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LOVE TRUMPS LIBERTY

Romans 14:13-16

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Romans, Lesson 94

Love Trumps Liberty Romans 14:13-16

In a sermon on our text, Pastor Ligon Duncan commented that someone needs to write a book, *Romans 14 for Dummies*, and he would be the first to buy it, because this is a difficult text to understand and apply in its context. I'd buy one, too! We're not concerned in our day about the spiritual implications of eating or not eating meat, which is the main issue Paul was addressing. He also mentions keeping certain days as holy (14:5) and drinking wine (14:21), which may be a bit more relevant. But even so, it's difficult to apply these verses in a way that is true to the text.

For example, I've heard of older believers who wrongly use this text to lay unbiblical rules on younger believers. They tell them, "As a Christian, you can't dress or look like worldly young people do. You need to dress and look as I do. If you don't, you're causing me to stumble." In some strict Christian circles, women are not allowed to wear any makeup. Sometimes men are not allowed to grow beards, but in other groups, all the men must grow beards. And so it goes!

One of the most ridiculous church splits that I've ever heard of happened years ago when a preacher was trying to make a point with a strong gesture and his hand got caught in his necktie. Of course this distracted the congregation from his point, so he tore off his necktie and declared that ties are from the devil. Others disagreed, and so they split into the non-tie church and the tie-wearing church. My sentiments are definitely with the non-tie brothers (I think that ties are strangulation devices), but obviously this is not a biblical reason for splitting a church!

In Romans 14:1-12, Paul's main point is that we are to accept one another and not judge or look with contempt on those who differ with us over non-essential matters. He was talking both to weaker and stronger believers. The weaker believers were not weak in the sense of not being able to resist temptation. That kind of weakness is sin. Rather, they were weak in that they were hung up with scruples about things that the Bible does not command or

with stipulations of the Jewish law that were fulfilled in Christ and thus no longer in effect. They tended to judge the Gentile believers who were not bound by these scruples. The stronger brothers (Paul classed himself with them, 15:1) realized that we are no longer under the Mosaic Law, and so they didn't have a problem eating non-kosher meat. They realized (1 Cor. 8:8), "But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat." But their tendency was to look with contempt on their Jewish brothers, belittling them for their petty rules.

Now (14:13-23), after an introductory summary that goes out to both sides (not to judge one another), Paul turns mostly to the stronger believers. He was concerned that they would flaunt their liberty in Christ to the detriment of weaker believers, who may be influenced to violate their consciences. Paul tells the stronger believers that love for their brothers should trump their use of liberty. As he states (14:15), "For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love." So the principle is:

Love for others should govern our exercise of liberty in Christ when our liberty would cause a weaker brother to stumble.

Our main focus should not be on our liberty or our rights, but on loving our brother. Love gladly yields its rights when it is necessary to keep a weaker brother from stumbling. But while the overall principle is fairly clear, the difficulty is in the details. Let's work through these verses, looking at four things that love does not do.

1. Love does not judge others on non-essential matters, but determines not to put obstacles or stumbling blocks in a brother's way (14:13).

Romans 14:13: "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." Paul uses a play on words here: the word translated "determine" is the same word translated "judge" earlier in the sentence. We might paraphrase, "Don't judge your brother; rather, judge yourself so that you don't put an obstacle or stumbling block in your brother's way." Keep in mind that in this chapter, Paul is talking about *non-moral* matters where the Bible does not give clear commands. He is not talking about judging your

brother regarding sin or serious doctrinal error (which we need to do), but rather on non-moral or secondary matters.

Not judging your brother means that you do not condemn him or question his salvation over matters of doctrine where the Bible is not clear or behavior where it gives no direct commands. You can have your own convictions before God by working through the issue biblically (14:5, 22), but let your brother work out his convictions. You aren't his judge; God is his judge and your judge, too!

The words "obstacle" and "stumbling block" are basically synonymous. "Obstacle" refers to anything that would trip up your brother. "Stumbling block" originally referred to a trap. Here it refers to any cause of spiritual downfall or ruin. Paul (Rom. 9:32-33) uses both words of Jesus, who is the "stone of stumbling" and "rock of offense" for those who try to be justified by their works. The cross of Christ offends the self-righteous because it tells them that their works can never commend them to the holy God.

To put an obstacle or stumbling block in your brother's way would be to do something in front of a weaker brother that for you is a matter of liberty in Christ, but it's not something that he feels free to do. When he sees you doing it, he joins you in doing it, but it violates his conscience. Perhaps he goes along with you because he wants your approval, but he gets his eyes off of living to please the Lord. He sins because he is not acting in faith (14:23). He is disobeying the Lord.

It's difficult to come up with modern examples, but perhaps one example would be having a glass of wine or beer. The Bible does not prohibit drinking alcoholic beverages, as long as you do not get drunk and you're not depending on the alcohol to escape from your problems. But perhaps you're with a new believer who had a problem with alcohol before he got saved. Because of the devastating effects alcohol had on his life, he now believes that it's wrong to have even one drink. You're out to dinner with him and you order a beer or a glass of wine with your meal. Your brother sees this and wants to fit in, so he orders a drink with his food, but in so doing, he violates his conscience. His guilt causes him to fall away from the Lord. Perhaps he begins drinking to excess again. You have put a stumbling block in your brother's way.

