

Lesson 35: Living Without Causing Others to Stumble Over Issues of Conscience

Romans 14:13-23

Beginning exhortation

- A** 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.**
- B** 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.
- C** 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.
- ¹⁶ Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;

Support for the exhortation

- ¹⁷ for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but **righteousness and peace and joy** in the Holy Spirit.
- ¹⁸ For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.
- ¹⁹ So then we pursue the things which make for **peace and the building up of one another.**

Ending exhortation

- C'** ²⁰ **Do not tear down** the work of God for the sake of food.
- B'** **All things indeed are clean,** but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.
- A'** ²¹ It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything by which your brother stumbles.*
- ²² The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God.
Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.
- ²³ But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is* not from faith;
and whatever is not from faith is sin.

NASB

Introduction

Accept one another. You would think this would be an easy command for Christians. That is, you would think it would be easy unless you have committed to being a part of a Christian community for any length of time. Acceptance is not easy. The principle of modern acceptance or tolerance tries to come up with an easy solution. That solution is to declare everybody's beliefs equally valid and all behavior equally good, as long as that behavior does not directly harm another person. But that easy solution is really hard to pull off. No one really accepts that all beliefs are valid. And behaviors said to not harm anyone often inflict deep wounds.

In any case, that modern idea of accepting all beliefs and behaviors is not an approach open to biblically minded Christians. We believe in the importance of an accurate worldview, and we believe that good behavior brings forth fruit and life, while bad behavior brings forth pain and death. Beliefs, thoughts, words and actions matter very much. Blanket acceptance of everything is not good for anyone.

In Romans 14:1-15:12, Paul brings up a specific type of disagreement that affects every Christian community at some point. The disagreements here have to do with issues of conscience in regard to certain religious or spiritual practices. Paul is telling the Romans, they need to figure out how to accept one another even as they continue to disagree with one another.

There are times when a brother or sister in Christ feels very strongly about certain behaviors and practices, so strongly that they feel it is sinful to do this or that or to not do this or that. It is a sin to drink wine. Or it is disrespectful to use drums in church. Or it is breaking the ten commandments to do certain activities on Sunday. Or all dancing is bad. Or there is one Christian way to raise your children. Everybody should homeschool because of the state of our public schools. Or nobody should homeschool because we need to participate in the community. The list is long that Christians feel

passionate about: vaccinations, interracial marriage, birth control, proper language, modest dress, acceptable movies, modern worship...

Paul says, "Accept." But Paul also realizes how difficult it can be to figure out what true acceptance looks like. It cannot be the modern version of everything goes. But it should also not be based on forcing everyone to the same thoughts and the same behavior.

So, how do we practice gospel-based acceptance when we are disagreeing about issues of conscience? What are the principles for acceptance in these cases?

Paul got us started in Romans 14:1-12 with two principles. The principle of the master and the principle of faith. The principle of the master is a reminder that each person stands before his master in regard to these issues. And we are not that master. God is the master. We each stand before God and are accountable to him. So, we can allow people to be in process. We do not have to fix everyone or draw everyone into line with our own sense of values. They stand before their own master.

Along with the principle of the master, Paul introduced the principle of faith which requires us each to take seriously the state of our own conscience. If we really believe that an act is sin, then for us to willfully participate in that act would be sin.

As we continue on with Romans 14:13-23, Paul will further develop the principle of faith and add a third principle, the principle of the stumbling block. Let's get into the text.

We have a similar pattern in 13-23 as we did in 1-12. If you remember 1-12 is a ring pattern. And a ring pattern you begin with one idea and you end with the same idea and you develop it in the middle. So, here we have the exhortation to not be a stumbling block at the beginning. That's in verses 13-16. Paul comes back to the exhortation in the end in verses 20-23. And in the middle, verses 17-19, Paul provides support for the exhortation. We will take each of these in turn, exhortation, support, exhortation and then consider a couple of challenges that come up when we try to apply Paul's principles in Christian community.

Let's read Romans 14:13-23.

[Read Romans 14:13-23]

Do not cause your brother to stumble. (14:13-16)

Point A

Paul starts in verse 12, "Let us not judge one another anymore." This is the language from verses 3 and 10. This is how you know that you are not accepting one another. If you are judging the morality or spirituality of your brother in Christ because of his convictions over issues of conscience, then you are not accepting.

