

Limiting Liberty in Love

Romans 14:13-23 10/30/11 a.m.

Michael Osladil, Calvary Bible Church, Hanover, PA

[ENGAGE] After last week's sermon I received an email I want to briefly address as we begin today's sermon: "Hi Pastor Mike, I just wanted to write and tell you I really appreciated your sermon today. It's great to hear you speak about Christian liberty and how it applies in our church. I would love for you to expand on this topic and wanted to give you some feedback.

"I love how you try to teach us to distinguish between essential/unchanging/core doctrinal issues versus non-essential/changing/cultural issues that are dependent on culture, interpretation, and subject to Christian liberty. **The problem that I have - and I'm sure other Christians have - is discerning the difference between the two.** You mentioned **contemporary Christian music** this morning as an example of a non-essential cultural issue. I agree with you that this area is subject to Christian liberty, but I fear that many people think it is an essential/doctrinal issue that can be backed up with scripture and therefore is not subject to Christian liberty. That's why this area in particular is so hard to deal with.

"[How do I discern] core vs. non-essential issues[?] . . . I'd love to have a short list of questions/concepts . . . to help me discern an essential doctrinal issue vs. a non-essential Christian liberty issue. **Is there a short concise, easy to remember series of questions I can ask myself to help me discern the difference?**

"In addition, it'd be great if you could expound on this litmus test during a sermon by choosing an example area (such as contemporary Christian music) and applying this "litmus test" to show us how to use it. For example, you could address some of the major objections people state when justifying the ills of contemporary Christian music, such as **1. the drum beat of the music falls on the 1st and 3rd beat of the measure, which is somehow inherently evil**, **2. the music is so loud you can't hear the words**, **3. the beat is so rocky that people end up dancing at their seats.**

"This would help us to see the litmus test in action and give us a better sense of discerning between the essential/non-essential issues. A lot of it comes down to 'Does it bring glory to God?' and the point that even if I think something doesn't bring glory to God, that doesn't necessarily mean it's true. How do we determine what brings glory to God? Thanks for listening and for bringing up this topic." [End of quote]

Let me give a brief answer to this question. How do we determine essential vs. non-essential areas of the Christian faith? Let me give you a few questions to ask that may be helpful to determine essential vs. non-essential areas: **Question #1: Does this activity violate a clear command of Christ?** Jesus told his followers to teach new disciples to obey all that He (Christ) commanded them. Thus we have an obligation to seek to obey all the universal commands Christ gave to his disciples. This calls for us to keep growing in our understanding of Christ's commands. **Question #2: Does this activity violate my conscience?** The apostle John tells us, "If our conscience does not condemn us, we have confidence in the presence of God" (1 John 3:21 NET). Paul in Rom 14:22 states, "Blessed is the one who does not judge himself by what he approves" (Rom 14:22 NET). **Question #3: How does this activity enhance God's reputation through my life?** In all that we do our goal should be to enhance God's reputation ["Do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31)].

Regarding the objections people give to contemporary Christian music or other objections people give in disputable matters one question I would ask: What is the Scriptural basis for your conviction? Do you recognize that sincere Christians hold differing views on this activity?

[TRANS] Now just because we recognize our liberty from man-made rules that go beyond our understanding and application of the commands of Christ does this mean we should indiscriminately exercise our freedom?

[FOCUS] This morning I want to consider: What commands must we obey to walk in love? **Specifically, what commands must we obey so we maintain unity amidst our diversity?** What actions do we need to take to promote righteous harmony when we don't see eye-to-eye as God's people in disputable matters.

[SET THE STAGE biblically (this section skipped in sermon delivery this week)] We continue our series today on a healthy church. (cf. 1 Cor. 9) We continue to learn from Paul's instructions in what today we would call "gray areas." "Gray areas involve **amoral areas**, issues in which no clear-cut, black-and-white command has been given in the Bible. **God has given absolute moral standards in the Bible that never change to show us what God regards as wrong.** These never change. Scripture speaks very clearly against homosexuality, for example. The question of whether a Christian ought to marry an unbeliever is spelled out with perfect clarity in Scripture. Scripture plainly forbids any Christian to take another Christian to court. It is wrong to steal, lie, murder, be involved in spiritism. It is wrong to be involved in **idolatry**. It is wrong to be **greedy**. It is wrong **to rebel against God-ordained authority**. It is wrong **to abuse the body or soul** and to allow them to be controlled by anything or anyone except God. It is wrong to use **offensive speech**.

