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**Relationships between “Strong” and “Weak” Believers  
(Part 2)  
*Don’t Offend Your Weaker Brother!*  
Romans 14:13-23**

**Introduction:**

In **1928 Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse** was speaking at a **youth conference** in **Montrose, Pennsylvania** where about **200** young people were present. One day **two women** came to him in **horror** because some **girls** were not wearing **stockings!** These women wanted him to **rebuke** them. **Barnhouse** says that he looked these women **straight** in the **eye** and said to them, “The **Virgin Mary** never wore **stockings.**” They **gasped** and said, “**She didn’t?**” I answered, “In **Mary’s time**, stockings were **unknown.** So far as we know, they were **first** worn by **prostitutes** in **Italy** in the **15<sup>th</sup> century**, when the **Renaissance** began. Later, a lady of the **nobility** wore **stockings** at a **court ball**, greatly to the **scandal** of many people. Before long, however, **everyone** in the **upper classes** was wearing **stockings. . . .**”

**Barnhouse** went on to say, “These **ladies**, who were **holdovers** from the **Victorian epoch**, had **no more to say.** I did not **rebuke** the girls for not wearing **stockings.** A **year or two** afterward, **most girls** in the **United States** were going without **stockings** in summer, and nobody thought anything about it. Nor do I believe that this led toward the **disintegration** of **moral standards** in the **United States.** Times were **changing**, and the **step away** from **Victorian legalism** was all for the **better.**”

As we continue on in our study of **Romans 14:1-15:13**, we are looking at how Paul handled the **differing opinions** in the church at Rome over certain issues, often called the “**grey areas**” of Christian living, which are not directly **commanded** or **forbidden** in Scripture. There have been numerous things down through church history that have fallen into this category, but remember these things have nothing to do with **sin** or **false doctrine**, but that of **personal preference**. However, unless such “**non-sinful** things in themselves” are “**handled correctly**,” **believers** can be greatly **harmed**, **unity** in the church can be **destroyed**, and **churches** can be **ripped apart**. This is what we are going to be looking at this morning. Turn in your Bible to **Romans 14**.

**In Romans 14:13-23 we see five reasons why “strong” believers must be careful to not insist on always exercising their Christian freedom on matters of opinion.**

The **first reason** is because:

### **I. Exercising Freedom can cause Believers to Stumble**

- A. Look at the first part of **v. 13**: **Therefore** let us **not judge** one another **anymore...** (Stop there)
  1. As we come to **v. 13** Paul both **concludes vv. 1-12** and **begins** a new paragraph. The word “**Therefore**” (oun) refers particularly to **vv. 10-12**, in which **Christ alone** as **God** has the **authority** to **judge** His people, who will all **individually stand** before His **judgment seat** and **give account** of themselves to Him.
  2. In the **first part** of **v. 13**, Paul addresses **both “strong”** and “**weak**” believers commanding them to “**...not judge** (i.e. to criticize and condemn) one another anymore” over the non-sinful issues of **diet** and **days**. **Both groups** are to stop because God

has **accepted** each one, and it is to Christ alone their one Master that each is **answerable**, no one else.

3. Now **last time** we saw that the “**weak in faith**” are **immature** and **uninstructed** believers who are not **strong enough** in their faith to enable them to **appreciate** and **exercise** their **freedom** in Christ. For various reasons they are still carrying along some kind of **legalistic** baggage.
  4. The “**strong**” are **mature** in the faith, have a **greater biblical knowledge**, and understand and enjoy their **liberty in Christ**, which **frees** them from the rules and regulations of **legalism** and **ceremonialism**.
  5. However, since **Christian freedom** was never intended by God to be an **open season license** to exercise it **regardless** of the **impact** upon others, the “**strong**” can never **rightly** say, “I’m **free in Christ** and I’m **going** to do whatever I want, **like** it or **lump** it!”
  6. Since the “**strong**” have a **greater biblical understanding** of their **Christian freedom**, they are more **responsible** before God to handle it correctly. This is why Paul directs his **primary focus** on them in this paragraph.
- B. So instead of “**judging**” or **condemning** the “**weak**,” with a **play on words** Paul commands the “**strong**” at the end of **v. 13**: but rather **determine this** (i.e. make this judgment)—**not** to **put** an **obstacle** or a **stumbling block** in a **brother’s** way.
1. Last time we saw that Paul referred to the “**weak**” as a “**brother**” in **v. 10**. He does so again here and will repeat this **two more times** in **vv. 15** and **21**.

