

Christian Liberty (Part 2)
Text: Romans 14:13-23
Series: Book of Romans [#19]
Lyle L. Wahl
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Theme: **Use Your Liberty Constructively—Not Destructively.**

Introduction

After a man purchased a parrot named Chico he realized the bird's wings had been clipped, so he couldn't fly. He took Chico outside when the weather was nice, but he didn't even try to fly. Somehow this parrot knew he couldn't lift off and fly around. Some months later when the man took Chico outside he became agitated. Then he flapped his wings and flew away. You see, his feathers had grown back sufficiently for him to fly. He returned the next day, but it took a fair bit of coaxing to get Chico to fly onto his shoulder and go back inside. Whenever the weather was nice the man would let Chico fly outside, and he always returned before it was dark. A few months later Chico became ill. The vet said he had picked up a disease from pigeons in the neighborhood. Chico died a few days later. He was free to fly. But with that freedom came dangers.¹

Last week we began looking at Paul's teaching about walking out our new life in Christ with responsible freedom. He gave some practical examples and principles in the first part of chapter 14 as he described this freedom. Now, in the second part of the chapter, he turns to *the dangers of Christian freedom*, the dangers of *Christian liberty*. Yes, there are dangers. So we need to make sure that we *use our liberty constructively— not destructively*.

The Dangers Of Christian Liberty.

The first danger of Christian liberty is that we can throw stumbling blocks in front of other believers. Verse 13 tells us that we are “not to put an obstacle or stumbling block in a brother's way.” Undiscerning use of liberty can trip up or trap others. Think about the words Paul uses to paint the picture.

- He talks about an *obstacle*. This word refers to any object you can trip over. We find it in 9:32-33 as Paul tells us that most of Israel was trying to work their way to righteousness and so, “They *stumbled* over the *stumbling stone*”, i.e., they stumbled over Christ, and His gift of righteousness.
- Then, *stumbling block*. This word literally referred to a trap. It is translated as *trap* back in 11:9, and as *hindrances* ahead in 16:17.

Both terms are used figuratively here. The overall picture is that we are decide, to determine to use our liberty in ways that do not trip up other believers and so impede their spiritual progress.

Let's assume, for a moment, that a strong-in-faith believer in the church at Rome, with the best, the purest of intentions, invited some new, weaker-in-faith Jewish believers to a

special outing involving many in the church. It is spring. So, on Saturday they are going out to the country to put in a communal garden. After the day's hard work they will celebrate with a banquet, complete with a whole roasted pig, choice steaks from the market, and a bit of top quality wine, also from the market.

How many stress points, obstacles or stumbling blocks do you see for these weaker-in-faith Jewish believers? Let's start with doing *work* on the Sabbath. Then eating pork, which "everyone knows is unclean!" Add to that eating meat and drinking wine from the market, which probably had been ceremonially offered to idols before it was put out for sale. Undiscerning use of liberty can trip and trap others.

This principle has a positive side as well: true liberty is driven and limited by love for others. Drop down to verse 15. "For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love" (15a). Paul stressed the key role of love back in chapter 13. Turn back to verse 8 in that chapter.

"Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (8-10)

Paul says "Walk, live in love." Our attitudes and actions to others are to be driven by love. As he wrote in Ephesians 5:2, "walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma."

Love not only drives the rightful use of our freedom, it also limits it. Christ has set us free. We *are* free. Love is a key factor in defining how that freedom behaves. In the opening of his *The Freedom Of A Christian*, Martin Luther put forward two principles. He wrote,

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything.

*A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.*²

While these two assertions may seem to be in conflict, they actually go together, balancing each other. So, in verse 21 Paul writes, "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles."

Paul also wrote pointedly about limiting personal freedom in 1 Corinthians 8, "if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble" (13). While there is a bit of hyperbole here, it does not diminish the principle of limiting my personal freedom because of love for other believers. You see, God's love for others moves us to build up each other, not my own freedom, position, or ego. Look at verse 19. "So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one

another.” Now look ahead to 15:2. “Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.” In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul wrote,

“All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.” (23-24)

Use your freedom constructively — not destructively. Be alert to, avoid the danger of throwing stumbling blocks in the path of other believers.

