

## Do Not Destroy

Romans 14:13-23

Sunday, March 10, 2024

Last Sunday when we looked at the first half of Romans 14, we were introduced to a new term: *disputable matters*. In light of last Sunday's sermon, how many of us found ourselves in a conversation this past week wondering, "Is this a disputable matter?" I know we had a great discussion the other night at our Life Group about these things.

Many of you also picked up a copy of the article we have available in the Connection Cafe entitled *On Disputable Matters*.<sup>1</sup> Hopefully, you found it helpful in clarifying the difference between disputable and indisputable matters.

The topic we considered last week and will build upon this morning is certainly a relevant one. For those of you who missed last Sunday's sermon, I encourage you to find it on our church's website or contact the church office for a printed copy.

Last Sunday we defined the disputable matters that Paul spoke of in Romans 14:1-12 as "areas of Christian belief and behavior that Scripture leaves to personal conscience." When we take the time to prayerfully study what Scripture teaches, we should be able to—with the Spirit's help—discern where there is room for matters of personal conscience and where there is not.

For example, to the church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul wrote, "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!" (Gal. 1:9, NIV). In other words, on matters related to the truth of the gospel, there is no room for alternatives.

But on matters such as those described in Romans 14, whether or not Christians should continue to observe Old Testament food laws or traditional holy days, Paul taught that these are matters of conscience. A Jewish background believer and a Gentile convert may come to different conclusions based on their grasp of the gospel as to what does and what does not honor the Lord Jesus in principle and practice.

Paul's purpose was to address a growing source of conflict within the church. In the passage we'll look at, Paul was calling the church in Rome to stop passing judgment on one another over the disputable matters of eating and drinking. Instead, Paul was urging them to resolve to never put a stumbling block in the way of a fellow believer.

Having looked at verses 1-12 last Sunday, we come now to verse 13: "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister" (Rom. 14:13).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/on-disputable-matters/>

I want you to notice two adjectives Paul uses in this section to describe these believers. Back in verse 1 of chapter 14, Paul spoke of believers “whose faith is weak.” Then in the first verse of chapter 15, which we’ll come back to next Sunday, Paul says, “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1). Paul describes some Christians as “strong” and others as “weak.” That might not sound very kind.

Some interpreters of this passage see Paul equating the “weak” with Jewish background believers and Gentile Christians with the “strong.” The problem with that interpretation is that in a similar passage in 1 Corinthians, Paul applied the category of “weak” to Gentile Christians who came to faith in Christ and left behind their pagan past. In other words, these categories of “weak” and “strong” probably don’t apply exclusively to one group or the other.

What did Paul mean when he called some Christians “weak” and others “strong”? Take a look at Romans 14:14 where Paul says of himself, “I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself” (Rom. 14:14a).

To be clear, what Paul was referring to was his own conviction about whether or not he was obligated to observe the Old Testament food laws. In this context, Paul still had what he said in verse 2 in mind: “One person’s faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables” (Rom. 14:2).

According to verse 14, Paul had concluded that based on his understanding of the gospel and the teaching of Jesus, he was no longer under obligation to eat only kosher foods. If he chose to eat something else, he knew that his conscience would not sound alarm bells that he was dishonoring the Lord. Paul was “convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself.” On this issue, Paul would have considered himself among the “strong,” not from a place of self-confidence but from a position of gospel-formed conviction.

However, not everyone in the church in Rome shared Paul’s convictions. For some, the distinction between clean and unclean, as it related to eating and drinking, still applied. On this matter, their conscience was warning them not to dishonor the Lord by ignoring these boundaries. Perhaps some Christians still associated certain foods with idolatrous pagan worship. For them, to eat would be blasphemous. Others might still be operating under the Old Covenant distinction between what God called clean and what was not. For them, personal holiness and God’s glory were at stake.

With this in mind, let’s return to verse 13 and reread Paul’s command. “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another” (Rom. 14:13a). In this first part of verse 13, we see that Paul is drawing a conclusion based on what he taught in verses 1-12.

But notice where Paul goes next in the rest of verse 13. He says, “Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister” (Rom. 14:13b). In the verses that follow through the end of the chapter, Paul appears to be addressing those whom he would consider to be in the “strong” camp, or at least those who considered themselves to be in this place. Paul addresses those who, as they came to a deeper understanding of the gospel, were working out how their freedom in Christ applied to these disputable matters.