What principles do we employ to help us not to judge? Well, we recognize that it is not our job. God is okay with these kinds of differences. Each person is in process as they try to live for God as their king. Each of us needs some freedom in our walk with God. This is always an issue inside the Christian family when you are trying to raise your kids in Christian community. Different families disagree on how to handle various issues. Some families in church are going to have one standard for the kinds of shorts or bathing suits that are appropriate for little girls. Other families are going to have a different perspective. Some families are going to go to see Harry Potter together. Others are going to forbid it. And those who forbid it might go to a different set of movies off limits to the first family. Some families are going to drink wine or beer at a meal, others are not. We learned early on that we needed to say to our kids, "Girls, these are the Brent rules. There is not one right or wrong way to approach some of these things. That family is not bad for having a different approach. We have to do what we think best for our family before God. So, in our family we follow the Brent rules. God is our master. God is their master. We are both trying to follow God."

That's how the principle of the master frees us up to not judge our brothers and sisters. We could call this a passive principle. It just requires you letting others be. Here in verse 13 Paul is giving us an active principle. It requires you to exert some effort by changing your own behavior in order to help a brother out. This is the principle of the stumbling block. Paul says that we are not to create an obstacle that would get in our brother's way. The way here is his walk with God. Like you, your brother and sister are trying to honor God with their lives. They are doing their best to walk the path he has marked out for them. And as they move along the way, they are going to have enough challenges to deal with. Don't you be the cause of putting up additional stumbling block or obstacle in their way.

We could think back to 9:32 where Paul talks about Jewish people stumbling over the idea that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus himself is the stumbling block. That's not a stumbling block we can do anything about. It's not one we would want to change. The brother or sister in this passage has overcome Jewish resistance to Jesus as Messiah and has come to accept that they are under the new covenant of grace. They are just struggling with how to live out the gospel in light of a deep value for the practices of Mosaic Covenant. They already have some major obstacles to overcome. Do not put up additional obstacles that do not even need to be there.

Let's look at how Paul develops this idea. He gives us a second point in verse 14.

Point B

He says, "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." Paul reaffirms here that we are talking about an issue of conscience, not a sin issue. Under Mosaic covenant it would have been wrong for a believer to ignore the food laws. But one of the new things about the new covenant is that the ceremonial laws no longer apply. Those laws belong the older covenant. So, Paul can say here, in reference to food, "nothing is unclean in itself." Some prohibitions are symbolic for teaching purposes or for extra protection. The thing in itself is not sinful. It is not immoral to eat a mouse or a scorpion or a lobster. It might be unhealthy. It might be unwise. It is not immoral. If God specifically says, "Do not do it." Then it is not immoral because of the thing itself, but because of the command.

This is a standard principle with raising children. If I say, "Do not cross the street without holding my hand." And my daughter looks at me with that look, like, "I hear you." And then she runs across the street by herself hands free. Not only has she done something unwise, but she has done something sinful. The sin is not crossing the street without holding someone's hand. When she gets a bit older, she will be free to cross the street on her own with no hand holding. Hand holding across streets is not a moral requirement. Obeying a clear command from your father is a moral requirement. The sin, in that case, is the sin of disobedience. And I want her to understand this distinction when she gets older, so that she will not go through life feeling guilty and bad every time she crosses the street without holding somebody's hand. When she gets older she is free from that command. And I do not want her going around judging people who cross the street without holding people's hands. The thing in itself is not a sin. And it is the same with the food laws. The eating is not in itself a sin. It was only a sin as long as God's command to not eat applied. Now that God has removed that command in the New Covenant, we are all free to eat non-kosher food, though some who grew up under the command may still have trouble getting over guilty feelings associated with eating formerly forbidden foods.

So, Paul's comment that "nothing is unclean" reaffirms that this is not a moral issue we are talking about but an issue of conscience. Paul is also reaffirming here the principle of faith. Though a thing in itself may not be sinful or immoral, if you believe it is and do it anyway then that is sin. With all immoral acts there are two sins. There is the thing in itself, the murder or theft or adultery or whatever leads up to that, and there is the rebellion committed in doing the sin. We disobey God, sin 1. And we do the sinful thing, sin 2. In this case of eating formerly forbidden foods, the thing itself turns out to be not immoral. It is not a sin. Despite what the believer thinks, his act is not sinful.

There is potentially, however, still a sin. If you think your behavior goes against the will of God, and you do it anyway, then you are committing the sin of rebellion or disobedience. This is how Paul can say that a thing might be unclean in itself, "But to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Paul adds another point in verse 15.

