

Romans 14:13-23 “Exercising Liberties in Love” Pt.2

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Intro. The Christian life is like walking a tightrope. The object is to navigate this life, and reach the desired destination, without falling into the twin perils of legalism (adding rules beyond those imposed by God) or liberalism (neglecting the limits created by God). The means to balance well is to learn the Bible, live it as empowered by the Holy Spirit, and follow Jesus. This challenge is magnified, however, when you imagine multiple people on the tightrope and their ability to follow Jesus well impacts others on the rope.

Subject: Christian liberty and responsibility to others

Object: Exercise liberty with love

1. Consider limiting liberty to avoid stumbling others [13-19]

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way. ¹⁴I 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. ¹⁵Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness

and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. ¹⁹ Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another

As we contemplate how we are to relate to one another we are instructed to examine how we are living rather than judging others [13]. We are to *resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way* [13]. It is wrong to take away freedom that God has given, and it is wrong to exercise liberty without regard for potential harm to others. Five times in this chapter we see the term “brother.” We need to be sensitive how our actions influence others. Note: we are either stepping stones or stumbling blocks.

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 [14]. In Paul's day, one of the big issues related to food. Jews had been raised in the Old Testament with dietary restrictions that distinguished clean or kosher foods from forbidden non-kosher foods (unclean) such as pork. In the New Testament, both Jews and Gentiles could eat all foods [1Tim. 4:4], but as you might imagine, some Jewish Christians might struggle gathering with Gentiles, and especially other Jewish Christians, who were eating foods forbidden in the Old Testament, or food and drink which had been offered in pagan temples [1Cor. 8:1-9].

Exercise liberty with respect for how it is likely to impact others [15-16]

Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. ¹⁶ Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil.

If I know that another believer is going to struggle, because of my attitude or actions I want to be sensitive to what I say and what I do to try to avoid causing others to stumble. Love requires us to be considerate in exercising liberties. We have to consider how the liberty impacts our relationship with God, and impacts others [1Cor. 6:12].

Restrain liberty to promote peace [17-19]

¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸ For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.

¹⁹ Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace...

The kingdom of God is more important than food or drink. Being right with God, and seeking to experience peace and joy with others is important, and sometimes we need to restrain our liberties out of consideration of others. Restraining liberties for the sake of God's kingdom *serves Christ, is acceptable to God and approved by men* [18]. Thus, we should pursue the things which make for peace.

There always have been, and always will be issues that are clearly forbidden in the New Testament, and those limits need to be understood, and God's people are to respect and seek to adhere to those boundaries. Similarly, there are principles that should be gleaned and applied. For example, in 1Tim.

2 there is a principle regarding dressing modestly so as not to cause distraction, or become the object of attention during a worship gathering.

On the other hand, legalism creates boundaries beyond those that God has established. For example, saying Christians can't dance. The Bible doesn't prohibit dancing and affirms it as an expression of worship [Ex. 15:20, 2Sam. 6:16]. Nevertheless, someone dancing sensually may be an inappropriate exercise of liberty.

There are also presumably countless areas where the Bible gives liberty, or may give freedom, but the exercise of that liberty may need to be restrained to so as not to cause others to stumble. For example, the Bible gives liberty regarding alcohol consumption, but clearly limits consumption by declaring that intoxication is sin. Someone who struggles with whether Jesus' followers should have wine should not be imposing a legalist standard, nor should God's people be insensitive to the feelings and thoughts of someone who struggles with the idea.

Similarly, there is no prohibition regarding tobacco, and thus liberty. Clearly there is enormous health risk associated with that behavior, but a smoker should not be seen as immoral, nor should someone who is addicted to caffeine, nor being overweight. The health risks are real, and should be considered in that light. We want to be good stewards of our lives, however using verses regarding the body being God's temple out of context to label those behaviors as immoral seems inappropriate (1Cor. 6:19, deals specifically with sexual immorality).

What we watch or the content we view is also relevant. Presumably, we would all realize that pornography is clearly out of bounds [Rom. 1:32]. On the other hand, R-rated movies as an example may not be as clear. Arguably, Jesus' followers have liberty in this area, but should be sensitive to how the content regarding violence, profanity, and sex are impacting them. Also God's people should be sensitive to whether their endorsement or encouragement is causing others to struggle.

Drugs that have been legalized, such as Marijuana, might not be out of bounds because they are illegal, but might be out of bounds because of the intoxication. It seems that partaking of any substance that produces intoxication is out of bounds. So, Jesus' followers need to be aware of this tension before engaging or endorsing drug usage.

Undoubtedly, there are people hearing this teaching who are reacting in part due to preconceived conclusions on these matters. We don't advance the cause of Christ by reacting, and being quick to label someone else's view as liberalism or legalism without understanding what they think, why they think it, and what the Bible actually says about these matters.

2. Consider limiting liberty to build others up [19-23]

¹⁹ Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. ²¹ 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. ²² Do you have faith?

Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

Pursue the things by which one may edify [build-up] another [19]. Exercise your liberties in Christ while still helping others to grow in Christ rather than causing them to stumble or being critical of them (1-13).

Consider limiting liberty to avoid harming others [20-21]

Destroying the work of God [20] or demolishing is in contrast to edifying or building-up [19]. Paul understood that all food was pure or kosher [20], but also understood that many Jewish Christians would be offended [20] by eating what had been in the Old testament non-kosher foods, or to drink wine that had been offered to idols (e.g. Romans Bacchus, Greeks Dionysus). The offense would might cause a person to begin to distrust, disapprove, or even depart from the one exercising their liberty. Thus, he declared that it is good to limit your liberty to avoid harming others [21].

Consider limiting liberty to respect others [22-23]

Don't encourage others to do what is contrary to their conscience. Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves [22]. Even if you are sure that you have liberty there is no need to impose your view. Personal convictions are balanced with public perception and respect for others' convictions. But he who doubts is condemned if he

eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin [23]. If there is no confidence that God would approve than out of respect for others consider limiting the liberty.

The analysis is not to simply eliminate liberties, because that results in legalism. Simply hiding your liberty results in hypocrisy, and this is not the answer. Furthermore exercising liberties without regard for how others might be impacted is irresponsible and unloving. The answer is to love Jesus, learn the Bible, and navigate your liberties with sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. Also, create relationships for dialogue so that you can discover better how your actions are perceived, and can discuss your thoughts and motives on issues with others that you impact.

Study Guide Qs

Q1. What might be some liberties today that may cause some believers to stumble?

Q2. How is last week's study in Romans 14:1-13, and not judging related to the exercising liberties with love?

Q3. As a group, discuss some of the challenges presented in the Study Guide, and share your various opinions with love and respect. Look to learn from one another, let it be messy, and don't be frustrated if you don't arrive at consensus on all issues.

Q4. How would you like to apply this lesson to your life?

Digging Deeper

1. Here is a thoughtful article on what the Bible says about exercising liberties: <https://www.gotquestions.org/Christian-liberty.html>
2. Consider an area of liberty that wasn't discussed in the Study Guide. Research the issue. What does the Bible teach, what did you learn, and how can you and others apply the lessons to life?