

“Handle with Care” (Romans 14:13–23)

Have you ever used the right thing in the wrong way? Think of perfume or cologne. If you use it in the right way, a small amount actually makes you somewhat appealing to most people, but use it in the wrong way—use too much—and you will be appalling to people. This is also true of salt. If you use the right amount in your food, it is a delicious seasoning, but use too much and it can ruin your meal. The same principle is true with most medicines as well. Aspirin, for example, is a good blood thinner, but use too much of it and it will thin your blood to the point that it could kill you.

The apostle Paul, likewise, argues that it’s possible to use the right thing in the wrong way. He applies this adage to Christian liberty. Previously, in Rom 14:1–12 Paul stated that we are absolutely free to decide for ourselves on non-essential issues like eating, drinking, dancing, music, and movies. We learned to “be slow to judge others; be quick to judge yourself.” Now in 14:13–23 Paul presents the “other side of the coin” in our Christian liberty.¹ Those who are free to enjoy their liberty are responsible for not having an adverse effect on other believers.² Someone has recommended to Americans that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast should be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast. Such a balance would be a helpful reminder. We need to recognize the same balance in our Christian life. Rights bring responsibility.³ How do you handle liberty? The answer is: you handle it with care. *Liberty must be limited by love.*⁴ Paul provides three warnings against abusing your Christian liberty.⁵

1. Don’t harm your fellow believers (14:13–15). Paul commands you to limit your Christian liberty because not all believers have the same freedoms in non-essential issues. In 14:13 he writes, “**Therefore let us not judge one another anymore,⁶ but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.**” There is a classic wordplay in this verse. The verb translated “determine” (*krino*, 14:13b) is the same Greek word translated “judge” (14:13a).⁷ This verse can be literally rendered: “Let us not *judge* one another anymore, but rather *judge* this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.” Paul says: Stop judging other believers on “opinions” (cf. 14:1)!⁸ What are you more concerned about: what your brother or sister is doing or what you are doing? If we were as preoccupied with our own conduct as we are other believers’ behavior we would really be spiritual! Here, however, Paul is concerned that those who have liberty protect those who don’t. The word translated “obstacle” (*proskomma*)⁹ referred to something in the road that causes one to stumble.¹⁰ In this context, a strong believer who puts an obstacle in the path of a weak believer might set him back temporarily or even do permanent damage to his sensitive conscience. The term “stumbling block” is the Greek term *skandalon*,¹¹ from which we get the English word “scandal.” It literally refers to the triggering mechanism on a baited animal trap. The activity looks enticing until those jaws snap shut.

When I was in high school I was a bit of an athlete. I did not drink alcohol, but my teammates and friends did. I can recall a few times when they attempted to trick me into drinking alcohol. They would typically do so by putting Jack Daniels or some other hard liquor in a soft drink can. They would then casually offer me a drink. I always declined the drink because the scent of the liquor was overpowering. Of course, I also knew whenever they pressured me to have a drink it wasn’t Pepsi or Coke. This was a *skandalon*! Similarly, we must not tempt a weaker Christian to sin by partaking of our liberty and thereby violating his or her conscience. We must remember that we are either stepping stones or stumbling blocks.¹² Which one are you? *Liberty must be limited by love.*

Paul builds his argument in 14:14a: “**I know¹³ and am convinced¹⁴ in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.**” Paul is not saying here that anything goes because everything is good. However, he is absolutely confident¹⁵ that *nothing* is unclean in and of itself (cf. 14:5).¹⁶ In other words, a marijuana leaf is not sinful. A cocoa plant is not an evil thing. A gun or a knife is not wicked. Sex is not impure. These things in and of themselves are not unclean. Rather, it is how these things are used that leads to sin.

Paul confirms this notion in 14:14b when he writes: **“but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”** If a believer thinks anything is unclean it becomes unclean for that person.¹⁷ This verse leads to a shocking truth: Some things are wrong for you that are right for others, and some things are right for you that are wrong for others. This statement means that you can’t always know in advance what will be “right” or “wrong” for another Christian brother. It is a matter of one’s conscience.¹⁸

A man consulted a doctor. “I’ve been misbehaving, Doc, and my conscience is troubling me,” he complained. The doctor replied, “And you want something that will strengthen your willpower?” “Well, no,” said the fellow. “I was thinking of something that would weaken my conscience.” While this may be amusing, it is especially true in the church. Many of us are caught between traditions and preferences and what the Bible really prohibits or doesn’t prohibit. This reality should drive us to study the Scriptures to determine how our traditions and preferences affect what we believe. Like Paul, we must get to the place where we can honestly say, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself” (14:14a). However, it still may be that you can’t stomach a particular activity or object. If so, it is “unclean” to you and would be sinful for you to participate in. Listen to your conscience! The conscience isn’t always right, but it’s always wrong to violate it (cf. 14:22–23).

