

**Not Ashamed
(Week 34)
Romans 14:13-23
“Stumbling Blocks”**

Introduction

If anyone causes one of these little ones — those who believe in Me — to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. **Mark 9:42 (NIV)**

In **Romans Chapter 14:1-12**, we are commanded to accept those who are weaker in the faith. Accept them and do not judge them. We are to do this, because they have been accepted by Christ, and they will ultimately be judged by Christ. In **verses 13-23**, Paul adds to this teaching by saying that not only are we to accept those who are weaker in the faith, but we are to do everything that we can to strengthen and encourage them as well. This edification (building up) of those who are weak is to be done, even if it comes at great expense to us. Although those of who are now free in Christ have come to realize what a great freedom we have been given, that freedom does not give license to disregard the feelings of those around us. In short, my freedom in Christ ends where others may become hurt because of it. It is always the responsibility of the child of God to “love first”, before anything else. We live in a world that is bent upon divisiveness these days. But *The Bible* has commanded us to love, to put the needs of others ahead of our own, and to weigh our every decision against the effects that it would have upon those around us. This does not come natural for the “sensual man”, but it should be to the spiritual one.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. **Philippians 2:3 (CSB)**

The Christian who has become a living sacrifice will be burdened for their brothers and sisters in Christ, in such a way, that they are willing to do whatever is necessary to see to it that not only their physical needs are met, but their spiritual ones as well. It is impossible to be a follower of Christ and not be concerned for the rest of the flock. In fact, we should long to see others “finish the race” ahead of us! In his commentary on *Romans*, John Phillips writes: “*The shepherd must pace the flock to accommodate the weakest lamb.*”

What a wonderful way of describing the way that we are always to love others first! The ultimate goal isn't just about getting myself to the “greener pastures” that God has for me. It is about making sure that every member of the flock arrives there safely as well. How amazing would our churches be, if we actually cared for the weakest lambs with such fierce devotion? Sadly, the church is often known as the only people group on earth that “shoots its wounded”. We are called to be healers and not judges. How many weaker believers have wandered away from the flock, because they felt that no one really cared for them? How many were left behind, because they simply couldn't “keep up” as it were? There are always going to be “stumbling blocks” out there, but we are meant to help others overcome them and not make matters worse. As The LORD has said:

...Things that cause people to stumble are bound to come, but woe to anyone through whom they come. **Luke 17:1 (NIV)**

In **Romans 14:13-23**, Paul lists four “Thou Shalt Nots” that we are to carefully consider when it comes to the weaker brothers and sisters in Christ: 1) Do Not Be A Stumbling Block; 2) Do Not Destroy Another's Faith; 3) Do Not Destroy Our Own Witness; 4) Do Not Tear Down God's Work. We are to always be cognizant of spiritual well being of those around us, even at our own personal expense. Those whom Christ has accepted are to be nurtured by His Body, The Church, at all cost. When we are dealing with those who are weak in the faith, above all else, we are to Love First.

Do Not Become A Stumbling Block (vs. 13-14)

Therefore, let us no longer judge one another. Instead decide never to put a stumbling block or pitfall in the way of your brother or sister. I know and am persuaded in The LORD Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean. Romans 14:13-14 (CSB)

As long as we live in this fallen world, there will be conflicts and controversies that arise within the Church. In Paul's day, one of the larger ones had to do with what foods were considered to be "clean" and acceptable for the Christian to partake. The Jewish Believers had one set of convictions regarding food, and the Gentile Converts had quite another. Not only did Paul command the church to accept those with differing opinions, he goes on to say that it would be better to give up something that you enjoyed in order to strengthen a weaker brother in Christ! Not only are we not to judge one another, but we are commanded to compromise with each other in order to build up those who are weaker.

For example, the Gentiles had absolutely no problem whatsoever eating pork. (I personally cannot begin to imagine life without bacon!) But even though many Jews had come to faith in Christ, they simply could not get over being raised "Jewish" and living according to *Old Testament* Law concerning clean and unclean meats. Pork, in every shape form or fashion, was strictly forbidden by Jewish Law. Now, imagine being raised with this belief for your entire life and then one day having someone in the Church tell you this directive no longer applies. For some, it is very difficult to ever get past what mom and dad has taught us.

Jesus in fact did declare all foods to be clean (***Mark 7:19***). I, for one, am so very glad, because I sure would miss ham if I had to give it up. But what if I were sent to a place somewhere in the Middle East to minister? Would I be free to keep on doing as I please? Would my ministry be effective, if I constantly offended the very people I was trying to reach? Probably not. Instead of a minister, I would be a stumbling block. A stumbling block, by definition is something that trips people up and prevents them from arriving at a desired destination. As a minister of the gospel, my primary goal is to win souls to Christ, but how can I do that if I am an offense to those I am trying to win?

