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Romans Road to Recovery / Romans 14:13–23

Main Idea: The exercise of personal liberty must always yield to the law of love.

Notes

8/9/2026 — Romans 14:13-23

Title: "Building Up vs. Tripping Up"

Subtitle: Sacrificing Christian Liberty for the Spiritual Health of Your Brother

Main Idea: The exercise of personal liberty must always yield to the law of love, ensuring that our choices never cause a weaker brother to stumble or violate his conscience.

Companion Scripture: 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

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Introduction

"Recently, *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article that caught my eye. It was titled, 'The Rise of the \$100 Hot Dog.' Now, I don't know about you, but I grew up thinking a hot dog was something you bought for a dollar at a baseball game or grabbed at a backyard barbecue. It's supposed to be cheap, simple, and frankly, a little mystery-meat-ish.

But today, high-end chefs are taking the humble hot dog and upgrading it. They are making them with dry-aged beef, topping them with shaved black truffles, wrapping them in edible gold leaf, and charging exorbitant amounts of money for them. You can literally go out and exercise your culinary freedom to spend \$100 on a hot dog.

And here is the thing: if you have the money, you have every *right* to buy it. It is entirely within your liberty to spend your hard-earned cash on a gold-plated frankfurter. No one can stop you.

But just because you *can* do something, doesn't mean it's the best thing to do. In fact, we live in a culture obsessed with personal rights and individual liberties. "I have the right to do X" is the ultimate trump card in modern society. We love our freedoms.

- As Christians, we actually *do* have immense freedom. Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1). We have immense liberty under the New Covenant—we aren't bound by dietary laws or ceremonial calendars.

- But what happens when my legitimate, God-given freedom collides with the fragile conscience of my brother or sister? What happens when I say, 'I have the right to do this,' but exercising that right actually damages someone else's faith?

"This is the exact issue the Apostle Paul steps into in Romans 14. He is writing to a divided Roman church. Some of the believers understood their freedom in Christ and were eating whatever they wanted. Others, the 'weaker' believers, were still bound by strict dietary laws and felt it was a sin to eat certain things.

And Paul steps into this tension not to declare a theological winner, but to introduce a higher law."

Main Idea: The exercise of personal liberty must always yield to the law of love.

Saying that our liberty must yield to love sounds beautiful in theory, doesn't it? It sounds noble. But in practice, it requires a radical shift in how we view our fellow believers. We have to stop asking, '*What am I allowed to do?*' and start asking, '*What will this do to my brother?*'

Paul begins this practical shift with a jarring change in focus. He tells the Roman Christians to stop looking at each other with critical eyes, and start looking at what they are leaving in the path for others to trip over.

Which brings us to three specific ways that we can yield our personal liberties to the law of love: **Refuse to let your freedom become a trap, Elevate the Kingdom Above Your Preferences, and Commit to Building Up Instead of Tearing Down.**

The first way to refuse to let your freedom become a trap for other is to...

I. Refuse to Let Our Freedom Become a Trap (vv. 13-15)

- If we are going to refuse to let our freedom become a trap for someone else, it requires a complete change in where we are looking. It is so easy in the church to keep our eyes glued to what everyone else is doing wrong.
- Paul tells us that the only way to protect our brother is to take our eyes off of his behavior and look down at our own feet.

A. We Refuse to Judge Our Brothers by Watching Our Own Steps (v. 13)

Romans 14:13 *"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."*

- It is so important for us to realize we have more to worry about with our own walk than can ever be corrected fully in a lifetime. And until our own walk is fully corrected, we should not give in to judging the walk of others.
- Paul begins in v. 13 with a command to stop passing judgment on one another, and instead turn that critical eye on ourselves.
- We must make the active decision to never place a stumbling block (skandalon) in a brother's way.
 - As the Greek word skandalon evolved into our English word scandalous, it lost its original danger. Today, "scandalous" just means something causes public outrage, gossip, or shocks our traditional sensibilities.
 - In the modern church, we often confuse "being stumbled" with "being offended." (e.g., "That worship music is too loud, it's a stumbling block to me," or "I can't believe that she wore that outfit.")
 - The Biblical Reality is that *skandalon* literally refers to the trigger-stick or bait-stick in a hunter's snare.
 - Paul isn't telling us to avoid annoying people or avoid hurting their feelings. He is warning us not to set a trap.
- If our liberty at any point acts as the trigger of the trap that pressures someone to violate their own conscience, we haven't just offended them—we have acted as a trapper who snapped the cage shut on their faith.

Instead, it is imperative that we **Refuse to Judge Our Brothers by Watching Our Own Steps.**

B. We Must Not Allow Our Theological Rightness to Override Relational Love (v. 14)

Romans 14:14 *"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."*

- Paul agrees with the "Strong" theologically: he knows in the Lord Jesus that nothing is inherently unclean. The freedom is real.
- However, if a "weaker" believer's conscience tells them an action is sinful, it becomes sinful for them.
- This is where 1 Corinthians 8:1 comes in:

1 Corinthians 8:1 *"1 Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant (tears down), but love*

edifies (builds up)."

