

“Why Can’t They Be Like Us?”
Romans 14-15
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker were two great English preachers at the end of the 19th century.

They were both godly evangelical men proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But Spurgeon thought Parker wrong to attend the theatre and Parker thought Spurgeon wrong for smoking cigars.

(Wiersbe “Be Real p 256)

Spurgeon on one occasion rationalized to Parker that he, Spurgeon, didn’t smoke to excess to which Parker asked, “What do you think is excess?”

Spurgeon responded that he would “never smoke two at a time.”

(Kent Hughes in “Romans”)

How do Christians get along when they disagree on lifestyle issues?

How do you feel about Christians who smoke?

Do you think of them the same as you do of those who over-eat?

Or do you think of those who smoke as slightly inferior Christians?

How do you feel about those who think drinking alcoholic beverages, even in moderation is wrong?

Do you think of them as legalistic or sadly fundamentalistic?

How do you feel about Christians who think there is nothing wrong with drinking alcoholic beverages in moderation?

You go to a church member’s home and as he opens the refrigerator to get you a soda you notice a six-pack of beer on the bottom shelf - what deductions do you draw about that man’s Christianity?

What’s your attitude toward those who speak in tongues?

What's your attitude toward those who think speaking in tongues is wrong?

Have you ever felt judged by other Christians because you do certain things you believe are legitimate for a Christian?

Have you ever felt judged by other Christians because you wouldn't do certain things you felt were wrong?

What are Christians to do when they disagree on issues about which they feel strongly?

The Apostle Paul has some very important instruction on the matter.

When writing to the Christians in Rome, he recognized that in the congregation were both Jew and Gentile Christ-followers - Christians. They obviously brought with them into the church their own backgrounds including their ideas about a godly person does and does not do.

As we will see in a minute, apparently some of them thought eating certain kinds of food was wrong for a Christian.

Apparently some thought certain holy days had to be celebrated while others thought that was unnecessary.

Still others apparently thought drinking alcohol was wrong.

And also apparently these differences either already were causing strife or had potential for causing strife and maybe even division among these Christians.

READ 14:1-15:7

To begin, I think it would help to define some words.

The very first verse raises some interesting questions:

14:1 "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters"

The word “**faith**” here is not a reference to a person’s saving-trust in Christ; Paul refers to them all as true Christians – “brothers” and sisters in the Lord (14:4,8,10,14,15).

The word “faith” is a reference to a person’s understanding of the implications of their relationship to Jesus.

Look at verse 2 to see how he uses the word “faith:”

“One man’s faith allows him to eat everything but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables.”

“Faith” here is their understanding or convictions of what is right and what is wrong.

So we might interpret the sentence this way, “Accept him whose understanding of the implications of his faith is weak...”

But what about the word “weak”?

This word does not here mean easily overtaken or easily overwhelmed by temptation.

These are not weak-willed Christians who might fall prey to sin.

These are not “baby” Christians.

But clearly the word carries a negative connotation.

These are “weak” in their faith, or as we already saw, “weak” in their understanding of the faith.

Particularly it has to do with being weak in their understanding of the freedom that is theirs in Christ.

They have a conscience that says things are wrong when they aren’t wrong.

John Stott captured it with these words: “What the weak lack is not strength of self-control but liberty of conscience.” (Stott, *Romans*, 355)

These are people whose convictions about the Christian life have sometimes been shaped more by their cultural background than by the Word of God.

They are having trouble believing that certain things may now be very legitimate for Christians to do even though in their past they weren’t.

Again verse 2 gives the illustration of this kind of “weakness”.

All their lives they had been taught to make certain that the foods they ate were ceremonially clean - “kosher” - and that meant there were some kinds of food they didn’t eat - particularly some kinds of meat.

They lived in an idol-worshipping Roman culture where it would be nearly impossible to know whether the meats had been prepared properly according to Jewish tradition.

So they evidently concluded to eat no meat at all to be safe.

When Christ came he established a new covenant – a new way of relating to God through him rather than through the keeping of the many ritual laws of the OT.

The sacrificial ceremonies were obsolete.

The dietary laws and holy days no longer binding.

Jesus had fulfilled or completed the law.

But it was difficult, especially for Jewish Christians, to change.

Acts 15:5 “Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the Law of Moses.”

Many of us can identify with that:

We’ve grown up in cultures or sub-cultures that communicated to us that certain things were wrong - period!

It doesn’t matter whether the Bible says its wrong or not -
It’s just wrong!

Paul calls it a “weakness” because these convictions are not biblically based and because these Christians live under self-imposed restrictions.

One man wrote, “These are Christians who are not able to accept for themselves the truth that their faith in Christ implies liberation from certain OT/Jewish ritual requirements... (Their weakness has to do with) their convictions about what that faith allows or prohibits.” (Moo, 836)

What about the word “judgment?”

