

Liberty is limited by love

• When the strong do something acceptable they do not sin themselves

• But they have to consider the damage they might do if they persuade a weaker Christian to sin against his conscience

There is no material 'thing' that is unclean in itself

• It is not the 'thing' that is sinful or holy, but what you do with the thing

• The weak Christian's relationship with God is damaged when he goes against his conscience

• We are to be governed by our love for the other Christian

• Not solely our own understanding of the truth

Liberty is limited by love. Paul is slow to get to his main point because (on both sides) he has some attitudes to gently rebuke before he comes to the central statement of his teaching on these matters. Now he must let the strong know that law is limited by love. ¹³*Therefore, let us no longer be judging one another, but make a judgement about this: not to place a stumbling block or hindrance before your brother.* If the strong want to show their skill in good doctrinal judgement, let them show their skill in this way. Make a judgement about this, says Paul. Decide not to place a stumbling block or hindrance before your brother. He is playing with the word 'judge'. 'Stumbling block' means something that makes a person trip or stumble. 'Hindrance' means 'trap' or 'something which causes disaster or misfortune'. When the strong do something that is perfectly acceptable (eating meat, not bothering to observe some holy day, drinking wine) they do not sin themselves. But they might well be putting pressure on the weak to follow the example of the strong. Then when the weak do the same things they are going against their conscience and it is this that damages or ruins them. It is no small matter to sin against conscience – even when conscience is wrong. The strong Christians were right in their doctrine, but still wrong in their behaviour. The strong have to consider the damage they might do if they persuade a Christian to sin against his conscience.

Now **Paul comes to a main point.** ¹⁴*I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.* Christians who were influenced by Greek philosophy (as many early Christians were) tended to be 'ascetic'. That is, they severely deprived themselves of any pleasure that had anything physical in it. Often in Paul's time these philosophical ideas got mixed up with regulations that were to be found in the law of Moses which forbade certain foods as 'unclean'. But Paul insists that there is no material 'thing' that is unclean in itself. A 'thing' does not decide to obey God or decide not to obey God. There is no morality or immorality in the thing itself. Matter is not wicked in and of itself (although many of the Greek philosophers held that opinion).

There are Christians who will not eat pork and Christians who think tea or coffee is sinful. Then there are those who think that certain 'things' are worldly. It may be a cinema film or a credit card. It might be a novel or a TV programme. But it is not the 'thing' that is sinful or holy – but what you do with the thing. Everything created by God is in itself good and is to be received with thanksgiving and used wisely.

Yet there is something else that needs to be said. *However, to the person who reckons anything to be unclean, it is unclean for him.* If a person feels that God does not want him to make use of this 'thing', then he sins when he uses it even though there is nothing wrong with the thing itself. The 'weak' Christian feels (wrongly) that God is laying certain regulations upon him about food or drink or his discipline of the body. He may be wrong but if he goes against what he believes, he feels guilty before God and so his relationship to God is damaged. In itself what he is doing is not sin, but it is sin for him! So the strong Christian cannot simply act on his own freedom without regard for the feelings of the more sensitive Christian. ¹⁵*To explain further: if your brother or sister is distressed through your meat, you are no longer walking in love.* We must not cause the weak Christian the 'distress' of a damaged relationship to God if the weak Christian goes ahead with what he (wrongly) thinks is sinful. We are to be governed by our love for the other Christian. *Do not through your food ruin the life of that person for whom Christ died.* The principle is: our relationship to other Christians is not to be governed solely by our understanding of the truth, it is to be governed by our understanding of the other person as well! ¹⁶*Do not let something which is*

• *Temporary – for the sake of others*

We must remember the nature of the kingdom of God

• *The greatest matters are righteousness, peace and joy*

• *Keeping minor regulations is less important*

• *Relatively insignificant matter*

• *For the sake of others we may need to exercise voluntary restraint towards the use of our liberty*

good for you be slandered. By ‘something which is good for you’ he means the liberty of the believer, our freedom to enjoy God’s world. But do not let something which is good for you be slandered, he says. We must help other people to have good consciences also. Of course all of this is temporary. It is a short-term legalism voluntarily entered into for the sake of others.

We must remember the nature of the kingdom of God¹. We do not let our freedom get abused and misunderstood, ¹⁷*For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* The big things matter more than the small things. In this kind of topic (meats and drinks, holy days, and so on) we are tempted to get preoccupied with small matters and forget the greatest matters of all: righteousness, peace, joy in the Holy Spirit. How can you fight over a mosquito and not notice a camel!

¹⁸*For anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and is approved by other people.* The important matter is not whether we keep or do not keep minor regulations concerning food or drink or holy days – or any similar small item of behaviour. The important thing is our enjoying righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Anyone (whether weak or strong in conscience) who serves Christ in this way (focusing on a kingdom which is righteousness, peace and joy) is pleasing to God, and is approved by other people¹. The life of righteousness, peace and joy will be approved by other people.

Verse 19 brings the thought of verses 17–18 to a conclusion. *So then let us follow after the things that make for peace and the things that help to build each other up.* ²⁰*Do not break down the work of God on account of food.* Many of the things that Christians quarrel about are really insignificant. It is part of the sinfulness of human nature that we lose a sense of proportion. Why should we let some minor matter do great damage to something that is infinitely more important? We should be patient with the fussy and over-scrupulous Christian. *All things are clean but they are evil for the person who eats meat but creates a stumbling block by what he eats.* A good thing becomes an instrument of sin if the good thing is not used wisely. This may demand a voluntary restraint on our side towards the use of our liberty. ²¹*It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything in which your brother or sister is made to fall.*

14:17-20a

14:18

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