In 14:15 Paul switches to the second-person singular “your” for greater clarity and conviction: **“For¹⁹ if because of food your brother is hurt,²⁰ you are no longer walking according to love.²¹ Do not destroy²² with your food him for whom Christ died.”²³** Paul explains that it is possible to “hurt” and “destroy” a fellow believer. When another Christian sees you doing what his own conscience condemns, it grieves him or causes him pain. When he then proceeds to do himself what his conscience condemns, he commits sin and is destroyed. Some scholars argue that the Greek word “destroy” (*apollumi*) refers to eternal destruction.²⁴ Yet, the word here does not mean “made to go to hell” or “made to lose his salvation.”²⁵ Paul is talking about the loss of peace, assurance, and effective ministry. He lays out two motivations for our conduct: (1) love for other believers and (2) Christ’s death on the cross (cf. 5:8). If we are believers we ought to love one another. Furthermore, Christ’s sacrifice should compel us to demonstrate sensitivity. If Jesus was willing to die for believers certainly we should be willing to make the smallest of sacrifices. Remember, *liberty must be limited by love*.

There have been several times when my wife, Lori, and I have had to get up on the steep roof of our house. Lori climbs a ladder, jumps on the roof, and begins walking back and forth across the roofline. I, on the other hand, experience absolute terror whenever I am on our roof. Due to prior basketball injuries, all of the ligaments and tendons are torn off my ankle bones. I can sprain either of my ankles walking a straight line on a flat surface. I am a hazard—an accident waiting to happen! Furthermore, I have discovered I am afraid of heights. Whenever I am on the roof I am fearful that I am going to make Lori a widow. I can’t see how I can walk across the roof without falling. Now it would be cruel for Lori call me a “girlie-man,” take my arm, and drag me across the roof. I might lose my balance and fall off the roof and suffer injury or death. I don’t share Lori’s courage or liberty in this arena. It is like this with various non-essentials. Some believers just can’t see themselves walking freely in a certain area that they have been brought up to think is wrong; they have difficulty doing so. Thus, we are responsible to be sensitive and thoughtful toward such believers. *Liberty must be limited by love.*²⁶

If your spouse firmly believes that a purchase is wise stewardship but your spouse is worried that the Lord will not approve, you should restrain your liberty for the sake of your spouse. If you are out to dinner with a friend from your small group who has struggled with alcoholism you should not consume alcohol in their presence or even discuss it. You shouldn’t check the Lotto numbers when a friend who disagrees with gambling is nearby. You should never encourage a friend to dress up for Halloween who thinks it is idolatrous.²⁷ *Liberty must be limited by love.*

[Paul’s first warning is: Don’t harm your fellow believers. His second warning is . . .]

2. Don't harm your testimony (14:16–18). Since the world is always observing Christians, we ought to be wise in our use of freedom.²⁸ Paul writes in 14:16: **“Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil.”**²⁹ The phrase translated “spoken of as evil” (*blasphemeo*) is translated from a word that literally speaks of being “blasphemed,” which is usually used of unbelievers. The “good thing” refers to the liberty to eat meat or to do anything amoral. Paul is saying that unbelievers can legitimately speak of our freedom in Christ as “evil” if it results in the fall of another Christian or the compromise of our testimony. However much we wish it is not so, the world watches what we do.³⁰ When we use our liberty indiscriminately the world watches and shakes its head. Many unbelievers’ biggest reason for ignoring God is what they have seen a Christian do. Now certainly, sometimes they have a wrong perspective on what it means to be a Christian, but many times our liberty can harm our ability to tell the world about the Lord. What we intended for good, and what really is good in our lives, can be spoken of as evil when we do not restrain ourselves when it is appropriate. Many non-Christians say, “Why should I be a Christian? You don’t get along with each other, so why should I think becoming a Christian will bring peace or happiness?”³¹

Let’s say you have the liberty to check your personal e-mail at work, but the unbelievers in your workplace do not share this same freedom. Or perhaps you sense the freedom to talk freely with your coworkers during work hours, but those you work with do not feel free to do so. Consequently, in both of these cases they look down on you. Your coworkers assume that you are lazy and are always trying to proselytize others. In your neighborhood, you may have “freedom in Christ” to let your yard go. Grass, weeds, and sticker bushes consume your yard while you are serving the church or taxiing your kids all over the place. Or, maybe God has given you a beautiful view, but you have allowed trees and shrubbery to block your neighbors’ view. In both of these cases your unbelieving neighbors may be rather indignant because in our crashing housing market, you are further hurting the value of their house. While you may argue that you have Christian liberty to do such things, I would caution you to think twice because your testimony could be on the line. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

In 14:17 Paul explains where true life is for the Christian:³² **“For the kingdom of God³³ is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** The “kingdom of God” here refers to the sphere over which God rules and in which all believers live and operate.³⁴ Yet, we are prone to think that God’s kingdom primarily involves what a person does or does not do. This is how the Pharisees lived, making a big deal of externals. But the kingdom of God is not mainly a matter of *externals* but of *eternals*.³⁵ In God’s kingdom, freedom comes from what He tells you on the inside, not what people tell you on the outside. But we spend so much time worrying about what people think that we never get around to finding out what God thinks.³⁶ However, Paul is asking: How can you fight about such little things and miss the big things. You are fighting over a gnat and not noticing a camel! You are concentrating on a pimple and not noticing Mount Everest!³⁷ Paul says the eternals are “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Righteousness refers to “ethical righteousness,” that is, behavior pleasing to God (e.g., 6:16, 18, 19). Peace refers to the horizontal harmony that believers should manifest. The result of these blessings is “joy.”³⁸