Paul says don't pass judgment.

Clearly this judgment means drawing a negative conclusion about some person because of what they do or don't do.

- It is fault-finding; it is quickly noticing and even looking for the negative.
- It is to put the worst possible motive on others' actions.
- It is to condemn another as not a Christian or at least not a good Christian.

But please notice Paul's prohibition of judging is on disputable matters.

This is not a prohibition of all judgment

Jesus said we are to notice, to distinguish, to judge.

Matthew 7:16 “By their fruit you will recognize them.”

Paul said we must be discerning/judging in order to help someone: Galatians 6:1 “If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.”

Jesus and Paul are not saying we should suspend all belief about right and wrong.

We are not to be a non-discriminating, non-discerning, accepting-everything, non-thinker?

We must make judgments.

But we are not to make moral judgments on “disputable matters.”

We should not draw a negative conclusion about another Christian's relationship to God based on disputable matters.

So what are these “disputable matters?”

Looking at verse 2 again we already saw that one of the “disputable matters” had to do with whether they, as Christians, should **eat non-kosher food**.

Looking at verse 5 we see the issue is whether **certain days had to be considered more holy than other days.**

The Jewish calendar was filled with holy days - did all Christians have to honor all those days as special?

What about the Sabbath?

Did Christians have to honor Saturday as the special day of the week or was setting Sunday aside for special worship enough? For that matter could any day serve that function?

Looking at verse 21 we see the matter of drinking wine.

These were matters over which Christians disagreed but the disagreement came from cultural differences, not from a proper understanding of Scripture.

Don't misunderstand; **Paul is not hesitant** to say things are wrong when they are.

And he rules out many activities for the Christ-follower:
Gossip, Greed, immorality and much else.

Certain things are wrong!

Galatians 5:13 "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature."

1 Peter 2:16 "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God."

But that is not the issue here; these are disputable matters of conscience.

For example, what do you think of those who insist that women have no place in leadership in the local church?

How do you respond to those who insist the church must aggressively place women in leadership to compensate for the way women have been treated in the past?

What is your attitude toward those who raise their hands in worship?

What are your thoughts about those who won't?

What's your attitude about men who wear their hair long or women who wear it short?

What about people who pierce their ears, noses, eyebrows, or navels?

What about drums and electric guitars in the church?
What about organs and hand bells?

Oh my! The ways in which we can draw distinctions between ourselves and even separate from each other. - Oh! The disputable matters - the differences of opinions!

But what is to be our attitude toward each other on disputable matters?

14:1 says, "Accept."

You are going to see in a minute that acceptance goes both ways - between those who are freer (the strong) and those who are more restricted (the weak) in matters of conscience.

But I want you to see that even in verse one there is an emphasis on one group - the "strong", the more liberal, the ones who feel more liberty.

The ones with more freedom have a greater responsibility.

I'll come back to that in a minute.

Look at verse 3 to see the heart of the instruction in this first section: "The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does..."

Paul says, I don't want you judging and rejecting each other on the basis of these matters of opinion - these disputable matters.

He says I don't want **you with more liberty** to "look down" on the one who thinks those things are wrong.

I don't want you to take a superior attitude that smiles with condescending disdain at the poor legalistic brother who just doesn't get it.

But he also says, “I don’t want **you who are more conservative** to condemn or judge those who take more liberty than you do.

Your temptation is to shake your head in disgust and think either they may not even be Christians or at least not very good ones based on certain conduct.

To the more conservative (weak?) I think NT scholar F.F. Bruce’s words are apropos:

“While Christ is unchanging he is nevertheless onward moving, always leading his people forth to new ventures in his cause, always calling them to go out not knowing where they are going, knowing only that it is he who is guiding them there... Every age in human history is an age of transition, but in some ages the transition is more abrupt and disconcerting than in others... We too live in a changing world in which the old familiar landmarks are disappearing. Those to whom we once looked for guidance are no longer available to give us the kind of help they once did; and even if they were, it is questionable if the guidance we received from them then would be relevant now. But Jesus Christ remains the same and calls his people to claim the new and unfamiliar world of today for him. It seems at first more comfortable to construct for ourselves tight little “camps” or enclosures and feel at home inside them, psychologically insulated from the world outside, content to see the old familiar faces, follow the old familiar ways, sing the old familiar hymns and forget what is happening outside. But this kind of insulation is a fool’s paradise. The old familiar patterns of life are undergoing rapid change and dissolution, for all our attachment to them; and the world outside, uncongenial and unfamiliar as it appears to those who long for better days that will never return, is desperately in need of the ministry of our unchanging Christ.” (The Kerygma of Hebrews,” Interpretation 23, no. 1 (Jan. 1969): 17-19.)