We noted that God applies his moral absolutes not only to our outward actions but also to our inward thoughts and attitudes. Christ drives at this in the Sermon on the Mount: the person who gets angry with another person commits murder in his heart; the man who lusts for a woman not his wife commits adultery in his heart (Matt. 5:21–28). Even to think a wrong thought or to harbor a wrong attitude breaks one of God's absolutes. These are not gray areas. There is no room for compromise here. Now we noted as well that according to the Scriptures **in those areas of life where God's absolutes are not involved we enjoy liberty to what our own conscience dictates.**

"There are many questions to which Scripture does not explicitly speak. For example, there is no list of holidays and holy days for Christians to observe or avoid celebrating. The issue is clearly left in the realm of indifferent matters by the apostle Paul: "One person esteems one day above another; another person esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind."

As we approach those issues where no biblical absolutes are involved, each of us must seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in arriving at our convictions. Each of us will approach these "gray areas" in different ways, coming to different conclusions. **The apostle Paul expresses deep concern that as we arrive at our own convictions we guard against self-righteousness, and against a judgmental spirit.** Paul warns us not to judge another Christian for doing something that a moral absolute of God does not forbid. On the other hand, as Christians we are not to have contempt for another Christian who does not feel free to do something, even though a moral absolute does not forbid the doing of it (Rom. 14:1–12).

[PREVIEW] This morning I want you to see and purpose to obey four actions God commands each of us to practice to build unity amidst our diversity.

[ANNOUNCE the passage] Please turn with me in your Bibles for the Scripture reading to Romans 14:13–23 [p.1010]

Here in Rom 14:13 Paul turns from focusing on the attitude to nurture within ourselves to maintain unity with other believers in spite of differences in disputable matters to **specific actions for us to put into practice in order to experience unity in diversity.** So in the first half of v. 13 Paul sums up the

attitude we should maintain with fellow Christians who disagree with us in disputable matters. **Remember, we are not to find fault with fellow Christians who don't see eye-to-eye with you on disputable matters** (14:13a). “[Warmly] receive the one who is weak in the faith, and do not have disputes over differing opinions” (14:1 NET). It is hard not to condemn others in areas where our conscience condemns us.

[ILL] Some years ago, a woman discussed with her pastor some areas of disagreement she had with her husband. These disagreements caused severe tensions in their marriage relationship. With complete seriousness and sincerity she summed up the conflict between them as she saw it: **“Whenever we have an argument, my husband goes his way and I go God’s way.”** She remained utterly convinced that, even in issues where the Bible remains silent, **her way agreed with God’s way**, and her husband simply did not understand God’s way. **Paul, in Romans 14, issues a strong warning against such an attitude.**

[REIT] Last week we noted rather than **despising or finding fault** with Christians who hold to a contrasting opinion on a disputable matter, **warmly accept them. Why? First**, because God has accepted them (v. 3). **Second**, Christ died and rose to be the Lord, and when we condemn others in disputable matters we assume Christ’s role as Master (vv. 4–10a). **And third**, warmly receive those who disagree with you on disputable matters **because you will stand before Christ to give an account of your actions.** “Therefore,” Paul commands, “we must not pass judgment on one another” (Rom 14:13a NET).

[TRANS] Now in vv. 13–23 Paul focuses on **the responsibility the strong have towards the weak. How can we walk in love so we maintain unity amidst diversity in these disputable matters? First:**

Determine Not to Be a Source of Stumbling (Rom 14:13–15).

