

Romans 14 13-17A

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.

14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

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.

16 Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil;

17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Before we move into this week's text I wanted to add to what I said last week. I talked about the reward that Christians will receive in eternity for their **faithful service**. And the examples I used about faithful service were largely evangelism and discipleship. Well, not everyone has great opportunity to do mass evangelism and discipleship. Mothers serving in the confines of their home will exhibit much of their faithfulness by how they serve those in their families. Their evangelism and discipleship will primarily be directed toward their children. Their faithfulness may be displayed in how they live out their lives as wives and mothers. And for many of us, much of our faithfulness toward Christ will be seen in our involvement with other body members, reaching out to meet each other's needs. I did not want what I said to, in any way, belittle **any** act of obedience to Christ, whether it be among our families, among the church family, or in the world. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love. And there are lots of ways that can be carried out.

Now to our text.

When we start with a therefore, we know that we can't begin with the passage we are in. We need to get our context. I think we have been pretty thorough in understanding what Paul has said up to this point. So we will go on, building on his flow of thought.

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.

The first thing we need to know is that Paul uses a play on words. He takes the word for Judge and uses it two different times in two different ways in this sentence. And it is not a whole lot different from the way that **we** use the word

“judge”. We might say to someone, you are **too judgmental**. What we are implying is that they are judging in an **improper** way, an **unfair** way, a way that didn’t have all the facts. We might mean it to say that a person rejects every view but his own.

At the same time we might say, “**Judge for yourselves.**” When we do that we are being very positive. We are asking a person to verify the validity of a statement. So we are **used to** the word “**Judge**” being used to convey different things.

Well here in our text, the word judge and the word resolve are both from the same root. Those hearing it in Greek would have known it was a play on words. To paraphrase our text, it would be something like, “**quit being judgmental of people, but if you are so inclined to judge something, judge this. Don’t put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in a brother’s way.**”

Do you get what he is doing? He is talking to the stronger brothers. And he is reiterating that they are not to be judgmental of the weaker brother. In fact, the right way of thinking is directly opposite of that. Instead of being critical of the weaker brother’s opinion or lack of knowledge, be critical of **your own behavior**. Instead of looking at them as some kind of problem, focus on yourself **so you aren’t** a problem.

How often is that true in the Christian life? I have been involved in Christian leadership for 34 years. And in those years I have been involved in a lot of conflicts between believers. And what I have found is that as long as the parties keep their focus on what the other brother is doing wrong, resolutions to the problems are few and far between. It is only when we begin examining ourselves that we begin reconciliation. So many difficulties in our lives are of our own making. So many of them are the fruit of our own decisions. But when we see the fruit of our actions in other people’s lives we want to **blame them**.

Do you want to cut to the quick? Look at the patterns. Do you think that everyone overlooks you? Everyone mistreats you? No one appreciates you? Everyone resists you? Do you see the pattern? The only thing in common in all these situations is you. Then we need to ask the hard question. What am I doing to cause this? If you will not do serious business with that question, you will never get to the resolution to the problem.

Well that is what Paul is telling the brothers in the strong position to do. Change your focus. Also Paul is telling them to switch their focus from how we **regard** our brothers, to how we **TREAT** our brothers. We move from what we think about them to what we do for them.

Now we are **to resolve, to judge, to decide** not to put a stumbling block in their path. That means we must **think about it**. Does that surprise us? It shouldn't. All sanctification involves our minds. We need to consider this seriously. We cannot have a simple consideration that says, well God says this is not forbidden so I am going to do it. That is all I need to know. No one can be critical of me. No, that is not the Christian attitude. **Love** is the Christian attitude. Remember, love is the debt we never pay off? That is the outstanding debt we will carry until we die?

So we begin to consider, how does what I **do** affect my Christian family? Our biggest consideration becomes not, what **CAN** I do but what **SHOULD** I do.

Now how can we apply this judgment, this consideration?

Well first, don't put a stumbling block in front of this person.

A stumbling block is an obstacle that someone would not likely see and they would stumble over it.

As I was thinking of an illustration, this was the first thing to come to my mind. When Carla and I were first married we lived in a home we endearingly referred to as The Shack. We called it the shack because it was, well, a shack. There are lots of stories we have from that place, but Carla, and maybe all of you, can probably guess the one that is coming next. I often say that I only have a few stories and I tell them over and over again.

I had a habit back then, in fact it is a habit that I quickly fall back to, of leaving my chair pulled away from the dining room table. Carla reminded me to put the chair in, until it got to be a futile gesture. But she often said, one day you will fall over that chair. I knew better, of course.

Well the path between our bedroom and the bathroom ran right by that dining room table. One night I decided that I did not need a light to make my walk to the bathroom. There was some moonlight and I thought, what is the worst that can happen?