Paul says, either way, whether it’s contempt or condemnation, stop it and accept one another!

Why?

Paul gives two reasons:

The first begins at the end of verse 3.

14:3-4 “God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”

That other person may do things you wouldn’t do but since they are trusting Jesus Christ as saving-Lord, they belong to God; they are accepted by Him and they are your brother or sister in the Lord.

I think one of the points Paul is making is that **God didn’t accept that other person on the basis of whether they agree with you** on every matter.

Later, in verse 15, Paul spells that out even more specifically - we are accepted by God only on the basis of Christ’s death for our sins and our acceptance of that death as our access to God.

And again, looking at verse 4, we notice that Paul knows that the other Christian will “stand”, that is they become and remain a Christian - even a good Christian, **not because they agree with you but because they belong to God in Christ.**

The second reason why we must accept and not reject each other is found in verses 5-12: Jesus is Lord and we each answer to him.

Verse 5 restates the very practical problem with an illustration:

Romans 14:5 “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike.”

When Christians disagree they usually can’t both be right. These are real differences.

To baptize infants or not baptize them is a real difference.

Whether you should purchase expensive cars or give the money to the poor is a real difference.

Whether you believe in spanking children or not is a real difference.

How does each Christian make a decision on those matters?

The end of verse 5 tells us how:

“Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”

Paul says each person is responsible for arriving at his own conviction.

But **how** that conviction is arrived at is important.

Verse 6 tells us **how** by using illustrations:

Romans 14:6 “He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.”

On matters where there is liberty, where the Scripture has given no command, each Christian is responsible for arriving at a conviction by answering two questions:

1. Can I, as in verse 6, thank God for this thing? Is this thing I want to do from God and for my good?
2. Can I, as in verse 6, do this thing as unto the Lord? Will he be pleased with me for doing this thing? Will his kingdom be advanced by this action?

In “disputable matters” answer those two questions and be convinced in your own mind before the Lord.

Then fully convinced in our own minds what are we to do in our relationships with those who disagree?

We must accept and not reject each other because Jesus is Lord and we each answer to him.

Verses 8 and 9 both remind us that Jesus is Lord of our lives.

We are not Lord of each other’s lives.

And since he is Lord, we will each stand before him to account for the things we have done.

So what does God instruct?

14:13a “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.”

Verse is the fulcrum of the passage:

14:13 “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on (condemning) one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.

The first part of the verse summarizes verses 1-12 and addresses both the “weak” and the “strong” – both those with more liberty and those whose consciences restrict them.

But now in the second part of the verse and in the rest of the text, Paul turns his attention to one group alone:

Those who consider themselves to have more freedom - those who are more liberal - those who see nothing wrong with certain kinds of activities which others consider wrong.

And what is the command here?

14:13b “Make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”

What does that mean?

Paul walks us through it with some principles:

Principle #1: Some things are inherently okay!

14:14 “As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.”

Paul uses the specific example of those who did or did not think eating meat was okay for a Christian.

But he could have used any example of “disputable matters” - matters on which the Bible doesn’t give any specific instruction.

And what is he saying in this principle?

Many things that some have called wrong, because of someone’s cultural bias, are not in and of themselves wrong - they are perfectly legitimate things for believers to do.

Do you remember the time the apostle Peter was told by the Lord to eat food that Peter had all his life considered inedible?

Jesus was communicating that a new day had dawned.

Changes had come - Peter now had freedom to eat those foods.

But Peter struggled greatly with the idea.

Eating the meat was not evil but Peter struggled with his cultural heritage.

Drinking alcoholic beverages is certainly one of those issues in our evangelical sub-culture.

I grew up believing that a man could hardly be a Christian if he drank alcohol.

But I am convinced, from much study, that while the Bible says much against being intoxicated to any degree - it does not altogether prohibit alcohol for Christians.

I personally think there are some very good reasons for being a teetotaler but I must admit it is an area of Christian freedom.

I personally consider dancing, theater attendance, tattoos, body piercing and many other things to be in this category of Christian liberty.

While I might think some of them are just dumb, I have to admit there is nothing inherently spiritually negative about those actions.

Principle #1: Some things are inherently okay.

But there is a second principle mentioned immediately:

Principle #2: Some things that are right, may be wrong for you.

Look at verse 14b: "But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean."

That statement would be illogical if Paul was saying that something can be right and wrong for the same person at the same time in the same way.

What he is saying is that just because something is objectively okay doesn't mean that it feels okay for some people.

And, if you look at the last part of verse 22 and 23 you will see that Paul is addressing the same issue when he writes:

Romans 14:22-23 “Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.”

