

### **Romans 14:13-23**

If you want one word to describe Paul's thinking in today's section of Romans 14, it is the word 'balance'. That's the name of the game. The fact is, one of our greatest enemies, the devil himself, is the expert of extremes. He's the master at swinging the pendulum from one side to the other. I think it's good for us to realise that Satan will do anything he can to move us off-centre and into an imbalanced lifestyle.

That's what Paul is on about in these verses – he wants us to fully embrace and enjoy our freedom in Christ, but not at the expense of others. He wants us to go carefully and thoughtfully when it comes to those issues on which people differ. It's true, we won't always agree, we'll never see eye to eye, but that's no excuse for splitting a church fellowship.

There are issues which are non-negotiable but, when it comes to personal taste and preference, we need to accommodate each other in the family of God. Paul wants us to show a measure of love and consideration for those around us, he pleads for us to exercise common sense, and for us to give and take a little in our interpersonal relationships!

You see, at the end of the day, it's all about motives, it's what drives me on, it's the reason why I have to do it my way all the time! See what I mean, Paul gets to the heart of the issue in the section we're reflecting on today—he challenges us to sort our life out on bended knee before the cross of Calvary; he exhorts us, in the light of a coming day of personal accountability at the judgment seat of Christ for us to apply the golden rule in all our dealings with one another. When it comes to freedom, yes, we thank God for it, but we must never use it to ride roughshod over other people. That's a serious abuse of the liberty we have in Christ. When it comes to freedom, we exercise it with the discretion that comes from genuine love. To me, that's the course of action the apostle encourages us to pursue!

I reckon we're walking a tightrope but it's nothing that we and God can't handle together. It's what Chuck Swindoll calls 'the tightrope of liberty'. On either side of us lie two extremes, one is legalism, the other is license. The first one threatens to place us under a strict, narrow set of rules and regulations. The other urges us towards the shackled bondage of self-centredness and immorality.

See what I mean—two extremes—two positions that are poles apart! The challenge we face is this: how do we avoid landing on either side of the spectrum? Well, I reckon the answer is in verse 13 where Paul tells us 'to stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.'

We see something of the genius of inspiration in Paul's choice of words in verse 13. You'll notice he talks about a stumbling block as well as an obstacle—both cause huge problems. You are probably wondering, what's the difference between them! I think we can explain them like this: a stumbling block means something carelessly left about over which someone stumbles, whereas an obstacle means something deliberately left to cause someone to fall on their face!

The first is like you forgetting to clear up after you in the lounge and your son falls over a tool or some other object—the second is when you intentionally leave something in a position that is destined to cause someone a lot of anguish and pain. At the first, your son falls and you're really sorry; at the second, a fellow believer falls and you're glad and pleased about it. The first is done in all innocence, the second is malicious and full of evil intent.

That's fairly clear! The issue is, when next faced with a dicey situation, how do we respond? Paul wants us to stop sitting in judgment on our fellow believer, we don't get anywhere when we come down on them like a ton of bricks—all we do is crush them and that's not the way to handle a brother or sister in the church family. Quite honestly, it's not worth the hassle for we end up feeling harassed and frustrated ourselves. So what's the point!

Before we take a short music break, let me say this: it seems to me that the key to maintaining a balanced Christian life doesn't lie in legalism, for that destroys freedom, nor in license, for that abuses freedom. When all is said and done, the balance we are looking for can be achieved, but only through the responsible exercise of our liberty.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Having cleared that hurdle, Paul goes on to give us three basic guidelines for us to take on board. The first one is outlined in verses 14-16 and it's a very powerful reminder that nothing is intrinsically unclean. Paul spells it out in such a way that the message is unmistakably clear when he says 'as one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself.' You can't argue with that! No foods are unclean, no days are unclean, no people are unclean. You can read Acts 10 to see how Peter learned this lesson. So far as Paul is concerned, he doesn't have a problem eating greens, he could go veggie tomorrow! But why should he? By the same criteria, he doesn't have any problems eating the best of meat! Whatever, if it's steak or cabbage, mince or tatties, he is more than happy to enjoy them all! Paul reckons they'll not do him a button of harm. In his eyes, it's good stuff!

At the same time, the man sitting beside him in church might have a problem taking the steak—well, that's his problem, and it's only his problem. He shouldn't make an issue of it when it comes to other people. The sad fact is, he does! He makes a song and dance about it. That's why Paul encourages us to go easy on such folks, we should think twice before we eat a slap up meal with all the trimmings in their presence.

We could do it, but there's no point in rubbing it in; there's no point in hurting the weaker brother's walk with the Lord; that's where and when we exercise restraint and show Christian love. That's the ideal moment for us to bite our tongue and hold fire on what we think. By adopting that mindset, we recognise that the other person's

growth in Christ is more important than the full exercise of our freedom in Christ to eat whatever we want to eat!

When we come to study 1 Corinthians in a few weeks time, we will discover that principle is enshrined there as well. Paul puts it like this: 'all things are lawful, that is, they're ok, but not all things are expedient!' It's ok for me to do it when I'm on my own or when I'm with people of like mind, but when other folk are in the company, it's best not to do it!

We'll pause for a break and that'll give you a moment to mull over what we've been thinking about. When we come back, I want us to look at Paul's two remaining principles.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Paul's second principle is found in verses 17-19, it is this: the essence of Christianity is not found in externals. In other words the bread and butter of Christian faith is not found in a long list of dos and don'ts. If we don't track it down there, where on earth is it? Well, according to Paul, 'the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.'

