

ROMANS – LIVING BY FAITH
LOVING GOD AND LIVING GODLY – Chapters 12-14

LESSON 49 – LOVING FREEDOM – Romans 14:13-23

The quickest way for children to get hurt is to tell them they are free to do whatever they want to do. It won't be long before immaturity leads to something bad...maybe even devastating. This lesson will show us why self-denial is the foundation of personal freedom in Christ. The person who is truly free is the one who knows how to use freedom to build up others...even at their own expense.

In our last lesson we learned that we are not to judge each other...especially over things that don't really matter. We are to be led by the Lord in everything we do and serve Him with a motivation of thanksgiving and praise. By doing this, we live lives that please Him. We also learned that whoever is accepted by God should be accepted by all of us.

In the second half of Romans 14, we see that while it's true we have freedom in Christ, that freedom is to be used as a license to do whatever we want to do. How our actions affect our brothers and sisters in Christ is extremely important. All our actions should be bound by the debt of love we owe the Lord and our fellow Christians.

There are two extremes of Christian liberty...legalism and liberalism. On one end are those who think they have to legislate their lives and the lives of everyone around them. On the other end are those who never met a rule or guideline they thought applied to them. Neither of these extremes is what Christian liberty is all about. The best definition of liberty is the freedom to lay down one's rights or desires for the well-being of another.

Don't Cause Others To Fall

The first of seven principles found in this part of Romans is in verse 13...don't let your freedom be the cause of others stumbling or falling. A stumbling block is a stone or other object left in the middle of the road...something you don't see...something carelessly left in the way. The second phrase, "obstacle in the way," is something that was put in the way on purpose...something put in the way with the intention of tripping up others. A stumbling block is not intentional but an "obstacle in the way" is. Paul is saying here that Christians who walk in love do not do things that would cause others to fall into sin or some other spiritual trap. William Barclay wrote this, "A new age would dawn in the church if we remembered that our rights are far less important than our obligations."

Don't Cause Others To Feel Grief

The second point is that our actions can cause others to be grieved. In our last lesson, we saw that there were a number of Christians in the church in Rome who had come out of Judaism where there were all kinds of rules about food, sacred days and other ceremonial lifestyle issues. Others in the church didn't have this background so these things were not issues for them. So a problem arose over what was okay to do and what was not...especially when it came to eating certain foods.

Paul tries to clear this up in verses 14-15 when he says, "I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died."

In other words, if we know another Christian has an issue with a certain action, then because of our love for them, we should not do that action when we are with them. The reality is that the Christian life is a relationship with Jesus and not a relationship with a rule book. We need to learn that people are the most important thing to God...not rules and regulations... and act accordingly.

Don't Cause Others To Fail

When Paul uses the word "destroy" toward the end of verse 15, he's talking about tearing someone down and keeping them from reaching their full potential. Our lack of love and care for another can cause them not to grow in spiritual maturity. Because of our lack of love...they suffer.

1 Corinthians 8:8-12, "But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ."

Don't Cause Your Witness To Be Forfeited

According to verse 16, our witness can be hurt by what "we know as good being spoken of as evil" by others. It's interesting to think about how something good might become a bad thing in the life of someone else. Paul is not saying to give up your freedom but he is saying to use it wisely so it is not a negative thing to others.

Did you know it's possible to become a slave to your freedom in Christ? If you have to constantly demonstrate your freedom on every occasion and you aren't free to deny yourself when necessary, you aren't really free at all.

Don't Cause Your Focus To Be Forgotten

Your freedom can actually cause you to lose your focus. Verse 17 reminds us that our focus should be on the values of the kingdom of God...righteousness, peace and joy. The kingdom of God isn't about how long a man's hair is or what kind of music you listen to. It's about righteousness, peace and joy. If Satan gets us off track so we are focused on the wrong things, then divisions in the church are the result. The way we know the right things to do is by building a close, personal, intimate relationship with Jesus. When we're focused on Him, we rarely have to ask, "Can I do this thing or that thing."

Don't Cause God's Work To Be Frustrated

What is the work of God Paul is talking about in verse 20? It is the work of God in another person's life. Every Christian is the workmanship of God created in Jesus, and that work is not to be destroyed or frustrated by the lack of love or self-control in our lives. If we destroy the work of God in another person over the right eat certain kinds of food or wear certain kinds of clothes, isn't that getting awfully petty? Paul's whole point is that we should never hinder the spiritual growth of another Christian. Instead, we are to limit our freedoms in order to build them up...to advance the work of God in their life.

Don't Cause Your Faith To Be Flaunted

The danger with being the stronger Christian is the temptation to flaunt it. Paul doesn't brag about having great faith and knowledge...instead, he says to keep it between yourself and God. In Galatians 5:13 he said, "Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love."

Have you experienced the joy of limiting your personal freedom in Christ to make someone else stronger? If dying to self for the good of others was the example Jesus set, there must not be a better way. I hope all of us will choose that path to follow.