Happy is the person who acts consistent with his/her conscience.
Wrong is the person who violates his/her own conscience - even when his conscience may be ill-informed.

We are not dealing here with objective right and wrong.
We are dealing with people’s consciences.
If it’s wrong for you, don’t do it.

And even more importantly, as we will see in principle # 3, if someone considers it wrong, don’t pressure him or put him in the place where he must violate his conscience.

Principle #3: Love trumps liberty!

14:13 “make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way....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.¹⁶ Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.”

The Kingdom of God is not most of all about our personal liberties but about our contribution to the welfare of others.

Look at verse 16 again: Don’t take what is okay in and of itself and use it in a way that harms others - Don’t flaunt your freedom to the detriment of others.

And so after stating those three principles, he restates the basic command of V13 in positive way:

V19 “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” - to what helps others grow in their relationship to Christ.

And how does that work:

Principle #4: Forsake freedom for the sake of others.

Romans 14:20-21 “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

I may have perfect liberty to drink alcoholic beverages.

But I will restrict that freedom in a heartbeat for the sake of those who don't have that freedom and whose consciences will be offended if I do.

I have perfect liberty to see some movies.

But I will restrict that freedom quickly for the sake of those who don't have that freedom and for the sake of those who may otherwise be harmed by my example.

And then Paul takes us right back to the instruction he gave us in chapter 13 when he says in 15:1-2

“We who are strong ought to bear with the failings (weaknesses) of those who are weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”

*And the grand conclusion of the whole passage is in 15:5-13, with verses 5-6 summarizing it well:

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I want to close with a letter I received about three months ago from one who is part of us as a church.

I have changed the names to provide appropriate anonymity.

12/7/07

“Good morning! As we go through the book of Romans, I know we'll be approaching chapters 12 and 14 before long.

I have been praying about whether to share our story with you or not, but it is a life story right out of Romans 14. You may use it...as part of the sermon, *if you believe it to be useful*.

Tom and I had been Christians for only a few years. We were going to church and Sunday school and developing relationships at our new church. We were saved out of a life in the world, nightclubs and partying as teens and young adults. We still went to a nightclub now and then after being married.

But the Lord convicted me and I began to seek His guidance in what he wanted me to believe about those activities. He worked a very definite work in my heart that gave me a deep desire to live only for Him and obey His guidance. He convicted me that nightclubs and drinking, etc. belonged to my old life and didn't fit with a life seeking his holiness. I submitted and had perfect peace.

In time Tom became aware of some people at church that went to nightclubs and drank alcohol in their homes. It didn't take long for before Tom's thinking started changing. I didn't realize how much until a couple years later when he informed me he was leaving us. I was shattered. We went through 2 years of *'hell on earth'* as Tom would move home and then out again, and work on me the whole time trying to destroy my convictions and beliefs.

He said he didn't understand why I changed and why I couldn't just change back! I'll spare the details, but my son and I went through at extremely painful time. The Lord was awesome to provide prayer support for us, Christian friends that stood by (my son and me)...

(In the midst of some very strong boundaries, Tom was finally) ready to stop and admitted to me that he had tried to break my faith.

I only share this because of the HUGE effects we suffered as a result of the (lives) of other believers... using their liberty in Christ...

I am fully aware that we are all at different places in our walk with the Lord and I accept people as having different convictions. But studying Romans, I felt it might be a time to share our experience...

(The Lord) has brought us all a long ways since those days and I praise Him for the things He taught me through the whole ordeal!”

And she signed her name.

I close with Romans 14:13-18 “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way. 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. 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. ¹⁶ Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, ¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.”

Additional Notes:

Outlines of Romans 14:1-15:7

Broad Outline:

- A. 14:1-13a Accept one another, not judging one another.
- B. 14:13b-15:4 Nurture unity, don't cause others to stumble.
- C. 15:5-7 Conclusion: Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you

Detailed Outline:

- A. 14:1-13a Accept one another not judging one another.
 - 14:1 Basic command: accept and don't judge.
 - 14:2 First illustration of eating
 - 14:3 The first Illustration is applied to the command of verse 1.
 - 14:3c-4 Why judging in these disputable matters is wrong: because each of has been accepted by God, belongs to God and answers to God not each other.
 - 14:5a An illustration of holy days
 - 14:5b-9 Our conduct in disputable matters is between us and God and we must remember that we live and die FOR THE

LORD not for ourselves. (This latter note makes it clear that the principle is not unlimited human freedom but service to the Lord. He is Lord; our own inclinations or desires are not "lord.")
 14:10-13 We must realize we all stand on level footing before God and we will each give an account for ourselves not for others. So stop passing judgment!

