

Christian Liberty (Part I)
Text: Romans 14:1-12
Series: Book of Romans (#18)
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Theme: **Use Your Freedom In Christ Responsibly.**

Introduction

Freedom is a familiar and cherished concept. Freedom, being free, has many facets which are clear. It refers to being able to do things independently. It describes not being confined. It tells us that something has no price or cost. Because the United States was born out of a revolution against England, political freedom has been important to its people. Young school children learn Patrick Henry's clarion cry, "Give me liberty or give me death!"

But there are some facets of freedom that are not so clear. From time to time people ask me, "What does *Evangelical Free* mean (as in Knox *Evangelical Free* Church)? Does it mean that there are no evangelicals in your church?" I explain that this use of *Free* goes back to Europe where it refers to churches which are free from state authority, control and funding. In North America, without state churches, this use of *Free* emphasizes the independence of each local church within our denomination. We are a bottom up, not top down, family of evangelical churches.

Romans chapter 14 through the first part of chapter 15 deal with freedom. The apostle Paul continues telling us how we are to walk out, to practically live out presenting ourselves to God as a living, holy and acceptable sacrifice, of being transformed and going upstream in our downstream world. There are different facets of freedom in the Bible. Paul has written about being free from the domination and penalty of sin earlier in Romans. Those truths deal with our salvation. Here Paul is dealing with our life as people who have been saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

At the onset you need to know that there are some aspects and implications of the freedom Paul describes here that might make you a bit uncomfortable. Some aspects relate to yourself and how you view things that are a matter of choice rather than obedience to a prescribed standard. If you need to have all the details clearly spelled out in yes/no, right/wrong terms, you may find this a challenge before realizing the wonderful blessings of this freedom. Other aspects relate to other people—how you handle others making choices in areas of freedom that differ from the choices you make. If you struggle with people seeing things of freedom differently than you do, again, this truth may cause you discomfort as you work through it.

The first 12 verses of chapter 14 give us a *Description of Christian Liberty*. The central message of the section is to *Use Your Freedom In Christ Responsibly*.

The Description Of Christian Liberty.

A basic question when trying to describe Christian liberty is “What does it cover”? Paul gives us two examples in this section. Look at verse 2. “One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only.” As we go on through verses 3, 4 and 5, it becomes clear that to eat meat and vegetables or only vegetables is a matter of personal freedom.

The exact details of this situation are not clear. Many think those who didn’t eat meat were Jewish Christians who didn’t have ready access to a kosher meat market in Rome. Many others think it refers to the common practice of meat being offered to idols before being put in the market. We don’t know with certainty. What we know from the following verses is that this is not a matter of right or wrong. Both eating meat and being a vegetarian are acceptable choices. Each person has the freedom to make his or her own choice. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2:16, “no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink.”

A second example is in verse 5. Paul writes, “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.” Once again Paul does not give us all the details we would like to have. Some Jewish Christians may have been continuing to celebrate the Old Testament festivals and/or the Sabbath. Some may have insisted on worshiping on the first day of the week whether they were Gentile or Jewish, while others may have held that any day was fine. What we know from this section is that this also is not a matter of right and wrong, but of personal free choice. Going back to Colossians 2:16,

“no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.” (16-17)

Those are the examples. And they are only two of a long, long list of things where God gives us freedom. How are we to know what is a matter of personal freedom and what is not? There are two foundational principles that form the base for the other principles we will see a bit later. First, where the Bible gives us direction by specific commands or clear principles, we are to obey. There is no liberty to do otherwise. Go back to our first parents. God told Adam,

“From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.”
(Genesis 2:16b-17)

Adam did not have the freedom of being in fellowship with God and at the same time choosing to eat the fruit of that tree, even if he “just wanted to please Eve,” or was fully convinced it was okay because, “After all, you know, *times change*.”

God gave Moses and Israel the Ten Commandments. They are strong, sharp “You shall not” and “You shall” commands. Israel did not have the freedom to enjoy fellowship with God and at the same time choose to obey some of the Ten, but not others.

Then Jesus declared “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). Peter echoed this as he preached, “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Salvation is clearly defined by God. No one has freedom to try to be accepted by God through any other way.

Jesus also said,

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

(Matthew 28:19-20)

Being actively involved in making disciples is not an optional area of freedom for any believer.

Then, both the Old Testament Law and Jesus tell us, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹ This is a broad principle which comes into play every day. Part of it is described here in Romans back in chapter 13 verse 10, “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” We do not have the freedom to set this principle and practice aside.