Be careful that your actions do not hinder your brother or sister’s spiritual progress. V. 13: *“Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way”* (Rom 14:13 NKJV). In other words, Paul says, **“Be very careful lest your exercise of liberty creates pressure on a ‘weak’ believer to do what his or her conscience forbids them to do**, with the result that they fall into sin and spiritual ruin (v. 13). Seek to nurture the spiritual progress of other believers. **Don’t put an obstacle that will hinder the spiritual development or be an incentive to sin.**

[ILL: An American Christian tells about walking into a dining room for a meal and sitting with a whole tableful of Russian Christians. They communicated as well as possible despite the language barrier, and when the meal was over a translator joined them. One of the Russian Christians at the far end of the table asked the American Christian what he thought of **playing cards**. The American Christian responded that the Bible did not have anything to say about that, and he replied that some missionaries had been playing **Pit** (a card game) the night before. At that point this Russian Christian launched into a ten-minute dialogue, and the American Christian could not get a word in edgewise. **For this Russian Christian, cards were definitely against his conscience.** “In those situations,” Paul teaches us, **“Be sensitive to what will hinder the spiritual progress and possibly get other Christians off track spiritually.** In such cases **curb your liberty.”**

Why do this? **Paul gives us the rationale behind this call to careful living in v. 14:** *“I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that **there is nothing unclean of itself** [i.e., nothing ceremonially impure of itself]; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean”* (Rom 14:14 NKJV). Paul previously pointed out in Romans chapters six and seven [cf. Rom 6:14-15 and 7:4] that **Christ’s coming brought an end to the absolute validity of the Mosaic law, and thus explicitly to the ritual provisions**

of that law. This does not mean that all people have been able to understand the implications of that freedom (v. 14).

An understanding of the truth revealed in the Lord Jesus and one's relation with him convinces the "strong" believer of freedom from the OT/Jewish laws of ritual defilement (v. 14a). Jesus' teaching about true defilement was so important that Mark (writing in Rome) added his own editorial comment to make the point clear to his readers: **"And so he declared all food clean"** (Mark 7:19b) Because of past teaching, experience, and input not all believers understand the implications of their freedom from the Mosaic law and its regulations on ceremonial uncleanness (v. 14b).

Paul goes on to tell us: **Recognize that the rights and privileges that your freedom in Christ brings must be bridled by love for your fellow believers.** Any behavior that distresses another's conscience is morally unacceptable. **Look at v. 15:** *"Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died"* (Rom 14:15 NKJV). The seventeenth-century poet **John Donne** [Dun] wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Paul wants us to understand here our interrelatedness and inter-dependence in the body of Christ. We belong to each other, each of us a part of the whole. **This means our relationships and love for one another far outweigh the importance of those "gray areas" that so easily divide us.** So Paul says: **"Act in love" (v. 15) as you exercise your freedom.** Christian freedom does not mean flaunting your freedom and doing as you please." That would be undisciplined freedom. **If your exercise of freedom results in the spiritual detriment of other believers you are clearly no longer conducting yourself in a loving manner.**

[ILL] Exercise your Christian liberty as if walking a tightrope. As you walk the rope with balancing pole in hand, at one end of the pole visualize love for others and at the other end visualize Christian liberty. When love for others and Christian liberty remains balanced, your conduct pleases God.

Martin Luther had it right when he began his article, "On the Freedom of the Christian" by saying, "A Christian is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all." **We are all immensely free in Christ. Our only bondage—the bond of love to our fellow believers.** So as you exercise your freedom in Christ, **think about how your actions affect others, not just yourself** (v. 15b).

[ILL] I think about to one of my "hall of shame" moments. We had spent a week of vacation at Gull Lake Bible Conference and were traveling back from near Kalamazoo, Michigan to our home near Minneapolis, Minnesota. As we passed through the Wisconsin Dells I thought it would be nice for our family to attend a water-ski show. Now my great idea of our family experiencing the thrill of seeing these water-ski theatrics did not thrill my children. Getting home held much more appeal to them.

Rather than allowing their dissatisfaction squelch this idea I persisted in taking the family to the show. I discovered that the experience of seeing a ski show becomes greatly diminished when most of the rest of your family had preferred to continue traveling home. In hindsight I should have deferred to the wishes of the majority.