Does this mean that you must become a teetotaler? Well, there may be good reasons to do that, but not necessarily. The entire church is not limited by the conscience of the weakest believers in its midst. But you should not flaunt your liberty in front of a weaker believer when you know that it's an issue for him (see 1 Cor. 10:23-30). Out of love for him, limit your liberty in his presence. As the Lord gives opportunity, you may teach him about true liberty in Christ. But don't do anything that would cause him to violate his conscience by following your example. That's the next point, which Paul explains in verse 14:

2. Love does not cause a weaker brother to violate his conscience (14:14).

Romans 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." "Nothing" here is limited by the context. Paul is not saying that you can do anything you feel like doing! The Bible gives clear, absolute, binding moral commandments. To violate these commands is to disobey God and defile yourself. Paul is talking about non-moral matters, where Scripture is silent. He is especially talking here about the matter of eating or not eating certain foods. He is saying (and this was radical for a former Pharisee like Paul!) that the Old Testament laws for clean and unclean foods were no longer in effect.

Paul underlines what he says with strong conviction: "I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus." This could mean that the Lord had revealed these things directly to Paul, perhaps during his time in Arabia shortly after his conversion. Or, perhaps he knew what Jesus said (Mark 7:18-23), that it is not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him, but what comes out of his heart that defiles him. Mark (7:19) adds his own editorial comment, "(Thus He declared all foods clean.)" God showed Peter the same truth through a vision before he went to preach the gospel at the house of the Gentile centurion, Cornelius (Acts 10:15), "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." Paul mentions the same thing in relation to food (1 Tim. 4:4-5), "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer." (See, also, 1 Cor. 8:4-8.)

Okay, if Paul is so convinced that we're free to eat anything, then what's the big deal? Just eat what you want and don't worry about it! No, because Paul adds, "but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." In other words, it is wrong to violate your conscience, even if your conscience is not completely in line with Scripture. God gave the conscience as an inner "faults alarm." It goes off when you think you're at fault. As Paul said (Rom. 2:15), even the Gentiles who do not have the law of God have a conscience that either accuses or defends them. They will be guilty before God someday because when they violated their conscience, in their heart they were disobeying God.

Again, it's important to keep in mind here that the weaker brother is not a legalist who would never be tempted to do what he sees you doing as you exercise your liberty in Christ. To use the drinking illustration, the weaker brother is not the teetotaler who would never touch a drop of alcohol even if he was dying of thirst. Rather, it's the brother for whom to drink a beer would violate his conscience. He does not have the liberty in Christ to do what you are free to do. But he sees you drinking and it tempts him to join in, even though he thinks that he shouldn't. So out of love don't flaunt your liberty in front of him and cause him to sin.

But you may be thinking, "Don't I have a right to drink a beer or a glass of wine? Why should I have to limit my freedom because of the weaker brother's hang-ups? Why doesn't he just grow up?"

3. Love does not insist on its rights to the point of damaging a weaker brother's walk with God (14:15).

Romans 14:15: "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." The argument here is, "If Christ loved this brother enough to die for him on the cross, then don't you think that you should love him enough to be willing to give up your ham sandwich (or glass of wine) so that you don't lead him into sin?" In other words, get some perspective: Your sacrifice of some liberty is nothing compared to Christ's sacrifice of His very life! Since Jesus called us to love one another as He loved us, the least you can do is to give up your right to certain liberties for the sake of your weaker brother.

But what does Paul mean when he talks about destroying your brother? He uses the same Greek word (translated "ruined") in 1 Cor. 8:11: "For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died." It's a very strong word, used most often to refer to eternal damnation. Paul uses it this way in Romans 2:12, "For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law" It's also translated "perish" to refer to damnation in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

Because of this, a number of scholars who believe in the eternal security of believers nonetheless argue that Paul is saying that if you cause a weaker brother to sin by violating his conscience, you could cause his damnation. They explain this by saying that if the weaker brother falls away so as to perish, then he was a "brother" in name only, not in actual fact. Also, since Jesus will not lose any of His sheep for whom He laid down His life (John 10:28-29; 17:2, 12), they have to say that Christ didn't actually die as a substitute for this so-called brother. It only appeared for a while that this weaker brother was one of God's elect. But his falling away proves that he was not.

Also, they explain that God uses severe warnings in Scripture to cause the elect to persevere. For example, Paul says that Christ has reconciled you and will present you holy and blameless before God (Col. 1:23), "if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel" The warning passages in Hebrews sound as if true believers could perish, but the severity of the warnings causes true believers to turn from sin and continue in the faith.

One example of this use of means to accomplish God's promises is when Paul was on the boat about to be shipwrecked. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and promised that none on the ship would perish. But a short time later when the sailors tried to escape on the ship's small boat, Paul told the centurion that unless these men remained on board the ship, the centurion and his men would not be saved (Acts 27:22-24, 31). Paul's warning was heeded, the sailors stayed on board, and all were saved.

