

Romans 15 (2017)

- As our study of Romans winds down, we're finishing Paul's next-to-last issue of sanctification today and beginning his final topic
 - Paul's issue in chapter 14 is liberalism
 - Liberalism is the error of encouraging other believers to participate in certain freedoms contrary to their convictions
 - Paul uses the term "weak" to describe the faith of believers who feel convicted to restrict their own liberty to please the Lord
 - From the stand point of scripture, their self-imposed restrictions are unnecessary
 - Nevertheless, Paul taught that from the stand point of righteousness, these weak believers are sinning when they go against their convictions
 - Moreover, we sin when we encourage liberalism rather than respecting the convictions of other believers
 - Today we finish Paul's teaching on liberalism with his exhortation to all believers, especially the "strong" of faith to not judge another's liberty

Rom. 14:13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this – not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.

Rom. 14:14 I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

Rom. 14:15 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.

Rom. 14:16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil;

Rom. 14:17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Rom. 14:18 For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Rom. 14:19 So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

Rom. 14:20 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.

Rom. 14:21 It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.

- Paul says we must sure we keep the right goal in our fellowship
 - Our goal is not obtaining others' agreement with our convictions or conformity among the body in matters of liberty
 - Rather our goal should be to do nothing that might harm another believer's pursuit of obedience to Christ
 - Let's look for ways to make it *easier* for people to receive a good reward at their judgment moment
 - We can accomplish our goal by working to remove obstacles to another's obedience, not by placing new obstacles in their path
 - Paul refers to our hindering other believers' obedience as being a stumbling block
 - The Bible makes frequent use of the metaphor of stumbling to represent falling into sin
 - It appears 99 times in the NASB
 - In literal terms, a stumbling block is an object that a person walking does not see or recognize properly
 - As a result, the person's foot catches on the object, leading him to lose his balance and fall
 - We've all done this more than a few times, and it's a scary moment
 - It often leads to injury or at least embarrassment
- This metaphor powerfully illustrates the nature of the problem
 - Spiritually speaking, every believer is endeavoring to walk with Christ
 - To walk with Christ pictures obeying Christ, following His lead as He directs us toward righteousness
 - When we listen to His instructions and following His guidance, we are walking closely with Him
 - When we veer away after our flesh or temptations of one kind or another, we cease walking with Him at least for a time
 - As we walk, the Spirit points out dangers in our path, helping us avoid stumbling

- But when we press others to act against their convictions, we interfere with the Spirit, making ourselves a stumbling stone
- We break their stride, leading them to fall
- We contradict the Spirit's instructions, keeping the person from following Christ
- Just as the person walking didn't recognize the stone before they tripped, our fellow believers won't realize we're leading them astray
 - They won't recognize we were truly their adversary, at least in that moment
 - Our advice may have been well-meaning, but it led them into sin
 - That's the chief danger with liberalism...it's spiritual poison offered delivered by the hands of friends
- And that's why Paul puts the burden on those who would offer the advice
 - Notice he doesn't ask the weak to become stronger, to become more discerning in what advice they take
 - Remember, they are the weak ones, like a toddler
 - We can't expect them to take responsibility in this situation
 - Instead, Paul places the burden on the stronger in the body expecting them to protect the interests of the weaker
 - Which is why Paul directs the church to set a goal of not putting an obstacle in a brother's path
 - Meaning we must not advocate for greater liberty than someone feels comfortable assuming
 - But also not acting in ways that make another believer uncomfortable in light of their convictions
 - So it's both being careful in what we advocate by our words and what we endorse by our actions
 - Here again, Paul's not advocating for us adopting the weakness of other brothers nor endorsing their theological shortcomings
 - Notice in v.14 Paul makes clear that there is no need to abstain from any food for the sake of righteousness

