

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

Loving Our Freedom/Loving People More! Study #25

(Romans 14:12-23)

Introduction: Limiters we love...

My lawn mower’s engine has one and only one job. It is to spin the blades that cut the grass. I pull the cord. The engine starts. I push. Simple.

I don’t even have to adjust the throttle because my mower doesn’t have a throttle control. The engine runs at a factory set rpm and is controlled by a *governor*.

A governor is a device that keeps people (like me) who might want to mow faster from revving up the engine.

If I could increase the engine speed, could I walk faster, even run, and get the mowing done quicker? Yep. If I did increase the engine speed, might I, over time, do damage to the engine? Yep, again.

A gasoline powered engine is a pretty complicated piece of work, made up of lots of parts that move at very high speeds. If the speed is too high, lots of bad things can happen to those parts. The governor limits my freedom to go as fast as I might want to, but it preserves the mower’s engine.

Governors are actually used on all kinds of engines.

U-Haul places a governor on their trucks to keep people who are renting from them and aren’t used to driving bigger sized vehicles from going dangerously fast on the freeway.

In Europe, Mercedes-Benz and BMW place governors on their cars to limit speeds on the Autobahn to 250 kph (roughly 155 mph).

Governors keep us engine operators from doing everything we might want to do for the sake of preserving the health of the engine. Yes, a governor limits freedom, but limiting freedom protects against damage to something fragile. So, in this case, a limiter can be a very good thing.

Today we discover that a governor is a pretty handy device to keep around when it comes to how we relate to each other in the church, too. In fact, when you put a governor on freedoms you could legitimately exercise, you can protect the unity and witness of Jesus’ church AND you can protect vulnerable brothers and sisters for whom Christ died.

As we turn back to Romans 14, we’ll listen as Paul carries on with the same theme he’s been addressing for the last couple of weeks. He’s been talking about Weak Christians and Strong Christians, those who have freedom to exercise their liberties in Christ to the max, and those who don’t.

Weak Christians and Strong Christians often come to different conclusions about what to do in a given situation. That difference of opinion can sometimes cause problems.

Paul’s got some pretty helpful and blunt counsel for us as we disagree with each other.

Enough with the Negative and Destructive! (v. 13)

Christians, Don’t Judge One Another ANYMORE (v. 13a)

[13a] Therefore let us not judge one another anymore

Now, judging is a special problem for the Weak.

When a Weak Christian sees a Strong Christian (one who understands and embraces his freedom in Christ) doing things that are not explicitly condemned by the Bible, the Weak may be tempted to judge the Strong as being in sin, or not *really* committed to Jesus.

But, the Strong are sometimes tempted to judge the Weak, too.

The Strong see the Weak, not as *obeying* their conscience, but as *shackled* by their conscience. The Strong may accuse the Weak of failing to enter into the fullness of their liberty in Christ. The Strong may judge the Weak for their hesitancy and tentativeness.

In the first century, such judging concerned whether or not Christians should eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

Today, the issues that provoke judging may involve movies, media, schooling options, alcoholic beverages, or any one of a dozen other matters about which the Bible does not give us a *“Thus saith the Lord.”*

And, as is obvious from the way Paul says what he says here - *“let us not judge one another anymore...”* - the Christians at Rome were judging each other for having differing convictions.

They were to stop it, right now, just as we are to stop it right now, too! No more judging!

But then, Paul moves from the topic of judging to introduce us to another category of relational tension. And he does so by using a term Jesus used on occasion.¹

Christians, Don't Cause Each Other to Stumble (v. 13b)

[13] Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine² this - not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

Let's take a minute and backtrack into the Gospels to see what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of *“stumbling blocks.”*

One time, His disciples asked Him, *[Matthew 18:1] “Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”*

Jesus replied, *[3]...“Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.*

[4] Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. [5] And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; [6] but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to STUMBLE, it would be better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

The Lord went on to say, *[7] “Woe to the world because of its STUMBLING BLOCKS! For it is inevitable that STUMBLING BLOCKS come; but woe to that man through whom the STUMBLING BLOCK comes!”*

We can't read Jesus' words and miss the idea that something very sobering and bad happens when someone causes someone else to stumble.

