will. His action has become an act of rebellion against God for him. Whatever is done without the conviction that God has approved it is by definition sin. God has called us to a life of faith. Trust is the willingness to put all of life before God for His approval. Any doubt concerning an action automatically removes that action from the category of that which is acceptable. For a Christian, not a single decision and 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.

Many tales are told about the greatest preacher of the nineteenth century, England's Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He ruffled the feathers of not a few Christians in his day by his lifestyle choices—particularly his fondness for fine cigars. Compared to today, there was relatively little public awareness of the ill effects of tobacco on the human body, but smoking was shunned nonetheless by many Christians, but not Spurgeon. On one occasion, a young man approached Spurgeon and asked what he should do with a box of cigars he had been given. “Give them to me,” Spurgeon replied, “and I will smoke them to the glory of God.”⁶² Some time later, at the height of his fame, Spurgeon was walking down the street and saw a sign which read, “We sell the cigar that Charles Spurgeon smokes.” After reading this sign Spurgeon gave up the habit. He came to see that what was for him a freedom might cause others to stumble.⁶³

What Christian liberty is God calling you to give up either indefinitely or at appropriate occasions? Whatever it is, would you respond today? God wants you to prioritize other believers and follow Christ's sacrificial example. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

Scripture References

[Romans 14:13-23](#); [Matthew 7:1-5](#); [Matthew 15:10-11, 16-20](#); [Mark 7:14-23](#); [Acts 10:1-23](#);
[1 Corinthians 8:7-13; 10:23-11:1](#); [2 Corinthians 6:3-10; 11:16-29](#); [Ephesians 5:1-2](#)

Study Questions

1. In what way(s) have I been guilty of judging a Christian brother or sister (Romans 14:13)?

Is there any lifestyle behavior of mine that has led a fellow believer into sin?

If necessary, am I willing to stop that behavior for the sake of unity?

Can I trace any failings of unity in the body of Christ to exercising my preferences?

What opportunity to model unifying, Christ-like service has God placed before me?

2. Have there been certain "freedoms" that I have participated in that have left me feeling uncomfortable afterwards (Romans 14:14)?

Why have I felt uncomfortable?

Have I violated my own conscience by participating in activities or choices that I did not believe were appropriate for me as a Christian?

If I am not sure whether something is right or wrong should I do it (14:14, 23)?

Why or why not?

3. Have others expressed concern over the exercise of my Christian liberty (Romans 14:16)?

If so, how did I respond to their comments?

Do I regularly remind myself that God's kingdom is more concerned with eternal things than external things?

Could I be characterized as a person who pursues peace with the body of Christ (14:19)?

Why or why not?

4. What might it look like to be "approved by men" (Romans 14:18)?

How can we successfully balance God's approval and people's approval (see Galatians 1:10)?

How should those who have freedom in a particular area respond to those who do not have freedom (Romans 14:21-23)?

Does "unity" mean that believers must come to the same opinions or convictions about everything (14:1, 5, 22)?

5. Which is more important to me: the spiritual health of a fellow Christian, or enjoying my freedoms in front of one who may be stumbling?

Am I so intent on doing my "own thing" that I am hurting the people around me?

Am I showing consideration for those who may have an opinion different than my own?

In what specific way(s) have I modeled a considerate spirit?

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