In 14:18 Paul sums up 14:13–17 and brings the reader back to the main point here: We must decide not to put obstacles or traps in other Christians’ paths. He writes, **“For he who in this way serves³⁹ Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”**⁴⁰ If we have a healthy balance in enjoying our liberty and limiting it when it is appropriate we will not only be acceptable to God, we will also win the approval of other people since they realize what is more and less important. When we live out our conscience before God we are accepted by God (14:3), and if we do not abuse our liberty around others we are also approved by people. In other words, they respect us for our restraint and concern for others. When we embrace kingdom priorities, our service to Jesus is pleasing to God and vindicated in the sight of people, even people who disagree with us. Our self-control may also open the door of ministry and witness to the unbelieving community (cf. 14:16).

[Paul has issued two warnings: Don't harm your fellow believers or your testimony. Now he provides a third and final warning . . .]

3. Don't harm your church (14:19–23).⁴¹ Your highest priority is the building up of the church. Paul shifts gears in these transitional verses and moves from a negative to a positive emphasis. He moves from what we should stop doing to what we should pursue. In 14:19 Paul states: **“So then⁴² we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.”**⁴³ The verb “pursue” (*dioko*) pictures a hunter chasing after his prey or a runner sprinting for the prize.⁴⁴ Paul says that we must pursue peace and the building up of one another over our own use of personal liberty. The Greek term “building up” (*oikodome*) is a construction term that was used to describe the process of making a building stronger. Our goal, then, is to strengthen and solidify the church by protecting other believers from violating their conscience.

Several years ago our men's ministry was planning a night of card playing. A woman came into our church office and explained to me that her husband was a gambling addict. She said that if we were going to be playing cards he would attend and that would most likely lead him into further sin. What do you think I said to this woman? I told her that I am confident that the men in our church would care more about her husband's holiness than their freedom.

It is worth noting that sometimes the authority you may be under will restrict your choices. Female teaching and discussion leaders in Bible Study Fellowship (BSF) are required to wear dresses. Some women may see this as a violation of their Christian freedom; however, the women who serve in this capacity whom I have spoken with are more concerned with the joy of serving in this great ministry. Bible Colleges, Christian organizations, and churches also have certain rules and expectations that may not be explicit in Scripture. Nonetheless, if you choose to be a part of such an entity, you need to pursue peace and honor the guidelines that have been established. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

Paul makes another strong statement in 14:20: **“Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food.”**⁴⁵ **All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.** There is a play between “build up” (14:19) and “tear down” (14:20). Both are construction metaphors. Paul uses the verb “tear down” (*kataluo*),⁴⁶ which functions as a synonym with the verb “destroy” (*apollumi*) in 14:15.⁴⁷ In 14:15 the danger was destroying the weak Christians, and here it is expanded to encompass the destruction of “the work of God”—the church as a whole. Paul reminds us again—it's just not worth indulging yourself. Yes, “all things are indeed clean” (cf. 14:14a)⁴⁸ but to a fellow Christian who is a weaker brother or sister they may be “evil.”⁴⁹ The “weaker brother,” then, is not the one who simply disagrees with what I do, or who gets upset by my freedom;⁵⁰ the “weaker brother” is the one who is likely to imitate me in what I do, violating his own conscience and convictions. The “weaker brother” is the one more likely to sin because he gives in to another's convictions rather than living by his own.

So what are some steps we can take that will help keep other believers from stumbling over us? Paul gives three practical applications.⁵¹

Be considerate. In 14:21 Paul writes, **“It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything⁵² by which your brother stumbles.”**⁵³ Paul urges the “strong” to abstain, not because their example might lead the “weak” to drink to excess, but because their example might lead the “weak” to drink, and thus to violate their consciences (14:22–23).⁵⁴ Paul himself is willing to forego any particular food or drink to avoid causing spiritual growth problems for a brother.⁵⁵ Certainly we should be willing to do the same.⁵⁶ We willingly alter our pace of walking while leading a small child by the hand so he or she will not stumble. How much more should we be willing to alter our Christian walk for the benefit of a weaker brother or sister in Christ whom we are leading? We must learn the sensitivities of other believers and we must respect differing convictions. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

However, I do think it is a healthy thing for a Christian who has liberty in some of these areas to indulge it on occasion. I do not think the cause of Christ is ever advanced by having every strong Christian in a congregation completely forsake their right to indulge in some of the things God has given them the freedom to enjoy. What happens, then, is that the whole question is settled on the basis of the most narrow and most prejudiced person in the congregation. Soon, the gospel itself becomes identified with that kind of view. That is why the outside world often considers Christians to be narrow-minded people who have no concern except to prevent the enjoyment of the good gifts of life that God has given us. Because we tend to major on the minors, we're known for what we're against, not what we're for. Ultimately, exercising Christian liberty is very much like walking a tightrope. As you walk the rope with balancing pole in hand, at one end of the pole is *love for others* and at the other is *Christian liberty*. When these are in balance, your walk is as it should be.⁵⁷