In some places in Scripture, where we find this concept of the *“stumbling-block”*, there is the idea of enticement or entrapment, even seduction.³ Clearly, it is a serious offense to put a stumbling-block in front of someone.

And what both Jesus and Paul were warning against when they spoke of being a “stumbling-block” was the possibility that someone (the Strong) would lead someone else (the Weak) into sin.

Apparently, in addition to judging, that was also happening in the First Church of Rome.

Some of the Christians there (the Strong) knew that it was perfectly all right to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, because idols are nothing. There is only one God. So, they went ahead and ate!

Other Christians (the Weak), perhaps sensitized to the issue because of past experiences with idolatry, just couldn't bring themselves to eat that meat.⁴

³ In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word translates a Hebrew verb meaning *“to lay a trap.”*

⁴ Or, to use another example, some Jewish converts couldn't bring themselves to break with the Old Testament dietary restrictions, and couldn't stop observing kosher, even after conversion to Christ.

¹ See Matthew 13:41; 16:23; Luke 17:1-2.

² The words “judge” and “determine” are the same Greek word (*κρινω*).

The Weak's restriction was unnecessary (there is, really, only one God!), but they didn't have the freedom of conscience to eat what they used to eat - meat sacrificed to idols - before they came to faith in Christ.

It's easy to see how this difference of perspective came about. Personal history probably would have had a lot to do with it.

AND there need have been no problem with this diversity of conviction. Christians should be able to disagree and still get along just fine, and live with differing positions in "the grey zone."

But a problem does sometimes arise because the exercise of liberty on the part of the Strong can lead to problems for the Weak.

Before delving into that idea, though, Paul goes out of his way to make clear that the Strong's ideas about eating meat were not wrong.

Embrace the Positive and the Helpful! (vv. 14-19)

Intro: Clean and Unclean (v. 14)

Nothing is unclean in and of itself... (v. 14a)

[14a] I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself⁵

He's pretty forceful here. He's pretty convinced and convincing ("***I am convinced in the Lord Jesus...***") about the idea that there is now no "unclean" food (i.e. - that God would not allow us to eat).

So, how did he become so convinced? Jesus convinced him! When we turn back to the Gospels, we hear Jesus speaking about clean and unclean food.

He says, ***[Mark 7:14]... "Listen to Me, all of you, and understand: [15] there is nothing outside the man which can defile him if it goes into him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man."***

⁵ The ancient Roman Stoics used to teach that there are a great many things in life that were neither good nor bad, they were "indifferent." (Greek, *adiaphora*)

Now here, Jesus wasn't talking primarily about the digestive system. In a break with dramatic historic Jewish thought, His main application is that taking in food of any kind doesn't make a person unclean before God.

What makes us dirty are the words that leave our mouths and the actions we take. That was a radical thing to say! And Mark clearly *got* Jesus' meaning, adding, ***[19] Thus He declared all foods clean.***⁶

The Strong have a perfectly legitimate right in Jesus to enjoy their food - even lobster and crab and pork!

Then, Paul speaks to the situation of the Weak, those whose consciences won't allow them to do what might be considered "questionable things.

What he says about them may surprise you.

...but things you THINK are unclean ARE unclean to you (v. 14b)

[14b]...but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.⁷

Let's trace this thought carefully. God doesn't actually consider any food unclean. But it does not follow that everybody is therefore allowed to eat everything.

There were some Christians (the Weak) who couldn't quite accept the idea that all foods were clean.

⁶ We find the same thought at 1 Timothy 4:4 where Paul says, "***For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude.***" And the historical moment at which the church actually "got it" is recorded in the book of Acts when God gave Peter a vision of clean and unclean animals being lowered down from heaven on a sheet, while a voice commanded, "***Arise Peter, kill and eat.***" (Acts 10)

⁷ Notice that Paul doesn't affirm the converse. He doesn't say that whatever is of faith is righteous/not sin. We might believe that what we are doing is right and true and what God wants us to do - but it isn't. Example: The Pharisees thought that killing Jesus was the right thing to do before God. Paul thought that the right thing to do before God was to stone Stephen to death.

They thought that to eat the foods prohibited by the Mosaic Law or to eat food that had been sacrificed to pagan idols would be sinful.

