

## 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 standpoint of scripture, their self-imposed restrictions are unnecessary
    - Nevertheless, Paul taught that from the standpoint 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 be sure to 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 no 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
  - 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 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 to 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 a 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 that comes from 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 summarizes 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
    - Paul's already told us to respect each other's convictions, when 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 it is relatively muted
  - While there were certainly Judaizers 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 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 mirrors 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 accept 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 those 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 accepted 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, believers can still be instructed from the Old Testament
  - And in this case, stronger believers 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?
    - Is it 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 strengthen 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'll stop caring about whether others' convictions are inconvenient or unnecessary
    - You'll only care about what's best for them
    - And in exercising that concern, you grow too
    - And in the end, we will glorify Christ with one voice
- So the opening teaching of Chapter 15 establishes two main ideas:

- First, 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 are the spiritually 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 we should 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 then 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've 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 out our righteousness
  - That's been the topic of Chapter 12 and 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 it 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