

Christian Liberty (Part 3)
Text: Romans 15:1-13
Series: Book of Romans [#20]
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Theme: **Responsible Freedom Builds Community.**

Introduction

Today we take our third and final look at Christian liberty, as Paul discusses it in Romans 14-15. In the first part of chapter 14 Paul described this freedom as he told us we are to use it responsibly. Where the Bible gives us direction by commands and principles we are to obey. Where the Bible does not, there is freedom. He told us that part of using our freedom responsibly is to lovingly accept all other believers, including those who are weak in faith. We are to exercise our freedom with firm conviction out of dedication to God, and knowing we will give account to Him for how we use it.

Then in the second part of chapter 14 Paul alerted us to the dangers of Christian liberty. Undiscerning use of it can trip or trap others. Discerning use is driven and limited by love. Undiscerning use can result in bad press and a poor reputation as well as turning relationships into demolition derbies. So we are to make sure we use our liberty constructively, not destructively.

Now in the first part of chapter 15 Paul addresses the duties of Christian liberty.

The Duties Of Christian Liberty.

He begins with the duties of the strong in faith. Paul spoke of the weak in faith and the strong in faith in chapter 14, but did not actually use the description *strong*. But now he uses it as chapter 15 opens. The word *strong* basically means to have ability or strength. The word translated *without strength* is the opposite—not having ability or strength. Paul is writing about strength of faith in this section. Because Christ fulfilled the Law, certain days being special and some foods being off limits are now a matter of personal choice. That's true whether the standards come from the Law or any other set of rules. The faith of some believers in the church at Rome was not strong enough for them to live in this freedom in certain areas. They also might have problems with the choices and actions of others who did have faith to live in this freedom in those areas.

Paul tweaks his emphasis. He does not say to the strong in faith, “Bear with those without strength”, but “Bear *the weaknesses* of those without strength.” He says this is something the strong in faith ought to do. It is an *obligation* or *duty*. Later in verse 27 as Paul talks about ministry and money, he uses this word twice and both times it is translated *indebted*. The strong have the duty to *bear* the weaknesses of those without strength.

The uses of this word *bear* in a literal sense in the New Testament include carrying a pitcher of water¹, carrying a coffin², and Jesus carrying His own cross.³ It's figurative uses, such as here, include bearing one another's burdens⁴, bearing our own load⁵, and Jesus'

disciples' carrying their own cross.⁶ So, Paul does not say, "Put up with their weaknesses", but "Help them carry the load of their weaknesses", or even, "Carry the load of their weaknesses." It's one thing to say it, but what does this look like?

In physical terms it is easy to picture. In the Hanson household, Pastor Tyler and Tabitha do not expect four month-old Leif to change his clothes, make his crib, take his turn at doing dishes or carry one-third of all the things they have to take when the family goes on an outing. Leif is *without strength*, he is not physically, developmentally able to do those things.

But what about in spiritual terms? We see part of the picture in terms of the issues Paul addressed here back in 14:21. "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles." Helping carry the weaknesses of those who are weak in faith, in part means the strong in faith are to give up doing things they know are okay, and also may be enjoyable, so the weak in faith do not stumble under a heavy weight of questions, confusion and doubt.

Yes, at times that can sound a bit unfair. And, no, as we said last week, this does not refer to the *professional weaker brother* who tries to get his way by playing the "that offends me" card. Remember, responsible freedom is not all about me. Rather, it focuses on and *builds community*. As well, if you are truly going to carry part of my weaknesses, you need to understand something of them and why I am weak in those things, and accept those weaknesses without criticism or a sense of being superior to me. A principle duty of the strong in faith is to bear the weaknesses of those without strength.

Then there is the duty to please others for their good. Look at the start of the chapter again.

"Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification." (1-2)

Negatively, we are to "not *just* please ourselves." You may notice that the word "just" is in italics. It is not in the text, but is supplied to give context. It actually reads "not please ourselves." This does not mean we should not do things we enjoy or that are for our benefit. The setting of chapters 14 and 15 makes it clear that we are not to do things that please us at the expense of others, particularly the weaker in faith. Paul didn't just say this, led by example. In 1 Corinthians 10 he wrote,

"Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved." (31-33)

Positively, we are to please others for their "good." This quickly dismisses any thoughts that we should try to please people by doing whatever they want, or whatever makes them feel good at the time. Just as Paul instructed slaves to obey their masters with sincerity, and

“not by way of eye-service, as man-pleasers” in Ephesians 6 (5-6), so we are to sincerely please others for what is truly good for them.

