

Faith Evangelical Free Church
Romans 14:13-23; Lovingly Limiting Our Liberty
Sunday, April 10, 2016

Last week Pastor Steve continued our study of the Book of Romans by walking us through the first twelve verses of Chapter 14. In Romans 14 the apostle Paul introduces and tries to answer a question I'm sure many of us have wrestled with with, argued over, and maybe even seen some damage done to our relationships with other believers. That question is "what do we do when we disagree on something that's not black-and-white in the Bible?"

It is one thing for us to agree that where the Scripture is clear we must be obedient. But what do we do when we discover that we have differing convictions about the things that aren't so clear in the Bible?

Some Christians think it's okay to eat this food or drink this beer, while others think it's better and more pleasing to God if we refrain from doing so. Some believe we're required to make Sunday the day we gather as a community to worship and rest, while others feel free to have church on any day of the week that works best for them. Do we need to dress in our "Sunday best" or should we go to church in whatever is most comfortable for us?

As we think about these kinds of questions it's important to remember that when we discuss differing convictions that don't have clear biblical commands to guide our beliefs, then what we're often talking about are two valid, acceptable ways of thinking. It is good and pleasing to God to realize your liberty as a Christian, but he also honors those who are still developing their understanding of the freedom granted to a life in Christ, and therefore holding themselves to a more restrictive standard.

Last week Pastor Steve made the great point drawn from Romans 14:1-12 (if you weren't here for the sermon I'd encourage you to go online and listen to it) that we're not lecture or pester one another about our strength or lack of freedom. Instead we need to trust **that Jesus is a very competent Lord** and that he (and he alone) will rightly judge our beliefs and actions.

To the weak in faith -- those who've not yet come to walk in the full freedom of Christ -- he will bring them along into greater freedom at a pace and time that is right for their walk with him. And for the strong in faith -- those who have realized and are continuously realizing the many ways Christ has blessed them to freely and joyfully live -- Jesus will guide them in the proper use and expression of their freedom.

But Paul's not done with this conversation regarding what to do when Christians disagree. Although Romans 14:1-12 helps us to understand that we must not judge one another when it comes to the small stuff, the non-essentials of the Christian faith, there's still the big question of "*how do I relate to someone (how do I treat someone, disciple someone) who has a differing conviction than me?*"

In our passage for this morning, Romans 14:13-23, Paul seeks to help us answer this question from the perspective of someone who is strong in their faith desiring to live in community and right relationship with someone who is weak in their faith. It's important to remember that the designations of "strong" and "weak" are not meant to be understood as first and second class Christians. It's simply Paul's way of referring to those who better understand what it means to live freely in Christ (strong) and those who are still working on a fuller understanding (weak).

In Romans 14:13, Paul writes,

"Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother."

When I was in grade school I was fortunate enough to grow up on a block with a bunch of kids around my same age. We'd shoot hoops in one another's driveways, ride our bikes up and down the street, and play small games of baseball in the yard where the porch was first, the tree was second, the hole we weren't supposed to dig in my dad's yard was third, and home base was whatever jacket or hat someone had donated to the cause.

One particular evening when all three of these activities were happening simultaneously, I saw one of my friends riding his bike down the street from his house toward mine. For reasons I still cannot explain, a thought crept into my head: what would happen if I tried to hit one of his bike wheels with the basketball as he rode by? Would it bounce off? Could I get it to pass under his bike? Without ever considering other far more likely consequences, I decided I had to know.

So as my friend sped past me on his bike I aimed, fired...and then everything went slow-mo. The ball defied all laws of physics and landed just under the frame and in front of the back wheel, causing my friend to hit the ball with that wheel, flip his bike forward, and land...well...everywhere. The ball went flying one way, the bike another, and my friend just kinda went "splat" onto the sidewalk.

Now, why did I tell you that story? Because that's the image that comes into my mind every time I read "never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister in Christ."

Based upon the understanding from Romans 14:1-12 that Christians are to stop standing in judgment over one another, accept one another as God has accepted them, and remember that each of them is answerable only to our very competent Lord, Jesus Christ -- Paul then turns to the "strong" in faith and warns them not to do anything that might cause the spiritual downfall of a brother or sister in Christ. "Stumbling block" translates as word that in the New Testament always refers to the potential of spiritual ruin.

The underlying message is this: You, strong Christians, may very well understand your freedom and liberty in Christ...but be careful not to use it or force it upon those who have not reached the

same level of understanding as you. The exercise of your freedom is not worth their potential spiritual harm. Don't needlessly put your fellow believers in danger over the small stuff -- like what food to eat, liquid to drink, or holy days to celebrate.

