

## 32. Christian Liberty 2

### Romans 14:14-23

Paul has to this point in Romans 14, laid down the general principles regarding Christian Liberty. From Romans 14 Paul moves on to the more practical side of Christian Liberty. The question he is seeking to answer in our passage is how should a Christian use His liberty? It is here that perhaps the greatest dangers lie for the professing Christian.

We should keep Paul's summary statement of Romans 14:13 before us constantly. No longer should we judge our brethren over these indifferent matters. Rather we should seek to exercise love toward one another, and this will mean a number of things in the area of Christian Liberty for the strong, including the refusal to practice out liberties if they should cause a weaker brother to stumble.

**NOTE:** If you are able to view a copy of Stuart Olyott's commentary on Romans, attention is drawn to his excellent comments on Christian Liberty at this point in his commentary.

Please Read Romans 14:14-23

**Verse 14:** This verse is something of a parenthesis between verses 13 and 15. Paul wishes to re-affirm the correct understanding of the strong, for they are essentially right in their beliefs. Paul has a deep and firm conviction (Gal 5:10; Philip 2:24; 1 Thess 3:4; 2 Tim 1:5,12) based upon the teaching of Christ (Mt 15:10,11,16-20; Mk 7:14-23) that the distinction between common (unclean) and uncommon (holy/clean) is over (Acts 10:14,28; Mk 7:2).

However, those that are troubled in their conscience about such matters, who are weak in conscience and who would violate their conscience by taking of an unclean thing, these things remain unclean to them. Therefore they must not take of the unclean thing.

**Verse 15:** This verse is linked with the thought of verse 13. Though certainly at liberty in the gospel, the practice of liberty is to be determined by the law of love. We are to forgo our liberty if it leads the weak to violate their conscience. The strong need to seriously

consider in the context of love how they are to practice their liberty.

The weak brother is precious to Christ, having been purchased by Him in His death, therefore we must be careful not to destroy the conscience of this brother by our behaviour, but rather deny ourselves the practice of our liberty. To destroy is to damage his conscience before God, and to lead him into a life of misery through an accusing conscience.

**QUESTION:** Can you think of any areas where a weaker brother's life might be destroyed by your exercise of legitimate liberty?

**Verse 16:** This verse could mean one of two things, or the combination of two things. We must give no occasion for slanderous talk. This could be either from unbelievers, seeing the quarrels between the strong and the weak over these doubtful matters; or the slander of the strong by the weak who cannot understand the practice of Christian liberty in the strong.

**Verse 17:** This verse is a further explanation of the previous and therefore leads to the conclusion that the slander in verse 16 is that of either party. The evidence of God's salvation has nothing to do with debates over food or drink, or even the act of eating or drinking certain substances, but it is evidenced by a state of righteousness before God, peace with God and the brethren, and Spirit wrought joy. The fruit of the Spirit is the mark of a Christian. It is these things that we should be most concerned about, and not the practice of our liberties.

**QUESTION:** How can the practice of Christian Liberty lead to a loss of these important things mentioned in verse 17?

**Verse 18:** This verse continues the explanation of verse 17. The one who praises God is the one that truly lives for God to His honour and glory, through the exercising of his spiritual graces (14:6-8; 6:22). The exercise of our spiritual fruit is far more important than the exercise of our Christian Liberty.

'... he is approved by men, because they cannot do otherwise than bear testimony to that excellence which they see with their eyes; not that the ungodly always favour the children of God; on the contrary, when there is no cause, they often pour forth against them many reproaches ... but Paul speaks here of honest judgment, blended with no moroseness, no hatred, no superstition.'

John Calvin

**QUESTION:** How would the relaxing of our Christian Liberties bring praise from men and from God? Discuss.

**Verse 19:** On the basis of what has gone before we are to pursue that which makes for peace (1 Pet 3:11; Heb 12:14), and for that which builds up Christian character in one another. Therefore the implication is that it will be necessary for the strong to forgo their liberty on occasion, and to not enter into useless and vain disputes.

**QUESTION:** How can Christian Liberty lead to a situation that is unedifying? Explain.

**Verses 20,21:** We need therefore to carefully consider the practice of our liberty in Christ, being careful to not harm our weaker brethren (1 Cor 8:12,13). Though we are free in Christ and these things aren't sinful in themselves, if we practice our liberty and cause offence through troubling the weak, then we are practicing evil.

We also need to consider what the consequences will be through continual debates over doubtful matters. How will the church be affected if I continue to practice this legitimate liberty - will the church remain united, or will it be divided? Will the work of the church be able to go on?

'A Christian man is a most free Lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.'

Martin Luther

**Verse 22:** The strong does have a firm and true conviction before God that what he is doing is right and he is not to renounce that liberty. He is in fact to keep it, and to practice it privately before the Lord for it is true and right for him to do so, yet there is no need for him to parade his liberty at the expense of his brother. He is a most happy Christian if in the practice of his liberty he does not condemn himself through harming another.

**NOTE: INDIVIDUAL DISCOVERY QUESTION HERE:** What does Paul mean by Romans 14:23?

**Verse 23:** The previous verse was a summary statement for the strong, and this verse is so for the weak. If the weak practice what their consciences are not ready for, then they are condemned by it, contracting a sense of guilt. This is so because their practice is not based on an inner conviction that what they are doing is right or in line with the Christian faith. They are convinced that to do so would be wrong before God, and would

be sin. What they do without faith therefore is sin toward God in this regard, for they would do that which they believe to be sin against God, and that against their conscience which tells them it is so.

### **INDIVIDUAL DISCOVERY**

What is a scruple? Why are these things scruples?

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