Point C

"For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love." If we hurt a brother or sister over an issue of conscience, then we are not acting in a loving way to that brother or sister. Paul uses strong language. He says, "Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died." How is our freedom in regard to a certain issue destructive? A friend once told me that in high school he saw a case of beer in his youth leader's room. After seeing that it caused him to withdraw from discipleship and threw him off his path with Christ for some time. Later he found out that what he saw were bottles of root beer. It was just soda. It's not alcoholic. So, in this case, I have to admit that there are sometimes things just out of our control. That we create obstacles with good intentions and without knowing what other people are thinking. The youth leader was not being unloving by hoarding root beer. Still, the example reminds us that people are in process and these issues of conscience have potential to create serious internal struggle.

I think Paul has more in mind the idea of us urging one another to a freedom that we do not yet feel comfortable with. If you are at a church or movement event and there is dancing going on, how hard should you work to get people out on the dance floor? Generally, it is probably okay. There are probably not dancing because they are introverted. They just need some encouragement. And you can get them out there. But if someone let's you know that they really do not feel comfortable dancing, you should probably let it go. You do not want to talk someone into doing something that they feel is sinful for them to do.

I had another friend for whom this was a real issue. He had qualified to go to the Olympics for the exhibition sport of competitive dance. He hurt his back and he was not allowed to go. Then he came to Christ. And after coming to Christ, he made the decision not to go to a dance club and not to dance at all. For him, the environment of dance brought up a range of sinful memories and desires associated with the culture of dance. To pressure him to dance would be putting a temptation, a stumbling block in his path.

Even more similar to Paul's context, if someone grew up in church where they were taught that dancing is sin or drinking is sin and you pressure them strongly to join in, you might be pressuring them to join in doing something that they still believe is sin. If you don't know there is not much you can do about it. But if you are aware that this is something they struggle with, then back off for the moment. You can have a gospel conversation later to explore the issue, but in the moment is not the time to pressure someone to behave in a way they may not be comfortable with. You might disagree with their rationale, but you can respect as good their desire to honor God in their behavior.

Love is a higher goal than personal freedom of behavior. Sometimes we express love by curbing our freedoms so as not to cause others to stumble. So, in the American South Christian leaders may make the decision never to have alcohol in their home, because they do not want create confusion or a stumbling block for other Christians who might come in their home and see the alcohol and have wrong ideas or have their own temptations.

Sometimes the right action of love involves, not suppressing freedom, but expressing freedom. In Croatian Protestant culture a number of churches make a distinction between drinking a beer or a glass of wine and getting drunk on beer or wine. The first is okay, to drink a glass; the second is not, to get drunk. I mentioned in our last lesson a non-Christian student who brought a small keg of beer to a joint viewing of a world cup soccer match with our college movement and our church members. An elder from the church walked into the room. What do you think he did? Well, he walked over to the keg and poured himself a cup of beer, that's what he did. Not only was there no drunkenness

that night, there was also no unnecessary communication of judgement. That action by the elder did not result in us bringing beer to church events. It did not change the way we behaved. It did allow for the acceptance of a college student who did not exactly understand what kind of social event he was coming to but had acted with good faith, with generous and hospitable motives.

In verse 16, Paul exhorts us to “not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil.” That requires considering the needs, the motives, the understandings, how the other person feels and being able to express or curb your own freedom out of love for them. So, you may feel strongly about your view about a particular issue of conscience. Paul challenges us here to think more deeply. There is a more important good to be concerned about.

We see what he means in verses 17-19, the center of the passage.

Relinquish liberty for the good thing. (14:17-19)

“For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved’ by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” Paul has not used a lot of kingdom language, but the concept of the kingdom is basic to his biblical worldview. Paul did point out in 1:3 that Jesus is the expected son of David, the Jewish king, the Messiah. Then in chapter 5 Paul compared Jesus to Adam, declaring that through Adam sin reigned in death and through Jesus grace reigns in life. There are two different realms or kingdoms, one of Adam, sin and death and the other of Jesus, obedience and life. Jesus will one day establish his right reign on a new earth. So, we pray, “Thy kingdom come.” For now, he reigns from heaven, so we pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The reality of the kingdom of God on earth shows up as men and women live according to God’s will. They have submitted willingly to his reign. The kingdom is expressed by transformed people who live out of a new heart in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul describes this transformational new covenant living here as “righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” And using the language of 12:1, he says, “the one who serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God.” We want to present ourselves to God in a way that is pleasing and acceptable, a real offering of worship. So, the gospel of Jesus has freed us from a whole range of ceremonial or religious practices that people attach to true spirituality. But the expression of that freedom is not the goal of true spirituality. Love is the goal. Freedom is not the main thing. Living out the will of God in love is the main thing.

Paul comments that not only is this kind of spirituality pleasing to God, he says it is also approved by men. I do not think that he means that it is approved by all men all the time, but that authentically loving one another in growing maturity is our witness to the world of the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives. People will not be impressed by our ritual habits of religion. They will notice a community that practices genuine love and acceptance. Jesus was quite serious when he said, “by this all men will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.”