Be convinced. In 14:22a Paul states, “**The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God.**”⁵⁸ If we are engaged in certain activities that are not clearly prohibited by the teaching of Scripture, then we should be confident in our thinking that they are right. If we entertain any doubts about the goodness of these activities, then we should give them up. Unfortunately, the NIV provides a rather misleading translation. It suggests that you are to keep quiet about your liberties. However, that is not quite accurate. What Paul is saying is: If you have faith, have it between yourself and God. That is, let God and His Word be the basis for your faith, and nothing else. Be sure that what you are doing is not because of pride on your part because you want to show off how free you are; you are doing this because God has freed you by His Word.⁵⁹

Be consistent. In 14:22b–23 Paul writes, “**Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.**⁶⁰ **But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.**”⁶¹ You are a happy (blessed) person if, in exercising your liberty, you do not condemn yourself by harming another. You are blessed if your exercise of freedom is free from doubt. When we arrive at the conclusion that something is right, unless we receive solid confirmation to the contrary, we should not waver in our conviction. For doubts concerning our beliefs will yield condemnation, but consistency in belief will bring us happiness. In this context, “faith” (*pistis*) does not refer to the teachings of Christianity but to what a person believes to be the will of God for him. If a person does what he believes to be wrong, even though it is not wrong in itself, it becomes sin for him. He has violated what he believes to be God’s will. His action has become an act of rebellion against God for him. Whatever is done without the conviction that God has approved it is by definition sin. God has called us to a life of faith. Trust is the willingness to put all of life before God for His approval. Any doubt concerning an action automatically removes that action from the category of that which is acceptable. For a Christian, not a single decision and action can be good which he does not think he can justify on the ground, of his Christian conviction and his liberty before God in Christ.

Many tales are told about the greatest preacher of the nineteenth century, England’s Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He ruffled the feathers of not a few Christians in his day by his lifestyle choices—particularly his fondness for fine cigars. Compared to today, there was relatively little public awareness of the ill effects of tobacco on the human body, but smoking was shunned nonetheless by many Christians, but not Spurgeon. On one occasion, a young man approached Spurgeon and asked what he should do with a box of cigars he had been given. “Give them to me,” Spurgeon replied, “and I will smoke them to the glory of God.”⁶² Some time later, at the height of his fame, Spurgeon was walking down the street and saw a sign which read, “We sell the cigar that Charles Spurgeon smokes.” After reading this sign Spurgeon gave up the habit. He came to see that what was for him a freedom might cause others to stumble.⁶³

What Christian liberty is God calling you to give up either indefinitely or at appropriate occasions? Whatever it is, would you respond today? God wants you to prioritize other believers and follow Christ’s sacrificial example. *Liberty must be limited by love.*

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Scripture References

Romans 14:13–23

Matthew 7:1–5

Matthew 15:10–11, 16–20; Mark 7:14–23

Acts 10:1–23

1 Corinthians 8:7–13; 10:23–11:1

2 Corinthians 6:3–10; 11:16–29

Ephesians 5:1–2

Study Questions

1. In what way(s) have I been guilty of judging a Christian brother or sister (Romans 14:13)? Is there any lifestyle behavior of mine that has led a fellow believer into sin? If necessary, am I willing to stop that behavior for the sake of unity? Can I trace any failings of unity in the body of Christ to exercising my preferences? What opportunity to model unifying, Christ-like service has God placed before me?
2. Have there been certain “freedoms” that I have participated in that have left me feeling uncomfortable afterwards (Romans 14:14)? Why have I felt uncomfortable? Have I violated my own conscience by participating in activities or choices that I did not believe were appropriate for me as a Christian? If I am not sure whether something is right or wrong should I do it (14:14, 23)? Why or why not?
3. Have others expressed concern over the exercise of my Christian liberty (Romans 14:16)? If so, how did I respond to their comments? Do I regularly remind myself that God’s kingdom is more concerned with eternal things than external things? Could I be characterized as a person who pursues peace with the body of Christ (14:19)? Why or why not?
4. What might it look like to be “approved by men” (Romans 14:18)? How can we successfully balance God’s approval and people’s approval (see Galatians 1:10)? How should those who have freedom in a particular area respond to those who do not have freedom (Romans 14:21–23)? Does “unity” mean that believers must come to the same opinions or convictions about everything (14:1, 5, 22)?
5. Which is more important to me: the spiritual health of a fellow Christian, or enjoying my freedoms in front of one who may be stumbling? Am I so intent on doing my “own thing” that I am hurting the people around me? Am I showing consideration for those who may have an opinion different than my own? In what specific way(s) have I modeled a considerate spirit?

Notes

¹ Dunn notes a chiastic pattern in Rom 14:13–23:

- A Judging (14:13a)
- B Stumbling block (14:13b)
- C Clean/unclean (14:14)
- D Destroying (14:15)
- E Peace and unity (14:16–18)
- E' Peace and unity (14:19)
- D' Destroying (14:20a)
- C' Clean/unclean (14:20b)
- B' Stumbling block (14:21)
- A' Judging (14:22–23)

James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 816.

