

In the larger context, Paul teaches that even though we should accept the weaknesses of others, we should not give up or deny our Christian liberty. We should not call things sinful that are a matter of personal preference, nor allow the conscience of someone else to dictate our actions (14:14). However, there are also greater principles that govern our behavior at any given moment; namely, we should always act out of love, not liberty, and we should do nothing that causes a brother to stumble.

14:13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this-- not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

14:14 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.

In 14:13–14 Paul concludes his discussion about judging others and moves on to the manner in which Christian liberty is to be exercised. Though his exhortation applies to all Christians, it is primarily aimed at the one who is strong in faith (see discussion on verses 1–12).

In practice, Paul agrees with the “strong” but his concern is not with who is right or wrong; rather, he desires peace and mutual edification. Before we act we should first consider if it will cause a fellow Christian to stumble.

Stumbling blocks and obstacles are things that impede forward progress or make a person fall (Matt. 5:29; 18:5, 6; Jn. 6:58–61; 1 Cor. 8:13; 1 Pet. 2:8). In the context, it is doing something that would violate someone’s conscience or cause them to be hindered in their walk with Christ or to do what *they* believe is wrong.

Verse 14 illustrates this in how people applied what they ate to their faith.

In the OT, the notions of clean and unclean expressed an understanding of holiness that was consciously felt in the everyday life. Because certain foods were forbidden, every meal reminded the Jew that he was holy, distinct from the nations around him. This, in turn, helped him to remember that his life should be characterized by purity and integrity. The section on dietary restrictions in Leviticus 11 is concluded with the statement, “For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy. Neither shall you defile yourselves with any creeping thing that creeps on the earth . . . You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44–45). In other words, the reason given for not eating certain things is because God is holy, and we should imitate God. It may have been this understanding of the law that directed the “weak in faith” in their behavior. The motivation for their actions was good (they were trying to be holy), but they had failed to realize that the demands of the law are no longer binding (Ro. 6:14–15; Gal. 5:18; 1 Cor. 9:20). Clean and unclean foods were intended to picture the separation between the Jew and Gentile (Acts 11:4–17); however, since this separation no longer exists in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Ro. 3:22; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11), the practice was no longer needed.

Though the distinction between clean (holy) and unclean (common) foods no longer exists (1 Tim. 4:3, 4), some may still believe that dietary restrictions are binding. Although they are mistaken, if we make them violate their conscience by insisting that they eat unclean foods, we would not be acting in love; we would be causing them to do what they believe is sinful.

Anytime anyone does what they believe to be sinful, they are sinning, since a willingness to sin is itself sin.

Though a believer may be incorrect in his beliefs, if his practices are not contrary to Christian principles, he should not be despised (14:1, 10) nor should he be persuaded to do what he believes is wrong.

14:15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.

Though it may be “theologically correct” to have the freedom to eat all foods, indulging in our liberty may cause a brother with different convictions to be hurt. In that case, we would not be acting in love and would be disregarding the person whom Jesus loved enough to die for.

The point is, just because we are persuaded that a certain course of action is right, it does not authorize us to do it. Christian love and concern for others are of greater importance than our convictions about non-essential matters. Love should dictate how we act. We should do nothing that damages another believer.

***14:16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;
14:17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.***

Paul is not saying, “Don’t let other people call your actions sinful”; he is saying, “Don’t let your liberty be called evil by allowing it to be the occasion to cause another to sin.”

In 14:17 a new reason to restrain our Christian liberty is given. The kingdom of God doesn’t consist in externals like eating and drinking; rather, it is spiritual in nature. It comes from the Holy Spirit and manifests itself in peace, joy, and righteousness. There is no sin in abstaining from freedoms, so if the good of others requires us to abstain, that is the course of action we should follow.

***14:18 For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.
14:19 So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.***

Abstaining from freedom in order to pursue peace and build each other up (14:19) is service to Christ (14:18); this is both acceptable to God and approved by men.

Behavior that is “approved by men” contrasts verse 16 where our freedom could be disapproved by others and called evil due to the negative effect it has on the weak in faith.

We should not be spending our time correcting or judging other peoples’ freedoms. Neither should we pursue exercising our freedoms at all costs. We should pursue the things which “make for peace and the building up of one another.”

14:20 Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.

