

**TUTORIAL**  
**3.17**

# Christian Liberty

Bible presenter Scot Keen delves into Romans chapter fourteen in this tutorial. The author of Romans addresses the unique issues of Christian liberty in the first century and we will find that the same principles apply today.

## Introduction

In this tutorial we get into the last section on application in Romans and this time we are dealing with the issues of Christian liberty. This takes us back to the purpose of the book. If you remember the beginning of this module, Paul is writing to the church in Rome and it is made up of believers from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. These brought with them differing convictions because of their unique backgrounds which resulted in differing convictions on issues such as holy days, food and drink.

## Attitudes towards other believers

Paul wrote this section (Romans 14:1-15:13) to provide instruction for believers to live together in unity. What I love about this section is that Paul does not say who is right or wrong, he simply gives principles that will unify believers regardless of what the issue is. That is relevant for us today because we often work and worship in multicultural communities made up of people who have differing backgrounds and differing convictions. We need to learn how to dwell together in unity. Romans fourteen and fifteen reveal not only that it is possible for us to function in unity, but it is possible because of God's provisions.

The Gospel is the answer for Jews and Gentiles, both are sinners before God and both are justified by faith. So now we get into these practical issues of why they were divided. Romans fourteen and fifteen deal with holy days, food and drink, but in order to make this more practical and relevant I want you to consider certain things that might be issues of conscience in your congregation or community. I can think of some things that I have witnessed in my sphere of interaction. At the beginning of this module I mentioned that in the south where I grew up, most believers would not think of alcoholic beverages as being permissible, whereas tobacco was no problem at all. At

the same time, people in the north had no problem with alcoholic beverages but were deeply disturbed by tobacco users.

## Accept and don't condemn

Other things I have heard people debate are things like appropriate versus inappropriate clothing, tattoos and home schooling versus mainstream schooling. Whatever the issue is, it is worth knowing that Scripture gives us a certain amount of liberty and often does not command or forbid specific things. Paul teaches us that we are to accept one another and not condemn. Look at Romans 14:1, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions."

Paul introduces us to this person called *the weak in faith*, a person who is not confident concerning their freedom in Christ. They are not sure whether it is okay or not to do certain things. The weak in faith in Rome would most likely be the Jewish believers who were not confident that they could eat certain meats, not confident that they could neglect certain days and not convinced of the freedom that they had in Christ. Paul says to accept the weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgement on their opinions. He goes on to say that some people have faith to eat all things but others who are weak eat only vegetables. So there were some believers who were confident they could eat anything they desired, and others who believed that they could only eat vegetables.

Paul says the one who eats is not to look down on the one who does not eat. The temptation is for believers who are convinced of their liberty to disdain people who do not enjoy their liberty, as if that makes them inferior. On the other hand, Paul says believers who do not eat certain foods are not to judge those who do because God has accepted them, and with this Paul introduces us to the *strong in faith*. You have the *weak in faith* who are not certain of their liberty in Christ, then you have the *strong in faith* who are confident of their liberty. The strong are not to look with contempt on the weak, and the weak are not to judge the strong. It would be tempting for a weaker brother to conclude that the believer who has freedom is somehow excessive or over the top or worthy of God's judgement. But Paul says not to judge.

## Assume the best

And so they were supposed to accept one another because God has accepted them. Now Paul will say that we need to assume the best of others. We should assume that others are likely trying to please the Lord through their convictions. Going back to the context of Romans, picture the Jewish believer judging the Gentile believer who eats meat. The temptation for each party would be to scorn the other. Paul says God has accepted them, so the implication is we should accept them as well. We would do well to realise that other believers are probably trying to please the Lord through the freedom

they take or refrain from taking. Look at verse five, “One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike.” So Jewish believers would likely conclude that certain holy days must be observed, whereas Gentile believers would view every day as being alike.