² Moo explains it this way: “What Paul wants the ‘strong’ to realize is that people differ in their ability to internalize truth. The fact that Christ’s coming brought an end to the absolute validity of the Mosaic law (cf. 6:14, 15; 7:4), and thus explicitly to the ritual provisions of that law, was standard early Christian teaching. And, at the intellectual level, the ‘weak’ Christians may themselves have understood this truth. But Paul wants the ‘strong’ in faith to recognize that people cannot always ‘existentially’ grasp such truth — particularly when it runs so counter to a long and strongly held tradition basic to their own identity as God’s people.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 853.

³ John Wecks, *Free to Disagree: Moving Beyond the Arguments Over Christian Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 56. I like how Swindoll puts it: “The gift of freedom always comes in the plain wrapping of responsibility.” Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 301.

⁴ See also Michael Eaton, *Romans*. Preaching Through the Bible (Kent, UK: Sovereign World Trust, 2010), 250.

⁵ Paul arranges his argument by utilizing the inferential conjunction *oun* (see Rom 14:13, 16, 19).

⁶ The Greek word *meketi* that is translated “not anymore” or “any longer” is the first word in the sentence for emphasis. The expression implies that Paul is issuing a corrective against actual wrong behavior within the community.

⁷ The verb *krino* (“to judge”) was used five times in Rom 14:1–12 (14:3, 4, 5 [twice], 10) and now three more times in 14:13–23 (14:13 [twice], 23). Paul’s use of *krino* (14:13) and *katakrino* (14:22–23) nicely frame this passage.

⁸ Moo writes, “Paul may be alluding to Jesus’ teaching: ‘Do not judge, or you too will be judged’ (Matt. 7:1). Absolute prohibitions of judging are rare in Judaism, and Paul consistently alludes to Jesus’ teaching in this part of Romans.” Douglas J. Moo, “Romans,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary* vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 84.

⁹ See Paul’s other uses of *proskomma* in Rom 9:32, 33; 14:13, 20; 1 Cor 8:9.

¹⁰ Everett F. Harrison and Donald A. Hagner, “Romans” in the *Revised Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 208. Moo, “Romans,” 84 writes: “But the word also became a metaphor for the idea of ‘occasion of misfortune’ or ‘cause of ruin.’ All fourteen New Testament occurrences of this word have this significance. Leviticus 19:14 (“Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD”) may have been the seminal text for this metaphorical significance in the Scripture.”

¹¹ Paul uses *skandalon* (“stumbling block”) in Rom 9:33; 11:19; 14:13; 16:17.

¹² John Phillips, *Exploring Romans* (Neptune: Loizeaux Brothers, 1991), 239.

¹³ See BDAG s.v. *oida* 4, “to grasp the meaning of something, understand, recognize, come to know, experience.”

¹⁴ See BDAG s.v. *peitho* 4: “to attain certainty in reference to something, be convinced, certain.”

¹⁵ The two verbs “I know” and “I am convinced” (14:14a) are in the perfect tense which focuses on the enduring results of an event completed in the past.

¹⁶ In the preceding (Rom 14:2–3) and succeeding context (14:15), the issue Paul seems to have in mind is food. Hence, he viewed the kosher laws of the Old Testament (Lev 11:1–23; Deut 14:3–20) to be non-binding on Christians. Paul’s conclusions (cf. 1 Cor 10:25–26; 1 Tim 4:4; Titus 1:15) are the clear teaching of other NT writers as well (see Mark 7:14–19; Acts 10:9–16). Nevertheless, not all Christians had grasped this teaching. Many still regarded the Jewish dietary laws as God’s will for them.

¹⁷ Stott remarks: “The paradox, then, which faces the strong, is that some foods are both clean and unclean simultaneously. On the one hand, the strong are convinced that all foods are clean. On the other, the weak are convinced that they are not. How should the strong behave when two consciences are in collision? Paul’s response is unambiguous. Although the strong are correct, and he shares their conviction because the Lord Jesus has endorsed it,

they must not ride roughshod over the scruples of the weak by imposing their view on them. On the contrary, they must defer to the weaker brother's conscience (even though it is mistaken) and not violate it or cause him to violate it." John R. W. Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 365.

¹⁸ Most genuinely "weak" believers fit into one of the following four categories: (1) A relatively recent convert who may have come from a particularly immoral background. Often such babes in Christ immediately reject virtually every aspect of their former lifestyle, including some practices that may be very well within the believer's sphere of freedom. (2) A young adult who is in the process of leaving the parental nest. His conscience is tender and he will need special sensitivity. (3) A believer from another country or culture. Whether we like it or not, culture plays a large part in our choices regarding "things that don't matter." Believers in Europe, where drinking is generally viewed as a legitimate freedom, should be careful regarding the use of alcohol with regard to the conscience of a young American Christian visiting in their midst. (4) Dependent children of weaker brothers and sisters in the Church. This is a serious warning to all those who work with our children and youth. We must be careful to realize that some "weaker" believers have entrusted their children to our care, and if they see their personal standards being frequently violated by their teachers or youth leaders, the result can be unnecessary tension in those children's lives and in their homes.

¹⁹ Lopez comments: "'For' (*gar*) translated by the NASB better expresses the meaning than the NKJV translation of Yet, because this conjunction explains (not contrasts) v 14 in v 15. Thus, Paul explains that to persist in one's conviction to eat food disapproved by the weaker brother, considering his pain, violates the greatest principle of grace, *love*. If one sits down with an immature believer (who thinks the laws of kosher foods are still in effect) and insists on his right to eat pork, oyster, shrimp or lobster, he is no longer walking in love." René A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (Springfield: 21st Century Press, 2005), 269.

