

The Right to Yield

by Ray C. Stedman

In our study in Romans 14, we are facing again the troublesome question of different views on such matters as dietary restrictions (whether it is all right to eat meat at certain times or days, or whether we should be free from that); on ritual regulations (such as observance of Sunday or other special days, such as Lent); on ceremonies; and especially, personal preferences in the matter of drinking wine and beer and alcohol, smoking, movies, cosmetics, or whatever.

We are right in the middle of the apostle's treatment of these kinds of problems, and I remind you that this all comes in one great section, from Chapter 14, Verse 1, through Chapter 15, Verse 13. This is a very lengthy section which deals with these matters, showing how much they were a problem in the early church, as they are in churches today.

The section falls naturally into three divisions: what you must not do about these things; what you can do about them; and what happens when you handle them in the right way.

Last week, we looked at what you must not do. We saw that the apostle tells us that we must not criticize or condemn each other in these matters. There is an area of freedom in anyone's life which only God has the right to correct. We must not judge each other in these matters; we must not try to regulate one another's conduct by legislation, by majority rule, or by artificial codes of behavior. These methods are wrong because, as Paul brought out, they are taking the place of Christ. He alone has the right to judge. He alone has the right to criticize or condemn in these areas. And he will do so. Therefore, when Christians take this on themselves, they are usurping the place of Christ. I think that argument was very clear.

This morning we want to look at what you can do about these matters; how we are to behave toward one another in these areas.

Paul sets out the first thing we can do in Chapter 14, Verse 13:

Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. [That summarizes what we have covered so far: we are not to judge one another.] **Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. {Rom 14:13 NIV}**

I have always appreciated the fact that Scripture is never merely negative. It never says, "Do not do something," without suggesting a positive action to take its place. If all the apostle had to say was, "Stop judging," that would be like saying to someone, "Do not worry," which is a futile thing to say, unless you give them a basis on which they can stop worrying. If you try to stop worrying without any reason for doing so, you will find yourself worrying all the more; that is the nature of worry. Someone said,

The worry cow would have lived till now,
if only she'd saved her breath.
But she got so afraid she was going to worry,
that she worried half to death!

Scripture never says anything like that. It does not merely say, "Stop judging"; it says, "Stop judging, but, if you want to judge, fine! Start with yourself; judge yourself." Are you pushing liberty so hard, are you insisting on your rights in certain areas, and your freedom to indulge in something, that you are upsetting others and forcing them to act beyond their own conscience? That is what you ought to judge. What is the effect upon others of your attitudes about some of these things?

The apostle goes on to give us two reasons why we must not judge others, but must judge ourselves first in this area.

The first reason is in Verse 14:

As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. {Rom 14:14 NIV}

Now, there is a fundamental, psychological insight into life that governs our behavior in these areas, or it ought to. It is one thing to be free yourself to partake of something that others are not free to indulge in. And, like the apostle, you may have arrived at that by some direct teaching of Scripture, even as Paul did in the case of the Lord Jesus himself.

Actually, it does not really say in the Greek text, as this version translates it, "As one who is in the Lord Jesus," that is, as one speaking as a Christian. What Paul really says is, "As one who has been taught by the Lord Jesus, no food is unclean in itself." The Lord Jesus did say that. It was he who said, "No food is unclean." He does not mean that all foods are good for you; some foods are not; some things you can eat are highly poisonous. Jesus does not mean that everything is all right to take in; he means that there is no moral question about food. It is never wrong, morally, to eat what your body may enjoy. Jesus taught that himself, and Paul says, "That is enough for me. That sets me free."

But that is not the only problem involved. The conscience needs to be trained by this new insight into liberty. One person's conscience may move much slower than another's, therefore, we are to adjust to one another's needs along this line.

I liken this to crossing a swinging bridge over a mountain stream. There are people who can run across a bridge like that, even though it does not have any handrails. They are not alarmed by it, they can keep their balance well. They are not concerned about the swaying of the bridge, or the danger of falling into the torrent below. That is fine; some people can do that. But others cannot. You watch them go out on a bridge like that, and they are very uncertain. They shake and tremble; they inch along. They may even get down on their hands and knees and crawl across. But they will

make it if you just give them time, if you let them set their own speed. After a few crossings, they begin to pick up courage, and eventually they are able to run right across.

It is like that with these moral questions. Some people just cannot see themselves moving in a certain area that they have been brought up to think is wrong; they have difficulty doing so. As in the case of the swinging bridge, it would be cruel for someone who had the freedom to cross boldly to take the arm of someone who was timid and drag them across, to force them to run across. They might even lose their balance and fall off the bridge and suffer injury.

This is what Paul is warning about in Verse 15:

If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. {Rom 14:15 NIV}

It is wrong to do that. It is not loving to force people to move at your pace. To refuse to indulge a freedom that you have for the sake of someone else, to adjust to their pace, is surely one of the clearest and truest exercises of Christian love. That is what the apostle urges us to do here.