Now I think at this point Paul imagined someone raising his or her hand and saying "Now just hold one a minute. Why can't I, understanding my freedom in Christ, act on that freedom even if a fellow believer is bothered by it? Shouldn't I show them everything they are missing? Wouldn't it be better if they believed like me?"

With the rest of this passage, Paul addresses that attitude. He does so by showing us that there are three really bad things that can happen when we try to force our freedom -- as good a gift as it is -- upon weaker believers, and by showing us a clearly better strategy: a better way to build friendships and our church, even with believers who hold differing convictions and are at different places in their walk with Christ.

As we work through the rest of this text I'm going to approach the verses a little bit differently than normal. Paul doesn't make his case in a nice, logical, linear fashion. Instead he uses a literary tool of his time in which he surrounds his main point with very similar or identical arguments. Because of this, vv. 14-16 are actually connected to and further explained by vv. 20-23, with vv. 17-19 containing Paul's big idea, the thing he wants to be sure we understand. So stick with me...and I'll do my best to not lose you :)

Stumbling Blocks: Three Warnings/Consequences of Forcing Freedom

In Romans 14:14 we read,

"I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean."

For a long time this verse was very puzzling to me. Paul writes that he agrees with those whom he has identified as strong in faith -- that nothing is unclean in itself, that there's nothing wrong with eating all kinds of meats and drinking all kinds of drinks (within reason).

But then Paul adds that curious additional clause -- it is true that nothing is unclean, but *"it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean."*

So...meat and drink are objectively morally neutral -- in and of themselves they are neither bad or good...unless you have the conviction that they are in some way unclean, that in some way simply associating with them is sinful and causes you to sin...then it's something you shouldn't consume.

Things get even stranger when we read Paul's words from Romans 14:23:

“But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”

I think that last little phrase, “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” is the key to understanding Paul’s first warning here about what might happen if a Christian who is strong in the faith tries to force their understanding of freedom upon a Christian who is weak in faith.

Imagine that a movie has recently come to theaters, and it’s supposed to be the greatest movie of the decade. It’s got action, it’s got major actors and actresses, it’s got an amazing plot, and before it ever reached local theaters film critics were already calling it the runaway favorite for oscar nominations and wins.

You decide that you really want to see this movie, so you text all your friends to buy tickets and meet at theater that evening. One of the people you text is someone who has recently started coming to Faith and has joined your lifegroup, and he sends you a text back that says, “I don’t think we should go to that movie because I’ve heard that it’s got demons and magic, and I don’t think God wants us to be entertained by that kind of stuff.”

Now you really want to see this movie and you think this guy’s reasons for bailing are a little weak, so you text back, “Don’t worry about it, it’s just a story, and God gives us the freedom to enjoy creativity and storytelling” -- and you really, truly believe that. He’s still not sure, but you keep texting him, telling him it’s okay; you even send him a couple Bible verses to help him see that he’s got nothing to worry about. You get the other people you’ve invited to text him as well, until finally he responds “Alright, you wore me down, I’ll be there.”

Now that seems pretty harmless, right? I can tell you right now that I’ve done things like that. Let me show you your misunderstanding, hurry up and read these couple verses so you can join us in our fun, it’s not that big a deal, God wants you to be freer than you letting yourself be.

And then suddenly someone makes a decision to do something that 5 minutes ago they believed was contrary to the way God wants them to live their life. Chances are pretty good they still have doubts about whether or not this is the right thing to do, but they think that because this guy or this gal who believes in Christ seems to think it’s okay that it must be alright, and makes the decision to go.

My question to you is this: *who did he just follow into freedom? Who was Lord over that decision?* Is he going to go to that movie based off a decision that proceeded from his faith...or from someone else’s?

I think the danger that Paul is trying to warn us about when we insist that others share our same level of faith, our same convictions regarding non-essentials, our same understanding of freedom in Christ is that we may lead them to make a decision based off what they think of us and not what they think of Jesus.

The Bible has a word for this kind of thing: idolatry.

Now hear me well, I'm not saying those who are stronger in faith want to be the Lord of those who are weaker, and I'm not saying those who are weaker can't follow Christ just as ardently and passionately as those who are stronger. I'm saying that Paul is warning us that there is a subtle idolatry that can work its way into our relationships when we don't take into consideration the spiritual maturity of those who are weaker in faith.