- You might be theologically correct that you are free to eat or do what you are, but if you push that knowledge into the face of someone else without love, it is destructive.

C. Refuse to Destroy What Christ Died to Save (v. 15)

Romans 14:15 "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."

- If your exercise of freedom pressures a fellow believer to act against their fragile conscience, you have sprung the trap—you have caused them to fall into sin.
- Therefore, flaunting our liberty isn't just rude; it is a spiritual snare.
- Paul sets the ultimate stakes:

Do not let our exercise of freedom destroy someone for whom Christ died. Our liberty should never be their ruin.

So, **Refuse to Let Our Freedom Become a Trap**

The second way we can yield our personal liberties to the law of love is to...

II. Elevate God's Kingdom Above Our Own Preferences (vv. 16-18)

Paul knows that limiting our freedom is difficult.

We naturally want to defend our rights.

So in verses 16 through 18, he gives us the motivation we need to let it go.

We have to elevate the Kingdom above our preferences.

A. Protect the Reputation of Our Freedom as We Protect the Church (v. 16)

Romans 14:16 "16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;"

At first glance, it feels like a paradox: *Paul, you just told me in verses 13-15 to hide my freedom so I don't trip up my brother. Now in verse 16, you are telling me to defend the reputation of my freedom? Which is it?*

- Paul tells the "Strong" believers: "Do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil."
 - **Paul is not telling them to defend their rights; he is warning them about how their rights get a bad reputation.**
 - The "good" Paul mentions in verse 16 (*"do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil"*) is their Christian liberty. Freedom in Christ is a profoundly good gift.
 - But how does a "good" freedom get spoken of as "evil"?
 - **When it is used selfishly to destroy someone else.**
 - If the "Strong" believers aggressively exercise their freedom to eat meat, and it causes the "Weak" believers to stumble, violate their conscience, and ruins the peace of the church, observers are going to look at that "freedom" and say, *"If that is what your freedom looks like, your freedom is evil."*
 - Therefore, the way to protect the reputation of your liberty is not to shout about it louder, but to wrap it in love. A beautiful gift used as a weapon will always be called evil.
- Even if your freedom is entirely legitimate (eating meat, drinking wine, observing certain days), if it causes division and destruction in the church, the outside world will look at your "good" freedom and call it evil.
- The exercise of our rights should never become the reason the church is slandered.

So, you protect the reputation of your freedom by never letting it be the reason the church, or your fellow believer in the church be slandered.

B. Remember What the Kingdom is Actually Built On (v. 17)

Romans 14:17 *"17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*

- Paul connects the command directly to the reality of the Kingdom: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking..."
- The "Strong" and the "Weak" were treating secondary issues (foods and calendars) as if they were the foundation of the faith.
- However, the Kingdom of God is built on spiritual realities, not earthly liberties: Righteousness (right standing with God), Peace (harmony with one another), and Joy in the Holy Spirit.
- When it comes to Christian liberty that is given to us by God through Jesus Christ's redemption, wise preachers have repeated a concept since the 1800's that I think is

imperative for us to echo:

Christian liberty is not the freedom to do what I want to do, but rather it is the power to do what I ought to do.

- In other words, is the God-given power to do what is right in order to fulfill the two greatest commands spoken of by Jesus Christ Himself, "Love the Lord your God" with everything that you have and "Love your neighbor as yourself."
- If we are going to "Love God" with all that we are, then we should...

C. Seek God's Approval Over Our Own Satisfaction (v. 18)

Romans 14:18 "18 For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men."

- If we serve Christ by prioritizing righteousness, peace, and joy—rather than demanding our right to a specific food or preference—God approves.
- A church that sacrifices its preferences for the sake of peace becomes a beautiful testimony to the watching world.
- What are the "food and drink" arguments in the church today? When we elevate secondary freedoms over primary spiritual realities, we misrepresent the Kingdom.

A church living out the Kingdom of God isn't marked by how much freedom it exercises, but by how much righteousness, peace, and joy it cultivates.

- Whoever serves Christ with these priorities is approved by God (v. 18).
- When we finally grasp that the Kingdom of God isn't built on our personal rights, but on righteousness, peace, and joy, it changes how we interact with every single person in these pews. We realize that we are not just consumers of grace; we are contractors in the Kingdom. Every time you exercise your freedom, you are either holding a tool that builds the church up, or a weapon that tears it down. Which brings us to Paul's final directive in this passage: **Commit to building up instead of tearing down.**

So, yield our personal liberties to the law of love by Refusing to Let Our Freedom Become a Trap and elevating God's Kingdom Above Our Own Preferences

The last way in which we yield our personal liberties for the sake of love it to...