Paul commands: **Don't cause the spiritual ruin of another person for whom Christ died by your exercise of a freedom** (v. 15b). Act with consideration for others. Be willing to limit your freedom out of love for fellow believers. If Christ already paid the supreme price for the "weak" Christian, how can you refuse to pay the quite insignificant price of a minor and occasional restriction in freedoms that you believe you have in Christ.

Remember, our demonstration of sacrificial love commends our faith to the world, not our display of Christian freedom. Jesus said, *"Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my*

disciples" (John 13:35). **As you voluntarily limit your freedom out of love for weaker brothers or sisters in Christ you demonstrate your maturity in Christ.**

[APPL] How far should we go in applying this? If we fully apply what Paul says, won't our conduct be controlled by the narrowest Christian in the Church? It is indeed possible for **disordered personalities** to dominate the Church. **One time there was a self-consciously pious Christian who grimly told his pastor that the Scriptures nowhere records that Jesus smiled or laughed, and he wanted his pastor to know that godly people like himself followed suit.** The absurdity of this argument from silence is seen if you make a list of other things the Scriptures never mention Jesus doing! **We are not called to an uncritical, indiscriminate limitation of our freedom.**

[ILL] In 1928 Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was speaking at a conference in Montrose, Pennsylvania where about 200 young people were present. One day two women came to him in horror because some girls decided to not wear stockings! These women wanted him to rebuke the others. Barnhouse's reply is classic. As he tells it: Looking them straight in the eyes, I said, **"The Virgin Mary never wore stockings."** They gasped and said, "She didn't?" I answered, "In Mary's time, stockings were unknown. So far as we know, they were first worn by prostitutes in Italy in the 15th century, when the Renaissance began. Later, a lady of the nobility wore stockings at a court ball, greatly to the scandal of many people. Before long, however, everyone in the upper classes wore stocking.

Barnhouse said, "These ladies, who were holdovers from the Victorian epoch, had no more to say. I did not rebuke the girls for not wearing stockings. A year or two afterward, most girls in the United States were going without stockings in summer, and nobody thought anything about it. Nor do I believe this led toward disintegration of moral standards in the United States. **Times were changing, and the step away from Victorian legalism was all for the better.**"

Voluntary limiting of our freedom is not meant to subject us to the intolerance of Christians who are well established in the faith but persistent in sub-Biblical legalism. In Rome the believers were relatively young in the faith, and their scrupulous consciences had a supposed Biblical base. We must remember to wisely apply Christian self-restraint and never to unknowingly or knowingly, by our exercise of liberty, cause another Christian to go against his conscience.

[REIT/TRANS] How can we walk in love so we maintain unity amidst diversity? **Determine not to be a source of stumbling.** Secondly:

Live as Citizens of the Kingdom of God (Rom 14:16-18).

Focus on living with kingdom priorities. The reign of God means lovingly accepting people in the church who disagree with us on these nonessentials with which Christians hold differing convictions.

In vv. 16-18 the apostle Paul encourages us to keep the bigger picture in view. **Don't allow the freedom you believe you have in Christ be reviled because of your refusal to regulate that freedom.** The kingdom of God is not mainly a matter of externals but of internals. Note what Paul says in v. 16: "Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; Then in vv. 17-18 Paul provides us with the reason why we as Christians are to curb our freedom in respect to those whose scruples will not allow them to partake in the same action as ourselves. 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 serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men" (Rom 14:16-19 NKJV). Concern yourself with doing what is right in the essentials, maintain harmony, and share God's joy, rather than forcing your scruples and life-styles on others. As you serve Christ by doing right before God, maintain peace among the believers, and share joy with others you accomplish the acceptable service to Christ. You please both God and people.