2. The “**strong**” are not to **exercise** their Christian freedom in a way that can cause “**weak**” **believers** to **stumble**. Although the words “**obstacle**” (skandalon) and “**stumbling block**” (proskomma) are different Greek words, in this **context** they are essentially **synonymous** and carry the idea of **stumbling** into **sin**.
3. Paul warned the “**strong**” in the same way in **1 Corinthians 8:9**, “But take care that this **liberty** of yours does not somehow become a **stumbling block** to the **weak**.”
4. Since the “**strong**” can cause “**weak**” believers to **stumble** into **sin** by their **example** or by **pressure**, Paul commands that they **determine** to never allow their **liberty in Christ** to be a **booby-trap** in another believer’s way.
5. The **second reason** why “**strong**” believers must be careful is because:

## II. **Violating Love spiritually Harms the weaker Brother**

- A. Look at **v. 14**: I **know** and am **convinced in the Lord Jesus** that nothing is **unclean** in **itself**; but to **him** who **thinks** anything to be **unclean**, to him it is **unclean**.
  1. Although the “**weak**” have an **inadequate biblical understanding** of what their Christian faith **permits** them to do, here Paul goes on record to **emphatically** side with the **theology** of the “**strong**” by saying, “...**nothing** is **unclean** in **itself**...” The word “**unclean**” (koinon) means impure or sinful.
  2. Now this isn’t just Paul’s **personal opinion**. Notice again that he declares, “I **know** and am **convinced in the Lord Jesus**.”

His **certainty** that “**nothing is unclean in itself**” was by divine revelation.

3. Even Jesus Himself said in **Mark 7:15**, “There is **nothing outside** the man which can **defile** him if it goes into him; but the things which **proceed out** of the man (i.e. from his heart) are what **defile** the man.” (vv. 18-23; 1 Tim. 4:3-5)
  4. The Bible alone **determines** what is **sinful**. Therefore, whatever is not directly **commanded** or **forbidden** in Scripture is **not sinful**.
  5. Nothing **physical** or **material** in itself is **intrinsically sinful**. It is **morally neutral, amoral, non-moral** or **non-sinful**; it doesn't make us **worse** or **better** before God (1 Cor. 8:8).
  6. However, for **various reasons** (e.g. tradition, personal upbringing, religious background, etc.) not everyone has this **knowledge** or **conviction** (1 Cor. 8:4-7). Believers' **subjective opinions** are not always in line with **objective biblical truth**.
  7. Even the **apostle Peter** had a problem letting go of his **legalistic baggage** concerning **food** until God straightened him out (Acts 10:9-14) and told him in **Acts 10:15**, “What God has **cleansed**, no longer consider **unholy**.”
- B. Therefore, although the **biblical truth** is that “**nothing is unclean in itself**,” Paul goes on to say in **v. 14**: but to **him** (i.e. the **weak**) who **thinks** anything to be **unclean**, to **him** it is **unclean**.
1. Now just because the “**weak**” “**thinks**” (logizomeno) or **reckons** that **something** not directly **commanded** or **forbidden** in Scripture is “**unclean**” or **sinful**, does not in **reality** make it **sinful** because it's **not**.

2. However, since he **thinks** it is, therefore **for him** to **partake** of what he **believes** is **wrong**—it is **sin** because he is **doing** what he **believes** God **doesn't** want him to do and **violating** his **conscience**.
- C. Therefore, Paul tells the “**strong**” in **v. 15: For if** because of **food** your **brother** is **hurt**, **you** are **no longer** walking according to **love**. (Stop there)
1. Whenever the “**strong**” **knowingly insist** on exercising their Christian freedom, in this case **eating meat** in the presence of “**weak**” believers who believe it is **wrong**, Paul says, “...your brother is **hurt**.” The word “**hurt**” (lupeitai) here means to **grieve**, to cause **sorrow**, **pain** and **distress**.
  2. This has to do with a **moral grievance**, in that, by the **insensitive example** or **pressure** of the “**strong**” the “**weak**” also **eats** what he **believes** is **wrong** and in so doing **violates** his **conscience**. By his **violation of love** the “**strong**” has **spiritual harmed** his “**weaker**” brother, who is now **full of guilt**, and he is **out of fellowship** with the Lord.
  3. The **key** to exercising Christian freedom is “...**walking** (i.e. living our lives) according to **love**.” Christlike “**agape**” **love** is God’s **preeminent standard** (12:9-21; 13:8-10).
  4. When it comes to our **liberty** in Christ **loving relationship** is always **more important** than **personal rights**. The “**strong**” are **responsible** to always **lovingly consider** the **impact** of their **Christian freedom** upon **others** not merely **themselves** (1 Cor. 9:19).