However, as we all can likely attest to, sometimes our love for one another doesn’t grow at the same rate as our love for Jesus. And when that happens, there can be conflict among Christians. In this case, it was conflict over disputable matters. The problem Paul sought to address is that **when Christians flaunt their freedom in Christ, they can endanger the faith of fellow believers.**

As we work through verses 13–23, we’ll observe four actions we can take as Christians to keep us from flaunting our freedom so as not to endanger the faith of fellow believers.

You’ll find the first action in verses 13–15. **Out of love for one another, Christians must resolve to never lay a stumbling block in the way of a brother or sister.**

You’ve probably heard Christians talk about stumbling blocks or causing another person to stumble. The particular stumbling block Paul had in mind had to do with leading a fellow believer to violate their conscience and thus sin against God.

We already looked at verse 14 briefly when we sought to define Paul’s use of the terms “weak” and “strong.” Again, Paul was “convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus that [no food] is unclean in itself” (Rom. 14:14a). But Paul goes on to say in the rest of that verse, “But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean” (14:14b). But how can something be both clean and unclean at the same time? How can something be permissible for one Christian but off-limits for another?

Look at the next verse. In verse 15 Paul says, “If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love” (14:15a). Where the NIV uses the word “distressed” the ESV uses the word “grieved” Paul was describing the inward pain, distress, or grief brought about when a person violates their conscience.

I recently started reading a book entitled *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ*. In it, the authors define *conscience* as “your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.”<sup>2</sup> As we get older and as our faith in Christ matures, our awareness of what we believe to be right or wrong takes its form.

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In the book, the authors say that our conscience is one of God's good gifts. They say,

“Consider your sense of touch. That sense is a gift from God that can function as a warning system to save you from great harm. If the tip of your finger lightly brushes the top of a hot stove, your nervous system reflexively compels you to pull back your hand to avoid more pain and harm. Similarly, the guilt that your conscience makes you feel should lead you to turn from your sin to Jesus. God gave you that sense of guilt for your good.”<sup>3</sup>

When Paul says in verse 13, “Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister,” he's saying, “Don't flaunt your freedom in Christ such that by your behavior (free as it may be) you end up leading your brother or sister to violate their conscience and thus sin against God. At best, Paul says in verse 15, such an assertion of your freedom is unloving; at worst, it can be destructive.

Notice the second half of verse 15 says, “Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died” (Rom. 14:15b). Interpreters differ on what exactly Paul has in mind when he says that a brother or sister's faith may be *destroyed*. But notice Paul doesn't say injured, damaged, or bruised. Paul says *destroyed*. Whatever it means, it's bad.

Let's move on to verses 16-18 and consider a second action we can take as Christians that will keep us from flaunting our freedom in Christ and not endanger the faith of fellow believers. **Out of reverence for Christ, Christians must keep their focus on kingdom matters.** Look with me at verses 16-18.

“Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval” (Rom. 14:16-18).

What causes Christians to lose their kingdom focus? What leads us to take our eyes off of the gospel and fix our attention on less important matters? Notice I didn't say *unimportant* matters. I said *less* important. I don't think Paul was suggesting that matters of eating and drinking were *unimportant*. But these matters were not of *first* importance. “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

Jesus said something similar in his Sermon on the Mount. Preaching to the crowds, Jesus said,

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 25

heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:31-34, NIV).

When I was a freshman at Ohio University, I got involved with Campus Crusade for Christ. This was before they changed their name to Cru. During that first year on campus, my faith grew significantly. I learned how to read my Bible. I learned how to pray with other Christians. And I learned how to tell others about Jesus.

My sophomore year was different. My faith continued to grow, but I also became overly curious about deeper matters. A few of us decided to jump into the deep end of the theological pool before we knew if we could swim. We became fixated on knowing whether someone was a Calvinist or an Arminian. We debated whether we were five-point Calvinists or four-pointers, judging anyone who didn't hold to all five points as being of weaker stock. We turned these things into a litmus test of spiritual maturity and ended up frustrating and confusing many of our friends. We spent more time obsessing over Reformed doctrine and less time reading our Bibles, praying for our campus, and sharing our faith.

Was studying the finer points of Calvinist doctrine unimportant? No, but it definitely wasn't of first importance. Out of reverence for Christ, we needed to keep our focus on kingdom matters.

There's a third action we can take as Christians that will keep us from flaunting our freedom in Christ so as to not endanger the faith of fellow believers. **For the sake of building church unity, Christians must embrace humility with respect to their liberty.** Look at verses 19-21.

“Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall” (Rom. 14:19-21).