Paul does not say who is right or wrong, he simply says that each person must be fully convinced in their own mind. Look at verse six, “He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord.” Imagine interviewing Jewish believers from the first century and asking them why they observed the Sabbath day. They would most likely say that they were doing it for the Lord, as they sought to please him through their convictions. On the other hand Gentile believers would most likely say that they were eating in thankfulness for the Lord, thankful for their freedom. Both Jewish and Gentile believers were seeking to please the Lord through their use of liberty, and Paul says for that reason neither should be judged. In fact, we should assume that they were united in their desire to please the Lord just as we are.

## **We answer to God**

Remember that every individual has to give an answer to God. Look at verse ten, “But you, why do you judge your brother?” And, “You again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, ‘As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’”

We will all have to give an account for ourselves and the way that we treat other believers. That should remind us not to judge our fellow believers who are within the perimeters of God's will. These are not sin issues we are discussing here, but instead issues of conscience, issues where one believer thinks that something is wrong when it is in fact not wrong Biblically.

Paul says accept one another because God has accepted you and realise other believers are pleasing the Lord through their convictions. Each person will give an account before God.

In the second half of chapter fourteen, Paul launches into a discussion about the attitudes that believers should have towards each other. He emphasises that we must be committed to live in consideration for others. You can make this relevant to whatever setting in which you find yourself. I teach at a Bible college that has students from diverse backgrounds, some from conservative backgrounds and others not. When you put these students in the same dormitory it can become an issue. Some watch movies or listen to music that they feel they are free to listen to or watch. Other students are offended by those things and struggle, wondering whether it is okay.

## Committed to Care

Of course Paul is not saying that everything believers do is acceptable. We are discussing issues where there is legitimate Christian freedom and we have to learn how to live together in unity. We need to be committed to live in consideration for others. Paul says, "Let us not judge one another anymore but rather determine this" (Romans 14:13). The word for *judge* and *determine* is a play on words in Greek. Paul is saying do not judge one another, instead make a judgement call to never put a stumbling block in front of another believer. That means changing the way we live and forgoing the liberties we might enjoy for the sake of ministering to other believers. We lay aside our privileges and become living sacrifices, once again for the sake of the body.

I'll give you an analogy. When I used to walk with my youngest (who was three years old at the time) I would have to dramatically slow down my pace and reach down low to hold her hand. In the same way, we are sometimes called to alter the pace at which we are walking with other believers. We need to be considerate of them, perceiving what may or may not be a stumbling block for them so that we can ultimately serve them. Putting a stumbling block in front of someone is to somehow put pressure on them to violate their conscience, to do something they are not convinced that they have freedom to do.

Back to the first century context, let's say a Gentile believer is having a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich (we know the Jews could not eat pork). The Gentile believer is about to enjoy a bacon sandwich, and a stumbling block would be to place that sandwich in front a Jewish believer and to say, "Man, do you smell that bacon? Crispy, fried, this is so good, you have got to have some of this." A stumbling block is to put pressure on people to violate their conscience, and Paul says we need to determine not to pressure others to sin against their conscience. He elaborates on this, "I know and I am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself" (Romans 14:14). Again, Paul is not saying that there are no moral absolutes. He is very clear that certain things are sin, but in this context he is talking about things that are not sinful, things that are issues of Christian liberty.

Paul is convinced that nothing is unclean in and of itself, however notice what he says, "To him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Think back to the first century again. We know eating meat or pork could not defile believers. In fact, Jesus declared that all foods are clean, and so for a Jew to eat pork, he would not be sinning against the Lord as it was no longer forbidden. However, if that person thinks that God does not want them to eat pork and they eat it anyway, then even though it is not inherently sinful, they are actually sinning. If they think they are violating God's standard, then in their heart they are going through that same process. In essence they are dethroning Christ in their hearts and choosing to walk in what they think is rebellion against God. That rebellion is the sin, not the actual eating of the meat.

