

“We Belong to the Lord”

Sermons on Romans # 34

Texts: Romans 14:1-23; Isaiah 45:18-25

In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul defined the gospel in terms of the revelation of a righteousness from God received through faith alone. In these same chapters, Paul also described how those who receive this righteousness will also die to sin and rise to newness of life. Beginning in Romans 12, Paul exhorts us to be renewed in mind and to stop being conformed to the pattern of this age. Paul then moves on to describe how the righteous status that is ours through faith, is worked out in nitty-gritty details of daily life. Now in Romans 14, Paul discusses Christian liberty which is directly connected to justification and essential in understanding how Christians are to relate to one another.

Far too many Christians consider the subject of Christian liberty to be only incidentally related to the gospel. But this is not the case—Christian liberty is absolutely essential to the gospel. If we say that we believe the gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone based upon the imputed righteousness of Christ and yet deny Christian liberty, do we really understand the gospel? I’m not so sure that we do! For the apostle Paul, freedom in Christ was the wonderful fruit of a right-standing before God and therefore something absolutely necessary to fight for. To lose Christian liberty through apathy (not defend it) or through a misunderstanding of justification (through efforts of legalists, such as the Judaizers) is to seriously undermine the gospel.

The importance of this freedom can be seen in Galatians 5:1, where Paul writes—“*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*” To divorce Christian liberty from justification, or to deny that Christian liberty necessarily flows from our justification, is to live inconsistently with the truth of the gospel. This subject is so important that it provoked one of the few disputes among the apostles recorded in the pages of the New Testament. As he recounts the story in Galatians 2:11-21, Paul thought the matter of Christian liberty so vital that he confronted the Apostle Peter directly to his face, telling Peter that his actions in withdrawing from fellowship with the Gentiles while at the same time allowing the Judaizers to force Gentile converts to live as Jews, was not only cowardly, even worse, Peter was not acting in accordance with the gospel. Thus justification *sola fide* without Christian liberty, is not justification *sola fide*. It is something else, something completely distorted from its biblical ideal.

This is such an important matter that Reformed theologians almost inevitably raise the subject of Christian liberty in direct connection to the doctrine of justification *sola fide*. Failure to do it, it is argued, is to fundamentally misrepresent justification *sola fide*. According to John Calvin: “He who proposes to summarize gospel teaching ought by no means to omit an explanation of this topic. For it is a thing of prime necessity, and apart from a knowledge of it consciences dare undertake almost nothing without doubting; they hesitate and recoil from many things; they constantly waver and are afraid. But freedom is especially an appendage of justification and is of no little avail in understanding its power.”¹ According to Calvin, Christ died to set us free, therefore, if we don’t live in freedom, we miss out on one of the most important benefits of our Lord’s death. We will live in fear, our consciences will not give us a moment’s peace, and faith will become doubt. If we are not free we will live in fear. And we will

¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xix.1.

never be assured of God's favor towards us in Christ.

This topic is also important because lack of clarity about Christ liberty opens the door to two great errors associated with the Christian life: legalism and antinomianism. To say that we are justified by faith alone and then tell people that their consciences remain bound to things not forbidden in Scripture is to fall into the error of legalism. If we do this, we are back on the treadmill of justification by faith *plus* avoiding certain things God has not commanded us to avoid. But to use Christian liberty as an excuse to indulge the flesh is to fall into the error of antinomianism. This is condemned by Paul in Galatians 5:13 every bit as harshly as he condemns legalism—"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." The two boundaries we must consider are: 1). Christ sets us free from being bound to those things not condemned by the law, and, 2). We are not to use our freedom as an excuse to continue in sin.

The subject of Christian liberty is also particularly germane to Christian prudence and charity towards our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Christian liberty understood correctly means that we are free to serve each other in love. As Paul has just told us in Romans 13:10, love is the fulfillment of the law. From this comes Martin Luther's famous dictum: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."² As justified sinners, Christians are free to do all things not forbidden by the law and subject only to the constraints of prudence (all things are lawful, but not all things are profitable, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians).³ Therefore, as Christians we are obligated to oppose Pharisees and Judaizers of every stripe to defend and preserve Christian liberty with as much energy as Paul. In such cases, the gospel itself is at stake.