The second thing Paul says in this regard is that the issue of freedom versus non-freedom does not really demand unyielding firmness. There are some issues that do demand that. There are certain doctrines in the Scriptures we are to stand fast on, and refuse to let anyone change us on. But not on one of these questions. We are not to take that kind of unyielding view.

That is what Paul says in Verses 16, 17 and 18:

Do not allow what you consider as good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. {Rom 14:16-18 NIV}

If you are going to create division by arguing so hard for your rights, or your freedom, or by flaunting your liberty in the face of those who do

not agree with it, then you are distorting the gospel itself, Paul argues. He actually uses the word *blaspheme*. You are causing that which is good, Paul says, the good news about Christ, to be blasphemed because you are making too much of an issue over a minor matter. You are insisting that your rights are so important that you have to divide the church over them, or separate from a brother or sister who does not believe as you do. That is saying to the watching world around that Christianity consists of whether you do, or do not do, a certain thing.

I heard of a church some time ago that got into an unholy argument over whether they ought to have a Christmas tree at their Christmas program. Some thought that a tree was fine; others thought it was a pagan practice, and they got so angry at each other that they actually got into fist fights over it. One group dragged the tree out, then the other group dragged it back in. They ended up suing each other in a court of law and, of course, the whole thing was spread in the newspapers for the entire community to read. What else could non-Christians conclude other than that the gospel consists of whether you have a Christmas tree or not? They made such an important issue over it, they were ready to physically attack one another.

Paul says that is utterly wrong. The main point of the Christian faith is not eating or drinking or Christmas trees. The main point is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. A non-Christian, looking at a Christian, ought to see these things, not wrangling and disputing and fighting and law courts, but righteousness.

- You have seen that word *righteousness* many times in Romans, and you know what it means. It means God's gift of a sense of worth about yourself. It means that, because of the death of Jesus on your behalf, you are loved by him; you are accepted by him; you are a valuable person in his sight. In fact, he cheerfully and delightedly calls you his beloved child. That is righteousness, and from it, when we understand that, comes a sense of dignity, a sense of self-respect. That is what the world ought to see. The world ought to see you confident as to who you are, with that kind of underlying assurance that is without conceit; that shows you have a basis of self-acceptance that the world knows nothing about.

- The second thing the world ought to see is *peace*. That comes across visibly as a kind of calmness, an inner core of unflappability that is undisturbed by the minor irritations of the moment. It is that quiet and calm assurance that God is present in the situation; that he will work it out for his glory, and therefore, we need not get upset or angry, or vindictive toward someone. It is hard for the world to get that impression of peace and calmness if they see two people screaming at one another over what they disagree on. That does not look very calm. The important thing, therefore, is that you manifest that gift of God, which is peace.
- The third element is *joy*. These three always go together: righteousness, peace, and joy. They are gifts of God. They do not come from you; they come from him. Joy is that delight in life that always finds life worthwhile, even though it may be filled with problems. Joy, in a Christian, does not come from circumstances.

I was down south a couple of weeks ago, and I met a lady who has been lying in her bed for 13 years. She has arthritis so bad that her joints are disconnected and she cannot even raise her hands. But the smile on her face, the joy that is evident in her, is an outstanding witness to the fact that joy of this kind is a gift of God. It comes out of relationship, not out of circumstance. She has a tremendous ministry to the community around her because of that.

Paul is saying that if that is what you have discovered, if that is the center of your focus and interest, then you can easily give up some momentary indulgence in a pleasure that you enjoy and are free to participate in, if it is going to bother someone, or upset someone, or make them move beyond their own conscience.

Sometimes, when you enter a main highway, you see a sign that says "YIELD." Now, I would not suggest that you steal one of those, but it would be good if you could make one and put it up in your dining room. That is a Christian philosophy – to yield, to give way. Do not insist on your rights under these circumstances.

What should guide us in that? Paul takes it up more fully in the second section, Verses 19 to 21:

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. {Rom 14:19 NIV}

There are the guidelines:

1. Enjoy your liberties, indulge them wherever you desire, if you do so in such a way that you do not destroy peace, or mutual building up in truth, or arrest the learning process for someone else. Paul enlarges on these guidelines for us. Whenever you are doing something that threatens the peace of a community, or a church, or a group, or an individual, so that they cannot handle it, so that they become angry and upset, then back off. You who are strong, bear that burden. Do not insist on your rights.

Some Christians get so intent on having their rights that I have seen them indulge in the very presence of people they knew would be highly offended by what they did, simply because they wanted to show how free they were. Paul says that kind of thing is absolutely wrong. He goes on to say,

Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. {Rom 14:20a NIV}

Peace is the work of God. Nothing can produce lasting peace among people, especially those of different cultural backgrounds, except the work of God. It is the Spirit of God who produces peace. So, if for the sake of some right that you have, some liberty you feel, you destroy that peace, you are destroying what God has brought about. Do not do that. It is not worth it.