- We are righteous by faith alone in Jesus Christ, and His work on our behalf has put to rest any need to observe ritual cleanliness
 - Simply put, the rituals of the Law, including ritual cleanliness, are not longer in effect for the believer
 - And therefore, food means nothing in the matter of our personal holiness
- So all the more, we should not use food to diminish another's holiness, Paul says in v.15
 - We are walking without love ourselves if we divide over food
 - Which means, we can't press others to eat what they do not feel comfortable eating
 - Nor should we cause them to separate themselves from us because we continued eating things that offended them
 - In both cases, we've chosen food over loving our brothers
 - This chapter began discussing weaker brothers eating only vegetables in the fellowship gatherings
 - This likely happened because Jewish believers avoided eating with Gentiles due to their unclean dietary habits
 - While the Gentiles hadn't persuaded the Jews to relax their convictions, they did offend their Jewish brothers by their actions
 - They persisted in their own eating habits despite knowing it offended their Jewish brothers and sisters
 - Remember this letter was written to a mostly Gentile church in Rome that was probably founded by Jews from Pentecost
 - Therefore, based on Paul's comments we assume that a division had developed in this church body between the two groups over Jewish convictions
 - Jews keeping the dietary laws were at odds with Gentiles and maybe some more mature Jews who didn't
 - So when food was served, these weaker Jews adopted vegetarianism rather than sharing in the meat of the meal

- Sounds like a very awkward, unloving community
- Which leads Paul in v.16 to advise that we not take our liberty and weaponize it against our brothers
 - Liberty is a great thing in the body of Christ
 - How much happier are we living under liberty than we would have been living under the burdens of the law?
 - Gentiles take this privilege for granted, since we were never under the law
 - But imagine what it would mean for us if we had to adopt the Law as part of our pursuit of Christ?
 - What if Christ hadn't performed all the Law for us?
 - What if He had left some of the Law unfulfilled so that we would have to perform it for ourselves
 - That would have eliminated our liberty and left us burdened with specific rules we could never break or else we would lose our salvation
 - Instead, Christ won the prize of liberty for us, which is a good thing certainly
 - So we should protect our liberty
 - We protect it first by not allowing our liberty to be thought of as as evil, a source of sin
 - And that's another way to define liberalism...making liberty a source for sin
- The life of the church should use our liberty too advance eternal causes, eternal outcomes
 - Paul says the kingdom is not eating and drinking
 - The mission of the Kingdom is not found in the pleasures we have on earth
 - We aren't advancing the causes of the Kingdom when we encourage certain dietary habits

- Nor are we experiencing the fullness of the Kingdom when we enjoy a particular food or drink here
- At best, these things bring comfort to the body, which is a dying thing destined to be shed before the Kingdom comes to us
 - So regardless of how noble our motives, we cannot make the adopting of a certain lifestyle the aim of our work for Christ
 - We are ambassadors for Christ, assigned to work for the expansion and the Kingdom
 - We further that mission by soul work, not by body work
- Being absorbed in eating and drinking concerns is body work, not soul work Paul says
 - Instead, our mission is to pursue righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit
 - Pursuing righteousness refers to working to advance the Gospel, both in words and in our actions
 - Obviously, we share the Gospel with others
 - But we are also to pursue righteousness in our person through a walk of sanctification
 - Restraining our own liberty will be necessary part of that process at times
 - Pursuing peace refers to seeking unity in the body, being at peace with one another and in our own convictions
 - When we trouble each other with our personal convictions, we rob one another of peace
 - That's the opposite of soul work
 - And even more, we undermine unity in the body by making our differences in personal conviction appear to be "problems" that must be solved
 - Instead, we should guard each other's liberty to maintain different convictions, and in so doing encourage unity in peace
 - Finally, pursuing joy in the Holy Spirit means ensuring everyone knows the joy pleasing Christ by our obedience