Where God speaks in the Bible there is no freedom to do otherwise and at the same time please Him, to be in fellowship with Him.

The second and complimentary principle is that where the Bible does not speak by specific commands or clear principles, there is freedom. The examples in this chapter are eating or not eating certain foods, observing or not observing certain days and, later in verse 17, drinking or not drinking wine. There is a long list of such things in our lives. Sadly, at times individual positions in areas of freedom are seen as binding, universal principles which then lead to arguments. The Bible does not tell us, for example, which party to vote for; which system of theology is closest to the one true interpretation of Scripture; what kind of church organization and government we are to have; that movies, bowling, dancing are inherently right or wrong.

The New Testament does tell us to live in and to guard our freedom in Christ. Paul opens the fifth chapter of his letter to the churches of Galatia with “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” Going back to Colossians 2,

“no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— things

which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.” (16-17)

Peter wrote, “Act as free men ...” (1 Peter 2:16).

These two principles go together. Both of them, and the combination of the two may lead us to feel uncomfortable at times. Where the Bible speaks there is no freedom. Where the Bible does not speak there is freedom.

“But,” you may say, “that is really broad stroke! We need something that’s more specific!” That leads us to the second question: How is this freedom, this liberty in Christ to be practiced? The central message here is to use our freedom in Christ responsibly. Paul gives us four guiding directions for doing this. The first one is that we are to practice our freedom with a loving acceptance of others. We find this in the first four verses. Go back up to verse 1.

“Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

Paul uses a pair of contrasting descriptions: believers who are weak in faith and strong in faith. There are a number of ideas about who these weak and strong believers were, sometimes broken down by either Jews or Gentiles, or both; and then by the specific nature of eating/not eating, observing/not observing. The specific identity and issue is not as important as the principle. While the contrasts here describe the state of faith in overall terms, each of us can be strong in faith in some areas and not as strong in faith in others. So in some areas we will find ourselves on one side of the contrast and in other areas on the other side.

Those who are strong, mature in faith, are to accept those who are weak in faith. The word *accept* use here means to “take to yourself.” Paul used this word as he wrote to Philemon about his runaway slave, now believer Onesimus. “If then you regard me as a partner, *accept* him as you would me” (verse 17). And so it means the strong in faith are not just to put up with those of weaker faith, but to fully, personally, continually accept those who do not yet have a mature insight into the faith in any given area.

Paul quickly goes on to tell the strong, “but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.” Being strong or weak in faith does not imply any superiority or inferiority. So, Paul reminds the strong in faith not to adopt a superior, paternalistic attitude toward those who are weaker in faith. Nor are they to note the evidence of weaker faith in others and

then criticize and debate. He then says that the strong in faith are “not to regard with contempt” the weak in faith. The word translated “not to regard with contempt” is translated in 1 Thessalonians 5:20 with the word “despise.”

Moving to the other part of the contrast, the weak in faith are not to judge those who are strong in faith. It is common for those who are weak in faith to react this way. They tend to think they are the ones who see the commands and limits clearly and so judge those who see and decide differently. So, for the sake of argument, if one of the issues was about observing or not observing the Sabbath, those who observed it could be critical of those who did not, seeing them as having a fuzzy focus, or not caring about the truth as much as they should, or even as having sold out on the truth in this area.

We have freedom to choose where the Bible does not give us direction. But whatever our choice, whatever the strength of our faith in overall terms or in a particular area, that freedom must be used responsibly, it must be lived out with a loving acceptance of others.

A second guiding direction for walking out our Christian freedom responsibly is to exercise it with firm conviction. Look at verse 5. “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.” Paul used this word for “be fully convinced” earlier in 4:21 of Abraham “being *fully convinced* that what God had promised He was able also to perform.” And so, Paul says, “Don’t regard one day as more important than another and celebrate it just because your family and friends do, but think it through. Be fully convinced that you should celebrate that day.”

I need to draw two distinctions here. First, while both courses of action are acceptable, the view of the strong in faith is preferred because it is *strong*, or more mature. Second, this disagreement about days (as well as food) here in Romans was not as it was in some of the churches in Galatia. There some came into the churches and taught that if you did not observe days and other parts of the Jewish Law you were not truly saved.² Paul strictly condemns that teaching.

Why is this important? Look ahead to the end of the chapter, verse 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. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”

(22-23)

Our exercise of freedom must be responsible. That includes it being lived out with a loving acceptance of others and firm personal conviction.

As well, it needs to be part of a mindset and actions of a life that is dedicated to God. Paul makes this point in terms of the food and days issue starting in verse 6.