2. The apostle's second guideline is that you stop exercising your liberty whenever it arrests someone else's learning process. All Christians ought to examine these issues more and more. They ought to investigate for new truth from the Word, in a sense, constantly keeping an open mind on these matters. And they will, if you do not push them too hard. But if someone flaunts his liberty in such a way as to anger people and upset them, it will often harden them in their resistance to change, so that they no longer want to examine the question. That, Paul says, must be the limit to those who in-

dulge in their liberty. Do not push people that far, or press them that hard. Rather, we are to help them understand the reason for our liberty.

I think it is a healthy thing for a Christian who has liberty in some of these areas to indulge it on occasion. I do not think the cause of Christ is ever advanced by having every strong Christian in a congregation completely forsake their right to indulge in some of the things. What happens then is that the whole question is settled on the basis of the most narrow and most prejudiced person on the congregation. Soon, the gospel itself becomes identified with that kind of view. That is why the outside world often considers Christians to be narrow-minded people who have no concern except to prevent the enjoyment of the good gifts of life that God has given us.

It is a good thing for people to indulge their liberties. It makes those who are not free raise questions in their minds, especially when they see that that indulgence is linked with a clear manifestation of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It makes you think, when you see a godly person whom you admire and respect feel perfectly free to indulge in something that you have never been able to indulge in, and yet you cannot deny that he is a godly person. I think that kind of thing is right, and Paul is suggesting this, as we will see in our next study.

But, Paul says, be careful, and judge how far you are going. If what you are doing upsets people and hardens them in their views so that they will no longer examine and investigate, then stop, you are going too far. That should be the limit. This is what the apostle means when he says,

All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. {Rom 14:20b-21 NIV}

Now, be careful there. Paul does not say it is wrong to make him think; it is never wrong to indulge your liberty to such a degree that your brother has to ask questions about his viewpoint. That is all right. But it is wrong to persist in it to such a degree that you cause him

to act beyond his convictions in order to feel acceptable.

3. Paul brings in the third guideline in Verses 22 and 23:

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. {Rom 14:22a NIV}

Unfortunately, that is not a very good translation. It suggests that you are to keep quiet about your liberties, that you do not say anything to anybody, that you keep it between yourself and God. That really is not what Paul is saying. What he is saying is, “if you have faith, have it between yourself and God.” That is, let God and God’s Word be the basis for your faith, and nothing else. Be sure that what you are doing is not because of pride on your part, because you want to show off how free you are – you are doing this because God has freed you by his Word. And, Paul says, if you do that,

Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. {Rom 14:22b NIV}

If you have really based it on that, then your action will be one in which your conscience is free. You will not feel guilty and troubled as to whether you are acting beyond what the Word of God really says. You will be happy, free, blessed.

But, if you do not, if you really have not settled this on the basis of Scripture, but are acting only because you want to indulge yourself; if you like this thing but you still feel a bit troubled by it; if you act then, you are going to be condemned by your conscience. And if you are condemned by your conscience, you will feel guilty. And if you act because you feel guilty, you are not acting out of faith, and, therefore, you are sinning. This is Paul’s argument.

“Without faith,” Hebrews says, “it is impossible to please God,” {Heb 11:6a}. Faith means believing what God has said. Thus, you must base your actions in Christian liberty on what the Word of God declares – not about any specific thing, but

the great principle of freedom which is set forth. Now, if you understand that, fine, Paul says. But be sure that you yourself are acting not out of pride, not out of mere self-indulgence, but out of a deep conviction that rests upon the Word and revelation of God.

To sum up, what Paul has said to us is:

- Do not deliberately stumble or shock your brother or sister. Do not deliberately do things that will offend them, or even make them feel uncomfortable. Think about them, not yourself.
- Second: Give up your right when it threatens the peace or hinders the growth of another individual. Be alert to judge in that area.
- And third: Never act from doubt. Act only from conviction, by the Word, and by the Spirit of God. If these problems are all settled on that basis, a congregation will be moving gradually toward the great liberty that we have as children of God.

What will happen in the eyes of the watching world? Christians will be seen to be free people, not controlled by scruples that limit them and narrow them in their enjoyment of God’s great gifts. Yet, these things will not be of such importance that they are put at the heart and center of everything. The world will begin to see that the heart of the Gospel is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, the gifts of God. Those gifts, then, are the basis for freedom in all these areas. But you are just as free to say “No” to the indulgence of a gift as you are to say “Yes” to it. That is true freedom. You are not free if you think you have won your rights. That is not freedom. Freedom is the right to give up your rights, for good and proper cause. That is what the watching world will begin to see.

These are wise words. Properly followed, they will gradually work out the differences of viewpoints we may have. But if they are ignored, the church is bound to go along with one side or the other, and division, anger, and upset will follow, and the whole cause of Christ will be injured by that.

The Right to Yield

In our next study, we are going to see how Christ is our great example in this, and what will happen to us when we really begin to live on these terms.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for words that help us to understand these problems, and the

way of working them out peacefully and cheerfully and joyfully, “preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Teach us Lord, to walk softly before you in this, with a concern for our brother and sister; to be patient and to learn to enjoy our liberties only as they do not injure or hurt another. We ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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