The kingdom of God is the good thing that we do not want people to speak badly of. We recognize that people are in process. And rather than flaunting our freedom which may lead to dissension or spiritual disillusionment, instead “we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.” We do not want this good to be destroyed simply because we held on to our right to live according to our freedom in the gospel.

Moving to the last section of the passage in verses 20-23, Paul repeats the exhortation to not cause your brother to stumble. In fact, he repeats each of the three primary points from verses 13-16, and he does so in reverse order, creating a chiasmic pattern.

Do not cause your brother to stumble. (14:20-23)

Point C'

In verse 15, he said, “**Do not destroy with your food** him for whom Christ died.” Here in verse 20, he says the same thing, “**Do not tear down** the work of God for the sake of food.” The point of the

kingdom is to build one another up in spiritual maturity in Christ, not tear one another down over disagreements about issues of conscience.

Point B'

In verse 14, Paul made clear that he is indeed talking about an issue of conscience and not a moral issue by stating, “**nothing is unclean in itself.**” He repeats that point in the second half of verse 20, “**All things indeed are clean,** but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.”

Point A'

Finally, just as Paul warned us against putting up “**an obstacle or stumbling block**” in verse 13, he repeats the same in verse 21, “It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything by which your brother stumbles.*”

That’s the stumbling block principle. We do not want to entice another believer to go against his or her conscience. Nor do we want to make our freedom such an issue that it turns another person away from the more important reality of their spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul ends the passage with a clear statement of the principle of faith, “The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”

You stand before God as your master. Whenever you encounter a choice or decision or opportunity, and you ask, “What is the wise thing for me to do in this situation? How do I honor God in this?” You are accountable to your own conscience. To know whether or not I can do something with faith, I think about whether or not I can feel good about asking Jesus to join with me in whatever I am doing. If I am comfortable eating this or drinking this or doing this or watching this with Jesus, that shows me that I believe it is not sin. Whether I am right or wrong, at least, according to my conscience, if I can freely ask Jesus to join me and I am okay with that, then I do not believe it is a sin. If I am uncomfortable doing it with Jesus, if I don’t think I could watch this or eat this or drink that with Jesus, that shows me what I think about the watching or the eating or the drinking. I think there is something wrong with it. So, I can’t do it by faith. For me to do that would be sin, because I don’t think Jesus really wants me to do it.

Paul has given us the exhortation to accept one another when we disagree about issues of conscience. And he has given us three principles, great principles to apply; the principle of the master, which frees us up to let people stand before God, the principle of faith which challenges us to consider our own conscience and to act accordingly, and the principle of the stumbling block which exhorts us not to become part of the problem but to look at something deeper, to be willing to limit our own freedom out of love for somebody else.

And as we seek to apply these principles we are going to encounter some further challenges. And I am going to mention just three of those. These are important in thinking this out and applying this. And the first is, “When does an issue of conscience become an issue of sin?”

Challenges to consider in Christian community

1. When does an issue of conscience become an issue of sin?

We know that chapter 14 is not intended by Paul to encourage the acceptance of sin in the Christian community. Paul began way back in chapter 1 of Romans describing fallen human nature. He gave us several examples of sin there if you want to go back and review. And he says this displays a darkened heart and corrupt mind. This is a turning away from God. It is becoming less than human. Then in chapter 6 Paul called us to stop offering the members of our body to unrighteousness and instead to offer ourselves to God. And as recent as the previous chapter we have Paul calling us to turn our backs on murder or theft or adultery or drunkenness and to turn ourselves towards the life of love.

This passage cannot be encouraging the acceptance of sin in gospel community. That would run contrary to the presentation of the gospel of grace Paul has been giving us. Believers do not see grace as permission to sin, but freedom from sin. We pursue life and growth in Christ, together.

So here in chapter 14, we have issues that are not sinful, such as whether or not to eat non-kosher food. A problem that arises is the grey area between clear issues of conscience and clear issues of sin. We have questions about sabbath keeping and drinking and modesty and entertainment. How do we recognize when we have moved from something that is just an issue of conscience into something that really is a sin issue? How do we recognize, for example, when we should leave the watching of certain movies up to each person to determine before God, and when we should communicate a moral stance in regard to certain kinds of material?

This is one of the challenges of applying this passage. I can imagine Paul saying that we are free to watch movies. I think he would have loved the Jesus Film. I cannot imagine at all, however, the apostle Paul watching an uncut episode of the Game of Thrones. At some point we moved from an issue of conscience to pornography. And pornography is not okay for Christians. And we need to speak out against it.