That, of course, leads to the question, “How can I know what is truly good for someone else?” In the specific things Paul covers here, part of it was not to put a stumbling block regarding days, food or anything else in the path of a fellow believer and so trip him up and tear him down.⁷ Here in verse 2 Paul explains that the *good* is that which edifies or builds up the other person. We also saw this in chapter 14. Look at verse 19. “So then we pursue the things which make for peace and *the building up* of one another.” 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).

To edify is to build up. We see one description of being built up in Christ, being built up in the faith, in Colossians 2, beginning at verse 6.

“Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and *now being built up in Him* and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.” (6-7)

You see, it involves stepping forward in faith to put the instruction we have received from God’s Word into practice, not reluctantly or grudgingly, but with overflowing thankfulness for that precious gift of God’s grace. It is not limited to teaching and encouragement. In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul defends his apostleship and calls the people in that church to repent of sin. All of that, he wrote, was for their edification (19).

So we are to look at the Bible, to apply truth that fits the situation and needs, and then please the other believer by doing the things that are truly in his or her best interest to growing in Christ. When it comes to Christian liberty it is not all about me. It is not even mostly about me. It is about community, about the others, about all of us. And our example, as Paul notes in verse 3, is Christ who, for our good, “did not please Himself” but took the reproaches, insults, abuse, and punishment that was due us.

The goal, the end result of this is beautifully described in Paul’s brief prayer in verses 5-6. Look at those verses.

“Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Let’s work backward from the ultimate goal, which is that each local group of believers glorify God. To glorify God is not only to please Him, but to display His great perfection, His perfect splendor, His love and grace so others will see it and see Him. It is being a living testimony of God’s grace and splendor.

Paul tells us we are to do this “with one voice.” That means being united, not fragmented. It would have been easy for the church in Rome to be fragmented by the issues of freedom they faced. So it was and so it is. The church I cited last week that split down the middle over the placement of a piano bench could not claim, and would not be seen by anyone as glorifying God in that, let alone glorifying Him with one voice, with one accord, and being of the same mind. This “same mind” is neither my ideas nor yours but, as Paul tells us, is “according to Christ Jesus.” It lines up with Him, and flows from Him.

We know this can be far from easy. So it is encouraging to see at the beginning of this prayer that God gives both perseverance and encouragement. Even if you get along with most people, you have met at least a few people you don’t click with and more than that, who try your patience and sap your energy and joy. You will continue to experience this if you continue try to handle it with your own resources. God gives perseverance and encouragement to all of us so that whatever our differences, whether we are strong or weak in faith, we can preserve and enjoy the unity that Holy Spirit creates.⁸

When we rely on God and submit to each other, God brings glory through us out of that community, and as others see that unity they will recognize it as something different, something beyond enforced conformity or thoughtless following. Tertullian wrote a defence of the faith titled *The Apology* early in the third century, a time when Christians were being persecuted. He tells us

“...it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. ‘See,’ they say, ‘how they love one another ...’”⁹

People saw something in Christian community that was dramatically different. Responsible freedom builds community. This takes place as those who are strong in faith fulfill their duties that come with their liberty.

As we come to verse 7, Paul turns to duties of the entire church for Christian liberty to be lived as it should be and to build community that brings glory to God. The duties are really one over-arching duty that should be an old friend to us by now—all of us are to truly, fully accept each other. Verse 7. “Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.” Now look back to 14:1. “Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.”

To *accept* means to “take to yourself.” It refers to fully accepting someone, not just putting up with, nor accepting at arms length, not with reservations and limitations. While there are varying degrees of familiarity with other people in the family of God, varying degrees of trust, every person in the church is to be fully accepted as part of the church community by every other person.

This, as we know, has not always been the case. In the first chapter of Paul’s first letter to the church of Corinth he pointed out their divisions based on the leaders the different

factions followed. In James chapter 2 the problem was personal favoritism of the rich over the poor.

Consider this situation. An article in the *Milwaukee Daily Journal* on April 7, 1890 reported that a paper titled *The Relation of the Church to the Working People* had been read at the regular monthly meeting of the ministerial association. The writer contended that, with the exception of the Catholic churches, the churches in Milwaukee were much more ready to welcome the rich than the poor, and so were responsible for the absence or exclusion of many working class and poor people.