Paul's words in this verse are beautifully arranged, again it's a touch of inspiration at its very best, they are truly spectacular for they show us what makes God tick! These are issues that God is big on! The primary element of God's kingdom is 'righteousness'. It is potentially life changing! You see, the whole experience of God's righteousness in our lives produces an infinite longing for holiness, a driving desire to know God better and an intense thirsting in our inner parts. That was David's experience in Psalm 42 when he compared himself to a deer. Jesus talked about it in Matthew 5 in the beatitudes when he said: 'blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.'

Hard on the heels of righteousness is 'peace', it's that profound inner satisfaction which only God's presence can give. Peace with God is the secret of peace with one another. It has been well said that 'kingdom peace is an inner unflappability which remains

undisturbed by minor irritations, a quiet assurance that God is at work.'

The third factor is 'joy in the Holy Spirit'. I reckon this is the outward and visible mark of the presence of Jesus Christ. When the Queen is at home in Buckingham Palace, her flag is flying high! So it is in your life and mine, when joy flies as the flag over our lives, the world knows the King of heaven is in residence in our hearts.

That's why Paul says what he does for he reckons there's no point in us causing our weaker brethren a lot of aggro and unnecessary angst – we should live our life in such a way that it has a positive influence on them. In other words, we should seek to promote these wonderful qualities of 'righteousness, peace and joy' in their life. If what we're doing doesn't have that influence, then we need to think twice. That is when we have to back off and rethink our position.

We don't give in to them, nor do we cave in to their legalistic demands; we do, however, show them a heart of compassion and love. We let them see that we can accommodate them and that we can do it without sulking or frowning. We want them to feel better at the end of it rather than leave them feeling a lot worse.

Paul says if we adopt that attitude then God is pleased in verse 18, and others are encouraged and edified in verse 19. It's easy to pull down, it's much harder to build up! And that's what he says we should aspire after—we look for harmony in the family of God and we look for consistent, steady growth in the life of individuals in the church of Christ.

In the light of Paul's comments, it is abundantly clear to me that no matter how much some folks elevate the externals, it's the eternal that must be first in our lives. We need to major on living a godly life rather than getting bogged down in the minor incidentals—things like the colour of the carpet and curtains for the main sanctuary!

During the war when vessels had to be convoyed across the Atlantic because of the U-boats, all ships had to proceed at the speed of the slowest. This is something of what Paul has in mind here. The

strong brother could stride ahead, but his love will not permit it. To change the analogy, the shepherd must pace the flock to accommodate the weakest lamb. That means the Christian must regulate his freedom to take into account the feeble conscience of a weaker brother or sister.

Paul's third principle is supremely important for it challenges our thinking in so many areas. You see, it's not how things affect me, that's not mega important—it's how our attitude impacts the kingdom of God. Remember, the church is bigger than any one individual!

Paul lays it on the line when he tells us: 'Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food!' See what I mean, it just is not worth it. If and when that happens, the devil's happy, you bet he is! He's laughing at us with a big cheesy smirk all over his face!

Whatever we do, we should think of the ramifications of every decision, the consequences of every action—they impinge on so many facets of Christian work and ministry. Anything and everything we do should be done exclusively for the glory of God—if we embrace that mindset, we don't have anything to worry about, it'll work out fine!

By the same token, we will think about others, even when their demands and nit picking ideas really get under our skin—we'll not walk all over them, we'll show them genuine love and we'll hold fire on our liberty!

We'll take a break there and when we come back we'll take a look at three suggestions that Paul gives us to prevent us being a stumbling block.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

In the cold light of day, any man worth his salt would rather be a stepping stone than a stumbling block. In the final paragraph in Romans 14, Paul gives us three bright ideas that should help us keep our head above water, three practical applications that prevent us from becoming the dreaded stumbling block.

Number one is found in verse 21 where Paul says ‘it is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.’ In other words, let’s be considerate. When we find ourselves in the company of another believer who regards certain good things as evil, we should care enough for him or her as a person to avoid those things.

Number two is found in the opening phrase of verse 22 where Paul encourages us to keep our counsel and be convinced in our own mind as to the rights and wrongs of a given situation. The seasoned campaigner writes: ‘So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.’ There are times when it is best to keep our mouth shut, times when we need to be discrete, times when it is best to remain silent!

So often people who pander after the little things and get hung up on insignificant issues are folks who are very shaky in their belief system. That’s why it is so important for us to know why and what we believe—not that we ram it down their throat, far from it, but that we know the reason why we are free to enjoy what God has provided for us.

Paul makes an impassioned appeal for consistency in verses 22b and 23. He doesn’t want us moving from pillar to post, he doesn’t want us chopping and changing our beliefs as often as we change our clothes! He makes the valid point that once we have prayerfully thought something through, we should stick at it and stick with it—after that, we should not waver in our heart conviction. If we have niggling doubts in the front of our mind, it will yield internal condemnation, while, if we are consistent in our belief system, that will result in happiness.

Sound advice! Let’s put it into practice and begin to reap some of the benefits that come with it. Our fellowship will be greatly enhanced, our life will be richer, and our Lord will be delighted and thrilled for there is nothing that warms his heart more than seeing his people united in Christ.