5. For without the central qualification of “**love**” we have **no right** to call it “**Christian**” freedom. It is merely **license** that violates **love!**

D. **Warning** of the **serious spiritual harm** that can be done to the “**weak**,” Paul goes on to command the “**strong**” at the end of **v. 15**: Do not **destroy** with your **food** him for whom Christ **died**.

1. The word “**destroy**” (apollue) is a **strong word** that often means **eternal damnation in hell** (Matt. 10:28; Lk. 13:3; Jn. 3:16; Rom. 2:12). Because of this, some scholars believe Paul is talking about the “**strong**” having the ability to cause the “**weak**” to **sin** to the point of **eternal destruction**.
2. Obviously, not all “**professing**” Christians are “**true**” Christians and if one **continues** in an **unbroken pattern** or **lifestyle of sin** he has no **biblical basis** for being a Christian and has revealed himself to be an **unbeliever**.
3. However, in this **context** the person who is “**weak in faith**” is repeatedly called a “**brother**,” which makes him a **fellow believer** in Christ. Therefore, for him to be “**destroyed**” cannot mean that he can **lose his salvation**, for every believer will by God’s steadfast love **persevere** to the end (8:28-39).
4. Greek scholar **W.E. Vine** accurately states, “The idea is not **extinction** (i.e. **eternal damnation**) but **ruin, loss**, not of **being**, but of **well-being**.” (pg. 294)
5. Therefore, for the “**strong**” to “**...destroy with your food him** (i.e. the **weak**) for whom **Christ died**,” speaks of the “**strong’s**” **loveless exercise** of their freedom whereby the “**weak’s**” **spiritual growth** and **development** is **devastated**.

6. Paul said a similar thing in **1 Corinthians 8:11-12**, “For through your **knowledge** (i.e. **liberty**) he who is weak is **ruined**, the **brother** for whose sake **Christ died**. And so, by **sinning** against the **brethren** and **wounding** their **conscience** when it is weak, you **sin** against **Christ**.”
7. Notice how God Himself is **defending** the **heart** of the “**weaker**” brother here, who is a **valuable person** in God’s eyes, one “for whom **Christ died**.”
8. Since Jesus Christ has **lovingly sacrificed** His **life** for the “**weaker**” brethren, how can the “**strong**” refuse to **lovingly refrain** from **flaunting** their freedom and causing **spiritual harm** to the “**weak**.” To **violate love** and sin against one’s “**weaker**” brother by **wounding** his **conscience** is a **serious matter** because it is to **sin** against **Christ**.
9. The **third reason** why “**strong**” believers must be careful is because:

### **III. Eternal Priorities matter More than external Pleasures**

- A. Not only does the behavior of the “**strong**” impact his “**weaker**” brother next to him in the pew, it also impacts the **kingdom** of **God**. Look at **v. 16**: Therefore do not **let** what is for you a **good thing** be spoken of as **evil**; for the **kingdom of God** is not **eating** and **drinking**, but **righteousness** and **peace** and **joy** in the **Holy Spirit**.
1. In this **context**, the “**good thing**” (agathon) Paul talks about here is best taken as the believer’s **liberty in Christ**, not the **gospel** of **salvation** or one’s **Christian testimony**, etc.,

although those things can also be **negatively impacted** by the **abuse** of Christian freedom.