A second danger to avoid is that of our liberty becoming sin. Paul tells us that using our liberty thoughtlessly results in bad press and a poor reputation. Look at verse 16.

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

The “Therefore” points back to his statement in verses 14-15 that while nothing is unclean in itself, we are *not* walking in love and *are* hurting other believers when we use our freedom focusing on ourselves and our rights.

Paul doesn’t name the ones he pictures speaking badly of thoughtless freedom. Were they people in the church or not in the church? I don’t think we have to choose. When Christians hurt each other by misuse of freedom, or in any other way, *everyone* will speak badly of that behavior — those in and those not in the church. I remember all too well more than one occasion where believers hurt other believers, and people in those churches, in other churches and non-Christians in the community alike shook their heads in disgust, and even in anger. Those liberty-abusers got the bad press and reputation the old fashioned way — they earned it.

Yes, some people will take offense at the gospel and speak badly of it and its messengers even when their lives and words are without blame. But here the issue is not offense at the gospel. Rather, it is offense at offensive behavior.

Turn back to chapter 2 here in Romans. In the second half of this chapter Paul demonstrates that the Jews who look to justify themselves by works of the Law cannot succeed. Let’s pick it up at verse 23. “You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For *‘the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you ...’*” (23-24). In 2 Corinthians 6:3 Paul instructs us to give “no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited.” Using our liberty thoughtlessly results in bad press and a poor reputation.

Then Paul tells us that flaunting liberty turns relationships into a demolition derby. Demolition derbies have been around for at least 50 years. You get some old cars on a soaked dirt track. When the flag drops, the drivers start ramming their cars into each other. The last car running is the winner. There even have been school bus and combine demolition derbies. While that may be great fun for some people, a demolition derby of

Christians is anything but fun. Go to verse 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.” Now look at verse 20. “Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food” (20a).

Paul uses strong language. Don’t *hurt* each other. This word means to grieve, pain or distress another; to be in pain; to be hurt. *Destroy*. Do not ruin or destroy others. *Tear down*. The picture is to throw down; to tear down; to dismantle; to demolish. Since Christ died for that Christian brother or sister, why do you flaunt your liberty in a demolition derby where the last one standing wins? Granted, people then and today don’t see themselves doing this. But when we flaunt our liberty, that is exactly what we are doing.

The point is clear—indulging our liberty at the expense of others is sin. When a Christian indulges his or her liberty and so causes Christian liberty and the gospel to be seen and spoken of as evil, causes the hurt, tearing down and destruction of others, causes a demolition derby, that is not good. That is sin. Verse 20 says, “All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense” (20b). In 1 Corinthians 8:12 Paul tells us “And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.”

You probably have a few questions by now. Questions such as, “Isn’t this a bit extreme?” And, “What about *the professional weaker brother*? You know, the one who always drags out ‘You can’t do that because it will offend me’ to get his own way?” Throughout this section Paul assumes and writes about situations where both the strong and weak in faith are sincerely trying to live for and please God.³ The gamesmanship of trying to be in control and get my way, whether by the strong or weak in faith, is sinful, and a different matter from Paul’s subject here. Liberty that is abused is sinful. Use your liberty constructively—not destructively.

The final danger of liberty that Paul puts before us is that misunderstanding and misusing it can harden our conscience. Even as a cleansed and justified new creation in Christ Jesus, my conscience, and yours, is not 100% reliable. The Bible is the test and standard of all things, including our conscience. At the same time, one of the means the Holy Spirit uses every day to teach, correct, guide, prod and restrain us is our conscience.

Last week I noted that where God’s word does not speak, we not only have freedom, but we are to act on the basis of strong, deep conviction. Go back up to verse 5. “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be *fully convinced* in his own mind.” God moves in our conscience to give us a conviction that this is something that we should do or should not do.

Paul picks up that idea as he closes this chapter. Drop down to 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.” One of the best ways to squelch happiness is to go against your conscience. And, one of the best ways to enjoy true happiness from God is to follow His leading through your conscience.