And if these folks ate what they thought was unclean, their eating would actually BE sinful, because it is sinful when I do what I think is wrong, when I violate my conscience.

Now, we might wonder why someone would violate or seek to silence his conscience? There could be all kinds of reasons. Maybe because he or she:

- sees “everyone else doing it.”
- does not want to stand in a minority of one.
- does not want to be different or unpopular.

But, here’s the thing. If you or I or anybody else - in our heart of hearts - believes a thing to be wrong, if we can’t rid ourselves of the feeling that it is forbidden, and then go ahead and do it anyway, we have sinned.⁸

Paul IS NOT saying that whether an action is sinful or not simply depends on how we view it. No! There are some things that are, objectively, sinful acts!

But he IS saying that some Christians are more free than others to enjoy certain activities without sinning.⁹

Now, here’s where it gets tricky.

⁸ You might be able to think of an exception to this rule, but I couldn’t. The old adage, “*When in doubt, don’t*” appears to me to be true, not because by not participating in something we can be sure that we don’t cross moral boundaries (that was the Pharisees’ strategy), but because our doubting indicates that what we are contemplating is not done in faith. And, as verse 23 says, whatever is not of faith is sin.

⁹ In the early church, Christians recognized the need for some give and take between those whose consciences allowed certain things, and those whose consciences didn’t. Because of tensions that existed between Gentile and Jewish Christians, they convened a council in Jerusalem, the minutes of which are recorded at Acts 15. The Jewish Christians who came together recognized that the Gentiles were full-fledged members of the church, but also determined that the Gentiles should abstain from food considered abhorrent by the Jews (blood, things sacrificed to idols), and conform to the Jewish marriage-laws against fornication, to keep from offending their Jewish brothers. The thought was that if Gentile Christians who lived alongside of Jewish Christians lovingly limited their freedoms, the church could maintain unity and its powerful witness.

When the Strong Christian uses his freedom, we don’t condemn/judge him for doing so. But, the Strong has got to be careful that his freedom doesn’t jeopardize the spiritual health of the Weak.

And that thought, jeopardizing the spiritual vitality of our brothers and sisters in Christ - being stumbling-blocks - is exactly where Paul is headed.

We are all free in Jesus. Free from the penalty of sin, free from the controlling power of sin, free to enjoy liberty.

And in what follows, Paul uncovers three more wonderful freedoms Jesus brings. First, we are free to love.

Freedom - to LOVE (vv. 15-16)

Hurting someone by the exercise of my liberty (v. 15a)

[15a] For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love.

So...

You pull into the Valero gas station to fill up your car. Fifty dollars later, you hang up the pump and walk inside to grab a snack. There on the counter is a lottery machine.

Now, it just so happens that before you came to Christ you had a pretty destructive relationship with gambling. In fact, your online gambling habit put you deep into debt and caused problems with people you love.

In the year and a half since you’ve been following Jesus, you’ve put all of that behind you.

You know that the Bible doesn’t come right out and say “*Thou shalt not gamble.*” But, because of your past, you just haven’t felt good about it. You don’t gamble at all. You don’t even play the lottery.

While you’re standing in line to buy your Cheetos and Dr. Pepper, you notice the guy in front of you from church.

You recognize him as a strong believer. Sunday School teacher. Care Group leader. Elder. You respect him. Then you hear him say to the cashier, with a chuckle, *“I’ll take three ‘Texas Two-Step’ tickets, please.”*

And all of a sudden, you are confused. You assume that this Christian knows what he is doing when he plays the lottery. So you’re not judging him for playing the lottery.

But, because of your personal history, you don’t feel good about playing. It still seems like an “unclean” thing to you.

Yet, on this day, because your brother played, you go ahead and play, too. And, based on what Paul just said, you sinned when you played because you did something that you thought was wrong.¹⁰ It was, therefore, wrong for you.

The point of my story is to show that some Christians (maybe especially those Christians with “history” in a certain area of life) will be seriously hurt if they follow the lead of a fellow-Christian who exercises his or her liberty. The weaker Christian will be sinning because they don’t, as of yet, possess the confidence to exercise that freedom.