And yet, the Christian is also the servant of all. This means that as Christians, we must be equally willing to give up our freedom for the sake of charity and so as to build up those who are weak in faith when the gospel is not at stake. This can be seen in the contrasting tone between Paul's letter to the Romans and in Galatians, where the gospel is at stake. In Galatians, when false teachers began denying Christian liberty, Paul grants them no quarter. But in Rome, the gospel was not in dispute, there was only confusion about the application of the gospel. This is why practical matters come to the fore as Paul wraps up this epistle and why his focus is upon the need to use our liberty responsibly when around those who are weak in faith. The reality of the Christian life is that each of us have different backgrounds, different opinions and temperaments, and different levels of Christian maturity. Some of us do certain things others feel are positively sinful for them to do. Collisions between such opinions are inevitable in the church. Such collisions occurred in the Roman church, and Paul's response to this problem points to us the ways in which we must attempt to deal with such matters when they arise today.

In the first part of our text, Romans 14:1-12, Paul now addresses the very important subject of Christian liberty using the categories of weak and strong.

Paul begins by identifying one group, "the weak," and then informs us of how the strong are to treat them. In verse 1, Paul commands us to "*accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.*" The NIV is not particularly helpful here. The text literally reads "him that is weak

² Martin Luther, Christian Liberty, p. 7.

³ See Michael Horton's excellent essay, "Recovering the Art of Christian Prudence," in Modern Reformation, March/April 2000.

in faith,” or weak “in respect of faith.” Paul is not making a reference to someone whose faith in Christ is weak (in the sense that they barely trust in Christ and are hanging on by their fingernails), but rather to someone “who does not understand the conduct implied by faith; perhaps he is the person whose faith is ineffective. His faith is weak in that it cannot sustain him in certain kinds of conduct. He does not understand that when the meaning of justification by faith is grasped questions like the use of meat and wine and special days becomes irrelevant.”⁴ The person whose faith is weak is someone who feels that to engage in certain conduct is a sin even though such conduct is not expressly forbidden in Scripture.

Nevertheless, despite misconception about such things on the part of the person who is weak in faith, they are to be accepted by the strong despite all of their weaknesses. In the church in Rome, the old habits of Jewish converts to Christianity, as well as the old pagan habits of the Gentiles die hard. Paul urges them to be accepting of those struggling with such matters. Paul is concerned that such things might divide the Roman congregation, since the issue here is not the nature of the gospel, but how people who believe the gospel are to relate to each other when some of them are weak and others are strong.

The clause “*without passing judgment on disputable matters,*” is difficult to translate, and means something like “without attempting to settle doubtful points.” Paul is instructing those who are strong, not to bully or pick-on the weak, those who have not fully thought through these matters, nor have come to terms with their weakness. In other words, when someone is still hung up on a basic misunderstanding of Christian liberty, because they have not yet reached maturity in their thinking, the strong must not hammer away on such things, belittle the weak or shame them. The strong must accept the weak where they are and give them space to work through such things. The goal of the strong is not to win the argument or boast about being strong, it should be to build the weak up to their “strong” level.

But this is a two way street—the weak cannot insist the strong give up their freedom. This becomes clear in verses 2-4, when Paul writes, “*One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.*”

One concrete instance of a difference within the Roman church now surfaces. One person (“the weak”) is a vegetarian, while the other (“the strong”) eats everything. Paul’s principle is very simple. Neither is to look down on the other, because both are justified sinners, equally accepted before God because of the righteousness of Christ. This is one place where Paul’s emphasis upon minding our own business enters in. Why should we even be worrying about what other people eat? The fact that we are so preoccupied with the business of others and what they eat is one of the sure signs of the pervasiveness of indwelling sin. Why should we care if someone else is a vegetarian? As long as they don’t insist that being a vegetarian is necessary for justification, there should be no division over such things.

Again, in verse 4, Paul reminds his hearers of the fact that God is the judge, hence the emphatic assertion to both the weak and the strong—“who are you to judge?” Since God justifies all sinners based upon the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, all sinners (both the weak and the strong) will be regarded as righteous on the day of judgment, because in Christ they are righteous. The weak cannot sever the strong from Christ because they eat things the weak consider unclean. Nor can the strong sever the weak from

⁴ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 477.