So the question arises, which is more important to me; my freedom in Christ, or my calling to reach the lost? If we are completely honest, we all know the correct answer. But, if we continue along this same path of honesty, we would have to admit that we often put our own selfish desires ahead of our true purpose. The flesh wants to have its way, but the Holy Spirit has called us to be living sacrifices. These two are at war with one another within us. Can I get a witness?

Paul admonished the Church of Rome to purposely determine to never become a stumbling block for anyone. So, his command to the church was simple: even though a mature believer understands that all foods are acceptable, it would be better to give something up, in order not to cause a weaker brother to stumble. In short, people are worth more than pork! We must be determined, as living sacrifices, not to be an offense to our weaker brethren in the faith.

Now, let me give a modern day illustration. We don't run into many people in our neck of the woods, who are offended by eating pork. But, let's talk about the consumption of alcohol (as a hush falls over the crowd). There is absolutely no single verse of scripture that tells us that it is a sin to consume alcohol. I know, I've looked for them. However, there are plenty of Scriptures forbidding drunkenness. I grew up in a church that was absolutely dogmatic in its teaching that alcohol was a sin (as well as dancing, now that I think of it). It has been so ingrained in many of us, that we cannot get over it.

Now that I am more mature in my faith, I realize that drinking alcohol in and of itself is not sinful. However, there are many people who think it is dreadfully wrong to do so. God has called me to be a preacher of the gospel of Christ. I have been around long enough to know that if someone sees me having a glass of wine with my dinner, then word would have spread all over town by that same time the next day. Some would have no problem with my wine drinking. But others would be incredibly offended. So what I am to do? I know that having a glass of wine is not a sin, but many others believe that it is. So, which would I rather win, my argument about the acceptability of wine, or lost souls. For me, its not even close. I don't drink. I would rather be effective in the ministry, as to exercise my freedom in Christ to have the occasional drink. To be honest, I don't really enjoy the stuff that much anyways. But the fact remains, I'd rather give up my freedom, than to become a stumbling block. It's really a matter of priorities. All the wine in the world cannot come close to reproducing the feeling I get when I baptize someone into the faith! Whatever you do, don't allow your freedom to become a stumbling block for others.

Do Not Destroy Another's Faith (vs. 15)

For if your brother or sister is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy, by what you eat, someone for whom Christ died.
Romans 14:15 (CSB)

This goes hand in hand with being a stumbling block. Just as we discussed last week, if you disturb a cake while it is still in the “rising stage”, you can cause it to fall. The same is true for immature believers. The word that Paul uses here for “destroy” means to render useless. He is not speaking here of one “losing their salvation”, but rather, about one being so discouraged that they become ineffective for the sake of the gospel. The devil knows full well that he cannot ever get his hands on a believer’s soul, but he certainly can render them ineffective.

When we discourage a fellow brother in Christ by our actions, we run the risk of “destroying” someone that Christ has died to save. What a tragic thing for a child of God to do to a brother in the faith! Remember that we will all stand before the judgement seat of Christ and give an account for what we have done with our own salvation. God forbid that we have to answer for all those that were rendered ineffective, because of our own selfish behavior. Why is it so important to put the spiritual needs of others ahead of our own? So that we do not destroy someone for whom Christ gave His life to save. I really don’t believe there is a need to expound upon this any further. We must conduct ourselves in such a way as not to discourage the faith of those who are weaker. Remember, in all things, to love first. If Christ is willing to die for someone, then we should be willing to give some things up, if it serves to help them. Or as Paul told the church at Corinth”

To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. 1 Corinthians 9:22 (CSB)

Do Not Destroy Your Testimony (vs. 16-19)

Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in The Holy Spirit. Whoever serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and receives human approval. So then, let us pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another. Romans 14:16-19

The most important thing a Believer has on this earth is his or her testimony. If we lose that, then we will never accomplish anything for the kingdom. Paul reminds the membership of the Church of Rome, that no meal, no matter how satisfying, is worth losing your testimony over. Just because we have the freedom to do certain things does not make those things of greater worth than our testimony. Or, as Paul says, “for the kingdom is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit”. In other words, we did not become followers of Christ in order to have the freedom to eat certain foods or enjoy certain beverages. We are in this to make disciples for Christ. We do this by living righteous lives before our God, becoming living sacrifices led to serve one another through His Spirit. We live to please Him, and not ourselves. Food is temporary, but souls live forever. By all means, be willing to do whatever it takes to reach some.