So, now you’re thinking, *“Oh great, Dave is telling me I’m free to have some fun, exercise my liberty in Jesus AND at the same time he’s telling me that I can’t have any fun because of what that fun might do to someone else. So... what? Shouldn’t my brother be big enough to come to mature opinions and convictions on his own?”*

Well, yes, he should. And, given time and maturity and growth, he will.

One of the applications I think we can derive from what Paul is saying here is that we should all seek to develop personal conviction before

¹⁰ We find exactly this thought at the end, where Paul says that whatever is not of faith is sin (v. 23). Cranfield is of the opinion that Paul is using “sin” (hamartia) in a somewhat different sense than the way he normally uses it. In Romans, sin is normally understood to have reference to a power that controls a man. Here, Paul uses it in a more relative way, to characterize the conduct of the Christian who does a particular action in spite of the fact that he has not received the inner freedom to do it.

God about issues that are grey or questionable or simply not specifically addressed in the Bible. And I further think that we should try to be as expansive as possible. Aim to be strong!

But the point is not that we are to allow everything about our conduct to be determined by the weaknesses of others.¹¹ That would make us paranoid to do anything!

The point is to warn us of a problem of priority misplacement. The danger is that it is possible for me to allow my love for my freedoms to surpass my love for my family in Jesus. And that’s a problem.

Destroying an object of Jesus’ love (vv. 15b-16)

Again, listen to Paul’s strong language. He writes, **[15] Do not destroy...**

You who are exercising your liberty aren’t destroyed. It is the tentative, the Weak, the undecided, the doubtful who is destroyed.

The Weak is imitating the actions of the Strong without having yet arrived at the clear conscience before God that the Strong Christian has wrestled with God to achieve.

And, no, by **“destroy”** Paul doesn’t mean that we condemn the weak Christian to death or Hell. But we need to be careful that we not take his words too lightly.

By **“destroy”** he means to say that we have placed a stumbling-block in front of someone who is Weak - and we have already seen how serious a matter that is!

When the Strong enjoys his freedom to the detriment of the Weak, that weaker brother’s walk with Christ is compromised. His internal bearings are skewed. His conscience is seared.

And who is this that we are hurting by the exercise of our freedom?

¹¹ Of course it is a great thing if the more emancipated Christian can guide the weaker Christian into a more liberated conscience, but this process can’t be rushed.

[15b]...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.¹²

What a powerful reminder to us all that Jesus loves us all. He loves: those who have an expansive sense a freedom and those who don't; those who take a glass of wine with dinner, and those who don't; those who play the lottery and those who don't.

To bring about the spiritual ruin of my brother or sister in Christ (to be a stumbling-block) by insisting on the exercise of my freedom is to destroy the object of Jesus' love.

What a pity it would be to stunt the growth of a soul or to derail the development of a work of God in a fellow Christian for the sake of anything so trivial as food or drink or entertainment.

There are a bunch of legitimate activities you are free to enjoy. Love requires that you may need to partake of some of those freedoms with discretion, lest some person for whom Christ died stumbles and falls.

As you grow in Jesus, there will be times when you will joyfully refrain from the exercise of a legitimate liberty because you know that if you don't put a governor on your behavior, you might become a stumbling-block. You might tempt them to violate their conscience and thereby sin.

So, we have been set free so that we can learn to LOVE.

Paul next points out that we have also been given freedom so that we will be conformed to the image of Jesus, so that we will become people of CHARACTER.

Freedom - to Grow in Character (vv. 17-18)

¹² Paul says that when we cause our brother to stumble by the exercise of our freedoms, then our freedoms - and even the Gospel itself - will be spoken of as evil.

[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.

Lest we would ever be tempted to think that this is the case, Paul assures us that the point of being IN and living FOR the Kingdom of God is **NOT** all about the exercise of our freedoms.

No, the Kingdom of God is all about the formation of our character, the growth of our souls, the transformation of our lives.

To be living under the reign of King Jesus is to be marked by holiness. We submit to His reign as we pursue peaceful dealings with others. People see the Kingdom of God in us as they see our joy.