2. The Christian's **liberty in Christ** is a **gracious gift** from God and a **wonderfully "good thing,"** but whenever the "**strong**" **selfishly insist** on exercising their freedom at the **expense** of spiritually harming the "**weak,**" then **Christian freedom** becomes something that can be "**spoken of as evil**" by both **believers** and **unbelievers** alike. This should never happen!
  3. When it does, the "**strong**" are **guilty** of a **grave lack** of **perspective** and **priority**. Even though the **views** of the "**strong**" are drastically different from those of the **Pharisees,** they actually **fall prey** to the **same error** of sacrificing the **eternal** on the **altar** of **external**.
  4. **Douglas Moo** insightfully states "...the **Pharisees** insisted on strict adherence to the **ritual law** at the expense of 'justice, mercy, and faith' (Matt. 23:23), the '**strong**' are insisting on **exercising** their **freedom** from the ritual law at the expense of 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.'" (pg. 856)
- B. Look what Paul says about the **eternal priorities** of the **kingdom of God** in v. 17: for the **kingdom of God** is **not eating** and **drinking,** but **righteousness** and **peace** and **joy** in the **Holy Spirit**.
1. Now the "**kingdom (Basileia) of God**" that Paul is referring to here is the **present reign** of God in the heart of every believer to which he now belongs. It was **inaugurated** at Christ's **first coming** when He established His **church**.

2. The **essence** of God’s kingdom has to do with **eternal priorities** not the **external pleasures** of **eating** and **drinking**.
  3. Whereas some say that these **eternal priorities** refer to the **righteousness** of justification (1:17; 3:21-22; 5:1; 10:3, 6), **peace** with God (5:1), and the **joy** of salvation. However, in this **context “righteousness”** (dikaiosune) refers to ethical **righteousness** or **right behavior** in accordance with the Word and will of God.
  4. “**Peace**” (eirene) has to do with the harmonious living and mutual support of believers with one another. And “**joy**” (chara) refers to the internal reality of believers who are living by these eternal priorities in dependence on the Spirit of God.
  5. Notice that all of these **eternal priorities** are “...in the **Holy Spirit.**” They are the **manifestations** of the Holy Spirit in the lives of **kingdom citizens** who are **allowing** Him to **control** their lives.
- C. Paul further explains the **importance** of living by these **eternal priorities** in **v. 18**: For he who in **this way** serves Christ is **acceptable to God** and **approved by men**.
1. Those who live according to these **eternal priorities** as **manifested** in their lives by the Holy Spirit “in this way **serve Christ,**” in that, they are **wholehearted committed** to Him. And as a **result**, Paul says that they are “...**acceptable** (or **well-pleasing**) to **God.**”
  2. They are also “**approved** (e.g. as by testing) by **men.**” When we are truly **serving Christ** by manifesting in our lives that

**eternal priorities** matter more than **external pleasures**, this will be experienced and approved by both **believers** and **unbelievers** alike. This stands in **stark contrast** to **v. 16** where the “**strong**” who brazenly **flaunted** their freedom now have their **liberty** “spoken of as **evil**.”

3. The **fourth reason** why “**strong**” believers must be careful is because:

#### **IV. Abusing Freedom doesn't Edify but tears Down**

- A. Since living by the **eternal priorities** of God's kingdom is His design, Paul commands the “**strong**” in **v. 19: So then we pursue** the things which make for **peace** and the **building up** of one another.
  1. Since God is all about His people living in “**peace**” (eirenes) and harmony with each other (Eph. 4:3) and “**building up**” (oikodomes) or **edifying** one another (1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 4:11-16), He commands us to “**pursue**” these things.
  2. The word “**pursue**” (diokomen) means to seek, chase, and follow after. The **present tense** of the word indicates that the **goals of peace** and the **mutual building up** or **edification** of the body of Christ are to be an **on-going, continuous pursuit**.
  3. However, this cannot happen when the “**strong**” are **abusing** their **Christian freedom** among the “**weak**.”
- B. Therefore, Paul **commands** in **v. 20: Do not tear down** the **work of God** for the **sake of food**. (Stop there)
  1. The one Greek word translated “**tear down**” (katalue) is the opposite of “**building up**” the body of Christ, and since it is in