“He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” (6-9)

In 1 Corinthians 6 he makes the same point as he calls us to run from sin and to holy living,

“do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” (19-20)

Then in chapter 10 of that same letter he sums up his directions about helping build up others by telling us “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (31).

Yes, the Bible makes it clear that our chief purpose and goal is to glorify God. Knowing this, we need to ask the question “Is this really my chief purpose and goal?” “Have my thoughts, words and actions to this point today been driven by the desire to glorify God, to bring praise to Him, to radiate His splendor so others can see it?” I guarantee you that any and every time we think in terms of insisting on our right to exercise our freedom, or do not fully accept someone who is weaker in faith, or judge someone in an area of freedom, we are not committed, dedicated to living for God and His glory. Christian liberty is truly, faithfully, responsibly exercised when it is part of living dedicated to God and His glory.

The final guiding direction for walking out our Christian freedom is to exercise it knowing and being prepared to give an account to God for our use of this freedom. We find this at the end of this section, beginning at verse 10.

“But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.” (10-12).

This accounting is not about our sins. Jesus Christ’s death on the cross paid for every one of our past, present and future sins. As we saw earlier in Romans, that gracious work was applied or accounted to us when we placed our faith in Christ. And so, in the words of the song,

“My sins are gone. They’re underneath the blood on the cross of Calvary, as far removed as darkness is from dawn; in the sea

of God's forgetfulness, that's good enough for me, praise God, my sins are gone!"³

Christians do not have to give account for our sins. But we will give account to God for our work for Him, including how we have used our freedom. James wrote, "speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty" (2:12). Paul pictured Christ's judgment of our works in 1 Corinthians 3.

"Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire."
(12-15)

Conclusion.

As you make choices every day, remember, where the Bible gives you direction by specific commands or clear principles, you are to obey. Where it does not, you have freedom. We are to use our freedom responsibly. We do that as it is guided by and exercised with

- loving acceptance of others,
- firm conviction,
- dedicated living for God,
- and being prepared to give an account to God.

We know that sometimes the choices in areas of freedom are not easy, but sometimes they are very difficult. The guiding directions or principles we have seen are just that. We cannot plug our situation into them and then wait for a quick and easy answer to appear. God has given us these principles to guide us working through the situations and choices in which He has given us freedom. As well, they are principles for all of us. One of the implications of this truth being given to both the *weak* and *strong* in faith, is that they are for each and every one of us, each and every one of God's children. wherever we are at in growth in faith.

And, yes, again, sometimes the choices are difficult. The story is told of a man named Phocas, who was believed to have been martyred early in the fourth century. He lived in Asia minor and lived as a hermit by the gate of his city. He had an open door, welcoming and feeding those who came by. When persecution against Christians broke out in his area, his name was put on the list and soldiers were sent to seize and kill him. The soldiers arrived at the city late in the day after the gates were closed, but Phocas welcomed them and let them with him. They told them their mission and the name of the man they were to find

and kill. Phocas told them he knew the man, and would give them the information in the morning.

During the night while they slept, he prayed, dug a grave, and made other preparations for his burial. In the morning he told them, "I am Phocas." At first the soldiers refused to execute him, but he reminded them of their duty and what would happen to them and their families if they did not fulfill it. As well, he told them that he considered martyrdom for Christ an honor. So he died.⁴

The Bible did not tell Phocas that he had to stay through the night and be killed. You may recall from the book of Acts that when Paul was in Damascus the Jews were plotting to kill him. "But," Luke writes, "his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering in a large basket." He escaped to continue serving God (cf. Acts 9).

Phocas could have chosen to escape and continue living for and serving God. But out of his relationship with God and in line with the very principles we have seen today, he chose to stay, and to die for his Savior.

You see, as I said at the beginning, these truths can be uncomfortable at times. As you think and talk with God now about the freedom He gives you in Christ, begin by thanking Him for this freedom; review how you have been using or perhaps abusing it; and determine to use it responsibly as you serve God as His servant, and as you serve others as their servant.

¹ Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43; 19:19; 23:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27

² The principle is set out in Galatians 1:6-9. It is developed throughout the letter, e.g., 3:1-14; 4:8-10; 5:, 13.

³ N. B. Vandall. *My Sins Are Gone*. © 1934 N.B. Vandall. Renewed 1962. Assigned to New Spring (Admin. by Brentwood-Benson Music Publishing, Inc.)

⁴ Alban Butler. *Butler's Lives Of The Saints: September*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000, p. 204.

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