So, here's a gauge to check on your spiritual dashboard. When the exercise of your freedoms becomes your chief concern, or when you get upset about having to install a governor that limits your freedoms to protect someone else's tender conscience, you can be certain that you've strayed from the interests of the Kingdom.

We have been set free in Jesus so that we can learn to love. We have also been set free in Jesus so that we can become people of character.

And we have been set free in Jesus so that we might help each other out, here and now.

Freedom - to Build Each Other Up (v. 19)

[19] So then we pursue the things which make for peace¹³ and the building up of one another.

It is a very good thing to be strong in faith and to have a liberated conscience. But enjoying our freedoms is not the best thing.

No, among the best things in life is allowing God to use you to build someone up.

¹³ Whatever we might think of "peace" in verse 17, that is, whether it involves finding peace with God (as in Romans 5:1) or refers to pursuing peace with other believers, it definitely refers to peaceful relationships in the church here at v. 19.

When the ancient Greeks described the construction of a sturdy home or a temple to be used for worship, they used the word Paul uses here, **“build up.”** It is a construction term.

You can be a workman who adds planks to your friend’s life of wisdom and strength and courage and faith and love.

Over time you can help your friend understand Scripture, help him navigate relationships biblically, lead her to know how to pray.

As a result of your friendship, over time, your friend has been “built up” in the faith. You have poured your life into your friend and the result is that your friend has a Jesus-centered life that will withstand storms - and the storms will come.

God has richly blessed me by peppering my life with men and women, skilled in construction, who have built me up in my faith.

Beginning in my earliest days as a Christian, when my church’s youth group was led by Bob, Bill, and Dwain, there has been a steady stream of people who have poured their lives into me, blown wind into my sails, added necessary planks to my faith, trained me, taught me, corrected me. To this day I am surrounded by people who are building me up.

Today, I see it happening all over the place. I watch as parents pour into their own kids, Sunday School teachers “build up” children in their classes, and youth leaders do the same. “Building up” goes on in every Care Group, Interface group, Bible study, and prayer group at our church.

“Building up” is what we do. That’s what you are called to do!

You are invited to the awesome privilege of “building up” your friends in Jesus. Each one of us here this morning has the privilege of adding bricks, mortar, and planks to the lives of others.

You can be the workman God is pleased to use to help your friend get solid in Jesus.

What a sad disaster it would be if your construction work in the life of your friend was halted, was derailed, because you chose to exercise a freedom that caused your friend to stumble.

Strong Believer, Use Your Strength for Good! (vv. 20-21)

[20] Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. [21] It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine¹⁴, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.

A careless exercise of liberty tears people down. It’s like ripping out the cornerstone of a solid building. It’s like taking a wrecking ball to a carefully crafted structure.

Of course you completely understand that food and drink and such are not the main issues in life. Stuff like that doesn’t make much of a difference in the eternal scheme of things.

But when your friend’s “house” is only partially built, still in the earliest phases of construction, you don’t add to the mix something that might make her stumble.

No, you install a governor on your personal freedom to protect your friend at a fragile, vulnerable stage of development.

Today, God’s Word calls us to commit to never consciously doing anything that might cause our brother to stumble. We’re to keep an eye out for anything that might cause a trip and a fall - and avoid it like the plague!

Obviously, nobody is omniscient. We will never know ALL that might negatively impact our fellow Christians, and I’m not suggesting a life of paranoia.

But, part of what is implied in the *“passionate pursuit of life-changing relationships with each other”* is that we are growing in our knowledge of one another to the extent that we have a pretty good idea of how to avoid placing stumbling blocks in each others’ paths.

¹⁴ Cranfield believes that “drinking wine” is suggested by Paul hypothetically. This is the first time in the section (chapter 14) that we get a clue that wine-drinking was involved in the scruples of the weak in first century Rome.

Conclusion:

The great German reformer, Martin Luther, said, "*A Christian is a most free lord of all, subject to none.*" - TRUE!

The liberties we enjoy in Christ are incredible. We have been given authority over all God's creation, knowing that everything created by God is good, and is not to be rejected if it is received with gratitude.

But then, Luther added, "*A Christian is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*" - Also TRUE!

You are free to do some things you will choose to NOT do so that you can obey Jesus' commandment to love.