

Romans

Bible Study

Stumbling Blocks

Romans 14:13–15:7

It's easy to look down on someone you think is not at your level of understanding. When it comes to spiritual matters, those who understand Pauline doctrine know that we have much freedom in deciding what we do. Unfortunately, we can easily let the flesh use this knowledge of our freedom to give us a feeling of superiority toward others who lack this insight. However, even though Paul teaches us that we have a great amount of freedom, he throttles this by saying that our focus should be on building up other believers and not on exercising our freedom (Galatians 5:13). It should be a priority to come alongside the weaker brother to edify him, not berate him. We were not put on this earth as a spiritual judge of those who don't have a good grasp of Pauline doctrine, but to gently teach them so that we all have the same understanding of the faith (Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 4:5; Colossians 3:12; 2 Timothy 2:25; Titus 3:2). How can we in good conscience judge others when we have such limited knowledge? Instead of being the judge, we ourselves will be judged by the all-knowing Judge, Jesus Christ (Romans 14:10).

Paul gives many admonitions for us to confront people with a gentle manner. He brings this up often because it seems to be a pervasive problem among believers. Knowledge without love can cause a person to become arrogant (1 Corinthians 8:1). If we have correct knowledge and a true love for others then we will be properly equipped to reach out to those who need a better understanding of Pauline doctrine.

Zeal without knowledge is the opposite problem and can be just as bad as having knowledge without love. Believers need proper knowledge with the proper attitude when dealing with others. We will not be able to live a life pleasing to the Lord if we are missing either knowledge or love (Colossians 1:9–10; Galatians 5:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:3).

Hindrances

Although the stronger Christian understands the great amount of freedom we have in Christ, we are not to use this freedom carelessly. Our freedom should always be tempered by those around us. If we are in the presence of a weaker brother, one who has not come to understand our freedom, then we are to be careful not to lead him to go against his conscience by doing something he feels is wrong. We know that we are free to go to a movie theater, but the weaker brother may believe that he is restricted from doing so. Someone who grew up thinking a certain activity is wrong will often carry this over into his Christian life. If he sees us going into a movie theater, it may cause him to do the same, and that would be a sin for him because he would be going against his conscience (1 Corinthians 8:9–13). It is not a sin to go into a theater, but it would be a sin for any believer who is convinced it is a sin, because if a believer is convinced that God does not want him to do something and then he does it, he is in effect thumbing his nose at God. It is the attitude that is the sin, not the action.

The stronger Christian always needs to be cognizant of how his actions will be viewed by others. If a certain action could be misinterpreted, then it would be better to restrict yourself for the benefit of the weaker brother. If we ignore the weaker brother in our actions, we are not living according to love. Living your freedom may lead to the downfall of a weaker believer. We need to look at the bigger picture. Is it worth causing a believer to fall for the sake of certain freedoms? If you know that exercising a certain freedom will cause someone to fall, then don't do it. If eating certain foods will cause someone to sin, then don't do it. If what we do could cause someone to derail in their spiritual walk, then don't do it.

In many cases, we will not cause weaker brothers to fall into sin, but we may cause them to look down on us for not being the kind of Christians that they are. Weaker brothers are very often legalistic Christians who have become really good at judging others who don't live up to the standards that they have

set for themselves. Paul is just as tough on them as he is on how stronger brothers treats weaker brothers. Each is to make concessions for the other, not in condemnation, but in love. If we truly love someone, it will not be a sacrifice to give up certain freedoms for their good.

Righteousness, peace, and joy

Paul raises our sights to remind us about our position in the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is not about exercising our freedoms at the expense of a fellow believer, it is about righteousness, peace, and joy. When we take full advantage of the freedoms we have, we are only thinking about ourselves. This isn't what the Christian life is all about. We don't live in a bubble, only looking out for ourselves. We are to live in a manner that builds up other believers. When we live a life thinking about others, we will not only be accepted by people, we will also be accepted by God. As verse 19 says, we are to pursue things that make for peace and build up one another. This means that we need to strive to make these things happen. It takes thought and effort to do things that benefit others. We need to look beyond ourselves and to the needs of others (Philippians 2:4). The Kingdom we are in is not about all these petty earthly issues, but is about righteousness, peace and joy. We lose the significance of these things when we are only focused on exercising our freedoms.

These three aspects of the Kingdom of God, righteousness, peace, and joy, are all obtained through faith. We are declared to be righteous through faith (Romans 4:5; 5:1; Galatians 3:24). Our faith in Jesus Christ also brings us peace with the Father (Romans 5:1). Likewise, because of our faith in Christ, we have joy (2 Corinthians 1:24). Being members of the Kingdom of God means that we should live in a manner congruent with our position. We are righteous, so we need to live righteously. We have peace with the Father so we should be able to live in peace with others. We understand our position in Christ so we should live a life of joy. Note that happiness is not joy. Happiness comes from external circumstances, but joy is the result of our internal position with Christ. Happiness is fleeting, joy is eternal. We do need to decide to live according to our position (Romans 6:4; Galatians 5:25; Ephesians 4:1).

What kingdom?

The Kingdom that Paul mentions is not to be confused with the earthly Millennial Kingdom that was taught by Jesus Christ. There is a spiritual Kingdom that all believers become a part of as soon as they are saved. Believers are transferred out of a kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13). Paul mentions this Kingdom fairly often, indicating that it existed in Paul's day and it exists today, unlike the Millennial Kingdom, which the Little Flock of remnant believers of Israel is still waiting for (Colossians 4:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5). When Paul preached the Kingdom of God (Acts 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31), he was not necessarily speaking of the Millennial Kingdom that will be set up after the Rapture. He is usually talking about the spiritual kingdom that all believers become a part of at the point of salvation. The term *Kingdom of God* is a universal term which can refer to the Millennial Kingdom or a general spiritual Kingdom. The context of its usage will define which Kingdom is being referenced. Perhaps one reason many fail to see the distinction between Israel and the Church, the Body of Christ, is because they fail to distinguish the different usages of the word *kingdom*.

The wrap-up (15:1-7)

Paul wraps up his teaching on edification by stating that we need to accept one another as Christ accepted us. We were completely imperfect and inadequate, but yet Christ accepted us just as we were. He is our example in accepting others. We are to accept one another in spite of each other's weaknesses and imperfections. We are not living this life to please ourselves, but everything we do should be to please the Lord. As we draw closer to Christ, we will naturally draw closer to each other. Instead of looking for weaknesses in others, our focus should be on Christ and in growing in our faith. Together, we will be able to give God all the glory.

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