## Valuing our freedom

Paul says that nothing is unclean, but to the one who thinks it is unclean, then for him it is unclean. If we value our liberties more than we value others, we are not living consistently with God's purposes. Paul goes on to say, "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." I love how Paul puts this into perspective for us. If we are using our liberty in such a way that pressures other believers to violate their consciences then we are doing a number of things. We are being a stumbling block, no longer walking in love, and have forgotten Romans twelve, about being a living sacrifice and preferring others in love. Paul says do not destroy with food him for whom Christ died. Our value of our freedom can sometimes be so high that we value it more than people. God values people so much that He died for them.

If that is how much God valued people, then we should value them as well and be willing to lay aside our liberties for the sake of others. Paul says in verse sixteen, "Do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil." Christian freedom can be a good thing. It is good that Christ declared all food clean and it is good Sabbath laws are no longer binding. However these good things could become spoken of as evil if we do not exercise wisdom. We should not pursue liberty at all costs, instead we should be pursuing edification within the body. Look at verse seventeen, "For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the holy spirit." Valuing others is more important than our liberty.

This is what God is about, righteousness and peace and joy in the Spirit, not about how much liberty we can have. If that is what God is all about, then that is what we should be all about too. Look at verse eighteen, "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." That means that as servants of Christ we want to be sensitive to issues of conscience in the lives of others so that we can ultimately serve them and that by pursuing those things, make peace.

Here's another analogy from Papua New Guinea. My wife and I spent the summer in Papua New Guinea back in 2006 along with our son. Before we went over, we were told by the missionaries that my wife would need to wear a dress that touched the ground, because anything that would show her ankles would be offensive to the culture we were serving in. Well, that is a case where we laid aside our liberty for the sake of ministry. That is what Paul is talking about here, pursuing things that make for peace.

It would not have been wrong for my wife to wear different clothing besides a dress that drags the ground, but that was a choice that we made for the sake of building up other believers, and that is what Paul speaks of here. He says in

verse twenty not to tear down the work of God for the sake of food. God is trying to mature believers and we could actually interfere with that process with careless use of our Christian liberty.

## **Laying aside our freedom**

Paul says, "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine or to do anything by which your brother stumbles." We recognise that God has given us liberty in certain areas and He actually wants us to enjoy these freedoms, but not in a way that is hurtful to other believers and the work that God is doing amongst the body of Christ. Look at verse twenty-two, "The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves." Paul is saying that there are times when you may only get to enjoy your Christian liberty between you and God. This does not mean that we are secretly going around indulging ourselves in liberties and lying to other people. If somebody asks us about our liberty then we should be honest about it, but it does mean that sometimes we have to limit the use of our liberty because we do not want to offend others.

Note verse twenty-three, "But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin." Even though it is not sinful for believers to eat pork, if they think God disapproves of it and do it anyway, then it is sin. Paul is not teaching moral relativism, he is simply stating that if believers do not think they have liberty to do something and yet do it anyway, in essence they are disregarding what they think is God's authority and that would be the sin. Paul brings it then to a point of application here in chapter fifteen, "We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength." He puts the responsibility on the shoulders of those who are strong in faith to please themselves but to please others for their good edification.

## **Others first**

Paul says be thinking of others first and then he gives us a memorable example, "For even Christ did not please himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me'" (Romans 15:3). Consider Christ, He is God in the flesh and He gave up certain rights and privileges that come with being God when He became a man and lived among us. Maybe that will help us put things into perspective. We give up certain liberties but Christ clothed Himself in humanity too. If He would do that for the sake of others, surely we can lay aside the exercise of our liberty for building up other believers. The purpose of this in in verse six, "So that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." If in Paul's context Jewish and Gentile believers were not unified, then they could not glorify God together.

If we are not unified with the believers in our community, we cannot glorify God together. Paul should endeavour to arrive at a place where we are one unified voice, glorifying God together and serving each other for the glory of God.