- B. 14:13b-15:4 Nurture unity, don't cause others to stumble.
 14:13b Basic command: don't be an obstacle to others.
 14:14 Illustration: no food is unclean but if someone thinks it is, for him it is.
 14:15 Therefore if you encounter someone like that don't harm him by your freedom but love him for whom Christ died.
 14:16 Don't turn something good into something evil by abusing your freedom.
 14:17 The kingdom of God is not personal freedoms at the expense of others but is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.
 14:18 That is what pleases God and is approved by people.
 14:19 Command restated: Therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and edification.
 14:20 RESTATES v15-16
 14:21 Principle: It is better not to do what will cause your brother to fall.
 14:22 You don't have to make every issue a test of fellowship. Blessed is the man who doesn't cause a larger problem of disunity by flaunting his freedoms.
 14:23 Violating your conscience is sin.
 15:1 Command restated: The strong ought be patient with the weak and live not just to please ourselves.
 15:2 Command spelled out: we live for our neighbor's good - to build him up.
 15:3-4 Christ is an illustration of that

C. Conclusions: Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you

- 15:5 May God give you a spirit of unity
 15:6 So that together we may glorify God

15:7 Accept one another as Christ accepted you Jews and Gentiles alike.

A Judging Spirit:

“Believe as I believe,
no more, no less;
That I am right,
And no one else, confess.

Feel as I feel,
Think only as I think;
Eat what I eat,
and drink what I drink.

Look as I look,
Do always as I do;
Then and only then,
Will I fellowship with you.” (Hughes, *Romans*, 259-60)

Sermon on a similar subject:

"CHRISTIAN LIBERTY"
I Corinthians 8-10
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Bill and Sally had for several months been trying to build a relationship with their neighbors. It was slow going at first because both couples were busy. But over time it was easy to start and carry on conversations with them.

It seemed like a real break-through in the relationship when the neighbors initiated a dinner out together. They were to meet at the Charthouse and Bill and Sally prayed about their time together with these new friends.

Both Bill and Sally had grown up in homes where alcohol was just not used. In fact while their parents weren't legalistic about it they

all had strong convictions against the drinking of alcohol of any kind and so Bill and Sally were glad that the first invitation from their new friends wasn't to a nightclub.

Dinner went well, the conversation was easy and the food good. About the time that dessert would have been ordered, the neighbors rather awkwardly said they had a surprise to announce and it was so special that they wanted Bill and Sally to join with them in the celebration. At that the neighbor signaled the waiter who brought a very elegantly wrapped bottle of wine to the table. And before Bill or Sally could say anything, the neighbor had poured a small amount of wine into four glasses and proceeded to announce his and his wife's glad announcement. They had just received the name and particulars on the child they were adopting from out of the country. With that they asked Bill and Sally to drink a toast to their good fortune and their baby.

The neighbor had been talking non-stop during the few seconds that passed and while Bill heard everything he said, nonetheless Bill's mind was going a hundred miles an hour wondering what he and Sally should do. How do they break this grand celebration by refusing the toast? They have been praying for weeks for an opportunity to talk about Jesus and so they want to encourage this relationship not offend it. BUT how can they drink wine when that is intentionally not part of their lives? And then to complicate the situation sitting near them in the restaurant was a young couple from their church who had recently talked with them about their struggle with alcohol. The waiter and the neighbors had made such a big deal out of this apparently expensive and special wine that everyone nearby was vicariously entering into the celebration. What to do?

I think all of us can identify with the situation and dilemma here even if alcohol isn't an issue for you. For most of us as Christians there are certain behaviors that we find morally objectionable even if the Scriptures don't specifically prohibit them.

Through the years some Christians or others have sometimes objected to:

card playing,

certain kinds of clothing,
long hair on men,
games of chance,
smoking,
drinking,
various kinds of music,
various or all kinds of dancing,
attendance at night clubs, pool halls and bowling alleys,
movies of any kind or movies of certain kinds,
some types of magazines or fictional reading
cosmetics,
bathing too often,
Playing or attending games on Sunday,
working on Sunday,

Whether you agree that all of those things are morally neutral or not, I want you to remember that in the past there have been things that were not wrong in and of themselves but were perceived by some Christians as wrong because of other factors. There has been conduct which in itself was not wrong or evil but which, in some eras, had been so tainted by the culture, so associated with that which is wrong that the conduct itself became wrong.

For example: Twenty five years ago only one kind of woman wore slacks in the villages of rural Mexico - prostitutes. And even though there was nothing inherently sinful about wearing slacks, for a Christian woman to wear them in that cultural setting was a sin. It would have led immature Christians to false conclusions and it would have hindered the hearing of the gospel by non-Christians. That which was not inherently sinful became sinful under certain circumstances.