Believers are to be built up (14:19), not torn down (14:20).

The last part of verse 20 has at least two different interpretations:

1. VIEW 1: This first view sees the sin in the one who causes someone else to stumble. In reality all things are permissible to eat, but we are sinning if someone stumbles as a result of *our* eating. In this case, our actions are evil because they are causing someone else to stumble. That is, all things are clean but they are evil if I offend someone else. This is not acting out of love. Actions that hurt another's faith are not only *called* evil (14:16), they *are* evil for they tear down the work of God in the lives of others for the sake of food (14:20).

The ESV leans this way: "it is wrong for anyone *to make another stumble* by what he eats."

2. VIEW 2: Some see these verses as two parallel ideas; "thinking that something is unclean" (14:14) and "giving offense" (14:20) are seen as synonymous and so the latter half of verse 20 is explained by the first half of the verse.

"nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." (14:14)

"All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense" (14:20)

The NKJ seems more in favor of this view: "it is evil for *the man who eats with offense.*"

The resulting interpretation would be that it is evil if we eat something we feel is wrong to eat. In the first view, the sin is committed by one person sinning against another. In this view, the sin is committed by the individual sinning against his own conscience. The verse would mean "All foods are clean, but they are evil if they cause me to stumble by eating them anyway."

Verse 22 would be the opposite of this: we should not condemn what we approve of (14:22), nor should we participate in things we condemn (14:20, 23).

It is difficult to know which Paul means. Both are true (14:20, 23). However, "throughout the whole context, to offend, to cause to stumble, offence, are used, not of the man causing himself to offend his own conscience, but of one man's so acting as to cause others to stumble. And as this is the idea insisted upon in the following verse, the common interpretation (view 1) is to be preferred" (Hodge, 426).

14:21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.

In the days when Paul wrote, drinking wine wasn't considered a social evil as it is by some today; everyone drank wine due to the impurity of water. The fear in drinking wine possibly came from the fact that some wine was offered to idols, and the weaker believer felt that he would be

participating in idolatry by drinking it (cf. I Cor. 10:13 ff.). If a brother in Christ had that concern, it would be evil to pressure him into drinking it anyway. In fact, a Christian should do nothing that causes a brother to sin.

14:22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

14:23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Paul did not want the Christians in Rome to believe that something was sinful when it was not. The faith he speaks of is defined by the context as a faith that believes that it is permissible to eat all things. That is, it is the faith of the stronger brother. This faith need not be abandoned but used wisely. The strong are blessed (happy) because there is no pain of conscience when they eat. However, the one who eats meat when he has doubts if it is right or not is sinning against his own conscience.

Whenever we do things that we are not convinced are right, we sin (14:23). This verse is similar in meaning to verse 14; it would be wrong to eat something clean if I perceive it as unclean. Though an act itself may not be sinful, strictly speaking, it is always sinful to do what we believe God forbids.

Sometimes we don't know what course of action will please God. If we have doubts about what we are doing, we should not do it. If we have a clear conscience and we know that our actions are not sinful, we have the freedom to proceed if we do not cause someone else to stumble.

NOTE: Paul speaks differently about the same things under different circumstances. He had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3), and told him to follow certain Jewish practices so that he would not cause offense to the Jews they were trying to reach with the gospel. Paul was a Jew to the Jews. On the other hand, he would not allow Titus to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3), nor yield even to the slightest suggestions of those in Galatia who insisted that aspects of the law had to be followed to be a believer (Gal. 2:5). When the heart of the gospel was not in question, Paul was willing to do anything possible to avoid offense, but when the people tried to subvert salvation into a system of works instead of faith, he did nothing that may be interpreted as agreement with false doctrine.

Principles of Christian Liberty

INTRODUCTION:

The Bible teaches that the Christian is free in Christ. We are free in the sense that (1) we are not bound to the OT Law (Ro. 6:14, Gal. 5:18), and (2) that we are liberated from the dominating power of sin in our lives.

We are free from the Law.

Our life and salvation from start to finish is based on our relationship to Christ. We are not saved by the Law (Ro. 3:20), not made holy by the Law (Ro. 6:14), not preserved by the Law (Ro. 8:3–4), nor is the Law the standard that governs our lives (Ro. 7:4; 10:4). If Christ governs our lives, then Christian conduct is determined by His will, not external commandments.