- There is simply no greater joy to be found in the body of Christ than a quiet confidence we are obeying Christ by our convictions
- A believer never knows greater joy than obeying Christ, turning from temptations to sin and maintaining a close walk with Him
- And we will never know more trouble than when we are out of step with Christ, ignoring our convictions
- Our mission as a body must be to encourage every believer to find that place in their walk with Christ
 - Knowing His will so they can live in harmony with it, seeking to please Him by obedience
 - Having peace in the certainty of our convictions and the joy of keeping them before Christ
- As Paul says in vs.18-19, those believers who set their mind on serving Christ will be approved both by God and their fellow man
 - So let's not seek for others to approve your convictions by joining us in them...that's not love, that's ego
 - Pursue those things that make for peace and for the building up of one another
 - Give way to others convictions without adopting them yourself
 - Affirm others in their determination to be obedient, without making them feel smaller for having restrained their liberty
 - A believer who won't eat a certain food is not someone to be mocked or "fixed"
 - They are a weaker brother or sister whose conscience must be protected and whose convictions must be respected
 - Yet once more, for the sake of emphasis, Paul reminds us in v.20 not to adopt the weaker brother's restrictive lifestyle
 - We can avoid tearing them down without joining them in their weakness
 - We want to walk that line between two evils
 - On the one hand, don't undermine their convictions

- As Paul says in v.21, it is a good thing that we restrict our lifestyle to help weaker members
- On the other hand, we don't want to give reason for believers to agree with the weaker viewpoint
 - We don't want to undermine a believer's confidence in their liberty
 - We are just giving room for weaker brothers to catch up in their spiritual maturity
- Paul summary's his argument in vs.22-23 with three rules for dealing with liberalism

Rom. 14:22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

Rom. 14:23 But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

- Rule #1: Hold to the faith you have on matters of liberty as a matter of conviction before God
 - Each believer is likely to have differences in their liberty according to how the Lord convicts each of us
 - So follow your convictions as a matter of faith and obedience
 - Remember, you seek to please God alone, not other believers
 - And you are accountable to God alone, not other believers
 - So knowing this, don't let liberalism compromise your convictions
- Rule #2: Don't condemn yourself by what you approve
 - Don't become an advocate for meaningless things like eating or drinking
 - For in doing so, you run the risk of leading other members of the body into sin, causing them to stumble, and bringing yourself under condemnation
 - Instead, be an advocate for the Kingdom, for eternal outcomes of righteousness, peace and joy

- Happy is the one who doesn't condemn himself by what he approves
- Finally Rule #3: When we are persuaded to go against our convictions, we sin – even in matters that are not themselves sin
 - Our convictions are a roadmap for sanctification given to us by the Holy Spirit
 - Our journey will look different than other believers
 - The Spirit will grant us freedoms He may not grant to other believers, or that others have not traveled far enough yet to experience
 - Don't second-guess your conviction merely because others have freedom you don't
 - Respect the Spirit's direction, trusting that He knows better why you need these restrictions when others may not
 - To act contrary to your convictions is sin
- Now Paul is ready to flip this coin over...
 - In chapter 14, we just studied the situation of stronger believers who enjoyed more freedom imposing their liberty on weaker members
 - In Rome, the situation came in the context of Jewish and Gentile believers contending over food
 - Stronger Gentile believers wanted to impose their freedom on weaker, Jewish believers
 - This was liberalism, and it was wrong
 - Now in the first half of chapter 15, Paul moves to considering the opposite problem
 - Now the problem is one of weaker believers seeking to impose their more restrictive lifestyles on more liberal brothers and sisters
 - Again in Rome, the concern was Jewish believers who wanted Gentile believers to become more like Jews to secure unity