What are the things you don't do that other Christians do and it bothers you? What are the things you can't build a strong biblical case against but you nonetheless wish other Christians didn't do? Or what things do you do that you know bother other Christians? Things that aren't wrong in and of themselves but other Christians think they are wrong? What guides our conduct in areas of lifestyle wherein Christians disagree?

When was the last time you were invited to a dinner party where they served meat that had been sacrificed to idols? It does still happen today - It probably happened to me in India but it is not a common occurrence in Colorado. But it was very common in the city of Corinth in the Apostle Paul's day! Now I know the issue for you isn't "meat offered to idols" but maybe for you it is drinking, or smoking, or certain kinds of music, or what you should or shouldn't do on Sundays, or how much money Christians should have, or dancing or all of the above or something else. What you will see in this text is how Paul deals with their issue but from it glean principles for how to deal with our issues.

I have quite intentionally taken a rather large portion of I Corinthians to discuss with you. We are looking at all of Chapters 8-10. I don't pretend that in one presentation we will exhaust the wealth of material in these chapters but I do want you to see the whole of Paul's argument. Yes there are others issues addressed in these verses, issues well worth spending other time on, but I want you to see that even those other issues are presented here by Paul to make his primary and overarching point - How to conduct ourselves in lifestyle issues on which we disagree.

Now back to what it was that was so common in Corinth: 8:1 "Now about food sacrificed to idols?" Or more particularly 8:4 "Now about eating food sacrificed to idols."

After studying ancient Greek and Roman culture, William Barclay wrote: "Sacrificing (animals) to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. (The sacrifices) might be of two kinds, private or public. In private sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts. A token part was burned on the altar...' the priests received their rightful portion...' the worshipper himself received the rest of the meat. With that meat he gave a banquet. Sometimes these feasts (10:27) were in the house of the hosts; sometimes (8:10) they were even in the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice had been made. (The temples were the social centers of that day - even social events not overtly religious would be held in the temples just as today some community events will be held in church buildings)..."

The problem which confronted the Christian was, "Could he take part in such a feast at all? Could he possibly take on his lips meat that had been offered to an idol, to a heathen god?" And if he could not, then he was going to cut himself off almost entirely from all social occasions and contact with non-Christians. In public sacrifice..., after the required amount had been burned and after the priests had received their share, the rest of the meat was given" to the city officials who sold in the markets what they didn't want. So even when a Christian went to market and purchased meat for his own home, it may well have already been offered in idol worship. What followed was that Christians could hardly eat meat at all which had not in some way been connected with a heathen god. Could the Christian eat it? (Barclay p 79ff)

In this text we will look at five principles that will help us deal with similar difficult lifestyle differences between Christians. But first I want you to look briefly with me at how Paul develops the theme in these three chapters - I want you to do a quick overview with me:

Please look at chapter 8.

We have already noted that the issue is whether Christians should eat meat that has been offered to idols. In 8:2 we see the way Paul first addresses the issue: "love builds up". And in this chapter he builds the argument that even though you may have freedom to eat meat there is a higher principle that will guide your actions - love for others - and therefore from V.13 If exercising my freedom will hurt my brother or sister in Christ - I won't do what I'm otherwise free to do.

Look now at chapter 9. Here Paul gives a lengthy illustration of freedom restrained by love (The principle set forth in Chapter 8). Yes, I have freedom to do certain things but I willfully restrict my freedom for the sake of others (vv 5, 12, 12, 15, 19).

Looking at Chapter 10 we find that Paul cautions against taking the idea of freedom too far. Yes you have great freedom as a Christian but liberty doesn't give you a license to sin. Using the Israelites as an illustration, he says you can go too far. And then at V14, returning to the specific issue of eating meat he again notes there are some things which truly are wrong even for the free Christian.

And then beginning at 10:23 and concluding with 11:1 Paul gives a summary of the whole discussion of liberty controlled by love. V 25 Meat eating is still the issue. See how it all ties together?

Now as I said, after that quick overview I want us to back up and look at five principles that Paul develops that help Christians know how to act when there are difficult lifestyles differences.

1. Principle # 1: Some lifestyle choices are truly neutral - in and of themselves they are neither good nor evil. Look please at 8:4. Paul in essence says idols are not real spiritual beings - they are just what they look like- wood or stone. We know there is only one God from whom all things were created and one Lord Jesus by whom all things were created. Therefore meat offered to idols is not truly tainted - nothing about the meat objectively changes because it was offered to an idol - the meat is morally neutral.

Look at verse 8: Food in and of itself is neither good nor evil. In spite of what you think of Cheetos and Twinkies.

Look at 10:25-26: What a thing for a Jew to write: Nothing which God has created is inherently evil.