²⁰ See Paul's other uses of *lupeo* ("to hurt, grieve") in 2 Cor 2:2, 4, 5; 6:10; 7:8, 9, 11; Eph 4:30; 1 Thess 4:13.

²¹ Paul's use of "love" in this context is often called "the law of liberty" (cf. Jas 1:25; 3:12), "the royal law" (cf. Jas 2:8), or "the law of Christ" (cf. Gal 6:2).

²² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 854 n. 28 lists seven places where *apollumi* means eternal destruction in Paul's letters. He also cites three possible exceptions (1 Cor 10:9, 10; 2 Cor 4:9). Outside of Paul's letters, see Matt 2:13; 8:25; 2 Pet 3:6; 2 John 8. It is also worth noting 1 Cor 1:19 and 1 Tim 6:9. Moo (854–55 n. 28) quotes Charles Hodge, *Romans*, 424 with approval: "Believers (the elect) are constantly spoken of as in danger of perdition. They are saved only, if they continue steadfast unto the end. If they apostatize, they perish . . . Saints are preserved, not in despite of apostasy, but from apostasy."

²³ Stott, *Romans*, 365 sums up Paul's message: "Already twice Paul has referred to the weaker Christian as a 'brother' (10); now he repeats the epithet four more times (13, twice in 15, 21), and adds the poignant description *for whom Christ died*. Did Christ love him enough to die for him, and shall we not love him enough to refrain from wounding his conscience? Did Christ sacrifice himself for his well-being, and shall we assert ourselves to his harm? Did Christ die to save him, and shall we not care if we destroy him?"

²⁴ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 855. Schreiner, *Romans*, 734 calls this "eschatological destruction" caused by the loss of eternal salvation. Storms writes: "Some argue that the *destruction* here is eternal. But there are several reasons why this cannot be true. First, 'are we really to believe that a Christian brother's single act against his own conscience—which in any case is not his fault but the fault of the strong who have misled him, and which is therefore an unintentional mistake, not a deliberate disobedience—merits eternal condemnation? No, hell is reserved only for the stubborn, the impenitent, those who willfully persist in wrongdoing' (Stott, 365–66). Second, Paul just affirmed in unequivocal terms the eternal security of the believer (Rom. 8:28–39). If nothing in all creation can separate one from the love of Christ, then surely another believer's callous disregard for a weak brother's religious scruples cannot do so! Third, Paul says in v. 15 that a Christian can 'destroy' another Christian. This cannot refer to eternal destruction because Jesus said that God alone destroys body and soul in hell (Mt. 10:28). Fourth, Jesus said explicitly in John 10:28 that his sheep will '*never perish*'. Clearly, then, the 'destruction' in Rom. 14:14 must refer to something less than and different from the loss of eternal salvation. Fifth, the context provides a perfectly reasonable explanation of Paul's words. He envisions serious damage to both the conscience of the weak believer (cf. v. 15) and to his growth as a disciple of Jesus. Gundry-Volf identifies two forms of damage incurred by the weak: 'a subjective form consisting in grief and deep self-deprecation, and an objective form consisting in concrete sin, resultant guilt and possible incapacitation to behave consistently with one's beliefs. None of Paul's descriptions of the negative consequences born by the weak when they follow the example of the strong—stumbling, sinning, sorrow, defiling and wounding of the conscience [cf. 1 Cor. 8:7], self-condemnation—necessarily entails loss of salvation or complete dissolution of a relationship to God' (*Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away* [Louisville: Westminster, 1990], 95). The 'destruction', therefore, presents an obstacle to one's *sanctification*, not to

one's *justification*." See Sam Storms, "Romans 14:1–23": www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/141-23/; accessed 29 July 2011.

²⁵ Eaton rightly remarks: "The word ('destroyed' or 'ruined') has quite a weak meaning here." Michael Eaton, *Romans: A Practical Exposition*, forthcoming. Stott, *Romans*, 366, eloquently asserts: "*Apollymi* has a broad spectrum of senses which range from 'killing' to 'spoiling'. Here the opposite of to 'destroy' is to 'build up' (19f.; 15:2). Paul's warning, therefore, is that the strong who mislead the weak to go against their consciences will seriously damage their Christian discipleship. He urges the strong against causing such injury to the weak. *Do not allow what you consider good (i.e. the liberty you have found in Christ) to be spoken of as evil* (16), because you flaunt it to the detriment of the weak."

²⁶ See also Michael Eaton, *Romans*. Preaching Through the Bible (Kent, UK: Sovereign World Trust, 2010), 250.

²⁷ John P. Correia, "Freedom Isn't Free" (Rom 14:13–23); unpublished sermon notes.

²⁸ *Contra* Harrison and Donald A. Hagner, "Romans," 209 who write: "Some understand Paul's exhortation in terms of possible slander by unbelievers who find occasion to deride the Christian community for squabbling over such minor matters. But the thought does not necessarily range beyond the circle of the redeemed."