[APPL] Like the Pharisees of old, we Christians have a way of majoring in the minor (Matt. 23:23–24). **How essential to allow nonessentials to remain nonessentials. How essential to not make essentials out of nonessentials. My father-in-law shared with me last week he knew of a church that divided over where someone placed a water bucket in the basement of a church building.** Churches have split over such minor matters as **the location of the piano in the auditorium and the serving of meals on Sundays.**

The essentials of Christian fellowship do not consist of what food you eat or do not eat, or what you drink or do not drink (v. 17a). The sum and substance of God's kingdom is not food or drink.

Not the externals, but the eternal must be first in our lives: righteousness, peace, and joy. Where do they come from? The Holy Spirit of God at work in our lives (see Rom. 5:1–2). As we yield to the Spirit and major in a godly life you will discover that the Holy Spirit will give you the grace to bear with fellow believers and enjoy harmony with others in the church. Don't allow disputable matters to separate and divide you from other believers in Christ.

[REIT/TRANS] How can we walk in love and maintain unity amidst diversity? First, **determine not to be a source of stumbling.** Secondly, **Live as Citizens of the Kingdom of God** (vv. 16–18). **Concern yourself with doing what is right in the essentials, maintain harmony, and share God's joy, rather than forcing your scruples and life-styles on others**; then third, in vv. 19–21:

Pursue That Which Brings Mutual Benefit (Rom 14:19–21).

Christian fellowship should be characterized by peace and building up one another. Notice how Paul sums up much of what he said previously in vv. 19–21: *“Therefore let us **pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. 20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. 21 It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak**”* (Rom 14:19–21 NKJV).

In the exercise of your freedom always ask yourself, “Is what I am doing helping to bring unity to the whole church and build it up (v. 19)? **We foster peace in our fellowship by making the interests of the church as a whole our priority.** Recognize that the rights and privileges that your freedom in Christ brings must be bridled by concern for the building up of the body of Christ. “The things that make for peace” in the context refer to **practices that do not cause others to stumble and attitudes that are non-judgmental.** Peace between the strong and the weak is in view primarily. Rather than tearing down we should do things that build one another up. **For the strong this might be foregoing some legitimate practice. For the weak it could be refraining from verbal criticism and judgmental thinking.**

[ILL] I appreciate what Warren Wiersbe says in this regard: “Both the strong believer and the weak believer need to grow. The strong believer needs to grow in *love*; the weak believer needs to grow in *knowledge*. **So long as a brother is weak in the faith, we must lovingly deal with him in his immaturity. But if we really love him, we will help him to grow. It is wrong for a Christian to remain immature, having a weak conscience.**

“An illustration from the home might help us better understand what is involved. When a child comes into a home, everything has to change. **Mother and Father are careful not to leave the scissors on the chair or anything dangerous within reach.** But as the child matures, it is possible for the parents to adjust the rules of the house and deal with him in a more adult fashion. It is natural for a child to stumble when he is learning to walk. But if an adult constantly stumbles, we know something is wrong.

“Young Christians need the kind of fellowship that will protect them and encourage them to grow. But we cannot treat them like ‘babies’ all their lives! The older Christians must exercise love and patience

and be careful not to cause them to stumble. But the younger Christians must “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). As they mature in the faith, they can help other believers to grow. **To gear the ministry of a Sunday School class or local church only to the baby Christians is to hinder their growth as well as the ministry of the more mature saints. The weak must learn from the strong, and the strong must love the weak.** The result will be peace and maturity to the glory of God.” [Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Rom 14:13]

[REIT/TRANS] How can we walk in love so that we maintain unity amidst diversity? How can we contribute to the spiritual growth of others rather than destroying it? Determine not to be a source of stumbling. Focus on living as Citizens of the Kingdom of God; i.e., focus on the eternal rather than the external (vv. 16–18). Pursue That Which Brings Mutual Benefit (vv. 19–21). Finally in vv. 22-23 Paul instructs us:

Make Sure You Keep a Clear Conscience in All that You Do (Rom 14:22–23).