What's the application? Just as eating meat offered to idols could be wrong as we will see in Chapter 10 - it is not necessarily wrong. And, no, this is not situation ethics. Some things are wrong and no situation can make them right. But some things are morally neutral - and **it is how they are used which makes them right or wrong.**

Let me be so bold as to make some modern comparisons: Is dancing wrong for a Christian? We know the Bible commends dancing in some instances. We also know the Bible condemns dancing in others situations. Is dancing in and of itself a sinful behavior? No, the act is neutral - amoral - of itself it is not a moral issue. But can dancing be wrong? yes, of course!

Is all alcoholic consumption wrong? Only a few diehards would try to make a case for the "fruit of the vine" of Abraham's day, of David's day, or of Jesus' day being anything other than the fermented

juices of fruit. Is wine inherently evil - No. Can drinking be wrong
- yes, of course!

Is having money inherently wrong for a Christian? We know from the Bible that money is a powerful tool for evil. But is money itself therefore necessarily evil. No. But can money be hoarded or used in an evil way? Absolutely!

There are lifestyle issues on which Christians disagree today wherein the activity itself is neither good nor evil. And Christians must be able to acknowledge that and make their own lifestyle decisions on the basis of other things not just on the basis of calling something evil which in itself is not.

Principle #1 Some lifestyle issues truly are morally neutral.

2. Principle #2 "The Christian has freedom in those matters that are morally neutral - those things that, in themselves, are neither right nor wrong. Look please at 10:25-27. Please see that Vv 28-29a note an exception which we will deal with in a minute but let's go on to finish reading 29b-30. The Apostle Paul was particularly hard on legalists. There were Christians who thought they had the inside information on exactly how everyone else should live. They would take their personal view on lifestyle and try to impose it on other Christians telling them that doing these things made for a better Christian - one more acceptable to God.

Jewish Christians were doing that with circumcision - demanding that new Gentile Christians be circumcised. Paul said no. Circumcision is not a moral issue.

Others were demanding of new Christians that they eat only certain kinds of food and that they must celebrate certain holy days Paul said, no. Certain days and certain foods are not moral issues.

And here in Corinth some were saying that eating meat offered to idols was evil. Paul says, "No, the meat is not evil."

Principle #2 In those things that God has not forbidden the Christian is free.

But does that mean anything goes? Paul not only had to deal with legalists (those trying to impose their standards on everyone else) but he also had to deal with libertarians - those who said "everything is permissible"!

3. Let's look at principle #3: Some things are clearly wrong! Freedom in Christ does not give Christians liberty to sin. Look again please at chapter 10:1-13. Paul uses the illustration of Israel to make a point.

Those who came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership were all part of the people of Israel - the chosen people of God. But just because they were free people didn't give them liberty to do whatever they liked. In Vv 6-10 Paul uses four examples of when these people of God abused their freedom and sinned. No, Paul says, don't let your liberty as a Christian turn into a license to sin.

Then at verse 14ff, in case we missed the point, Paul turns our attention to the specific issue of the Corinthians - eating meat offered to idols. Paul has already pointed out that the meat, even the meat offered to idols is morally neutral - neither good nor evil. He has already pointed out that Christians are free to eat the meat, to engage in lifestyles that are morally neutral. But in verses 14-22 Paul makes it clear that if you eat that meat in the conduct of a pagan religious ritual - you are actually entering into that evil, demonically inspired world. You crossed a line from what was morally neutral (eating meat that had been offered to idols) into the openly sinful (participating in their pagan worship).

Did the "strong" "free" Christians of Corinth think they could do anything and still be spiritually healthy and acceptable to God? Apparently they did. But the point is that the amoral can become immoral.

Drinking can become drunkenness.

Occasional smoking can become addiction.

Harmless games can become gambling.

Explicit movies can become sexual fantasizing.

Fictional stories can turn into an entrance to the occult

Principle #3 Some things clearly are wrong - The Christian is responsible for never letting his or her freedom turn into a license to sin.

Principle #1 was: Some lifestyle choices are truly neutral.

Principle #2 was that the Christian has freedom in those lifestyle choices that are morally neutral.

And Principle #3 was that freedom does not give a person a license to sin.

I think those three principles form the foundation for the last two. Because the fourth and fifth principles directly address the issue of how our conduct relates to others.

4. The fourth principle is this: "Love restrains freedom" - love for other Christians causes us to voluntarily restrict our freedoms - love controls our choices in lifestyle. Paul really began this whole discussion with this idea.

Let's go back to chapter 8:1-3. "We possess knowledge" he wrote, but "knowledge puffs up". You may know that you have a great deal of freedom to do or not to do certain things in life but sometimes that knowledge leads to an arrogance - a self-centered exercise of personal rights. "Since I'm free in Christ - I'll do whatever I want".