When someone who is stronger in faith forces their understanding of liberty in Christ on someone who is weaker in faith, they run the risk of leading the weaker believer to react in obedience to them rather than in obedience to God.

That's the first danger of placing a stumbling block before a fellow believer in Christ.

Returning to the text, in Romans 14:15 we read,

"For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died."

And in vv. 20-21 Paul continues,

"Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats."

"It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble."

A second danger of placing a stumbling block before a fellow believer in Christ is that you may cause them serious spiritual harm.

If, in your zeal and desire for someone weaker in faith to keep up with your understanding of freedom in Christ, you cause them to doubt their convictions and lead them to compromise their conscience without reaching an understanding of their Christian liberty for themselves, then it makes sense that a consequence for them might be a serious crisis of faith, and possibly, in a worst case scenario, a desire to walk away from their relationship with Christ altogether.

Take a moment and think of every non-essential to the Christian faith in which you feel a great deal of freedom. Eating, drinking, smoking, tattoos, entertainment, education, the right kind of worship songs to sing, the right way to practice communion, the right way to collect offerings...the list could go on, and your list might be quite different than the list of the people sitting around you.

Think about your list...is there a single issue on that list in which exercising your freedom is more valuable to you than the spiritual well being and relationship with Christ of your fellow believer? Is there any freedom you feel granted in Christ that is more precious to you than the faith of a weaker brother or sister?

Are you able to pause or forgo your conversation about how much you love homebrewing when you know it has the potential to seriously spiritually disrupt and harm someone who struggles with the morality of drinking? Do you have to post your opinions of that movie on facebook when you know many of those who follow you will feel scandalized and disturbed should they happen to read it?

Do not for the sake of food, or drink, or entertainment, or ANYTHING (v 21) destroy the work of God.

Charles Spurgeon was a famous preacher who lived in London in 1800s -- so great was his fame that his nickname was "the prince of preachers." Early in his career he was frequently quoted saying that he enjoyed both liquor and cigars "to the glory of God." For Spurgeon neither of these activities were sinful for him, a man who understood his freedom under Christ.

Shortly after Spurgeon made his declaration that he was able to smoke a cigar "to the glory of God," he walked into a store to find that the cigars there were being advertised with the slogan, "Spurgeon smokes!" The Prince of Preachers began hearing complaints from parents who were encouraging their children not to drink or smoke, only to receive in reply, "But Spurgeon drinks and Spurgeon smokes..."

In the 1880s a movement to ban drinking and smoking began to gain momentum in England due to the rise of alcoholism and sickness throughout the entire country. Spurgeon watched as his friends, neighbors, and even members of the congregations in which he preached to began to struggle with alcohol abuse.

He began to rethink his stance on drinking, and in one service he said, "I neither said nor implied that it was sinful to drink wine; nay, I said that, in and by itself, it might be done without blame. But I remarked that, if I knew that another would be led to take it by my example, and this would lead them on to further drinking, and even to intoxication, then I would not touch it."

Spurgeon came to understand both the reality of his Christian liberty and the responsibility he had for his influence over those weaker in faith who would not engage in the same activities he did with the same care and conviction.

There is no freedom granted to us under Christ that is worth pursuing at the expense of another's well-being.

The second danger of placing a stumbling block before a fellow believer in Christ is that you may cause them serious spiritual harm.

Returning to the text, Romans 14:16, we read,

“So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. “

And in 14:22 Paul continues,

“The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves.”

The third danger of placing a stumbling block before a fellow believer in Christ is that you may cause them to hate and despise what ought to be regarded as a good gift from God.

The warning and prohibition Paul offers in v. 16 is drawn from, and is natural result of, what he'd just said in vv. 14-15; freedom from such things as dietary laws or strict practice of ceremonies is indeed a “good” thing” -- a completely legitimate implication of the coming of Christ and of living in the New Covenant.

But if one who is stronger in their faith uses that freedom in such a way that puts one who is weaker in faith into spiritual danger, that “good” thing would quickly become something bad for the one experiencing a crisis of conscience or spiritual harm -- it would cause the weaker in faith to revile, defame, hate, and despise that which ought to have been a good gift from God.

It is for this reason that Paul urges us to keep our faith -- and here “faith” refers to the small stuff, the non-essentials in which freedom can be explored -- “between yourself and God.” Now, clearly he cannot mean never share your faith in Christ with others -- that would obviously be in serious conflict with the rest of the New Testament!