We are free from the bondage of sin.

Christ's death not only paid the penalty for sin, but also broke its power. We are no longer slaves to sin, but have been freed to practice righteousness (Ro. 6:6, 11–22). Therefore, though our life is not governed by external commandments (the Law), that does not mean that we have personal autonomy apart from God. Rather, as slaves of righteousness, we are to live in harmony with the will of God in Christ.

SEVEN GUIDELINES FOR LIVING IN FREEDOM

1) *Stand firm in your freedom* — Gal 5:1 (cf. Gal. 4:9), Ro. 14:16, 22

Although people abuse freedom by using it as a justification for sin, it can also be violated when people impose their personal standards of conduct upon others.

Galatians 5:1 says, "For freedom Christ has set us free. *Stand firm, therefore*, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

In the context, Paul is speaking to Christians who were being taught by others that they needed to follow the OT Law in order to please God. In other words, they were being pressured to live in accordance with someone else's convictions and, in this case, those convictions were wrong. The Law, Paul says, is a yoke of slavery. Christ has set us free and, therefore, we must do all we can to stand firm in that freedom.

Some Christians, either consciously or subconsciously, think of spirituality as a list of "do's and don'ts." Many times such lists are helpful in maintaining a disciplined life and focus on God. For example, it's good to read our Bible and pray daily. It's good to faithfully attend a small group. Likewise, it's wise not to listen to certain music or go places where our testimony may be damaged or our faith compromised. But these "good" things can easily turn into bad things when they become "Christian law," rules of conduct, or tests of spirituality. When other Christians impose their values on us and we

respond out of guilt, fear, or a desire to impress them, we will not only lose our joy (Ro. 14:22), but we will subject ourselves to the same type of slavery that Paul warned those in Galatia to avoid. In such cases, we must stand firm in our freedom.

2) *Don't use your freedom as license to sin* — Gal. 5:13; I Pet. 2:16; II Pet. 2:19

Probably the greatest fear that Christians have with freedom is that people will fail to apply godly discernment and use “freedom” as a personal justification for sin or as an excuse to live an undisciplined life. Paul also recognized this danger. In Romans, Paul tells us that when the Law came, sin increased, but as sin increased, grace increased even more (Ro. 5:20–21). However, he was fearful that some may conclude that they could then continue to sin, since through their sin, grace would abound and God would be glorified. So he asked, “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” His answer is a resounding, No! “How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” (Ro 6:1–2) Elsewhere he says, “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13).

It is not freedom to be enslaved to sin (II Pet. 2:19), nor is it God’s intention that we use freedom as a cloak for evil (I Pet. 2:16). Freedom is not personal autonomy, it is the liberation we receive to follow the will of God, something which could not be done when sin held us in its power.

3) *Don't use your freedom to do things that appear evil* — I Thess. 5:22

When using our Christian freedom we should consider the appearance of our actions. I Thessalonians 5:22 tells us to “abstain from every form of evil.” The word “form” refers to the outward appearance of something. For example, in Luke 3:22, it says that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the “form of a dove”. In Luke 9:29 Jesus was transfigured and His appearance (form) changed; He manifested His glory (II Pet. 1:17–18) and His robe became white and glistened. In John 5:37 Jesus said to the religious leaders that they had never seen the form (a visible manifestation) of the Father. In each case the outward appearances of something is being described. The Holy Spirit isn’t a bird, but He *appeared* as a dove when He descended on Jesus. Jesus was the same person before and after the transfiguration, but during the event His outward appearance changed. God is spirit; however, in the OT He appeared in the form of a man (Exo. 33:18–23) or even in a cloud of glory (Ezek. 10:4). But the religious leaders had never seen any outward form of God.

If we are to avoid every appearance (form) of evil, then we need to take into account how our actions look to others. We should not do things that might be interpreted by others as being sinful even if we have the freedom to do them.

For example, unmarried couples spending the night together may be completely innocent, but in a society dominated with promiscuity, others would most likely assume that the couple was sexually active. In such cases, we should limit our freedom in order not to damage our testimony for Christ (or place ourselves in a position to be tempted).