Make sure all you do, you do with a clear conscience. You are blessed if you do not need to judge yourself for what you discern as correct. **What else can we do to insure unity? Paul gives advice to the strong regarding the use of his conscience in verse 22 and advice to the weak in respect to the conscience in verse 23.**

Paul tells the strong: “What you believe about neutral things is to be kept between you and God.” **Notice v. 22:** “Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves” (Rom 14:22 NKJV). **The faith Paul speaks of here refers to the faith that enables you as a believer to follow without hesitation or scruple a course of action that the weaker brother or sister cannot follow.** Paul says, “Don’t parade that faith, rather exercise the freedom your faith provides you in Christ with discretion.”

Talk about your freedom with discretion rather than trumpeting it. You are blessed if your exercise of freedom is free from doubt. You experience God’s blessing when you do not condemn yourself in what you approve. **If you partake of an action, and later find yourself condemning yourself for what you did, this indicates a violation of your conscience.**

You are blessed if no one is being scandalized and led toward sin by you. You are blessed because you feel God’s pleasure. “Christian liberty is allowed, not for our pleasure but for the glory of God and the good of others” (Matthew Henry).

[ILL] **Charles Spurgeon**, at the height of his fame, was one day walking down the street and saw a sign that read, “**We sell cigars that Charles Spurgeon smokes,**” whereupon Spurgeon gave up the habit. He came to see that what was for him a freedom might cause others to stumble. “Blessed is the person who does not condemn oneself by what he approves.”

[TRANS] After Paul counsels the strong regarding the use of his conscience in v. 22 Paul gives advice to the weak regarding one’s conscience. **Notice v. 23:** “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23 NKJV). **If you in your heart of hearts believe a thing to be wrong, if you believe something is forbidden for you, then if you do it, for you it is sin. A neutral thing only becomes a right thing when it is done out of faith, out of the real, reasoned conviction, it is the right thing to do.** Our only motive for doing anything comes as we believe what we do is right. **When you do something only out of social convenience, out of fear of unpopularity, or to please people, then it is wrong.**

Your conscience is not an infallible guide, but it is wrong to go against your own conscience. We should never sin against our conscience, no matter who pressures us to do so.

[Conclusion]

Paul wisely details four “actions” to help us walk in love and promote unity amidst our diversity. First, determine never to be a source of stumbling. **Focus on contributing to the spiritual growth of others rather than destroying it.** Second, live as citizens of the Kingdom of God, concentrating on the eternals rather than the **externals**. **Third**, actively pursue that which benefits other believers. Talk about your freedom with discretion rather than trumpeting it. **Fourth**, do all that you do with a clear conscience. Make all your decisions on the basis of your faith in Christ.

When you or I refuse to love in this way, we put ourselves under legalism and we put others under legalism as well.

[ILL] We become like the guy who ordered a suit from Hans the tailor. Hans had a reputation for being an incredible tailor, so when an influential businessman came to his community, he asked Hans to make him a tailor-made suit. When he came to pick up his suit, he found that one sleeve was twisted this way, and the other sleeve twisted the other way. One shoulder bulged out, while the other shoulder caved in.

The businessman struggled and struggled to put on the suit jacket, until finally, twisted and contorted, he managed to make his body fit the poorly designed suit. As he walked to his hotel, someone on the street asked if the suit had been made by Hans the tailor, to which the businessman answered that it had. The person responded, **“Amazing! I knew that Hans was a good tailor, but I had no idea he could make a suit fit so perfectly someone as deformed as you.”**

“Isn’t that what we do with these disputable matters? We have in our mind what a real Christian should look like, and so we push and shove them into grotesque configurations until they fit wonderfully. Yet we make them fit our wooden legalism rather than giving the grace of liberty in these disputable matters that honest Christians have different opinions about? **May God help us not be like Hans the tailor as we seek to help each other grow into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.”** [Cf. “Legalism,” in *10,000 Sermon Illustrations*]

My desire remains for us to continue to grow and to give that freedom that God gives to others in these disputable matters. I want us to be a place where we have that freedom to grow in Christ and not force our convictions on disputable matters upon others.

At the same time we also must realize God calls us to obey all the universal commands Christ gave to his disciples. And the first command God holds us responsible to heed is this: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved (cf. Acts 16:31). . . .