In verse 2 Paul says the person who thinks like that doesn't truly know what he ought to know. From verse 1 what is the Christian to know? "Love builds up" - love is concerned for the welfare of others. We may have freedom but our greater concern is to help those who are less mature in the Lord. In verses 7-13 Paul says in essence, there are some Christians who can't yet discern the difference between morally neutral and morally sinful actions. If you exercise your freedom in front of them they might follow your example and then even go further than you go. For example they might see you eating meat offered to idols and assume that it is permissible to even enter into the worship of idols. Your "free" conduct might actually wind up hurting this less mature Christian - leading them away from God instead of strengthening them in the Lord. Paul says in V 12 that when you exercise your freedom in a way that hurts your brother or sister in Christ you sin not only against them but you sin against the Lord - because that brother belongs to the Lord. Paul goes on in verse 13 to emphasize, that for the sake of

others, he would be willing to give up his freedom forever so that he wouldn't hinder the spiritual growth of another.

In the first part of chapter 9 as we saw earlier Paul makes a strong case for the rights that are his, the freedoms that are his BUT he notes several times what he has chosen to do with those rights: V12b, 15a, 18c "For your sake, I did not use my rights.

At the risk of being misunderstood I'd like to illustrate that: We live in an "immoral sex" and "violence" saturated society. Two of the most influential purveyors of that sex and violence are television and motion pictures. Even secular sociologists and psychologists are beginning to recognize what our grandfathers told us all along - "If you watch that stuff and it will affect you." I do not believe that all "R" rated movies are inherently wrong just because they are rated "R". I believe there are biblical stories that if shown on the screen would get an "R" rating. (By the way, I'm not suggesting that all "R" rated movies are morally neutral.

From the reviews I have read and the previews I have seen, I highly suspicion there are few "R" rated movies that are anything other than morally evil. And for that matter many that are rated "PG". But my point is that I have chosen to restrict my freedom to see any "R" rated movies, even those that may be morally neutral or even morally good BECAUSE I have wanted my children to grow old enough to make biblically based and godly decisions about movies before they were subjected to so much evil that they were trapped. And if I didn't want them to choose "R" rated films, with their level of maturity, I would do better for them by not tempting them with my watching "R" rated films. By the way, the pastors of SGC have asked our volunteer youth leaders to take the same position - restrict their freedom for the sake of others.

Let me give you another example: I personally hold the same conviction regarding the consumption of alcohol. Do I believe that alcohol is inherently evil? NO. But given the American culture, the abuse of alcohol that plagues students and adults, I want to give the least occasion I can to my children or any others to fall victim to the excesses of alcohol or have to live in the family lifestyle that alcohol too often creates. Therefore I will restrict the freedom I have to drink in

moderation and will instead give no occasion for someone else to follow me and go beyond me into the abuse of alcohol. I know there are others who believe that modeling "drinking in moderation" is a better example. But in either case I believe Paul is saying let "love" for others, not our "rights" truly be the driving force of our decisions.

The 4th principle was let love for **fellow believers** restrain my freedom.

The 5th principle is let love for **non-Christians** restrain my freedom.

In the last part of chapter 9 Paul makes a passionate statement about his desire to do whatever it takes to get a hearing for the gospel. He wasn't suggesting that he would do anything sinful just to get others to listen BUT he was saying he would restrict his freedom, his rights, in whatever way it took so as to open the door to others to hear about his Jesus. Read v19.

Look with me also at Vv 10:32-11:1. Do you know what guided Paul's thinking about what he would or would not do when it came to lifestyle issues? "Kingdom thinking." Here was a man who ate, slept, and breathed opportunity to tell others about Christ. His life was not governed by his freedoms - oh, he had freedom and he could articulate those freedoms clearly. And Paul never wanted anyone to try to impose their restrictions and man-made laws on other adults. But he would voluntarily yield all his freedoms if it meant he could reach one more person with the Gospel.

My point is that Paul had rights but because of a much higher purpose in life he didn't allow himself to stoop to that immature self-centered attitude of "I have my rights and I will exercise them no matter what anybody thinks".

As I close let's visit Bill and Sally up at the Charthouse restaurant again. What should they do? Take the wine or refuse it? I'm not going to answer it for you.

Instead I ask you to answer whatever issues you confront by applying these five principles:

1. Some lifestyle issues are truly neutral - neither morally good nor evil.

2. The Christian has freedom in matters that are morally neutral.
3. Some things are clearly wrong and even that in which we are free can be turned to sin.
4. Love for other Christians will cause us to limit our freedom and
5. love for those who don't know Christ will cause us to limit our freedoms

When it comes to the lifestyle choices that are neither inherently right nor wrong love for others guides us - that is "kingdom thinking".

Paul said it this way to the Galatian Christians: "You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature, rather, serve one another in love."

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