III. Commit to Building Up Instead of Tearing Down (vv. 19-23)

It is easy to agree that we should build each other up, but actually doing it requires

rolling up our sleeves and grabbing our tools.

Paul tells us that if we want to be builders instead of demolishers, we cannot afford to be passive. We have to get to work, to be proactive instead of reactive.

The first proactive step is to...

A. Aggressively Pursue Peace and Mutual Edification (v. 19)

Romans 14:19 *"19 So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another."*

- "Pursue" is an active, aggressive word. Peace in any church doesn't happen by chance or accident; it has to be hunted down and captured.
- Another word in this passage that bears noting is "upbuilding/building up" (edification). This word is architectural.
 - The church is a building under construction.
 - Evaluate your choices with this question:

Is my exercise of freedom laying a brick for my brother's faith, or is it taking a sledgehammer to it?

Now, we again need to remember that Paul is not telling us to ignore actual, biblical sin in the name of 'peace.' If a brother is living in active rebellion against God's Word, we are absolutely called to confront that sin in love to restore them. That is also part of building the church up.

But that is not what Paul is talking about here in Romans 14.

He isn't talking about confronting sin; he is talking about flaunting our freedoms.

He is talking about the non-essential things—the gray areas, the preferences, the liberties—that we demand our right to enjoy, even when they smack our brothers and sisters right in the face.

When it comes to our legitimate freedoms, Paul says the strongest thing you can do is to willingly put them away if it protects the reputation of Christ's church.

Instead...

B. Refuse to Let Our Rights Destroy the Work of God (vv. 20-21)

Romans 14:20–21 *"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. 21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles."*

- Paul states plainly: "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God" (v. 20).
- Everything may be objectively clean, but it is wrong for anyone to eat it if it becomes destructive to someone else, whoever they are.
- One of the "living sacrifice" parts of Romans 12:1-2 is to know that, "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (v. 21). The "Strong" gladly abstain from legitimate rights if exercising them damages the spiritual health of the "Weak."

Notice what Paul *hasn't* done here in these verses. He does not chastise the 'weak' for being too sensitive, and he does not scold the 'strong' for having freedom. Being in either camp isn't the issue.

Here is the true test of spiritual maturity:

Whether you are weak or strong, you honor God by avoiding the offense.

And whether you are weak or strong, you dishonor God the second you elevate your personal rights over another believer's hurt.

The sin isn't in your theological position; the sin is prioritizing your preferences over people.

So instead...

C. Treat the Conscience as Sacred Ground (vv. 22-23)

Romans 14:22–23 "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. 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 tells the Strong, "Keep your conviction between you and God. You don't have to flaunt your freedom to validate it," in v. 22.
- He warns the Weak: "Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith."
- The Ultimate Rule? "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (v. 23).
 - A believer's conscience is sacred ground. We are to protect the conscience of our brothers and sisters as fiercely as we protect our own, ensuring we never pressure them to act without faith. Isn't that part of what it means to "...love your neighbor as yourself."?

Conclusion

Bringing It Full Circle: From Demanding Rights to Living Sacrifices

- We started this morning talking about the \$100 hot dog and our culture's absolute obsession with personal rights. The world's mantra is, "I have the freedom to do what I want, and no one can tell me otherwise."
- But remember how Paul began this entire practical section of his letter back in Romans 12:1-2? He urged us to present our bodies as a "SACRIFICE OF LIVING" and commanded us "not to be conformed to this world, but be transformed."
- The world demands its rights. The transformed mind sacrifices them.
- Laying down your legitimate Christian liberty for the spiritual health of your brother isn't just a nice thing to do—it is exactly what it means to be a living sacrifice.
- We take our freedoms, and we lay them on the altar for the sake of the church.

And then look to the Ultimate Model

- We are asked to lay down our rights for the sake of weaker brothers and sisters because that is exactly what our Savior did for us.
- Jesus Christ had ultimate liberty. He had every right as the King of Kings. Yet, as Philippians 2 tells us, He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He laid aside His divine privileges.

Jesus became a servant, sacrificing Himself on a cross so that we—the ultimate "weaker brothers," trapped in our sin—would not face ruin, **but experience grace**.

What Will You Leave on the Altar for God's Kingdom?

- Christian liberty is not the freedom to do whatever you want; it is the Spirit-given power to do what you ought to do.
- As we close today, we need to ask ourselves, "What legitimate freedom is God calling me to lay on the altar this week for the sake of someone else's spiritual health?"
- Let us be a church, a people of God, that refuses to trip each other up.
- Let us lay down our rights, pick up our trowels, and commit to building up the Kingdom of God together.

Main Idea: The exercise of personal liberty must **always** yield to the law of love.