Christ because they have scruples about eating meat, which Scripture does not condemn.

The same question enters in with regard to Sabbath and Lord's Day observance, just as it does with the dietary laws. This becomes clear in verses 5-6. *"One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God."* Paul's treatment of the Sabbath question is most enlightening. He clearly acknowledges the differences among those in the church regarding Sabbath observance. But Paul simply asks believers to be convinced in their own minds about this matter—just as they should do regarding eating meat. This means that Sabbatarians in the Roman church are not to condemn those who do not observe the Lord's Day as they do. It also means that those who do not see the need to observe the Sabbath as the Sabbatarians do (that is, beyond the biblical requirement to attend Christian worship) are not to flaunt their liberty in front of those who do. Says Paul, we are to do these things, "unto the Lord."

As a parenthetical aside, we do not fulfill the command to keep the Sabbath by checking off a list of those things we don't do and then measure others by that list. The Reformed regard Lord's Day observance as a day of rest since it is also creation ordinance and not just part of the ceremonial law. The Lord's Day (the Christian Sabbath, which is Sunday) is a gift from God and a testimony (witness) to unbelievers around us as we gather to worship the true and living God. Attendance at worship on the Lord's Day is a sacred duty, not something we can be indifferent about whether we be weak or strong. Our catechism summarizes the biblical data well when the subject is raised in **Q 103**: "What is God's will for you in the fourth commandment? **A.** First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I regularly attend the assembly of God's people to learn what God's Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath."

Again Paul's response to the division in the church over matters not expressly discussed in the Bible is remarkably simple. As we read in verses 7-9, *"for none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living."* Since we don't live or die to ourselves, and since we belong to the Lord in life and in death, we must regard Christ alone as both Lord and judge of the weak and the strong. Therefore, all of our conduct as Christians in such matters must be made in reference to Christ's Lordship, not our own "lordship" over our weak or stronger brothers. This is made perfectly clear in the light of Christ's death and resurrection. In his resurrection Jesus is Lord of all.

And Christ's Lordship leads to Paul to conclude in verses 10-12 as follows: *"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.' So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God."* Since we will all appear before God's judgment seat to give an account of ourselves, we are not to look down upon those who are weak, nor are we to resent those who are strong. Together, we will all bow before Christ.

Thus the obvious conclusion follows in verse 13, a verse which not only serves as the conclusion to the preceding but also serves as the bridge to what follows.

Paul writes, *“Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.”* Neither the weak nor the strong should judge the other. Furthermore, Paul informs us that we are to stop putting stumbling blocks in our brother’s way. The Greek term here for stumbling block refers to intentionally blocking a runner’s path so that he cannot reach the finish line. The term for obstacle is taken from the bait in a stick and box trap. Thus as we must refrain from judging each other, we must also refrain from creating situations in which we erect obstacles or set traps to catch one of our brothers doing something we think is wrong.

But it is Paul’s next assertion in verse 14 which is perhaps the most revealing. *“As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.”* Paul’s language is emphatic—as one who is in Christ Jesus, and who is the apostle to the Gentiles—Paul now declares that all foods are clean. This would not only have been a shocking statement to Jewish believers, it should also make it perfectly clear, that those who regard certain foods as ceremonially unclean are the weak. But in the case where someone has not yet come to realize this—either through ignorance or habit or culture—*“then for him it is unclean.”* This establishes two points. The one is that the strong have the biblical high ground—all foods are clean (cf. v. 16). The other is that the strong must not cause someone to go against conscience, by enticing them to eat or drink those things they regard as unclean. For such people, such things are unclean! And it would be a sin for them if they consume them.

Again, Paul’s response in verse 15, is for all Christians to strive to keep the unity and peace of the church. *“If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.”* The point is that if we are eating something which offends our brother (with the implied intent of offending him) we are not acting in love—something Paul has just spent a great deal of time emphasizing in chapters 12-13. The strong Christian assumes the burden here—it is up to the strong to make the necessary sacrifice and not flaunt his liberty in the face of the weak so that the weaker brother is not offended. Christian liberty goes both ways. It entails “freedom to,” as well as “freedom not to.” For if the strong forces the weak to violate their own conscience, they may do irreparable damage to their relationship with Christ, causing them to doubt the gospel and to labor under a burden of guilt which Christ died to remove.