Somewhere between the bedroom and the bathroom I was attacked by some object with brutal force. I caught that chair in full stride at my knees. That naturally knocked me off balance so that my ribs came down on the back of the chair. But I evidently needed more of a lesson. So my momentum drove me over the back of the falling chair to where I did a complete flip and landed on my back. Now as you can imagine I did none of this quietly, so Carla heard the commotion and came out to check on me with great concern. That is until she figured out what happened. To her credit she didn't laugh out loud... at first.

That is the best example I can think of as a stumbling stone.

Now think about that. That is what we are putting into our brother's way if we exercise our freedom in the face of a weaker brother without concerning ourselves with their understanding of what we are doing.

Would any of you do this to a brother intentionally? I mean, we wouldn't want to hurt our brother or sister physically like that. But this is **spiritual** harm. This is a brother getting laid flat on their back **spiritually**. It is hideous to think that our love for **our freedoms** would be such that we would not care about the **harm to our brother or sister**.

Now, what about the next phrase- **a cause to fall**. This Greek word literally is the trigger of a snare. It is the stick that holds the snare in place until the bait is taken. In our day it would be similar to the metal poles that are used in a live trap that trip the door to fall shut. Caleb used one of these to trap a local resident that lived above my head.

Jesus used this same word when He was talking to Peter after Peter began telling Christ that Christ would not have to suffer and die. He said

Matthew 16:23 (NKJV)

23 "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense- a cause to fall, a skandalon to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

I John says this:

1 John 2:10 (NKJV)

10 He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling- no skandalon in him.

In Christ's example Peter's words were a temptation to Christ. If Christ believed them, if he was influenced by them, it would have harmed the whole mission he had come for. Those words would have derailed the track that Christ was on.

In I John we see that love causes a believer to be someone who does not cause another brother to be ensnared. In our case this is ensnared, entrapped into an action or a thought that would trap them. It would cause them to get off track in their Christian lives. It would do them harm.

Now keep in mind- these weaker brothers are people who are thinking **wrongly** about an issue. This is referring to their attitude toward something they **technically, biblically** have freedom to do but their knowledge does not allow them to do this thing. They believe it to be wrong, probably not just for them but for anyone.

And we are told, it does not matter that they are wrong and we are right. What matters is that they are a brother and we are to **do them good**. That is what matters most.

Notice too that this is specifically talking about a believer. There may be other passages about living a certain way in front of unbelievers, but our context this morning is about believers.

Now, what is Paul talking about? How could a believer with a weak conscience stumble?

Well first, suppose I think it is ok to work on Sunday. I have a brother who lives next to me and he believes that it is wrong to work on Sunday. Now I have been ministering to this brother trying to disciple him on leaving his sinful ways and walking in Christ. He sees me out working on my addition on Sunday.

First, he might think that I am living in such a way that says one thing and does another. He might think that I am living hypocritically. How will that affect him? Well the next thing he hears from my lips, his first thought is going to be, **he doesn't really mean it**. He talks a good line, but ultimately he does what he wants to do, so I might as well do what I want to do.

Second, he might think that he can follow my example on this particular thing without having the same knowledge on this particular thing. And this will lead him to violate his conscience. He would be doing something that he feels guilty about. It will be something he cannot give thanks for because he is kind of doing it on the sly.

Third, I may be in conversation with this person encouraging them to do that thing that I can do in good conscience. Maybe I am brow beating him into believing like I do. Maybe I am treating him as an inferior so he does what I am doing but does not believe what I believe.

No matter what it is, you can see the problem. The believer is ensnared. The believer is either, **believing something about other believers that is not true**, or they are **living in a way that is sinful** just because they cannot do that thing by faith. And the likelihood of communicating that difference with you is very slim. Why? Well either they think they will be exposing your hypocrisy, or they will have to admit to you that they really don't agree with you, the stronger believer. This is the kind of thing that can fester for a long time before it gets exposed. So we can see the danger of not giving this kind of thing proper consideration. Now let's move on.

14 I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

Now most of us would realize that this text is not talking about food with dirt or grime on it. It is talking about food that is unholy. Food that is spiritually defiled or untouchable. And Paul is saying, I go back to what Jesus said and I know that there really is no food like that. How does he know?

Mark 7:14-23 (NKJV)

14 When He had called all the multitude to Himself, He said to them, "Hear Me, everyone, and understand:

15 There is nothing that enters a man from outside which can defile him; but the things which come out of him, those are the things that defile a man.

16 If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear!"

17 When He had entered a house away from the crowd, His disciples asked Him concerning the parable.

18 So He said to them, "Are you thus without understanding also? Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him,

19 because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?"

20 And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man.

21 For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders,

22 thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness.

23 All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

I think Paul is saying that hearing what Christ said caused him to conclude that this is the final word on foods. None of them are any longer **unclean**. That is no longer the focus or the issue. The issue is now the **spiritual status** of the heart. That is the stuff we should focus on. That is where the spiritual action must take place.

But look at the dilemma here. There are two truths that look like they counter each other.

Is it wrong to, for example, eat pork?

The answer is scripturally, **no**, it is not wrong for a believer to eat pork.