- the **present tense** Paul is telling the “**strong**” to **stop doing** what they are **already** in the **process** or **habit** of doing.
2. The phrase “**work of God**” (ergon tou theou) here in this **context** clearly refers to **believers**, all of whom are, according to **Ephesians 2:10**, “...His **workmanship**, created in Christ Jesus.” All true believers constitute **God’s building**—we are all a **block** in the **building** of His church (1 Cor. 3:9).
  3. Paul is saying that the “**strong**” must not **abuse** their freedom in Christ “for the **sake of food**,” and in so doing, become a **wrecking ball** that tears down the “**weak**” and the very **purposes** of God for His church.
- C. So everyone knows what Paul is talking about, he **reminds** us that he is not speaking about **sinful things**. Look at **v. 20: All things** indeed are **clean**, but they are **evil** for the man who **eats** and **gives offense**.
1. Paul has already said in **v. 14** “**nothing** is **unclean** in **itself**,” and now he states that “**all things** indeed are **clean**.” He is referring to those things not directly **commanded** or **forbidden** in Scripture.
  2. However, even though this is **objective biblical truth**, the **danger** comes when “**strong**” believers **abuse** their freedom by having **no concern** for the **impact** of what they do on others. Paul says that by doing this these non-sinful things in themselves now “...are **evil** (i.e. sin) for the (“strong”) man who **eats** and **gives offense**” to the “**weak**.”
  3. Just because something may be **right** for us to do doesn’t mean that is always **right** for us to do it.

D. Because of this, Paul declares in v. **21**: It is **good not to eat meat** or to **drink wine**, or to **do anything** by which your **brother stumbles**.

1. Paul now adds “**drinking wine**” to the other **two examples** of **diet** and **days** that separated believers in the Roman church. Whereas **drunkenness** is always **forbidden** in Scripture, Paul is **not prohibiting** all **drinking of alcoholic beverages**, which neither the Old nor New Testament forbids.
2. **John MacArthur** is correct when he states, “If Paul considered the **drinking of wine** to be **sinful in itself**, it would not make sense to use it as an **illustration** of discretionary, nonsinful practices.” (pg. 300)
3. In addition to diet, days, and drinking, Paul tells the “strong” that it is “**not good. . . . to do anything** (fill in the blank) by which your (**weaker**) brother **stumbles**.”
4. Just because we may **know** that we have **liberty in Christ** to do certain things doesn’t mean that we always have to **exercise** our freedom. For certain reasons we may choose to not exercise it, especially when we know that it might cause a “**weaker**” brother to stumble into sin.
5. **No wonder** Paul, who was the **most free** of any Christian, said in **1 Corinthians 8:13**, “Therefore, if food causes my brother to **stumble**, I will **never** eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to **stumble**.” (1 Cor. 10:23)
6. The **fifth reason** why “**strong**” believers must be careful is because:

#### **IV. One’s Conscience before God cannot be Violated**

- A. Paul **first** addresses the **conscience** of the “**strong**” in **v. 22**: The **faith** which you have, have as your **own conviction** before God. **Happy** is he who does not **condemn** himself in what he approves.
1. The “**strong**” have a **mature faith** and a **correct biblical “conviction before God,”** so that they are **assured** that a certain activity is **not sinful** and they are **free** to do it.
  2. **They alone** are said to be “**happy**” (makarios) or **blessed**, in that, what they “**approve**” or partake of “**does not condemn**” them. In other words, their **conscience** is not **violated** and they don’t feel any **guilt**.
  3. The “**weak**” are not “**happy**” or **blessed** in this regard, for instead of having “**faith**” or confident assurance they have “**doubt.**”
- B. Paul then addresses the **conscience** of the “**weak**” in **v. 23**: But he who **doubts** is **condemned** if he eats, because his eating is not from **faith**; and **whatever** is not from **faith** is **sin**.
1. The “**weak**” does not have the “**faith**” (pisteos) or **assurance** that he **free** to eat. Therefore, if he **eats** what he believes is **wrong** (i.e. “**doubts**”), he is “**condemned**” (kekritai), in that, he **sins** against his **conscience** before God and is **guilty**.
  2. Our **conscience** is not an **infallible guide**, but it is always **wrong** to go against it (1 Tim. 4:2). Paul then **concludes** “...and **whatever** is not from **faith** (i.e. the **assurance** or **conviction** that this is **right** before God) is **sin.**”
  3. Therefore, it is always **wise** to go by the **principle: When in doubt—don’t!**

## **Conclusion:**

In closing, since we are all **growing** and **maturing** in our Christian lives, we all are “**strong**” in some areas and “**weak**” in others. Therefore, we should never **flaunt** our freedom or **force** our opinions of things not directly **commanded** or **forbidden** in Scripture on others.

Instead, we need to let Christlike “**agape**” **love** be our **guide** in all issues of **personal preference**. For Jesus said in **John 13:35**, “**By this** all men will **know** that you are **My disciples**, if you have **love** for one another.”