But one pastor contended that “most of the churches would extend a hearty welcome to the poor but there is not a hearty response to this welcome.” His point, with which others agreed, was that the poor were as responsible as the churches for this problem. “They say the don’t want to go to church.” One pastor proposed a resolution stating they were in full sympathy with the poor and that they would be warmly welcomed when they desire to come. After discussion and amendments they agreed to say they were “in full sympathy with all people, rich and poor, learned and unlearned and stand ready to assist any desiring to lead a better life.”¹⁰

We may laugh at this 120 year-old problem. Certainly the *Milwaukee Daily Journal* did. The main title they gave to the article was *Ministers as Humorists*. But the problem of full acceptance of every believer, and every person seeking God, is still around in the 21st century as it was in the 1st and 19th centuries.

From time to time we meet Christians from different cultures and church traditions who don’t speak the same *church language* we speak. I remember one couple who started attending the church I pastored and then asked for church membership. I had come to know them a bit. Both their ethnic and church cultures were quite different from ours. Before they met with the elders, I encouraged the elders to listen to this couple’s hearts and not look for our familiar church language. We all heard both their beliefs and their hearts and thanked God that He directed them to us. I mention this because I have heard of others times, as you may have, when churches have rejected believers, or accepted them with reservations, based on these and other differences.

Paul states and supports the reason for this duty. Go back to verse 7 again. “Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.” How has Christ received you and me?

- Lovingly and graciously,
- freely and fully,
- immediately and eternally.

Now, if the God of the universe has accepted us who were dead to Him in our sins, how can we not accept every other fellow-redeemed-sinner?

The largest part of this section, verses 8-12, backs up this duty and Christ as our example with citations from the Old Testament. This may seem like a bit much. Paul explains what he is doing in verses 8-9. Look at what he writes.

“For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, ‘Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles, and I will sing to Your name.’”

First, he reminds us that Christ became a servant to Israel to fulfill God’s promises to them. Then, Christ served the Gentiles, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies by including them in His kingdom. His overall point is that Christ has united Jews and Gentiles. He has created a new unity, a new community of acceptance. Jews and Gentiles now are brothers and sisters glorifying God together for His mercy. This is important and central to God’s heart. So, full acceptance of others and glorifying God together with them should be important and central to us as well.

The goal of this duty is summarized in verse 13. “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Paul prayed that as the believers in Rome believed and lived this truth, God would not just give them, but “*fill them with all joy and peace in believing.*” You probably have discovered that you are not filled with God’s joy and peace when you don’t truly believe truth you have learned by living it. God floods the hearts and minds of His believing, trusting, faithful children with His joy and peace by the power of the Holy Spirit.

That is for today and for the long haul. The result of this full joy and peace is hope, abounding hope or certainty for the future. Hope abounds or overflows as we know and live God’s truth. Look back at verse 4. “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

Conclusion.

Responsible freedom builds community. Christian liberty is a great gift from God. When we use it responsibly it will bring the blessing of community as well as great glory to God. Are you using your liberty responsibly?

Community is vital to the church. It is required to function and fulfill the design and mission Christ has given us. So we must worship and work together in unity. Years ago a well-known organist was scheduled to give a recital on an old organ where air was supplied by hand pumping rather than electrical compressors. A young boy was hired to pump for this concert.

Everything was fine until the boy poked his head around the side of the organ and whispered to the organist, “We’re doing pretty good, aren’t we?” “What do you mean, ‘we’,

the annoyed organist whispered back. A few minutes later, in the middle of a very beautiful section, the organ wheezed to silence. The red-faced organist was helpless. The little boy stuck his head around the corner again. With a big smile on his face he said, “Now do you know what I mean by ‘we?’”¹¹ We need each other. We need to work together.

As you reflect on this truth about your Christian liberty with God, thank Him for this wonderful gift. Review how you have been using your freedom this past week. Determine to use it responsibly this and every week.

¹ Mark 14:13.

² Luke 7:14.

³ John 19:17.

⁴ Galatians 6:2.

⁵ Galatians 6:5.

⁶ Luke 19:27.

⁷ cf. 14:13, 15, 20, 21.

⁸ cf. Ephesians 4:3.

⁹ Tertullian. *The Apology*. Chapter XXXIX.

<<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anfo2.iv.iii.xxxix.html>>. Accessed 24 March 2010.

¹⁰ “Ministers as Humorists.” *Milwaukee Daily Journal*. April 7, 1890, 5 O’clock Edition, Volum 8,

No. 120, page 1. <<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1499&dat=18900407&id=18900407&id=lOkqAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=Rn4EAAAAIIBAJ&pg=6715,3919545>>. Accessed 25 March 2010.

¹¹ There are a number of sources for this old story. One is:

Michael Hodgkin. *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, pages 341-2.

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