²⁹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 856 writes: "Paul is warning the 'strong' Christians that their insistence on exercising their freedom in ceremonial matters in the name of Christ can lead those who are spiritually harmed by their behavior to revile the legitimate freedom that Christ has won for them."

³⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 739 notes that the closest parallel texts to Rom 14:16 are Rom 2:24; 1 Tim 6:1; and Titus 2:5 where unbelievers are in view.

³¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*. The IVP NT Commentary series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 369.

³² For the unbeliever who has no hope for eternity, life consists of "eating, drinking, and being merry" (1 Cor 15:32).

³³ The expression "the kingdom of God" occurs in Paul's epistles (1 Cor 4:20; 6:9–10; 15:50; Gal 5:21 [cf. Eph 5:5]; Col 4:11; 2 Thess 1:5). Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 822 shows how seldom Paul emphasizes kingdom by comparing him with the Synoptics: *kingdom* appears infrequently (14 versus 105 times) while *righteousness* (57 versus 7 times) and *Spirit* (110 versus 13 times) show the true Pauline emphasis. Paul probably uses it here to stress the essence of Christianity.

³⁴ "The kingdom of God" is an echo of our Lord's teaching. The phrase is used normally in Paul's writings of that messianic kingdom which is to be the reward and goal of the Christian life. Hence, it comes to mean the principles or ideas on which that kingdom is founded, and which are already exhibited in this world (cf. 1 Cor 4:20). Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 270 argues that "the kingdom of God" should be interpreted here as a literal future kingdom, which appears to be more consistent to interpret it as a literal future kingdom, with operative principles now to be fully realized in the future state when Christ returns. The thought here fits a *future* Kingdom better than a present one. For surely in the present life no one can deny the importance of meat and drink; but so far as the Church is concerned in the future Kingdom, these things will be of no consequence. Therefore, since the Church is to reign in that Kingdom, its members should not judge or grieve one another in such matters here and now (cf. 14:13–21). All disputes of this nature should be left for the judgment seat of Christ which will inaugurate His Kingdom upon the earth (14:10).

³⁵ Hughes, *Romans*, Electronic ed.

³⁶ Tony Evans, *The Promise* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 196.

³⁷ Eaton, *Romans: A Practical Exposition*, forthcoming.

³⁸ This is the first appearance of "joy" in Romans, but Paul concludes this section with a prayer that "joy and peace" will "fill" the Roman church through the "power of the Holy Spirit" (15:13). Gal 5:22 also connects peace and joy closely together along with the Holy Spirit whom believers in Christ have received (Rom 5:5).

³⁹ "The service spoken of is, therefore, not for winning of God's favor in the final judgment, but our service that pleases God in the present." Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 520.

⁴⁰ Osborne, *Romans*, 371 writes, "When the strong subordinate their freedom to these more important kingdom principles, then they will first be *pleasing to God*, alluding back to 12:1 where the presentation of the total self to God was also 'pleasing' to him.

⁴¹ Some Manuscripts (MSS) include the doxology of Rom 16:25–27 following 14:23. Others include the doxology both here and at the end of the epistle. Origen reports that Marcion omitted chapters 15 and 16 of Romans from his edition of Paul's epistles: this may account for the displacement of the doxology. Others suggest that Paul may have issued the letter in two forms; a shorter form may have omitted chapter 16 or even chapters 15 and 16.

⁴² The Greek phrase *ara oun* ("So then") is very strong suggesting a new section or a summary of what has been said. See Rom 5:18; 7:3, 25; 8:12; 9:16, 18; 14:12, 19; Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Thess 5:6; 2 Thess. 2:15.

⁴³ Osborne, *Romans*, 371 notes, “The idea of ‘pursuing peace’ occurs frequently in the New Testament (2 Tim 2:22; Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 3:11; cf. 2 Cor 13:11; Eph 4:3; 1 Thess 5:13; Jas 3:18) and is an essential component of life in the Spirit.”

⁴⁴ BDAG s.v. *dioko* 4: “to follow in haste in order to find something, *run after, pursue*.”

⁴⁵ Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 272 explains: “God works in everyone uniquely and at a different pace. To dispute over nonessential matters of foods with an immature believer disrupts his spiritual growth. This is like giving an infant a piece of meat that his body is not yet able to tolerate since the physical organs are not fully developed. It could cause choking and lead to death. Thus, mature Christians should be cautious in exercising their liberty because using such freedom liberally could trap immature believers by hurting their conscience which will stunt their growth (cf. v 13).” Stott, *Romans*, 367 notes that Paul does not identify the weaker brother here. He has referred to the ruin of a brother in 14:15, and here he uses an entirely different phrase. Thus, Stott’s suggestion that what Paul has in mind here is the church and not the individual has merit. When we use our liberty to ruin weaker believers it creates dissention and strife in the community. Instead of pursuing peace and building one another up the church is torn down and destroyed. The thought of destroying a local body of believers over something as inconsequential as food is repugnant to Paul; it must be to us as well. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 860 clarifies: “Paul is warning ‘strong’ believers that they can seriously damage the church — destroy its unity and sap its strength — through their attitudes and actions toward the ‘weak.’ And they cause this damage ‘for the sake of food’ — because they persist in behaving in a certain way in a matter that is peripheral, at best, to the kingdom of God.”