4) Don't use your freedom if your conscience is defiled — Ro 14:5, 14, 23

What the Bible calls sin is sin, regardless of how we feel about it. I may feel that "I have the right to do what I want with my own body," but because the Bible says that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, that you are not your own, and that you were bought with a price, you are not free to do with your body whatever you want (I Cor. 6:19–20). Using your body as a tool for sin is always wrong, in every culture, in every generation, under every circumstance, and for every person. When the Bible is clear, we should obey it no matter how we feel about it.

On the other hand, there are some things that are sinful for some people which are not sinful for others.

Paul said, "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." (Ro. 14:14). ". . . for whatever is not from faith is sin." (Ro. 14:23).

Romans 14 talks about those who have different convictions about what pleases God. Some feel one particular day is holy, while others see every day as His (Ro. 14:5–6). Some feel God disapproves of eating certain foods while others believe it is alright to eat everything. Although one opinion is certainly right, Paul tells us not to judge others, but to accept each other's convictions in love, for we all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

The value of our conscience in determining what we do needs to be balanced. On the one hand, our conscience alone can be a highly defective guide, especially if one relies solely on the absence of pain to guide our conduct. To function at all, it must depend on knowledge. A clear conscience is no guarantee of being right. Some, due to spiritual immaturity or hardness of heart, are insensitive to what would be godly behavior; others are overly sensitive and live unduly strict lives. On the other hand, although our conscience may be wrong and in need of correction by the Word of God (as was the case of the weak in Ro. 14), it should not be ignored. To ignore our conscience is to step down the road that leads to our moral destruction, for God uses our conscience as a moral guide (Ro. 2:14–16). All our actions should be made with a clear conscience founded upon faith. If we are uncertain which course of action will please God, we should not act until we gain certainty. We should never act beyond what our faith will allow us in order to exercise liberty. If we act contrary to what our conscience tells us, we defile our conscience which in itself is sin.

What we must always remember is that when the Bible does not clearly address an issue, we should be careful not to impose our values on others and restrict their freedom to act in a way contrary to what they believe.

5) Don't use your freedom if it causes others to stumble or be offended — Ro. 14:20–21; I Cor. 10:32–33.

Christian love is not self-seeking, but seeks the good of others. Although we are free, we should not exercise our freedom if it causes someone else to stumble.

Romans 14:21 says, “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.” This verse is saying something like this: Even though there may be nothing wrong with what we are doing, it’s a beautiful (good; kalos, καλός) thing when we restrain our freedom for fear that we might cause a fellow believer to fall spiritually, or offend them, or make them weak.

We cause someone to stumble when we provide the occasion for them to fall into sin. For example, suppose that I don’t think there is anything wrong with having a glass of wine with dinner, but I am with a friend who connects drinking with his past sinful life and, therefore, doesn’t drink. In spite of his feelings, because I am free in Christ I order a glass anyway. My friend, against his conscience, orders one, too. I have caused him to stumble, for I have created the occasion for him to defile his conscience. Regardless of what I am free to do, I should be considerate enough to limit my actions if they offend another or weaken their faith in any way.

6) Use your freedom to be all things to all men — I Cor. 9:19–22.

Even though Paul declares that he is free, he paradoxically uses that freedom to be a slave to all men (1 Cor. 9:19–23).

Paul’s goal is not to be free, but to see people saved. Being free in Christ allows us to be all things to all men in order to break down every barrier possible to aid in their reception of the gospel.

What it means to be all things to all men is illustrated in I Corinthians 9:20–22: “to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews. . . to those who are without law, as without law . . . that I might win those who are without law. . . to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might by all means save some.”

Our freedom in Christ works in two ways. If our behavior offends others and creates a barrier for the gospel, we are free to forsake that behavior. But being free in Christ also means that our behavior can include those activities that help us relate to other people in order to reach them for Christ. For example, even though we may have no interest in dancing, we may decide to go to a dance simply to identify with those who are there. If we were not free in Christ and dancing was a forbidden activity, such an opportunity would be lost. Our freedom in Christ thus becomes a tool for evangelism. To the dancer, I become as a dancer, that I might win dancers.

7) Use your freedom to glorify God at all times in all ways — I Cor. 10:31

One general principle guides all of our behavior: Whatever we do, do to the glory of God. Comparing our convictions to others is irrelevant. Imposing them on others is sin. What matters is that whatever we do, we glorify God.

