

“The Believer’s Freedom” Romans 14:13-23

Author: Paul the apostle (a Roman citizen by birth), born to proclaim God’s gospel (Gal 1:15-17).

Date/Provenance: Late 50s AD (58-59). Written from Corinth on his third missionary journey.

Purpose: Systematic proclamation of the gospel that saves (Rom 1:16-17), Paul’s “Magnum Opus.”

- 13 – Paul’s focus here is to exhort the *strong* to not place a stumbling block in front of their fellow believer. No Christian ought to want to see their brother hindered in their race (Heb 12:1-3)!
- The sin of the strong is “judging” in a way that despises the weak, while the weak “stumbles.”
- 14 – “Unclean” here means defiled or impure, i.e., sin (cf. w/Mk 7:2-5, Acts 10:14, Heb 10:29, Rev 21:27). Evil comes by the *misuse* of material things as guided by the human heart (Gen 1:31, Jer 17:9). Paul follows Jesus, whose teaching on this subject is clear (see Mt 15:10-20, Mk 7:14-23).
- 15 – If your brother is “grieved” here means he actually falls into sin (cf. v13), not merely has painful displeasure in his mind as the strong exercises their freedom. John Murray: “The sin committed, therefore, is of a grievous character and the grief can be nothing less than the vexation of conscience that afflicts a believer when he violates conscience and does what he esteems to be disloyalty to Christ.” V23 clarifies for us that is primarily the issue of heart-motivation in view.
 - App: Christ’s death is an *extreme* sacrifice and regarding our brother is insignificant in comparison. How can we say we walk in love – a key apostolic theme (1 Cor 13:4-7, 1 Pet 4:8, 1 Jn 3:16, 4:8) – if we won’t make this effort for our weaker brothers? Are you willing to sacrifice even your *correct* preferences in order to walk in love in this congregation?
- 16-19 – Paul makes an appeal to the strong to continue to call good “good” and evil “evil” – and then to live a kingdom life pursuing peace. In freedom, the believer may enjoy with thanksgiving what is good (v6, cf. w/16, 1 Cor 10:30). Note, Christian freedom is from sin/toward holiness in a way that is founded upon God’s absolute freedom to all His holy will (Ps 135:5-6). Christian freedom *cannot* be freedom to sin (see Rom 6:1-11)! Yes, even when we do sin, we have an advocate with the Father (1 Jn 2:1-2)! But God has called us to holiness. True freedom means following His revealed will in Scripture for us (1 Thess 5:18). Remember that it is His kingdom being worked out in our hearts, so He alone is sovereign to give His law and also to give us the strength to follow it for His glory (Mt 6:31-33, Jn 3:3-8, 1 Thess 2:12, Phil 2:13).
 - App: Sin *deceives* us about what true freedom is all about (our desires vs God’s desires).
 - The kingdom of God being characterized by righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit show God’s kingdom is spiritual, exceeding all our material concerns (Mt 6:31-33).
- 20-21 – The sin of placing a stumbling block is a *serious* issue (Cf. 1 Cor 8:11). John Murray: “When the apostle bases his plea on the vicarious death of Christ, he is reminding the strong believer of two things: (1) the extent of Christ’s love for the weak believer; (2) the death of Christ as the bond of fellowship among believers. If Christ loved the weak believer to the extent of laying down his life for his salvation, how alien to the demands of this love is the refusal on the part of the strong to forego the use of a certain article of food when the religious interests of the one from whom Christ died are thereby imperiled!”
- 22 – This is *not* a statement that faith ought to be kept as something personal that doesn’t affect our words and actions! On the other hand, it does remind us to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15).
- 23 – If one has doubts about whether or not something is sinful, then one is *willing* to offend God if acting in the area in doubt. App: Motivation is a key component to understanding the *gravity* of any sin (consider the different offerings of Lev 4-5) and understanding a sin’s gravity helps us prioritize, weep and pray accordingly. Pragmatic vs principled action in politics, culture. How the church handles issues of conscience among members (baptism, etc.) ought to reflect this verse.