⁴⁶ This is a strong compound verb (*kata + luo*). It is used only three times in Paul’s writings (cf. 2 Cor 5:1 for death and Gal 2:18 in the sense here, destroy).

⁴⁷ Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 825. Schreiner, *Romans*, 735 remarks: Paul likely uses the verb *kataluo* because he desired to contrast “building up” with “tearing down.”

⁴⁸ Stott, *Romans*, 368 comments that this appears to be somewhat of a slogan for the strong in Rome.

⁴⁹ With the adjective *kakon* Paul returns to the theme of “evil” that he mentioned several times in Rom 13 (13:3, 4, 10). This is also the same word Paul used in 7:19, 21 to describe his struggle against his own flesh. The term denotes something that is “socially or morally reprehensible” (BDAG 1) or “harmful or injurious” (BDAG 2). BDAG also notes that sometimes the intent seems to fall somewhere between def. 1 and 2 so that the harm is caused by an evil intent.

⁵⁰ Joe Aldrich makes a distinction between the genuinely weaker brother and the “professional” weaker brother (see Joe Aldrich, *Lifestyle Evangelism* [Sisters: Multnomah, 1993], 44). We can’t always accommodate a professional weaker brother. In Gal 5:1 Paul says, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” We need to have freedom in our Christian lives.

⁵¹ Charles R. Swindoll, “Relating to Others in Love” (Fullerton: Insight for Living, 1985), 40. See also Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, 299.

⁵² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 861 notes that the particle *mede* (“anything”) is being used absolutely. Thus Paul broadens his command past eating and drinking issues to any other issues that affect the community of Christ.

⁵³ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 856 comments: “This is the first time in the passage that Paul has said anything about ‘drinking.’ He may add the word here simply because it is a natural complement to ‘eating.’ But it is also possible, in light of the reference in v. 21, that drinking wine was another issue that separated the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak.’ We would therefore assume that it was the ‘weak’ who abstained from drinking wine, while the ‘strong’ insisted on using their liberty to do so. But it is important to note that, supposing this to be the case, the ‘weak’ would have abstained not because they were afraid of the intoxicating or enslaving potential of alcohol, but because they were afraid that the wine had been contaminated by association with pagan religious practices.”

⁵⁴ Moo insightfully remarks: “We should also note a point that Paul is *not* making in this text, although it is often read into it. The weak brother or sister is not someone who has a susceptibility to a particular vice, and Paul does not urge the strong believer to abstain because he is worried that our example may lead that individual to a life of degradation. This type of argument is especially brought up in connection with the drinking of alcohol. We are told that we ought to avoid drinking because our example may lead someone who has a weakness for alcohol to indulge to excess and so bring physical and perhaps even spiritual ruin to that person. This concern may well be valid, but it is not what Paul is teaching here. The weak are not those who have a propensity to eat meat or to drink wine. Their weakness is spiritual: an inability to see that their faith allows them to drink. The potential problem is not that they may indulge to excess but that they may drink even when their faith is still telling them not to.” Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 468–69.

⁵⁵ See 1 Cor 8:13; cf. Mark 9:42.

⁵⁶ But we can certainly do so graciously. It is a sign of spiritual strength, for example, for a total abstainer to respond graciously when offered a beer, “Thank you, but I think I’ll pass,” instead of “No thank you, I don’t drink.” Michael P. Andrus, “Limiting Our Liberty by Love” (Rom 14:13–23); unpublished sermon notes.

⁵⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*. Preaching the Word (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), Electronic ed.

⁵⁸ Paul evidently wrote this verse with the strong in view primarily (cf. Rom 14:23). He did not want his readers to force their convictions (“faith”) about amoral practices on others. The strong believer can be happy in his private enjoyment of amoral practices because he knows that he is neither violating the will of God nor the conscience of a weak brother.

⁵⁹ Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 272 comments: “By such restrictions Paul does not require mature believers to abandon their convictions on issues that are not wrong. Instead, Paul encourages one to have faith in these matters, but discourages such practices when sharing a meal with immature believers. Such restrictions are not limited to the immature, for in principle to drink wine in front of a mature believer who is a recovering alcoholic may also cause stumbling. Mature believers are free to practice these things privately before God, but if one chooses to do it publicly before others he should exercise caution at all cost.”

⁶⁰ Barnett writes: “Christian faith is personal, between the believer and God. I am ‘saved’ as an individual who has heard and believed the gospel of Christ. I will stand before God as an individual and give my own answer for the life I have lived and the service to others that I have rendered. Paul is reinforcing the intense sense of the individual Gentile’s accountability to God his judge (vv. 4, 7, 8-12). So Paul is saying, ‘Live your life now in God’s presence.’” Paul Barnett, *Romans: The Revelation of God’s Righteousness* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 312.

⁶¹ In contrast to Rom 14:22, this verse seems to be addressed particularly to the weak. The weak brother who eats something that he believes he should not eat stands condemned by his own conscience and by God (cf. Gal 2:11). His action is contrary to what he believes is right.

⁶² Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, *Romans*. Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2000), 436.

⁶³ Hughes, *Romans*, Electronic ed.