THREE SUGGESTIONS FOR OUR CONSCIENCE**1) Remember the difference between form and function — I Cor. 10:19–27**

In determining appropriate Christian behavior, we must remember the distinction between the form of something and its function. Just as innocent behavior that appears evil should be forsaken, we also need to understand how something functions in a society before we either embrace or abandon it.

The misunderstanding of form and function can be illustrated in the way that some people respond to celebrating Christmas. They claim that owning a Christmas tree is a sign of worldliness, or even worse, participating in false worship. They come to their conclusion because hundreds of years ago the unbelieving world decorated trees as a way of celebrating the winter solstice and ancient Romans decorated trees to worship the god of agriculture. But such critics fail to see that in different cultures and in different ages there are practices that outwardly appear similar (form), but their purpose, or function, is different. Celebrating the winter solstice is not the worship of false gods, and no American decorates a tree in order to do so. A decorated tree isn't idolatry or worldliness in itself. It only becomes idolatry if the reason it is decorated is to worship other gods.

A similar idea can be found in I Corinthians. Paul says that when the unbelieving sacrifice to idols, they are offering sacrifices to gods that don't really exist. The worship that they think is taking place isn't worship at all, for there is no god to receive it (I Cor. 10:19–20). But what they are doing is real idolatry and has a destructive influence on the soul. Though those who worship idols are not intending to worship Satan, they are doing so by obeying his will, yielding to his impulses, and fulfilling his designs. To him all sin is an offering and a homage (Hodge, I Corinthians, 193). Therefore, no Christian should eat the meat being offered to an idol as sacrificial meat, for in doing so they would be having fellowship with demons. However, under different circumstances the meat could be eaten. For example, the same meat that was offered to idols was also sold in the marketplace. In such a setting, the meat had no sacrificial significance so it was permissible to eat (I Cor. 10:25). In fact, Paul says to not even bother asking if it was offered for sacrifice or not since (I Cor. 10:25) meat is meat, and was created by God to be enjoyed (I Cor. 10:26). What made the meat permissible to eat or not was not the meat itself, but the function it fulfilled. If it was meat functioning as a sacrifice to idols, it shouldn't be eaten. If it is meat simply sold for food, it could be eaten.

In the same way, if a believer were to go to someone's house for dinner and served meat, there is no need to worry where it came from since the meal is not a sacrificial meal to false gods (I Cor. 10:27). However, if someone else's conscience is bothered because they know that the meat was sacrificed to idols, neither they nor the believer who is strong in faith should eat it. If they ate anyway, the weak would defile their conscience and the strong might cause the weaker brother offense (I Cor. 10:28–29).

The difficulty in making such decisions is in making sure that (1) our conscience is truly clear on the matter, (2) we understand the function clearly, and (3) what we are doing doesn't appear evil.

2) Set boundaries before being in the situation to use freedom consistently.

Know clearly what you consider to be wrong before you enter a situation where you may be tempted to compromise. Not knowing what you believe leaves no basis upon which we can act. Rationalization and compromise feed on ambiguity.

For example:

- If dating, what do you believe is appropriate physical contact? No contact? Handholding? Kissing? Heavy kissing? No limits?
- What does the Bible teach about drinking? Is drinking sin? Is just a sip O.K.? A glass? Drunkenness? A buzz?
- What can you do to assure that your standards are not broken? Will you create fences to keep you from entering temptation? (For example, if you are tempted by pornography, you “could build a fence” by limiting your access to the internet to those times someone is home and the computer monitor is in clear view of others, or by being accountable to fellow believers through software designed for such purposes). Will you share your temptations with an accountability partner so you will be held responsible?
- What will be done if your standards are broken? Will an unhealthy relationship be terminated or the circumstances that led to your fall be off limits?

3) All things are lawful but not all things are profitable — I Cor. 6:12; 10:23

Many issues in life are a matter of indifference — they have no spiritual implications attached to them. “But the use of things indifferent is limited by two principles; first, a regard to the welfare of others; secondly, a regard to our own welfare” (Hodge, I Corinthians, 196). If something is not useful or edifying to others, its value is questionable. As Christians, we should see every occasion as a potential opportunity to build someone else up (Ro. 14:19; 15:2; Eph. 4:29; I Thess. 5:11), and then choose the road that will meet that end. Choose those things that are profitable.