The answer is also, **Yes**, it is wrong to eat pork if your understanding is incomplete and you still **believe** that it is wrong to eat pork.

Paul says, **"to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean."**

Now, realize here that Paul is preaching a sermon to all these believers. Some of them are weak and some are strong. Some are informed and some are not. And when he preaches this, he does not change the definitions. And he was not going

to change the definitions. He was not going to allow someone who he is preaching to stand up and say, "but Paul, you are wrong". That meat is unclean. And it is not just unclean for the one who thinks it to be unclean. It is unclean for **everyone**. It is just wrong.

No, Paul would not allow the weaker brother to tyrannize the rest of the fellowship. He would not let the weaker brother create doctrine that others would be forced to live by.

We see that by the decisions Paul made in his life. It is interesting to follow how Paul handled circumcision. At first he seemed pretty open to anyone who wanted to get circumcised to get circumcised. But you see an abrupt change. And what instituted that change? The Judaizers were coming in and preaching that as a Christian **you must** live according to the Jewish laws. **You must** be circumcised. They had the weaker position but they acted like they had the strong position, the only position. How did Paul respond then?

Galatians 5:2-14 (ESV)

2 Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

3 I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.

4 You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

5 For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

7 You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?

8 This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

9 A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

10 I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is.

11 But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

12 I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

You see here that Paul was using very strong words. I think if a preacher were just to say this, instead of reading **Paul's** words, he would not be very well received. He would be too crude or crass. But this is scripture and it is strong for a reason. There is very little more dangerous than legalism, than people who

begin placing rules where God did not place them, and then holding people to conform to those rules in order to gain or keep their salvation.

So you can see that what Paul is saying is not about allowing those who are weak to **push their legalisms** as truths in the church. No. What Paul is talking about in our text is relationship, about love, about the welfare of individual Christians.

But let's go a little farther in in the Galatians text because I think it has a bearing on our text. It says:

13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul is saying- yes you have freedom. You don't need to conform to the Jewish laws. And how would flesh respond at this point? PARTY! It would show no restraint. It would become self absorbed.

So what should this freedom be used for, if not for the flesh? He says the same thing as in Romans. Our freedoms should be used **to love one another**. Because ultimately that is the best fulfillment of the law. That is what the law was really about. That sums up the law.

And Romans is dealing with freedoms and coming back to that same punch line. So again, we aren't supposed to get the idea **from what Paul is saying** that weak positions can be pushed as good doctrine. They cannot be and it is up to the elders to see that they aren't.

But love between brothers and sisters is to rule the day. That is what matters. That is the high ground, no matter how strong or weak your doctrinal position may be.

Let's go on to verse 15

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.

We need to look at two words here.... Grieved and destroy.

The word for grieve is loo-peh-o. It means to make sorrowful. To affect with sadness, cause grief; to throw into sorrow.

This gives us some insight into what is to be protected, and what is not being discussed in this passage.

What Paul is talking about is genuine harm. These are people that truly suffer when they see someone do something that is controversial to them. These people are left in a quandary. They are shaken. When they see a brother doing

something they think is a sin **it makes them sad**. It shakes their world. It leaves them uncertain.

Notice that there is no mention of anger. I think that is telling. Christians need to be discerning. There are lots of Christians who think **you ought to do** what they **tell you to do** because **they tell you to do it**. There is lots of arrogance floating around as spirituality. There are people who self-righteously think they understand what true spirituality is and they are judging every other believer on their self-righteous standard. And how do they respond when you do something different than what they command? They are angry. They vent. They are confrontational. They gossip. They slander. Well, Paul is not talking about these people when he warns us that we should be concerned.

He is talking about people that are genuinely hurt. They are confused. They are not attacking. They are huddling. They don't know what to do.

This helps us a lot. We don't need to buy every manipulative story trying to get us to conform to another person's legalism. But we do need to look out for the best interest of our weaker brothers.

Then the word- Destroy. It is the word *apollymi*. What this means ranges from kill to spoil. And the opposite of **destroy** in our text is **build up**. So we get the idea Paul is talking, not about a person losing their salvation, which Romans has told us is impossible. But it is talking about tearing down a brother, doing him harm.

Essentially Paul's reasoning is this:

Do you really want to care **so much** about your liberty and **so little** about one for whom **Christ** cared **so little** about His liberty and **so much** about this brother's salvation? Paul is an expert at giving us the proper perspective.

I have a question for us this morning.

Let's assume that Christ had the liberty to remain in heaven and never come to earth to die in our place.

If Christ regarded us the way we regard our brothers and sisters, would he have ever given up His liberty to come save us?

Think about that. Look at those things that you regard as liberties. Are you willing to give them up for your brothers and sisters in Christ? Paul was. Christ was.

Or do we regard it as some kind of right that we are not willing to give up for anyone?

I think that is the essence of our text.

Do we love our brothers and sisters more than we love our liberties?

Is there any liberty that you have, any disputable thing, that you would not give up for the benefit of someone who is wrong about that liberty if you know it is doing them harm?

We ought to consider that this week.