Next Sunday, our Global Partners Steve and Kathy Austvold will be joining us. A few years ago, a team from our church went with Steve down to Lake Charles, Louisiana for a week to serve with Crisis Response. We were working with homeowners whose homes had received hurricane damage. We were fortunate to have people on our team who knew a thing or two about home construction. That wasn't my skill set. However, demolition was something I could do. Give me a sledgehammer and I'll leave my mark.

Let me reread verses 19-20 from the Christian Standard Bible. Paul says,

Andrew David Naselli & J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ*, 2016, Crossway, p. 42.5

“So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another. Do not tear down God’s work because of food” (Rom. 14:19–20a, CSB).

Our freedom in Christ can either be used for building up the body of Christ or tearing it down. Depending on how we choose to exercise our freedom in Christ, we’ll either be taking part in construction or demolition.

Paul insists in verses 20–21, that even though “All food is clean... It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall” (Rom. 14:20–21). This verse helps us bridge from the particular situation Paul was addressing to modern-day applications. “It is better,” Paul says, “not to... do anything... that will cause [a] brother or sister to fall” (Rom. 14:21).

The principle is clear: For the sake of building church unity, Christians must embrace humility with respect to their liberty. But in practice, laying aside our rights for the sake of another isn’t easy. If you’re anything like me, your first response in these cases may be to ask, “Why should I have to?”

The question we should be asking ourselves is “What can I do to build up my brother?” “What can I set aside to build up my sister?” If I’m convinced that my freedom in Christ allows me to act, then I am also free *not* to act. For the sake of the unity of the church, let’s find ways to turn “Why should I have to?” into “Why shouldn’t I want to?”

There’s one final action mentioned in this passage that we can take as Christians to keep us from flaunting our freedom in Christ and not endanger the faith of fellow believers. **For the sake of keeping the peace, Christians may need to keep some personal convictions private.**

Let’s look at the last couple of verses of this chapter. In verses 22–23, Paul writes,

“So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:22–23).

Returning to the book I referenced earlier, there’s a quote I found helpful related to this principle. The authors explain that,

“Conscience is personal. It is *your* conscience. It is intended for you and not for someone else. And the conscience of others belongs to them and not you. You

cannot, must not, force others to adopt your conscience standards. MYOC. Mind your own conscience.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul says in verse 22, “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God” (Rom. 14:22). Let’s unpack that verse a bit to better understand what Paul was and was not teaching.

First, Paul wasn’t saying that we are to keep *everything* we believe private, only what we believe “about these things,” i.e., disputable matters. By no means are we to keep *everything* we believe about the gospel and the way it instructs our beliefs and behaviors private. For iron to sharpen iron,<sup>5</sup> there has to be a place for dialog about how the gospel forms what we think and what we do.

Second, by stating that these things are to be kept “between [ourselves] and God,” those whose personal convictions leave room for freedom need to be content that the matter is settled between themselves and God. They are blessed. There’s not much reason to make a personal matter of conscience public.

Otherwise, third, when personal convictions are made public, there can be pressure put on others to act in such a way that they violate their conscience. Doing so is, for that person, a matter of sin.

So, for the sake of keeping the peace, Christians may need to keep some personal convictions private. What does this look like in real life? We can start by putting James 1:19 into practice,

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (Jas. 1:19).

It’s only by listening, and at times holding our tongue that we can learn where a brother or sister is coming from, even if their convictions don’t mirror ours.

Keeping some personal convictions private might also mean choosing our words carefully. Let’s reserve words like *heresy* or *blasphemy* for contexts where the truth of the gospel is under fire, not our personal opinions. Let’s use wisdom and caution when we declare “All good Christians do this,” and “No Bible-believing Christian I know would think that.”

As Paul said back in verse 5, we “should be fully convinced in [our] own mind[s]” about our convictions, yet, according to verse 23, “whatever [we] believe about these things [we should] keep between [ourselves] and God” (Rom. 14:23).

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>5</sup> Pr. 27:17

We've reached the end of Romans 14 and we've only got two chapters left in this letter. This morning we've revisited the topic of disputable matters and have looked at four actions we can take as Christians to keep us from flaunting our freedom in Christ so as not to endanger the faith of fellow believers.

Out of love for one another, let us resolve to never lay a stumbling block in the way of a brother or sister.

Out of reverence for Christ, let us keep our focus on kingdom matters.

For the sake of building church unity, let us embrace humility with respect to our liberty.

For the sake of keeping the peace, let us choose to keep some personal convictions private.

So let's wrap up by asking for the Lord's help. Let's pray.