The answer is not to develop a system of laws that will keep us safe. So, we'll just ban all movies and not have to worry about it. That's a legalistic answer. In dealing with issues of conscience, we need to allow individuals and families to make their own decisions. We acknowledge that they must follow the principle of faith and God is their master. On the other hand, when we move from issues of conscience through the grey area to sin, we also need to call sin, "Sin." The ongoing challenge for us in Christian community has to do with handling this grey area between, that area that is in between a clear issue of conscience and clear issue of sin.

Here is a second challenge. At what point do we say the weak are exerting too much influence on the community?

2. At what point do we say the weak are exerting too much influence on the community?

This is Paul's language. The weak in faith are those who do not yet understand the freedom they have from certain practices. The stumbling block principle can be taken too far. Paul calls the strong in faith to hold off acting on their liberty in the gospel, so as not to cause others to stumble. We could imagine practicing this principle by choosing not order wine or beer when out with other Christians because someone may see drinking alcohol as a sin. You reason, "Why hurt our opportunity to have good Christian fellowship, if it only means I need to order water? It's really no big deal?"

This is a valid application of the stumbling block principle. If, however, a group in the church insists that all wine is evil and that Jesus never really drank wine, and it is never acceptable for any Christian to drink wine, and furthermore this should be the teaching of our church, then that individual or group is beginning to exert an undue influence on the whole community. We set aside our liberty out of love, but we do not change the biblical teaching of liberty in order to be at peace with those who have not yet come to a certain understanding of biblical truth.

Paul did use the terms strong and weak, which shows us that he had a view regarding whose understanding of the gospel was correct. Furthermore, Paul taught what he understood to be the correct position that we are indeed free from Mosaic ceremony. Those who felt they must still follow those laws did so out of an incomplete understanding of the gospel. And though Paul might choose himself to eat kosher food when in fellowship with these Christians, he was not going to let their failure to grasp the implications of the gospel change his own teaching of the gospel. Paul wants them to live in faith according to the current state of their conscience, but he also wants them to grow into maturity. He wants them to be transformed and come to a more full, a stronger understanding of their freedom in Christ.

Healthy gospel community should resist the imposition of a weak view of the gospel onto the whole. This is especially the responsibility of the community's leadership. That brings us to the third challenge. We need spiritually mature leadership.

3. We need spiritually mature leadership.

Both of these challenges highlight that need. We need spiritually mature leaders who are continuing to grow in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Based on the tone of chapter 14, I believe Rome had that kind of leadership. I believe Paul had confidence in Priscilla and Aquila and the others he names in chapter 16. He had personally disciples Priscilla and Aquila in gospel ministry. They worked with him. They sat under his teaching. Now they are back in Rome. I doubt Paul would have written this chapter in this way if he did not trust the leaders in Rome to apply these principles in community.

I will admit this is not something I can prove. It is simply something I am assuming. It seems to me that Paul trusts the Roman leadership to understand the freedom of the gospel, while also trusting them to understand when to set aside that freedom for the sake of love and building others up.

We need leaders who can recognize when we have passed from an issue of conscience to a sin issue, and who know how to communicate about the grey area in between. And we need leaders who are willing to subjugate their own liberty for the sake of others, and yet, do not subjugate the glorious message of the gospel out of pressure from those who are still struggling to understand the gospel.

We need these kinds of leaders. So, pray for your leaders. They are also in process, and they are also in need for your acceptance.

One of the best ways you can support your leaders in the building up of your community is to put into practice yourself these three principles of acceptance, that you entrust each one of your brothers and sisters in Christ to his own master without judgement, that you try hard not to create a stumbling block for anyone else, that you are willing to hold back your liberty out of love, and that you resolve to do nothing, except that which you can do by faith in Jesus Christ.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 14:13-23?
2. How would you describe in your own words each of the three principles of acceptance?
 - The principle of the master
 - The principle of faith
 - The principle of the stumbling block
3. What is one issue of conscience that is relevant to your Christian community (worship styles, keeping the Sabbath, movies or television, drinking, etc...)? Consider your past experience or current circumstances to select an issue that could be or is real in your community?
4. After deciding on one issue, come up with an example or two for how you have seen each of the three principles being applied or how you could imagine each principle being applied.
5. Come up with a second issue of conscience to consider.
6. Again, thinking about this second issue, how might each of the principles of acceptance be applied.
7. How do the three challenges at the end of the lesson apply to each of the cases you considered for questions 3-4 and 5-6? Review the three challenges and consider each case again.