- For these Jewish believers, unity in the body required that Gentiles adopt Jewish dietary laws, Sabbath restrictions, or even take circumcision
- This is the opposite of liberalism...it's legalism
- So just as liberalism is an abuse of liberty, legalism is an abuse of personal conviction
 - It's making your personal convictions law for everyone
 - That's we call it legalism...it's requiring others to live according to a law that doesn't actually exist
 - We're not talking about enforcing actual biblical commands... that's a necessary discipline of ensuring the body meets God's standards
 - Rather, legalism is making ourselves another's judge convicting them for failing to meet our standards
- Paul spends less time on legalism than he did on liberalism for several reasons
 - First, many of the points in the earlier chapter would apply here
 - Pauls' already told us to respect each other's convictions, which they are more liberal or more restrictive than our own
 - And he said we cannot impose our convictions on another
 - Nor can we judge others for having different convictions
 - These truths carry over to the topic of legalism
 - Secondly, Paul addressed the relationship of the believer to the law in previous chapters of this letter
 - Therefore, Paul doesn't spend time covering the error of imposing law on others
 - He's already explained we are under grace and therefore, the law holds no power over us
 - Finally, the problem of weaker believers imposing a legal lifestyle on stronger believers is a far less worrisome prospect than stronger believers corrupting the weak
 - For all our fear of legalism, the frequency and power of

- While there were certainly Judiazers operating in many places, their influence was doomed to die out
 - The church was becoming increasingly Gentile even in Paul's day
 - So Paul understood that the future course of the church would be among Gentiles, not Jews
 - And since Gentiles for the most part have little interest in adopting the law of Moses, the threat of legalism from Jews was destined to die down
- Therefore, Paul's focus in chapter 15 is only tangentially about Jews imposing legalism on Gentiles
 - Paul does address the issue specifically it in vs.8-12
 - But before that, Paul writes more generally about accepting one another in the body
 - His teaching on showing acceptance bridges his teachings against liberalism and legalism

Rom. 15:1 Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves.

Rom. 15:2 Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

Rom. 15:3 For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me."

Rom. 15:4 For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

Rom. 15:5 Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus,

Rom. 15:6 so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- Paul's opening statement in v.1 is a concise summary of the previous chapter
 - It mirror his opening verse in v.14
 - In chapter 14, Paul said accept the weak but not for passing judgment
 - Here he says you strong bear the weaknesses of those without strength but not to please ourselves

- He's saying something similar, though not exactly the same
- In chapter 14, Paul asks for the strong to except the weak in unity
 - Here Paul is asking the strong to bear those weaknesses
 - So in the first case, Paul expected the weaker to be included in the body without demands they drop their convictions first
 - And now Paul is reminding the body not to lose patience with the weaker's convictions after joining
- So we bring weaker in and we continue to seek to please them for their edification
 - This is how the stronger deal with the legalism of weaker brothers
 - Just as it was wrong to force liberal thinking on them, we must also bear up under their desires to share their legalism with us
- Notice again who bears the responsibility for dealing with the problem?
 - You might have expected Paul to put the burden for dealing with legalism on the perpetrators, the weaker brothers and sisters
 - Instead, Paul continues to ask the stronger brothers and sisters to take ownership for solving the problem
 - The stronger bear up under the assault of these weaker who insist we adopt their legalistic restrictions
 - We don't try to stop their convictions, nor do we make them feel bad for pressing their legalism against us
 - We bear all this, seeking to please them within limits, for their edification
 - And of course the best example of us in this regard is Christ Himself
 - He bore the reproaches of rejections, beatings, scourging and ultimately the cross
 - These were things Christ didn't deserve to experience, and they were placed upon Him by those who didn't know what they were doing