## Jews and Gentiles included

Finally Paul says Christian ministry is inclusive of Jews and Gentiles. This gets to the heart of the Christian liberty issues in Romans fourteen and fifteen because the issues of conscience were ultimately issues of culture. Paul brings this out and he talks about Christian being inclusive of both. Look at verse seven, “Accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.” Remember that when Jesus accepted us, he accepted us just as we were, not on the condition of us giving up or keeping our liberties, but just as we were. That is how Paul wants us to accept one another.

Christ’s ministry is inclusive of Jews and Gentiles, look at verse eight, “Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers.” So Jesus came as the Jewish Savior but not only did He come for the Jews, verse nine, “And for the Gentiles to glorify God for his mercy.” He quotes from the Psalms and from the Law and from the Prophets (three sections of the Hebrew Scriptures) to back up this point that God had always designed for Christ’s ministry to go beyond the Jews to the Gentiles. Paul’s ultimate argument on why Jewish and Gentile believers should live together in unity is because Christ came for both of them. If Christ can accept Jews and Gentiles with their differing backgrounds and convictions, then we should be able to accept one another as well. He concludes this discussion with a benediction, “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the holy spirit.” God reminds us that the ministry He is calling us to (serving one another in the body of Christ) is ultimately accomplished by the power of the Spirit.

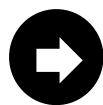


## DISCUSSION POINTS

*Christian Liberty*

1. Who are the “weak” in faith?
2. Who are the “strong” in faith?
3. How were the strong supposed to relate to the weak?
4. How were the weak to relate to the strong?
5. A stumbling block is...?

6. According to 15:1, upon which person does the bulk of responsibility rest, the strong or the weak?
7. 15:1-7, what reason does Paul give for each of us to please his neighbor and to accept one another?
8. Are you allowing this reality to effect the way you view yourself and the way you live?
9. Have you presented yourself to God as a living sacrifice? If not, on a separate sheet of paper, write down the reasons for not doing so, and think about the validity of your reasoning.
10. In what ways have you been conformed to the world?



## ACTIVITIES

### *Christian Liberty*

1. A man was invited to a men's fellowship at the home of an elder in the church. Once he arrived, the elder offered everyone a beer as they waited for the food to cook. After supper, the guys planned on having a poker game (small amounts of money). As two of the guys drove home together, one believer was shocked and disappointed that this was happening at an elders home.
2. Taking the perspective of a weaker brother;
  - a. How do you feel about the strong brother in this situation?
  - b. How does his exercise of liberty make you feel?
  - c. How could it possibly effect what you do?
  - d. If the stronger brother puts pressure on you to do what he/she is doing, what are some practical ways to respond?
  - e. How is it sin for the weak brother to do something that is scripturally permissible?
3. Later that evening, the elder told his wife that he saw the disheartened look on the faces of his visitors. He knew he had probably offended them. Taking the perspective of a stronger brother (the elder in this scenario);



- a. How do you feel about the weak brother in this situation?
  - b. How do his convictions make you feel about him?
  - c. How do his convictions make you feel about yourself?
  - d. How do you know when you have been a stumbling block?
  - e. If there is a difference between offending someone and being a stumbling block, is there a place for setting aside the exercise of my liberty even if it is just offending the other person (vs. pressuring them to conform)?
  - f. If I am exercising my liberty at the expense of another, what scriptural principles have I violated (things that we have learned in Romans thus far)
    - i. I am not being a living sacrifice (12:1-2) ii. If I say I am loving my brother, I am loving with hypocrisy (12:9)
    - iii. I am not preferring someone above myself (12:10)
    - iv. I am not being of the same mind toward one another (12:16) v. I am being proud (12:16) vi. I am not living in peace with others (12:18) vii. I am not walking in love (13:8) viii. I am putting my own desires above the good of my brother (14:15)
4. How might the principles of Romans 14:1 – 15:13 impact your ministry?