While I greatly respect these scholars who say that the word *destroy* here means eternal destruction and I agree with some of the arguments that they put forth in other contexts, it seems to me that the context here overrides the usual meaning of the word and that here Paul means that flaunting your liberty will damage your brother's walk with God, not that you will cause a professing believer to go to eternal damnation. It's still a serious matter—we shouldn't minimize how bad it is to hurt a brother's walk with God. But I think that it goes too far here to insist on the usual meaning of *destroy*. Here are some reasons why I think as I do:

First as John Stott says, (pp. 365-366, cited by Sam Storms on enjoyingGodministries.com), "Are we really to believe that a Christian brother's single act against his own conscience—which in any case is not his fault but the fault of the strong who have misled him, and which is therefore an unintentional mistake, not a deliberate disobedience—merits eternal condemnation? No, hell is reserved only for the stubborn, the impenitent, those who willfully persist in wrongdoing." Granted, perhaps this act of violating his conscience could lead to further violations, until finally he makes shipwreck of his faith (1 Tim. 1:19). So if we've caused a brother to stumble, we need to do all that we can to restore him. But our one sin that resulted in our brother's sin does not cause him to perish.

Also (as Martyn Lloyd-Jones argues, *Romans: Liberty and Conscience* [Banner of Truth], p. 191), the ultimate destiny of another soul is never in our hands. If we could cause anyone to be eternally lost, then our power would be greater than God's, who alone is able both to save and to keep us for eternity (Rom. 8:31-39). Also (Lloyd-Jones, p. 192), if sinning against our conscience results in perishing, we all would perish, because we've all sinned in this manner. But the Lord promises that those to whom He gives eternal life can never perish (John 10:28).

The practical application is that we should be very sensitive about not doing anything that might cause a weaker believer to violate his conscience. If we have sinned in this way, we should do all that we can to help get him back on track with the Lord. Love does not insist on its rights if doing so would damage a weaker brother's walk with God.

Thus love does not judge others on non-essential matters, but rather determines not to put a stumbling block in a brother's way. Love does not cause a weaker brother to violate his conscience. Love does not insist on its rights to the point of destroying a weaker brother's walk with God. Finally,

4. Love does not insist in its rights in disregard of the testimony of Christ (14:16).

Romans 14:16: "Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ..." Some say that the "good thing" refers to the gospel, but in the context it seems to refer to the liberty that we enjoy in Christ as a result of the gospel. Paul does not say who it is that speaks evil of your liberty that has caused harm to a brother. It may be other weak believers, who say, "Look at what your liberty in Christ did! You have liberty, but where's your love?" Or it could be unbelievers, who see that you're not walking in love and scoff at the message behind your liberty, namely, the gospel. Either way, the testimony of Christ, which is supposed to result in believers loving one another, will be damaged.

The late Bible teacher, H. A. Ironside, was once at a Sunday School picnic in Detroit where a former Muslim from India who had come to know Christ was present. His name was Mohammed Ali (not the boxer!) and he ran his father's tea business in the States. As Ironside and he were chatting, a young woman came by passing out sandwiches. Ironside helped himself to several of them, but when Mr. Ali learned that they were all pork or ham, he refused to take any. The young woman laughingly said, "Why, Mr. Ali, you surprise me. Are you so under law that you can't eat pork? Don't you know that a Christian is at liberty to eat any kind of meat?"

"I am at liberty to eat it," he said, "but I am also at liberty to let it alone. You know that I was brought up a strict Muslim. My old father, nearly eighty years of age now, is still a Muslim. Every three years I go back to India to give an account of the business and to visit the folks at home. Always I know how I will be greeted. The friends will be sitting inside. My father will come to the door and say, 'Mohammed, have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?' 'No, father,' I will say. 'Pork has never passed my lips.' Then I can go in and have the opportunity to preach Christ to them. If I took one of your sandwiches, I could not

preach Christ to my father the next time I go home.” (Edited from H. A. Ironside, *1 Corinthians* [Loizeaux Brothers], pp. 244-246.)

That converted Muslim was willing to limit his liberty in Christ for the sake of the gospel. Whether towards unbelievers or toward weaker Christians, out of love we should not insist on our rights if it would damage the testimony of Christ.

Conclusion

As I said, it is difficult to extrapolate the principles that Paul sets forth here into modern situations. The first thing to determine is whether the Bible speaks directly to the situation. If so, obey what it commands. If not, don't think first about your rights to liberty. Rather, think about your weaker brother's spiritual growth. Love trumps liberty. Love says, “My liberty is no big deal. The big deal is that my brother grows in his walk with Christ.”

Application Questions

1. What are some situations where the principles from this text may apply? Be as specific and practical as possible.
2. Has a stronger believer ever caused you to violate your conscience by following his example? Was it difficult to recover?
3. Sometimes Jesus deliberately offended the legalists to make a point (e.g., Luke 11:37-52). Should we do this? When? How?
4. Sometimes it seems that whatever you do is bound to offend someone on both sides. What should you do then?

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