Even though your conscience is not 100% reliable, it is dangerous to go against it. Going against it is not the route to true happiness. In fact, it blocks experiencing God's joy. In 1 Corinthians 8:7 Paul tells us that going against our conscience, even when knowing on some levels it is not correct, can defile it. The case there involved believers who before faith were used to eating food in temples which had been sacrificed to idols. They had considered those idols as actual gods. Now, even though they know idols are not real gods, they can defile their conscience, which is weak in this area because of their past experience, by going back into that setting with all the memories, and then eating.

In Ephesians 4 Paul writes about nonbelievers walking in futility, having darkened understanding and that they have "become callous" (19). Going against God's truth built up callouses. Going against my conscience will build up callouses. I will no longer be as sensitive to its directions and warnings. In 1 Timothy 4 Paul tells us false teachers by the hypocrisy of their falsehoods have seared their own conscience "as with a branding iron" (2). Seared, scarred, and so no longer sensitive.

It is dangerous to go against your conscience, and it also is sinful. We saw that we sin against other believers by unloving use of liberty. That also is a sin against Christ who died for them as well as for us (1 Corinthians 8:12). The last verse of this chapter tells us that even if no one else knows about our misuse of liberty, it still is sin. Look at Paul's words. "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin."

I can choose to regard one day above another and you can choose to regard all days alike. I can choose to abstain from certain foods and wine and you can choose to eat and drink them. There is no fault or sin in those choices. Back in verse 5, again, Paul said we are to be fully convinced in our minds before God that the choice we make is the right one for us. This is not relativism in areas of truth and error or righteousness and sin. This deals with, only with, choices in things where God gives us freedom.

Paul strengthens verse 5 by now telling us that if we doubt, rather than choosing and acting in faith, that is sinful because "whatever is not from faith is sin." In both the things where God has spoken and given us directions and in the things where God has not spoken and given us freedom, we, who are the righteous ones of God, are, as 1:17 tells us, to "live by faith." Yes, it is dangerous to go against your conscience, and it also is sinful. Pay attention to your conscience. Test its directions by Scripture.

Conclusion.

Use your liberty constructively — not destructively. Misuse of liberty goes beyond individual relationships. It can extend to, engulf a whole church. The headline began with, "Church Splits Down The Middle..." According to the brief article, over 100 years of Christian fellowship, spiritual love, Godly unity, and community growth ended as the Holy Creek Baptist Church split down the middle.

The pastor of another congregation mediated an agreement which resulted in separate

Sunday services. Each faction had its own services with its own pastor. The services were scheduled far enough apart so that neither group would come in contact with the other.

What was the great flashpoint of this split? A piano bench. Yes, a piano bench. Specifically, exactly where it should be placed in the sanctuary. An outside party was enlisted to move it to the exact position for each group's service to help make sure the conflict would not escalate into physical violence.⁴

If it weren't serious, it would be laughable. And we know that in such cases the *piano bench* is only the flashpoint of the real problem. Even if it were just the placement of the piano bench, that certainly is an area of freedom. It clearly appears that the bad press and reputation, the demolition derby destruction of unity and relationships was played out by an abuse of freedom, which is always sinful. The root of that issue most certainly went to each group focusing on their own opinions. Paul would say, "The kingdom of God is not about the placement of the piano bench, 'but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'" (17).

We are privileged to have great fellowship here at Knox. We don't have people as the man Diotrephes the apostle John wrote about,⁵ who love to be first. People who focus on being in charge, directing, controlling what happens in the church. In fact, as I often tell others, we are a group that doesn't cling to positions or roles, but gladly allows others to speak up, step in, and minister. We have a range of ideas on some non-essential things, and that is where the proper use of Christian liberty comes in.

As you reflect with God on the dangers of Christian liberty, thank Him for this liberty, and how it is used well here at Knox, and among many other believers. Determine to use it according to the principles we considered last week, and guard it from the dangers we have seen today.

¹ Charlie Badenhop. *The Rewards and Risks of Personal Freedom*. <<http://www.wow4u.com/rewardsrisks/index.html>>. Accessed 18 March 2010.

² Martin Luther. *On Christian Freedom*. Trans. Mark D. Tranvik. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008, page 50.

³ cf. Romans 14:6.

⁴ C. Harper. *Church Splits Down The Middle Over Issues Regarding Piano Bench*. August 1999. <<http://www.landoverbaptist.org/news0899/piano.html>>. Accessed 18 March 2010.

⁵ 3 John 9.

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