- Nevertheless, Christ in His strength accept them, bearing them beautifully for the edification of all those who receive His grace
- That's our model...bear the indignities of others legalistic convictions when around them for the sake of unity and edification
 - Making them feel pleased that others are respecting their convictions
 - Doing so without condemnation or judgment
 - Remembering Christ did worse for our sake
- And then in v.4 Paul says there is a silver lining in this cloud...
 - Referring to the Old Testament scripture – and specifically of the Law itself – Paul reminds us that these things were written to instruct us
 - Paul says that many believers over the centuries have found perseverance and encouragement in these scriptures
 - While we may not be under the letter of the Law, a believers can still be instructed from the Old Testament
 - And in this case, stronger believer can be instructed by the Law as they learn how to bear up under the legalism of weak believers
 - Remember what we learned last week...in time through instruction in the word these weak believers will eventually gain strength
 - And by their strength, they will move beyond these restrictions by themselves, learning to enjoy liberty
 - And when they do, they will look back fondly on your respect for their convictions and your willingness to love them in that way
- So let's not diminish the Law in the eyes of those who have an excessive dependence on them
 - In that way, even the Law may become a cause for edification in weak believers who use it as a crutch
 - By bearing this weakness, we further unity in the body which is the way we all grow in maturity
 - We all need the rest of the body to gain strength

- Consider how spiritually mature, strong believers will be made to grow further?
 - Will it be in great book study? Self-admiration societies?
 - Isn't going to be by learning to bear up under the inconveniences and weakness of the spiritually immature?
 - By baring the legalism of weak brothers and sisters, we give opportunity for the Lord to strength us and test us
 - Do we care more about others than ourselves? Are we ready to make more sacrifices for the weakest among us?
 - Or will we divide the body over meaningless things like food or drink?
- In v.5 Paul prays that the Lord might give the stronger in the church the perseverance and encouragement to pursue unity among the weak
 - To be of the same mind of Christ, Who sought unity with sinners
 - Talk about a union of unequals...Jesus united with the likes of us
 - And He did so, at great personal cost, so that He could present us to Himself a spotless Bride, Scripture says
- If you are one mind with Christ in that goal, then you're stop caring about whether others' convictions are inconvenient or unnecessary
 - You'll only care about what's best for them
 - And in exercise that concern, you grow too
 - And in the end, we will glorify Christ with one voice
- So the open teaching of chapter 15 establishes two main ideas:
 - Even though weaker believers are responsible for promoting legalism, nevertheless the responsibility for solving the problem falls to stronger believers
 - Just as with liberalism, Paul expects those with seniority in the faith to assume the responsibility for making things better
 - Unity in the body is all important, and the spiritually strong believers (those with a mature understanding of liberty) will be held accountable for how we handled these situations

- Just like a parent is responsible for a misbehaving child, so our the spiritual strong responsible for helping the spiritually immature
- Secondly, the solution for legalism is found in bearing the weaknesses rather than pleasing ourselves
 - Once again, we aren't endorsing legalism or even adopting these lifestyle choices in general
 - But we don't condemn others for having them, we accommodate them
 - And at times we adopt certain restrictions to please those who hold to them so that unity is maintained
- His teaching is summarized in v.7

Rom. 15:7 Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God.

- Paul says accept one another in the body, echoing his earlier command in chapter 14
 - So if we might ask how accepting should we be, here's our answer
 - For example, are there some circumstances where we can't accept a believer's weaknesses?
 - Where we must reject them until they overcome their problems?
 - Then after they shed some of these legalistic tendencies, we can find opportunity for fellowship
 - Take a look at Paul's standard for how we are to accept one another
 - Paul says we must accept one another to the same degree that Christ accepted us
 - So let's ask, on what terms did Christ accept us into His body? Grace alone
 - How burdensome were your sins upon Christ? How unnecessary was His gift of grace? Very
 - How unlike Christ were we when He accepted us into His body by faith? We were completely unlike Him

- But what allowed us to become more like Him? It began with Christ accepting us into the body
- So Christ is our standard for how we accept weaker believers in our gathering
 - We accept them by grace
 - We accept them no matter how burdensome or unnecessary their convictions
 - We accept them though they may place demands on the body very unlike our standards or choices so that we may please them
 - And we do this because only by accepting them into the body first may they mature and grow to something better
- Doing these things will be to the glory of the Father
 - The Father was glorified when Jesus accepted us
 - And the Father is glorified when we accept one another
- Moving on, Paul now touches on the specific issue of Jew and Gentile in the Roman church
 - This next passage represents the last major teaching section of the letter

Rom. 15:8 For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers,

Rom. 15:9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written,

“Therefore I will give praise to You among the Gentiles,
And I will sing to Your name.”