Nor is he requiring the “strong” believers to never mention their views on differing convictions or speak of their sense of freedom before others. Instead, Paul simply urges his readers not to put a needless stumbling block before other believers.

Don't brag about the freedom you enjoy before those who are weaker in faith. Such boasting will likely only encourage the kind of judgment that continues to break down and fragment the Christian community.

In regards to the freedoms we have been blessed with as a result of our relationship with Jesus Christ, we must be careful never to enjoy them in such a way that would cause those who have not yet come to understand that freedom to have a crisis of conscience, experience spiritual harm, or hate what ought to have been a good gift from God.

So then...what do we do? How should we live with and interact with those who are weaker in faith than ourselves?

A Better Way To Build One Another Up: Loving Limiting Our Own Liberty

Romans 14:17-19 provides an incredibly beautiful answer to that very question:

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

“Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”

“So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”

I love this response. Paul tells us the Kingdom of God is not about being right about every little thing! It's not about exercising every little bit of your freedom not matter the cost! The Kingdom of God is about BIG things -- about righteousness and peace and joy, not achieved on our own, but only in the Spirit of God who is a good and precious gift to us.

Do you want to be used by God? Do you want to see your relationships with others contain more avenues for talking about the Gospel and God's will for your life? Then commit yourself not to yourself, but to peace and the building up of others.

The believer who seeks the peace and building up of the church should gladly refrain from activities that might cause a fellow believer to stumble.

If you want to be someone who seeks the peace and building up of Faith Evangelical Free -- the building up of the people who gather here to worship and learn and love one another -- then you should gladly refrain from any activity that might cause a person on your left or on your right to be needlessly and harmfully torn down. You must lovingly limit your liberty.

What happens if you do this? What happens if you value and love others, if you commit to the peace and building up of the church, if you lovingly limit your own liberty?

First, I don't think you'll cause people crisis of conscience...I think you'll discover incredible opportunities for discipleship.

Maybe it's the weather, but thinking about this made me again think about bike riding (but this time no balls will be thrown at rider's wheels).

When you teach your kid how to ride a bike, you don't ride around in front of them telling them how great it is and how much better their life would be if they'd only try. You also don't help them to start, only to let go of the seat 1 second into the process.

You begin by installing training wheels. You show them how the steering works. You help them understand the breaks. You coach them on how to feel their balance. Then, later, you take the training wheels off. You wrap them in as many velcro knee and elbow pads as will fit on their tiny legs and arms. You put them in a big, goofy looking helmet. You help them on their terrifying two wheeler and walk behind them, holding on to the seat or the frame, as they learn to balance. Then you let them go faster, jogging behind, still holding on. Then you let go...and if they fall, you pick them back up. You go again. And again. Until they have it. You don't gloat about how much better you are how much freer your bike rides feel cause you have two wheels. Additionally, once they begin to ride, if you're riding alongside them and see a stump you know you can jump but also know your son/daughter cannot, you don't go at it anyway and watch them crash...you forgo the experience until they've reached a level of bike riding where they could succeed. You are patient, you are kind. You teach them as longingly as you can.

That's a picture of discipleship. Out of love and a desire to help a fellow believer in Christ, you limit your own liberty in order to walk alongside them as Jesus calls them into deeper faith. That can't happen if you try to force feed them freedom. Take the time to pursue peace and build one another up in love.

Secondly, if you lovingly limit your liberty for the sake of a fellow believer, you won't cause them spiritual harm...you'll learn to ask a very important question: What is the most loving thing I can do for this person?

When you find yourself disagreeing with another believer over convictions that don't have a clear biblical answer, try this: take a deep breath...and commit to loving them well. Whether you believe you're the stronger or weaker in faith...take a deep breath...and commit to loving them well.

Finally, if you lovingly limit your liberty for the sake of a fellow believer, you won't cause them to hate good gifts from God...in fact, over time you may very well, by good example through patient love, be a part of how God gives them the gift of greater freedom in Christ.

I want to close by reading a passage from 1 Corinthians 13, which was also written by Paul, and in many ways sums up the attitude he's trying to teach us to have toward one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate."

“If I speak God’s Word with power, revealing all his mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, “Jump,” and it jumps, but I don’t love, I’m nothing.”

“If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don’t love, I’ve gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love.” (From Translation “The Message”)

If you want to be someone who seeks the peace and building up of Faith Evangelical Free -- the building up of the people who gather here to worship and learn and love one another -- then you should gladly refrain from any activity that might cause a person on your left or on your right to be needlessly and harmfully torn down. You must lovingly limit your liberty.