But with that being said, in verse 16, Paul once again reminds the strong that they have the biblical high ground—all foods are clean. *“Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil.”* When the weak attempt to prevent the strong from enjoying their liberty, the strong are to gently remind the weak that God has declared all things clean, and even though the strong must not put obstacles in their way, or set traps for the weak, the strong must not let the weak succeed in declaring clean things to be “unclean.” Good things are not to be spoken of as evil, for God made them and gives them to us to enjoy.

But according to verses 17-18, we are to keep these matters in their proper perspective. *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.”* In light of the fact that the kingdom of God is the eschatological rule of God in the person of Christ, we must not allow trivial things as food and drink to divide us when it comes to eternal things. The kingdom of God is centered in the revelation of Christ’s righteousness, peace with God, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Fighting over food and drink misses the mark. God is pleased when we do indeed keep things in proper perspective and we are approved when we are able to do so.

As with the command to love our brethren because this fulfills the law, keeping these things in

perspective is also not an option. As Paul puts it in verses 19-21, “*Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*” Once again, Paul’s wisdom is self-evident. We must strive to keep the peace and not to destroy the church over such trivial matters as food and drink. While all things are clean and the strong are free to use them, the strong must not entice people to violate their consciences. We must be always willing to give up our freedom so as not to cause division or offence.

In verses 22-23, Paul now returns to his theme that Christians should mind their own business. “*So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.*” The first part of verse 22, could indeed be paraphrased as “mind your own business.” But in the latter half of the verse and in verse 23, Paul pronounces a blessing upon those who are able to enjoy their freedom, while at the same time reminding the weak of the peril of doubting. Doubting can indicate a lack of faith, and ultimately, the root of doubt is sin. The man who understands the ramifications of the gospel does not doubt that God made all things good and pronounced all foods as clean. But, if someone still thinks it is a sin to eat or drink they should not and the strong should leave them alone.

As we wrap up, several things should be said in terms of application:

AFirst, Pharisees and Judaizers must be opposed whenever they appear in our midst. It is for freedom that Christ set us free, therefore, we cannot be subjected again by false teachers to a yoke of slavery. We cannot allow anyone to compromise the integrity of the gospel. If we give up our freedom in the face of assaults upon Christian liberty, we are not living in line with the truth of the gospel! The gospel sets us free. It does not enslave us.

Second, the weak cannot be allowed to force their own scruples about things not forbidden in the Scripture upon the strong. Christian liberty should not be taken away because some do not understand that all things are clean. And yet Paul is perfectly clear that the strong have an obligation to accept and encourage the weak. And sometimes this means voluntarily giving up our freedom when it gives offence to those who don’t know any better. But the goal is to build the weak up, not allow the weak to force the strong to live as if they were weak. We cannot allow the weak to condemn things which God declares to be lawful.

Third, the principle Paul sets forth is that the love for the brethren is paramount. We must do everything in our power to preserve the unity of the church and not fight about things as basic as food and drink. According to Paul, we must balance very carefully the relationship between people and principle. When the gospel is at stake, people’s feelings are secondary. When the gospel is not at stake, our love for our brothers and sisters despite their weakness fulfills the law.

Fourth, Paul reminds us once again, that we should live our lives as before the Lord, and mind our own business when it comes to things like what others eat and drink and how they observe the Lord’s Day. Preoccupation with the piety and practices of others is sin and requires repentance. Paul forbids us from judging others and plainly tells us “*whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.*” Since we are sinners, let us worry about our own sanctification and not that of others.

Fifth, Christian liberty goes both ways: freedom to and freedom not to. You have the freedom to eat and drink before God as you see fit. But always be willing to give up your liberty for the sake of the weak.

Beloved, we all belong to the Lord, not just the strong or the weak. Therefore, let us live our lives before the Lord in the freedom that Christ has won for us. Let us keep our own sanctification before our eyes, and learn to mind our own business, not the progress and business of our neighbor. This, beloved, pleases the Lord and builds up his church. It is for freedom that Christ set us free, so let us live in this glorious freedom by loving our neighbor and working for the peace and edification of Christ's church, for we all belong to the Lord.