When we operate in the sensual, rather than in the spiritual, we run the risk of discrediting the very thing that we stand for, the gospel itself. We have been chosen to be salt and light in a world that is desperate for both. To lose our testimony for the sake of our own self-gratification is simply not an option.

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It’s no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. Matthew 5:13 (CSB)

When we lose our testimony (saltiness), then this world will walk all over us. That’s what they did in those days, when salt was no longer “salty”. They used it to pack down the pathways where people walked. When we, as Christians, do not operate in the purest of motives, we will be seen by the world as hypocrites. Then we should not be surprised when this world tramples all over us.

I believe that now, more than ever, the devil is “baiting” The Church. It seems that all around us we are being drawn into one conflict after another. What I fear most in our nation today, is not the wickedness of the lost people all around us, but rather, the rage that has consumed those who are called “Christian”. We are reacting to a lost world with the same tactics that the lost world so often uses. We are so caught up in fighting for our “rights” that we have forgotten the call to love God, and our brothers, as well as, our enemies. We would do well to remember:

...human anger does not accomplish God’s righteousness. James 1:20 (CSB)

Does this mean that we do not take a stand against sin? Absolutely not! Of course we preach against the things that are an offense to God. But we do so in the hope that men will come to repentance, not that we will utterly destroy our enemies. Again, it is a matter of motives. Do we preach because we love? Or do we do so out of contempt? The child of God should be willing to give up all he has, in order to win those who are lost. Jesus said it this way...

...If anyone wants to follow after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. **Luke 9:23 (CSB)**

Our Savior didn't waste His time trying to win arguments. He didn't go around demanding His rights to be respected. He lay down His life to save those who are lost. There are those who despised Him. There are those who despise Him still.

But to all who did receive Him, He gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in His name. **John 1:12 (CSB)**

Say what you will about Jesus, but He never once lost His testimony. He lived, and He died, to save that which was lost. He was strong for those who were weak. He loved against all odds. This is what He requires from each of us. Don't be willing to sacrifice your testimony for personal gain. Speak the truth in love.

Do Not Tear Down God's Work (vs. 20-23)

Do not tear down God's work because of food. Everything is clean, but it is wrong to make someone fall by what he eats. It is a good thing not to eat meat, or drink wine, or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever doubts stands condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and everything that is not from faith is sin. **Romans 14:20-23 (CSB)**

Again, Paul reminds us what we are here for... the kingdom. God wants us to do everything in our power to reach people for Christ and not turn them away. My liberty does not give me license to live only for my own personal satisfaction (Regardless of what the televangelists say). In everything that we say or do we should ask ourselves, "Will this build up or tear down the kingdom of God?". While in this body, we make it our aim to please Him, Paul says (**2 Corinthians 5:9**). Let us do nothing that discourages others from their zeal to follow Christ. Think before you speak. Pray before you act and always love first.

The things which you have no problem with doing, but may be offensive to others, keep between yourself and God. Don't try and force others to see things your way. Pray that God will help them grow, as you do all that you can to assist in that growth. Let the weaker brothers follow their conscience in matters that are not clearly defined in Scripture. If something feels wrong... then don't do it!

When I was younger in my faith, I became very legalistic. I thought if a person didn't go to church at least three times a week (Sunday morning, Sunday evening, and Wednesday evening), then they did not love God as they should. I was really convinced of this fact. And now, I pastor a church that doesn't even have a Sunday evening service! God has a way of changing our hearts over time. But if you had tried to convince me of this twenty years ago, you would have only discouraged me. Trust in God to bring His children along at the pace He has set for them. Be the kind of shepherd that leads the flock at a pace where even the weakest lambs can keep up! Let the Spirit of God and your conscience be your guide. Don't become a stumbling block. Don't destroy another's faith. By all means, don't destroy your testimony, or do anything to tear down what God is building up in His Church.

When medical doctors take their oath of service (Hippocratic oath), one principle that they all must swear to uphold is, "First, do no harm". This would be a great way to summarize what Paul is teaching us in **Romans 14**. It is a way of living to which every Christian should aspire. My freedom in Christ is not a license to live in such a way that another's loss can become my gain. We must always remember to LOVE FIRST, and do no harm, for our God so LOVED the world (**John 3:16**). Let us go and do likewise.

And let all of God's people say... TRUTH!!!