Rom. 15:10 Again he says,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.”

Rom. 15:11 And again,

“Praise the Lord all you Gentiles,
And let all the peoples praise Him.”

Rom. 15:12 Again Isaiah says,

“There shall come the root of Jesse,
And He who arises to rule over the Gentiles,
in Him shall the Gentiles hope.”

- Paul reminds the Jews within the church that Christ came as a servant to the circumcision, meaning to the Jewish nation
 - Jesus was fulfilling the promises the Lord made to Israel
 - Those promises, given to the fathers of Israel, included the promise to Abraham to bless all nations through his seed
 - Of course, Paul's point to the Jewish believer was don't forget that your Messiah came to fulfill all the promises of God
 - Including the promise to bless (save) Gentiles
 - Nothing serves to make the point to a Jewish reader better than scripture
 - So Paul quotes Psalm 18 in v.9 and Deuteronomy 32 in v.10 and Psalm 117 in v.11 and Isaiah 11 in v.12 to make his point
 - All these passages reaffirm that God intended to bring Gentiles into His assembly alongside Israel
 - Therefore Gentiles must be accepted into the body too, despite their lifestyle differences with Jews
 - After all, if the Lord accepted Gentiles than who were Jews to reject them
 - It was simply a matter of submitting to the will of God
- Paul's teaching ends with a benediction of sorts...

Rom. 15:13 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.

- Paul wished for the Lord to fill the church in Rome with all the joy and peace that comes with believing
 - The fact that Paul expresses this as a wish or request strongly suggests that experiencing joy and peace is optional for a Christian
 - Make no mistake...every Christian has access to joy and peace
 - And by God's grace, we will all know joy and peace in eternity

- But Paul was speaking about the experience of his readers in this age, while we serve Christ in this body
 - During this time, we may know joy and peace or we may not
 - We have all met miserable Christians
 - And we'e all probably been that person at one time or another
- So what determines whether we experience joy and peace as believers?
 - It's found in the phrase "in believing"
 - The phrase in Greek describes an action that is on-going
 - It's a euphemism for our walking with Christ, for pursuing sanctification, for living our our righteousness
 - That's been the topic of chapters 12 onward
- So Paul is saying that for those who follow the prescription found in these chapters, those who live out their faith obediently, you will know joy and peace
 - You will likely also know trials, tribulation, persecution, disappointments, etc
 - But those things will not define you
 - They will not rob you of your spiritual joy
 - And they will not disturb your spiritual peace
 - Because those things will be based not in circumstances or feelings
 - Our joy will be a supernatural response to working hand-in-hand with Christ, recognizing His righteousness taking hold in our hearts
 - And our peace will be unshakable as we grow in our maturity and understanding of what's coming for us in eternity
 - These are the fruits of living in the Spirit
 - Paul says at the end of v.13 that if you obtain these things, you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit in you
 - This hope is an eternal hope
 - Not a hope for earthly things but for heavenly things

- You will set your mind on things above
- And as you do, the things of this world fade in importance
- If you aren't feeling that fruit now or haven't felt in a while or have never known it, then check your walk with Christ
 - Are you hand-in-hand with Him or are you watching Him from a distance?
 - If He feels distant then run back to Him
 - Return to listening to Him, to serving Him, to craving the experience of becoming more like Him
 - And by the power of the Spirit, He will change you from the inside out
- Next time, our final lesson will cover the second half of 15 and the personal details of chapter 16
 - It's a teaching of history more than doctrine
 - Which seems an appropriate way to finish a book so heavy in weighty matters