



# HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

## Christian Liberty and Responsibility

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Romans 14:13-18

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*<sup>13</sup> Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. <sup>14</sup> I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. <sup>15</sup> For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup> So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. <sup>17</sup> For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.*

*(Pastor prays)*

The church is not just a place you go; it's a family where you belong, a people that is yours, a spiritual home, a connected part of you that is hard to leave and harder still sometimes to stay in. It's a family of refugees who were once dead in sin but have been sought by God, redeemed at the cross and loved by grace in Jesus.

Our state of depravity is the common ground we stand on and the cross of Jesus. The Gospel of God is the common unbreakable bond we share, and this passage is so helpful when it comes to living the Christian life with people who love Jesus like you do but are remarkably different from you. This is nothing new. Paul writes this mixed church in Rome to help them center on Jesus and give space to each other. This is the classic passage for Christian liberty and Christian responsibility. Christian liberty is the freedom we have in Christ to live in grace as new covenant children of God. And Christian responsibility is the mandated Christ-centered care we have to live our lives as a source of life and encouragement to other brothers and sisters in Christ. Making sure that the freedoms we enjoy in Jesus don't do harm to brothers and sisters Christ

died for. Paul sees that judging and backbiting and division is a problem. That's why he says in verse 13, <sup>13</sup> *Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.* In other words, that's what you've been doing and that it's the tendency of human nature but, instead, we need to pour the glue of grace over the whole body of believers and let grace do its miraculous cohesive work! What are the things we need to do?

## **We Do the Things of God to Strengthen the People of God**

Let's talk about those things.

### **We need to decide the right things**

What are those things?

Decide to *not* cause another to stumble. Look with me at verse 13. We will read it and then talk about it. <sup>13</sup> *Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.* But rather, never put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. That means you giving real thought to your life and how you live your life and what effect it has on other Christians who might be struggling. It's a vivid idea of someone slogging along in life, barely making it, weary from walking and comes up on an uneven piece of pavement on the sidewalk, their foot catching it and that person goes down. Paul says, I know you have freedom to live how you see fit, but if it's hurting other believers, it's sin. He uses another word, hindrance. *Skandalon* that has more of a sinister edge like a trap. It's like some political conversations can become. Paul says categorically and in Jesus' name, we have responsibility to *not* cause another brother or sister to trip and fall or to get caught in a trap. It's good to ask questions. Am I saying that out of love? Am I doing that out of love? Will this encourage more faith? Will this drive my brother to Jesus?

Decide to be confident in grace. Listen to the confidence in what Paul says in verse 14. It's a triple layer confidence. <sup>14</sup> *I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.* I know. I am persuaded. In the Lord Jesus. This is a declaration of Christian liberty. When we sing the song, "I'm free," this is what we are talking about. It was said by Jesus in Mark 7, said by Peter in Acts 10 and believed by Paul in Romans 14. Paul is reminding us that the coming Christ and His death on the cross brought an end to living under law. We now live in grace. And at the end of verse 14 he is

urging people to have their consciences governed by grace and not overcome with guilt. Grace doesn't permit or promote sin. Grace pays for it at the cross of Jesus. And Paul is inviting us to more and more be confident in the grace of God found at the cross of Jesus. It's what we call "free grace." Decide not to be a stumbling block. Decide to be confident in grace.

Decide to protect God's people. What a great empathetic, others-focused, cross-centered verse. <sup>15</sup>*For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.* Paul has already stated how convinced he is about his great freedom in Christ. But now he is insistent that, if you demand to live your life any way you want, to exercise all your rights even when it damages another believer, then you got being a Christian all wrong. In this verse there is tremendous responsibility. Your brother is grieved and you are not loving him but destroying him. And then he adds tremendous value, *the one for whom Christ died*. See the infused intrinsic value of a blood-bought brother or sister in Christ! If Christ has paid that price for a brother, then how could we refuse to pay the prices of holding our tongue or restricting some practice? This is a radical Christian ethic tied tightly to the cross of Jesus. But we do the things of God to strengthen the people of God! We need to decide the right things.

We need to hold onto the right things. Let me show you where I get that in verse 16-18. We need to protect the reputation of grace. We see that in verse 16. <sup>16</sup>*So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil.* That good that he says to protect is the freedom he declared in verse 14, Christian freedom. So read it like this. Do not let what you regard as good (Christian Freedom) be spoken of as evil. You see, grace is at stake. And he is warning those that have a firm grasp on grace to not rub your freedom in the face of a brother or sister that is still trying to figure it out. Because if you do, you are going to ruin the reputation of grace which is what we are all about. As we do that, there is something else in verse 17.

We need to focus on what's important. There's a whole sermon in this passage. Let's take a look at it. <sup>17</sup>*For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.* There are a couple of things to see. This is the only time Paul uses the phrase "kingdom of God" in the entire book of Romans. And look what he says. God's kingdom is higher and holier and deeper than the petty argument about consumables. And then Paul hits us with the dynamic trio of what the kingdom of God is. It is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Let's look at these three things.

**Righteousness.** Righteousness is the central theme of Romans and the driving home of the Gospel. It also addresses the universal problem of human beings who are not righteous. We are sinful by birth and sinful by choice. We are unrighteous. That's why we say hurtful things, fall into addictive behavior and commit sexual sins. It's why we desire power and advantage. In short, it's why the world is the way it is. Depravity. Soaked in sin. And the righteousness of God is given to us in a person. Righteousness is a person and it's why the living of Jesus' life is so important. He lived perfectly because we actually need perfection to be pleasing to God and we don't have it. We need the perfection of another to cover us, to stand in our place. It's why we call it "the great exchange" at the cross. When you repent and believe, Jesus takes your sin and gives you His righteousness. It removes any need for you to gain it through being good. Only Jesus is good and only His life can save, and the kingdom of God is us trusting in the righteousness given to us freely at the cross. The kingdom of God is not food and drink. It's righteousness and peace.

**Peace.** *Eirene.* This could be the equivalent to "Shalom" in Hebrew. It's wholeness, settled or content. It shows up primarily in two places and they are connected. You don't have one without the other. It is peace with God or peace of God. Peace. And maybe you don't have the peace *of* God because you don't have peace *with* God. That's what the Gospel gives and it's what Paul meant in Romans 5:1 when he said, *Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* The cross provides peace *with* God and now you can have the peace *of* God. Isn't that what we need even now? The peace of God? Paul writes about it in Philippians 4:6-7. <sup>6</sup> *do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.* <sup>7</sup> *And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* This is the kingdom of God, and we need to focus on it. So we had righteousness and peace with/of God. And all that brings us to one fabulous word.

**Joy.** But not just any kind of joy. It's the joy in the Holy Spirit. That's the joy of the Lord. And it's vital because the Bible says, *The joy of the Lord is strength.* That's what's going to carry you through and give you contentment in crisis and a foundation to stand on and grace to sustain you. And in verse 18 Paul says, <sup>18</sup> *Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.* Whoever serves Christ is focusing on the kingdom of God which is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Paul says whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and

approved by men. We normally get those out of order. We want to be *approved* by men and then *acceptable* to God, but the Gospel reverses it for us. We have to decide the right things and hold onto the right things to have righteousness found in Christ, peace *with* God and *of* God and joy in the Holy Spirit. The things of God strengthen the people of God. I want us to be a church that embraces our liberties and freedoms in Christ but does so with a real sense of responsibility for one another and a laser focus on the Gospel.

*(Pastor prays)*